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Is *The Society of the Spectacle* Relevant in the Age of the Algorithm?

Andrew Bailey



The audience at the premiere of *Bwana Devil*,
photographed by J. R. Eyerman, 1952

In 1967 Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* in which he argued that modern life is no longer experienced directly, but instead is mediated through images and representations; and that consequently authentic human relationships have been substituted by a passive consumption of commodities.

This paper will look at the origins of Debord's theories and examine his work in greater detail, including his revisions as the twentieth century progressed and his proposed solution to this perceived crisis.

Then it will attempt to evaluate whether his ideas are contemporarily relevant in what has been called 'The Age of the Algorithm', by presenting two case studies: in Putin's Russia, and the tech-driven 'West'.

Finally it will survey those who hold contrary opinions, attempt at a conclusion and provide some ideas for further discussion.

1. Debord and the *Spectacle*

1.1 Guy Debord (1931–1994) was a French Marxist philosopher and co-founder of the Situationist International group of artists, intellectuals and political theorists; whose ideas greatly influenced the 1968 student protests in Paris and beyond.

His 1967 book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, offered a radical critique of consumer capitalism. It held that modern life had been replaced by a representation of itself. What were once authentic social relationships were now mediated through the passive consumption of commodities and media depictions: "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation".

The spectacle is not simply 'media' or 'entertainment'; it has become the dominant mode of social life, where images, advertising and representation mediate human experience: turning life itself into a commodity. An endless cycle of consumption, reducing every interaction to a transaction detached from any real connection or authenticity.

And not just as a tool of distraction; but as a method of control.

2. Debord's Influences

2.1 Ludwig Feuerbach: Debord prefaced *The Society* with an 1841 quote from Feuerbach: "The present age... prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence... truth is considered profane and only illusion is sacred."

Here Feuerbach inverts the biblical claim insisting instead that Man created God in his own image, projecting humanity's best qualities onto the divine illusion. It was then this image, rather than any underlying reality, that was worshipped. But by choosing the image over the thing itself, the image became separated from reality and humans became alienated from their true nature. Debord updated this for

modern consumerism. Debord's spectacle is a secular religion where humans project their life desires onto mass-media images and commodities: "The commodity contemplates itself in a world it has itself created."

2.2 Karl Marx: "It's not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness."

Here Marx reverses traditional idealist philosophy: it's material reality that shapes your mind and not the reverse. Economic status dictates how the world is viewed. Hence, morals, religion and politics are not universal truths but products of a specific time and social class. So, to change ideas, you must first alter material and economic conditions.

Debord pushed Marx's economic critique into the cultural realm. Whereas Marx saw capitalism degrading human life from "being" into "having", Debord shifts it further to "appearing". In modern consumer capitalism, "social existence" is no longer defined by what you do or own, but by what you appear to be.

2.3 György Lukács: Debord takes his notion that "reification" led to "false consciousness". That treating an abstract idea as if it were a physical thing produced a mental state where the oppressed mistakenly believe that the very system that exploits them, capitalism, is a natural, unchangeable law.

Debord's spectacle is this reification visualised; creating a totalising environment where false consciousness is automated. The worker no longer just suffers alienation on the production line; they actively consume their own alienation during leisure hours through television, advertising and the print media.

3. The Society of the Spectacle

3.1 As the spectacle mediates our social relations, it alienates us from a genuinely lived life; instead, providing "a *separate pseudo world* that can only be looked at."

It "presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: *what appears is good; what is good appears.*"

“It is the sun that never sets over the empire of modern passivity. It covers the entire surface of the globe, endlessly basking in its own glory.”

“A permanent Opium War”, in which, “increasingly extensive campaigns are necessary to convince people to buy increasingly unnecessary commodities.”

3.2 Debord broke with Lukács over what he saw as the latter’s dogmatic devotion to the Soviet system. Instead, Debord held that dictatorships such as the USSR or the PRC had merely replaced private capitalists with a state bureaucracy, which similarly exploited the mass of workers within it. Indeed, he saw these autocracies as using a “concentrated” form of the spectacle, rather than the “diffuse” variety deployed in the West.

“The concentrated spectacle is primarily associated with bureaucratic capitalism. The dictatorship of the bureaucratic economy cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice because it has to make all the choices itself, and any choice made independently of it... amounts to a declaration of war against it... The dominion of the concentrated spectacle is a police state.”

However, in the West he saw the ‘Mad Men’ advertisers of Madison Avenue holding sway: “the diffuse spectacle is associated with commodity abundance [where]... each individual commodity fights for itself”, so that, “consumers are filled with religious fervour for the sovereign freedom of commodities whose use has become an end in itself”; and “the proliferation of faddish gadgets reflects the fact that as the mass of commodities becomes increasingly absurd, absurdity itself becomes a commodity... all this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission.”

3.3 In both, he diagnoses a cult of personality; a ‘star’ system, based around perception:

“The stars of decision-making must possess the full range of admired human qualities... Khrushchev retrospectively became a general so as to take credit for the victory at the Battle of Kursk... and Kennedy survived as an orator to the point of delivering his own funeral oration, since Theodore Sorenson continued to write speeches for his successor in the same style.”

And although the commodities may change, “the system endures. Stalin, like any other outmoded commodity, is denounced by the very forces that originally promoted him.” Whilst “each new lie of the advertising industry is an admission of its previous lie.”

3.4 Meanwhile, the time accrued by using new labour-saving devices is merely employed to inhabit not a “true life”, but “a *truly spectacular* life”. So that, “the present age... knows nothing of real festivals... when members of a community joined together in a luxurious expenditure of life are impossible for a society that lacks both community and luxury. Its vulgarised pseudo-festivals are parodies of a real dialogue and gift-giving; they may incite waves of excessive economic spending, but they lead to nothing but disillusionments, which can be compensated only by the promise of some new disillusion to come.”

3.5 Finally, in what many have seen as a hauntingly prescient descriptor of our present age: “Imprisoned in a flattened universe bounded by the screen of the spectacle that has enthralled him, the spectator knows no one but the fictitious speakers who subject him to a one-way monologue about their commodities and the politics of their commodities. The spectacle as a whole serves as his looking glass.

What he sees there are dramatisations of illusory escapes from a universal autism.”

4. A Revision: The Integrated Spectacle

4.1 As the Twentieth Century progressed Debord came to believe that the distinct lines between capitalist and communist states were blurring. He perceived that Western democracies were becoming increasingly authoritarian, whilst erstwhile communist regimes were adopting market economies.

4.2 In response, in 1988, he published *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in which he argued that the “diffuse” and the “concentrated” spectacle were now joined by an “integrated” form that sought to control reality by merging state, corporate and media power. He also identified that technological advancements had allowed the spectacle to shift from external media channels, such as television sets and billboards, and more directly into the fabric of daily life. So much so, that this

integration tended to eliminate any external vantage point from which a citizen could critique their society. He identified five interconnected features of this new integrated spectacle.

- 1) Continuous technological renewal: rapid technological shifts that force dependency.
- 2) Integration of the state and the economy: public and private sectors intertwine, so that the market economy operates like a powerful and unchecked political agent.
- 3) Generalised secrecy: corporate and political intrigue infect society, but the mechanisms driving this are kept opaque, so obscuring that daily 'reality' is actually based on systemic falsehoods.
- 4) Unanswerable lies: a media landscape where facts are so thoroughly modified and the truth so constantly rewritten, that it becomes difficult for the public to verify claims or find an objective frame of reference.
- 5) The perpetual present: history and critical thought are actively discouraged. The spectacle keeps its spectators occupied with a continuous, fleeting cycle of trivial trends to distract them from actual material conditions and the possibilities for change.

5. Debord's Tactic of Resistance: *Détournement*

5.1 Debord, despite the gloomy nature of his analysis, remained optimistic: resistance need not be futile. On the contrary, by employing tactics of *détournement* [rerouting, hijacking], the dominant narrative can be subverted, so exposing the constructed nature of the spectacle and thus enabling it to be rejected.

5.2 *Détournement* aimed at the following process to turn the media's weapons against itself:

- 1) Decontextualisation: an image, logo, or text is stripped of its intended, sanitised meaning.
- 2) Recontextualisation: the image is placed into a new, shocking or ironic framing.

3) Loss of Authority: the original creator, be it a corporation or a government, is forced to inadvertently speak the uncomfortable truth about themselves.

5.3 Contemporary 'street artists' like Banksy frequently use *détournement* by mixing idyllic or authoritative imagery with symbols of violence or poverty. For example, his *Guantanamo Detainee at Disneyland* (2006) placed a life-size, inflatable doll dressed as a hooded, shackled Guantanamo prisoner in the middle of Disney's Magic Kingdom, thereby contrasting a symbol of corporate happiness with the grim reality of modern warfare.



6. Does Debord Have Any Contemporary Relevance?

*I Can't Believe You Morons Act,
Buy This Shit, Banksy, 2007*

6.1 In Debord's time, the spectacle was primarily mediated through mass media and advertising. However, today the spectacle has evolved into an even more immersive experience, thanks to the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). These technologies create entirely new forms of representation, where the blurring of the lines

between the real and the artificial is increasing exponentially; further distancing individuals from any direct engagement with the world.

6.2 The implications of these developments may be profound. As people spend more time interacting with AI-driven content or immersing themselves in virtual environments, the spectacle becomes even more totalising. In the future, people may live entirely within these constructed realities, where their interactions, relationships and even identities are shaped by algorithms and artificial intelligence.

But this manipulation of reality has serious consequences for democratic life. Political discourse, once grounded in debate and dialogue, has become a spectacle of soundbites, viral moments and superficial engagement. Leaders perform for the camera, tailoring their messages for maximum media impact rather than addressing real issues. As Debord warned, this spectacle distracts people from substantive engagement with the world; leaving them as passive observers of, rather than active participants in, their own lives.

6.3 One of the most insidious manifestations of the spectacle in contemporary society is the rise of post-truth politics and misinformation. In the age of fake news, deepfakes and algorithm-driven echo chambers, the spectacle not only mediates our experience of reality, it distorts it. People increasingly live in information bubbles, consuming narratives that reinforce their existing beliefs rather than engaging with objective truth. They no longer relate to one another through genuine experiences; instead, they engage through spectacles: projected images of lives that may or may not resemble reality. We engage with representations, not people; we respond to curated profiles, not human beings. This alienation, Debord would say, is the logical consequence of a society governed by the spectacle.

Could Debord be anticipating social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok? In order to explore this question further, I want to employ two case studies.

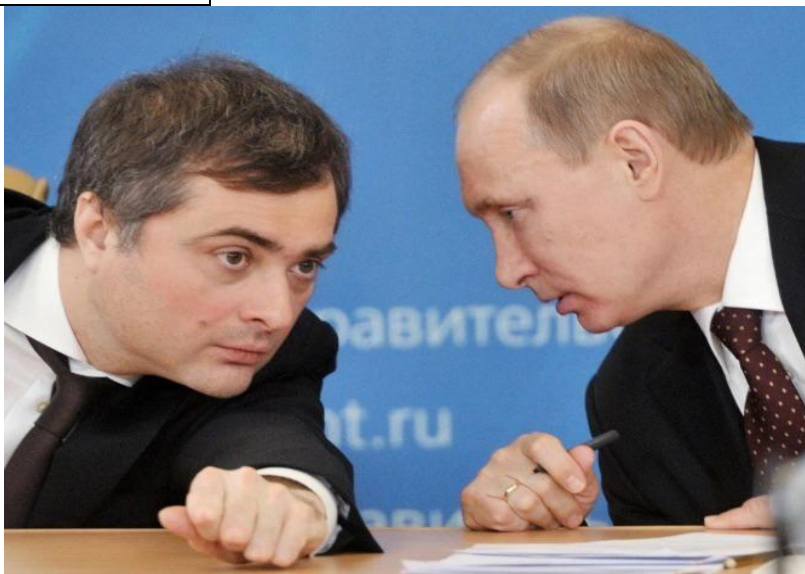
7. Case Study One: Putin's Russia

7.1 Peter Pomerantsev's 2014 book *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*, recounts his experiences working in Russian TV during Putin's rise to power. The

situation he describes appears to accord with Debord's notion of the "integrated spectacle". Unlike the blatant censorship of its Soviet predecessor, the regime now sought to overwhelm with contradictory narratives and with a politics that resembled reality TV. The aim was less to persuade you of one truth, but rather to make you cynical about truth itself. Not to make you believe a lie, but to make you believe that nothing can be known: *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*. Or as Debord put it, "spectacular power can... deny whatever it likes... knowing full well there is no danger of any riposte".

7.2 This engineering was overseen by theatre director turned Kremlin puppetmaster, Vladislav Surkov, ominously nicknamed The Grey Cardinal. Pomerantsev saw Surkov turn modern governance into a theatrical production where the state owns the stage, writes the script and controls the audience.

Vladislav Surkov and
Vladimir Putin



However, irony of ironies, Surkov was a keen student of Debord's work. But instead of seeing it as the red flag that Debord intended, he treated it as a political playbook. Combining consumer entertainment with concentrated political power and using "unreality and generalised falsehood" as a system of rule.

7.3 So are we able to map aspects of contemporary Russia onto Debord's five features of the integrated spectacle?

(i) Incessant Technological Renewal.

The Kremlin employs digital infrastructure, domestic software monopolies and AI software to both automate public compliance and crackdown on dissent.

For example: Moscow's extensive Internet Protocol (IP) camera network.

This is installed around its public transport systems and linked to facial recognition AI. Ostensibly for public safety, it is also used to implement Russia's digital draft system; offenders being picked up as they attempt to travel in the city. The same equipment is also used to enable "preventive detentions". On symbolic dates like Victory Day, known activists are flagged and detained by the police before they can even reach a protest site, thereby neutralising dissent before it occurs. Meanwhile, Western social media applications are electronically disabled, replaced by Russian versions equipped with censorship tools that detect forbidden terms such as "war" or "invasion", and can then auto-generate blocks, fines or worse against transgressive individuals.

(ii) Fusion of State and Economy.

Russia functions as a kleptocracy where corporations and state agencies are indistinguishable from one another; and where wealth is entirely contingent on loyalty to the regime.

For example: Gazprom and Rosneft.

These massive energy monopolies should legally function as private corporate entities; yet they actually operate as direct instruments of domestic patronage and malign foreign policy on behalf of the Kremlin. Essentially, the Russian state functions through "oligarch capitalism," where billionaires manage vast private wealth, but can have their entire fortunes stripped or redistributed at a moment's notice if they break from state-mandated political narratives: a mafia state?

(iii) Generalised Secrecy.

Russian politics runs on a system of hidden actors, invisible funding networks and opaque 'black-box' decisions made within the FSB security apparatus (former head: V. Putin) and the presidential administration (current head: V. Putin).

For example: Vladislav Surkov.

Surkov is accused of secretly funding and controlling opposing sides of the political spectrum, by covertly financing liberal art groups and ultranationalist youth organisations simultaneously. This 'theatre of politics' ensures that even the antigovernment opposition is often engineered by the state itself, creating a confusing hall of mirrors where no one knows who is genuinely independent and who is on the government payroll.

(iv) Unanswerable Lies.

Rather than defending a single totalitarian ideology, Russian state media unleashes an avalanche of contradictory narratives to deliberately destroy the concept of objective truth, fostering a culture of nihilistic compliance.

For example: Malaysia Airlines Flight 17.

When this plane was shot down over eastern Ukraine, Russian state networks didn't stick to just one 'cover story'. Instead, they pushed multiple conflicting theories: it was shot down by the Ukrainians; it was a CIA plot with a plane filled with the dead bodies; it was an assassination attempt on Putin. The goal was not to make people believe a specific lie, but to overwhelm the spectator with so much noise that they could only conclude that they would never know the real truth. Similarly, in relation to the Salisbury poisonings, the aim wasn't to convince the investigating authorities that their suspects were actual enthusiasts of tall spires; but rather it was an example of *Kombinatsiya* [strategic mockery]: trolling whilst also demonstrating effective impunity.

(v) A Perpetual Present.

The Kremlin treats public attention like a reality TV show, rapidly pivoting from one urgent existential threat to another in order to justify its authoritarian rule, while simultaneously censoring and re-writing actual events. History becomes a malleable prop for the regime rather than an objective pursuit. Democracy is simulated, the future is cancelled, change is no longer an option.

For example: the 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine.

This is presented simply as the conclusion of 'The Great Patriotic War' against

Nazism. Meanwhile, the media simultaneously curates the illusion that life inside Russia remains completely untouched by the conflict: consumerism, concerts and luxury culture continue unabated. The populace is assured that they will suffer no tangible deleterious consequences from the state's geopolitical actions; whilst the state swiftly neutralises calls for a different future by branding all progressive alternatives as existential chaos.

8. Case Study Two: The Broligarchy

8.1 'Broligarchy' is a slang portmanteau of 'bro' and 'oligarchy' used to describe a small, powerful group of extremely wealthy men, primarily from Silicon Valley, who exert significant political and economic influence: men such as Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai and Elon Musk. The term describes how these billionaires transitioned from traditional lobbying to direct involvement in government and policymaking, notably under the second Trump administration. Indeed, all the above had front row seats at Trump's 2025 inauguration, in preference to those who were actually in his cabinet.



From left to right: Mark Zuckerberg, Lauren Sánchez, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai and Elon Musk at Trump's inauguration on 20 January 2025.

However, unlike Russia's top-down, state-dominated 'theatre', the Western brologarchy operates as a bottom-up, infrastructure-driven spectacle. They own the platforms and the algorithms that now dictate how Western societies communicate, think and even perceive reality.

8.2 So are we also able to map their aspects onto Debord's five features?

(i) Incessant Technological Renewal.

The 'Tech Bros' employ 'hype-cycles' to maintain their economic dominance, distract regulators and keep the public in a permanent state of cognitive destabilisation. If you do not immediately adopt the newest technology, you are rendered economically and socially invisible.

For example: Zuckerberg's *Metaverse*.

Unveiled in 2021 as *the* absolute future of human interaction and commerce, it attracted billions of dollars of investment, but by only 2023 it was abruptly abandoned in favour of Generative AI. Hence, the public and traditional businesses are perpetually left playing catch-up, without the time or expertise to see beyond the new 'next big thing'.

(ii) Fusion of State and Economy.

The Brologarchs have evolved past mere 'lobbyists' and now act as shadow state actors, securing massive government contracts, embedding their technology into critical state infrastructure and directly dictating national policies.

For example: Elon Musk's Space X, Starlink and DOGE.

Musk's private aerospace ventures have become so deeply integrated into Western state governance that the US military, NASA and international coalition forces rely directly on his private infrastructure for national security and wartime communications. But when a single private individual can unilaterally decide to cut off a nation's military communication network based on a personal whim, the line

between private trillionaire and sovereign state actor disappears entirely. Meanwhile his role as “Co-Leader of the Department of Government Efficiency” (DOGE), gave him unprecedented and wide-ranging access to highly sensitive U.S. Government financial and personnel networks.

(iii) Generalised Secrecy.

The Broligarchy-run social media platforms loudly champion “free speech” and claim open protocols. However, they mask their actual processes behind arcane ‘blackbox’ algorithms, proprietary AI models and secretive venture capital networks.

For example: algorithmic shadow-banning and engagement boosts.

When Musk purchased Twitter he promised to ‘open-source’ its algorithm to provide a truly transparent and accessible “digital town square”. In reality, the mechanisms that govern what hundreds of millions of people see on their feeds remain deeply opaque. Under the guise of “improving user experience”, lines of code can be secretly tweaked to artificially boost specific political figures or polarising content, whilst suppressing others. The more the system speaks the less it actually reveals.

(iv) Unanswerable Lies.

The Broligarchs have systematically dismantled traditional journalistic institutions that verify facts and replaced them with algorithmically boosted “alternative facts”, conspiracy theories and AI-generated content designed purely for emotional engagement.

For example: monetised outrage and the inversion of verification.

Verification used to be a rigorous process undertaken by editors, experts and journalists to establish the credibility of a claim. But social platforms, such as X, have transformed account verification from a marker of identity and expertise into a commercial subscription model. Users who pay a monthly fee receive artificial algorithmic boosting for their posts and replies; and because these engagements pay out financial dividends to these subscribed creators, the system actively rewards the manufacturing of sensationalist falsehoods, deep-fakes and conspiracy theories. ‘Rage-baiting’ creates clicks, which in turn creates revenue. Viral posts are rarely organic but are sent to us by the algorithm in response to deliberate, monetised

manipulation. Meanwhile, the truth is treated as a matter of majority vote or algorithmic preference rather than empirical reality. Hence, the lie is built into the ecosystem itself; turning reality into a subjective simulation, where whoever owns the server owns the 'truth'. In this way Musk (et al) seeks to edit our relationship with reality: but can you have a democracy if nobody knows what's real anymore?

(v) A Perpetual Present.

Social-media platforms are designed for hyper-current engagement: infinite scrolls, automated recommendations, expiring stories, etc. These constant algorithmic crises serve to distract users from noticing the steady erosion of their material rights, wages and democratic institutions. When everything is hyper-current, nothing is permanent. The continuous, manufactured urgency leaves no room for historical context or long-term political organising.

For example: the infinite scroll and the death of retrospective thought.

Historically, consuming information had natural friction and stopping points: finishing a book chapter, reaching to the end of a newspaper page, or waiting for the evening news broadcast. These pauses allowed for reflection and mental consolidation. However, social media platforms purposely remove these structural boundaries by introducing the "infinite scroll" as automated feeds refresh. The interface never stops delivering content; as long as a user pulls-down or swipes-up new algorithmic stimuli appear, so militating against reflection. Meanwhile, recent events are buried beneath miles of digital sediment, or evaporate altogether amidst the ephemera of "disappearing messages": instead, a permanently urgent *NOW* dominates.

"Such a strange question to be asked at this date, because you're talking about a long time ago." Donald Trump on 17th June 2026 when asked about the bombing of a girls' primary school in Iran on 28th February 2026, less than four months before.

9. Debord's Detractors

9.1 The best-known criticism of Debord came from the French lapsed-Marxist and postmodernist thinker, Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007), whose 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation* took Debord's concept of the *spectacle* but magnified it into that of the

simulacrum. A representation that no longer has an original referent in the real world: a copy of a copy where the original object may not even exist anymore. Whereas Debord held that the spectacle hid reality behind a mask of commodities, Baudrillard argued that reality had been completely destroyed and replaced with a 'hyperreality'. Where Debord held that resistance to the system was possible via acts of *détournement* aimed at waking people up to return them to 'authenticity'; Baudrillard argued that the media was now so powerful that there was no 'authenticity' left to return to, hence mere *détournement* was insufficient. Would-be subversive, anti-capitalist artworks are turned into trendy commodities by the hyperreal system; sold for millions of dollars or consigned to museums, thereby neutralising any threat: Banksy anyone?

For Baudrillard, Debord's *détournement* was merely "banal". Instead, the only possible solution was to employ "fatal strategies". If we are being overwhelmed by information overloads, it's futile to attempt to return us to the 'truth' via 'fake news' detectors or by rationing social media use. Rather, Baudrillard's "fatal strategy" recognised that the information itself is destroying meaning. Hence, the only effective response would be to generate so much data, content and simulation that the entire concept of 'truth' evaporated, rendering the system's control mechanisms totally obsolete: kill or cure.

9.2 In his 2008 book *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière denounced the "myth of the passive spectator". Rancière believed that Debord's theory relied on a patronising, elitist view of the working-class as entirely passive and brainwashed. Instead, Rancière rejected any binary opposition between passive, ignorant 'viewing' and active, knowledgeable 'acting'. He argued that spectators were not helpless victims of media manipulation; instead, they were active interpreters who constantly decode, modify and translate the images they see. He viewed Debord's stance as an intellectual trap that disempowered people by telling them they are incapable of seeing through their own alienation.

9.3 As well as attacks from the left, Debord has also, and more predictably, been criticised from the right. Traditionalists, such as Roger Scruton (1944 - 2020), despite having sympathy with Debord's distaste for the superficiality of modern mass

media and consumer culture, argued that the spectacle is not caused by capitalism itself, but rather by the collapse of spiritual, religious and traditional hierarchies.

However, others, such as American economist Thomas Sowell (b.1930), mirror Rancière and defend consumers whose choice they see as a rational exercise of freedom, not a trick of the spectacle. They reject the idea that intellectuals can dictate what people *truly* need via a critique of the left-wing concept of "false needs", arguing that that was simply an excuse for an intellectual elite to feel superior to ordinary consumers. If people preferred mass entertainment or comfort, it was merely a reflection of human nature and democratic preference, not an insidious capitalist conspiracy.

9.4 Richard L. Kaplan has argued that phenomena such as people mobilising on Facebook groups to protest outside asylum hotels also seem to contradict Debord's thesis. Here, digital spectators become physical actors, with online communications sparking real-world protest. So has social media reintroduced agency and collective action, turning once passive consumers into galvanised political participants? Not according to Jodi Dean's 2009 concept of "communicative capitalism"; where digital participation, although endlessly circulating, rarely disrupts power. Instead, these apparent activists are actually operating *within* the spectacle. Social media platforms actively structure the conditions of these mobilisations by algorithmically amplifying emotion, outrage and identity. Hence, these protests often reproduce the spectacle's logic: generating visibility and emotional intensity rather than any sustained critique or structural change. Thus, while Facebook can indeed mobilise bodies and voices, she would argue that it does so only via mechanisms that commodify expression and sustain the spectacle's power. For Dean, the political implications are profound. Social media can turn even resistance into spectacle. 'Hashtag' activism and viral campaigns often rely on visibility rather than collective organisation, producing what she calls a "reflexive impotence".

10. Conclusion

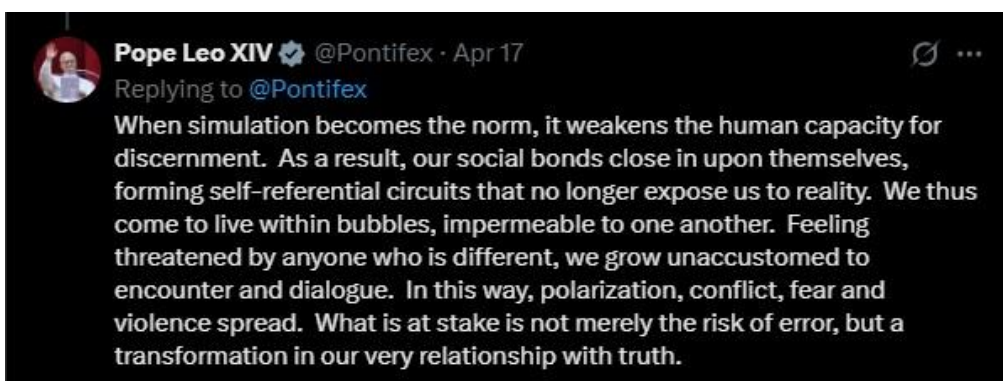
So is Debord's critique relevant in the digital age?

I find it hard not to be impressed that Debord's vision of a society governed by images hasn't just endured but has evolved and intensified. That this is a world in which visibility itself has become the ultimate commodity.

Facebook users curate identities through photographs, posts and timelines; selecting moments that project happiness, success, or social connection. But what emerges is more of an idealised self than the messy totality of lived experience. The "likes" and "shares" transform social interaction into quantifiable affirmation. Friendship and recognition become mediated by metrics; turning emotional and social life into data points of symbolic capital. What Debord called, "the concrete inversion of life into spectacle."

Pope Leo XIV, X post,
17th April 2026.

If Facebook represents the social organisation of the spectacle, then TikTok appears to represent its hyperactive, intensified form. With its short-form videos, looping sounds and algorithmically curated *For You Page (FYP)*, it exemplifies a world of fragmented attention and perpetual novelty. Meanwhile, its algorithm exemplifies Debord's insight that the spectacle is not just a set of images, but a form of centralised control. It's TikTok that determines who is seen and who remains invisible, shaping taste and attention in ways that align with its commercial interests. Viral dances and trends are a mere performance of individuality; whereas, in fact, they are tightly structured by the algorithm.



11. Questions and Discussion Topics

1) What can we make of the claim that there has been a historical shift in human experience, from *being* to *having* to *appearing*?

- 2) Do we agree with Debord's acceptance of Feuerbach's claims on the origin of religion, Marx's belief that social existence precedes consciousness, and/or Lukács's insistence that reification leads to false consciousness?
- 3) Is Debord's 'a plague on both your houses' condemnation of the enthrallment of both democratic and autocratic regimes to the spectacle accurate?
- 4) Are Debord's five features of the integrated spectacle persuasive? Are their applications to Putin's Russia and/or the Broligarchy relevant?
- 5) Is *détournement* likely to be effective, or is Baudrillard's pessimism more convincing?
- 6) Is Debord being elitist in seeming to accuse the masses of being hypnotised dupes?
- 7) Was Debord's diagnosis of his contemporary world compelling? If so, is it still relevant today? Is it actually more so?