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**SOCIETY
OF THE SPECTACLE**

**Black & Red
Detroit
1983**



II

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.

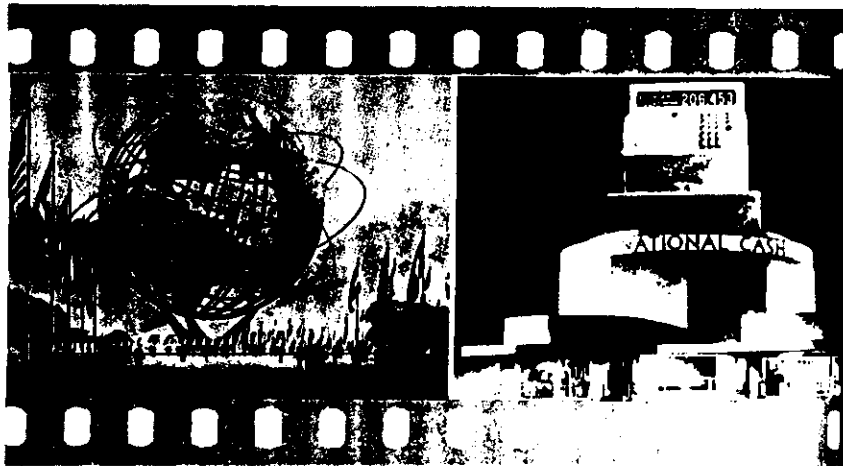
The loss of quality so evident at all levels of spectacular language, from the objects it praises to the behavior it regulates, merely translates the fundamental traits of the real production which brushes reality aside: the commodity-form is through and through equal to itself, the category of the quantitative.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

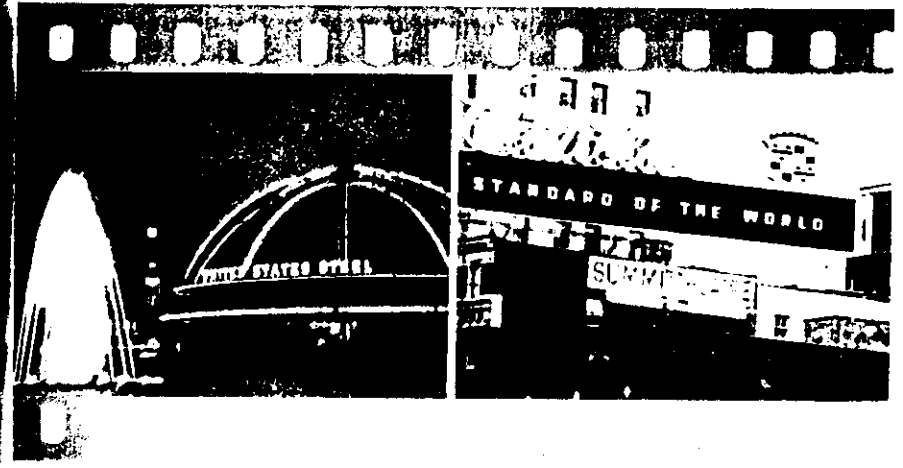
The commodity's domination was at first exerted over the economy in an occult manner; the economy itself, the material basis of social life, remained unperceived and not understood, like the familiar which is not necessarily known. In a society where the concrete commodity is rare or unusual, money, 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.

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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.

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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.