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Holding and Reversing the Camera Obscura

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Abstract. The following study examines the critical interplay between ideology, mediated reality, and the role that individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and actions play in this process. In doing so, the study delves into the examination of the way power structures and dominant narratives proceed into influencing cultural expression and, consequently, impact social action. It is thus argued that in contemporary society, the Situationist notion of "the spectacle" has replaced any understanding of reality and created a reified social world dominated by commodities that reinforce dominant ideologies and determine subjective perceptions. Furthermore, the paper addresses the impact of this mediated reality on personal subjectivity and agency. Drawing on Marx's metaphor of the "camera obscura" as ideology, it argues for a transformative "reversal of perspective" that changes how individuals view and engage with their environment. Ultimately, this study underscores the profound impact of "the spectacle" on social relations, ideology, and perception. It argues for a transformative and creative approach that challenges individuals to resist the grasp of the spectacle, reclaim their agency, and develop new perspectives for interacting with the world. The extensions of the gaze subtly refer to the basis of economy manifested as "false consciousness" reflected by the camera obscura as an inverted image but readjusted with the tools of spectacles and mirrors within the reflective apparatus.

Keywords: situationists, the spectacle, perspective, contemplation, agency, ideology

Удержание и переворачивание камеры-обскуры

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Аннотация. В предлагаемом исследовании рассматривается критическое взаимодействие между идеологией, опосредованной реальностью и ролью, которую восприятия, убеждения и действия людей играют в этом процессе. При этом исследование углубляется в изучение того, как властные структуры и доминирующие нарративы влияют на культурное самовыражение и, следовательно, на социальные действия. Таким образом, утверждается, что в современном обществе ситуационистское понятие «спектакля» заменило любое понимание реальности и создало овеществленный социальный мир, в котором доминируют товары, которые усиливают господствующие идеологии и определяют субъективное восприятие. Кроме того, рассматривается влияние этой опосредованной реальности на личную субъективность и активность. Опираясь на метафору Маркса о «камере-обскуре» как идеологии, она утверждает преобразующий «переворот перспективы», который меняет то, как люди смотрят на окружающую среду и взаимодействуют с ней. В конечном счете, это исследование подчеркивает глубокое влияние «спектакля» на социальные отношения, идеологию и восприятие, выступает за преобразующий и творческий подход, который побуждает людей сопротивляться захвату зрелища, восстанавливать свою свободу воли и развивать новые перспективы взаимодействия с миром. Расширение взгляда тонко отсылает к основе экономии, проявляющейся как «ложное сознание», отраженное камерой-обскура как перевернутое изображение, но корректируемое с помощью очков и зеркал внутри отражающего аппарата.

Ключевые слова: ситуационисты, зрелище, перспектива, созерцание, агентность, идеология

Introduction

To think, the Cartesian subject also serves oneself with the faculty of vision. For Descartes, the faculty of vision not only aids in forming thought but could also install doubt with which one continually verifies the reality in which one finds oneself. Indeed, Descartes has devoted extensive studies to the mechanics of the gaze, exploring the way the eyes perceive objects, which are subsequently comprehended by the mind. As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, before Descartes, there were two schools of thought regarding how the eyes can hold objects and 'insert' them into the eye: one school of thought proposed that the eyes emitted rays that touched the object of vision to return to the eye — at the same time, the second

believed that small copies that could enter the eye were made by the object of perception [1. P. 74]. On the other hand, Descartes presented a diagram in his *Dioptrique* (1637) depicting the dynamics of the eyes, clearly connected to the brain, which in turn was metaphorically represented as an elderly sage evaluating and judging the object of perception. Descartes claimed that after light entered the eyes, it created images on the retina — a kind of impression and a separate 'camera obscura' device, as the brain received these images via the optic nerves. In his study, Descartes did not specifically name the pineal gland as a link between mind and body in the context of vision. Instead, he emphasized how the brain is the central organ responsible for processing the information the eyes receive by using the visual metaphor of the sage critic, who evaluates what is presented to him. However, before Descartes changed the understanding of vision and perception [1. P. 76], the investigations into how reality was to be perceived and appropriated by the mind through tools and devices were anticipated by the first explanatory designs of the camera obscura in Giovanbattista della Porta's *Magia Naturalis* (1558) in which reality was not only to be recovered and appropriated through the mechanics of the gaze but also to be transferred to another surface different from the original on which reality was already located, to then be appropriated by the human gaze, from that second place where reality stood mediated. This process, as described by della Porta, was achieved with the help of lenses and a mirror attached to the projecting device that would help to make the transference of the reflected image onto a flat, distinct surface, as natural and nitid as it is in its reality [2].

The mechanisms of transferring reality from its original place to the gaze and the brain — to another surface or another device, and every time adding instruments to adjust the image more and more, have become part of how one participates in the reality he or she inhabits. It is a way to relate to one's mediated environment. Thus, manipulating, reversing, and inverting the reflected image of the real becomes a (second) human nature being part of how the subject deals with and explores reality, trying to change and manipulate it according to one's thoughts, judgments, and desires.

Reality, the environment, and the media that enclose and mediate it elsewhere, where it is not, have also become of interest to postmodern studies and theories. The subject, referring to what is seen, adapts to it and dwells elsewhere — in the place of the environment in front of one's gaze, whatever the surface, whatever the space.

The problem of representation

The Frankfurt School is one of the most remarkable movements that has explored how the subject relates to the already mediated environment, what the subject becomes when it identifies with one's perceived surroundings in a Lacanian way, and subsequently, how one reads oneself in this mediated, modified, and adapted reality — a reality that in turn shapes one's thinking [3]. This becomes a way of life as soon as one tries to adapt to it — reifying the individual based on an

ideology — a hypostasized worldview. Similarly, Louis Althusser saw the materialization of ideology in the world through how it is mediated elsewhere and anywhere to ultimately assert that "ideology represents the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence" [4. P. 109]. Thus, according to Althusser, ideology is one's understanding of reality and his/her mediation process of actual reality — one's meaning of reality according to their conditions of existence, instead of being the actual reality of anything itself, as ideology conceals the basis of the real. Hence, it can be asserted that ideology reflects society's idea about itself.

Nevertheless, Guy Debord, the founder of the *Situationist International*, published a manifesto-like book in 1967, criticizing a society that dwells in an altered reality — one that has completely lost its place of origin. Using the term "spectacle," Debord defines a society reified by a mediated and artificial reality governed by invisible economic laws. Through a tautology, he asserts that "[w]hat appears is good; what is good appears" (Thesis 12) [5]. The spectacle is thus the other side of reality, or, to use a Lukàcsean term, a "second nature" for a society that adapts to a mediated vision of reality itself [6]. In Debord's vocabulary and frame of reference, the "spectacle" is another definition for a society that identifies with its environment until both become the same — the still image of consumer society — without movement and with a single goal, which is itself.

As a matter of fact, in some translated versions of Marx's German Ideology (1846), the terms "environment" and "life" are used to denote the same concept. Thus, for Marx, it is not consciousness that shapes the environment but the environment that determines consciousness [7. P. 47]. Similarly, and simultaneously conversely, the Situationist concept of 'psychogeography' considers the observation of one's feelings evoked by the environment in which one finds oneself to create an 'emotional map' of the physical space and the space of contemplation. This 'map' is meant to shape an authentic human subject, as the environments selected from the whole city are chosen as places (signifiers) of pleasure — which, in turn, produce a similar (pleasant) subject. Likewise, what the Situationists denounce throughout their theoretical texts is an impoverished existence, an existence plundered by the spectacle, where once again, it is not life that is determined by consciousness, but consciousness delineated by life — "The spectacle <...> is specifically the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness…" (Thesis 3) [5].

Thus, it can be asserted that how one sees also shapes one's subjectivity. Hence, if life and environment are the same things, then Vaneigem's suggestion to create a passionate life is equivalent to creating a passionate environment — which is implied in the technique of the Situationist dérive in the sphere of psychogeography [8. P. 103]. Nevertheless, for Marx, 'life' also means one's social conditions. Life, then, is the environment as a product of human labor within a particular ideology that reflects a particular moment in historical time, i.e., the time

of human consciousness and thought at a very particular moment in history, and the conditions, that is, the way one experiences one's physical survival and the comfort and ease with which one maintains one's survival within it.

Similarly, Alexander Gungov's theory of an already post-consumer society reflects conditions that have developed through the reification of other visual means that serve to make reality visible to be able to dwell in it [9. P. 124–125]. This, according to Gungov, is reflected by the means of statistics. As for the author, society is visualized through statistical diagrams in which individuals are its units. Consequently, this process makes it harder for individuals to become active subjects in a reality that they shape or to act on an element that does not exist in the diagram of reality. This mechanism "blocks the dialectic of becoming conscious" [10. P. 283]. As a result, the individual becomes a "real" number in the diagram, representing that which is perceived as real and fulfilling the task of being one: to be reflected and to recognize oneself in the graphs, which stand for the entire selfhood — the personality, choices, and one's uniqueness — thus indicating the position of the individual. As Baudrillard notes, "Instead of strengthening agency and democracy, statistical visualization and representation prevent certain elements from being preserved" [10. P. 279]. In this way, the real disappears to make way for an image [9. P. 138].

Following Gungov's introduction of the concept of a post-consumer society, one can see that the individual is not only the passive body who is susceptible to manipulation by the environment to which they are exposed but also a subject who already perceives and recognizes themselves in the mirror of a statistical environment, recognizing one's place (significance in the social context) in the diagram representing them [11]. As Ken Knabb points out, ideology is a conscious recognition, but the world it refers to is false. To further explain this metaphorically, Jacques Rancière suggests that one's position in the environment is also one's ideological position [12]. However, if viewed as a compliant statistical unit, the individual's only role is to be the symbol of one's choices and lifestyle in numerical units that hypostatize his or her being, existential meaning, and values. Thus, as Vaneigem explains, the individual's ability of "reversal of perspective" should become a permanent condition — because this is the authentic position of a human being in the world — and the "radical subject" is the one that establishes the common ground and prepares the terrain of the battlefield [8. P. 88–103].

The tools of ideology

As aesthetics erect barriers that serve to identify and recognize the supporting structures of society, through which one can think, relate, act, create, and live — in a tautological direction, reality and meaning are the tokens of meaning and reality — their *raison d'être* and the exact reason for maintaining such an eternal cycle. In this sense, the creation of any object, in reality, is the creation of the object's reality and the confirmation of this reality within the object itself. Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle launched such a claim, specifically noticeable in his thesis 69,

in which he states that "another object already carries the justification of the system and demands to be acknowledged" (Thesis 69) [5]. At the same time, it is a statement of the fact that every kind of communication is, sooner or later, appropriated by the objects of reality and the language that absorbs everything. Language is always political and always real. Thus, reality, or social reality, is incorporated and represented by the subjects acting in it through language, which is accurate insofar as it is understood and shared by others.

In this sense, statistics can be likened to the Orwellian Newspeak language (*1984*), which was purposefully "designed to diminish the range of thought" rather than to see better and understand the invisible elements that make up society, becoming the concrete numbers of an abstracted reality instead. Soon, things are excluded from the reality of the world, so they cease to exist and are forgotten, with no hope of being remembered through the abstract universality of concrete numbers — similarly, any transmission of reality in a place where it is not. As Baudrillard notes [10. P. 283], deprives the original movement of its rhythm and its meaning" [10. P. 282]. Moreover, as Althusser points out, "the individual is always already a subject, even before he [sic] is born, (and this) is <...> the plain reality accessible to everyone and by no means a paradox" [4. P. 119].

Nevertheless, to exist in a situation where getting access to the unaltered reality seems impossible, the Situationists offer two options: To speak the language of nothingness[1]. Alternatively, to use the familiar (dominant) language in an inverted way to devaluate its meaning.

However, one of the most commonly proposed Situationist techniques for escaping such circularity is the "reversal of perspective" described in another seminal Situationist text by Raoul Vaneigem in *The Revolution of Everyday Life,* 1967. In this case, the inversion of perspective would do nothing but straighten up the inverted image of the world and put it back on its feet, rendering the mediating device redundant. It can be asserted that the Situationists' excessive use of the word revolutionary in their theories is not accidental — considering that the words revolution and revolt, even etymologically, anticipate the desire for a reroute — a change of direction. The same is true of the word catastrophe, which has a similar meaning to revolution[2]. Baudrillard has noticed that 'catastrophe' does not refer to destruction but to the curvature of one such event — downward — rerouting into another direction from what is supposed to be, naturally [13. P. 83]. Similarly, to gain consciousness can always be interpreted as an apocalyptic event that etymologically involves lifting the veil off of the things of the world as they are. In their unveiling, every act of criticism, judgment, or commentary on a present

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[1] Baudrillard made a similar statement later in the years with his concept of *silence* as a subversive strategy (*Fatal Strategies*, 1983). Silence, as the opposite of the continuous self-praising and unbroken monologue of the media, can reverse the ongoing narrative of the established order. Also (Thesis 24) [5].

[2] In the former case, it is in archaic Greek (kata-over and strophein — to turn. Similar composition has the Latin word "revolve").

situation is a kata-strophein (down/over-turn). In this sense, the literal meaning of re-volution presupposes that there is a central point, an axis, around which the rotation takes place: This central point, both in the Situationist view and in the perspective of the historical avant-gardes, is the subject itself so that it can shift and reverse its view of the world — act consequently in its opposite environment, or to change it according to the newly adopted perspective it now has.

Visualizing agency

Thus, the spectacle in its immateriality is "the materialization of ideology," but on the other hand, for Debord, a commodity is the spectacle itself, and the spectacle is a commodity — in a twist in which idealism and materialism are subsumed by the lenses and mirror of the spectacle (Theses 212–213) [5]. To reiterate, the Althusserian claim, "ideology has a material existence," and it is reflected in common social practices [4. P. 212]. For this reason, the Situationists' decision to refuse to produce or communicate through works of art that they identify with the language and means of capitalism to feed and sustain its existence is an exciting proposition. However, their methods of radicalism and their language have nonetheless been appropriated and co-opted by capitalism. In this sense, any cultural product — art — is the material existence of ideology — the superstructure that sustains the base. As Althusser notes, "what apparently takes place outside ideology takes place inside ideology <...>. Therefore, those inside the ideology believe, by definition, that they are outside the ideology. One of the effects of ideology is the practical denial by ideology of the ideological character of ideology: ideology never says, "I am ideological" [4. P. 118].

According to Marc Augé, the world of the spectacle is a universe of recognition rather than a universe of knowledge [14. P. 33]. In other words, that which is familiar to all: a symbolic totality composed of "collections of codes" and "signifying spaces" and transpires in the entire "organization of space" in order to constitute "closed universes in which everything is a sign" and as a matter of fact, the organization of space in the world of the spectacle is designed to create a sense of familiarity and recognition for the audience. Augé argues that this act of recognition, rather than actively seeking knowledge, deprives the individual of their agency, leaving them in a contemplative and docile state. This emphasis on symbolic codes and signifying spaces also highlights how the organization of space within the spectacle serves to reinforce its status as a closed universe where everything is imbued with meaning that is indisputable and inaccessible to questioning or any critical analysis.

Accordingly, and paradoxically, the Situationist attempt, in its rejection of the dominant culture, creates a new ideology with which it combats the dominant ideology, thus constituting a new language that is eventually absorbed by the dominant ideology, takes it over, in turn, and perhaps undergoes a (minimal) transformation toward its opposition. However, as Fredric Jameson points out, "even overtly political interventions <…> are all somehow surreptitiously disarmed

and absorbed by a system of which they might themselves be considered part since they cannot achieve any distance from it" [15. P. 49].

Similarly, following Gungov, it can be stated that with his introduction of the concept of post-consumer society, the individual is not only a docile body subject to manipulation by the environment to which one is exposed, but such a subject already perceives and recognizes oneself in the mirror of a statistical environment. To mix two theories: Lacan's mirror phase and Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a mirror in which the subject recognizes oneself where he or she is not, in another place in front of the subject's gaze. In Lacan's case, the subject recognizes itself and its role in the environment by recognizing one's environment [3; 12; 16]. However, suppose one considers the individual as a compliant statistical unit. In that case, the individual's only role is to symbolize one's choices and lifestyle in numerical units that hypostatize his or her being, existential meaning, and values. Therefore, as Vaneigem explains, the "inversion of perspective" should become a permanent condition — because this is the authentic position of the individual acting and interacting in the world [17].

Thus, a camera obscura projects an inverted image — its mirror and lenses turn the projected image upside down and straighten the image: the first is the device that captures reality, the second is the means to bring it to its "natural" state and direction. The concept of the camera obscura is complemented by Debord's metaphor of the mirror, using the concept of the "spectacle." But perhaps Baudrillard's allegory of the Moebius strip [18. P. 18] suggests that no revolution is possible, no reversal of the situation, since the side that remains visible is always the same — suggesting that there is no real verse of reality since everything has already been absorbed into the camera obscura.

In conclusion

As argued above, the appropriation of the visible reflects one's relationship to one's surroundings — the reversal takes place on the terrain of the visible — the knowable, the shareable, and the desirable. Thus, the immediately visible intervention in the digital space, following Baudrillard, depends on the factor of "the lowest common culture" [19], or the most recent element of popular culture, substituting and serving not only as casual and independent cultural signs but as whole language systems. Currently, as units of digital culture, memes are the means of communication reflecting the most immediate and globally comprehensible means of expression.

Memes circulate on the web as a means of communication, and their aesthetics often reflect a reversal of perspective as they use the expedients of the familiar cultural element (the lowest common culture) to counteract culture itself. In this case, the use of culture to combat culture in the organization of society echoes the Situationist "parodic-serious" — a technique of devaluation explained in *Détournement as Negation and Prelude*, published in the third issue of the Situationist bulletin (IS, 1959). The technique of the "parodic-serious" undermines

the element's relationship between context and language — through an inversion of that which is familiar, making it mean the exact opposite. However, it is still a matter of using the same language of oppression to oppress it with the same means — an actual *reversal of perspective*, organizing the same old elements in an ever-new way — constituting a new structure through recombining the same elements.

In this sense, if "(t)he language of the spectacle consists of signs of the ruling production, which at the same time are the ultimate goal of this production" (Thesis 7) [5], to the extent that societies and technologies are co-produced through the digital, the digital offers new possibilities of being and interaction to create new lifestyles and social existences, just as culture has always sought to transform its subjects and their world.

Another view is possible

McKenzie Wark is among the first scholars to have connected the digital world with a Situationist theory (*A Hacker Manifesto*, 2004). Drawing on Marx's *Communist Manifesto*, the author analyzes, in a Debordean fashion, the digital world of capital and the world-building capabilities of algorithms. The assertion that "hackers produce new perceptions and sensations" (Thesis 002) [20] — suggests the individual's ability as a creator of worlds — the creator of one's reality according to one's skills and knowledge. Wark specifies that "the slogan of the hacker class is not the workers of the world united, but the workings of the world untied" (Thesis 006) [20].

Accordingly, in an information society, where information forms consciousness [14. P. 92–100], the same way all other environments do, Wark shares Vaneigem's optimism about the emancipatory potential of technology if applied for the benefit of society and praises the multidisciplinary character of the digital realm, where programmers could finally take possession of the means of control and sustenance and make them their own.

As the Situationists advocated for a decentralized, anti-authoritarian society and sought to subvert dominant cultural and political systems, the blockchain, as a decentralized digital ledger, can potentially disrupt centralized systems of control and power by enabling direct, peer-to-peer transactions without intermediaries. In this sense, the use of blockchain in contemporary political culture is a form of Situationist-inspired intervention.

Nonetheless, the blockchain offers some revolutionary aesthetics: by creating new spaces of social interaction based on constructing new values as a counter-spectacular basis for new kinds of relations, contrasting "the spectacle" which presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable, and inaccessible. The access to the inaccessible (Thesis 12) [5]. Lyotard has envisioned the importance of access–especially in a cybernetic future where bureaucratization is remotely controlled by (pre)programmed programs and their inherent platforms of use [21. P. 14]. Similarly, as culture and its products have shifted to the digital world,

hackers and programmers could suggest new ways of thinking[3] [12. P. 39] by directly manipulating perceptions of the livable world — offering multiple possible experiences that can be lived in these places, changing the nature of social interactions [12]. Hence, a new empirical dimension becomes a plethora of meaningful data, codes, and signs that are thus an inseparable part of the social reality everyone experiences in their everyday lives.

In this sense, manipulating digital signs and logos is as vital as manipulating signs in the physical environment. Not only are social relationships dictated by the digital, but the arrangement and rearrangement of its signs open up new possibilities for relationships and exchange (even communication as an exchange). In this sense, as Rancière points out, thinking the social is thinking of the world so that to disrupt or destroy a feature on which the social is based is also to destroy that world and end it[4] [12. P. 38]. To reiterate in a Situationist way, "the destruction of contemporary conditioning" must occur "simultaneously with the construction of situations," which is now happening mainly in the field of digital space [22. P. 111].

Thus, the "organization of appearances" (For the Situationists, this is another way to refer to culture), or in other words, "the distribution of the sensible," requires an act similar to taking a standpoint — taking a position and acting according to one's desire to inscribe oneself in the world.

Individuals can actively shape and challenge existing cultural norms by embracing the "inversion of perspective" as a permanent condition. This radical subjectivity establishes a common ground for collective action and lays the groundwork for transformative change in society.

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[3] For Rancière, artists who work with cultural materials can be subversive, not by presenting an aesthetically relevant product per se, but by "suggesting (to the viewer) new ways of thinking."

[4] This paper claims that the spectacle is a model — a model of social relations and a model of an objectified worldview.

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