Click If You Like This, or OCCUPY as Spectacle: a Technological Derive.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is the textual component of a dialogic, performative, multi-media lecture that re-reads Guy Debord’s, The Society of the Spectacle (1967) with reference to the global Occupy movement, and the role social media, and the proliferation of digital images play in the facilitation and hindrance of this recent form of political activism. It explicitly addresses the connections between global capitalism, public space and digital technology by responding to selective quotations from Debord’s book in creative and anecdotal registers.

Using the multiple functions and staggering proliferation of various image making technologies used to record and represent OCCUPY actions as a starting point, we ask questions about the status of social media as a spectacular technology par excellence. The presentation, on which this paper is based, enacts various situationist strategies of ‘artistic interference’ — such as the dérive and détournement — in order to generate a series of interrogations and provocations about the politics of place, the degradation of social space, networked images and the ubiquity of contemporary ‘spectacular’ technologies, which have colonized all forms of everyday life. This paper must be read in conjunction with the film ‘Click if You Like This.’

A more expansive version of this paper, which includes links to the integral audio-visual component of the presentation, can be found here: http://clickifyoulikethis.wordpress.com/

Because of the limitations of space, we have provided abridged quotations from Debord’s text. Readers can find Debord’s book on-line:

http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/pub_contents/4
INTRODUCTION

This paper is a metaphor for the break down or colonization of traditional notions of narrative, complicity, place and social space in the age of social media. In broad terms, it invites a critical (re)engagement with Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle by using selective quotations from the book to initiate a series of reflections on the commodification of social space and political activism. Part reflective essay, part critical analysis, and part memoir, ‘Click if You Like This’ uses various situationist strategies of ‘artistic interference’ — such as the dérive and détournement — to generate a series of questions and provocations about the politics of place, the degradation of social space, networked images and the ubiquity of contemporary ‘spectacular’ technologies, which have colonized all forms of everyday life. The paper questions whether contemporary strategies of ‘interference’ are the same as their historical precedents, and invites its readers to contribute their own responses to Debord’s writings.

4. The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

![Image of the Megaphone Man at Occupy Melbourne](image)

*Figure 1. The Megaphone Man at Occupy Melbourne, copyright Glenn D’Cruz*

Click, Click, Click.
The crowd gathers round the man with the megaphone. Outstretched arms capture his image with ubiquitous cameras. Some are equipped with professional DSLR technology, long telephoto lenses protruding from bulky camera bodies in aggressive phallic salute, poised to record the grand parade for posterity; others unceremoniously brandish their multifunction smart phones, raising them like cigarette lighters at a rock concert. Where will these images be displayed? How will they be distributed, consumed, and interpreted, and by whom, and to what ends?

I am part of the crowd, I, too, hoist my camera in righteous salutation, hoping to document the megaphone man’s testimony, which echoes around the streets of Melbourne, its signal strengthened by the ‘human megaphone’, the throng of chorused voices that repeat every utterance as a droning prayer, a solemn, monotone chant devoid of expression, but suffused with rhythm, a music of the masses.

No doubt, some are casually hanging around, hoping to see a fire starter, hoping to see a blood red river flow through the streets of their city, just like on TV, or the Internet, or on the gigantic high definition screens found in plazas and piazzas, just like in those far away places where the ground is stained with human gore, and the prospect of revolution palpably imminent.

It’s not clear who is protesting, and who is merely observing. The faces are predominantly young — some earnest, excited, and sober; others mildly curious, or vaguely distracted by the promise of diversion from mundane chores, and the daily bump and grind of alienated labour.

I hear the roar of the football horde, I hear the compliant grumble of totalitarian fear, and, perhaps, the faintest murmur of the multitude, a coming community, a blind giant wrestling with the contradictions of the collective, a bond of belonging not predicated on any particular identity (Agamben, 1993). I hear the confused whispers of a disorganized rabble waiting for something to appear. Waiting for something to happen. Waiting for the ultimate photo opportunity. Waiting for the end of history, perhaps, or eagerly anticipating the moment when they can upload images of the carnival to the digital cloud, so they can function as expressions of political solidarity, manifestations of personality, symbols of potent potentiality. Click, if you like this, Facebook friends, for I was there, and I really care. Hey, I raised my tightly clenched fists in the crisp morning air, didn’t I?
Political kitsch, said Kundera, the cynical, reluctant dissident, is the absence of shit on the royal road to equality and justice. The identity of kitsch comes not from a political strategy but from images, metaphors, and vocabulary.’ (Kundera 1984, 261)

I’ve seen these poses before, I’ve chanted these slogans and sung these same songs many years ago with passionate intensity, and an unerrring sense of justice. We are the 99per cent, brothers and sisters!

Click, Click, Click.

165. Capitalist production has unified space, breaking down the boundaries between one society and the next. This unification is at the same time an extensive and intensive process of banalization …This homogenizing power is the heavy artillery that has battered down all the walls of China.

One of my three sons sent me a text message a few weeks ago from Shanghai: ‘I am pretty sure a few people were crushed to death on trains this morning. At Jingan Temple there was no room on the platform to use the escalator. I waited 30 minutes — only 2 trains came in that time. When I finally got on, the scene was just as bad at People’s Square. There was no room for people to even get off the train without yelps from the platform.’

I sent back the disempowered invocation of a parent’s love: look after yourself! This bit of information hit me as disarmingly real. It was news from the front, a slither of visceral energy slipping through the surface of the normalised amnesic news cacophony. I myself did little more. Look after yourself?

The globalized hallucinations that my stuttering criticism drowns in day-to-day had struck me dumb. Inside the fogged concern for my son’s safety, this mass of straightjacketed constricted yelps got to me.

I had been in Shanghai a few months earlier visiting Abe, having moved through and filmed inside Jingan Temple and People’s Square Underground stations. I had devised a means of shooting these crowds in the subway with time exposure at the exit gates, getting these masses of bodies blurring into each other with animated faces stretched out like a Francis Bacon painting. When told by an official that filming was illegal I moved on without
hesitation. But I already had my catch. In these short animations the blur that in analogue
times resided in the landscape outside the train window was now contained in clusters of
ghosted bodies moving through the subway. Later together we wrote words with light at night
on the Jigan Temple itself and captured the streak of cars at the traffic lights. This city could
have been in Europe.

Figure 2. Copyright, Dirk de Bruyn.

On this trip I had also performed with voice and film at a local gallery, manipulating three
strands of images in a 50-minute piece with mirrors and shadows, punctuated with guttural
screams that assaulted the audience, pre-cogging the effect on my young audience that I now
felt.

It had been difficult getting 16mm projectors for my performance, finally getting two for an
outrageous $200 a day. I could buy 2 projectors for that in Australia, taken them to Shanghai
and left them there. One did not work. But they were unique, made in China about 50 years
ago, with everything a little bit different. It was like driving on the wrong side of the road.
Their owner, about my age, was also unique, a collector of Communist Party Propaganda
Films. He did not speak English. I gained his respect by learning his machines in a flash and
putting them to uses he had not thought of during my performance. He wanted to shake my
hand. That made my day. It was real.
Having read Abe’s text I had to get to work, and talk to a class about found footage cinema, and watch Judy Garland again transformed into a tick-riddled catatonic, involuntarily re-enacting the performances of hysterics at Paris’s Salpetriere’s Mental Hospital that Charcot had orchestrated weekly for public display at both psychoanalysis’s and cinema’s inception. Garland’s puppeted singing also connected me back to the possession of Haitian Voodoo that Maya Deren had witnessed directly and re-performed on her return to New York (de Bruyn, 2010). It was one of those films that was short enough for the students to enjoy although one emailed me to say she had already watched it online and would not be coming in. She missed out on the pristine 16mm print and a shared experience. Is there a connection here to the virus of asphyxiation plaguing a Shanghai metro station?

I hope not.

Abe was in China teaching English for Disney to five year olds. He enjoys it. He talked of engaging his students as their parents looked on, a kind of aspirant form of entertainment for the power parents. Coming to work late one day they insisted he work another hour so they got their money’s worth. They liked his work. Did that occur on this day? He showed me an image of a Korean Language School where the front door was mocked up like the airport entrance gate and departure lounge, a great metaphor or logo, I thought, for the hypermobility coupled to ‘English’ in this aspirant age of globalization.

Later I came across this same image in a film at a Bangkok Film Festival to which I travelled on a new underground system, the equivalent of Shanghai’s — you watch repeating ads on multiple monitors while waiting for and travelling on these trains. There was one about travelling around Sydney with an actor that looked, walked and dressed like Abe. I must have glimpsed it 50 times. It made me remember that Abe’s friends, travelling around Asia were saying there was this tourist ad and they were texting that it looked like him, and asking was it him?

I knew it wasn’t Abe, but I was incessantly brought back to the memory of his post-midnight telling of this anecdote in his Shanghai flat. He had this longing way of talking of such things. It passed me over then but it now meant something having become a recycled thought I tried to avoid. But a flash of this image in a fog still appears now and again.

The film with the image of the Korean Language School was Kim Kyung-man’s 118 minute An Escalator in World Order (2011) of which I wrote in a review: ‘When a group of very young Korean children phonetically singing ‘God bless America, my home sweet home’ to
Jimmy Carter, a hard-wired aspirational will performs at the feet of its ideological altar.’ (de Bruyn 2012) I imagined these children as coming from this school. But in Abe’s class the shoe is now on the other foot.

23 The root of the spectacle is that oldest of all social specializations, the specialization of power.

‘If you should think this is Utopian, then I would ask you to consider why it is Utopian (Brecht 1964, 51).’

The development of mass media technologies like radio and film in the first half of the twentieth century excited some of the most vociferous critics of fascism. Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin observed Nazism at close hand, and were only too aware of how the Nazi’s masterfully manipulated these new technologies as instruments of propaganda in order to unleash the mesmerizing force of its carefully orchestrated spectacles.

Brecht, according to his friend and most astute champion, Benjamin, saw how the Nazi’s aestheticized politics, so he attempted to politicize aesthetics, partly by incorporating nascent mass media into his theatre productions (Benjamin, 1969). These enemies of fascism were also aware that the one to many broadcast model that appeared as a fundamental feature of mass media masked its truly radical potential. At the level of the electronic circuit, every speaker is potentially a microphone, and as the poet and early media theorist Hans Magnus Enzensberger once observed, ‘every receiver is a potential sender (Enzensberger, 1970)’. This technological fact inspired utopian dreams of a networked society where everybody could interact and actively communicate with each other. This vision would see the realization of humanity’s ‘species being’ and the abolition of false distinctions between producers and consumers, authors and readers, actors and spectators. Or would it?

Today, we live in a networked world. It’s possible to broadcast your innermost thoughts, feelings, or misanthropic rants to the entire world, or at least those plugged into the labyrinthine World Wide Web, which, like capitalism itself, continues to expand without foreseeable limit or purpose beyond expansion itself. Today we can interact with the spectacle — we, the 99%, are king makers, or at least hit makers. We have the power to vote people off reality television shows, actively participate in creating the next pop sensation, or partake in the humiliation of obese people with a few finger taps on our cell phones. We, the 99%, can also potentially change the world. We can organize protest actions quickly, efficiently and more effectively than ever before.
Lacking structured leadership, a single spokesperson and even a clear message, the Occupy movement has grown through the use of personal media and new technologies, sustained by participants’ own network of contacts and willingness to dive into the political fray, says a UCLA information studies professor [Professor Leah A. Lievrouw] who studies the different ways media and technology shape society and culture (Wyer, 2012).

Everybody at Occupy Melbourne appeared at some point to click, tap, snap or excitedly stare into some kind of mobile device. It’s impossible to know exactly what they were doing with these devices. What is not in doubt is that today’s technologies have the same radical potential Brecht, Benjamin and Enzensberger glimpsed in the mass media of the 20th century. But to what extent do new media technologies and social media actually mobilize the 99%?

To what extent do they facilitate the utopian dream of a genuine participatory democracy?

To what extent does the heady flow of information, the cacophony of countless voices clamouring for attention in the virtual space of the Internet destroy the possibility of genuine political activism? Or does the very act of occupying privately owned ‘public’ space expose challenge old conceptions of ‘the nature and ontology of urban space (Ball 2012, 19).’

The spectacle, as Sadie Plant reminds us, quickly co-opts even the most radical revolutionary gesture, and turns it into a commoditized image (Plant 1992). Is there no location for critical distance in the society of the spectacle?

Remember Rodney King?

Remember Rodney King?

He was the hapless black man who received a merciless beating at the hands of the LAPD in 1992. A bystander armed with a video camera recorded the event before sending it to a television station. The subsequent broadcast of the tape resulted in the infamous LA riots of 1992. Lives were lost, property destroyed, communities ravaged and consumed by inchoate
rage and rebellion. I wonder what a similar incident might inspire today. Would a contemporary recording of police brutality attract the same degree of attention, or inspire the same kind of violent response? Would such a document struggle for attention amongst the detritus of the worldwide spectacle, or would the 99% express their abhorrence with a mouse click. Click if you like this! Click, Click, Click!

157. The lack of general historical life also means that individual life as yet has no history . . . Uncommunicated, misunderstood and forgotten, it is smothered by the spectacle’s false memory of the unmemorable.

I have been talking to my 92-year-old mother about the past or should I say she talks to me. Her speech is increasingly cut short from completed words. Only bits of sentences survive, word traces that I lock onto more through a thorough personal knowledge of her way of speaking than what is actually said. I gather her thoughts as best I can and I can see she is still healthily busy putting these half gestures together. It remains a lively conversation.

Hilda reads The Age every weekend and pointed me to a letter to the editor that she insisted, that’s how it is. Titled ‘A Long History of Bigotry’ it ended with:

‘Dear gay/black/wog/Muslim/asylum seeker…whatever. You’re welcome to help build the country and build the economy, but we’re rather threatened by you unless you are pretty much like us. So would you do us a favour and be less of who you are? There’s a good chap (Stratos, 2012)’

So you can participate but you cannot belong without throwing on an amnesic cloak is her, and the writer’s point, I suppose. Given that many have come to Australia to forget and escape this plays as a Lay Down Misère and an unerring complicity with the Spectacle’s dynamically seamlessly forms.

She always has a question about the Internet, wondering where the information actually is and why her email account is not working. But she has found photos online of the barges on which she grew up, which her father steered up and down the Rhine, in and out of Germany to Rotterdam and also to Antwerp. I remember that myself as a little boy. There are stories about the German Occupation attached to these boats, of the loudspeaker echo of Hitler Speeches in the public squares of settlements floated by, witnessed night bombings of these
towns, of being caught on ship in a crossfire and finding a cousin dead and half naked next to a set of soldier’s clothes at the end of the war.

Two stories remain important to me from this occupation. The first one concerns my diminutive but cocky grandmother entering a clothing shop previously owned by a Jewish family but now run by uniformed Germans. When asked by the new manager if she was happy with the service, she replied that if it was half as good as that performed by the previous owners then they would be doing very well. The second refers to an even riskier situation featuring my mother and her parents travelling on foot, boat-less, through a Dutch war zone. They reached a bridge where there were Germans and Canadians firing on each other across the river. When there was a lull in this exchange’s rhythm the German Sergeant would wave the waiting pedestrians to cross. My incredulous question was ‘Why would you trust him in that situation?’

‘Because it was his job to drag the shot bodies back from the bridge,’ remained the pragmatic reply. She has not been back. I have. On a visit to the Dordrecht’s Museum I came across a small picture covered with a black cloth which when pealed back revealed a small painting of the 1670’s political mob hanging, slaughter and gutting of the De Witt brothers in The Hague. This image exhumed a Ceausescu or Mussolini-like moment for me. This screened document is both present and absent to public scrutiny, occupying an unsettled pornographic space in a culture that revels in its liberal openness and whose front windows always frame a convivial domestic space to any passer-by. This mob act in the name of the House of Orange occurred near that site of moral rectitude where now the International Court tries the likes of Ratko Mladic and Charles Taylor. Perhaps this image should itself be nailed and hung above the court’s doors to let its ambiguities bleed back into our critical thinking. Failing that, I write this paragraph to ask ‘what is really hidden here?’

Figure 3. Fragment of De Witt Brother’s Hanging by Jan Baen circa 1672
My mother worked out that the man who had put the barge images online had written a book and lived near Dordrecht. I went there on a borrowed bike on the way to the Rotterdam Film Festival to buy some copies. Over a coffee and biscuit he told me in Dutch that the company had been sold and the new owners were throwing out these useless files and photos so when he lost his job he took them with him. It was a simple photocopied compilation that did the job for an old woman’s memory on the other side of the world, she didn’t mind what it looked like, did she?

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to apply the détournement to Debord’s work in order to make it speak out of context and work for our interrogation of the status of the image in the context of activist social media. While each section of the above paper is loosely connected to Debord’s ideas they neither endorse nor reject them. Rather, we have used Debord as a point of departure, or as a provocation to unsettle the romantic notion that social networks necessarily facilitate revolutionary political activism. We do this by drawing attention to the various inflections and meanings of the term ‘Occupy’ by making reference to the Nazi occupation of Holland, the tourist occupation of China, and the Occupy movement itself.

On the one hand, Debord’s critique of the spectacle underscores the ways spectacular technologies create the illusion of community while actually alienating people from each other, turning them, perhaps, into atomistic entities, soulless, reified commodities. Today, an extraordinarily large percentage of the population find themselves occupied by images in virtual space. We post, we stare, we glare, we click in celebration or indignation, we connect, we make friends, we network, and promote ourselves in a brave new, networked world. This may not be a bad thing, but what kind of community, its hour come round at last, slouches through cyberspace to be born?

REFERENCES


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BIOGRAPHY


Dr. Dirk de Bruyn teaches Animation and Digital Culture at Deakin University. He has a 40 year history of experimental film practice. More recently he has staged his multimedia performances internationally in London and Brighton UK, Utrecht, The Hague and Rotterdam Netherlands, Wellington, NZ. Tokyo and Shanghai.