



Edited by Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle

The Spell of Capital

Reification and Spectacle

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Cover illustration: Police rehearsal in Yiwu to prepare for the G20 summit in Hangzhou.

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Introduction

Reification and Spectacle: The Timeliness of Western Marxism¹

Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle

1. Yiwu: The Cryptogram of the Spectacle

We take our point of departure from the immense collection of commodities-become-spectacles of the trading stalls of Yiwu in the People's Republic of China, which we visited together in spring 2014 (Figure 1). If China as a whole has become the 'workshop of the world', then the mid-sized city of Yiwu located four hours southwest of Shanghai by train is its showroom. If the factories arrayed around the Shenzhen region of China have become the central sites of production in the global economy, in which the Middle Kingdom has participated with particular energy and dynamism since the structural reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the early 1980s, then Yiwu, with its wholesale market, the so-called 'China Commodity City', constitutes the



Figure 1. Trading stalls of Yiwu in the People's Republic of China. Photo by Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle.

nodal point for commodity exchange and accelerated capital circulation. It is a living monument to Deng's infamous 'Capitalist road to socialism', as if somehow, in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1949, that particular *pathway* could be thought and traversed independently of that specific *destination*.

Yiwu has only increased in importance since the aftermath of 9/11, we were told, with the tectonic shift of the Muslim world away from the United States towards China.² The evidence of such a shift is provided by the myriad Turkish coffee houses and Pakistani restaurants that line its bustling streets. In the endless stalls and shop windows of its commercial market one finds rows and rows of kitsch objects, souvenirs, Christmas decorations, ersatz art depicting familiar Biblical scenes such as the Crucifixion and the Last Supper, cute animals and cuddly teddy bears, children's toys, knick-knacks, and doodads, objects that sell not in the hundreds but the hundreds of thousands and millions of units to the legions of merchants who descend daily upon Yiwu from all over the world to place orders for their shops back home. Last but not least it was, ironically, in Yiwu where the police tested its men to prepare for the 2016 world economic summit to take place in Hangzhou as if to give visibility to the manifest and forceful ways in which global capital operates (see cover image).

What we find specifically in this epicentre of the global economy is precisely what has been identified in the period leading up to 9/11: the process by which it unleashes a certain rhythm of colonization on the world as was first captured by Rosa Luxemburg in her seminal text *The Accumulation of Capital* (See Retort Collective, 2004). Expanding ever outwards, well beyond the limit of the nation-state, 'capital accumulated to the point where it becomes images', transcends its 'diffuse' (Fordist), 'concentrated' (socialist) and 'integrated' (post-Fordist) forms and now becomes truly planetary. The unprecedented levels of economic growth and development in the periphery now enable social subjects of those societies to putatively participate in such development.

However, rather than benefitting *materially*, through increased access to clean water, housing, primary and secondary education, other than a rather modest, emerging middle class, citizens of China (and one could say BRIC societies as a whole) participate in capitalist development only virtually and passively by consuming only its *spectral image*; only in the form of the *spectacularization* of national economic and political power on the stage of global power politics.³ Inwardly, this leads to, indeed requires, a redoubled 'colonization of everyday life', not only through endogenous film and television, India's Bollywood, for example, but also through the

penetration of what we might term a kind of ‘micro-spectacle’ in the form of ever-shrinking and portable digital technology: the computers, iPads, iPhones, iWatches, wearable technologies, and the universally accessible social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Renren, Weibo, and a whole host of ‘hook-up’ sites that they make immediately available and present, whose varied and precise algorithms reflect back to us our own desires; what we always were, knew, and did all along. ‘Micro-spectacle’ describes a condition whereby forms of immaterial labour are appropriated by a form of ‘communicative capitalism’ (Dean, 2009) with an apparently insatiable appetite for digitally mediated communication, information that can then be fed into various marketing, actuarial, security circuits. Citizen/subjects are therefore kept in a dizzyingly permanent state of distraction, which results in political paralysis although not in a way that completely rules out the use of these technologies against separation itself as we discuss below.

Significantly, however, the terrain of resistance lies, in a manner that could perhaps never have been imagined by the originator of the concept of *détournement*, in the way in which the ‘spectacle’ could be turned against itself. This was already intimated by the repetition compulsion that manifested in the seemingly endless loop of the sequence of the twin planes flying into the Twin Towers, although with little or no apparent impact on a sanitized US popular culture. (The event wasn’t permitted to strain the upbeat ‘vibe’ of the Manhattan-set sitcom *Friends*, for example.) These attacks not only sought to land blows on the basic pillars of US power: the Pentagon and the Twin Towers, as a response to the US’s growing involvement in the Arab world, they can be understood as an attempt to confront the very logic of modernization itself.

If in the first Gulf War, with its so-called ‘smart bombs’ and hyper-voeurism, killing seemed to have become a pure matter of its representation. This constituted a prelude to our own drone age, represented after a decade or so of theoretical exuberance—perhaps itself an illusory symptom of Bill Clinton’s so-called ‘peace dividend’—the very limit of a kind of orgiastic postmodern excess reached its nadir in the claim made by one famous cultural critic that this war simply did not take place and was merely the *simulacrum* of a war (Baudrillard, 1995). (Try telling this story to a Kurdish family!) By the time of the attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing counterattack on the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that provided safe harbour for al-Qaeda, a certain lesson was learned and the position, this time, from the same critic was that this new line of conflict represented nothing short of the ‘fourth world war’ (Baudrillard, 2004).

A much more sober and productive discussion, in front of the backdrop of massive worldwide mobilization against the imminent and soon-to-be catastrophic invasion of Iraq by the US on 15 February 2003, could be discerned in a series of conversations undertaken by Giovanna Borradori published as *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* with erstwhile philosophical foes Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, who had just written an open letter on the possible emergence of a new 'European public sphere'.⁴ Both Habermas and Derrida see the event as resulting from the uneven nature of globalization, which has explosively combined a widening of social and economic inequities between North and South with the destruction of the symbolic resources of various lifeworlds, particularly in Islamic and Arabic regions. In the course of modernization, claims to universality become more and more problematic while the counter-strategy of fundamentalism seems to offer a successively concrete alternative. The sheer ubiquity of global capitalism, so Habermas and Derrida realize, subjects the normative resources stored up in local traditions to an almost unbearable pressure. What Derrida calls the 'auto-immune' response of terrorism, then, is the response to the increasing colonization of lifeworlds by strategic forms of rationality. The false concreteness of fundamentalism seems to provide an alternative to the crumbling social relations and normative foundations behind the glamorous and promising surface of commodification (Gandesha, 2006).

What neither philosopher properly grasps, however, is the way in which the commodifying logic of globalization unleashes profound and troubling anxieties within societies in which centuries-old traditions that are already under siege are challenged not just from the outside but from within as well. The best account of the transformation of the conditions of cultural life by an ever-globalizing capitalism remains, of course, Marx and Engels's Shakespearean paean to the transformative, liberating dynamics of capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto* in whose English translation one can hear clear echoes of the *Tempest*:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with the train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses [*mit nüchternen Augen*] his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Marx and Engels, 2008, pp. 38–39)

The uprooting of traditional social relations and community-based forms of life produces a political vacuum, very often filled with the spectacular imagery of concreteness, idols, and violence. These forms of concreteness are, in other words, part of the spell that capital itself produces. Nothing seems to escape the utter immanence of the system. This is made especially clear in the media strategy of the newly arisen geo-political player in the Middle East: the Sunni organization ISIS or ISIL (Islamic State in Syria/Levant) probably best known as Daesh (in Arabic, it is a mocking term meaning literally 'one who crushes underfoot'). Since its emergence in the chaos that has unfolded in post-invasion Iraq, post-civil war Syria and in the aftermath of the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, this formation has orchestrated a particularly deft media strategy by releasing high-definition video clips of its atrocities⁵—most recently its attacks on the twin spectacles of a heavy-metal rock show at Le Bataclan and a football match between Germany and France at Le Stade de France—via the internet to prospective recruits but also to a Western media which, in a state of crisis and intensive competition, compulsively and pathologically relies upon ever-more sensationalistic content to package, gloss, and market. In its very profit-maximizing logic, however, the Western media aids and abets Daesh in accomplishing its own strategic objectives: inducing nothing less than a condition of panic in ever-larger numbers of the population.⁶

In the absence of an organized Left in the Arab and Persian Worlds, either via co-optation or elimination, to enable popular forces to truly face the 'real conditions of life', namely, *social relations* as such, what has come to occupy the space of resistance are conservative revolutionary movements. They, for example, took power in Iran in 1979 and momentarily Egypt in the aftermath of Tahrir Square. The 'fundamentalist spectacle' (Lütticken, 2008), however, structurally repeats the nihilist vision of capitalist modernity in more than one respect: Where representation rules (both in the realm of the visual and in the realm of politics), alternatives will be rare if they appear at all.

The critique of reification and spectacle therefore also suggests an epistemic shift or a change of standpoint from the atomized reality of reified social relations and the glossy surface of hyper-capitalist idolatry, on the one hand, to the self-organization of those social forces that constitute and produce social reality, on the other. In other words, in the absence of an organized, self-confident workers' movement prepared aggressively to take up Nietzsche's dictum that 'Whatever is falling deserves a push', what we see is a quintessentially modern mobilization of the traditions organized around the idea of the 'holy', in opposition to an all-too 'profane' logic: what Marx elsewhere in the *Manifesto* deems the 'callous cash payment'.

However distorted the spectacle of terror might be, it may still contain an obscured image of social totality. The object of the attack on 9/11 was the multinational workforce housed at the World Trade Center as well as the military and security apparatus whose role it was to maintain the stability of the economic and geo-political order established by Bretton Woods (the Pentagon). On the other side of spectacle (see Lütticken, 2008), an equally distorted but equally symptomatic image was given: While typically understanding very little if anything and, indeed, visibly shaken and seemingly paralyzed upon learning the news about the attacks on the morning of September 11, George W. Bush did, however, possess unique insight into the real objective of the attack—the nihilism of expanded capital accumulation for its own sake and without limit. He unwittingly made this clear the day after the attacks when he enjoined US citizens to do their duty and go shopping or, indeed, to visit Disney World in Florida. This makes perfect sense: In the minds of those in power the world is truly a Manichean one, not so much divided by ‘good’ *versus* ‘evil’, as such, but rather by opposing versions of spectacle (Disney World *versus* 9/11).

But the problem of the spectacle, which emerges anew on 11 September 2001, has a more complex valence: the long-gestating Arab Revolutions.⁷ Ten years later, sparked by the tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the roadside fruiterer constantly harassed by the Tunis police, massive regional political convulsions were rapidly set in motion leading to, amongst other things, in the region’s most important state, Egypt, the rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in elections that followed the toppling of the Mubarak junta which, itself, in a farcical repetition that echoed that of Napoleon III so acerbically described by Marx, whereby Mubarak was replaced by Mubarakism in the person of General Sisi.

Egypt’s Tahrir Square, however, in September 2011, was the powerfully compelling inspiration behind the Occupy Movement that launched itself four years after the bottom fell out of the global economy as many US-based, supposedly ‘too-big-to-fail’ financial institutions were brought to their knees by virtue of their ‘exposure’ to macro-economic shocks through massive investments in ‘sub-prime’ mortgages and other financial instruments of highly dubious worth. The Occupy Movement was itself sparked by the call of Kalle Lasn, editor of the modest yet influential Vancouver-based ‘culture-jamming’ magazine *Adbusters*, to ‘Occupy Wall Street!’ against the image of a ballerina gingerly perched on Wall Street’s raging bull. ‘Bring folding chairs!’ it implored.

The call evinced the direct and abiding impact of Guy Debord’s influence, his analysis of the hegemony of the image, the spectacle, via advertising,

as well as his strategy of *détournement* as a refashioning and re-purposing of the spectacle in such a way that undermined its initial aims: namely, a disempowering of the people, a devitalization of life, in a word 'separation'. It was testimony to the Situationist International slogan: 'We express what's on everyone's minds'.

The 'Occupy Movement', such as it was called, and manifested itself throughout North America and Europe, and was roundly criticized in the mainstream media for its apparent inability to clearly articulate its demands. What the media seems to have missed is the fact that the movement was less about concrete-material demands that could be met, i.e. progressive income taxation, re-distribution of wealth, the provision of social housing, a guaranteed annual income, an increase in the minimum wage,⁸ than it was about meeting the spectacle on its own terms. After all, one can make demands of a social democratic sort strictly within the purview of the spectacle.⁹ This seems to be what Occupy was really about and in this can be as the attempt to reconstitute the very nature of political space along lines suggested by the Situationist International in the form of the constitution of a geographically concrete 'situation' by means of 'psychogeography', or pulses of attraction/repulsion as they spontaneously manifest themselves in the urban milieu, the *dérive*, or experiencing the city by way of an aestheticized 'drifting', or by what Lefebvre and later Harvey call the 'right to the city'.

The nature of the spectacle has, however, been profoundly misunderstood by postmodern cultural and media theorists who themselves engage in a curious act of amnesia and therefore of *separation* by dissociating the concept of the spectacle from corresponding key concepts that belonged to the core vocabulary of Western Marxism. The critique of a reified social life, of social totality, in the language of Lukács-inspired Hegelian Marxism all the way through to Debord himself, allowed for a profound socio-economic analysis and critique but also, more significantly, made it possible to identify traces of the *prospects for political resistance and indeed transformation* that the concept of 'spectacle' (at least in its contemporary revenants) more often than not—and much against its inherent ambition—tends to de-emphasize. It is as if the concept dropped from a first-year university-level media studies textbook fully formed without its own specific connection to historical praxis. Any discussion of the concept of 'spectacle' and the phenomenon it seeks to come to grips with, therefore, must come to terms with closely affiliated concepts of 'reification' and 'commodity'.

Indeed, as we suggest below, the constellation of commodity-reification-spectacle can be understood as a model that presupposes a 'political

ontology' or the way in which politics is ontological and ontology is political: the crossing point, of course, being some account of the very nature of agency. This ontology, we claim, has largely been prepared by the Marxian conceptualization of commodity fetishism, by Marx's analysis of the way in which capital simultaneously disenchant and re-enchants the modern world. And, put differently, this constellation can be read as one that enables us to come to grips with a structural or systemic account of 'depoliticization'.¹⁰ Other attempts to understand the politics of the spectacle that are not grounded in a postmodern appropriation have done so in equally superficial ways, for example arguing that a homogenizing global capitalism 'McWorld' finds itself ever more aggressively confronted by the very 'Jihad' (Barber, 1996) that it has generated, or that what we see from 9/11 onwards is a 'clash of fundamentalisms' (Ali, 2002) of the Christian-Zionist right with Islamic extremism, or that what we are witnessing now is the end of literacy and the 'triumph of the spectacle' (Hedges, 2010).¹¹ What is missing in these perspectives is a convincing analysis of the development of a certain logic that runs through an account of the cultural dynamics of commodification that stretches back through Lukács's attempt to understand, via the concept of 'reification', the failure of Central European revolutions, in which he, himself, played a not inconsiderable role, to Marx's famous account of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital, Volume I* (1867). It is only by reading the concept of spectacle in light of the conceptual history which makes it possible can we truly come to grips with the systematic and quite disastrous unleashing of processes of commodification in the present often referred to a 'neo-liberalism'.¹² Much of contemporary capitalism unfolds from the conception of commodity, much like in Marx's 1867, Lukács's 1923, and Debord's 1967. This is why we begin with Yiwu.

2. The Sequence (1867–1923–1967) and the Parcours

To our mind the axis Lukács-Debord, in the footsteps of Marx's conceptualization of commodity fetishism, does not, however, only identify a theoretical lineage that deepened and broadened the understanding of commodification. The sequence 1967–1923–1867 also stands for three stages of reflection of the real history of modern capitalism: The advent of high capitalism, of Fordist capitalism, and of capitalist consumerism and the increasing forms of opaqueness that characterize the economic system itself. This marks one of the strictly timely, understood as both contemporaneous and time-diagnostic, aspects of the Western Marxist

conceptualization of the cultural effects of commodification. It obviously also poses the question how to move on from within and in continuation of this framework: How to define the cultural logics of capitalism under conditions of post-Fordist, neo-liberal, globalized capitalism? To paraphrase Croce: What is living and what is dead in the legacy of Western Marxism?

The idea of timeliness is important also insofar as the concept of reification is, above all, one that addresses temporality or what we could call the de-temporalization of time, its flattening or hollowing out. Indeed, this is what Lukács, himself, in the key essay from *History and Class Consciousness*, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', calls the 'spatialization of time'. This is at the centre of the phenomenon of reification as an element of political theory. Reification seems to close off other possible futures. Reification thus seems to obstruct what Hannah Arendt considers the essence of the political, namely: the possibility of a 'new beginning' as opposed to the endless repetition of the same that she came, rightly or wrongly, to associate with the 'social' or the realm inhabited by what she calls *animal laborans*. The timeliness of our book can therefore be seen in the manner in which it can contribute to an understanding of the closing off of certain possibilities via the hypostatization of a market-based socio-economic logic (neo-liberalism) and the fake alternative between the hypercapitalist and the 'fundamentalist' spectacles.

To pose the question of timeliness of this particular tradition of Western Marxism also means to read Lukács and Debord as untimely contemporaries, as contemporaries of the ongoing commodification of culture (art, academia, etc.) in times of austerity politics. It therefore means to bring their accounts of reification and spectacle into dialogue with contemporary theories of the political, and of contemporary political ontologies that claim (legitimately or not) to inherit the legacy of Marxism.

The chapters of this volume approach these questions from a variety of different angles. The first section of this book is, however, dedicated to the philosophical foundations of the critique of reification. In Johan F. Hartle's chapter the concept of reification is brought into dialogue with contemporary models of political ontology to emphasize the depoliticizing effects of reification also on the level of theory. Lukács and Debord address the factuality of social reality not only through systematic analysis but also (both programmatically and performatively) through aesthetic strategies. The socially necessary semblance of reified life, so the chapter argues, has to be *aesthetically* re-staged to be accessible to political struggles.

Samir Gandesha's chapter discusses two conflicting lines of the conception of reification in light of their critique in the aesthetic considerations of

Theodor W. Adorno. What Adorno points out in critique both of an identity-philosophical conception of transparent self-determination on the one hand and a somewhat *ursprungsphilosophische* conception of authenticity on the other, is the non-identity of a temporality that disrupts any sense of primordial or teleological identity and thereby opens up dynamics of difference, dissent, and contradiction that are foundational for any emphatic conception of the political.

That reification itself has to be thought of as a dialectical concept is the central claim of Thijs Lijster's interpretation of Benjamin and Adorno's critique. To emancipate the object from the spell of reification, so Lijster shows, Benjamin and Adorno regard the fetishistic insistence on the thing as central. The collector is the central figure of such dialectical critique of reification, as is the autonomous (and thereby fetishized) artwork.

The second section of this book is dedicated to the cultural dynamics of the critique of spectacle. Tyrus Miller's chapter specifically discusses the artistic strategies and programs of two core members of the Situationist International: Asger Jorn and Constant Nieuwenhuys. Both of their urbanist visions aim, as Miller shows, clearly at a critique of the reification of urban life by reintroducing dynamics of play into the everyday.

The chapter by Sudeep Dasgupta is dedicated to the interpretation of the concept of spectacle in the art historical writings of T.J. Clark and Jonathan Crary. Dasgupta analyses three dimensions of historical corporeality: the staging of painted bodies, of the body of the spectator, and the social body. By discussing these 'cryptograms of modernism', Dasgupta not only articulates the critical emphasis on historical contingency that is inherent to the analysis of spectacle, but also underlines the immense analytical value of the concept of spectacle for historically grounded cultural analysis.

The chapter by Noortje de Leij reconstructs the influence of the concept of spectacle on contemporary art criticism—particularly its relevance for the art criticism around the journal *October*. The cultural diagnosis of spectacle is, as the chapter emphasizes, at the very core of the work of Krauss, Foster, and Buchloh, whose critical strategies also strongly rely on the specific interpretation of the term.

The third section of the book addresses the problems of 'reification' and 'spectacle' in light of contemporary questions. Kati Röttger's chapter discusses the critique of spectacle literally in light of the metaphors of theatre and stage. The critique of spectacle, Röttger argues, in dialogue with the political theories of Arendt, Nancy, and Rancière, sacrifices key aspects of the political that are necessarily tied to the stage-like reality of public action. Contemporary political practice therefore has to navigate carefully

between the various dimensions of spectacle, rejecting its depoliticizing elements while appropriating its mobilizing dimensions.

Willow Verkerk's chapter poses a critique of reification in light of contemporary feminist concerns. Late capitalism, which seeks to exploit the most marketable human characteristics, retains patriarchal interests in objectifying female sexuality and reproductive labour. Feminist activism requires, Verkerk argues, in conversation with Lukács, MacKinnon, Haraway, and Butler, an understanding of reification that includes its sexually objectifying trajectories as well as the unique opportunities for agency that women have under capitalism.

Joost de Bloois's chapter emphasizes the neglected ecological dimension of Debord's critique of spectacle against the background of the 1971 text of *A Sick Planet*. This does not only open up interesting correspondences with the early Frankfurt School (Adorno's idea of natural history in particular) but also links Debord's philosophy to vitalist conceptions of the political that characterize key strands of contemporary French political thought.

The concluding chapter of this volume, which stands out as a supplement to the three main sections of the book, constitutes an extended discussion between the book's two editors, Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle, and the American artist Zachary Formwalt, whose video essays are amongst the most poignant discussions of both contemporary and historical correspondences between visual culture and the structure of capital. The interview 'drifts' through Formwalt's work along the lines of the Marx-Lukács-Debord axis and thus concludes this book by addressing perspectives of contemporary cultural interventions that might in some ways inherit the aesthetic programs of Lukács and Debord.

The aim of the overall project of this book is to contribute to a critical theory and practice that addresses both the 'metabolic rift' (Marx) between humanity and the natural world on the one hand, and its corresponding subjective crisis on the other. The latter, so we believe, is a crisis of the very pre-conditions of political agency, that is itself formed by accelerated processes of commodification and reification that have, if not already in 1923 or 1967, certainly now become truly total.

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