McKenzie Wark

Spectacles of Disintegration

When the storm hit the Hansa Carrier, 21 shipping containers fell from its deck into the Pacific Ocean, taking some 80,000 Nike sneakers with them. Seattle-based oceanographer Curtis Ebbsmeyer used the serial numbers from the sneakers that washed up on the rain coast of North America to plot the widening gyre of ocean-going garbage that usually lies between California and Hawaii. Bigger than the state of Texas, it is called the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, and sailors have long known to steer clear of this area from the equator to 50 degrees north. It is an often windless desert where not much lives. Flotsam gathers and circles, biodegrading into the sea (unless it is plastic, which merely photodegrades in the sun, disintegrating into smaller and smaller bits of sameness). Now the sea here has more particles of plastic than plankton. The Gyre is a disowned country of furniture, fridges, cigarette lighters, televisions, all bobbing in the sea and slowly falling apart, but refusing to go away (Ebbsmeyer 2010; Bernadette Corporation 2007).

“New Hawaii” is the name some humorists prefer for the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre now that it has the convenience of contemporary consumer goods. Or one might call it a spectacle of disintegration. It is as good an emblem as any of the passing show of contemporary life, with its jetsam of jostling plastic artifacts, all twisting higgledy-piggledy on and below the surface of the ocean. Plastic and ocean remain separate, even as the plastic breaks up and permeates the water, insinuating itself into it but always alien to it. The poet Lautréamont once wrote: “Old Ocean, you are the symbol of identity: always equal to yourself . . .
and if somewhere your waves are enraged, further off in some other zone they are in the most complete calm” (1994: 38). But this no longer describes the ocean, which now appears to be far from equilibrium. It describes instead the spectacle, the Sargasso Sea of images, a perpetual calm surrounded by turbulence, at the center always the same.

“In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation” (Debord 2006: 766). When Guy Debord published *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, he thought there were two kinds of spectacle: the concentrated and the diffuse. The concentrated spectacle was limited to fascist and Stalinist states, where the spectacle cohered around a cult of personality. These are rare now, if not entirely extinct. The diffuse spectacle emerged as the dominant form. It did not require a Stalin or Mao as its central image. Big Brother is no longer watching you. In his place is little sister and her friends: endless pictures of models and other pretty things. The diffuse spectacle murmured to its sleeping peoples: “what appears is good; what is good appears” (Debord 2006: 769).

The victory of the diffused spectacle over its concentrated cousin did not lead to the diffusion of the victor over the surface of the world. In *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord thought instead that an integrated spectacle had subsumed elements of both into a new, spectacular universe. While on the surface it looked like the diffused spectacle, which molds desire in the form of the commodity, it bore within it aspects of concentration, notably an occulted state, where power tends to become less and less transparent.

That the state is a mystery to its subjects is to be expected; that it could become occult even to its rulers is something else. The integrated spectacle not only extended the spectacle outward, but also inward; the falsification of the world had reached by this point even those in charge of it. Debord wrote in 1978 that “it has become ungovernable, this wasteland, where new sufferings are disguised with the names of former pleasures; and where the people are so afraid... Rumor has it that those who were expropriating it have, to crown it all, mislaid it.
Here is a civilization which is on fire, capsizing and sinking completely. Ah! Fine torpedoeing!” (1990 [1978]: 74)²

Since he died in 1994, Debord did not live to see the most fecund form of this marvel, this spectacular power that integrates both diffusion and concentration. In memory of Debord, let’s call the endpoint reached by the integrated spectacle the disintegrating spectacle, in which the spectator gets to watch the withering away of the old order, ground down to near nothingness by its own steady divergence from any apprehension of itself.

And yet the spectacle remains, circling itself, bewildering itself. Everything is impregnated with tiny bits of its issue, yet the new world remains stillborn. The spectacle atomizes and diffuses itself throughout not only the social body but its sustaining landscape as well. As Debord’s former comrade, T. J. Clark writes, this world is “not ‘capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image’ to quote the famous phrase from Guy Debord, but images dispersed and accelerated until they become the true and sufficient commodities” (2008: 184).

The spectacle speaks the language of command. The command of the concentrated spectacle was: OBEY! The command of the diffuse spectacle was: BUY! In the integrated spectacle the commands to OBEY! and BUY! became interchangeable. Now the command of the disintegrating spectacle is: RECYCLE! Like oceanic amoeba choking on granulated shopping bags, the spectacle can now only go forward by evolving the ability to eat its own shit.

The disintegrating spectacle can countenance the end of everything except the end of itself. It can contemplate with equanimity melting ice sheets, seas of junk, peak oil, but the spectacle itself lives on. It is immune to particular criticisms. Mustapha Khayati, one of the most able Situationists of the later period, said, “Fourier long ago exposed the methodological myopia of treating fundamental questions without relating them to modern society as a whole. The fetishism of facts masks the essential category, the mass of details obscures the totality” (2006: 408).

Even when it speaks of disintegration, the spectacle is all about particulars. The plastic Pacific, even if it is as big as Texas, is presented...
as a particular event. Particular criticisms hold the spectacle to account for falsifying this image or that story, but in the process thereby merely add legitimacy to the spectacle’s claim that it can in general be a vehicle for the true. A genuinely critical approach to the spectacle starts from the opposite premise: that it may present from time to time a true fragment, but it is necessarily false as a whole. As Debord writes: “In a world that really has been turned on its head, the true is a moment of falsehood” (2006: 768).

This then is our task: a critique of the spectacle as a whole, a task that critical thought has for the most part abandoned. Stupefied by its own powerlessness, critical thought turned into that drunk who, having lost the car keys, searches for them under the street lamp. The drunk knows that the keys disappeared in that murky puddle, where it is dark, but finds it is easier to search for them under the lamp, where there is light—if not enlightenment.

And then critical theory gave up even that search and fell asleep at the side of the road. Just as well. It was in no condition to drive. In its stupor, critical thought makes a fetish of particular aspects of the spectacular organization of life. The critique of content became a contented critique (cf. Gitlin 2007). It wants to talk only of the political, or of culture, or of subjectivity, as if these things still existed, as if they had not been colonized by the spectacle and rendered mere excrescences of its general movement. Critical thought contented itself with arriving late on the scene and picking through the fragments. Or, critical thought retreated into the totality of philosophy. It had a bone to pick with metaphysics. It shrank from the spectacle, which is philosophy made concrete. In short: critical thought has itself become spectacular. Critical theory becomes hypocritical theory. It needs to be renewed not only in content but in form.

When the US Food and Drug Administration announced that a certain widely prescribed sleeping pill would come with strong warnings about strange behavior, it was not only responding to reports of groggy people driving their cars and making phone calls, but also
purchasing items over the Internet (Saul 2007; see Cronin and Seltzer 1982). The declension of the spectacle into every last droplet of everyday life means that the life it prescribes can be lived even in one’s sleep. This creates a certain difficulty for prizing open some other possibility for life, even in thought.

Debord’s sometime comrade Raoul Vaneigem famously wrote that those who speak of class conflict without referring to everyday life, “without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth” (2001: 26). Today this formula surely needs to be inverted. To talk the talk of critical thought, of biopolitic and biopower, of the state of exception, bare life, precarity, of whatever being, without reference to class conflict is to speak, if not with a corpse in one’s mouth, then at least a sleeper.

Must we speak the hideous language of our century? The spectacle appears at first as just a maelstrom of images swirling about the suck hole of their own nothingness. Here is a political leader. Here is one with better hair. Here is an earthquake in China. Here is a new kind of phone. Here are the crowds for the new movie. Here are the crowds for the food riot. Here is a cute cat. Here is a cheeseburger. If that were all there was to it, one could just load one’s screen with better fare. But the spectacle is not just images. It is not just another name for the media. Debord again: “The spectacle is a social relationship between people mediated by images” (2006: 767). The trick is not to be distracted by the images, but to inquire into the nature of this social relationship.

Emmalee Bauer of Elkhart, Iowa, worked for the Sheraton Hotel company in Des Moines until she was fired for using her employer’s computer to keep a journal that recorded all of her efforts to avoid work. “This typing thing seems to be doing the trick,” she wrote. “It just looks like I am hard at work on something very important” (Kauffman 2007). And indeed she was. Her book-length work hits on something fundamental about wage labor and the spectacle, namely the separation of labor from desire. One works not because one particularly wants to, but for the wages, with which to then purchase commodities to
fulfill desires. In the separation between labor and desire is the origin of the spectacle, which appears as the world of all that can be desired, or rather, of all the appropriate modes of desiring. “Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity” (Debord 2006: 768). The activity of making commodities makes in turn the need for the spectacle as the image of those commodities turned into objects of desire. The spectacle turns the goods into The Good.

The ruling images of any age flatter the ruling power. The spectacle is no different, although the ruling power is not so much a ruling monarch or even a power elite any more, but the rule of the commodity itself. The celebrities that populate the spectacle are not its sovereigns, but rather model a range of acceptable modes of desire from the noble to the risqué. The true celebrities of the spectacle are not its subjects but its objects. Billionaire Brit retailer Sir Philip Green spent 6 million pounds flying some 200 of his closest friends to a luxury spa resort in the Maldives. The resort offers water sports and a private beach for each guest. Much of the décor is made from recycled products and there is an organic vegetable garden where residents can pick ingredients for their own meals (Daily Telegraph 2007). “Sustainability” is the Viagra of investment. Sir Philip is no fool, and neither is his publicist. This retailer of dreams has the good sense to appear in public by giving away to a lucky few what the unlucky many should hence forth consider good fortune. And yet while this story highlights the fantastic agency of the billionaire, the moral of the story is something else: even billionaires obey the logic of the spectacle if they want to appear in it.

The spectacle has always been an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. But things have changed a bit. The integrated spectacle still relied on centralized means of organizing and distributing the spectacle, run by a culture industry in command of the means of producing its images. The disintegrating spectacle chips away at centralized means of producing images and distributes this responsibility among the spectators themselves. While the production of goods is outsourced to various cheap labor countries, the production of images is in-sourced to unpaid labor, offered up in what was once leisure time. The culture
industries are now the vulture industries, which act less as producers of images for consumption than as algorithms that manage databases of images that consumers swap between each other—while still paying for the privilege. Where once the spectacle entertained us, now we must entertain each other, while the vulture industries collect the rent. The disintegrating spectacle replaces the monologue of appearances with the appearance of dialogue. Spectators are now obliged to make images and stories for each other that do not unite those spectators in anything other than their separateness.

The proliferation of the means of communication, with their tiny keyboards and tiny screens, merely breaks the spectacle down into bits and distributes it in suspension throughout everyday life. Debord: “The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality. It was easy to predict in theory what has been quickly and universally demonstrated by practical experience of economic reason’s relentless accomplishments: that the globalization of the false was also the falsification of the globe” (2006: 1598). Ever finer fragments of the time of everyday life become moments into which the spectacle insinuates its logic, demanding the incessant production and consumption of images and stories that, even though they take place in the sweaty pores of the everyday, are powerless to effect it.

It is comforting to imagine that it is always someone else who is duped by the spectacle. Former movie star turned tabloid sensation Lindsay Lohan allegedly spent over $1 million on clothes in a single year, and $100,000 in a single day, before consulting a hypnotist to try to end her shopping addiction. Lohan’s publicist denied the story: “There is no hypnotist, and Lindsay loves clothes, but the idea that she spent that much last year is completely stupid” (Walls 2006). The alleged excess of an other makes the reader’s own relation to the spectacle of commodities seem just right. It’s all about having the right distance. For Debord, “no one really believes the spectacle” (Debord 2006: 1629). Belief, like much else these days, is optional. The spectacle is what it is: irrefutable images, eternal present, the endless yes. The spectacle does not require
gestures of belief, only of deference. No particular image need detain us any longer than this season’s shoes.

**They call themselves the bus buddies.** The women who travel the Adirondack Trailways Red Line spend five and even six hours commuting to high-paying jobs in Manhattan, earning much more money than they could locally in upstate New York. They are outlier examples of what are now called *extreme commuters*, who rarely see their homes in daylight and spend around a month per year of their lives in transit. It is not an easy life. “Studies show that commuters are much less satisfied with their lives than non-commuters.” Symptoms may include “raised blood pressure, musculoskeletal disorders, increased hostility, lateness, absenteeism, and adverse effects on cognitive performance” (Conlin 2005). Even with a blow-up neck pillow and a blankie, commuting has few charms.

For many workers, the commute results from a simple equation between their income in the city and the real estate they can afford in the suburbs, an equation known well by the real estate development companies. “Poring over elaborate market research, these corporations divine what young families want, addressing things like carpet texture and kitchen placement and determining how many streetlights and cul-de-sacs will evoke a soothing sense of safety. They know almost to the dollar how much buyers are willing to pay to exchange a longer commute for more space, a sense of higher status and the feeling of security” (Lyman 2005). By moving away from the city, the commuter gets the space for which they will no longer have the time. Time or space? This is the tension envelope of *middle class* desire. Homebuyers are to property developers what soldiers are to generals. Their actions are calculable, so long as they don’t panic.

There are ways to beat the commute. Rush hour in São Paulo, Brazil, features the same gridlocked streets as many big cities, but the skies afford a brilliant display of winking lights from the helicopters ferrying the city’s *upper* class home for the evening. Helipads dot the tops of high-rise buildings and are standard features of São Paulo’s guarded residential compounds. The helicopter speeds the commute,
bypasses car-jackings, kidnappings—and it prettifies the sky. “My favorite time to fly is at night, because the sensation is equaled only in movies or in dreams,” says Moacir da Silva, the president of the São Paulo Helicopter Pilots Association. “The lights are everywhere, as if I were flying within a Christmas tree” (Romero 2000).

Many Paulistanos lack not only a helicopter but shelter and clean water. But even when it comes with abundance, everyday life can seem strangely impoverished. Perhaps, as Debord says, “the reality that must be taken as a point of departure is dissatisfaction” (2005; 2006: 531). Even on a good day, when the sun is shining and one doesn’t have to board that bus, everyday life seems oddly lacking. Sure, there is still an underdeveloped world that lacks such modern conveniences as extreme commuting and the gated community. Pointing to this lack too easily becomes an alibi for not examining what it is the developing world is developing toward. And rather than a developed world, perhaps the result is more like what the Situationists called an over-developed world, which somehow overshot the mark (Knabb 2006: 191). This world kept accumulating riches of the same steroidal kind, pumping up past the point where a qualitative change might have transformed it and set it on a different path. This is the world, then, which lacks for nothing except its own critique.

The critique of everyday life—or something like it—happens all the time in the disintegrating spectacle, but this critique falls short of any project of transforming it. The spectacle points constantly to the more extreme examples of the ills of this world—its longest commutes, its most absurd disparities of wealth between slum dwellers and the helicopter class—as if these curios legitimated what remains as some kind of norm. How can the critique of everyday life be expressed in acts? Acts that might take a step beyond Emmalee Bauer’s magnum opus and become collaborations in new forms of life? Forms of life that are at once both aesthetic and political and yet reducible to the given forms of neither art nor action? This is not an easy question to answer, and so it is tempting to curtail critique, to reduce its scope to what is at hand, to what seems “do-able.” But perhaps the gap between what can
be thought and what can be done is far less a problem than the lack of such a gap.

The heightening of the gap between thought and the everyday should at least be a boon for critical theory, if not for the everyday. Having failed our desires, the disintegrating spectacle merely renames the necessities it imposes as if they were desires. Debord: “It should be known that servitude henceforth truly wants to be loved for itself, and no longer because it would bring any extrinsic advantage” (2006: 1685). Here we have an example of what the radical sociologist Henri Lefebvre called *historical drift*, where “the results of history differ from the goals pursued” (1961: 9).

The difficulty in the era of the disintegrating spectacle is to imagine even what the goal of history might be. Take the Tunisian revolution for instance. Writes the French-Tunisian novelist Mehdi Belhaj Kacem:

January 2011 is a May '68 carried through all the way to the end. It is a revolution that has more in common with the Situationists . . . that is, a revolution carried directly by the people, than with the Leninist or Maoist “Revolution,” in which an armed avant garde takes over power and replaces one dictatorship with another. . . . [Moreover,] “for the first time in history it was the media—television, radio or newspapers—that played catch up to a new kind of democratic information. . . . That is one of the major “situationist” lessons of this revolution: an absolute victory over one “society of the spectacle.” Which means that, tomorrow, others, and not only Arab dictatorships, might fall (Galloway 2011).

Let’s concede to Kacem his optimism, speaking so soon after the events. Let’s concede also that he is probably correct in his assessment of the success in Tunisia of what are essentially Situationist organizational and communications tactics. One still has to wonder which way histories can drift once Big Brothers are deposed and exiled. Is to be
freed from dictators the limit to the twenty-first century’s desires? As the Situationists wrote in the wake of the success and failure of the Algerian revolution some 40-odd years previously: “Everywhere there are social confrontations, but nowhere is the old order destroyed, not even within the very social forces that contest it” (Knabb 2006: 189; 1966: 43). As we shall see, revolutions are not exceptions, they are constants—but so too are restorations.

The critique of everyday life is the critique of existing needs and the creation of new desires. The everyday is the site of tension between desires and needs. It is where the productive tension between them either halts or advances. Today we may safely say it has come to a halt. Everyday life has been so colonized by the spectacle of the commodity form that it is unable to formulate a new relation between need and desire. It takes its desire for the commodity as if it were a need. The attempt to transform everyday life, to forge a new relation between need and desire, was decisively defeated. The emblem of that defeat is the signal year 1968. Even if the transformation that seemed so imminent at the time was impossible, now it hardly appears at all. And yet the everyday may still function as a fulcrum of critique, even if the work upon which such a critique might now build is not to be found in the optimism that effloresces in 1968, but the grim determination of those who lived through and beyond the moment of failure, and yet did their best to keep the critical edge sharp.

Taking the everyday as a site for critical thought has several advantages. For one thing, you are soaking in it. It is not the special property of initiates of a particular kind of art or literature. It remains beyond the reach of even the most tactile and ductile of philosophies. Nor is it a domain walled off and subjected to the specialized tools of this or that kind of social science. Hence, a critique of the everyday avoids a preemptive fashioning of a comfortable zone for thought detached from what is generally taken to matter to most people.

Lastly, the everyday has the peculiar property of being made up of slight and singular moments, little one-off events—situations—that seem to happen in between more important things, but which unlike
those important things tend to flow into each other and connect up, flowing, finally, into some apprehension of a totality—a connection of sorts between things of all kinds. The trick is to follow the line that links the experience of concrete situations in everyday life to the spectacular falsification of totality.

These days, extreme commuters may be working while they travel. The cell phone and the laptop make it possible to conduct business calls while driving or to work on the spreadsheets while on the bus or train. They allow the working day to extend into travel time, making all of time productive rather than interstitial. Isn’t technology wonderful? Where once, when you left the office, you could be on your own, now the cellphone tethers you to the demands of others almost anywhere at any time. Those shiny phones and handy devices appear as if in a dream or a movie to make the world available at your command. The ads discretely fail to mention that they rather put you at the world’s command. The working day expands to fill up what were formerly workless hours and spills over into sleepless nights.

The thread that runs from the everyday moment of answering a cellphone or pecking away at a laptop on a bus to the larger totality plays out a lot further. Where do old laptops go to die? Many of them end up in the city of Guiyu in China’s Pearl River Delta, which is something like the electronic-waste capital of the planet. Some 60,000 people work there at so-called recycling, which is the new name for the old job of mining minerals, not from nature but from this second nature of consumer waste. It is work that, like the mining of old, imperils the health of the miners, this time with the runoff of toxic metals and acids. In Guiyu, “computer carcasses line the streets, awaiting dismemberment. Circuit boards and hard drives lie in huge mounds. At thousands of workshops, laborers shred and grind plastic casings into particles, snip cables and pry chips from circuit boards. Workers pass the boards through red-hot kilns or acid baths to dissolve lead, silver and other metals from the digital detritus. The acrid smell of burning solder and melting plastic fills the air” (Johnson 2006). The critique of everyday life can seek out otherwise obscure connections between one
experience of life and another, looking for the way the commuter on a laptop and the e-waste worker melting chip boards are connected. It considers the everyday from the point of view of how to transform it, and takes nothing for granted about what is needed or what is desired.

Henri Lefebvre started this line of thought with his 1947 book, *The Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1*, and raised it to a fine pitch with that book’s second volume in 1961. But the group who really pushed it to its limit was the Situationist International, a movement that lasted from 1957 until 1972, and which its leading light, Guy Debord, would later describe as “this obscure conspiracy of limitless demands” (2006: 1382). While their project was one of “leaving the twentieth century,” in the twenty-first century they have become something of an intellectual curio (Knabb 2006: 177). They stand in for all that up-to-date intellectual types think they have outgrown, and yet somehow the Situationists refuse to be left behind. They keep coming back as the bad conscience of the worlds of writing, art, cinema, and architecture that claim the glamour of critical friction yet lack the nerve to actually rub it in. Now that critical theory has become hypocritical theory, the Situationist International keeps washing up on these shores like shipwrecked luggage. Are the Situationists derided so much because they were wrong or because they were right?

The gulf that separates the present times from the time of the Situationist International passes through that troubled legacy of the failed revolution of 1968 and 1969 in France and Italy, in which Situationists were direct participants. There was no beach beneath the street. Whether such a revolution was possible or even desirable at that moment is a question best left aside. The installation of necessity as desire in the disintegrating spectacle is a consequence of a revolution that either could not or would not take place. But even if a revolution could not take place in the late twentieth century, in the early twenty-first century it seems simply unimaginable (During 2009). It is hard not to suspect that the overdeveloped world has simply become untenable, and yet is incapable of proposing any alternative to itself but more of the same. These are times in which the famous slogan from ‘68—“be
realistic, demand the impossible”—does indeed seem more realist than surrealist.

And yet these are times with a very uneasy relation to the legacy of its intellectual realists. Debord in particular is at once slighted and envied, as he was even in his own time. He was, by his own admission, “a remarkable example of what this era did not want” (Debord 2006: 1685). He seemed to live a rather charmed life while doing nothing to deserve it: “I do not know why I am called ‘a third rate Mephistopheles’ by people who are incapable of figuring out that they have been serving a third rate society and have received in return third rate rewards. . . . Or is it perhaps precisely because of that they say such things?” (1577)

Not the smallest problem with Debord is that of all the adjutants of 1968 he was the one who compromised least on the ambitions of that moment in his later life. “So I have had the pleasures of exile as others have had the pains of submission” (1685). Unlike Daniel “Danny the Red” Cohn-Bendit, he did not become a member of the European Parliament. As Debord wrote in 1985, looking back on the life and times of the Situationists: “It is beautiful to contribute to the ruination of this world. What other success did we have?” (1685). The key to the Situationist project of transforming everyday life is the injunction “to be at war with the whole world lightheartedly” (1373). This unlikely conjuncture of levity with lucidity, of élan with totality, has rarely been matched.

Culture is nothing if not what the Situationists called détournement: the plagiarizing, hijacking, seducing, detouring, of past texts, images, forms, practices, into others. The trick is to realize in the process the undermining of the whole idea of the author as owner, of culture as property, that détournement always implies. The struggle of the old culture industries to keep up with the free circulation of information is not to be mourned. The digitizing of the image, of all information, realizes in part at least the positive vision contained in Walter Benjamin’s assessment of the erosion of the aura of the image (Benjamin 2003). Images lose their provenance, their connection to chains of ownership, and become instead common property. The thing is that images, even
freely circulating ones, do not perform the work of perceiving the political economy of their times all on their own. That takes labor, the labor of making and selecting and editing them, so that they might show the world beyond what one can see for oneself of the everyday.

That labor is détournement. In Debord’s time, he could take the written word to be common property, he could make any sentence his own, and he did. Society of the Spectacle contains whole chunks of Hegel, Lukacs, and Lautréamont, cut and mixed with extraordinary care. This aspect of his work is often overlooked. Far from being a lament at the enforced passivity of the spectacle, it is in its very form and method an active practice of constructing another kind of everyday life, based on the conviction that the whole of culture is always and already common property.

When Debord tried to realize this vision in cinematic form in 1973 it proved a little more difficult. His film editor had to use a certain subterfuge to “borrow” famous Hollywood films, so she could have copies made of scenes from them for inclusion in The Society of the Spectacle. Now this is not so hard. When the group calling itself DJ Rabbi made Society of the Spectacle: The Remix in 2004, they did it by searching the Internet using keywords from Debord’s book as search terms and mashing many hundreds of images thus found together (DJ Rabbi 2011).

This cut and mix practice is now the daily life of a generation. Of course, it rarely rises to the level of critique of the totality to which it belongs. And yet there is a spontaneous, popular movement afoot that treats the image as common property, exactly as Lautréamont predicted: “Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It closely grasps an author’s sentence, uses his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one. To be well made, a maxim does not call for correction. It calls for development” (1994: 240). The culture industries responded initially to this re-appropriation of what it considers its hereditary birthright by sending for the engineers and the lawyers. And so a new terrain of class conflict opens up: between those who claim to own our desires and those who actually do the desiring. The stake in
The struggle is stories, phrases, tunes, and above all images.

The rise of the vulture industries is something of a retreat and also something of a counteroffensive. The genius of Google is to find a way to extract a rent not by owning an archive of images someone else labored to make, but by owning the catalogue to everybody else’s images. It is a strategy that takes a step back to take a step forward in maintaining the spectacle, but at the price of conceding the ownership of the image itself. It is not a strategy, needless to say, that endears Google to the old culture industries.

If there is a positive sense to the disintegration of the spectacle, perhaps this is it. The disintegrating spectacle lost its battle with détournement, and regrouped around extracting a rent out of the ownership of the means of distribution and location of the images it now concedes to popular, collective practices embedded in everyday life. There may be a somewhat unpredictable side to what can result. Kacem is hardly of that self-congratulatory school that attributes the Tunisian revolution to Twitter, but he is raising the possibility that social movements can arise out of everyday life and spontaneously self-organize. There may be a subtle series of tactics by which movements and states both use the new fragmentary spectacle-networks that proliferate via mobile devices. The media are a plane upon which forces contend, rather than inherently vehicles of either change or repression.

The trick, then, is to use the method of détournement to turn spectacles of disintegration into more than partial critiques of the disintegrating spectacle. The image is more than ever a site of contestation. But it is not enough to reinterpret the image, or to edit the image together into counternarratives. It’s also a matter of joining the contest over the ownership and control of the means of imagination. It’s not what images mean that matters, it’s the means for making images. Given the severity of the disintegration of the spectacle and the extent of its colonization of everyday life, that might not sound like much, but it’s what we have. Debord: “The reigning deceptions of the time are on the point of making us forget that the truth may also be found in images. An image that has not been deliberately separated from its
meaning adds great precision and certainly to our knowledge” (2006: 1690–1691). The meaning of any image, for Debord, resides in the relation between the everyday as it is lived, and the totality as, on the one hand, it is, and on the other, it could be.

NOTES
1. The displacement of Big Brother by all the little sisters is analogous to what the Lacanians call the decline in symbolic efficiency. See Zizek (1999).
2. This may not be the most accurate translation, but it is the one that best captures the spirit. See Debord (1999 or Oeuvres 2006 [1904]: 1399–1400).
4. Jean Baudrillard (2006) developed this line of thinking in his early work.
5. I looked at this in some detail using an earlier example—Tiananmen Square in 1989—in Wark (1994).

REFERENCES


