Chapter 1

'Now, the SI'

The Situationist International was established in 1957 and published twelve issues of a journal, Internationale Situationniste, until 1969. Many aspects of its theory can be found in Marxist thought and the tradition of avant-garde artistic agitation which includes movements like Dada and surrealism. But the movement also stands in a less distinct line of pleasure-seeking libertarianism, popular resistance, and autonomous struggle, and its revolutionary stance owes a great deal to this diffuse tradition of unorthodox rebellion. With its beginnings in an artistic milieu, the SI finally developed a more overtly political position from which its members gave full expression to their hostility to every aspect of existing society.

The situationists characterised modern capitalist society as an organisation of spectacles; a frozen moment of history in which it is impossible to experience real life or actively participate in the construction of the lived world. They argued that the alienation fundamental to class society and capitalist production has permeated all areas of social life, knowledge, and culture, with the consequence that people are removed and alienated not only from the goods they produce and consume, but also from their own experiences, emotions, creativity, and desires. People are spectators of their own lives, and even the most personal gestures are experienced at one remove.

The situationist project was not, however, ridden with pessimism, and while the first chapter of this book dwells on the darker implications of defining modern society as a spectacle, reams of situationist exuberance and delight come quickly on its tail. For although the situationists suggested that the whole of life as it is experienced under capitalism is in some sense alienated from
tacle also facilitated a valuable analysis of the ubiquitous messages, signs, and images which conspire to confuse appearance with reality and throw into question the possibility of distinguishing true experience, authentic desire, and real life from their fabricated, manipulated, and represented manifestations. Above all, the notion of the spectacle conveyed the sense in which alienated individuals are condemned to lives spent effectively watching themselves. It suggested that, far from being inevitable attributes of the human condition, the boredom, frustration, and powerlessness of contemporary life are the direct consequence of capitalist social relations.

In common with other situationist texts, therefore, *The Society of the Spectacle* painted a picture of a society which believes itself capable of providing everything, satisfying all desire, relieving every burden, and fulfilling every dream. But this is also a world in which the experience of life must be mediated by the commodity form, a situation which makes it impossible to provide anything for oneself or act without the mediation of commodities. A spectacle can only be watched and enjoyed at a distance, from where it appears glamorous and desirable; participation may be possible, but its form and extent will be predetermined by the context in which it appears. The promises of self-fulfilment and expression, pleasure and independence which adorn every billboard are realisable only through consumption, and the only possible relation to the social world and one's own life is that of the observer, the contemplative and passive spectator. The commodity form places everything in the context of a world organised solely for the perpetuation of the economic system; a tautological world in which the appearance of real life is maintained in order to conceal the reality of its absence. Bombarded by images and commodities which effectively represent their lives to them, people experience reality as second-hand. Everything has been seen and done before; quests for fulfilment are always frustrated, and just as workers find no satisfaction in the products of their labour, so 'no one has the enthusiasm on returning from a venture that they had on setting out on it. My dears,' said Debord in one of his films, 'adventure is dead.'

The basis of this characterisation of capitalist society was already laid in Marx's early and graphic descriptions of alienation. Performed not in order to satisfy a need but as a means of satisfying other needs, all work undertaken within capitalism is external, alien, and 'shunned like the plague' wherever possible. Workers are left debased, exhausted, and denied, and the individual only 'feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home.' Alienated from the products of their labour, their time, and their own selves, workers produce and reproduce alienated relations both between themselves and things and between each other. The relations of capitalist production are therefore reproduced in all social relations; circumscribing social reality, alienation comes to be perceived as the necessary reality of daily life. In his later writings too, Marx emphasised the estrangement or alienation intrinsic to capitalist production. The commodity fetishism of *Capital* is a renewed consideration of the phenomenon in which relations between people assume the form of relations between things. In the absence of any real world of unalienated social experience, commodity relations become mysterious and fantastic; labour is turned against the worker and appears as an autonomous power, and because the totality of these relations is presented as a natural order, the worker loses all reason to challenge or understand the experience of alienation.

The situationists argued that these alienated relations of production are now disseminated throughout capitalist society. Leisure, culture, art, information, entertainment, knowledge, the most personal and radical of gestures, and every conceivable aspect of life is reproduced as a commodity: packaged, and sold back to the consumer. Even ways of life are marketed as lifestyles, and careers, opinions, theories, and desires are consumed as surely as bread and jam. Constantly creating new markets, the commodity relations of twentieth-century capitalism extend their grasp to the very intimacy of people's everyday lives where nineteenthcentury capitalism built its geographical empires. And although Marx had also recognised that commodity relations extend the experience of alienation beyond the workplace, he retained a sense of the worker being at home 'outside his work'. The spectre that has haunted subsequent radical theorists is that this remaining realm of free and unalienated experience is increasingly eroded by the encroachment of capitalist relations. And if alienation really does extend to both work and leisure time, there is a danger that it becomes completely meaningless, since there is nothing with which to compare it and nothing in relation to which
it can be defined. The situationists argued that although the ubiquity of alienated relations does indeed make them increasingly difficult to contradict, it is always possible to identify some point of contrast or opposition to them. The desires, imaginings, and pleasures of the individual can never be completely eradicated: as a system which operates by transforming objects into commodities and people into their producers and consumers, capitalism cannot but sustain a sense of the reality it distorts. And this suggests that some contradiction between life as it is and life as it could be is preserved regardless of the spectacle's insistence on its own seamless inevitability.

Presenting the spectacle as 'the material reconstruction of the religious illusion', Debord argued that the mediations of church and priest, the separation of body and soul, and the demands of sacrifice and deferred gratification which marked pre-capitalist society are now redeveloped to produce the same experiences of removal, alienation, and mystification. Seeking salvation and fulfillment in the spectacle of this world rather than the next, the producers and consumers of the spectacle are equally removed from their own lives and still live in a separated relation to themselves: 'The absolute denial of life, in the shape of a fallacious paradise, is no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself.' The spectacular world presents itself as a natural phenomenon, requiring no organisation, denying the existence of any economic foundation, and offering itself as 'an enormous positivity, out of reach and beyond dispute'; it is the 'moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see — commodities are now all there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.' And this vision of a united, complete, and natural social whole is a representation which compensates for the increasing fragmentation and alienation of daily life and belies the existence of all discontinuity and contradiction. The spectacle is the 'materialization of ideology', a society in which the particular perspective of the bourgeois is given a concrete form. It is a society asleep, in hibernation or a state of suspended animation, for which 'ideology is no longer a historical choice, but simply an assertion of the obvious'.

This absolute realisation of commodity relations produces an entirely inverted world, in which everything 'that was directly lived has become mere representation', a 'dull reflection' of itself. Mystified by this removal, it is difficult to understand why the world appears to be so whole, natural, and unremarkable, yet is so extraordinarily difficult to really engage and feel at home in. 'The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the spectacle is everywhere', and areas of life which were once untouched by the logic of the commodity form are now possible only within it. Free time is filled with provided forms of leisure and entertainment, and free choice is made from a pre-selected variety of goods, lifestyles, roles, and opinions. The content of life is swept aside by the commodity form, in which it appears; all other means of judging, evaluating, and living in the world are emptied of their real meaning and reduced to the abstract standards of production and consumption. The spectacle is a society which continually declares: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' A world in which such circularity dominates all social experience is impoverished; only the commodity can exist, and as representations of the whole social world become increasingly tangible, the 'real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation.'

The contradiction which displaces the tautologous unity of capitalist society has long been identified in the tension between the forces and relations of production. In The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels observed that just as the end of feudal society was necessitated by the development of the forces of production beyond the social relations they supported, so the productive forces unleashed by capitalism project it into a crisis of its own.

The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society . . . . The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them.

The consequent crises of over-production which mark bourgeois society can be temporarily assuaged, primarily by the cultivation of new markets, but their resolution can only be achieved with the abolition of the social and economic relations which lag behind the forces of production. The situationists agreed that the contradiction between the forces and relations of production is the
essential antagonism of capitalist society, and were similarly at
home with Marxist conceptions of history and class. The spectacle
remains a class society, founded on a system of production which
separates workers from one another, the products of their labour,
and the commodities they consume. Regardless of the abundance
of spectacular society, the essential poverty of everyday life left the
situationists convinced that the proletariat is still reproduced by
capitalist social relations as the class capable of realising and super-
seding the economic contradictions of capitalism. And the image
of unity and seamless self-sufficiency which modern society culti-
vates is itself a product of the separations, divisions, and
contradictions which riddle the spectacle. 'The unreal unity
the spectacle proclaims masks the class division on which the real unity
of the capitalist mode of production is based.'

But the waters of western Marxism in which the SI played were those which considered the essential problem of modern capitalism to lie with its ability to contain, rather than produce, class conflict and economic crisis. To generations of Marxist theorists, bourgeois society had seemed increasingly able to deal with the economic contradictions implicit in it, and the situationists were not alone in their concern with the effects of increasing alienation on the ability of the proletariat to gain consciousness of its strength and significance. Crisis had always been averted, not least because the extension of the market necessary to the solution of crises of over-production was largely achieved by the extension of commodity relations into discourse, culture, and everyday life. For earlier theorists such as George Lukács and Antonio Gramsci, cultural and ideological institutions exerted an unprecedented stranglehold on working-class consciousness, propagating a world view in which capitalism appears as the only possible system of social and economic relations. And in the 1960s work of Herbert Marcuse, capitalism's cultural and ideological stabilisers were emphasised still more with claims that capitalist social relations have infected the very souls of those who live within them. For
Marcuse, the working class had been bought off by a society which allowed no dissent from the single dimension of a dominant capitalist ideology, and in his work, the role of the proletariat was displaced by a new faith in the desires and imaginings of the unconscious mind and those social groups free to explore them.

Other theorists, like those involved in Socialisme ou Barbarie, a post-war movement whose membership included Cornelius

Castoriadis (who also wrote under the names of Paul Cardan and
Pierre Chalieu), Claude Lefort, Pierre Canjuers, Jean-François
Lyotard and, for a short time, Guy Debord, kept their faith in the
proletariat and argued that the dissemination of alienated relations throughout every aspect of daily life merely paved the way for a radical and all-encompassing contestation. Socialisme ou Barbarie defined the 'struggle of human beings against their alienation, and the ensuing conflict and split in all spheres, aspects, and moments of social life' as the central locus of modern opposition. And it was not merely capitalist social organisation in which unprecedented levels of alienation were observed: the group defined Soviet society as bureaucratic or state capitalist and argued that bureaucratisation was the common feature of Soviet, eastern, and western European societies. This was a position which Debord carried into the SI, pausing only to distinguish between the diffuse spectacle of advanced capitalist society and its concentrated totalitarian form.

Both Socialisme ou Barbarie and the SI redefined the proletariat in relation to the spectacular homogeneity of everyday life, reconstituting class society in terms of a division between those who give and those who take the orders, and identifying as proletarian all
those who have no control over their own lives. 'The triumph of an
economic system founded on separation leads to the proletariati-
ization of the world,' declared Debord, and rebellions against the
powerlessness and mediocrity of ordinary life become the motor of
a revolution which springs not from material poverty but from the
absence of control. There is therefore no question of the pro-
letariat having disappeared under the weight of consumerism; on
the contrary, the extension of commodity relations to all aspects of
daily life merely enlarges the revolutionary class.

Indeed, the situationists contemptuously dismissed claims that the proletariat had been eradicated. 'Where on earth can it be?
Spirited away? Gone underground? Or has it been put in a
museum?' laughed Vaneigem. 'We hear from some quarters that in
the advanced industrial countries the proletariat no longer exists, that it has disappeared forever under an avalanche of sound
systems, colour TVs, waterbeds, two-car garages and swimming
pools.' Pointing to a plethora of wildcat strikes, riots, and other
manifestations of dissatisfaction, Vaneigem quoted a French
worker in support of his case that even material abundance cannot compensate for the absence of passion and autonomy. 'Since 1936
I have been fighting for higher wages. My father before me fought for higher wages. I've got a TV, a fridge and a VW. If you ask me it's been a dog's life from start to finish. And although it appeared to the Debord of 1967 that the proletariat 'has utterly lost the ability to assert its own independence' and its illusions about itself, it had certainly not been eliminated:

Indeed it remains irremediably present, under the intensified alienation of modern capitalism, in the shape of the vast mass of workers, who have lost all power over the use of their lives and who, once they realize this, must necessarily redefine themselves as the proletariat — as negation at work in the bosom of today's society.

If alienation is both the means and the end of spectacular organization, all those who struggle to assert the negation of their alienation perform the proletariat's revolutionary role.

This conception of the proletariat enabled the situationists to see a nascent class consciousness in all rebellion against the poverty of everyday experience. So, for example, 'rebellious tendencies among the young generate a protest that is still tentative and amorphous, yet already clearly embodies a rejection of the specialised sphere of the old politics, as well as of art and everyday life.' Together with struggles against the hierarchy and bureaucracy of union organization, this sort of rebellion signals 'a new spontaneous struggle emerging under the sign of criminality'.

Calling for a new Luddism, this time turned against the 'machinery of permitted consumption', Debord pointed to all refusals of alienated work, leisure, organization, and consumption as the ground of a revolutionary onslaught on spectacular society.

Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* greatly influenced *The Society of the Spectacle* with its view that capitalist development produces elements which both deflect and encourage the proletariat's recognition of its position. On the one hand, the total occupation of social life by the commodity reifies consciousness to an unprecedented extent: 'as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fateful and more definitively into the consciousness of man.' But on the other hand, 'the commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole', and the commodity's dissemination to all areas of everyday life makes it increasingly visible. Older forms of domination, those of church and family, for example, are swept aside when the commodity comes to 'penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image', and the 'commodity character of the commodity, the abstract, quantitative mode of calculability shows itself here in its purest form'. Debord likewise argued that although the dissemination of commodity relations throughout social experience might make consciousness of them more difficult, it also produces the starkest of choices and the unprecedented possibility of a radical break with the whole. As the disaffected and the small-time saboteurs gain consciousness of their alienation, they are faced with the choice of accepting the spectacular totality, or completely rejecting it: 'capitalism's ever-intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment', but at the same time 'puts them in a position of having either to reject it in its totality or do nothing at all'.

Or, as a 1990s flyer says to a kid sitting in the middle of a wasteland: 'Have you ever considered a career in total revolution?'

Such a perspective did not endear the situationists to traditional forms of political organisation. The playful libertarianism of their avant-garde roots made them see both the revolutionary party, always in danger of developing as an end in itself, and the theoretical presuppositions on which it is based as the irredeemable components of the old world of separated contemplation. Debord saw the failure of the early revolutionary movements and the development of Marxism as a scientific discipline encouraging an emphasis on economic contradiction as the mainspring of revolution which merely reinforces the passivity and sacrifice of capitalist social relations.

It became important patiently to study economic development, and once more to accept, with Hegelian tranquillity, the suffering it imposed — that suffering whose outcome was still a 'graveyard of good intentions.' All of a sudden it was discovered that, according to the 'science of revolutions', consciousness now always came on the scene too soon, and needed to be taught.

For Debord, the party, from which this education traditionally comes, merely encourages the endless deferral of the revolutionary moment. Even when the contradictions are obvious and openly
acknowledged, the long wait for conditions to ripen means that possibility of their revolutionary supersession can remain a distant, and spectacular, dream.

For the situationists, the prospect of either revolutionary organisation or theory representing the working class was quite unthinkable. Since such representation is precisely the ground of alienation against which the revolution is effected, ‘the revolutionary organization must learn that it can no longer combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle’.52 It cannot ‘represent the revolutionary class’, but must ‘simply recognise itself as radically separated from the world of separation’.53

when the proletariat discovers that its own externalized power conspires in the continual reinforcement of capitalist society, no longer merely thanks to the alienation of its labor, but also thanks to the form taken on by unions, parties and institutions of State power that it had established in pursuit of its own self-emancipation, then it must also discover ... that it is indeed the class which is totally opposed to all reified externalizations and all specializations of power. It is the bearer of a revolution that can leave nothing outside itself, that demands the permanent domination of the past by the present and a universal critique of separation.54

Alienated social relations must be negated at every point of the revolutionary struggle if the profound impoverishment of everyday life is to be countered: ‘The revolutionary organisation must necessarily constitute an integral critique of society – a critique, that is to say, which refuses to compromise with any form of separated power and which is directed globally against every aspect of alienated social life.’55 And the only principles of political organisation capable of fulfilling these criteria are those of autonomous self-management on which the idea of the soviet, or workers’ council, is based.

Although workers’ councils do not overcome all the problems of separated organisations and hierarchies, such autonomous forms of organisation certainly raise the right questions and subject all forms of hierarchy and mediation to a rigorous critique. And the situationists were convinced that it is to the establishment of councils that the revolutionary organisation must work, without, however, producing a separated ideology of councilism itself.

Once embodied in the power of workers’ councils – a power destined to supplant all other powers worldwide – the proletarian movement becomes its own product; this product is the producer himself, and in his own eyes the producer has himself as his goal. Only in this context can the spectacle’s negation of life be negated in its turn.56

This had also been the position held by the young Lukács, who argued that the tight organisation and rigorous hierarchy of the Leninist party was merely the reproduction of the alienated relations produced by capitalism. Only the workers’ council spells the political and economic defeat of reification;57 since the increasing mechanisation and specialisation of capitalist production demands that the worker’s activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative.58 Capitalism’s ‘image of a frozen reality that nevertheless is caught up in an unrelenting, ghostly movement at once becomes meaningful when this reality is dissolved into the process of which man is the driving force.’59 And those who produce and reproduce alienated social relations cannot be given consciousness of this meaning by some external power, but must actively realise it themselves. For both Lukács and the situationists, only workers’ councils embodied the autonomous and direct forms of political participation by which this driving force might be realised. Capable of refusing all external mediation and resisting the spectacular separations of capitalist life, the situationists envisaged self-managed councils as both the means of social transformation and the basis of post-capitalist social organisation.

This hostility to all forms of separation led the situationists to adopt what might be characterised as a maximalist position, from which all experiences of alienation, representation and hierarchy were ascribed to capitalist social relations.60 Alienation, no matter how natural or necessary it might turn out to be, must be contested as if it were the sole consequence of capitalist society; only from this extreme position is the reversal of perspective necessary to the critique of the spectacle possible, and any stance which fails to subject the totality of existing society to a rigorous critique is vulnerable to accommodation within it. In History and Class Consciousness, Lukács’ own use of the term ‘reification’ was similarly broad. Reification, the reduction of the individual to the thing, appears in a society which satisfies ‘all its needs in terms of
commodity exchange', and constitutes 'the immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society'. Later criticising the term 'reification', Lukács pointed out that it confused those forms of alienation for which capitalist social relations are really responsible with those which form part of the natural separation of the human subject from the world. This position, he argued, had led to an analysis which on the one hand fostered the idea of some immutable human condition, and on the other demanded the impossible development of a consciousness capable of overcoming an alienation which was really the natural attribute of consciousness and not at all specific to capitalism. But the situationists' decision to hold capitalism responsible for all forms of alienation was a tactical response to the problem of criticising a society in which it is increasingly difficult to distinguish the natural from the socially constructed at any point. Everything must be contested in order to ensure that no remnants of the old world were carried over into the new, and if alienation is the defining characteristic of the social and discursive relations in which we live, then it is alienation in all its manifestations which must be contested. Although this was a stance which left the situationists vulnerable to charges of Utopianism for their invocations of a post-revolutionary world free of all mediation, specialisation, domination, and hierarchy, theirs was not an attempt to do away with the conflict between the individual and the world, but rather to interrogate every moment of their interaction.

This position was reinforced by the situationists' conception of the 'situation' itself. So far philosophers and artists have only interpreted situations, they declared, paraphrasing Marx and taking a swipe at Sartre: 'the point now is to transform them. Since man is the product of the situations he goes through, it is essential to create human situations. Since the individual is defined by his situation, he wants the power to create situations worthy of his desires.' Great importance had been attached to the way in which one is situated in the world by Sartre and those philosophers, including Heidegger and Kierkegaard, who exerted some influence on existentialist philosophy. For Sartre, 'there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom'. The human subject which acts 'for itself' (as opposed to the object which exists 'in itself') is always already thrown into the world and is only able to choose and act in relation to it. The freedom of the existentialist subject is not the unlimited ability to choose anything, but the ability to act in and against the world in which it finds itself. 'There can be a free for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. Outside of this engagement the notions of freedom, of determinism, of necessity lose all meaning.' In Hegel's conception of the development of human self-consciousness, to which Marx, Lukács, Sartre, and the situationists were all indebted, social awareness and human freedom again develop out of the struggle against nature and the recognition of oneself in productive activity or labour on the world. In this dialectical conception of the world, the separation and antagonism between consciousness and the world, the subject and the object, is necessary to human development: it is out of this difference or friction that full self-consciousness emerges. And the purpose of situationist attacks on this separation was not to achieve a Utopian world of perfect stasis without the possibility of future change or development, but one in which the real adventures of historical life could be played out in a society which, 'having brought down all its enemies, will at last be able to surrender itself joyously to the true divisions and never-ending confrontations of historical life'. So the attack on all forms of separation and mediation was really a challenge to the existing conceptions of difference and contradiction. The situationists were not determined to end all separation, but to live in a world which had emerged out of the radical critique of that which exists.

Although it is the sufferings and struggle of our labour on and against the world which have brought us to our present state of consciousness, human consciousness and its expression is merely fettered and arrested by the illegitimate perpetuation of alienated relations of production beyond the need to survive. 'The accumulation of production of ever-improving technological capabilities is proceeding even faster than nineteenth-century communism predicted. But we have remained at the stage of a superequipped prehistory.' Freedom from this prehistory would liberate us from necessity and launch us into a new world of free choice and playful extravagance, and it is the supersession of the relations which preclude these freedoms which must motivate the contemporary revolutionary project. 'We need to work toward flooding the market — even if for the moment merely the intellectual market', argued the situationists, 'with a mass of desires whose realisation is not beyond the capacity of man's present means of action on the material world, but only beyond the capacity of the old social
organisation." It is in the play born of desire that individuals should now be able to recognise themselves, progressing with a new and chosen set of relations no longer dictated by the ethos of labour and struggle but governed by the free and playful construction of situations, of which the revolutionary moment is the first and the best.

For the situationists, one of the central mechanisms by which the spectacle precludes the possibility of such a world is its cultivation of the myth that it is the only system of social organisation capable of providing the means of survival. Indeed, capitalist relations of production have always been justified on the grounds that they facilitate the satisfaction of basic needs, and if work performed in order to survive has been the stick of capitalist relations, the possibility of achieving freedom from this necessity has been its carrot, its heaven on earth. The prospect of increasing free time, leisure, and the opportunity to enjoy the fruits of one's labour is continually held out as the reward of increased productivity. And the situationists argued that although the economic and technological achievements of capitalism have made the prospect of this reward a real possibility, the alienated relations of production which were necessary to the abolition of material privation and the satisfaction of basic needs are now perpetuated without justification. Economic growth has 'given rise to an abundance thanks to which the basic problem of survival, though solved, is solved in such a way that it is not disposed of, but is rather forever cropping up again at a higher level'.

Alienated production was only necessary to a people desperate to survive; now that the forces of production unleashed by capitalism have rid us of this desperation, the social relations which once facilitated human development have become its brake and hindrance. Societies have been liberated from 'the natural pressures occasioned by their struggle for survival, but they must still be liberated from their liberators'.

New threats and enemies are continually introduced to combat that of material poverty: the perpetual terrors of nuclear war, epidemic, and environmental disaster reproduce an ideology of the urgent need to survive. The horizon of capitalist Utopia must constantly recede: 'The satisfaction of basic needs remains the best safeguard of alienation; it is best dissimulated by being justified on the grounds of undeniable necessities.' At a time when survival could have become an imperative of the past, superseded by a life free from the demands of need, everyday life remains 'governed by the reign of scarcity' and organised 'within the limits of a scandalous poverty'.

This poverty is enforced and reproduced through the production of commodities which pretend to offer satisfactions they continually deny. 'Consumable survival must increase, in fact, because it continues to enshrine deprivation.' Even the most banal and unnecessary of commodities is presented as a means of survival - 'how can you live without X soap powder?' - or sometimes offered as a more obvious threat: 'you cannot live without a credit card', or 'you need to use cosmetics'. 'As poverty has been reduced in terms of mere material survival', wrote Vaneigem, 'it has become more profound in terms of our way of life.'

Integral to the rhetoric of advanced capitalist societies, the free realms of luxury, leisure, and consumption merely reproduce the alienated relations by which they were produced, introducing a new cycle of scarcity, privation, and the imperatives of survival. The spare time for which generations of workers struggled has been invaded by the very alienated relations from which it was supposed to have been a holiday: modern capitalism demands a 'surplus of "collaboration"', and alienated consumption 'is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses'. At such a stage of over-development and abundance, the workers who were once coerced into producing the goods they needed are now encouraged to consume the commodities they are told they need; the extension of commodity relations to all areas of social experience means that the worker is not even free from them outside the workplace. Leisure is defined in terms of commodified time, activities, and goods; free time is spent, and the realm outside work is increasingly the province of alienated relations.

All of a sudden the workers in question discover that they are no longer invariably subject to the total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organisation and management of production; instead they find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role of consumers.

No longer a mere adjunct to production, consumption becomes necessary to the circulation of commodities, the accumulation of capital, and the survival of the spectacular system.

But consumption merely reproduces the alienation and isolation experienced in production. Increasingly meaningless
commodities are circulated and contemplated as external and hostile goods: intrinsically dissatisfying, they embody alienated social relations and take their entire meaning from the spectacular whole in which they arise. 'The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles.' A staggering abundance of commodity choices is offered, and identification is demanded not with a single commodity but the commodity system itself: it is the spectacle as a whole which is advertised and desired. The lights, the opportunities, the shops, the excitement: the attraction of capitalist societies has always been their glamorous dynamism, the surfeit of commodities and the ubiquity of choice they offer. But in practice, anything can be chosen except the realm in which choice is possible. One can choose to be, think, and do anything, but as the roles, ideas, and lifestyles possible within capitalist society are allowed to appear only to the extent that they appear as commodities, the equivalence and homogeneity of commodities is inescapable in the most private aspects of life. The shops always carry everything except the thing one really wants; they are 'full of things', but one cannot buy all of them, still less all the shops. The act of choosing between a variety of commodities, whether they are roles or things, lifestyles or opinions is, by virtue of its place in the alienated whole, fated to be an instance of 'false choice offered by spectacular abundance'; an irrelevant and meaningless choice between empty and equivalent commodities.

Every product represents the hope for 'a dramatic shortcut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption', but the fulfilment of this promise is possible only with the attainment of the totality of commodities, a desire which excites the accumulation of commodities but which is ultimately insatiable. 'The satisfaction that the commodity in its abundance can no longer supply by virtue of its use value is now sought in the acknowledgement of its value qua commodity.' Commodities circulate as ends in themselves; goods which are one day presented as unique and ultimate products, the very best and the very latest goods, are replaced and forgotten the next:

what this means for the consumer is an outpouring of religious zeal in honour of the commodity’s sovereign freedom. Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fuelled and boosted by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed. A film sparks a fashion craze, or a magazine launches a chain of clubs that in turn spins off a line of products. The sheer fad item perfectly expresses the fact that, as the mass of commodities becomes more and more absurd, absurdity becomes a commodity in its own right.

And the life of the consumer becomes increasingly absurd as well, able to find identity only in the act of pointless consumption. 'In this way reified man proclaims his intimacy with the commodity.'

Following in the footsteps of the old religious fetishism, with its transported convulsionaries and miraculous cures, the fetishism of the commodity also achieves its moment of acute fervor. The only use still in evidence here . . . is the basic use of submission.

This intimate identification of the individual with the commodity is born out of the attempt to escape alienation: the search for some unity and meaning in the midst of increasing fragmentation and isolation. But the commodity's role in the reproduction of alienated relations makes this fulfilment impossible: the society of commodity abundance produces its own contradictions. It needs to cultivate new needs and awake new desires, but can never allow them to be fulfilled since its own imperatives for constant innovation and increased production and consumption are dependent on a continued struggle for satisfaction.

Unable to allow participation on terms other than its own, the spectacle propagates the image of participation and invites everyone to 'join in' with the happy whole whilst at the same time ensuring that this totality is illusory and unattainable: a strong, appealing, but empty image. In principle, one can have anything, do anything, be anything, and go anywhere, but one cannot choose or define the whole in which these abundant choices are made. Everything is offered, and everything has great appeal, but the something it is possible to choose is impoverished and mundane. The world is an exciting place, but the bit in which one lives might be as dull as ditch-water. As the representation of itself, life is complete and fulfilling; as it is actually possible to live it, it is fragmented and disappointing. It is only in the context of the advertised whole, the image of spectacular unity, that the commodity has meaning; just as the colourful stripes of knitwear on the shelves of a Benetton shop conceal the single colour of each item, so the consumption of all commodities entails an immediate loss of their glamour.
The sole real status attaching to a mediocre object of this kind is to have been placed, however briefly, at the very center of social life and hailed as the revelation of the goal of the production process. But even this spectacular prestige evaporates into vulgarity as soon as the object is taken home by a consumer— and hence by all other consumers too. At this point its essential poverty...stands revealed—too late. For by this time another product will have been assigned to supply the system with its justification, and will in turn be demanding its moment of acclaim.64

It is, of course, necessary that the promised land remain unattainable. Everyone knows that gas central heating will not really make them feel more at home; perfumes do not bring everlasting happiness, and holidays can’t make one’s dreams come true. But these grand desires are constantly advertised, and the realisation that gas central heating does not fulfil its promises does not make our desire to belong in the world disappear. Even though we are condemned to seek fulfilment amidst the fragments of alienated commodities and second-hand experiences, the constant innovations of commodity production merely encourage our search for satisfaction, our eager watch for the next best thing.

In the midst of these perpetual cycles of re-development, revolution is, of course, the one change precluded by the spectacle. Change occurs within the spectacle, but the spectacle is static: time frozen into its own commodification and constantly reproducing itself in cycles of return. Every new commodity presents itself as the last, the perfect, and the ultimate: consume this product, try this experience, be this person, and you will never want for more. But wanting more is an experience built into the alienated commodity: desires are only raised and never fulfilled by its privation. Yesterday’s innovation is continually superseded, and the ultimate product has an ever-decreasing life span. The car to end all cars, the holiday of a lifetime, the perfect kitchen—the best, the biggest, the final achievement of production and design—all are passed over in favour of a new finity with an accelerated movement. ‘Something that can assert its own unchanging excellence with uncontested arrogance changes nonetheless’, and every ‘new lie of the advertising industry implicitly acknowledges the one before’.65 The commodity must simultaneously be the last and the latest; the end of history is declared and denied every day. And so the spectacle continually affirms that ‘there was history, but “there is no longer any history”’, a point made by Marx and developed by both Lukács and Debord.66

In The Society of the Spectacle, Debord agreed with Marx that capitalist relations of production have imposed a sense of linear time on a world whose pre-industrial time had been experienced as cyclical. ‘The victory of the bourgeoisie was the victory of a profoundly historical time—the time corresponding to the economic form of production, which transformed society permanently, and from top to bottom.’67 Lived in relation to the seasons, the hours of light and darkness, and the phases of the moon, the time of pre-industrial societies returned upon itself and embodied no sense of progress. But the accumulation of capital entails the constant development of all social relations: there is no cyclical return, but only the necessity of change. Capitalist production makes time historical, irreversible, and universal. Its history is no longer made up of a series of isolated events, but produced in the accumulation of capital and commodity production: ‘the worker, at the base of society, is for the first time not materially estranged from history, for now the irreversible is generated from below’.68

And, merely by ‘demanding to live’ the historical time that it creates, the proletariat discovers the simple, unforgettable core of its revolutionary project; and every attempt to carry this project through...signals a possible point of departure for a new historical life.69

The senses of time and history generated by capitalist production may be irreversible and progressive but, experienced purely in terms of commodified and spectacularised moments, they are necessarily lived at a distance: contemplated and observed without the possibility of real engagement. ‘So the bourgeoisie unveiled irreversible historical time and imposed it on society only to deprive society of its use.’70 And in this purely economic time, spectacular time manifests itself as a pseudo-cyclical form of ‘augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labour’.71 Spectacular time builds ‘on the natural vestiges of cyclical time, while at the same time using these as models on which to base new homologous variants’.72 Week and weekend, the morning after the night before, the news and the soap, the annual holiday and the office party: all these provide new cycles which punctuate and veil
the reality of linear time. ‘Cyclical time was the time of a motionless illusion authentically experienced; spectacular time is the time of a reality in transformation experienced as an illusion.’73 The festivals and events which the cyclical time of pre-capitalist society required to mark its passage and return are recreated in the spectacle as pseudo-festivals, in which the only available roles are those of audience, consumer, or star. Carnivals and festivals are outlawed when they threaten to transgress these spectacular forms.

In the spectacle, time is advertised and consumed as free time, time out, time to drink tea, eat chocolate, invest, or retire. Measured quantitatively in units of production and consumption, it is spent, wasted, and saved. Sliced into saleable units, time is sold as ‘moments portrayed, like all spectacular commodities, at a distance and desirable by definition’.74 This is epitomised by the selling of “fully equipped” blocks of time,75 the all-inclusive shopping mall and the package holiday in which time ‘sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable “things” [. . .] in short, it becomes space’.76 Travel, made easier by technological development and the imposition of the global market, is translated into tourism, ‘the chance to go and see what has been made banal’,77 and the peculiar characteristics of places are lost in the dissemination of commodity equivalence. The mass planning of the 1960s produced a ‘new architecture specifically for the poor’,78 and encouraged the development of a homogeneous space interspersed with ‘temples of frenetic consumption’,79 shopping centres, leisure centres, new towns, and environments which continually declare: ‘On this spot no one will ever do anything – and no one ever has.’80 As the recent development of theme parks, reconstructed villages, architectural pastiche, and the heritage industry shows, both history and space become objects of contemplation: geographical areas are increasingly places to look at rather than to live in, and although it is possible to go anywhere, there is less and less reason to do so.

With qualitative difference emptied out of every aspect of the spectacular world, all possibilities of real engagement and participation are removed. Even the most devastating criticism can assume the mundane superficiality of the commodity form and, translated into spectacle, the most transgressive of gestures loses its impact. Capitalism ‘paints its own picture of itself and its enemies, imposes its own ideological categories on the world and its history’ while real ‘historical changes, which show that this society can be superseded, are reduced to the status of novels, processed for mere consumption’.81 But the situationists were convinced that the perpetual raising and dashing of hopes, desires, and histories on which capitalism is dependent left it vulnerable to subversion on every front. ‘Capitalist civilisation has not yet been superseded anywhere, but it continues to produce its own enemies everywhere.’82 And to the immobile surfaces of the spectacular world they responded with a dynamic conception of dialectical critique, intended to expose the spectacle as a particular moment of the historical time it denies, undermining its claims to universality and revealing it as a partial construct masquerading as a real world. Lukács’ answer to the ubiquity of alienated relations had been to argue that ‘the developing tendencies of history constitute a higher reality than the empirical “facts”’,83 and the situationists also based their critique on the idea that the possibilities of transformed social relations bear a greater meaning than the immediate realities of the spectacle in which they arise.

Debord presented dialectical critique as a way of thinking ‘that is not content simply to seek the meaning of what is but aspires to understand the dissolution of everything that is – and in the process to dissolve all separation’.84 Situationist theory therefore conjured two perspectives: that possible within existing social relations, and that made possible by their supersession. History, change, participation, reality, and every meaning developed within spectacular society must be reinterpreted in the light of a perspective of the possible. The struggle against alienation demands a total reversal of perspective, embodied in a theory which again puts reality on its feet and posits a totality of historical development beyond the existing, pseudo-totality of the spectacle. But this reversal cannot be a contemplative turn made by theory alone, and it is useless to ponder the theoretical possibility of social contestation. The contestation of alienation is also a struggle against the separations and specialisations of an intellectual programme, and if an effective critique can only be generated from within spectacular relations, it must also be realised as a practical contestation. ‘A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it joins forces with the practical movement of negation in society.’85 Neither can the spectacle be opposed by some pre-existing, uncontaminated, or authentic reality. It does not present a situation in which two worlds, the real and the spectacular,
The most radical gesture

consumed: there is more free time, choice, and opportunity, but the commodity form in which everything appears serves only to reproduce the alienated relations of capitalist production.

The introduction of the radical demands of the imagination, creativity, desire, and pleasure to their revolutionary project is indicative of the situationists’ distance from orthodox Marxism. It also reflects the influence of Dada and surrealism, whose provocative style, demands for immediacy, and cravings for autonomy were carried into the situationist project. These movements extended their initial artistic concerns to attacks on the whole gamut of cultural and social relations, arguing that capitalism circumscribes even the possibilities of expressing subjective experience. While Dada railed against every constraint, the surrealists developed a more coherent and dialectical critique of existing society which demanded the complete reconciliation of subject and object, the individual and the world, reason and the imagination. Drawing on what they considered to be the most useful aspects of these movements, the situationists developed their recognition that language and artistic expression were implicated with all other social relations, their hostility to the separation of art and poetry from everyday life, and their demands for experiences disallowed by existing society. Dada and surrealism had interrupted and subverted the language and images with which they worked, invoking a wider world of meanings which challenged conventional arrangements of reality. And in their challenges to the inevitability and immutability of the spectacle, the situationists pursued this same attempt to conjure a totality of possible social relations which exceeds and opposes the totality of spectacular relations. They took the words, meanings, theories, and experiences of the spectacle, and placed them in an opposing context; a perspective from which the world was given a fluidity and motion with which the static mediocrity of the spectacle could be negated. Introducing a sense of historical continuity by showing that the spectacle, in spite of its seamless appearance, carries the seeds of an emancipated and pleasure-filled world, the situationists showed that what could become real is more meaningful and desirable than that which is in being. The spectacle circumscribes the reality it presents, but it does not preclude the possibility of identifying a bigger and better world of chosen relations and experiences beyond its constraints.

For the situationists, freedoms of thought and action were not
conflict: even this ‘separation is part and parcel of the unity of the world, of a global social praxis that has split up into reality on the one hand and image on the other.’

The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity, for the dichotomy between reality and image will survive on either side of any such distinction. Thus the spectacle, though it turns reality on its head, is itself a product of real activity. [. . .] Each side therefore has its share of objective reality. And every concept, as it takes its place on one side or the other, has no foundation aside from its transformation into its opposite: reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real.

There are no free realms or pockets of social experience untouched by the spectacle in which terms such as ‘authenticity’, ‘meaning’, or ‘reality’ maintain their independent meaning uncontaminated by commodity relations. Everything is compromised by its appearance within the spectacle, and all the terms in which this can be expressed are themselves the products of spectacular society. Even the subject against which commodity relations are pitted ‘can only arise out of society – that is, out of the struggle that society embodies’. Likewise, ‘the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumption’ cannot be opposed to ‘any authentic need or desire that is not itself equally determined by society and its history’. The critique of the spectacle can only be an immanent critique: there are no absolute standards, authentic human beings, or transcendental truths on which it can be based.

The implications of this position were developed in the situationists’ analysis of the Watts riots in Los Angeles in 1965. Dealing with a situation which has since reasserted itself in countless instances from Handsworth to Brixton, the situationists argued that the looting of the Watts district was ‘the most direct realisation of the distorted principle, “To each according to his false needs” – needs determined and produced by the economic system that the very act of looting rejects.’

But since the vaunting of abundance is taken at its face value and immediately seized upon instead of being eternally pursued in the rat race of alienated labour and increasing but unmet social needs, real desires begin to be expressed.
conceived as a society poised on the brink of revolution, saved only by its ability to control those manifestations of the desires and dissatisfaction that would disturb it.

Paying no regard to the distrust with which the traditional organs of opposition treated absenteeism, unofficial strikes, 'mindless violence', shop lifting, graffitoed advertisements, and every attempt to take momentary control of ordinary life, the situationists were convinced that such daily acts of disruption and resistance to work, authority, and consumption showed that the spectacle was already and always being contested. The development of increasingly sophisticated devices with which the control and removal of real experience is effected is matched by the sophistication of their appropriation by the very subjectivity it intends to control. Pirate broadcasters crowd the airwaves, fax machines send works of art in office hours, desk-top publishers produce propaganda, and electricity meters run backwards all over the developed world. Just as everything which appears in opposition to the spectacle can be brought within it, so everything which appears within spectacular society can be reclaimed by the consciousness which seeks to subvert it.

The situationists were aware of the difficulties in their theoretical stance. Although they could claim that the desires to participate in history and construct the situations in which one lives are reproduced by spectacular relations as surely as they are denied, they could offer only the hope that the consciousness of these desires would develop to the point at which a wholesale onslaught on the social totality was possible. And for all the sophistication of their conception of immanent critique, the situationists did not avoid the problem of finding some point of opposition to spectacular society. No matter how accurate, a theory, as Debord acknowledged, is useless in itself; of The Society of the Spectacle, he wrote:

Anyone who reads this book attentively will see that it gives no kind of assurances about the victory of the revolution, nor of the duration of its operations, nor of the rough roads it will have to travel, and still less about its capacity, sometimes rashly boasted of, to bring perfect happiness to everyone.\textsuperscript{94}

But although the situationists protected themselves with arguments that those who help 'the epoch to discover what it can do' are 'no more sheltered from the defects of the present than innocent of the most baneful of that which may come to pass', Debord was convinced that 'those who really want to shake an established society must formulate a theory which fundamentally explains this society'.\textsuperscript{96} With characteristic self-assurance, Debord was convinced he had achieved this goal. 'I flatter myself', he wrote in 1979, 'to be a very rare contemporary example of someone who has written without being immediately contradicted by the event.' He continued: 'I have no doubt that the confirmation all my theses receive ought not to last right until the end of the century and even beyond. The reason for this is simple: I have understood the factors that constitute the spectacle.'\textsuperscript{97}

This confidence marked all situationist writing. Convinced that their integration of cultural practice and political theory produced a unique and devastating formula for the critique of everyday life and the transformation of the social world, the SI treated the vast majority of contemporary analyses of consumer society with the contempt it was sure they deserved. The situationists were of course in a most unusual and fortuitous position: all earlier critiques of the everyday had been developed within academia, avant-garde artistic, literary, and political movements, or the minds of a few brave rebels, poets, and dreamers. Rarely had there been a collective attempt to overcome the fragmentations attributed by the situationists to spectacular relations and develop a unified critique of every aspect of daily life.

The 1960s were witness to a host of theorisations dealing with the proliferation of forms of communication, information, and consumption. Many bemoaned the superficiality of modern life and decried the absence of real experience, and the situationists were not alone in their view that the development of capitalist relations required renewed analyses of their production and reproduction. And although the question of alienation preoccupied many post-war intellectuals, observations of the ubiquity of alienated social relations produced unprecedented difficulties for social critique wherever they were made. Without the assurance of some realm free from the influence of commodity relations, the possibility of negating their hegemony is compromised and problematic. In One-Dimensional Man, Marcuse argued that while the structure of capitalism remained fundamentally undisturbed, new forms of domination and integration make alienation integral to consciousness itself. The apparent tolerance and variety of modern capitalism conceals its totalitarian tendency to eradicate
any alternative dimension of thought or experience. Indeed, 
Marcuse claimed that 'the extent to which this civilisation trans-
forms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body 
makes the very notion of alienation questionable'.

Attempts to defend the subject against the encroachment of 
commodity relations were thrown into further disarray by the rise 
of structuralist and semiological theories which questioned the 
whole notion of subjective experience and encouraged a turn away 
from the humanism of the western Marxist tradition. These 
theoretical developments gradually undermined every aspect of 
the situationist project, which nevertheless pursued its attacks on 
the alienating effects of modern society with a flagrant disregard 
for the new concern with signs and structures. Structuralism was 
seen as the spectacle's expression of itself, a philosophy which 
proclaimed the end of history as surely as the world in which it 
arose, with its claim 'that a brief freeze in historical time is in fact 
a definitive stability'. Structuralism, argued Debord, sees 'the 
eternal presence of a system that was never created and will never 
disappear' it is a 'thought underwritten by the State, a thought that 
conceives of the present conditions of spectacular "communication" as an absolute'. It is not structuralist theory itself 'that 
serves to prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the 
spectacle', but 'the society of the spectacle, imposing in its massive 
reality, that validates the chill dream of structuralism'. From a 
situationist perspective, structuralist analyses of the codes and 
categories in which everyday life is framed and produced were far 
too willing to take the spectacle literally. The situationists were 
certainly concerned to understand the role of the signs, codes, 
images, and messages which constitute modern life, but they 
remained convinced that these were merely the consequences of 
an over-developed system of alienated production, requiring no 
new science of signs or structures. The spectacle, insisted Debord, 
is not 'a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of 
images', nor a 'collection of images; rather, it is a social 
relationship between people that is mediated by images'.

The spectacular world which lends itself so well to structuralist and 
semiological analysis is 'both the outcome and the goal of the 
dominant mode of production'.

It is not something added to the real world - not a decorative 
 element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of 
society's real unreality. In all its specific manifestations - news 
or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of 
entertainment - spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of 
social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already 
made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result 
of that choice.

Although it is only with the later work of Baudrillard that the 
situationist project comes into open conflict with the conse-
quences of the turn away from critical negation foreshadowed by 
the development of structuralist analyses, it is undoubtedly with 
Baudrillard's early writings, in which commodities begin to circu-
late without reference to meaning, utility, or value, that situationist 
theory resonates most clearly.

Debord and the young Baudrillard shared the view that con-
sumption was occupying an increasingly central role in the lives 
of the inhabitants of advanced capitalist society, arguing that the 
circulation of commodities almost becomes an end in itself, quite 
regardless of the subjects who buy, sell, and produce them. 
Baudrillard's first book, Le système des objets, was close to many of the 
ideas of The Society of the Spectacle which narrowly pre-dated it. 
Charting the rise of the consumer society, Baudrillard argued that we 
live in an increasingly closed relation to commodities which 
assume an unprecedented plasticity, multi-purpose functionalism 
and superficiality. A new morality of consumption, circumscribed 
by leisure, advertising, and fun, replaces the work ethic of a society 
grounded around production, and a society of rapid and pointless 
change comes to dominate lived experience: 'Everything is in 
motion, everything is changing, everything is being transformed 
yet nothing changes. Such a society, thrown into technological 
progress, accomplishes all possible revolutions but these are revo-
lutions upon itself.'

Like Debord, Baudrillard argued that commodities have 
meaning only within the whole - the spectacle - in which they 
appear. 'Few objects today are offered alone, without a context of 
objects to speak for them. . . . Washing machine, refrigerator, 
dishwasher and so on have different meanings when grouped 
together than each one has alone, as a piece of equipment.'

Although at this stage Baudrillard retained the possibility of a 
critical relation to the consumer society, invoking forms of 
irrational violence and resistance to symbols of consumption such
as cars, neon signs, and shops, he also tended to argue that alienation had become complete and unsurpassable. Social relations ascend from pure and simple abundance to complete conditioning of action and time and finally to the systematic organization of ambience, which is characteristic of the drugstores, the shopping malls, or the modern airports in our futuristic cities.\textsuperscript{107} Multiple forms of refusal might come together for a while, as they did in 1968, but there could be no necessity or predictability about their development. In his 1973 text \textit{The Mirror of Production} and the subsequent publications considered later in this book, Baudrillard came to see social critique as an increasingly unforeseeable, dispersed, and purposeless reaction to a world in which commodities are displaced by a system of signs. Replacing the Marxist critique of political economy with a logic of sign value and fetishism, Baudrillard increasingly argued that modern society is characterized not merely by an extension of commodity relations, but by the conspicuous consumption of commodities as signs of social status and personal identity.

By this point in the development of Baudrillard's work, the process of spectacularization and the removal of meaning identified by Debord is completed, with the absolute abstraction of the commodity which signifies only itself. There can no longer be any distinction between the real and the advertised thing, and thus no experience of poverty, disappointment, or disillusion in the act of consumption. All that is consumed is the sign of the object: a sign, such as 'revolutionary new washing machine' which signifies only itself and conceals or belies nothing else. Whereas Debord argued that commodities circulate almost solely for the sake of abstract buying and selling, Baudrillard gradually removed all sense of the 'almost' and claimed that commodities have become pure signs which no longer even pretend to point to anything real. Two of the phrases - 'no longer' and 'always already' - which pepper Baudrillard's more recent texts express his position perfectly: it is no longer possible to speak of the real, and reality is always already become spectacle. Situationist theory always teeters on the brink of this position, continually advancing towards the abyss of a society made up of meaningless and inexorable signs, but always pulling its arguments back to the \textit{terra firma} of a real world experienced by real people. For Debord, it is no longer easy to speak of the real, and reality is always already vulnerable to spectacularization. But there is none of the inevitability of Baudrillard's bleak picture of homogeneity and meaninglessness. The leap into hyperreality is never made, and the struggle to assert and resolve the contradiction between reality and its spectacular inversion in the moment of revolution remains the defining characteristic of situationist theory.
to be sacrificed to the future: theirs was a programme of immediate demands to be lived in the present as both the means and ends of revolutionary activity. Scorning all mediation and representation, they demanded autonomy for themselves and the proletariat in whose hands the possibility of social transformation lay. Capitalist social relations arise in every area and must be exposed and contested by those who experience them, and in their advocacy of workers’ councils, the situationists joined a revolutionary tradition hostile to the hierarchy and bureaucracy of those who would educate, represent, and lead the people to revolution. Yet in a sense, the situationists formed a vanguard movement themselves, claiming theoretical superiority and tactical supremacy. They alone could sense the cravings of even the well-fed; of all radical currents, they had revealed the spectacular nature of capitalist society and could maintain a position in contradiction to it. But their libertarianism placed them in the role of propagandists and provocateurs rather than leaders or organisers. And in this role they continuously undermined complacency wherever it arose, particularly among the radical milieu. Situationist texts make uncomfortable reading for anyone with an interest in the maintenance of the status quo, and in their terms this includes even many of those committed to its negation.

This antagonistic stance has undoubtedly contributed to the scarcity of serious discussion of situationist theory, something which has not always been to the detriment of its ideas and practices. Those in sympathy with the movement’s goals and tactics have been able to proceed without the unwelcome attentions of academics, and there has been none of the mystification or stasis usually associated with the introduction of revolutionary discourse to the academy. For many, situationist theory is already mysterious, and the apparent obscurity of many of the texts has also contributed to their neglect. However, their basic thesis is plain enough. And what has really written the situationists out of intellectual history is their own determination to avoid recuperation within existing channels of dissent and critical theory. Shunning the academy, the media, and orthodox conceptions of art and politics, they defined themselves as the last specialists: in the post-revolutionary world, there would be no need for elite groups of revolutionaries, and art, politics, and all other disciplines would no longer exist as separated areas of thought. Situationist theory, the unified study of spectacular society, was therefore to be the last discipline too, the last great project, the final push towards the transformation of everyday life from a realm of bland consumption to free creation. Poetry, political theory, adventure, scandal: anything which disturbed the old world and revealed the possibilities of the new was collected and woven into situationist theory, and every hint of compromise with the spectacle smacked of complicity with its relations and promised certain defeat.

Of course, the situationists’ attempt to transform everyday life has been defeated, although their involvement with the upheavals of 1968 made them believe they had succeeded in helping it on its way. Neither have there been any further projects of the scale that perpetrated by the SI and, in the present fin de milénnium atmosphere of postmodernity, such all-encompassing revolutionary theories are said to be no longer possible. They bear the illegitimate arrogance of political totalitarianism, depending on unsupportable beliefs and assuming the possibility of ascertaining the way the world really is, regardless of the vicissitudes of appearance or the ambiguities of meaning. On this reading, the situationists’ attempt to construct a unified theory of capitalism merely brought them within the totality they thought they were opposing. But in spite of the radical opposition of situationist and postmodern thought, all theorisations of postmodernity are underwritten by situationist theory and the social and cultural agitations in which it is placed. The situationist spectacle prefigures contemporary notions of hyperreality, and the world of uncertainty and superficiality described and celebrated by the postmodernists is precisely that which the situationists first subjected to passionate criticism.

This continity is not coincidental. The philosophers most closely associated with postmodern thought, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, both emerged from the same political milieu as the situationists. Baudrillard’s work is informed by his contacts with the situationist Guy Debord, and Lyotard was involved with Socialisme ou Barbarie and the mouvement du 22 mars, probably the groups whose political ideas and activities were closest to those of the SI. Allusions to the situationists are to be found in the work of both authors, and although postmodernism turns situationist theory against itself, the traces, even the tyre-tracks of the style, vocabulary, and scope of the situationist project run across postmodernism. Poetry, pleasures, cities, and subversions are
themes common to both frameworks, and in their hostility to the Left, their attacks on the complacency and complicity of established forms of radicalism, their desire to collapse distinctions between the aesthetic and the everyday, and their search for the loci of social power in relations of language, knowledge, and everyday experience, the situationists provided postmodernism with much of the ammunition for its attacks on established genres of thought and social organisation. Moreover, the tactics with which postmodernism makes these attacks were already present in the situationist armoury: pastiche and deconstruction, subversive violence from within systems of social organisation or thought, playful irreverence towards respected theories, and the exposure of every hidden allusion and resonance.

Postmodernism uses all this to convey our departure from the modern period in which we experienced ourselves as autonomous subjects capable of making judgements, expressing desires, and acting upon the world. In Jean Baudrillard’s work, it suggests that modern society has become hyperreal, a world in which the spectacle defines, circumscribes, and becomes more real than reality itself. Baudrillard describes the seductive power of images which fool us into believing a reality persists beyond this hyper-reality, and suggests that subjectivity is produced by a host of networks of social relations and discursive constructions so complex that it cannot be unravelled to reveal causes, directions, or meanings. There is no such thing as a social whole or a theoretical unity: the notion of society is a myth belying the essential discontinuity of social relations, and the development of theory is the totalitarian exercise of power on the world’s dynamic fragments. The individual and the world are de-centred: there is no core, no soul, no God, and no economic imperative. Alienation is not a problem peculiar to capitalism, but an inevitable feature of life to which we might as well develop a positive attitude, and the search for authenticity betrays a hopeless nostalgia for a unity which never existed in the first place. We live in the midst of codes, messages, and images which produce and reproduce our lives. These may have had their origins in commodity production, but have since won their independence and usurped its role in the maintenance of social relations. All that remains is the pleasure of playing in the fragments, the disruption and resistance of the codes in which we live, the jouissance of realising that the search for meaning is endlessly deferred and has no point of arrival and, in

the absence of new movements, styles, or genres, the continual reiteration of those of the past. In the postmodern imagination, alienation is everywhere and is therefore nowhere; power is dispersed and so impossible to seize. We will only ever feel at home, liberated, and content if we give up looking for a world more real, a social organisation more free, and a happiness more profound than those provided for us. There is no subject of history digging capitalism’s grave, and no Elysian field on the other side of the barricade.

Considered in these terms, postmodernism is a manual for survival, and a very good one, in a capitalist world which seems immune to transformation. Building on the failure of the social revolution which has been just around every twentieth-century corner, it cultivates an attitude which enables one to cope with the continual refurbishment of buildings, opinions, cities, and fashions, and its reassurance that it is quite natural to feel lost, confused, and uncertain of the solidity of the ground beneath one’s feet is welcome news to the shaky survivor of the late twentieth century. But, full of advice about surviving in the here and now, it tells us little about the possibilities of transforming it: of metaphorically and literally leaving the twentieth century behind. And this was the intention of the situationist analysis, which was not a treatise on survival, but an indication of the possibilities of living in a world for which the imperatives of survival have long since disappeared. It was not an account of how to have as much fun as possible in this social environment — although in this respect it rivals postmodernism — but the theoretical transcription of attempts to have as much fun as possible changing it.

The articles published in *Internationale Situationniste* are indicative of the scope of the movement’s interests. Questions of town planning and artistic intervention were joined by critiques of the cinema, language, and political organisation; the Algerian War, the Middle East, Vietnam, the situation in China and, in later issues, the beginnings and aftermath of the events of 1968, were all given serious consideration. The SI’s conferences, its internal wrangles, and its reception in mainstream discourse were widely covered, and a variety of telling tales of everyday life were reported in support of the situationists’ theoretical stance. Like the metallic colours of its covers, the collective editorship of the journal
changed with each issue. An extraordinary number and variety of people passed through the ranks of the Situationist International, but the majority had brief and ignominious careers, with exclusion or resignation sealing the fate of most participants. Two major books emerged from this chaos, one by Raoul Vaneigem, who joined the SI in 1962, and the other, *The Society of the Spectacle*, by the somewhat self-styled leader of the group, Guy Debord.

*The Society of the Spectacle* appeared a decade after the establishment of the Situationist International. The book by no means encompasses the wealth of situationist theory and, read in isolation from the movement's other texts, it is dry and uninspiring, with the only hints of situationist provocation and extravagance appearing in the wealth of italicised enthusiasm and the stolen goods it collects. In line with the movement's tactical subversions of existing texts and materials, much of the book consists of passages plagiarised and subtly rewritten; as a consequence, it is full of Hegelian turns of phrase and vaguely familiar transpositions of the work of Marx and Lukács. But the condensed form in which its arguments are presented makes *The Society of the Spectacle* a rich source for a number of situationist themes, particularly those which define modern capitalist society as a spectacle and identify its internal contradictions.

Vaneigem's book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, was published in the same year as *The Society of the Spectacle* and presented a rather more anecdotal, extravagant, and subjective work of propaganda to accompany Debord's theoretical investigations. Vaneigem's rejection of the spectacle was a moral, poetic, erotic, and almost spiritual refusal to co-operate with the demands of commodity exchange. It unleashed witty and compelling tirades against the myths and sacrifices of consumer society, asserting a radical subjectivity which could fire pleasures, spontaneity, and creativity at the all-encompassing equivalence and emptiness of modern life. Above all, it contested the system of social relations which forces us to exist as survivors shackled by needs and forced into labour when all the possibilities of a rich, desiring life are constantly displayed. But although *The Revolution of Everyday Life* expressed the situationists' enduring appeal for life, intensity, passion, and play, it also displayed an impatience with theory and the rather more serious political commitment demanded by Debord. Nobody thought it was very funny when Vaneigem went off on holiday as the great events of 1968 began to unfold, and the tension between having fun in the present and saving it up until after the revolution was an enduring problem which played no small part in the final collapse of the SI.¹

It was in rather more sober tones, therefore, that Debord presented *The Society of the Spectacle*. More than a decade after its publication, he wrote:

In 1967 I wanted the Situationist International to have a book of theory. The SI was at this time the extremist group which had done the most to bring back revolutionary contestation to modern society; and it was easy to see that this group, having imposed its victory on the terrain of critical theory, and having skilfully followed it through on that of practical agitation, was then drawing near the culminating point of its historical action. So it was a question of such a book being present in the troubles that were soon to come, and which would pass it on after them to the vast subversive sequel that they could not fail to open up.²

The 'troubles' of 1968 which were indeed 'soon to come' were regarded by the situationists as the mass demonstration of their theory, and if Debord had a single message to convey, it was without doubt the conviction that the 'days of this society are numbered; its reasons and merits have been weighed and found to be lacking; its inhabitants are divided into two parties, one of which wants this society to disappear'.³ His book contended that although the class and economic structure of capitalist society had suffered no qualitative change since its analysis by Marx, the extension of commodity relations to all aspects of life and culture, accelerated by new systems of technology, information, and communication, required the development of a new paradigm within which contemporary society could be understood. The spectacle provided the perfect framework. It captured the contemplative and passive nature of modern life and accounted for the boredom and apathetic dissatisfaction which characterised social experience. It could move beyond the basic categories of orthodox Marxism while at the same time preserving the possibility of a revolutionary critique and providing a perspective from which every aspect of contemporary discourse, culture, social organisation, and daily existence could be challenged. And although the SI's analysis was not just a response to the increasing role of the mass media, information, and advertising, the notion of the spec-