

The Realm Of Creativity

Narrative:

At eight o'clock this morning, while you are driving to work; the Dow Jones Industrial Average drops precipitously, silver mining and photography stocks are particularly hard hit. At ten o'clock, while you are at a meeting, Kodak Corp. raises the price of film three hundred percent to make up losses. At three O'clock, your bosses' boss at the Lazy Days Portrait Studio Inc. walks in and demands across the board staff cuts to make up for added costs. At five O'clock, as you are leaving work your bosses tells you to take at least a week off...

"Jim Noriss' first novel "Our Fondest Dreams" will soon be published by Random House". Jim flows in a vast river of literary entrepreneurship.

Since college he undoubtedly has been working to get any sort of writing into recognized publications. He fights to combine his own vision with the official vision of this world.

One image rests on another image which altogether rest on the stream of images. Today's metaphors built on clichés show the mechanism of social construction that an aspiring author must become part of. The cliché today is the foundation of a whole system of attention channeling – cliché are images, arguments, and attitudes that are remembered in bunches. So attaching a product to a cliché gives the product automatic name recognition. For that

reason, clichés themselves have great value and being able to create them is valuable in itself: this becomes the last art form of capitalism.

Human relations

Common portraits of this society, from both it friends and its most extreme foes, focus on technology and economics as external objects. In one common way of describing things, technology and

development of this society is that it has transformed people, people's experience of themselves, and the way that they relate to themselves. This constant self-transformation produces a shifting ground. Everything in the past is now interpreted in light of the present. Just as Star Trek's space aliens today always speak English, the modern imagination projects the world as it is now onto all possible previous existences.

We have to do better. We must see that the system of today is a transformation of both people and things. Certainly this society presents itself as an immense accumulation of things. But the task for all of us is to translate this image of a pile of junk back into a series of ways that people relate to each other. Despite TV images of cars driving themselves or computers reaching out to people, the entire techno-structure, the entire



economics are simply neutral means of getting things done. With the opposite common description, technology or economics are incomprehensible forces, appearing out of nowhere, and unquestionably controlling human actions.

Neither of these frameworks is helpful for us. An important point of the

economic structure and the entire media structure are altogether the result of a continuous process of planning, maintenance, trouble-shooting and crisis management. In other words, it is a product of labor. And of it also all depends on the fragile resources of the planet.

This then, is what we mean when we

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describe the present system, capitalism, as a human-relation.

Defining The Spectacle

Karl Marx described how, in the transition to capitalism, the process of exchanging goods for money for goods (G-M-G) became the process of exchanging money for goods for money (M-G-M) and reflected a qualitative change in social relations.

The peasant sold grain to get some money and then get back some goods. Money only mattered as one part of how his rural existence continued.

The capitalist starts out with money, buys stuff, then sells it for more money – money is what matters. The capitalist can even short-circuit the whole process and just earn interest on his or her money. The capitalist was different, not because he used money but because his ultimate goal was just more money. The money was not a means to support a large or small land hold, it was an end, something that would grow indefinitely.

The change that happened when capitalism became dominant reflected upon everything that happened within this new society – when money existed to recreate itself, it was able to move to occupy the dominant position that it presently has. This created the broad framework of today: the world where everything is for sale. (An immediate result of the dominance of this circuit of money was the rise of

factories where proletarians toiled as dispossessed pure sellers of labor.)

The dislocation caused by capitalism has allowed the world of images to take a similar sort of false freedom. The spectacle reflects a refinement of how images and representations relate to the capitalist domination of life.



In an idealized “early capitalist” situation, there is only wage work that does not directly impinge the “culture” of workers. In most “advanced” conditions, capitalists directly markets the largest parts of the wage laborers’ culture. From sports to ideas to trends, everything is on the auction block. Of course, the ruling class never sells or

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controls everything. But quantitative increase in the level of marketing results in a qualitative change in the relationship of people to their representations. Culture becomes TV: a river of slickly produced junk.

Previously, people created a culture that in the balance belonged to them,

even if there were many parts created by particular specialists. Even those representations that were externally manufactured had to make reference to this culture. Today, the spectacle more and more refers to an area autonomous from the masses where the most important representations lie. In this reversal, even self-originated ideas have to make reference to this stream of representations. Television becomes an important topic of conversation.

The Situationist International formulated a concept of the spectacle. We will be describing the development of the spectacle as a parallel system to the accumulation of capital. For the Situationist, the spectacle was the sum of all looking, and all representation. In the pre-spectacular world, lies were balanced by

enough of common understanding that they could be unambiguously called lies. In the spectacle, all apparent authenticity on the level of surface in this sense is a false statement about the conditions of today.

This isn’t just a matter of an image being a reflection another image. Just as

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every commodity has basic use value, every image has some sort of relation to non-reflexive reality. A web site must publicize itself with TV advertisements etc., average people can have some real relationship with newscasters, etc. Provisionally, we might say life becomes *spectacular* when the balance of the social value flowing from images tips in favor of this self-referentiality over the representation of the concrete.

Capital is a system that traps the flow of human creative energy. Living labor is turned into dead labor – capital. And this is turned against the interests of the laborer.

By the same logic, the spectacle is a system that colonizes the social relations. As a whole, thoughts and social relations go from being immediate results of authentic relations to being controlled by the logic of the flow of images.

Images simultaneously are commodities and capital at the level of monetary relations. Capital is essentially quantitative. It is measurable as a mass of investment (though this measurement is limited by uncertainties of investment price and the general secrecy around trade, etc.).

The spectacle, on the other hand, is a phenomenon of subjective experience. The labor of ideologists and specialists in communication is united by a vast variety of links. The color and design themes that link the major appliances built in a particular year are dictated by the obscure Color Marketing Group (see <http://www.colormarketing.org/>, overshadowing the former American Color Council). Newspapers are linked together through their rewriting of the same news wires and press releases. The links are limitless.

The tenuous quality of these links forces each spectacular laborer to redouble their efforts to maintain their position within the entire flow of the spectacle. This same tenuous quality makes it impossible for us to totally map the spectacle. But the crucial thing is dominance of the spectacle as a whole. It is impossible to determine how spectacular the latest movie is compared

to say a punk rock show.

The main thing is the effort and incentive of the many specialist to enlist themselves in this very palpable “seamless stream of image.”

Naturally, the spectacle did not spring full-formed as a kind of new parasite on society but is an evolution of the realms of culture of dead labor and no culture – no organic unity.

Arguments about the exact point of initiation of the society of the spectacle misses the point in the same way arguments about the exact point of origin of capitalism. If some qualities of the spectacle can be applied “universally” to various realms of culture, it says no more than the partial applicability of market logic to pre-economic societies. Anyway, while television, shopping malls, and the Internet are only symptoms of the condition of life today, they still pretty well distinguish 1999 from 1799.

The Spectacle In Production

One of the main systems of capitalist management theory is “TQM” – Total Quality Management. TQM is doctrine which exhorts each company to find a niche where the sale of its unique “quality” can bring it profits.

This doctrine represents more than a single scheme to make a buck. It represents one common effort of capital to turn back a crisis of profitability. The one immediately obvious crisis of profitability comes from the inability of those companies which make “generic” products to make a profit. “Generic products” are those which anyone can make and sell. In world where a massive market system moves money with utmost rapidity, companies that sell something that many other companies also make and sell quickly lose their ability to obtain a profit since the selling price quickly goes down to the price of production (Of course, this is not the ultimate problem of capitalism but simply how the capitalist winds-up seeing it. For a more detailed description, see Karl Marx, *Capital* v: I-III).

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The alternative to this today is a series of angles, of scams. In the modern market, since production no longer consists of fixed commodities but of ever-varying gizmos of uncertain value, marketing must permeate the process to assure a market for whatever is produced – Internet start-ups are simply the latest within this racket.

Where did this begin? More than a hundred years ago, steam and coal gave capitalist society the means to conquer the globe purely quantitatively. Once it reached a quantitative mastery of the environment, the alteration of the *qualities* of environment became the key underlying project of capitalism. And within this, controlling the qualities of the world it builds has become key. And this increase in control has naturally happened *first obviously, then subtly*.

The most distinct aspects of the spectacle were first seen in the hypnotic power of mass communication – in radio, television and movies. And when these technologies first appeared, they had the appearance of separately acting forces. *The magic of Hollywood* involved prestige and glamour (words associated with magic). From Hitler to Saddam Hussein to Franklin Roosevelt, the power of centralized mass communication has reached its apex under all the varieties of *war capitalism*. Mass communication’s first wave is the harnessing of a scale of persuasion – from the “big screen,” to “big lie,” to “big stars.”

It is only by the further extension of the domination of exchange that the spectacle can be seen as an integrated aspect of alienated labor. In a previous issue, we described a view of the concept of spectacle which situated it as most focused on the process of consumption. The perspective of both Jean Barrot and those who view the Situationist International as being “media critics” is that the spectacle is only the experience of “consumers”, professional and skilled workers. It is viewed as merely a supplement to the consumption side of the production-consumption process. The framework of the spectacle as an

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accumulation of circulating appearances might seem similar to this, but ultimately it is more.

We will describe, instead, how the spectacle permeates many other aspects of capitalist relations: the entire circuit of production, consumption and reproduction are all reorder by this principle. Altogether the reign of the spectacle comes as capital's manipulation of the conditions of reproduction move from the obvious to the subtle, moving to conquer first the objective and then the subjective.

Capital does not just add advertising or packaging at the end of the assembly line. The assembly line itself is coated with a layer of "team spirit" ideology, the production process is packaged for the investor, the regulator and the competitor. A company that pretends to be efficient can be as ruthless to work for as a company that really does enforce efficiency. All activity is encapsulated within ideologies.

The spectacle reigns when the true and the false can coexist simply in the realm of the predictable. Lying about production and the production of lies are everywhere. Half of a company's revenues come from a gigantic factory while the other half may involve five people selling cocaine. As long as each has a statistically verifiable track record, each will be incorporated into a commodity.

This society is the product of the failure of each possibility for liberation, from the Paris Commune to the IWW of 1920's to the upheavals of the 1960's – but even without explicit revolts, even

the smallest moments of ungovernability must be stepped on.

An electronic-parts store owner described the advance of electrical parts to ASAN: "Twenty years ago, if a ten cent diode went out in a radio, you could just buy a replacement and keep the radio going. These days, all the electrical



appliances have parts that are specially designed by the manufacturer and not available anywhere."

We can roughly describe capital as "revolutionizing" production in two different phases. In the first stage, interchangeable parts, automation and research are used to reduce the price as much as is practical. Once the manufacturer has the most savings out of

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production, things enter the second stage. In this stage, the manufacturer rearranges production so the ways he or she makes things brings the greatest profits and control, even though things aren't made more efficient. The product is designed to break down more, so people will buy more. Spare parts are controlled more so the manufacturer will control the repair market. A thousand and one tricks are used.

Production Phases

We can trace three rough phases of capitalist production methods. Essentially, we move from traditional production to automated production to ideological production.

I. Traditional Industry: The small scale methods used to produce handicrafts. These advance but only in terms of individual activities. The single woodworker or iron worker would fit into this category.

II. Interchangeable Parts: automation and the scientific revolution - this begins with automation and larger scale production, most industry till recently fit into this broad category.

III Ideologized Production: The further revolutionizing of the entire production process using psychology,

cybernetics, systems theory, model and all ideological machinery of modern bureaucracy. The characteristic aspect is the "tweaking" one production process to influence over-all processes. The happens in the context of the increased unification of the spectacle.

Goals of Ideologized production seldom are simply increases in

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production but rather are driven by a need to fine-tune the entire shape of production. Indeed ideologized production requires the basic framework of production to be set. In ideologized production, the shape of the product is changed to allow easy shipping, or to allow for an assembly line where union organizing is more difficult or for a thousand interlocked levels.

As capital evolves, each industry has evolved from one phase to the next. But different industries and processes are still at different levels. Steel is still mostly a simple commodity after three hundred years. Software now is produced massive ideology contained within.

The cybernetics of managing an enterprise is by no means a dry, rational, scientific matter but a blending of production management and the creation of ideologies for the unification of marketing, production and human-resource management.

Software tools that permit the combination of production control and flexibility still involve an inefficient customization of processes. Each corporate entity builds tools and techniques for similar purposes, yet none of these are compatible with each other. Different kinds of fasteners may or may fit different cars, different computers programs may or may not run on different computers. Indeed, the presence or lack of compatibility is part of production strategies.

Now each of the phases we've discussed follows from the last. For us, the transition from stage II to stage III is what matters most for understanding the society's present condition. Ideological production, then, is production once the immediate pay-off of transformation of the world has been reached.

Car production is a good example. Today's automobile has essentially the same arrangement as the automobile of 1950. Its tremendously greater complexity has only marginally changed this. And the inside of a car has indeed

become massively more complicated. But all the automated factories, computer chips and ultra-exact engineering has not made the car cost less and only moderately increased its gas mileage and left its durability about even.

Henry Ford's assembly line and improvements to it, reached the level of maximum efficiency in simple car production by the fifties. After that, small changes to the each part of this framework became key. The final, numerical output of production is now only one of many aspect which must be managed – the company's ability to deal with labor and suppliers is also a key factor.

Auto companies have looked in detail at what parts of production are most profitable to control directly and which are most profitable to control indirectly. They have added layers of "features," of accessories to the basic automobile. They manage the credit system which spurs people to buy new cars with money not yet earned and so-forth. All these changes tweaked the system. They assumed an assembly line would keep existing, that cars would have similar functions and so-forth.

As production efficiencies have reached diminishing returns except in a few key industries, managing production by controlling the price of parts, the level of fixed capital (parts and finished inventory), the price of repairs and the structure of the labor process are all key aspects which ideological-cybernetic management attempts to solve.

Final products now are assembled out of pieces which are crafted for their convenient indirect results. A part may cause planned obsolescence, a part may prevent generic replacement parts from being used, a part may assure that prices are different in different parts of the world. DVD "zones" show this baldly. Each DVD sold can be played with players from the zone coded on the disk – the only purpose for this is to prevent people using movies made in different parts of the world.

The Up-Welling Of The Old

With the dominance of ideology, we see the immediate experiences of life today often involving more and more "technological misery" – the clearest horror being the longer and longer times spent on "support lines" either working for them or using them.

The transition to ideologized production is often, ironically, a freezing of the actual conditions of life. A computer programmer talked to ASAN about his efforts to automate the processes of Canadian tariffs. The regulations involved were far too complicated for modern trade. However, by using a computer, the authorities were able to automate these ancient regulations, thereby preserving into the indefinite future an otherwise unmanageable mess.

This pattern is repeated everywhere in the contemporary world – not only in terms of computer systems but in terms of all large-scale systems. Old things can be redesigned, stream-lined and marketed as new to the simultaneous delight of the market-place and the bureaucracy. And this casts the old in stone.

"Technology" as a generic is just one way of altering terrain. Ideology and mediation can be seen just as strongly in psychological or biological dynamics relating to the present society (see "The Medical Industrial Complex" and "The revolutionary unconscious"). And here too, ideology reproduces the archaic with its reactionary morality and moral panics.

While the spectacle is in the abstract a seamless stream of arbitrary images, its actual production is depressingly predictable. This is in the same way that television seems to promise you a chance to show you almost anything and winds-up showing you almost nothing. In this, the production and consumption are complimentary.

