Chapter XII
The Interactive Spectacle and the Digital Situationist

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ABSTRACT

The Situationists defined the increasingly spectacularized society (The Society of the Spectacle) as the alienation of the individual by an increasingly mediated and commoditised modern world that has spread across the globe, pacifying and alienating its audience with the manufacture of lack and the control of desire. Set dead against this spread of spectacular culture, the Situationists sought to free themselves from the commoditisation and mediation of everyday experience. By employing direct action and the creation of “situations,” they attempted to make clear the restrictive boundaries, both intellectual and environmental, that the habituated processes of modern capitalism (in the form of production and consumption, work and leisure) had placed upon society. In the era of the emerging digital or interactive Spectacle that now permeates every aspect of our culture, what has been added to the Spectacle is the illusion of agency administered through the new technological conduits. Virtual environments, for example, deliver visitation and visualization of places that, despite attempts at access by the viewer, remain remote. However, in our new digitally enhanced cultural spaces, despite restrictions, Situationist style interventions can still be made. Views can be expressed that had no outlet in previous media forms, allowing for the development of communities and exchange of ideas that require, at least in some part, the agency of the individuals taking part in them. Situationist theory takes its place in helping to describe such activities, even though, in some cases, the polemic is often watered down. Here we shall consider a number of examples of this kind of intervention, in relation to the Situationist practices of the dérive and détournement, to help give some structure to the critical analysis.
INTRODUCTION

Between 1957-1972, The Situationist International (SI) developed a coherent and incisive critique of modern society, the major tenet of which was a reaction to the alienation of the individual by an increasingly mediated and commoditised modern world that surreptitiously encroached upon felt life. “The Society of The Spectacle,” by Guy Debord (the main Situationist protagonist), is perhaps the most infamous example of this critique. In it, Debord outlines how the commoditisation of modern life has moved through the media and spread across the globe, pacifying and alienating its audience with the manufacture of lack and the control of desire. This extension of Marxist critique is the culmination of Situationist thought, but should not be read alone. Within the publications of the SI journals there is much discussion of how to combat the rise of the Spectacle by constructing ones own situations with the aim of reclaiming direct control over ones life. The performance of activities, such as the “dérive » and “détournement, » are focused on the reappropriation of places and things in order to transform everyday subjective experience and highlight the spectacular nature of modern life. The purpose of returning to Situationist ideas here is not only to highlight the level to which the Spectacle has now permeated our everyday lives, in the form of computer-enhanced spaces, virtual environments, and convergent technologies, but to critically reengage, using Situationist tools, with the problems of living within the newly evolving digitally interactive Spectacle. Indeed, what is presented here, as much as an overview of Situationist ideas, is a review of emerging digital works that are informed by Situationist practice.

THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of Spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation (Debord, 1995, p. 12).

For Debord, writes Douglas Kellner (Best & Kellner, 1998), “the Spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life- recovering the full range of their human powers through revolutionary change.” The Situationists theses were grounded in the very idea of reclaiming lived experience from the clutches of the Spectacle, which in their eyes, was passifying the population into consumers whose only role in life was to “spectate” on the reproduction of life through images. By advocating direct action and the creation of “situations,” they attempted to make clear the restrictive boundaries, both intellectual and environmental, that the habituated processes of modern capitalism (in the form of production and consumption, work and leisure) had placed upon society. In “The Production of Space” (Lefebvre, 1991), Henri Lefebvre produces a detailed exploration and analysis of the complex issues of inhabitable space from a critical Marxist perspective that was deeply intertwined, both theoretically and personally, with the Situationists (Hussey, 2002; Knabb, 1981). With the view that “Consciousness is produced through the material practices in the conduct of everyday life” (Shields, 1988, p. 2), Lefebvre highlights the repression of the ludic aspects of existence in favour of rationality and productivity. The key to understanding Lefebvre’s critique of the production of space is in understanding his explanation of how this focus on rationality and productivity has resulted in not only the alienation of the ludic, but also the alienation and exclusion of the body and its extensions. Lefebvre sees the body and its extensions as central to the production of space. Moreover, he explains that this production of space is, in its natural state, a playful and social activity. He suggests the example of the spider and its web. The spider has no logic or intellect,
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