A Genealogy and Critique of Guy Debord's Theory of Spectacle

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Abstract

This thesis addresses Guy Debord's theory of spectacle through its primary philosophical and theoretical influences. Through doing so it highlights the importance of his largely overlooked concerns with time and history, and interprets the theory on that basis. The theory of spectacle is shown to be not simply a critique of the mass media, as is often assumed, but rather an account of a relationship with history; or more specifically, an alienated relation to the construction of history. This approach thus offers a means of addressing Debord's Hegelian Marxism. The thesis connects the latter to Debord's interests in strategy, chance and play by way of its existential elements, and uses these themes to investigate his own and the Situationist International's (S.I.) concerns with praxis, political action and organisation.

Addressing Debord and the S.I.'s work in this way also highlights the shortcomings of the theory of spectacle. The theory is based upon the separation of an acting subject from his or her own actions, and in viewing capitalist society under this rubric it tends towards replacing Marx's presentation of capital as an antagonistic social relation with an abstract opposition between an alienated consciousness and a homogenised world. Yet whilst the theory itself may be problematic, the conceptions of time, history and subjectivity that inform it may be of greater interest. Drawing attention to Debord's claims that theories should be understood as strategic interventions, and also to the S.I.'s calls for their own supersession, the thesis uses its observations on the nature of Debord's Hegelian Marxism to cast the theory of spectacle as a particular moment within a broader notion of historical agency. It thus contends that Debord's work can be seen to imply a model of collective political will, and offers initial suggestions as to how that interpretation might be developed.

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<u>Acknowledgements</u>

__Preface__

In 1979, seven years after the Situationist International's (S.I.) dissolution, Guy Debord claimed that "the S.I. is like radioactivity: one speaks little of it, but one detects traces of it almost everywhere, and it lasts a long time."[1] Today however one might counter that the group and its practices are in fact spoken of a great deal, and perhaps to the detriment of their corruptive aspirations. The S.I.'s anti-art stance has been canonised into the pantheon of art history, 'psychogeography' and *détournement* have become tropes of popular culture, and Situationist material is now a staple of both the bookshop and the lecture hall. This popularity has led to a level of official acceptance that may once have seemed surprising: in 1966 the judge presiding over the closure of Strasbourg University's student union declared that Situationist ideas were "eminently noxious", and held that their "diffusion in both student circles and among the general public" constituted a genuine "threat";[2] today, the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs actively supports the dissemination of Situationist texts as a means of promoting French culture overseas,[3] and the French State has recently gone so far as to purchase Debord's archives for the nation. This acquisition, which prevented the collection's sale and relocation to Yale University, prompted Sarkozy's minister of culture to describe Debord as a "great French intellectual",[4] and led the President of the National Library of France to deem his work a "national treasure".[5] The disparity between the group's past notoriety and their contemporary endorsement is thus sharp, and perhaps raises questions pertaining to their theoretical legacy: it may, for example, lead the uncharitable to ask whether this material was ever quite as 'noxious' as was once supposed; conversely, one might also be led to consider whether the predominant interpretations of Debord and the S.I.'s oeuvre have omitted the latter's purportedly 'radioactive' elements.[6]

This thesis will attempt to offer responses to such questions by focussing on Debord's theory of 'spectacle', which is perhaps the most prominent and celebrated aspect of the Situationist corpus. My contention will be that its critique of capital's

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[1] Debord 1979
[2] Quoted in Dark Star 2001, p.9
[3] The most recent English translation of The Real Split in the International was "supported by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs" and the Institut Français du Royaume Uni (S.I. 2003, p.v).
[4] Gallix 2009
[5] Rousell 2009
[6] See Clark and Nicholson-Smith 2004 for a related critique of the S.I.'s incorporation into the canon of art history.

appearances is itself rooted within those appearances,[7] and that this has perhaps facilitated its reduction – as predicted by its own author in 1967 – to the status of "just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric".[8] However, I'll also show that a close and critical analysis of the theory can yield a set of ideas and themes that remain largely overlooked within the existing literature. Not only do these ideas serve to illuminate Debord's work as a whole: in addition, I'll suggest that they may be of greater contemporary interest than the theory of spectacle itself.

In this latter respect, and in keeping with the essentially Hegelian content of my subject matter, I've tried to adopt the maxim that "the refutation" should "properly consist in the further development of the principle".[9] To that end, and as far as is possible, the thesis will take Debord and the S.I. on their own terms: their work will be read through the philosophical and theoretical influences that inform it, and through indicating these lines of development and influence I'll attempt to provide a detailed reading able to identify the theory's shortcomings and contradictions. I will not therefore be taking the S.I.'s work as a discrete, given corpus that can be measured against more recent theories of deconstruction, assemblage, event, etc. (although connections to contemporary debates will be signalled where relevant); instead, I'll try to show the ways in which aspects of this material might be seen to point beyond their own extant formulations.

The primary elements of Debord's oeuvre that I'll attempt to draw out in this respect are his Hegelian Marxist views on praxis, and I'll place particular emphasis on the connections between the latter and his interests in temporality and strategic agency. Admittedly, Debord's interest in strategy has received greater acknowledgement since the re-release of his *Game of War* (2006; 2007 in English), but I would argue that this interest remains largely unexplored. I would also suggest that this is due to a broader failure to address the primarily Hegelian notions of time, subjectivity and history that structure Debord's work. These latter concerns have little to no place within what seems at times to be the popular understanding of the theory of spectacle, which is frequently depicted as a simple diatribe about society's saturation with visual media. It's thus pertinent to recall that in *The Society of the Spectacle* itself (1967) Debord describes the "mass media" as the spectacle's "most stultifyingly superficial manifestation",[10] and

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[7] My claims are close to those of Dauvé here, according to whom Debord "made a study of the profound, through and by means of the superficial appearance" (Dauvé 1979).
[8] Debord 1995, p.143; 2006, p.852
[9] Hegel 1977, p.13
[10] Debord 1995, p.19; 2006, p.772

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states that the spectacle "cannot be understood as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images."[11] In contrast to such readings, this thesis will stress the sense in which the spectacle should be understood – and I quote again from *The Society of the Spectacle* – as a "paralysed history": as an "abandonment of any history founded in historical time", and as "a *false consciousness of time*."[12] Rather than a simple complaint as to the functional import of the media and mass entertainment within modern capitalism, Debord's theory is a description of a society that has become separated from its own historical agency. This thesis will attempt to explore the nature and implications of that notion of agency.

My interpretation of Debord's theory will be set out in the thesis' general introduction, which also offers initial commentary on some of the existing literature on the subject (further remarks in this regard will be included in later sections of the thesis). My aim in the introduction is to demonstrate that addressing Debord's oeuvre through its concerns with time and history illuminates a number of connections between some of the more seemingly disparate elements of his work. I'll also show that the links that can thus be inferred between his concerns with temporality and strategy may afford insight into his Hegelian Marxism. In making that case – and by way of a brief overview of the theory of spectacle's primary problems – I'll present an initial argument as to the comparative merits of Debord's views on historical action *vis a vis* those of the theory of spectacle itself. The grounds and implications of that claim will then be developed throughout the thesis as a whole.

The rest of the thesis is composed of three sections, each of which is bracketed by an introduction and a conclusion. Part one attempts to clarify the temporal dimensions of Situationist subjectivity, setting out the ideas that inform the theory of spectacle; part two offers a detailed account and critique of the latter; part three then indicates the ways in which the material identified in part one might be developed in the light of the problems set out in part two. The thesis' movement through these three sections is also broadly chronological. Part one makes its claims by addressing the S.I.'s avant-garde beginnings in the late 1950's; part two is centred around Debord and the S.I.'s work in the 1960's, with a particular focus on 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*; part three addresses the interests in time and strategy that come to the fore in Debord's later years, and discusses 1988's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.

The movement between the three parts of the thesis is also a route towards

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[11]   Debord 1995, pp.12-3; 2006, p.767
[12]   Debord 1995, p.114; 2006, p.834

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addressing the nature, implications and potential relevance of the historical subjectivity implied by Debord's Hegelian Marxism, and each part of the thesis thus takes up a different aspect of the latter. The issue of historical closure is considered in part one; totality and alienation are addressed in part two; praxis is discussed in part three. In order to facilitate this and to link the diverse sources and arguments involved each of the three parts of the thesis employs a theme that corresponds to the issues under consideration. Tragedy serves as a motif for dialectical resolution in part one; Hegel's interest in the unification of universality and particularity provides a means of discussing alienation in part two; historical agency and self-determination provide ways of addressing the relation between freedom and the 'circularity' of Hegelian logic in part three. The content of the three parts of the thesis can be sketched as follows.

Part one addresses the Hegelian and existential aspects of Debord's views on time via the S.I.'s desire to unite art and life through the construction of 'situations': a unification that was to give rise to an inherently 'open' future of subjective self-determination. In considering the influences that inform this, part one also addresses the ways in which the famed 'restlessness' of Hegelian negativity was presented by Debord and others as undermining the completion and coherence of the Hegelian system itself. Tragedy is used as a means of linking these ideas: for tragic art, insofar as it presents negative disruption within a stable, coherent whole, provides a useful motif for both the spectacle's historical arrest and for the Hegelian system's own alleged neutralisation of negative change. This first part of the thesis will also look at the ways in which Hegel's connections between time, consciousness and negativity were highlighted by French Hegelianism and echoed in Sartrean existentialism, and will pay particular attention to the manner in which these aspects of Hegel's work were presented as standing opposed to his system's purportedly final closure; a view that can also be found in aspects of Surrealism's own critical appropriation of Hegel. I'll show that Debord's account is informed by these influences, and that it describes a historical negative able to undermine a society that he presents in similar terms to Kojève's (deeply idiosyncratic) reading of the end of history. That analogue between the spectacle and the end of history does however come with an important qualification. Although it might be assumed to imply an endorsement of the perpetual deferral of final dialectical resolution, I will suggest – whilst making reference to the constantly receding historical goal posited by Lefebvre (the unreachable 'total man'), and to Sartre's presentation of the individual as a

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perpetually 'de-totalised' totality (the for-itself's impossible "desire to be God")[13] – that any such deferral can also be seen to be 'tragic' in a sense. Such a continual deferral is, on my reading, closer to Debord's views on spectatorship than it is to the resolution of alienation and separation that he posits beyond the spectacle's historical impasse. I'll thus suggest that Debord is in fact far closer to what I take to be Hegel's own position than he gives one to realise. Hegel's 'absolute' is not a state of static arrest but rather a perpetual self-determinate process, and given that the concept of spectacle rests upon the denial of identity between the subject and its actions I'll suggest that Debord's views on the relation between Hegel and Marx serve to cast Hegelian resolution not as the end of history, but rather as an intellectual representation (a *Vorstellung*) of what Marx referred to as the end of *pre*-history.[14] Hegel's unification of the ideal and the material would then constitute a "mystified",[15] static depiction of self-determinate praxis, as would the spectacle's own "non-inverted"[16] manifestation of Hegelian philosophy. This is not a position that Debord states explicitly, but I'll show that it can be inferred from textual evidence. It will also form the basis for some of the proposals set out in part three.

Part two will then consider the theory of spectacle itself in greater detail, paying particular attention to its Marxist components, and will address its notion of alienation via Hegel's attempt to unite the universal and the particular. Having contended in part one that the Hegelian absolute becomes a figure for praxis, I'll look here at the manner in which both Marx's comments on capital and Debord's views on the spectacle indicate a disjuncture between the particular and the universal, thus implying a more 'authentic' form of collectivity. Both capital and spectacle are at times presented as 'false', alienated forms of interrelation that maintain the isolation of the particular elements that they mediate (e.g. for Debord the spectacle is a "unity ... of generalised separation";[17] for Marx capital is a "social relation"[18] in which "men are ... related in a purely atomistic

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[13] Sartre 2003, p.587
[14] "This social formation [i.e. capitalism] brings, therefore, the pre-history of human society to a close" (Marx 2000 p.426). See also volume three of *Capital*, where capitalism is described as "that epoch of human history that directly precedes the conscious reconstruction of human society" (Marx 1976, p.182).
[15] Cf. Marx 1976, p.103
[16] "[T]he contemplation of the movement of the economy in the dominant thought of present day society is indeed a *non-inverted* legacy of the *undialectical* part of the Hegelian attempt to create a circular system" Debord 1995, p.51, translation altered; 2006, p.795, emphasis in the original). I will suggest that this implies there to be a dialectical aspect to Hegelian 'circularity', and that this might be 'inverted'.
[17] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.767
[18] Marx 1976, p.932
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way").[19] Through a detailed critique of the concept of spectacle – in which I'll discuss the manner in which Debord's theory employs Marxist concepts and categories whilst undermining their connection to the classical primacy of labour – I'll contend that Debord's account effaces the particular differences of capitalism's antagonistic social relations by subsuming them under the equally abstract universality of the alienated, occidental spectator.

Having taken the Hegelian absolute as an image of praxis in part one, and having shown the degree to which the unity associated with it might be linked to forms of association in part two, part three will then consider its self-founding and self-determinate movement in relation to Debord's association of strategic and dialectical thought. I'll also show how Debord's *Comments on The Society of the Spectacle* can be understood in the light of the arguments presented in part one, and I'll present an interpretation of that book that highlights the importance of its remarks on the connection between historical and strategic thought. This will be shown to offer a response to the supposedly hyperreal morass that the *Comments* is often said to have described. However, having argued in part two that the theory of spectacle is flawed, I'll show that the model of historical agency that one can draw from it not only solves some of the theory's apparent problems, but may also be of interest in its own right. In this regard the closing sections of the thesis will offer indications as to the manner in which this material might be developed.

To sum up, the thesis will contend that:

1) The theory of spectacle should be understood through Debord's concerns with time and history.
2) The theory is inadequate as a critique of the operation of capital.
3) The ideas that found the theory may be of more interest today than the theory itself.

In demonstrating the first two claims, and in making a case for the latter, the thesis will make the following contributions to the existing corpus of work on Debord and the S.I.:

• The thesis will build on the extant literature on the subject by addressing the philosophical dimensions, influences and implications of Debord's work.

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[19] Marx 1976, p.187

• It will rectify some of the more prevalent misconceptions of Debord's concepts of spectacle, image and representation.

• The thesis will build upon and develop the extant commentary on Debord's Hegelian Marxism.

• It will also go some way towards indicating the inadequacy of the concept of spectacle as an account of the operation of capital.

• An attempt will be made to present a theoretical reading of Debord's interest in strategy.

• A notion of collective political agency will be inferred from Debord's work that may afford a means of reconsidering and re-evaluating the 'historicist' aspects of Hegelian Marxism.[20]

• Suggestions will be presented for further research in this area, amongst which will be the proposal that the notion of agency that one can draw from this material may imply a form of ethics.[21]

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[20] As we'll see in part two, Chris Arthur offers a useful distinction between a 'systematic' and a 'historicist' approach to Hegelian Marxism. The former, prevalent today, reads Marx's *Capital* in the light of Hegel's *Logic*; the latter is concerned with the connections between Hegelian and Marxist notions of history and agency, and has fallen into disfavour as a result of its connections to Soviet 'diamat'. Debord's work falls squarely into this second category, but remains at the same time resolutely anti-hierarchical and anti-dogmatic.

[21] I'll propose in the conclusion to the thesis that one can draw links between aspects of Debord's work and Sartre's attempt to develop an ethics able to cast "the final goal of humanity as the freedom of all" (Anderson 1993, p.59).

Introduction

Time and Subjectivity

The 125th thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*, which opens the book's chapter on 'Time and History', begins with the following claim: "Man – that 'negative being who *is* to the extent that he abolishes being' – is one [*identique*] with time". The quoted phrase ("*l'être négatif qui* est *uniquement de la mesure ou il supprime l'être*") stems from Hyppolite's translation of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,[1] and it provides us with an apposite starting point for a number of reasons. Firstly, its description of a negative, transitive and temporal subjectivity will be pursued throughout the thesis. Secondly, it illustrates the affinity between Debord's Hegelianism and aspects of existentialism: his work's occasionally fraught interrelation of those two schools of thought will be introduced below and developed throughout the thesis. Thirdly however, and most importantly for our present purposes, Debord's statement provides a means of addressing one of the most prevalent misconceptions about his work: namely, the contention that it posits a pure, *a priori* human essence that lies buried beneath the spectacle. Addressing this error here will serve to introduce a number of attendant themes.

For Vincent Kaufmann, Debord "postulates a golden age, a humanity originally transparent to itself".[2] There is however no such fixed human essence within Debord's work (a point also made by Jappe):[3] instead, on the reading that I'll present here, the human subject within Debord and the S.I.'s account is a changing, malleable being, engaged in a dialectical relationship with an objective world; an entity that creates and shapes itself through negating and changing the contexts in which it is located, and which is thus 'one' (or rather *identique*) with time. It would seem that like Marx, Debord presents human subjectivity as historically contextual, and this means that there can be no *a priori* human identity: only an open capacity for free self-determination. Consequently, the supersession of the society of the spectacle cannot involve the restitution of a buried realm of authenticity. Rather, it was to inaugurate a new form of

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[1] The line can be found on p.236 of the Hyppolite translation. Thanks are due to John McHale for this reference.
[2] Kaufmann 2006, p.222
[3] Jappe1999, p.131

subjectivity in which the latter's negative, temporal movement might be self-consciously directed rather than abdicated to alienated forms of social power. This, for Debord, was to be an inherently historical form of subjectivity: a qualification that might be clarified by noting that history, in his essentially Hegelian view, was by no means solely a catalogue of events or the study of the past, but rather something to be self-consciously and pro-actively *made*. I'll argue throughout the thesis that communism, for the S.I., was not to be a static economic formula or a discrete social system, but rather an ongoing historical process, and as we'll also see, Debord is far closer to Marx's early texts in this regard than he is to the latter's mature work. I would thus suggest that the line quoted above, which describes the negative and temporal qualities of subjective self-determination, might usefully be placed in relation to Marx and Engels' early claim in *The German Ideology* that "communism" is "the real movement that abolishes [*aufhebt*] the present state of things":[4] for time, in Debord's account, constitutes the medium in which a perpetual and collective project of change and self-determination was to be established. Thus rather than allowing the recovery of Kaufmann's lost, Arcadian past, post-spectacular society was to provide conditions in which the transitive, temporal nature of the human subject would flourish.

As is perhaps already evident from these initial comments, *The Society of the Spectacle* is at root a book about history, or rather the creation thereof. However, and as I signalled in the preface above, this has been largely obscured by the prevalence of academic works that fixate on the theory of spectacle's links to the mass media, and which pursue its possible relevance to visual cultural concerns. The import of time and history to the theory can however be illustrated here by way of reference to Debord's own statements about *The Society of the Spectacle*, and by drawing attention to its three seldom-discussed chapters on time and history. In a letter containing advice and instruction on an Italian translation of his book, Debord states that its fourth chapter ('The Proletariat as Subject and Representation'), which describes the rise and fall of the workers' movement in terms of a drive towards the self-conscious creation of history, holds "the principal place" in the whole work; in the same letter, the fifth chapter ('Time and History') is said to present "historical time" as the "milieu and goal of the proletarian revolution", whilst the sixth ('Spectacular Time') is referred to as describing "a society that refuses history".[5]

The importance of history to the book can be developed by referring once again

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[4]   Marx 2000, p.187
[5]   Debord 2004a, p.79

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to the human subject's identity with time. In Debord's view, different forms of temporality are engendered by different modes of production, and the alienation produced by the latter can be understood in terms of the former. *The Society of the Spectacle* contends that during the course of human history the technical power to shape that history has grown, as has the divorce of that power from any direct, conscious control on the part of its producers; a trajectory that has culminated in the "separation perfected [*achevée*]"[6] of spectacular society. The spectacle is thus cast as an historical juncture at which the ability to consciously shape and direct history has become greater than ever before, but at which individuals have become separated from that capacity. From such a perspective, concerns pertaining to commodification, subsumption and simulation need not be taken as symptoms of the loss of an originary realm of authenticity, but rather as demonstrations of a new-found technical capacity to shape and consciously control the world of human experience: for the latter is increasingly the product of human agency, however alienated the latter may be. The task at hand for Debord and the S.I. was thus that of returning that capacity for self-determination to the human agents from which it stems. The revolutionary desire to make that change was said to have been generalised throughout society by capital's increasing domination of life, whilst the technological and automative possibilities provided by capitalism's technical developments were said to have afforded the abolition of wage labour altogether.[7] The end of the spectacle would thus allow individuals to engage in the "free consumption of [their] own time". [8]

The latter point can be qualified by noting that the S.I.'s positions in this regard were responses to the apparent absence of a 19th century proletariat, which for some commentators had been eradicated by the relatively new-found wealth of commodity capitalism. This alleged absence was treated with no small amount of irony: "Where on earth can it be?", asked Vaneigem of the proletariat in 1967; "has it been put in a museum? ...We hear from some quarters that...it has disappeared forever beneath an avalanche of sound systems, T.V.'s, small cars and planned communities".[9] Yet for Debord and the S.I., this apparent wealth had given rise to a "new poverty" and a "new proletariat": [10] a 'higher' form of poverty, and one that made explicit the true, implicit nature of that of the past. The deprivation of the means of subsistence entails the

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[6] Debord 1995, p.11; 2006, p.766
[7] See Jorn in S.I. 2006, pp.55-8; 1997 pp.22-5. See also Debord 2002, p.40; 1998 p.1616
[8] Debord 2003a, p.15; 2006 p.472.
[9] Vaneigem 1994, p.68
[10] S.I. 2006, p.141; 1997, p.309

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deprivation of the power to freely shape one's existence; thus, whilst commodity society was tending to remedy the former problematic, through doing so it was also tending to reveal and generalise the latter. The proletariat – now considered as "all people who have no possibility of altering the social space-time that society allots to them"[11] – was not disappearing at all, but rather growing: for the expansion of capitalist wealth was also that of a desire for a 'real' wealth of self-directed time and experience (the S.I. can thus be seen to echo some of Marx's contentions in the *Grundrisse*[12] prior to its French translation).[13] Thus for Debord, "history itself is the spectre haunting modern society".[14]

As the S.I. developed, the avant-garde artistic and cultural concerns that characterised their early years came to be replaced by more explicitly theoretical and political positions. Nonetheless, their early concerns and interest in the construction of situations bear direct relation to these themes, for the constructed situation was intended as an experimental anticipation of the conscious control over lived experience offered by post-revolutionary society. The situation would later evolve into a more general concern with historical self-determination, but it originated as an attempt to unify art and life through the 'realisation' of the former as lived praxis; an actualisation that was deliberately modelled upon Marx's Young Hegelian concerns with the 'realisation' of philosophy. Echoing the *Theses on Feuerbach*, the S.I. held that where Sartre and the existentialists had "only interpreted situations", the S.I. would "transform them";[15] and where spectacular society constituted an historical arrest, or rather a separation from one's own history, the "Situationist attitude" would consist in "going with the flow of time."[16] The revolutionary unification of art and life would thus inaugurate a new, richer and more sophisticated form of historical agency.

Debord and the S.I.'s concern with the construction of situations and self-constitutive action owes an obvious debt to the legacy and intellectual ambience of French existentialism, as indeed does Debord's concern with temporality. This is not to deny that his interest in time was perhaps more directly inflected by French

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[11] S.I. 2006, p.141; 1997, p.141
[12] "For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time" (Marx 1973, p.708).
[13] The *Grundrisse* appeared in France in two volumes in 1967 and 1968. Marx's comments on time as wealth appear towards its end, so would presumably have become available after *The Society of the Spectacle*'s publication. Debord did not read German ("my ignorance of German surpasses credulity [as I was] unaware [as a youth] that...I would become an internationalist and dialectician" (Debord 1986b)).
[14] Debord 1995, p.141; 2006, p.851
[15] S.I. 2006 p.178; 1997, p.388
[16] S.I. 2006, p.42; Debord 2006, p.327

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Hegelianism's focus on Hegel's association of consciousness, time and dialectics, which I'll discuss at length in chapter one; nor is it to deny that related notions of self-determination and self-constitution can also be discerned in the more obvious influences of Hegel,[17] Marx,[18] Lukács[19] and Lefebvre.[20] Rather, it is to suggest that the French milieu of the 1950's and 60's furthered an emphasis on those aspects of Hegel and Hegelian Marxism, and that as a result Debord effectively came to found the existential view that "one is what one does"[21] (Heidegger) not upon phenomenology, but rather upon a model of dialectical interaction between subject and object. This brings us back to his claim that the subject is both 'negative' and 'one with time', which I quoted above: for as that subject abolishes what exists by creating itself and its world anew through its own actions, and insofar as it comes to know itself through that process, both the subject and its world – *qua* their continual differentiation – are cast as inherently historical. This brings us to the sense in which a denial of self-determination – brought about through the restriction of such options and the imposition of set, predetermined experiences – would constitute not only a denial of the self, but also a separation of that self from its own lived time. It also leads us to Debord's Hegelian association of history and self-consciousness: for if one is and knows oneself through what one does, then abdicating autonomy over one's actions not only involves a divorce from one's own history, but also an absence of self-consciousness. Thus, just as Hegel wrote that "the slave knows not his essence ... and not to know himself is not to think himself,"[22] Debord held that "the more [the spectator] contemplates ... his own unthinking activity ... the less he understands his own existence and his own desires."[23]

Whilst this owes a great deal to Marx's early discussions of alienated labour, it also exhibits the influence of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* (an influence

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[17] "An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action" (Hegel 1977, p.240).

[18] For the young Marx, "Objective man ... [is] the outcome of man's own labour" (Marx 1988, p.149); "As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production" (Marx 2000, p.177; quoted in S.I. 2003, p.81; Debord 2006, p.1134). Against those who would argue for an 'Althusserian break', similar points can be found in Marx's 'mature' work: "Labour is ... a process between man and nature ... Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature" (Marx 1976, p.283).

[19] "To posit oneself, to produce and reproduce oneself – that is reality" (Lukács 1971, p.15).

[20] "An individual can imagine himself to be a nebula (a cloud) of virtualities (possibilities). ... The processes of his practical life consists of a sort of constellation of actions and powers (capacities)" (Lefebvre 2008, p.112).

[21] Heidegger 1962, p.283

[22] Hegel 2005, p.xlii

[23] Debord 1995, p.23; 2006, p.774

stressed by Jappe,[24] and one that can perhaps be demonstrated by noting the number of quotations that Debord seems to have lifted from Lukács' text).[25] According to Lukács, the alienation of the subject from his or her own activity entails an increasingly "contemplative"[26] attitude towards the latter: an attitude that had, as a result of the domination of society by the commodity form, begun to spread beyond the factory walls. Debord adopts and expands this position, claiming that all social activity now takes place in accordance with the demands of the economy, and he contends that the dialectical relation of mutual constitution between self and world has as a result been subverted: the consequence is a passive subject acted upon by an alien world, albeit a world composed – *qua* commodification – of that subject's own alienated power and activity.

My initial claims here can thus be summarised by two contentions: firstly, that time and history are central to Debord's work; secondly, that the theory of spectacle cannot be understood without them. I'll now argue that to view the spectacle as a diatribe about the mass media, or solely in terms of the literally visual aspects of modern capitalism, is to gain a very limited and superficial view of the full ambitions and scope of Debord's thought. Having done so I'll then offer some preliminary remarks on the theory's shortcomings, before outlining the manner in which the themes introduced here may serve to illuminate further aspects of Debord's work.

Image and Representation

I hope that the broad overview of the theory that I've presented here has served to illustrate the degree to which a reductively literal interpretation of Debord's visual terminology fails to address the true scope and nature of his work. Nonetheless, the Hegelian ideas that render this otherwise misleading terminology intelligible are largely absent from much of the existing literature on Debord, perhaps as a result of the trends that coloured his work's academic appropriation. Initially brought to an English

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[24] Jappe 1999

[25] Debord seems to take an important line from *Capital* (Debord 1995, p.12, 2006, p.767; Lukács 1971, p.49); a quotation from *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Debord 1995, p.110; 2006, p.831; Lukács, 1971, p.89); another from Hegel's 'Differenzschrift' (Debord 1995 p.130; 2006 p.843; Lukács 1971, p.139; this latter appropriation is also noted by Jappe 1999, p.21). As discussed in chapter six, the ninth thesis of *The Society of the Spectacle*, an oblique reference to Hegel's *Phenomenology*, may also stem from Lukács (Debord 1995, p.14; 2006, p.769; Lukács 1971, pp.xlvi-xlvii).

[26] Lukács 1971, p.89

audience through the radical groups of the 1960's,[27] the S.I. came to be adopted by a more cultural and artistic milieu from the late 70's onwards. The exhibition of Situationist work in the late 1980's[28] laid the basis for the art-historical and visual cultural readings that would later proliferate,[29] and which fostered the assumption that Debord's 'images' and 'representations' could be read in a simplistically visual register. This lent the theory to its adoption by proponents of media studies, which in turn facilitated its connection to 'postmodern' notions of 'simulacra' and 'hyperreality'.[30] When coupled to the decidedly unfashionable status of Hegelian philosophy over the last few decades, these trends can be seen to have led to the denigration of the ideas that make Debord's theory fully comprehensible. In fact, Jappe's *Guy Debord*, which addresses Debord's Hegelian Marxism, remains the sole major work to treat the latter in detail. This thesis is undoubtedly indebted to Jappe's text, and given the latter's interest in Debord's Hegelianism it's significant to note that Debord himself described it in a letter as "the best-informed book about me".[31] Yet whilst Jappe brings this dimension of Debord's theory to the fore, he does so largely in terms of the influence of Lukács; and whilst he certainly recognises Debord's interests in time and strategy, he does not pursue the manner in which they cohere, or how they might relate to his Hegelianism.[32] Since the publication of Jappe's book writers on Debord have at least been obliged to make reference to the latte's Hegelianism;[33] others have addressed it more explicitly, and have attempted greater detail.[34] The topic does however remain largely unexplored.

As a result, Debord's own observation that "one cannot fully comprehend *The*

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[27] The Castoriadis-influenced Solidarity group, who remained critical of the S.I.'s departure from labour issues, were important in this respect. They were however by no means alone: *Rebel Worker*, having expressed Situationist sentiments (such as recommending Lautréamont and Blake as "precursors of the theory and practice of total revolution" (King Mob 2000, p.8)), evolved into *Heatwave*, which featured Situationist material in its second issue; the editors and others would go on to form the S.I.'s short-lived English section.

[28] The exhibition "On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time" toured between the Centre Georges Pompidou and the London and Boston ICA's in 1988-9 (see Black 1994 for commentary; see also Clark and Nicholson Smith 2004).

[29] e.g. Beller 2006, Crary 2001, Jay 1994

[30] See for example Best and Kellner 2000 and Plant 1992.

[31] Debord 2008, p.453

[32] See the discussion in the introduction to the third part of this thesis.

[33] One might think here of the flurry of Debord biographies that appeared around the millennium: Hussey, for example, acknowledges that the theory's "first influence was Hegel" (Hussey 2002, p.216), and Bracken writes that "Hegel is ... central to Debord's thought" (Bracken 1997, p.83).

[34] Moinet (1977) explicitly connects the spectacle to Hegelian philosophy; Turner (1996) provides an extremely useful and admirably concise overview of Debord's links to Korsch, Lukács and the young Marx; Grass (2000) also comments on the connection to Korsch, identifies a further correspondence with Clausewitz, and presents positions on Debord's use of Hegel that are close to my own in some respects.

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Society of the Spectacle without Marx, and especially Hegel"[35] continues to ring true. Kaufmann for example, who admits somewhat disarmingly that "the enthusiasm shown ... for Debord the theoretician[36] often leaves me ... sceptical",[37] informs us on a page that contains no less than nine rhetorical questions ("Do we know exactly what Debord means by spectacle? Can we know?", etc.),[38] that Debord's most famous work is "an enigma".[39] Yet by far the most prevalent error – as widespread as its following formulation is crude – is encapsulated by a frustrated Jean-Pierre Voyer: he "used to go to bed late, hoping to find an idea in Guy Debord's book"; he came to the conclusion that "there are none"; he thus contends that "when Debord pompously writes 'everything that was directly lived has withdrawn into a representation', the prick is simply saying that we see posters of naked women pushing brands of cigarettes."[40]

Traces of this simplistic reading can be discerned throughout much of the existing literature. Beller for example is close to the mark when he tells us that the theory "is merely a reformulation in visual terms of Lukács analysis of commodity reification",[41] but he conflates 'visual terms' with visual phenomena;[42] and just as Beller only half-grasps the spectacle's connection to the commodity, so too does Hussey fall short of its connection to alienation: he correctly notes that Debord is doing something "rather more nuanced" than "simply attack[ing] the obvious visual manifestations of modern society", but he believes this to be describing the ways in which those visual unite, as in ideology, "the fragmented aspects of modern life".[43] Dauvé is more successful, yet he too tends to identify the spectacle with fads, fashion and entertainment: "as capital tends to ... parcelize everything so as to recompose it with the help of market relations," he writes, "it also makes of representation a specialized sector of production"; as a result, "wage-workers are ... stripped of the means of producing

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[35]   Debord 2004a, p.454

[36]   Kaufmann is no doubt drawing on Debord's claim "The petty people of the present age seem to believe that I have approached things by way of theory, that I am a builder of theory" (Debord 2003, p.147, 150; 2006, p.1350, 1353-4). The context of Debord's statement does however make it clear that his target is the separation of theory from practice.

[37]   Kaufmann 2006, p.xi

[38]   Kaufmann 2006, p.73

[39]   Kaufmann 2006, p.73

[40]   Voyer 1998

[41]   Beller 2006, p.241

[42]   This pertains to Beller's use of the notion of an 'attention economy', within which things accrue value via the attention paid to them. Beller makes extensive use of *The Society of the Spectacle* in relation to this model: he contends that "the visual" for Debord is "the paramount field of capital exploitation" (Beller 2006, p.278).

[43]   Hussey 2002, p.217

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their ideas, which are produced by a specialized sector".[44] The spectacle, for Dauvé, would seem to be primarily associated with the marketing and ideology that supports the current economic system.

On my reading, Debord's visual terminology is best clarified by way of reference to its largely overlooked[45] roots in Hegel's notion of *Vorstellung* (often translated as 'picture thought' in English, and significantly as '*representation*' in French): conceptual representations that remain separate from their object, as do the rigid categories of the 'Understanding' (the latter, incidentally, forms the paradigm for Lukács' critique of bourgeois society's separation from history).[46] Insofar as *Vorstellungen* are separate from their referent, they fall short of the identity in difference grasped and actualised by the *Begriff*, or 'Concept': the motive force of Hegelian logic, and for Hegel the "life pulse"[47] of being itself (an explanatory discussion of Hegel's dialectical logic will be presented in the conclusion to part one). Thought that merely represents its object, in this sense, fails to identify its own true nature within that which it took to be other to itself: e.g. religion, for Hegel, is a 'picture-thought' of the 'Absolute': it simply depicts the latter, as opposed to directly communing with it (a communion actualised through Hegelian speculative philosophy).[48] Self-separation is of course a primary Hegelian theme, and can be found in all aspects of Hegel's work. I would however argue that its formulation in terms of representative detachment is particularly important for Debord (a formulation that is particularly evident in the *Phenomenology*, the central text in 20th Century French Hegelianism), and that it feeds into his account by way of the inflections given to it by Feuerbach, Marx and Lukács. For example, Feuerbach – whose *The Essence of Christianity* provides the epigraph to the first chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle* – presents religion in these same terms: "Man," he claims, first sees his [own] nature as if out of himself, before he finds it in himself";[49] thus to find oneself in God is to find oneself in an image that serves to occlude direct identification with human powers and capacities. "God," for Feuerbach, is thus no more than "the mirror of man".[50] This view was echoed by Bakunin,[51] the early[52] and late Marx,[53] and

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[44] Dauvé 1979
[45] Bracken (1997, pp.82-3) mentions the phrase 'picture-thinking' when signalling the influence of Hegel's aesthetics, but he does not analyse the concept or establish its connection to alienation, praxis or spectacle.
[46] See in particular the second section of Lukács' famous 'Reification' essay, which is entitled 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought' (Lukács 1971, pp.110-49).
[47] Hegel 1969, p.37
[48] Hegel 1977, p.453; see also p.479
[49] Feuerbach 1989, p.13
[50] Feuerbach 1989, p.63

is directly evident in Debord's spectacle: the latter is composed of separated social power, yet it presents itself as the very unity between that power and its producers that it itself denies. The spectacle's representations also involve a notion of reflection[54] and *speculum*[55] in this regard, yet being the "material reconstruction of the religious illusion"[56] the spectacle is not just a body of ideology, but also real, concrete social practice: hence the increasingly common tendency to link Debord's spectacle to the Marxist notion of 'real abstraction'. It is life itself, in other words, that becomes 'image', because its determination by alienated economic power means that it becomes separated from those that live it.

This does not mean that Debord's spectacle excludes what Debord refers to as "stultifyingly superficial"[57] and literally visual manifestations: rather, the latter are subsumed within a broader notion of alienation and separation. Like Lukács, Debord sought to understand society under the general rubric of a concept able to capture it as a totality: a concept able to grasp the essential, common, structuring nature of each determination within the social whole. For the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) this central concept was of course the commodity,[58] but for Debord a new concept was required, able to express the changes wrought by the commodity's increasing domination of society. Hence 'spectacle': a concept that unites, as Debord himself states, "a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena".[59] It expresses the purportedly completed 'perfection' of alienation, the need to overcome a dead art's separation from its living observers, but also captures (and here we come to the media and visual aspects of the theory) the sense in which the separation of subject and object had reached such an extreme that it had been made manifest within a society saturated with literally visual imagery: marketing, adverts and entertainment that

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[51] See Bakunin's *God and the State*, which argues that "God being everything, the real world and man are nothing" (Bakunin 1970, p.24)

[52] "Man, who has found only the *reflection* of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the mere *appearance* of himself, the non-man...and must seek his true reality" (Marx 1975, p.243-4, emphases in the original)

[53] "Thus at the level of material production...we find the *same* situation that we find in *religion* at the ideological level, namely the inversion of subject into object and *vice versa*" (Marx 1976, p.990, emphases in the original).

[54] "The spectacle is "the faithful [*fidèle*] reflection of the production of things, and a distorting [*infidèle*] objectification of the producers." (Debord 1995, p.16; 2006, p.769)

[55] "In French, 'spectacle' has the merit of being linked to the Latin *speculum* and thus to mirror, to the inverted image, to the concept of speculation, etc." (Debord 1980)

[56] Debord 1995, pp.17-8; 2006, pp.770-1

[57] Debord 1995, p.19; 2006, p.772

[58] "The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole". (Lukács 1971, p.86) Debord quotes this very same passage as the epigraph to the second chapter of *The Society of the Spectacle*.

[59] Debord 1995, p.14; 2006, p.768

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presented all possible satisfactions and desires as accessible only within the bounds set by the present order of things. Hence, the spectacle is "a negation of life that has become visible";[60] hence also Debord's contention that the cinema offered "the best representation of an epoch"[61] (see also Lefebvre: "someone sitting in front of a cinema screen offers an example and a common model of [modern] passivity").[62] Lukács' 'contemplative attitude', in other words, had truly come to define modern society.

My argument is thus not that media-centric readings of spectacle are wrong *per se*, but rather that their more limited perspective renders it difficult to see the connection between these 'superficial' phenomena and the theory's broader themes. As Debord put it in his correspondence: "behind the phenomenal appearances of the spectacle (for example, television, advertising, the discourse of the State, etc.), that is to say, particular mendacious forms, one can find the general *reality* of the spectacle itself (as a moment in the mode of production)."[63] I'll discuss this further in a moment, but first, and in order to present an argument for my methodology, I'll briefly qualify my earlier claim that the spectacle arises from a long line of historical development.

The Need for an Intellectual History

One could perhaps contend that the best way to address Debord's theory would be to look not at its conceptual roots, as I'm attempting here, but rather at the inception of the spectacle itself; one might then perhaps be able to understand it by defining it through the events, dates and phenomena that mark its historical arrival.[64] In my view, attempting to understand the spectacle through such phenomena would tend to reduce the former to the latter, and would cast the spectacle as a discrete, neatly bracketed phenomenon. This would entail a failure to identify the broader historical and teleological dimensions of the theory, and thus the themes of time, history and subjectivity that I'm emphasising here: for if one focuses solely on the spectacle's completed form, one loses sight of the trends and tendencies from which it arose.

Jonathan Crary, in his essay 'Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory', contends that "a striking feature of [*The Society of the Spectacle*] was the absence of any kind of

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60   Debord 1995, p.14, translation altered; 2006, p.768
61   S.I. 1997, p 8
62   Lefebvre 2008a p.32
63   Debord 1973
64   See Kinkle 2010 for a broader discussion of this approach.

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historical genealogy of the spectacle."[65] Arguing that the "critical or practical efficacy" of Debord's theory depends "on how one periodizes it",[66] Crary sets out to rectify this perceived lack, taking as his clue Debord's claim in the *Comments* that by 1967 – the year in which *The Society of the Spectacle* was published – the spectacle had "barely forty years behind it".[67] Crary thus contends, quite reasonably, that "1927, or roughly the late 1920's"[68] must mark the threshold of the spectacular era. He then proceeds to link its emergence to the development of television and sound in the cinema, and whilst he includes the rise of totalitarianism in his list of historical phenomena, his essay treats the latter in relation to media and propaganda (it should however be noted that he argues against a reductive, media-centric reading of Debord's spectacle elsewhere).[69]

Debord does indeed indicate that the spectacle's full emergence took place around this time. He (and Vaneigem)[70] viewed this period as one in which the culmination of an existing tendency towards art's negation of representation coincided with a further tendency towards the clear, self-conscious expression of mass revolutionary action; yet he also held that these years saw the loss of that potential to the rise of both the commodity and the Party (the latter being seen as an alienated representation of the proletariat's political will and agency). However, to say that the spectacle emerges in its fully developed form in the 1920's is rather different from claiming that it *begins* in the 1920's: for to opt for the latter is to miss the sense in which the spectacle arises from an existing historical and economic tendency, thereby overlooking Debord's claims that its roots lie in religion, and that "all separated power has...always been spectacular".[71] In fact, in a letter of 1971, Debord writes as follows:

[The spectacle] has its basis in Greek thought; it increased towards the Renaissance (with capitalist thought); and still more in the 18th century, when one opened museum collections to the public; it appeared under its completed form around 1914-1920 (with the brain washing [*bourrage de crâne*: literally, 'skull stuffing'] of the war and the collapse of the workers' movement).[72]

Debord thus has a much broader and more general trend in mind than any neatly bracketed set of 20th Century phenomena, and this only becomes fully comprehensible if

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[65] Crary 2002, p.456
[66] Crary 2002, p.456
[67] Debord 2002, p.3; 2006, p.1595
[68] Crary 2002, p.457
[69] Crary has warned against the "facile meanings" implied by *The Society of the Spectacle's* title, stating that the spectacle does more than merely describe "the effects of mass media and its visual imagery" (Crary 2001, p.73).
[70] Vaneigem 1994, p.146
[71] Debord 1995, p.20, translation altered; 2006, p.772
[72] Letter to Juvenal Quillet, 14th December 1971

one attends to his theory's essentially Hegelian basis. Without this approach, which requires addressing this material through its intellectual history, one is liable to lose sight of the sense in which the core of the spectacle is separated social power, and not just a discrete set of technologies. However, despite their subtleties, Debord's conceptions of image, representation and spectacle are by no means without their problems.

Spectacle and Capital

I'll argue in the second part of this thesis that Debord's theory offers little purchase on the actual operation of capital, and that it is instead largely given over to the latter's subjective effects. The theory stresses the subjective alienation of consciousness over the objective alienation of activity, and in theorising society as a totality united under the rubric of contemplation it subsumes the specificity and diversity of objective activity under the ubiquity of alienated consciousness, thus casting production, circulation, work, leisure etc. as effectively homogeneous. In short, Debord's theory attempts to understand social production on the basis of consumption, remaining within the "sphere of circulation" without entering "the hidden abode of production";[73] as a result (and as noted in the preface, I'm close to Dauvé here), its critique of appearances is itself founded in part on appearance.

These problems can be introduced by enquiring as to whether Debord fell prey to the idealism that Lukács later attributed to his *History and Class Consciousness*; a text that constitutes, as noted above, one of *The Society of the Spectacle*'s primary influences. "Man," Lukács claimed there, "must become conscious of himself as a social being, as simultaneously the subject and object of the socio-historical process."[74] This entailed that "society becomes *the* reality for man,"[75] and that "nature" became a "social category."[76] However, in his long and self-effacing preface to the book's 1967 edition, Lukács wrote that its presentation of nature as a social construct had led him to efface the independence of the real, objective world, together with that of the objective activity conducted upon it. *History and Class Consciousness*, he claimed, had equated the 'otherness' of the external world and action to the subjective alienation engendered

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[73] Marx 1976, p.279
[74] Lukács 1971, p.19
[75] Lukács 1971, p.19
[76] In other words, "whatever is held to be natural at any given stage of social development" is "socially conditioned" (Lukács 1971, p.234)

by capital: to use Marx's terms from the 1844 *Manuscripts* – the reading of which, Lukács adds, led him to recognise his own overly subjective errors[77] – *Vergegenständlichung* (objectification) had been blurred with *Entfremdung*[78] (subjective estrangement), in that the former was viewed in terms of the latter.[79] Consequently, according to the Lukács of 1967, "labour, the mediator of the metabolic interaction between society and nature, is missing [from *History and Class Consciousness*]",[80] and as a result his critique had fallen back into the "idealistic contemplation"[81] of capital's subjective effects: his presentation of "the proletariat seen as the identical subject-object of history" was thus "an attempt to out-Hegel Hegel", and "an edifice boldly erected above every possible reality".[82]

Debord avoids this problem by way of his concern with time, but he fails to do so in an entirely satisfactory manner. "Time", he writes, is "a *necessary* alienation, being "the medium in which the subject realises himself while losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself [*pour devenir la vérité de lui-même*]".[83] The object with which this subject was to unite was thus its own externalised actions, not nature *per se*, and a degree of 'necessary' otherness was thus retained within the unity of subject and object (this point will become important later, when we come to look at Hegelian identity in difference). However, Debord's theory does not entirely escape the charge of subjectivism: for although it presents capital as the result of alienated social activity, it offers little purchase on the social relations from which capital arises.

The theory of spectacle blurs different forms of social activity because the extension of reification and rationalisation throughout society had given rise to a world in which "time" (to borrow Lukács' phrasing) "sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature", and is thereby "transformed into abstract, exactly measurable"[84] space; and just

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[77] "In the process of reading the Marx manuscript [the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*] all the idealist prejudices of *History and Class Consciousness* were swept to one side" (Lukács 1971, p.xxxvi).

[78] Marx's *Entäusserung* is also frequently translated as alienation, although 'externalisation' perhaps serves to distinguish it from the more subjective dimensions of *Entfremdung*. Chris Arthur discusses this difficulty in the appendix to his *Dialectics of Labour* (1986), noting that *Entfremdung* is perhaps best for interpersonal relations and *Entäusserung* for the alienation of property. Following Bernstein (1999, p.45), and indeed Lukács himself (1971, p.xxiv), I will opt for *Vergegenständlichung* as a marker for the objective actualisation of subjective action and capacity.

[79] Lukács 1971, p.xxiv See also Clark (1991) for useful comments on this issue. Significantly, given his personal link to Debord (discussed in chapter one), Hyppolite also makes much of the distinction between subjective and objective alienation in his *Studies on Marx and Hegel* of 1955.

[80] Lukács 1971, p.xvii

[81] Lukács 1971, p.xviii

[82] Lukács 1971, p.xxiii

[83] Debord 1995, pp.115-6; 2006, p.835

[84] Lukács 1971, p.90

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as this time had become abstract and generalised across social experience, so too had Debord's proletariat: a 'class' that exceeded the bounds of traditional Marxist analysis, being formed, as we saw above, of "the vast mass of workers who have lost all power over the use of their own lives",[85] and of all those deprived of the possibility of shaping their own 'social space-time', "regardless of variations in their degrees of affluence".[86] Debord's effectively existential notion of poverty was therefore linked to the nature of 'spectacular time': a time that "manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its *exchangeability*".[87] Different forms of social activity were thus equated to one another (an equation furthered by the trope of a disconnected spectator, for whom all life is equally separate), thus denigrating the traditional Marxist primacy of labour and informing the S.I.'s shift in focus away from production towards the 'everyday'. Consequently, whilst Debord's account employs the Marxist framework of reification, fetishism, subject-object inversion, etc., its desire to update Marx and to do away with wage labour undermines the primacy of the latter to the very concepts that it appropriates and employs. As we'll see later, this pertains to the contention that the theory focuses on capital's 'effects' rather than its 'causes'.

Debord was in fact obliged to expand the wage-relation in a manner that would allow him to talk of the alienation of life as a whole, rather than that of labour time *per se*. This however renders that relation so abstract as to cast it as a binary opposition rather than a dialectical interaction: within the spectacle "the *entirety of labour sold*", i.e. the total activity of society, becomes "the *total commodity*",[88] i.e. spectacular life, which is then returned in fragments to its fragmented producers. The social, interpersonal antagonism of the wage relation thus becomes the opposition of 'humanity' as a whole to 'capital', or rather of 'life' to its denial. Thus although the theory of spectacle relies on traditional Marxist concepts, it removes their bases; and whilst the following contention may seem facile, its use of Marx's fetish could, from a classical perspective, be said to exemplify the fetish itself, insofar as the theory focuses only upon the immediate appearances of the social relations from which capital arises.

These remarks should be tempered by noting that such problems stem from Debord and the S.I.'s desire to open up a "Northwest Passage"[89] through and beyond 19th Century analyses, and the models of struggle and organisation associated with

[85]   Debord 1995, p.84; 2006, p.816
[86]   S.I. 2006 p.141; 1997, p.309
[87]   Debord 1995, p.110; 2006, p.831, emphasis in the original
[88]   Debord 1995, p.29; 2006, p.779
[89]   S.I. 2006 p.148; 1997, pp.323-4.

them. These ambitions, and the group's attempts to re-imagine what might be entailed in actually achieving them, doubtless number amongst the S.I.'s greatest contributions. It can also be noted that their rejection of any sense in which labour might be liberated rather than abolished also recalls aspects of Postone's recent provocative work,[90] and for some, such as Jappe, Debord's move away from a focus on labour is one of his chief virtues. Whilst making reference to Lukács' 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness* Jappe contends that its corrected presentation of labour as a constitutive force "turn[ed] a characteristic of capitalism into an eternal ontological necessity",[91] as for Jappe such a fixation on the primacy of labour and class denigrates their historical mutability, and thereby their potential supersession.[92] Yet one could respond by noting that neither Lukács nor the Marx of the *Manuscripts* equate all constitutive activity to contemporary capitalist labour; there remains a marked difference between recognising, on the one hand, that such a capacity for activity is at present given over to labour, and reducing the former to the latter on the other. Consequently, and as opposed to those who would hold that the relevance of Debord's theory lies in its resonance with contemporary issues of real abstraction, I would contend that the theory is itself simply too abstract.

Time and Contingency

I've argued that addressing Debord's work via its themes of time, history and subjectivity serves to clarify the meaning of his notion of spectacle. I've also used these themes to highlight that theory's failings, insofar as they inform its emphasis on subjectivity and its quasi-existential notion of poverty. I'll now contend that these same issues also illuminate Debord's oft-noted but largely un-theorised interest in strategy: an interest that can perhaps be best introduced with the following passage, taken from a letter of 1974:

The principle work that, it appears to me, one must engage in – as the complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle,* which described frozen alienation (and the negation that is implicit in it) – is *the theory of historical action.* One must advance *strategic* theory in its moment, which has come. At this stage and to speak schematically, the basic theoreticians to retrieve and develop are no longer Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides, Machiavelli and Clausewitz. [93]

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[90]   Postone 1996. Postone's account will be discussed in the conclusion to part two.
[91]   Jappe 1999, p.151
[92]   Jappe 1999, p.151
[93]   Debord 1974a

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In the absence of the themes that I've drawn attention to above, this interest in strategy can appear to be a mere idiosyncrasy without any inherent connection to the theory of spectacle's deeper concerns. I will however show that it can be viewed as being directly related to the notions of temporality and subjectivity discussed earlier. Again, this is largely missing from the extant commentaries on Debord. In the introduction to part three I'll discuss some of the existing attempts to engage theoretically with Debord's interest in strategy; here we can simply note that it's seldom used as much more than a means for Debord's biographers to add shade to their portraits. Merrifield, for example, enjoys picturing a melancholy philosopher-poet given to "ruminate" on "quiet, lonely summer days" over classics of military theory;[94] Hussey presents a self-consciously Machiavellian figure; Bracken[95] similarly describes a "player of human chess".[96] Yet if as a result of its identity with time the subject is (like Sartre's 'for-itself') located in perpetual opposition to its present – even to the reality that it has itself created, and by extension to its own self – then that subject is inherently transitory, and characterised by finitude. These claims will be developed further below, but it seems that for Debord consciousness is always bound to particular moments and contexts, precluding any God-like trans-historical viewpoint. Actions would thus have to be based upon limited knowledge of the factors in play, and this in turn means that the dialectical relation between subject and world described above must inevitably involve chance (albeit a degree of chance that was to be fostered through play and Situationist activity; thus Debord: "all progress, all creation, is the organization of *new conditions of chance*").[97] In other words, the construction of history becomes a strategic enterprise: or as Debord put it via one of his many quotations from Clausewitz, "one must become accustomed to acting in accordance with general probabilities; it is an illusion to wait for a time when one will be completely aware of everything".[98]

This homology between existential and strategic concerns[99] pertains to the S.I.'s

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[94] Merrifield 2005, p.11

[95] Bracken's book does however contain some real insight: "for Debord [the] apprehension of time was coloured [by a] Hegelian preoccupation with the self-conscious creation of history with acts of negation". (Bracken 1997, p.105).

[96] Bracken 1997, p.viii

[97] Debord 2006, p.296 emphasis in the original

[98] Debord 2003a, p.180; Debord 2006, p.1388

[99] A situational subject created and defined through its own strategic projects bears obvious relation to Sartre, but further homologies can be found: compare for example De Beauvoir's claim that "we must decide upon the opportuneness of an act and attempt to measure its effectiveness without knowing all the factors that are present" (De Beauvoir 1976, p.123) and Clausewitz's assertion that "the only situation a commander can know is his own" (Clausewitz 1993, p.95); after all, "war is the realm of uncertainty" (Clausewitz 1993, p.117).

goal of transforming life into a game,[100] and I'll show in a moment that it becomes particularly significant in relation to Debord's views on Marx's 'inversion' of Hegel. First however, and in order to introduce the 'openness' that I attributed to Debord's Hegelian view of history in the preface above, I'll offer some comments on the manner in which these issues entail that 'truth' – as opposed to the spectacle's 'falsity' – corresponds to historical action, and thereby to the contextuality of praxis.

As we've seen, the subject's identity with time necessitates autonomy and self-determination. This precludes political representation[101] (as the S.I. put it: "*We will only organize the detonation:* the free explosion must escape us and any other control forever"),[102] although this is not to suggest that Debord and the S.I. were in favour of "sub-anarchist spontaneism": according to the S.I., anyone who associated them with the latter would show that they "simply don't know how to read."[103] Their interpretation of councilism, which I'll take up in part three, does however differ sharply from Lenin's own disavowal of 'spontaneity'. Where Lenin held that the latter would constitute "nothing more nor less than consciousness in an *embryonic form*",[104] Debord maintained that the knowledge required to deal with an insurrectionary situation could never be 'imputed' by external, intellectual managers: "The task of directing the proletariat from without," he held, "by means of a disciplined clandestine party under the control of intellectuals who had become 'professional revolutionaries'," entailed that Bolshevism "gave rise to a genuine *profession ... of total social management*".[105] For Debord, theoretical knowledge was to develop immanently through praxis; and remembering the comments on Hegelian identity in difference signalled above (i.e. the unity of a thought with its referent, form with content, subject with object, etc.), it can be noted that just as the separation of thought from practice was to be avoided, so too was any such divorce between theory and the movement that it purports to clarify and articulate.[106]

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[100] We might note here that for Clausewitz (1993, p.97) "In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards".

[101] "We shall never begin to understand Debord's hostility to the concept 'representation,' for instance, unless we realize that for him the word always carried a Leninist aftertaste. The spectacle is repugnant because it threatens to generalize, as it were, the Party's claim to be the representative of the working class." (Clark and Nicholson Smith 2004, p.479)

[102] SI 2006, p.148; 1997, p.324

[103] S.I. 2006, p.356; 1997, p.637

[104] Lenin 1988, p.97

[105] Debord 1995, p.68, emphasis in the original; 2006, p.805

[106] "The proletarian revolution is predicated entirely on the requirement that, for the first time, theory as the understanding of human practice be recognised and directly lived by the masses. This revolution demands that workers become dialecticians" (Debord 1995 p.89; 2006, p.819). This position was itself much informed by the young Marx. As the latter famously put it in 1843: "we do not confront the

I'll argue in chapter nine that Debord identifies theoretical truth with history, or rather with the negative that drives the latter forwards. For example, and whilst alluding to Marx and Engels' famous remark on communism as a negative historical process (referred to above), Debord stated that "Nothing is ever proved except by the real movement that dissolves existing relations".[107] This means that if theory is to attain validity it must express a shared circumstance or problematic, insofar as it is to express and articulate that negative: hence the S.I.'s famous claim that "Our ideas are in everybody's heads",[108] and hence also Debord's later qualification that the group had not put those ideas there through "the exercise of some outside influence or other," but rather had merely given voice "to ideas *that were necessarily already present* in these proletarian heads".[109] Whilst this can be seen to involve a notion of recognition, it does not entail giving voice to a stable ontological truth: rather, it would seem to be fat closer to the acknowledgement and clarification of a shared, temporary exigency. As validity thus stems from an ability to diagnose and affect an existing historical tendency, the recognition and adoption of theory on the part of those who are to actualise it serves as a measure of truth. Hence Debord's claim that Marx's *Capital* is "obviously true and false: essentially, it is true, because the proletariat *recognized* it, although quite badly (and thus also let its errors pass)".[110] One might also note here his own and the S.I.'s view that the events of May 1968 demonstrated the truth of their own arguments.[111] These points can be placed in opposition to the erroneous notion of a lost, true, Arcadian past discussed above: for Debord, truth is ultimately history itself (the difficulties raised by such evaluation will be discussed in the thesis' conclusion).

In short: the subject's identity with time casts historical action as a strategic enterprise; yet in doing so, it entails that theoretical truth must itself be contingent, or at least historically contextual. Consequently, theory can only provide the articulation and clarification of a given moment, and this, as I will now suggest, connects to the anti-dogmatism that characterises Debord's Hegelian Marxism.

History and Hegelian Marxism

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world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it! We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles" (Marx 1843).

[107] Debord 2003a, pp.144-5; 2006, p.1347
[108] S.I. 2006, pp.275; 1997, pp.529
[109] S.I. 2003, p.9 emphasis in the original, translation altered; Debord 2006, p.1089
[110] Debord 2004a, p.457
[111] See in particular the S.I.'s 1969 essay 'The Beginning of an Era' (S.I. 2006 pp.288-325; 1997, pp.571-602).

Debord's views on the relation between Marx and Hegel can be introduced by noting his contentions that Marx "demolish[ed] Hegel's *detached* stance with respect to what occurs", and that "theory thenceforward had nothing to know beyond what it itself did".[112] As argued above, Debord rejects any *a priori* human identity that might require a specific form of realisation, and instead casts humanity as radically historically self-determinate. The full expression of such subjectivity cannot therefore be found within a particular, conclusive historical moment, but only in the continuity of historical process itself. This position is certainly closer to Hegel's own views than might be imagined, but the important difference, and indeed the source of Debord's allegation of 'detachment', is this: although Hegel grasps the identity between historical action and self-consciousness, he presents that identity in terms of a trans-historical notion of the necessary conditions of freedom, and thus via a discrete body of thought that purports to pertain to the entirety of historical action; the developing identity of thought and practice in praxis is thus lost.[113] For Hegel, we are certainly free self-determining agents, but our freedom requires the acceptance and actualisation of the "divine",[114] quasi-pantheistic[115] reason that his philosophy purports to express; having ascended to the level of Hegelian philosophy, the self-consciousness of historical action accords with that logic, following, as far as it is able, a fixed, eternal schema. Hence Debord's charge of contemplative detachment: for insofar as this schema coincided with many of the defining features of Hegel's age,[116] it served, as Marx later put it, to "transfigure and glorify what exists";[117] and whilst Kojève's end of history thesis is certainly questionable, it would seem that history after Hegel was to be more re-affirmed within its present state of affairs than made anew. We'll see that with Debord, in contrast, the meaning of history cannot be confined within a given end point, but is rather one with the actual process of a self-determinate history (just as the human subject is one with time). In fact, it seems that Debord re-casts Hegel's description of that process' purported end as that very process itself.

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[112] Debord 1995, p.51, emphasis in the original; 2006, p.795

[113] "[Hegel] constitutes *himself* at the end of history, since he gives (as the author of a system) the meaning of history, at the same time that he affirms that this meaning can only be found when history has been completed. This is the comic aspect of Hegel, which comes from a general tragedy of the bourgeois revolution" (Debord 1969).

[114] Hegel 1991, p.147

[115] See Beiser 2005, pp.143-4

[116] This is not to deny that Hegel's work is without critical content, or indeed the ambiguity and debates surrounding the degree to which the work of history is in his view entirely complete. This point will be taken up in chapter one.

[117] Marx 1976, p.103

Debord holds that Marx rectified historical thought's separation from the history that it contemplated through the famed 'realisation' of philosophy in praxis, and we can develop this point and thereby introduce some of the more distinctive aspects of Debord's Hegelian Marxism by noting his admiration for a Polish Young Hegelian named August von Cieszkowski. Debord discovered the latter's *Prolegomena for a Historiosophy* (1838) "after 1972",[118] but the book does nonetheless echo and thereby illustrate many of the themes presented in 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*. For Debord, Cieszkowski's significance was to have lain, "five years before the young Marx, and one hundred and twenty years before the Situationists", the "primary basis" upon which "the modern project of the social revolution is constituted".[119] He explains this as follows:

> Cieszkowski annihilates the central aporia of the [Hegelian] system, simply by recalling that time had not ended. Hegel had concluded history, in the form of thought, because he finally accepted the idea of glorifying the present result. In a single movement, Cieszkowski reversed the system, by putting the present in contact with the 'moment' of the future, because he recognized in the thought of history – the supersession of philosophy – the power to transform the world.[120]

Hegel's claims are of course far more subtle than this, and Cieszkowski's critique is in fact slightly different: he contends that Hegel, in limiting his focus to the past, failed to think history as a totality[121] (he does however certainly maintain that philosophy is to be realised as praxis).[122] Nonetheless, this description of Cieszkowski's contribution does chime with Debord's own remarks on Hegel and Marx in *The Society of the Spectacle*: there Debord claims that the crux of Marx's famous 'inversion' was not a "trivial substitution"[123] of unfolding categories for developing social relations, but rather a change in perspective; where Hegel cast the present as the conclusion of the past, Marx is viewed as having rendered every present moment the genesis of an open future. Thus after Marx, Debord writes, "history, once it becomes real, no longer has an *end*."[124]

Debord's own Hegelian Marxism can be understood in very similar terms, and

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[118] Debord 2008, p.84. The following year saw the book's publication through Champ Libre, the publishing house with which Debord was affiliated.
[119] Debord 1983
[120] Debord 1983
[121] "The totality of history must consist of the past and of the future, of the road already travelled as well as the road yet to be travelled" (Cieszkowski 2009, p.51).
[122] "The future of philosophy in general is to be practical philosophy or, to put it better, the *philosophy of praxis*" (Cieszkowski 2009, p.77 emphasis in the original).
[123] Debord 1995, p.51; 2006, p.794
[124] Debord 1995, p.51; 2006, p.795

one can begin to reconstruct its 'inversion' by way of the following. *The Society of the Spectacle*'s central fourth chapter on the workers' movement begins with a discussion of Hegel, and places his philosophy at the roots of what Debord refers to as 'historical thought' (i.e. the self-consciousness of historical agency).[125] The history that was to emerge from the spectacle is thus presented as having been anticipated, in however 'mystified' a form, by Hegelian philosophy. If one takes this in conjunction with the spectacle's status as a final, dialectical separation (i.e. its historical location prior to the grand, revolutionary unification of subject and object afforded by the Situationist future), then one can claim that the unity that Hegel presents at the apex of his system is in fact a depiction – a *Vorstellung* perhaps – of what Debord takes to be the real, objective conditions of a self-determinate history: the identity of the ideal and the material afforded by Hegel's absolute Idea constitutes a philosophical representation of the more dynamic unity of thought and practice involved in praxis. Hence Debord's claim that "Hegel was merely the *philosophical* culmination of philosophy", insofar as he "superseded separation, but *in thought only*".[126]

As noted in the preface, Debord does not state this explicitly; this is something that I myself am ascribing to his account. I will however attempt to develop this claim through textual evidence as the thesis progresses. It might also be noted here that such speculation is almost impossible to avoid: Debord gives us very little to work with when it comes to reconstructing these aspects of his thought, as is also the case with his views on the links between dialectics and strategy (a connection that I will however try to reconstruct in chapter seven).

Hegel's supposed end of history thus becomes Marx's end of pre-history, or rather an anticipation thereof, insofar as Debord's theory describes an era pregnant with the possibility of actualising the unity that had Hegel had glimpsed in his presentation of the absolute. Given Debord's remarks on workers' councils and his antipathy towards hierarchy and separation, one could add that this actualisation would realise not only the unity of thought and action, but also, in terms of collective agency, that of the universal and the particular. Furthermore, as there is no essence to be realised by that agency other than the perpetuity of self-determination itself ("history", for Debord, "has no goal [*n'a pas d'objet*] aside from whatever effects it works upon itself"),[127] and as such perpetuity entails the re-constitution of the conditions that render that agency possible,

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[125] Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.793
[126] Debord 1995, p.49, translation altered; 2006, p.793, emphasis in the original
[127] Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.792

one might also make the more tentative claim that this implies a unity of means and ends that points towards a form of ethics; a suggestion that I'll return to at the end of the thesis.

My suggestion, then, is that communism emerges from Debord's account as a historical process rather than as a discrete goal, and that this process is linked to the Hegelian absolute. Yet doesn't this contradict the points made above regarding Debord's critique of Hegel? The objection noted above was as to the assumption that the thought of history could be comprised within a conclusive point. My claim, however, is that Debord takes Hegel's depiction of that point as a static representation of an ongoing movement, and that this reflects a sensitivity to the degree to which Hegel himself presented the absolute as a state of continual movement and flux (a point that will be substantiated in chapter one). Furthermore, whilst a focus on the absolute is perhaps uncommon, it's not without precedent: Feuerbach, distancing his materialism from its Hegelian roots, made a similar claim in a preface to *The Essence of Christianity*[128] (a preface that provides the epigraph to *The Society of the Spectacle*'s first chapter), and a more explicit example can be found in the work of Raya Dunayevskaya. The founder of Marxist Humanism and a passionate advocate of Hegelian Marxism, Dunayevskaya models her account not on one of the famous stages on the paths towards the Hegelian absolute, such as the unhappy consciousness or the lord and bondsman, but rather on the absolute itself.[129]

Lefebvre too employs a notion of the absolute, but despite his links to Debord his use of the concept is rather different. For Lefebvre, the goal of history was the 'total' or "'de-alienated' man":[130] a "living subject-object"[131] said to arise immanently from the privations and demands of everyday life. Lefebvre's concept of the total man emerged as a reaction to the purportedly a-political relativism of existential freedom, as it offered a distinct target for political agency to aim towards: "only the notion or idea of the

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[128] "...the 'Idea' is to me only faith in the historical future, the triumph of truth and virtue; it has for me only a political and moral significance" (Feuerbach 1989, p.xiv).

[129] Dunayevskaya would later claim that she made this "breakthrough" in 1953, in a series of letters in which she established that "within the Absolute Idea itself is contained the movement from practice as well as from theory" (Dunayevskaya 2000, p.5). In her view, the absolute "signifies transformation of reality" (Dunayevskaya 2002, p.187), and constitutes not an end, but rather a "new beginning" (p.177). I don't mean to suggest a direct line of influence here, but there is a point of contact: Champ Libre, the publishing house with which Debord became involved in 1971, released a translation of her *Marxism and Freedom* that same year. There are also differences, as whilst Debord emphasises the 'inversion' of Hegel, Dunayevskaya presents her views as an interpretation of his philosophy: "When Marx said that the Ideal is nothing but the reflection of the real, translated into thought, he was not departing either from Hegel's dialectical method or from his Absolutes" (Dunayevskaya 2000, p.37).

[130] Lefebvre 1968, p.162

[131] Lefebvre 1968, p.162

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absolute [i.e. the total man]", he claimed, "gives a sense (in other words both a meaning and a direction) to historically acquired knowledge".[132] Yet this 'absolute' would seem to be a perpetually receding target rather than an attainable status: the total man was said to be "a figure on a distant horizon beyond our present vision",[133] and was described as a "mathematical limit" to which "we are forever drawing nearer but have never reached".[134] Lefebvre's deliberately anti-dogmatic dialectic thus maintains its 'openness' through the constant deferral of final synthesis. I would however contend that Debord founds his own 'open' dialectic upon the establishment of the very subject-object unity that Lefebvre defers: subject-object unity is re-figured as the grounds and conditions of historical agency rather than as its distant objective.

It should however be admitted that Debord tends to avoid the term 'subject-object unity', perhaps because of its association with Lukács and the Party. He does nonetheless frequently emphasise the importance of the identity between the acting subject and his or her actions (indeed, the whole theory of spectacle rests upon the deprivation of that identity). Yet Lukács provides a useful contrast here too. In his view, "no path leads from the individual to the totality,"[135] as "the form taken by the class consciousness of the proletariat is the *Party*".[136] As it is the latter alone that constitutes the historical self-consciousness of the proletariat, the Party remains necessary so long as historical agency exists: the conditions for a permanently open history are thus the conditions for the permanence of the party form, and thus, in Debord's view, for the perpetuation of a power that was "external"[137] to the proletariat and to its historical agency. Debord's emphasis on direct, collective self-determination in workers' councils is perhaps arguably more coherent in this regard than Lukács' insistence on the Party as a central, mediating hub.[138]

A Theory that Invites its Own Supersession

Having now set out some of the primary features of Debord's account and my

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[132] Lefebvre 2008a, p.67
[133] Lefebvre 2008a, p.66
[134] Lefebvre 1968, p.109
[135] Lukács 1971, p.28
[136] Lukács 1971, p.41, emphasis in the original
[137] Debord 1995, p.81; 2006, p.814
[138] 'The Party' is of course understood here in an arguably limited and Leninist sense. The S.I. themselves could be viewed as a party of sorts, and their self-presentation as an artistic avant-garde was coupled to the notion of a political vanguard. The crucial difference, however, is that the S.I.'s own attempts to articulate and express existing concerns were conducted in a manner that sought to avoid representation, control and centralised hierarchy.

reading thereof I'll draw this introduction to a conclusion, and in doing so I'll indicate the problematic that the thesis as a whole will pursue. As noted, Debord's account would seem to entail that the conditions of historical action need to be continually reformulated: for if communism becomes a historical process, in the sense of free, self-determinate agency, then the latter's actions must also re-constitute its own grounds. If this is viewed in relation to the issues of chance and contingency that arise from Debord's concerns with time and subjectivity, then one could contend that the agency involved in this process would need to be 'strategic' in some sense: theories, decisions and actions would need to be historically contextual, and geared towards moving that agency beyond a specific, present moment. This can be seen to pertain to the S.I.'s calls for their own supersession,[139] but also to Debord's broader remarks about the role of theory. For example, in his 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* he stated the following:

> Theories are only made to die in the war of time. Like military units, they must be sent into battle at the right moment; and whatever their merits or insufficiencies, they can only be used if they are on hand when they are needed. But they have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete – by their decisive victories even more than by their partial defeats.[140]

Theory, in other words, is akin to the contextuality of strategic thought. Yet Debord's views on the theory of spectacle would seem to depart from this position: in 1979 he declared that he had "no doubt that the confirmation all my theses encounter" would "last right until the end of the century and even beyond"[141] (according to Prigent's anecdote, Debord thought this period of validity would extend as far as 2030).[142] I would suggest that the bases for both this assumption and the drive towards theoretical reformulation that it perhaps contradicts can be identified within the themes of time, history and subjectivity introduced here: for on the one hand, these themes inform Debord's focus on praxis, negativity and change; on the other, they further the overly subjective perspective of the theory of spectacle described above. There is thus perhaps a sense in which addressing Debord's work in this way – i.e. approaching it via its intellectual history, and thereby pursuing the concepts that it rests upon – reveals a

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[139] For example: following the events of May 1968, the S.I. remarked: "From now on we are sure of a satisfactory consummation of our activities: the S.I. will be superseded" (S.I. 2006, p.325; 1997, p.602).

[140] Debord 2003a, pp.150-1; 2006, p.1354

[141] Debord 1979; 2006 p.1465

[142] "Around 1982, [Debord] told me that his 1967 *La Société du Spectacle* would be valid for the next fifty years. I told him: 'Are you sure?' His answer was categorical, his book would last for that period of time" (Prigent 2009a).

disparity, if not an outright contradiction: for the theory of spectacle's subjective abstraction and departure from concrete social relations jars with the strategic concerns that inform it. The theory omits any clear sense of what capital is, how it operates, and thus of how it might be combated. Yet if this problem is viewed in relation to the aspects of Debord's Hegelian Marxism indicated above, then Debord's account need not be dismissed outright: rather, the ideas about history that inform the theory can be seen to over-arch it and point beyond it. The theory itself becomes a particular moment within a far broader notion of historical agency.

The thesis will develop the claims introduced here via its three primary sections, and in doing so it will pursue the sense in which the ideas that found the theory of spectacle may project beyond Debord's own formulations. In the closing sections of the thesis I'll contend that viewing subject-object unity as the grounds and conditions of agency can, when viewed in relation to some of the nuances of Hegel's absolute, be seen to imply the beginnings of an ethics, or perhaps of a notion of general will.[143]

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[143] One might think here of Peter Hallward's notion of a 'dialectically voluntarist' general will. The degree to which the latter is said to be able to "make the way by walking it" (Hallward 2009, p.17) will be echoed to some extent in chapter nine's attempts to think the circular, self-determinate movement of the Hegelian absolute in relation to praxis.

PART ONE

Art and Negativity
1952-1961

INTRODUCTION

Overview of Part One

This first part of the thesis will expand upon the contentions presented in the thesis' general introduction, whilst also outlining some of the more pertinent aspects of Debord and the S.I.'s intellectual history. It will present two sets of claims. Firstly, I'll argue that the essential premises of the theory of spectacle can be traced back to Debord and the S.I.'s early concerns with the 'realisation' of art; I'll also show that the theory's problematic subjectivism can be seen to stem from these same avant-garde roots. Secondly, I'll argue that some of the aspects of Debord's Hegelian Marxism that I described above can be discerned within the S.I.'s early views on the construction of situations. My principal concern in this latter regard will be to indicate influences that correspond to the perpetual process that Debord attributes to time and history, and also those that pertain to the nature and status of the Hegelian system's ostensibly final 'closure' and resolution. I'll thus be looking at the influences of French Hegelianism, Surrealism and existentialism – influences that remain largely unexplored within the existing literature on Debord and the S.I. – and my focus will rest, broadly speaking, upon the inception and development of Debord's notions of situation and spectacle between 1952 and 1961. This is a period that begins with Debord's membership of the Letterist[1] movement, and ends with his own and the S.I.'s adoption of an increasingly Marxist and theoretical stance in the early 1960's. I've adopted the S.I.'s fifth conference in Gothenburg as a marker for the latter transition, as the claims and positions developed there led to the expulsion in 1962 of the S.I.'s 'artistic right wing': a primarily Scandinavian sect whose refusal to renounce the traditional plastic arts will be discussed in chapter two.

Spectacle and Tragedy

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[1] Translations of the term *Lettrisme* vary; 'Lettrism' and 'Lettrist' are often used. As the term stems from the French word for letter I will however follow the more recent trend of referring to the movement as 'Letterism'.

Many of the writers discussed in part one can be seen to be engaged, in various ways, with the nature and possible implications of Hegelian dialectical resolution. Of particular interest in this regard will be those who've suggested that Hegelian negativity might threaten that closure or render it problematic, and as indicated in the thesis' preface I'll use the common theme of tragedy as a means of connecting some of the more disparate elements of the material under discussion. To be clear however: I'm not claiming that tragedy is a particularly pressing concern for Debord or the S.I., and nor will I describe their work as tragic itself. Tragedy is simply a useful motif; partly for the simple reason that it's frequently invoked by the writers that we'll be looking at, but also because it affords a critical approach to some of the oppositional stances taken towards Hegel's alleged neutralisation of the 'restless' negativity that his work described.

Hegel himself was greatly interested in tragic art. In his early years in Tübingen and Frankfurt he became particularly interested in its presentations of human protagonists subjected to the dictates of fate and the gods; such works united the finite (humanity) and the infinite (fate, the divine) within a coherent artistic whole, and this led him to consider taking tragic art as a paradigm for the speculative unity that his philosophy sought to embody.[2] This was subsequently rejected in favour of the pursuit of an immanent logic (i.e. a mode of expression that would be one with its subject matter as opposed to depicting it, however artistically), but as is often noted, tragedy does nonetheless feature within Hegel's mature work. The manner in which I'll employ it here is indebted to the recent work of Theodor George, whose study of the *Phenomenology* looks at the theme of tragedy in relation to that of dialectical closure.[3] My approach is also informed by Nietzsche's claim that tragic art met "an ardent longing ... for redemption through illusion".[4] For Nietzsche, tragic art figures the 'Dionysian' impulse through its rational, 'Apollonian' counterpart, thereby rationalising and ordering a potentially dangerous and subversive force; and as we'll see in chapter one, the Surrealist affiliate Georges Bataille effectively reads Hegel's philosophy through this very notion of rationalisation. For Bataille, the Hegelian system offers a tragic "spectacle"[5] of negativity: the latter, in his view, is inherently resistant to utility,

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[2] George 2006, p.8
[3] George 2006. George's reading ultimately argues for the virtues of viewing tragedy as a trope of resignation to a world that one cannot control; my own use of the concept here emphasises the 'contemplative' implications of such a position (see Bunyard 2009).
[4] Nietzsche 1992a, p.45
[5] Bataille 1990, p.20

order and rationalisation, and in consequence Hegel's philosophy merely 'stages' a closure that can never be attained. Likewise, Breton and the Surrealists held that the Hegelian system stifles the very excessive and limitless negativity that it describes. In consequence, tragedy provides us with a useful motif for the sense in which Hegelian closure might stifle a potentially endless negativity within the artistry of a closed, ordered system.

I'll use this motif to form a narrative by way of which I'll elaborate on my earlier comments on Debord's Hegelian Marxism. I've claimed that Debord's account can be seen to base its own 'open' negative historical process not on the constant deferral of a final resolution, but rather on the defining figure of that resolution itself: the Hegelian absolute becomes an ideal, philosophical representation of the real conditions and requirements of historical agency. The Hegelian resolution of negative difference can thus be viewed as tragic in the sense outlined above, albeit with the further qualification that it is now not the negative *per se* that is equated to the dangerous and the Dionysian, but rather the figure of unity itself: a spectacular depiction of unity prevents its real instantiation in praxis. I will thus argue that Debord locates a negative, transformative force within that which many of the other writers discussed here viewed as that force's denial.

Now, if Hegel depicts a unity of thought and practice whilst sanctioning its real absence (a claim in keeping with Debord and Marx's claims that Hegelian philosophy validated the bourgeois order), and if his system can thus be viewed as analogous to tragic art, then so too can philosophical or theoretical accounts that argue for the necessity of deferring that absent unity, or indeed for its impossibility. If this connection can be made, we then also have a means of locating Debord and the S.I.'s critical relation to existential philosophy within this schema: for according to the S.I., the purportedly inevitable angst and anguish of existential subjectivity presented the symptoms of spectacular society as if they were eternal attributes of the human condition. As anticipated in the thesis' general introduction, I'll also show that something similar can be found in Lefebvre's own perpetually receding absolute.

The Structure and Content of Part One

I'll begin by discussing French Hegelianism's characteristic focus on the themes of negativity, time and perpetual unrest. Of particular importance here will be Wahl's

reading of the 'unhappy consciousness'[6] and Kojève's idiosyncratic account of the end of history, as I'll attempt to introduce the sense in which Hegel's philosophy can be interpreted as being characterised by both perpetual difference on the one hand (a flux that for Wahl, as we'll see, "even risk[s] breaking the bounds of the [Hegelian] system",[7] and which for Koyré means that history must be "eternally unfinished"),[8] and final resolution on the other (e.g. Kojève's emphatic claim that for Hegel "History is completed").[9] The tension between those two positions can be seen to inform the Surrealists' interest in a dialectical negativity devoid of any such final resolution, and I'll introduce this via Bataille's contention that the Hegelian system constitutes a tragic 'spectacle'. I'll then suggest that this interest in an 'open', transgressive dialectic pertains to the Situationists' views on the negative temporality of the constructed situation, particularly when linked to French Hegelianism's concerns with time, and to the Surrealists' call for the unification of art and life (Breton: "Marx said 'Change the world', Rimbaud said 'Change life': for us these two watchwords are one").[10]

Having thus indicated the degree to which Situationist time is not only dialectical but also somehow excessive and transformative, chapter two will then develop the claim that the spectacle constitutes the restriction of such a time. This will be attempted by way of a discussion of the S.I.'s roots in the artistic avant-garde: whilst discussing the ideas that informed the S.I.'s desire to realise art in lived praxis, I'll contend that the theory of spectacle can be seen to arise from Debord and the S.I.'s early concerns with the separation of a static art object from a passive observer. I'll also make

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[6] As the unhappy consciousness is rather less famous than the lord and bondsman relation (often translated as master and slave) a few words of explanation may be helpful. In short, the 'unhappiness' of this form stems from its awareness of its own finite, contingent particularity and from its fruitless pursuit of stability, universality and necessity: it continually pursues an absolute that forever eludes it, but which is nonetheless its own alienated self. It's introduced at the end of the *Phenomenology*'s chapter on self-consciousness, throughout which Hegel develops the contention – introduced at the end of the preceding chapter – that self-consciousness arises and is characterised by negation. This negativity drives the lord and bondsman's struggle to the death, as for each to recognise the other as a self-consciousness each must negate the other; it later prompts a stoical consciousness to negate the world by retreating into itself, and it causes a sceptical consciousness to declare that it alone is true, necessary and existent. This sceptical consciousness is however marked by the following contradiction: it had become sure of itself through negating an allegedly false world; yet doing so requires it to be contingent upon that which it declares to be secondary to its own necessity. The unhappy consciousness emerges as a new form that brings that contradiction to the fore: it knows itself to be both necessary and contingent, and locates its own necessity, permanence and stability within a separate object beyond itself: a universality that perpetually eludes its own finite particularity. Every attempt that it makes to grasp this 'Unchanging' absolute fails, because every attempt arises from – and thus demonstrates – its own separation from the latter.

[7] Wahl 1951, p.194

[8] Koyré 1971, pp.188-9; also quoted in Baugh 2003, p.27

[9] Kojève 1980, p.98

[10] Quoted by Trebitsch in Lefebvre 2008a, p.xx

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some preliminary indications as to the manner in which the theory's shortcomings can be traced back to this basis.

In chapter three I'll develop the contention that it is in fact the absence of Hegelian resolution (or rather the absence of the unity represented by the latter), and not just that resolution itself, that can be viewed as 'tragic' in the sense set out here. By looking at the S.I.'s focus on the 'everyday', and by addressing the provenance of the concept of 'situation', I'll introduce some of the salient features of Debord and the S.I.'s debts to existentialism, and will make reference to the links between existential subjectivity and the Hegelian unhappy consciousness (a link famously identified by Sartre himself: "human reality", he claimed, "is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state").[11] I'll then expand on my suggestion that a similarly problematic deferral of resolution and unity can be found in Lefebvre, and I'll do so by distinguishing his theory of 'moments' from the S.I.'s constructed situation. Lefebvre himself states that his moments – intimations of the absolute – are "tragic",[12] because they are finite instances within time, and pass as soon as they arise. By contrast, I'll argue that the S.I.'s situations were an attempt to move *with* time: the absolute thus becomes not a finite point, but rather a continual temporal process.

Hegelian and Marxist Negativity

Before we begin I should make a few initial explanatory remarks on Hegelian negativity and its Marxist appropriation, and an apposite starting point might be found in Hegel's fondness for a statement that he (incorrectly)[13] attributes to Spinoza: "the basis of all determinacy is negation"[14] (a line that Marx would later adopt).[15] Hegel's point is very simple: in order to have a discrete, positive identity, one must differentiate and distinguish it through negation (i.e. this is *this* because it's not *that*). This differentiation provides an example of the characteristic movement of Hegelian philosophy: in defining *this* through its difference from *that*, an initial, abstract and indeterminate identity becomes 'other' to itself before returning to itself from that

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[11] Sartre 2003, p.114
[12] Lefebvre 2008b, p.347
[13] "This tag, which Hegel loves, is a misquotation. The nearest equivalent in Spinoza's surviving texts is in Epistle 50, 'Figure is nothing else but determination, and determination is negation'" (Gaerts, Suchting and Harris in Hegel 1991, p.326)
[14] Hegel 1991, p.147
[15] Marx 1976, p.744

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difference, incorporating the new determination thus provided. The end of this movement is thus its own starting point, albeit given a 'higher' and more complete expression. This may illustrate that Hegelian negativity is not an abstract, outright negation that simply erases an existing positivity, but rather "supersedes [*aufhebt*] in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded"[16] (a crude example: if I was to criticise something by way of an abstract negation I would simply dismiss it; with Hegel however, in pointing out its faults I necessarily imply a means by which it might be improved).

      As Magee points out, recent trends towards a "non-metaphysical reading"[17] of Hegel contradict his work's explicitly cosmological and theological aspects (e.g. "nature is an embodiment of reason"),[18] and the Hegel that will be discussed in this thesis is most certainly a metaphysician. In this latter respect negativity is not only an epistemological function, but also an ontological force that generates difference and destruction, but which thereby promotes creation. Within the realm of human history this means opposition, conflict and revolt; within nature itself (which for Hegel is devoid of history, as reason remains latent and implicit within it) it means the continual collapse of existent forms. It is in this sense that he famously associated negativity with "death", "dismemberment" and "devastation",[19] and infamously cast history as the "slaughter-bench"[20] upon which "Divine Providence"[21] works. Yet as that metaphor may illustrate, Hegel's negative is an expression of the 'divine' reason that shapes and directs the world (Hegel states this explicitly: "Reason directs the world");[22] and whilst nature is devoid of Spirit's telos, the Spirit that emerges from it is driven by the negative to make explicit being's implicit, foundational onto-logical reason, and to thus bring being to the level of self-consciousness. This corresponds to the 'circular' pattern of the Hegelian system. The pure, abstract 'being' with which the *Logic* begins proves itself to be reason; this reason becomes other to itself as nature; nature gives rise to Spirit, which then ascends to the point where it is able to investigate the inherent logic of being (i.e. to the point where it can undertake Hegelian speculative philosophy). Thus whilst the movement of the negative gives rise to new positive forms, it does so whilst following the rationale laid out by the absolute Idea that lies immanent in the circuit's starting

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[16]   Hegel 1977, p.115
[17]   Magee 2001, pp.14-5
[18]   Hegel 2004, p.12
[19]   Hegel 1977, p.19
[20]   Hegel 2004, p.21
[21]   Hegel 2004, p.13
[22]   Hegel 2004, p.12

point, and which becomes manifest at its conclusion. Furthermore, whilst that conclusion does not erase negativity in favour of a final, static positivity, but rather sublates it and retains it within itself (the absolute Idea is "essentially *process*, because its identity is...the absolute negativity and hence dialectical"),[23] and whilst Hegel thus maintains that the negative remains forever 'restless', even after Spirit's attainment of self-consciousness, its movement remains 'enclosed' within its own conditions of existence, i.e. those necessary structures of the fundamental ontological reason expressed by the Hegelian system. Hence the attraction, clearly felt by some of the commentators that we'll look at below, towards suggesting that the negative might disrupt or subvert that stable unity.

To turn now to Marx: the latter's relation to Hegel is complex, and develops throughout his lifetime. Arthur and proponents of value form theory, being less concerned with the young Marx's philosophical anthropology, have offered useful insights into the degree to which the negative dimensions of Hegelian logic pertain to his mature economics.[24] As regards our concerns here however, the most salient issue lies in the degree to which Marx adopted – however cautiously and figuratively – a sense in which historical progress might be engendered through critical, hostile opposition. Hence his claim, made whilst ridiculing Proudhon, that "it is always the bad side [of history] that in the end triumphs over the good side," and which "produces the movement which makes history, by providing a struggle"; if one was to set about erasing that 'bad side', as Marx claims Proudhon advocates, one "would have set oneself the absurd problem of eliminating history."[25] Debord and the S.I. took these lines to heart, frequently identifying themselves with history's 'bad side',[26] and claimed to be one with the historical negative (e.g. "the S.I. itself is merely the concentrated expression of a historical subversion which is everywhere").[27] This theme will be taken up in part three, but what becomes particularly important with Debord, as signalled above, is the degree to which this negative movement is allied to that of time. In order to address this we'll now turn to some of the salient features of French Hegelianism. [28]

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[23] Hegel 1991, p.290
[24] See Arthur 2004
[25] Marx 2000, p.227
[26] S.I. 2003, p.8; Debord 2006, p.1089
[27] S.I. 2003, p.7; Debord 2006, p.1088
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Chapter One: Negativity and the End of History

The Context of the S.I.'s Hegelianism

I'll offer a few remarks on time in Hegel in a moment, before discussing the relevance of the interpretations offered by several French Hegelians; the second part of the chapter will then view the influence of Surrealism on Debord and the S.I. in connection to those readings. First however I'll begin with a few words on the background to Debord and the S.I.'s interest in Hegel.

The first thing to note here is that Hegel's work was translated and discussed in France from a very early date: the 1850's in fact, and thus far earlier than the history-oriented and *Phenomenology*-centric readings of the 1920's and 30's with which we are perhaps more familiar. As Kelly argues,[1] the latter readings were in fact responses to an earlier set of interpretations and concerns. French Hegelianism's initial focus lay not on the *Phenomenology* but rather the *Encyclopaedia*, and thus entailed a concern with the nature and structure of the Hegelian system as a whole; and, in a manner that prefigured many more recent complaints, much early commentary presented the all-encompassing 'pan-logicism' of the system as troubling and implicitly imperialist. This gave rise to two opposed responses. Firstly, that of rejecting Hegel's philosophy of history and its account of ascending developmental stages whilst retaining his epistemology; and secondly – once it was recognised that his epistemology was in fact the source of the problem – that of salvaging his conception of history from his epistemology by problematising the degree to which the latter ensured the formers' completion and finality.[2] Focus thus shifted towards Hegel's views on history and historical action, and an interest developed in extracting negative dialectical movement from the positivity of a completed system.

This was furthered by Jean Wahl's influential study of the *Phenomenology*'s sections on the 'unhappy consciousness' (*Le Malheur de la Conscience dans la Philosophie de Hegel* of 1929), which I'll return to below; a text that "laid," as Kelly puts it, "Hegelian foundations" for a "nascent existentialist movement".3 A trend towards a *Phenomenology*-centric reading was given added impetus by Kojève's seminal lectures in the 1930's. Attended by some of the most significant figures within

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1   Kelly 1992, p.71
2   Baugh 2003, pp.10-17
3   Kelly 1992, p.33

20th century French thought,[4] these lectures, despite the idiosyncrasies of Kojève's interpretation (which were perhaps glossed by the absence of a complete French translation of the *Phenomenology* prior to Hyppolite's version in 1939), did much to colour French theory and philosophy for years to come. Kojève emphasised Hegel's notorious 'end of history' and the *Phenomenology*'s lord and bondsman relation, adding much impetus to the mistaken[5] but no less prevalent assumption that it might offer a key to Marx (Sartre and Hyppolite would later claim, respectively, that "the…master-slave relation…profoundly influenced Marx",[6] and that "the master and slave...became the inspiration of Marxian philosophy").[7] Marx's debts to Hegel had already been highlighted in 1932 with the publication of the 1844 *Manuscripts* (followed by their partial translation by Lefebvre in 1933). The Communist Party however, perhaps sensitive to the degree to which the critique of alienation need not pertain solely to self-confessedly capitalist societies,[8] claimed that Marx had not developed or appropriated Hegel but rather vanquished him altogether; addressing the Hegelian aspects of Marx could thus be cast as reactionary.[9] Such official condemnation however furthered the purportedly subversive credentials of a Hegelian Marx, lending credence to the view that addressing Marx's use of Hegel might afford a more 'authentic' reading.

In the years following Stalin's death the Party's prohibition of Hegel relaxed somewhat. Lukács and Korsch, both of whom had developed deliberately anti-dogmatic forms of Hegelian Marxism in the 1920's (and had been criticised by the Party as a result) came to be translated and discussed in France. Essays by Lukács began to appear in France from the late 1950's onwards; *History and Class Consciousness* itself appeared in France in 1960 and received a reprint in 1967; a translation of Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* appeared in 1964. Lefebvre's early Hegelian works, such as his *Dialectical Materialism* of 1940, were also republished. The consequent reaction provoked by this surge of interest took the form of Althusserian structuralism (*For Marx* appeared in 1965; *Reading Capital* in 1968), which was of course current at the time

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[4]   Participants included Aron, Breton, Bataille, Lacan, Merleau-Ponty and others; it seems that Sartre, contrary to popular belief, did not attend (Arthur 1983)
[5]   See Arthur 1983 for a useful discussion of these issues.
[6]   Sartre 2003, p.61, also quoted in Arthur 1983
[7]   Hyppolite 1969, *Studies on Hegel and Marx*, p.29, also quoted in Arthur 1983
[8]   Lefebvre (1968, p.16): "We cannot confine the use of the concept of alienation to the study of bourgeois societies."
[9]   Following the arrest of Isaak Illich Rubin – a Russian economist, whose excellent *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (1924) inform the second part of this thesis – in 1930, an official Soviet philosopher wrote "The followers of Rubin and the Menshevizing Idealists…treated Marx's revolutionary method in the spirit of Hegelianism. …The Communist Party has smashed these trends alien to Marxism" (Perlman in Rubin 1972, p.277). Rubin was imprisoned, forced to confess and finally executed.

that Debord and the S.I. were formulating their ideas.[10] Hegelian philosophy was thus not only very much present within the intellectual milieu: in addition, the potentially subversive character ascribed to a Hegelian Marx in the 1920's and 30's was now furthered by its distinction from the academic tastes and fashions of the day.

Debord and the S.I. could thus view Hegel and a Hegelian Marx as possessing an air of potential radicalism; yet what becomes important here is the degree to which Debord's adoption of Hegel was coloured by trends within French Hegel studies. Pursuing this issue, given the import of time and subjectivity outlined in the introduction above, will entail looking at a number of different perspectives on the nature and status of time in Hegel. I should therefore first indicate the reading that I myself will adhere to; in doing so I'll develop my earlier contentions as regards the import of perpetual process within the Hegelian absolute.

Time and Circularity

At the very end of *Being and Time* Heidegger attempts to clarify his own account of temporality by contrasting it with Hegel's, on the grounds that Hegel offers "the most radical way in which the ordinary understanding of time has been given form conceptually."[11] This 'ordinary' conception of time is that of a series of finite 'nows' ("now-time"),[12] and it differs from Heidegger's own version of temporality wherein Dasein's being is "stretche[d] along between birth and death."[13] Heidegger bases his comments on an early section of Hegel's *The Philosophy of Nature*, which forms the second part of the *Encyclopaedia*; a work that thus follows directly from the final moment of the *Logic*, in which the Idea becomes 'other' to itself as nature. As negativity has been shown in the *Logic* to be an aspect of the positive unity of the Idea, when the latter becomes other to itself, so too does the negativity within it. This gives rise to the immanent emergence of negative determinations within space (points, lines, planes, shapes, solids, etc.), and it becomes' for itself' as time ("negativity, thus posited for itself is time").[14] Both space and time subsequently become one as 'matter' – i.e. space in temporal process – but just as 'being' gives rise to 'nothing' and thereby 'becoming' in

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[10] "I was happy to have attempted – in 1967 and completely contrary to the sombre dementia of Althusser – a kind of 'salvage by transfer' of the Marxist method by adding to it a large dose of Hegel" (Debord 2008, p.212).
[11] Heidegger 1962, p.480
[12] Heidegger 1962, p.474
[13] Heidegger 1962, p.425
[14] Hegel 1990

the *Logic*, so too does time emerge as present, past and future. It is this moment that Heidegger focuses on, taking the consequent differentiation of time into moments as a succession of discrete instants.

If time is viewed as being composed of such instants, he claims, then the continuous, 'stretched' temporality of Dasein's being is masked, or rather rendered inauthentic, as Dasein's true identity with time cannot be accessed. The Hegelian Spirit, he claims, is not truly one with time but merely coincides with it: Hegel, for Heidegger, is unable to show an identity between Spirit and time beyond that of their "formal dialectical connection",[15] i.e. their shared movement through the negation of negations. In reinforcing this claim Heidegger claims that Hegel links time to Spirit's development, insofar as time offers Spirit a means by which it can become more 'concrete'; a point that he illustrates through the *Phenomenology*'s claim that "Time...appears as the destiny and necessity of Spirit that is not yet complete within itself".[16] He thus seems to view Hegel as presenting time as a vehicle by which Spirit ascends to self-knowing: a vehicle that can be cast off at the point when such knowledge is achieved. For Heidegger on the other hand, Dasein is always already "factically" concrete by virtue of its "thrown existence", which involves the "primordial *temporalising* of temporality".[17]

I make reference to Heidegger's reading not in order to contest it,[18] but rather to make two points. Firstly, that time should not be separated from Spirit, insofar as both are aspects of the 'being' to which Hegel's system gives voice; secondly, that time does not come to an end with the attainment of absolute knowing (as we saw Debord claim rather carelessly earlier), but that it remains wedded to the absolute. I'll address the first point by way of reference to the circularity of the Hegelian system, and in looking at the second I'll discuss the work of Jean Hyppolite: the French Hegelian writer to whom Debord would seem to be closest.19 Hyppolite will in turn bring us to the theme of tragedy and thereby to some of the other major figures in the French tradition.

As regards the first issue: if Hegelian time is indeed composed of an endless and linear series of finite moments, and if, as Heidegger indicates, these moments are

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[15] Heidegger 1962, p.484
[16] Hegel 1977, p.487
[17] Heidegger 1962, p.486, emphasis in the original
[18] See however Houlgate 2006a.
[19] Debord was actually in contact with Hyppolite for a time. Merrifield claims that just prior to the publication of *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord "was all set to help out with a lecture...until Hyppolite had a change of heart and asked someone else." (Merrifield p.50). Clark and Nicholson-Smith (2004, p.479) also recount visiting one of Hyppolite's lectures with Debord. Hussey (2002, p.115) however goes so far as to claim that "Debord first encountered Hegel via the work of Jean Hyppolite, then a professor at the Collège de France". This is incorrect: Hyppolite took up that position in 1963, and Debord was clearly reading Hegel from a much earlier date.

distinct from the completed circularity of 'absolute knowing', then the true infinite of the absolute is separate from the finite, and from the bad or 'spurious' infinite of time's successive, discrete moments.[20] This would mean that the absolute could not be truly infinite at all, as it would be limited by that which it is not. It thus seems more accurate to read Hegel as contending that the negative flow of time falls *within* the truth that Spirit's full self-consciousness reveals, and this can be supported by the following: all of the determinations presented in the *Logic* and in the rest of the *Encyclopaedia* do not replace the 'being' with which the *Logic* begins, but are rather progressively more sophisticated aspects of that initial starting point;[21] being's self-consciousness *qua* Spirit thus entails Spirit's comprehension of its own true identity with all other determinations of being.[22] This must include that of time, which as noted emerges immanently from the determination of space.

The second point noted above is more complex. Hegel certainly states that when the Concept (the motive force of Spirit and of Hegelian logic *per se*) "grasps itself", i.e. returns to itself from the externality of nature via the agency of Spirit, it "sets aside its Time-form";[23] a line that would seem to reinforce Heidegger's claim. Yet Hegel also states that time is "the existent Concept itself",[24] i.e. its external manifestation in the physical world, and he indicates that it is to be recognised as just such an outward appearance ("Time is the Concept that *is there* and which presents itself to consciousness as an empty intuition").[25] The implication, given that Hegelian negation entails sublation, is that time is not abandoned by Spirit at the point of absolute knowing: rather, the absolute unity of subject and object can be understood as the comprehended identity between the physical, temporal world and the logic that founds it. This means that the absolute, as the lived self-consciousness of Spirit, can be seen to constitute an effectively endless temporal process:[26] time still exists, but its true nature

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[20] I'll describe the bad infinite in detail in the conclusion to part one. Here we can simply note that it constitutes a form of infinity in which the finite is not fully negated (an example would be an endless sequence of finite elements: 1+1+1+... etc.), and which thus falls short of the true infinity of Hegelian circularity.

[21] As Houlgate puts it, Hegel's account does not advance "by simply replacing an initial incorrect definition of being with a more adequate one... [but rather] by specifying more clearly what is entailed by the initial indeterminate thought of being itself" (Houlgate 2006b, p.45).

[22] "...absolute Spirit...reveals itself as the concrete and final supreme truth of all being, and...at the end of the development is known as freely externalising itself...into the creation of a world which contains all that fell into the development which preceded that final result" (Hegel 1969, p.71).

[23] Hegel 1977, p.487

[24] Hegel 1977, p.27, translation altered for continuity

[25] Hegel 1977, p.487, translation altered for continuity, emphasis in the original

[26] It's significant to note that Hegel depicts the actualisation of the Concept as a task that must be continually actualised. As Fackenheim (1996, p.49) has pointed out, the actualisation of reason in the

and underlying identity with Spirit is comprehended.

Hyppolite makes much the same claim. Recognising Hegel's quasi-vitalist currents he holds that the circular return to the self of the Concept constitutes true infinity, and that Hegel's "concepts of life and infinity are identical".[27] This leads him to claim that the life of Spirit is both infinite and necessarily temporal: for if the Concept is a state of continual self-separation, and thus process, then in order to become present to itself in consciousness it requires the continuity of the latter's temporal existence.[28] History therefore comes not to an end, but rather to fruition; and insofar as this entails the actualisation of philosophy in a fully self-aware, self-determinate life,[29] Hyppolite is able to claim – persuasively – that Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach ("The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it")[30] "was not too unfaithful to Hegelian thought."[31]

I would suggest that this notion of the absolute as continual temporal process informs the aspects of Debord's account discussed above. Hyppolite's emphasis on the retention of negativity within the absolute does however lead us to the issue of tragedy.

<u>Hegel and Tragedy</u>

For Hyppolite, the absolute "divides and tears itself apart in order to be absolute".[32] Thus as Butler puts it, the absolute in Hyppolite's account "is not an achievement as such, but the dialectic of achievement and loss";[33] it is in fact such a state of continual rupture that Hyppolite holds Hegel's "panlogicism" to be tantamount to a "pantragedism".[34] This pertains to the sense in which Hegel offers a theodicy, i.e. a justification of God's apparent cruelties (Hegel himself uses the term 'theodicy' in connection to his philosophy of history).[35] For Hegel, existence is the "life of God" and the "disporting of love with itself," but he stresses that it is so only insofar as it entails

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world, once achieved, is not a permanent condition; and as Harris (1995, p.107) puts it, "there is nothing in [Hegel's] logical theory to warrant the belief that the motion of consciousness must always be progressive". We can, in short, regress.

[27] Hyppolite 1969, p.6
[28] Hyppolite 1969, p.13
[29] Hyppolite 1974, pp.596-7
[30] Marx 2000, p.173
[31] Hyppolite 1974, p.598
[32] Hyppolite 1969, p.7
[33] Butler 1999, p.83
[34] Hyppolite 1975, p.30-1, see also p.194
[35] Hegel 2004, p.15

"the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative";[36] for as Hegel put it, and as Hyppolite (and more recently Nancy)[37] would later emphasise, Spirit "wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself".[38]

Because Hegel's account explains the necessary structural conditions within which that suffering takes place, it also presents an underlying cohesion and unity: the human individual, as a finite entity within a fractured reality that far exceeds it, can thus find solace and purpose by acknowledging, accepting and aligning itself with this underlying reason. The divine order can thus be grasped, and one's own place within it can be understood. Hence the suggestion that Hegelian philosophy can be viewed as being analogous in some respects to tragic art: it offers an 'Apollonian' image that placates its observers and neutralises the 'Dionysian' negativity that it serves to rationalise. For many of the writers discussed below Hegel presents just such an unwarranted and conservative resolution, whilst the negative that he described ought properly to exceed any bounds, even including that of the system itself.

Time and Closure in French Hegelianism

This view can be traced back to Jean Wahl's reading of the unhappy consciousness. The unhappy consciousness pertains to this notion of an 'open' dialectical negativity, as its constant dissatisfaction and self-alienation entails the perpetual re-constitution of opposition. For those who would view the absolute as a state of static repose or as a totalitarian imposition, such deferral remains attractive; and for Wahl, who held that the unhappy consciousness exemplified the motive force of the entire *Phenomenology*[39] (a point that Hyppolite would later reiterate),[40] its constant self-separation "risk[s] breaking the bounds of the [Hegelian] system"[41] itself. It was thus said to how aspects of Hegel's earlier, more romantic work subsisting within the

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[36] Hegel 1977, p.10

[37] See Nancy 2002. Nancy is in fact so keen to stress these aspects of Hegel's work that he effectively transforms Hegel's claim into the contention that Spirit finds itself *as* 'utter dismemberment'.

[38] Hegel 1977, p.19

[39] "If one studies a passage in Hegel, for example the pages of the *Phenomenology* on the unhappy consciousness, one cannot help being struck by the perpetual transfer from contrary to contrary, which is one of the most profound traits of Hegelian thought." Wahl 1951, p.1

[40] Hyppolite 1975, p.190

[41] "We can always rediscover, however, still living, the primitive elements of his thought, those which for us found the greatest part of his merits [as a philosopher], though they even risk breaking the bounds of the [Hegelian] system. Because perhaps they are more precious than the system." Wahl 1951, p.194

"apologetic theology"[42] of his mature system.

I'm drawing on Bruce Baugh's extremely useful *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (2003) in this chapter, as it traces echoes of the unhappy consciousness through a series of French writers from Wahl, through the Surrealists to Deleuze, thereby discussing differing approaches to the issue of dialectical closure. According to Baugh, Wahl's reading derived in part from the work of Victor Delbos, who observed – and I'll use a problematic shorthand here for the sake of clarity – that the synthesis that unites thesis with antithesis must lie in the original thesis itself. This entails that the synthesis must somehow precede itself, which in turn entails that the final moment of unity must perpetually give rise to its own rupture and division into its own grounds. This of course echoes Hegel's own claims (certainly as regards his talk of a "circle that returns into itself...that presupposes its beginning and reaches it only at the end"),[43] but for Alexandre Koyré, who took Delbos' ideas further, it precluded any 'conclusion' to the dialectic of history.

The influence exerted by Wahl's reading was such that Koyré was able to remark in 1934 that modern Hegel interpretation was now characterised by the attempt to find the "hot passion" of Hegel's youth beneath the "frozen steel" of his later "dialectical formulas".[44] Yet for Koyré, reading Hegel's mature work through his early writings risked misinterpretation, and in order to rectify that problem he translated and discussed the account of time presented in Hegel's *Jenenser Realphilosophie* of 1805-6; a text that showed a transition between the early and late Hegel, and one that brought to light an important contradiction. Koyré contended that Hegelian time entails that the future must precede the past. If the truth of the present is its future, then the past from which that present emerges is itself defined by the future. This means that a consciousness linked to such movement would perpetually re-define itself from out of its own future. One can see nascent elements of Sartre's existentialism here, and also echoes of Debord's views on subjectivity and temporality: echoes that become stronger when one notes that for Koyré this view of time renders Hegel's historical resolution untenable.

It is because man says 'no' to his present – or to himself – that he has a future. It is because he negates himself that he has a past. It is because he is time – and not simply temporal – that he has a present... [Yet] if time is dialectical and constructed *from out of the future*, it is – whatever Hegel says – eternally unfinished.[45]

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[42]   Wahl 1951 p.vi
[43]   Hegel 1977, p.488
[44]   Koyré 1971, p.149
[45]   Koyré, 1971, pp.188-9 (translation taken from Baugh 2003, p.27)

This is clearly analogous to Debord's problematic contention that 'the central aporia' of the Hegelian system is that 'time had not ended'. In order to clarify the relation between that claim and my earlier arguments regarding time's perpetuity in the absolute we might turn now to Kojève (Kojève in fact stated that that Koyré's essay provided the "source and basis" for his "interpretation of the *Phenomenology*").[46]

Debord seems to have avoided the post-Kojèveian error of reading both Hegel and Marx under the rubric of the lord and bondsman relation (Vaneigem however makes extensive reference to masters and slaves).[47] That said, his work certainly evidences a concern with the connection between self-consciousness and negative, historical activity that this section of the *Phenomenology* emphasises, and which Kojève's interpretation stressed.[48] The most obvious influence here however is his account of Hegel's historical resolution, the fame of which belies the fact that the actual phrase 'end of history' appears only once in Hegel's entire oeuvre: it serves as a metaphorical illustration in *The Philosophy of History*,[49] a work that Hegel didn't actually write directly, but which was instead compiled posthumously from his own and his students' lecture notes. Within the same text Hegel also describes America as the "land of the future",[50] and we should note his various indications that the task of Spirit is not yet fully complete (e.g. *The Philosophy of Right* claims that "the unity of the divine and the human" is a principle "charged upon the Germanic nations to bring to completion",[51] and contends that "The future is not absolute but remains exposed to accidents";[52] *The Encyclopaedia Logic* indicates that not everything that exists conforms to the Concept).[53] Kojève however maintains that for Hegel human history was at an end, and he sets his claim up by way of the following contentions:

...if Man *is* Time, he himself is Nothingness or annihilation of spatial Being. And we know that for Hegel it is precisely in this annihilation of Being that consists the Negativity which is Man, that Action of Fighting and Work by which Man preserves himself in spatial Being while *destroying* it ...And this Negativity – that is, this Nothingness nihilating as Time in Space – is what forms the very foundation of

46   Kojève 1980, p.134
47   See Vaneigem's 'Basic Banalities', published in two parts in *Internationale Situationniste* #7 (S.I. 2006, pp.117-31; 1997, 272-81) and # 8 (S.I. 2006, pp.154-73; 1997, pp.330-43). See also Vaneigem 1994.
48   e.g. according to Hegel, through his "formative activity" the bondsman "posits *himself* as a negative in the permanent order of things, and thereby becomes *for himself*, someone existing on his own account" (Hegel 1977, p.118).
49   Like the movement of the sun, "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning" (Hegel 2004, p.103).
50   Hegel 2004, p.86
51   Hegel 2005, p.204
52   Hegel 2005, p.54
53   Hegel 1991, pp.29-30

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the specifically human existence – that is, truly active or creative, or historical, individual, and free, existence.54

Humanity, in other words, is a negating, temporal process: an entity that thus does not coincide with the world that it works upon (we might remember here Debord's claim that the human subject is both negative and 'one with time'). Kojève then contends as follows:

Man opposed to single and homogeneous spatial Being...is necessarily Error and not Truth. For a Thought that does not coincide with Being is false. Thus, when specifically human error is finally transformed into the truth of absolute Science, Man ceases to exist as Man and history comes to an end. The overcoming of Man (that is, of Time, that is, of Action) in favour of static Being (that is, Space, that is, Nature), therefore, is the overcoming of Error in favour of Truth.55

In short: if humanity is a negating, temporal process that relies on a difference from objective being, and if the conclusion of that process entails the eradication of that difference, then that conclusion must also mean that humanity and history come to an end too (the peculiarities of this reading are manifold and have been discussed at length,56 as have their influence on Fukuyama's equally questionable claims).

We might now sum up as follows. Save for Hyppolite, I don't mean to suggest that Debord studied the writers discussed here individually, but I would contend that his work echoes and is seemingly inflected by the themes that they express. The spectacle's historical arrest can be seen to be modelled on Kojève's end of history,57 and the importance of time to anti-spectacular subjectivity echoes Koyré's views on the manner in which time's continuity renders Hegelian closure untenable.58 Yet to repeat, I am not suggesting that Debord adopts the continual self-alienation of the unhappy consciousness as a framework for that temporality: if anything, the unhappy

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54 Kojève 1980, p.155
55 Kojève 1980, p,156
56 See for example the essays collected in Stewart's useful *The Hegel Myths and Legends* (1996); see in particular Philip Grier's contribution.
57 Although Kojève's account differs from Fukuyama's own, the latter can serve to illustrate the spectacle's status as an illusory end of history; a point not lost on Debord himself (Debord 2001a, p.31). Fukuyama's views on the events of May 1968 are also pertinent, albeit ironically so: presumably familiar with the views associated with the May uprisings, he claims in *The End of History and the Last Man* that once the just cause of liberal democracy has been realised there is nothing to rebel against, save empty, directionless revolts against that cause itself; those who took part thus fought "out of a certain boredom", and the "substance of their protest...was a matter of indifference; what they rejected was life in a society in which ideals had somehow become impossible" (Fukuyama 1992, p.330).
58 Koyré's comments on temporal arrest are remarkably similar to Debord's, and perhaps echo elements of Lukács' account: "stop the incessant movement of the temporal dialectic," writes Koyré, and "we are faced with...the time of things...time becoming itself a thing, a *res*. This time, in effect, is space" (Koyré 1971, p.178); for Lukács, commodification entails that "time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature...in short, it becomes space" (Lukács 1971, p.90).

consciousness is more akin to spectatorship (a point that will become important in chapter three in relation to existentialism). Rather, I've argued that Debord follows Hyppolite in associating the absolute with a form of subject-object unity that entails a continual self-determinate process in time.

The degree to which the concept of spectacle chimes with the Hegelian end of history (or rather Kojève's interpretation thereof) corresponds to the sense in which Hegelian philosophy is itself said to depict, in a separate, alienated form, the genuine unity of historical praxis: for in the same manner, the spectacle represents self-determinate agency, thereby neutralising and rationalising it, and is thus also 'tragic' in the sense outlined above. One could even venture that the spectacle is a kind of inverted realisation of Hegelian philosophy: not the latter's actualisation in praxis, but rather a form that retains its detachment from lived reality ("far from realising philosophy, the spectacle philosophises reality, and turns the material life of everyone into a universe of speculation").[59] This can be seen in Debord's claims that the unity that it affords merely serves to maintain isolation: for although it presents itself as a world of satisfied desire and meaningful action, it arises from and perpetuates the separation of subject and object ("The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it *only in its separateness*").[60]

My major claim here, in other words, is that it is the actualisation in lived praxis of the subject-object unity that Hegelian philosophy depicts that constitutes the real challenge to its supposedly static arrest, and which also stands opposed to a society that mirrors that philosophy's merely ideal resolution. It does however remain the case that for many writers the continual deferral or rejection of dialectical resolution proved attractive, and echoes of the unhappy consciousness and the bad infinite can be found in the important influence exerted on the S.I. by Surrealism. This line of influence can be introduced by way of reference to Bataille.

Negativity without Limit

The Surrealists were particularly attracted by the manner in which Hegelian negativity constituted a force of creation as well as destruction. Gifted with the power to transform and erase fixed identities, it lent itself to Surrealism's concern with dissociating fixed meanings via new, unexpected and poetic combinations of existing

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59   Debord 1995, p.17; 2006, p.770
60   Debord 1995, p.22; 2006, p.774

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elements. For Breton and his compatriots the negation of the negation necessarily entailed the supersession of any fixed limitations, even the bounds set by the Hegelian system itself; to impose any kind of arrest upon dialectical flux was entirely inadmissible.

Bataille took up a similar position, but in his view this rejection of limit also meant the impossibility of imposing utility, purpose and function on negativity. For Bataille, the negativity articulated within the Hegelian system ought properly to be free from any rationalisation. This is expressed particularly clearly in an essay of 1955 entitled 'Hegel, Death and Sacrifice', in which he built on the ideas advanced in earlier works such as 'The Notion of Expenditure' (1933) and *The Accursed Share* (1946-9), and which is of particular significance to our concerns as it associates such a neutered, rationalised negativity with the 'tragic' and the 'spectacular'. The essay focuses on Hegel's famous assertion (referenced by Hyppolite and Nancy above) that Spirit neither "shrinks from death" nor "keeps itself untouched by devastation", but rather "wins its truth" upon finding itself "in utter dismemberment".[61] Strongly influenced by Kojève (Bataille and Breton had both attended Kojève's famous seminars at the École des Hautes Études), albeit located in steadfast opposition to the latter's notion of historical conclusion (as discussed by Agamben in *The Open*),[62] and perhaps also exhibiting the influence of Heidegger (whom he'd read as early as the 1930's), Bataille advanced the claim that Hegel's true profundity lay in the degree to which he'd understood the human subject as a fundamentally *negative* creature: as a 'living death', driven towards negation and towards its own ultimate demise. Yet Bataille also claimed that Hegel had overlooked the fact that any such 'living death' could – insofar as death constituted its true identity – only attain full self-consciousness at the very point of death itself, and that it was thus forever denied full, final resolution. Like the unhappy consciousness, Bataille's human subject was thus constantly opposed to its own self: a self that it perpetually strives towards, but which it can never reach.

In Bataille's view, this drive towards unity underlies Hegel's own philosophical ambitions, insofar as his desire to tame negativity by binding it within the positive unity and rationality of his system reflected a fundamental human characteristic. We are driven towards death, for Bataille (we are fascinated by our own and that of others); we take pleasure in death (it lies, for Bataille, at the base of eroticism); but insofar as we are alive we forever remain apart from it. As a result of this constant separation from death

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[61] Hegel 1977, p.19
[62] See Agamben 2004, pp.5-8

we are compelled, he claims, to construct "spectacles" and "representations"[63] of it. Tragic art, for Bataille, is an example of this compulsion: for "In tragedy," he writes, "it is a question of identifying with some character who dies, and of believing that we die, although we are alive".[64] His claims are thus close to those of Nietzsche, as tragedy is viewed as affording a safe, neutered communion with the negative, and he holds Hegel's system to present just such a "representation of the Negative".[65] I don't want to claim any direct line of influence between these views and Debord's own notion of spectacle (although this link is argued for by Brown),[66] but Bataille's account of tragic 'representations' in Hegel is nonetheless analogous to the spectacle's representation of historical agency; as Debord doubtless read Bataille this may have helped form his views. Furthermore, and as with Lefebvre, Debord and the S.I. share with Bataille a sense in which negativity might involve festival and excess:[67] Bataille argues that a truly "sovereign"[68] negativity must be completely exempt from utility or constructive purpose, and although he seems to indicate that the 'representation' of death and negativity can never be entirely overcome, he does allude to the need for glorious, purposeless negation and destruction ("a luxurious squandering of energy in every form!").[69] This notion of excession brings us to the influence exerted on Debord and the S.I.'s work by Surrealism's own objections to Hegelian closure. In order to present that material I'll employ a number of connections based around the links discussed above between Hegelian negativity and time.

Negativity and Surrealism

The second volume of *Panegyric*, Debord's peculiar and complex autobiography, was first published posthumously in 1997. It included a chronological outline of significant events in its author's life leading up to the publication of the first volume in 1989, and Verso's English translation of 2004 took the liberty of continuing that timeline up to Debord's suicide. Its entry for 1994 reads as follows: "On 30th November, Guy Debord carries out one last potlatch."[70]

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[63] Bataille 1990, p.20
[64] Bataille 1990, p.20
[65] Bataille 1990, p.21
[66] Brown 1986
[67] For the S.I., "proletarian revolutions will be festivals or nothing" (S.I. 2006, p.429).
[68] Bataille 1990, p.25
[69] Bataille 1991, p.33
[70] Debord 2004, p.170; 2006, p.1760

Casting Debord's suicide as 'potlatch'[71] may seem crass, but it does perhaps contain an element of truth. It was prompted by alcoholic polyneuritis, a condition that Debord cast in terms of negative defiance ("It is the opposite of an illness that one might contract through a regrettable imprudence. On the contrary, one must see in it the faithful obstinacy of an entire life"),[72] and one can, perhaps, detect something similar in his suicide itself. His widow, Alice, described his suicide as a "beautiful gift",[73] and when taken in conjunction with his request for the posthumous burning of *Panegyric*'s unpublished third volume it might be interpreted as a final act of refusal.

Debord's interest in potlatch owes much to figures such as Bataille, whose own interest in its negative aspects can be seen to stem from Dada's concerns with the negation and refusal of bourgeois society. Dada's refusal did however extend at times to that of existence itself. Suicide had been a tragic, romantic ideal in the 19th century, but in the hands of the Dadaists it became a gloriously absurd denial of an inherently absurd world.[74] Arthur Cravan, one of Debord's great heroes, spoke of suicide as art;[75] Rigaut shot himself through the heart in 1929, as would Debord some 65 years later; Jacques Vaché greatly impressed Breton and his Surrealist contemporaries not only with his poetry but also with his anti-social attitude and ultimate suicide. The January 1924 edition of *La Revolution Surréaliste* even went so far as to ask 'Is Suicide a Solution?'

Dada's outright, absolute negation and refusal (Tzara: "I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense...Dada means nothing")[76]

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[71] The term 'potlatch' gained common currency through the widespread influence of Marcel Mauss' anthropological study *The Gift* (1923), which used the word to refer to a wide variety of gift exchange systems. The word is taken from the language of the Haida, a North American Indian tribe, and means to "'to feed', 'to consume'" (Mauss 2004, p.7); this furthered the association of the concept to notions of dialectics, particularly for Bataille and the Surrealists, insofar as it pertains to the negative dimensions of *Aufhebung*. Mauss describes many different variations of gift exchange, but the most significant in this respect is that of the Haida, in which each party would try to outdo the other in destroying wealth, as opposed to simply giving it away. For the Haida, who according to Mauss "speak of killing wealth" (Mauss 2004, p.111), this was to be achieved through the destruction of one's own property; in the extreme, participants would destroy all their possessions, signifying that they care nothing for their opponent's own self-destructive response. The journal of the Letterist International, Debord's group prior to the S.I., produced a journal called Potlatch that was given away free; it was sent to randomly chosen addresses and correspondents, but it "was never sold", and "only given" (Debord 2006, p.130). This latter point can however be qualified by Marcus' anecdote: "'You picked names out of a the phone book?' I asked [the Letterist] Wollen. 'Let's not exaggerate,' he said. 'We didn't have a phone book. For that matter, we didn't have a phone'" (Marcus 1989, p.391).
[72] Debord 2006, p.1878
[73] Hussey 2002, p.375
[74] See Hale 2005 for a discussion of this theme.
[75] "The people I respected more than anyone alive were Arthur Cravan and Lautréamont..." (Debord 2004, p.12; 2006, p.1662). Cravan once drew a full house to watch his own supposed suicide: "drinking a bottle of absinthe and with his balls draped across the table he drunkenly harangued the audience for having made a social event of death" (Hale 2005, p. 20).
[76] Tzara 1996, p.249

burned itself out by virtue of its own nihilism, but it was subsequently given a degree of clarity and articulation by the Surrealists for whom negativity became a force of positive change. This view was directly informed by the importance of Hegel in France at the time, and partly as a result of the interpretations discussed above the Surrealists' adopted the sense in which the negative might be able to exceed the 'limits' of the system. "It seems impossible," wrote Breton, "to assign any limitations...to the exercise of a thought finally made tractable to negation, and to the negation of the negation".77

This informed their interest in the endless dissociation and reinvention of fixed meanings and identities in new, poetic combinations (hence their praise for Lautréamont, one of Debord's favourite poets,[78] and their enthusiasm for his now famous words in *Maldoror*: "As beautiful as the chance juxtaposition on a dissecting table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!").79 This excessive, transgressive negativity would also be given an overtly politicised form. Surrealism had found common cause with the communist project, as both sought the full realisation of human potential (Blanchot: "the service that Surrealism expects from Marxism is to prepare for it a society in which everyone could be Surrealist").80 In the second Surrealist Manifesto, released in 1929, Breton pledged Surrealism's allegiance to both dialectical materialism and to Communism: both "Surrealism" and "historical materialism", he declared, take as their "point of departure the 'colossal abortion' of the Hegelian system".[81] Claiming that the very nature of Hegelian negation precludes its limitation to the traditional spheres of social transformation (i.e. production and distribution), he argued that the task of emancipating labour ought to be allied to that of liberating dreams and the imagination. This is of course very close to the S.I.'s attempt to re-think the communist project, as is his proposal for a dialectical relation between dream and waking life: "The poet to come", Breton claimed, "will surmount the depressing idea of the irreparable divorce between action and dream".[82]

Surrealist negativity, with its aspirations towards subversion, liberation and an art able to unify thought and practice, can thus be seen to pertain directly to the S.I.'s own ambitions. Where the Surrealists had sought to overcome the disjuncture between dream and reality, the S.I. aimed to go one step further by abolishing art altogether

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77 Breton 1996, p.447
78 For further discussion of Debord and the S.I.'s interest in Lautréamont see Bunyard 2011a.
79 Lautréamont 1978, p.193
80 Quoted in Baugh 2003, p.54
81 Breton 1996, p.447
82 Breton 1990, p.146

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through its actualisation in lived practice;[83] and thus rather than produce discrete artefacts, the S.I. would create instances of experience ("we care nothing," wrote Debord in 1957, "about the permanence of art or of anything else").[84] As a result, the constant, negative movement admired by Surrealism came to be actualised as creatively lived time.

I'll return to the peculiarities of Situationist time in chapter two; suffice it to say here that the identity between consciousness, negativity and time discussed above, which had been given transgressive qualities by writers such as Wahl and Koyré, becomes infused via Surrealism with an equally transgressive artistic and creative dimension. The importance of the Surrealists' influence should in fact be stressed. The very first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* contained the observation that "for us, Surrealism has been only a beginning of a revolutionary experiment in culture, an experiment that almost immediately ground to a practical and theoretical halt. We have to go further";[85] yet this would ultimately entail an engagement with capitalism and everyday life, and a progressive departure from the S.I.'s early avant-garde concerns in favour of a far more explicitly Hegelian Marxist notion of historical agency.[86]

I'll close this chapter by returning to George's study of tragedy in the *Phenomenology*, insofar as his own attempts to draw on these themes are strikingly different to Debord's own Hegelianism. Hegel's "deep concern for tragedy", George writes, may point towards the "joy" that can be found by "those who learn to accept that they belong to a world they cannot master".[87] Such resignation, insofar as it entails a relinquishment of agency, is of course the absolute antithesis of Debord's own use of Hegel, and thus perhaps serves to illustrate the homology between the spectacle and the Hegelian system's rationalisation of the negative. In contrast, I've sought to show – following Bataille – that the tragic elements of Hegel's work can be viewed in a more critical sense: as an attempt to locate contingency, change and excession within the ordered and necessary coherence of a stable whole. Yet where Bataille rejects rationalisation and utility altogether, and where Wahl and others opt for forms

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[83] "Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realising it*, and Surrealism sought to *realise art without abolishing it*. The critical position since worked out by the Situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realisation of art are the inseparable aspects of the one same *supersession of art*" (Debord 1995, p.136, translation altered; 2006, p.848, emphasis in the original).

[84] S.I. 2006, p.41; Debord 2006, p.326

[85] S.I. 2006, p.48

[86] The basis of such a position is of course linked to the very notion of an avant-garde. As the German Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck once put it: "The highest art will be that which in its conscious content presents the thousand-fold problems of the day…" (quoted in Marcus 1989, p.234).

[87] George 2006, p.133

corresponding to the unhappy consciousness' continual deferral of subject-object unity, Debord can be seen to associate the transgressive and negative aspects of Hegelian negativity with that unity's actualisation.

Chapter Two: We are Artists only insofar as We are No Longer Artists"[1]

Antitheses and Aesthetics

This chapter will show that the theory of spectacle's conceptual roots can be identified in the S.I.'s early opposition to 'bourgeois' art and culture. Through doing so, it will attempt to provide a clearer sense of quite what it might mean to claim that history had been stopped or arrested by modern capitalism. I'll begin with an account of the aspirations towards the unification of art and life touched on at the end of the previous chapter; having done so I'll then look at the inception of the S.I. itself, before considering the theory of spectacle's debts to the group's early concept of cultural 'decomposition'. This will be followed by a further discussion of Situationist time.

We can begin with a letter sent by Debord to Asger Jorn in 1959, in which he wrote that "philosophy, like art" tend toward "disappearance in praxis".[2] Where the realisation of philosophy was to entail that thought about the world would become thought that changed the world, art would now no longer be made about life, but rather abolished and realised *as* life. This meant that the earlier revolutionary project was to be re-conceived: as the S.I. would later put it in 1966, "in the 19th century the proletariat was already the heir of philosophy; now it has become the heir of modern art".[3] This however returns us to the peculiarities of Debord and the S.I.'s conception of the proletariat. Marx's proletarian was an individual devoid of any control over his or her own means of survival; for Debord and the S.I., the 'new' proletariat was composed of all those deprived of control over their own lives. As described earlier, this new poverty was viewed as having grown from the amelioration of its predecessor – hence Debord's caustic remarks on the "augmented survival"[4] offered by the spectacle's "enrichment of privation"[5] – and its supersession, afforded through the abolition of labour and the reclamation of society's technical capacities, would, as a famous slogan once put it, allow the taking of one's desires for reality. In Hegelian fashion the Situationist project thus aimed at what the present lacked, but at which it had nonetheless made possible

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[1]   S.I. 2006, p.179, translation altered; S.I. 1997, p.389
[2]   Debord 2009, p.262
[3]   S.I. 2006, p.429
[4]   Debord 1995, p.28; 2006, p.778
[5]   Debord 1995, p.31, translation altered; 2006, p.780

("mankind", after all, "always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve").[6] As the result would most certainly not be a more equitable version of the present, one could comment here that the more utopian[7] aspects of the S.I.'s goals were not a romantic gloss upon an essentially traditional communist project, but rather a marker of their opposition to 'actually existing socialism'. Lukács, discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat, once warned that "Freedom cannot represent a value in itself," and must "*serve the rule of the proletariat, not the other way round*";[8] the S.I. however, reversing the Surrealists' own famous assertion that poetry must be put at the service of revolution, claimed that "the point" was in fact "to put revolution at the service of poetry"; doing so, they maintained, would ensure that "the revolution does not betray its own project".[9]

The view that labour could be made obsolete was fundamental to the S.I.'s aspirations. For example, Constant's plans for 'New Babylon', an early experiment in Situationist architecture, depicted a future city based on psychogeographical[10] principles and geared towards an endless *dérive*:[11] composed of endless branching corridors of interconnected environments, its inhabitants would wander at whim, rearranging its ambiances according to their wishes as they did so. Psychogeography and the *dérive* are perhaps the most widely known aspects of the S.I.'s oeuvre, and are certainly the most discussed. Yet however trite their contemporary 'recuperation' might be, they do reflect one of the group's major virtues: namely, a reaction against the reduction of Marxism to a statist ideology. "The next form of society will not be based on industrial production," declared the S.I. in 1962: "it will be a society of *realised art*."[12]

We'll see in chapter five that in this respect Debord and the S.I. can be seen to have positioned themselves further up the dialectical spiral than Marx and his successors. Yet

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[6]   Marx 2000, p.426

[7]   The S.I.'s optimism should not be underestimated. In 1959 Debord claimed that the use of "one-man helicopters" would "have spread to the general public within twenty years" (S.I. 2006, p.70; 1997, p.104); also in 1959, Constant declared that "space travel, which seems likely in the near future" would further the development of Situationist architecture, "since establishing bases on other planets will immediately raise the problem of sheltered cities, which may provide models for our study of future urbanism" (S.I. 2006, p.72; 1997, p.107).

[8]   Lukács 1971, p.292

[9]   S.I. 2006, p.151; 1997, p.327

[10] Psychogeography – a term carried over into the S.I. from Debord's earlier membership of the Letterists and the Letterist International (L.I.) – was defined in the very first edition of *Internationale Situationniste* as "The study of the specific effects of the geographical environment (whether consciously organized or not) on the emotions and behaviour of individuals." (S.I. 2006, p.52; 1997, p.13). For useful overviews of issues pertaining to these themes see Sadler (1999) and Coverley (2007).

[11] The *dérive*, or 'drift' – essentially a form of Freudian free-association in terms of architectural experience – involved wondering through an environment, navigating and engaging with it purely in terms of the psychological effects that it engendered.

[12] S.I. 2006, p.114; 1997, p.257

this location not only enjoyed the status of a purportedly penultimate state of separation between social power and its producers: in addition, it also constituted the conclusion of another line of teleological development, namely that of art and culture's drive towards its own self-abolition as a sphere separate from everyday life.

...just as in the first half of the nineteenth century revolutionary theory arose out of philosophy (out of critical reflections on philosophy and out of the crisis and death of philosophy), so now it is going to rise once again out of modern art and poetry, out of its supersession, out of what modern art has sought and *promised*, out of the clean sweep it has made of all the values and rules of everyday behaviour.[13]

The spectacle's illusory end of history was thus also the real end of art. Having made these initial observations we can now turn to Debord and the S.I.'s early years, in which that conception first arose.

The Beginnings of the S.I.

Debord began using the term 'spectacle' in the early 1950's,[14] and references to 'situations' can be found in his work as early as 1952.[15] The concepts emerged from and remained intimately connected to his own and the S.I.'s early opposition to the purported detachment of 'bourgeois culture', as evidenced by his seminal *Report on the Construction of Situations* of 1957: a text that was prepared for and accepted by the S.I.'s inaugural conference, and which compares modern life as a whole to a cultural trend towards 'spectacle'. "The construction of situations," Debord writes, "begins beyond the collapse of the modern concept of spectacle. It is easy to see which aspect of the alienation of the old world is attached to the very principle of spectacle: non-intervention."[16]

As the names, events and dates involved in the S.I.'s birth have been rehearsed many times[17] I'll take much of their background as read, but the following may help to orient what follows. The S.I. formed in 1957, in the Italian town of Cosio d'Arroscia, following an initial meeting of several avant-garde groups in Alba in 1956.[18] It arose

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[13]   S.I. 2006, p.139; 1997, p.307
[14]   e.g. Debord 2006, p.46 and 70
[15]   "The future arts will be upheavals of situations, or nothing" (Debord 2006, p.62).
[16]   S.I. 2006, p.40, translation altered; Debord 2006, p.325
[17]   See for example Bracken 1997; Ford 2005; Gray 1998; Hussey 2002; Merrifield 2005; Sadler 1988. Thus Ford (1995, p.viii): "the familiar type of beginning, 'The S.I. was formed in 1957...' is superfluous here".
[18]   As Ralph Rumney put it in an interview: "'What was decided in Cosio? What did you invent?' '...Collectively, we created a synthesis using Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and some others like Feuerbach, Hegel, Marx, the Futurists, Dada, the Surrealists, and the Vandals that Jorn was so fond of. We knew how to put all that together.'" (Rumney 2002, p.37)

from the union of a number of avant-garde groups – ex-members of C.O.B.R.A., Debord's Letterist International (L.I.), the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the London Psychogeographical Association (an 'association' formed of just one member)[19] – on the grounds that all were moving in a similar direction. Each group was characterised by the view that art, culture and architecture should be employed in the creative construction of lived experience (or, to use the phrase employed by Debord's faction, in the construction of a 'unitary urbanism'),[20] leading towards the fusion of life and art. This however could only be attained through the abolition of contemporary culture, and whilst that view certainly owed much to Dada and Surrealism, it was also informed by the ideas of Isidore Isou and his Letterist group.

Debord met Isou and the Letterists at the Cannes film festival in 1951, where they were trying to cause sufficient scandal to merit the showing of Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* ('*Treatise on Slobber and Eternity*'). Debord, who was only nineteen years old at the time, was sufficiently impressed to move to Paris – ostensibly to study law at the Sorbonne – in order to join them. However, in October 1952 he and what amounted to the Letterists' left wing split from Isou to form a new group, named the Letterist International. The break was prompted by their sabotaging of Charlie Chaplin's press conference: in a paper handed out at the event, entitled 'No More Flat Feet', Debord and three other signatories (Berna, Brau and Wolman) declared Chaplin to be a "swindler of emotions and a master singer of suffering", whose films presented a sentimental and reactionary ideology that served to stifle revolt.[21] Isou initially condoned this event, but upon recognising it as the work of a breakaway faction he denounced it and offered support for Chaplin; the L.I. denounced Isou in turn, and established themselves as an independent entity.[22]

However, and despite Debord's stated antipathy towards Isou, some of the latter's central tenets are echoed in Debord's later work; for example, the contention that the real source of society's creative potential lay in 'youth' rather than in a classical proletariat. Perhaps the most pertinent line of influence lies in Isou's claim that art and culture move through two cyclic phases, which he referred to as 'amplic' (*amplique*) and

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[19] "'To make our movement sound international I suggested that we should mention the London Psychogeographical Committee.' 'What was that?' 'Nothing at all. It was just me. I said "OK, I'm the London Psychogeographical Committee." It was a pure invention, a mirage.'" (Rumney 2002, p.37)

[20] As the L.I.'s statement to the conference put it: "a unitary urbanism – the synthesis we call for, incorporating arts and technologies – must be created in accordance with new values of life, values which we now need to distinguish and disseminate". S.I. 2006, p.21; 1997, pp.687-8

[21] "...behind your rattan cane, some have felt the truncheon of a cop...but we who are young and beautiful, reply Revolution when we hear suffering" (Debord 2006, p.84).

[22] See Hussey (2002, p.66), who makes rather more of Debord's tactical moves in this regard.

'chiselling' (*ciselante*): first, culture expands and develops, until it reaches its greatest possible stage of development; once it has done so, cultural progress takes place through a 'chiselling', negating process until such time as it is able to expand once more in an entirely new manner (thus, as Debord put it rather dramatically in 1952, "Letterist poetry screams for a crushed universe").[23] Isou's Letterists believed themselves to be located at a point where this 'chiselling' process was close to completion, and they set out to complete it by breaking words down into single letters; through doing so they hoped to inaugurate a genuinely new mode of poetry. As Debord put it in a letter from April 1951, "poetry will only survive in its destruction";[24] a view that can be seen to be echoed by the S.I. from their formation in 1957 right the way through to their demise in 1972.

Decomposition and the End of Art

This concern with negating art and culture bears direct relation to the notion of historical arrest presented above, particularly as regards the S.I.'s early preoccupation with cultural 'decomposition'. The latter concept stemmed from the Letterists view that culture was stagnant, having grown ripe for destruction and reinvigoration, and it would be retained by the S.I. and employed for many years to come; it can in fact be seen in Debord's writings in the 1990's.[25] I'll contend here that it also bears direct relation to the theory of spectacle.

The term 'decomposition' was defined in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* as denoting the manner in which "traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of superior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions".[26] It thus refers to the progressive demonstration and recognition of the inadequacy of culture as regards the new possibilities afforded by society's evolving economic and technological basis: possibilities that were held to have long since reached a point that necessitated a reconstruction that had yet to take place.

I drew attention earlier to Debord's claim that the spectacle's full emergence could be dated back to the late 1920's, and it's thus interesting to note that the S.I.

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[23] Debord, in 1952: "Letterist poetry screams for a crushed universe" (Debord 2006, p.46)
[24] Debord 2006, p.36
[25] See for example Debord 2008, p.237
[26] S.I. 2006, p.52; S.I. 1997, p.14

claimed that decomposition had started "around 1930".[27] Debord also made similar claims prior to the S.I.'s inception: in 1955, whilst still with the L.I., he wrote that "the movement of [cultural] discovery culminated around 1930", having been arrested by the "very serious retreat of revolutionary politics, bound up with the blinding bankruptcy of the workers' aesthetic".[28] In the absence of any such advance and of any new 'aesthetic', culture had descended into a state of repetition that merely reinforced its own obsolescence: "suffice it to say," wrote Debord and Wolman in 1956, "that in our view the premises for revolution...are not only ripe, they have begun to rot"[29] (one might also note here the S.I.'s much later claim in 1966's 'On the Poverty of Student Life': art being long dead, the "student is necrophiliac").[30] Consequently, art work that demonstrated or reflected the inadequacy of contemporary culture, or which – following the Letterists – exacerbated its collapse, was favoured and pursued by the early S.I. Of particular note here is their interest in *détournement*: a technique that involved subverting existing cultural forms into new configurations by actualising the negative potential within them. Examples of *détournement* include Debord's anti-cinematic films, which were composed of existing material and designed to antagonise a passive audience, and Pinot Gallizio's 'industrial painting': paintings produced by machines and supplied in rolls like wallpaper. In this latter regard it might be noted that détournement should not be solely associated with the subversion of adverts and films, but rather in more general terms as a kind of strategic *Aufhebung* of an opponent's force (it's thus significant to note that Debord included an excerpt from the S.I.'s early text 'Détournement as Negation and Prelude' as an appendix to 1972's *The Real Split in the International*, the text in which he announced that the S.I. would terminate itself in order to avoid recuperation and stagnation).

Thus whilst the Hegelianism that I stressed above is certainly less overt in the S.I.'s early years it's by no means absent, and it's worth noting in this regard the congruence between the concept of decomposition and Hegel's views on aesthetics. Notoriously (and arguably),[31] Hegel claimed that the development of art came to an end

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[27] S.I. 2006, p.52; S.I. 1997, p.14
[28] Debord 2006, p.195
[29] S.I. 2006, p.14; Debord 2006, p.221
[30] S.I. 2006, p.413, translation altered; S.I. 1966
[31] Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* concludes with the claim that "It is as the external realisation of [the] Idea that the wide Pantheon of art [i.e. its various styles, forms and practitioners] is being erected, whose architect and builder is the spirit of beauty as it awakens to self-knowledge, and to complete which the history of the world will need its evolution of ages" (Hegel 1993, p.97). This can be taken in conjunction with the many other comments in Hegel's work in which he seems to indicate that the work of history is by no means complete. Inwood however contends that Hegel is

with the completion of Spirit's drive towards self-consciousness, on the grounds that art, for Hegel, is an expression of the absolute. Philosophy affords the clearest conception of the latter, but representations and intimations of it can nonetheless be derived through art, just as they can through religion. Thus in societies in which philosophy has not developed to the point where it can grasp the absolute in a clear and self-conscious manner through philosophy – and in which the 'revealed religion' of Christianity was not present – art, or more specifically religious art, offers the closest possible proximity to Spirit's final goal. Hence Hegel's fondness for ancient Greek culture, in which the gods' status as alienated, separated expressions of human reason is mitigated by their human form, and by the degree to which they denote principles and traits of human life (a point that also pertains to Hegel's interest in tragic art's fusion of universal fate and human particularity). Yet once 'absolute knowing' has been achieved in philosophy, any such role for art falls away, as does art's capacity for further development: it can add nothing new, as its goal has already been attained. It can thus only rehearse old themes in new combinations and forms; hence the correspondence between these ideas and the notion of decomposition. In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord in fact talks of the end of the history of art and culture:

> The end of the history of culture manifests itself under two antagonistic aspects: the project of culture's self-transcendence [*son dépassement*] as part of total history, and its management as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle. The first tendency has cast its lot with the critique of society, the second with the defence of class power.[32]

My contention, therefore, is that the earlier concept of decomposition became a cultural symptom of the more objective, economic problems that the notion of spectacle sought to address. After all, decomposition – a perpetuation of art's separation from life, maintained by capitalism's arrest of their tendency towards unification – rendered its present a frozen moment of (cultural) history; for art's purpose and role was over, requiring its abolition and supersession through actualisation as lived praxis.

Art, Negativity and Time

In the very first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* the S.I. defined culture as "the reflection and prefiguration of the possibilities of organisation of everyday life in

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speaking here from a perspective located at the very beginning of art, and is looking ahead to its completion within his own present (Inwood in Hegel 1993, pp.196-7).
[32] Debord 1995, pp.131-2; 2006, p.844-5

each historical moment; a complex of aesthetics, feelings and mores through which a collectivity reacts on the life that is objectively shaped [*donnée*] by its economy."[33] The homology with the Hegelian Spirit that this formulation implies (remembering here that Spirit is, in essence, the self-consciousness of a community)[34] would become more overt in Debord's later work: for example, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, and whilst referencing Hegel's *Differenzschrift* (perhaps by way of Lukács, who uses the same quotation),[35] Debord described culture as "the general sphere of knowledge, and of reflections on lived experience," and as "the power to generalise".[36] He continued:

The whole triumphant history of culture, can be understood as the history of the revelation of culture's insufficiency, as a march towards culture's self-abolition [*autosuppression*]. Culture is locus of the search for lost unity. In the course of this search culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.[37]

Just as the Hegelian Idea becomes other to itself as nature and Spirit in order to return to itself from that otherness, so too is culture presented here as a means by which humanity achieves self-reflexive thought before sublating the detachment afforded by that reflection. Yet where from the S.I.'s perspective the Hegelian Spirit merely ascends to the point where it is able to 'interpret' the world, the 'cultural' self-consciousness described here was to be actualised in an attempt to change it. This is reinforced by the sense in which culture, in Debord's usage, would seem to correspond to Hegelian 'Understanding' and 'picture-thinking': modes of thought that fall short of the identity in difference grasped by speculative, dialectical philosophy. This separation of art and culture from everyday life, in other words, is analogous to the distinction between an observing subject and a separate object of enquiry; and, as the 'object' in question here is history and lived experience, this would seem to raise two issues. Firstly, we have a sense in which the separation of artistic representations of life from life itself constitutes a primary conceptual basis for the theory of spectacle. Secondly, insofar as the object to be reconciled with is life and history, the realisation of art that would be achieved through that unification would necessarily be one with lived temporality (a position similar to Hyppolite's view that the nature of the Concept's self-division entailed that it could only become present to itself in consciousness through temporality). Thus according to Debord in 1967, "the point is to take effective possession of the

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[33] S.I. 2006, p.52, translation altered; 1997, p.14.
[34] Spirit is "the unity of the individual and universal" (Hegel 2004 p.82); "the unity of the different and independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: 'I' that is 'We' and 'we' that is 'I'" (Hegel 1977, p.110),
[35] Lukács 1971, p.139.
[36] Debord 1995, p.130; 2006, p.843
[37] Debord 1995, p.130; 2006, p.843

community of dialogue and the game with time that up till now have merely been *represented* by poetic and artistic works"[38] (as he puts it in his correspondence, "any spirit of the 'pictorial' must be stamped out").[39]

These later formulations stem directly from the S.I.'s early concerns. For example, in 1958 Debord claimed that art must cease to be "a report about sensations and become a direct organisation of more advanced sensations."[40] In fact, these early texts can at times be seen to figure the realisation of art in praxis through notions of commodity fetishism: again in 1958, and in the very first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, Debord advocated – in connection to the creation of art – "produc[ing] ourselves rather than things that enslave us".[41] This brings us back to the point made in the previous chapter as to the sense in which the S.I. rejected the production of static, durable artworks in favour of the creation of transient moments of experience. "The goal of the Situationists," Debord explained, "is immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life by means of deliberately arranged variations of ephemeral [*périssables*] moments."[42] I'd like to put particular stress on that notion of ephemerality here, in order to relate it back to the ideas about time and negativity outlined in the previous chapter. It can also be noted that it entails that such moments cannot be represented, for to do so would be to introduce the very duality that the situation was intended to overcome; as a result, "the success of these moments can reside only in their fleeting effect [*leur effet passager*]."[43] Debord thus claimed in his *Report on the Construction of Situations* of 1957 that "our situations will be without a future, they will be passageways [*lieux de passage*]", as "we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else."[44]

If we jump forward a decade to *The Society of the Spectacle* once again we can see that these aspects of the constructed situation inform that later work, particularly as regards Debord's assertion that "Man – that 'negative being who *is* to the extent that he abolishes being' is one [*identique*] with time."[45] As noted in the thesis' general introduction, the line quoted in that statement stems from Hyppolite's translation of the *Phenomenology*. It is however possible that Debord found it in Kostas Papaioannou's

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[38] Debord 1995, p.133; 2006, p.846
[39] Debord 2009, p.149
[40] S.I. 2006, p.53; 1997, p.21
[41] S.I. 2006, p.53; 1997, p.21
[42] S.I. 2006, p.53;1997, p.20
[43] S.I. 2006, p.53; 1997, p.20
[44] S.I. 2006, p.41; Debord 2006, p.326, translation altered
[45] Debord 1995, p.92; 2006, p.820

preface to a French edition of Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history,[46] and the context in which Papaioannou employs it – which may well have inflected Debord's appropriation of it – bears useful relation to our concerns here; at the very least, it serves as an illustration of some of the points under discussion. This is because Papaioannou employs the quotation whilst presenting a set of claims that present Hegel as depicting human agency as a process of change, destruction and creation.

Papaioannou begins by contending that Hegel's significance as a philosopher lies in his supersession of the classical separation of God and man, thought and world, etc. He also notes that the Hegelian Concept, which perpetually becomes other to itself in order to become more fully itself, is one with humanity, and that Hegel thus casts the human subject as a negative, transformative and self-constitutive force: "because he is the Concept," explains Papaioannou, "man must, by his own same essence, negate nature and abolish (*aufheben*) matter, fixity and finitude, until they cease to resist Spirit; until they enter into the tumult of his moving life [*le tourbillon de sa vie mobile*]."[47] As the movement of the Concept gives rise to time, Papaioannou – like Hyppolite, Koyré and Kojève – claims that humanity's identity with the Concept entails that it is also one with the latter's temporal flux.

The constructed situation echoes this notion of constant temporal unrest. This greatly informs the 'ephemeral moments' and the 'fleeting effect' that Debord and the S.I. attributed to the situation, as also the sense in which it was to function as a means of 'going with the flow of time'. Whilst this may seem tacit within the S.I.'s formative years, it certainly comes to the fore in Debord's later work: for what we find clearly stated there is a sense in which human identity lies in temporal becoming, achieved via a continual process of self-separation, negation and otherness; albeit a form of separation in which the subject remains one with itself in its own externalised actions, as opposed to the contemplative detachment of spectatorship. Hence *The Society of the Spectacle*'s claim, referred to earlier in connection to Lukács' troubles with objectification, that "time is a *necessary* alienation, as Hegel showed; the medium in

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[46]   Papaioannou in Hegel 1965. Debord does not indicate the provenance of the quoted phrase, and nor does he include it within the list of détournements that he produced to assist his translators in 1973. This absence is appropriate enough, given the fact that the line in question is a quotation and not a détournement, but Bill Brown has however interpolated (without signalling the addition) what he takes to be its source into his own translation of Debord's list (Brown 2007). Brown traces it to Papaioannou, perhaps because all internet searches lead to that source, and perhaps also because Papaioannou himself neglects to provide a reference within his own text. It may however be the case that Debord found the quotation in Papaioannou's book, as it was at the time the only French translation of these lectures (Kelly 1992, p.73). As noted above, thanks are due to John McHale for his assistance in tracing this quotation.

[47]   Papaioannou in Hegel 1965, p.12

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which the subject realises himself in losing himself, becoming other in order to become truly himself [*pour devenir la vérité de lui-même*]";[48] hence also the sense in which the spectacle – insofar as it maintains the separation of thought and practice – was said to constitute an "abandonment of any history founded in historical time".[49] As with Hegel's philosophical system, the spectacle is a mere image of the real unity of thought and practice afforded by Situationist praxis.

This also brings us back to the issues of contingency and strategy described in the thesis' introduction. The realisation of art as temporal experience gave rise to a sense in which time itself was to become "playful in character",[50] and with this notion of the ludic we also have the strategic: for moving with time, as we'll see in chapter eight, involves the negotiation of chance. In an unpublished note on chance, written in 1957, Debord states that "In known conditions the role of chance is conservative"; yet he maintains that all "progress, all creation, is the organization of *new conditions of chance*".[51] Thus in order to be truly ludic Situationist practice would need to constantly create, negotiate and then create again a succession of new fields of chance. Each constructed situation, in other words, would involve contingency, rendering Situationist subjectivity a historical and strategic project.

Yet whilst we can see the beginnings of some of the characteristic themes of Debord's Hegelian Marxism here – and I'll develop that contention in chapter three, when we look at the situation in greater detail – we can also see the roots of the theory of spectacle's problems. As I've indicated, one could suggest that this concern with the separation of artworks from their observers served as the paradigm for a society marked by an equally redundant separation from its own agency; as a result, one can find a basis here for the theory of spectacle's problematic over-emphasis on the alienation of subjective consciousness, and thereby for its consequent denigration of the alienation of objective activity within the wage-relation. These artistic and cultural themes can also be seen to inform the romanticisation of political struggle: for insofar as they accord something akin to the sublime or the absolute to the passage of time (e.g. Debord's comments on accessing "a terrible and magnificent peace, the true taste of the passage of time"),[52] political struggle deemed to move in step with that time takes on the attributes of an almost theological force.

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48 Debord 1995, p.115-6, translation altered; 2006, p.835
49 Debord 1995, p.114; 2006, p.834
50 Debord 1995, p.116; 2006, p.836
51 Debord 2006, p.296
52 Debord 2004b, pp. 31; 2006, p.1669

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The aesthetic aspects of Debord's views on time will be discussed in chapter eight, and I'll return to the contention that the theory of spectacle's problems can be traced to these early, cultural roots in a moment. First however I'll offer some further comments on the S.I.'s rejection of traditional art, and on the group's turn towards Marxist theory.

Socialisme ou Barbarie and the Turn towards Marx

Although always keen to maintain the international dimension of the S.I., Debord and the French section quickly rose to prominence and established Paris as the group's hub. Debord's ideas consequently gained ground, and members of the group who insisted on continuing to work within the traditional plastic arts came to be increasingly sidelined. This culminated in the split of 1962, in which the S.I.'s primarily Scandinavian artists (the so-called 'Nashists', named after the Danish Situationist Jørgen Nash) were ousted. The break was prompted by Vaneigem's opening address to the S.I.'s fifth conference in Gothenburg, held in August 1961, in which he included the following, deliberately provocative assertions:

The point is not to elaborate a spectacle of refusal but to refuse the spectacle. In order for their elaboration to be artistic in the new and authentic sense defined by the S.I., the elements of the destruction of the spectacle must precisely cease to be works of art. There is no such thing as *Situationism*, or a Situationist work of art, and no advantage to [being] a spectacular Situationist. Once and for all.[53]

To continue to produce art was to perpetuate decomposition, and to reduce the Situationists' revolutionary project to a mere spectacle of itself. Upon returning from the Gothenburg conference, and prior to the expulsion of the 'Nashists', Debord, Kotányi and Vaneigem formulated the S.I.'s unpublished 'Hamburg Theses' whilst on a *dérive* through "a series of randomly chosen bars in Hamburg."[54] These theses would seem to summarise many of the claims advanced above: for according to Debord in 1989, the theses could be encapsulated in a single sentence: "The S.I. must now realise philosophy".[55] Debord's comments on that conclusion are however worth quoting in full. The theses signified, he claimed, that:

...from that moment [onwards], one could no longer accord the least importance to the ideas of any of the revolutionary groups that continued to subsist, in as much as they were inheritors of the old movement for social emancipation which had been annihilated [*anéanti*] in the first half of the century; and that one

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[53] S.I. 2006, p.115, translation altered; 1997, p.266-7
[54] S.I. 1997, p.703
[55] S.I. 1997, p.703

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could therefore only count on the S.I. to begin another era of contestation, by renewing all the bases of departure, constituted in the 1840's, from which such groups had emerged. This point did not imply the rupture that would follow with the artistic 'right' [wing] of the S.I., but rendered it extremely probable. One can thus recognise that the 'Hamburg Theses' marked the end, for the S.I., of its first era – the search for a genuinely new artistic terrain (1957-61); they also fixed the point of departure of the operation which led to the movement of May 1968, and what came after.[56]

Consequently, and with the expulsion and departure of those Situationist factions that failed to fully accept art's obsolescence, the themes that I've sought to highlight within the S.I.'s early years – i.e. the concern with the separation of art from life, and the desire to supersede that separation in praxis – came to the fore, leading to the development of an explicitly revolutionary stance (Dauvé puts this well: "Previously the most lucid artists had wanted to break the separation between *art* and *life*: the S.I. raised this demand to a higher level in their desire to abolish the distance between *life* and *revolution*.")[57] The return to an early and Hegelian Marx, already evident in the S.I.'s early years, would now become increasingly explicit.

These themes have led some, such as Home, to bemoan the split of 1962 as marking the eclipse of the more interesting aspects of the Situationist project by Debord's ascendant 'specto-situationism' (Home's own term, named after the theory of spectacle).[58] I take the opposite view: the split marks the S.I.'s turn towards greater theoretical depth and clarity, and thus towards a more sophisticated and political stance.

A drift towards the latter position can however be easily identified in the years leading up the split. Debord had been aware of the importance of figures such as Georg Lukács and Lucien Goldmann since 1959,[59] and in 1960 he begun his short-lived friendship with Lefebvre (discussed in the following chapter). Debord also engaged in an even briefer affiliation with Socialisme ou Barbarie (S ou B) between the end of 1960 and May 1961; this despite the S.I.'s prohibition of simultaneous membership of other groups,[60] and indeed despite the hostile attitude that he'd once held towards S ou B.[61] The reason that Debord gave for resigning from S ou B was simply that he didn't

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[56] S.I. p.703
[57] Dauvé 1979
[58] See Home 1991 and 1996
[59] In a letter to Jorn of July 1959, Debord encloses an article by Lucien Goldmann on 'Reification' which had been published in *Les Temps Moderne*s, and advises him to address both this and Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* in a pamphlet on value that Jorn was then producing. "Lukács," Debord remarks, "is becoming very fashionable here" (Debord 2009, p.264). *History and Class Consciousness* would not however receive a full French translation until the following year.
[60] Khayati, who resigned in 1969, would later be attacked for his dual membership of the S.I. and the Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (S.I. 2003, p.84; Debord 2006, p.1136; see also Gray 1998, p.132, and Dauvé 1979).
[61] In a letter of 1958 he refers to them as "mechanistic to a frightening extent" (Debord 2009, p.152); his views had however mellowed by 1959: the departure of Claude Lefort (who would later be attacked in the pages of *Internationale Situationniste*) and "the rebel wing of the anti-organisationalists" within S

"feel up to the task"; he remarked, somewhat ironically, that "it must be very tiring organising a revolutionary organisation".[62] Yet however tenuous his membership may have been, it was symptomatic of – and indeed informed by – his own and the S.I.'s increasingly militant and theoretical stance.

The influence exerted by S ou B on Debord's developing theory of spectacle will be described in part two, but suffice it to say here that the group sought to investigate the modernisation of capitalism and the new conditions of militant struggle, and that they were particularly concerned with addressing Marxism's own ability to function as a repressive ideology. For Castoriadis, the group's primary theorist, classical Marxist economics were no longer able to explain contemporary capitalism, and tended to accord primacy to impersonal, abstract economic 'laws' rather than to subjective autonomy; a denigration of the individual that corresponded, in their view, to the new primary contradiction of modern capitalism itself. Modern capitalism, for Castoriadis, was said to rely on reducing individuals to "mere order-takers" in production, yet also on cultivating and satisfying their needs and desires in consumption.[63] The resultant alienation that this engendered was to lead not towards greater equality within the existing mode of production and distribution, but rather towards a challenge levelled at the entire mode of contemporary life. The potential was there, according to Castoriadis, for "a *total* movement, concerned with all that men do in society, and with their real daily lives."[64] One can of course see clear links to Debord and the S.I.'s account here, as will be discussed in chapter five.

Art and Spectacle

When discussing religious art in the *Phenomenology* Hegel discusses Greek tragic drama, and comments on what he refers to as the "spectator-consciousness"[65] of the tragic chorus. For Hegel, the chorus is an on-stage representation of the drama's audience, and it constitutes an echo, higher up the *Phenomenology*'s 'spiral', of the unhappy consciousness' separation from its own true essence: for the chorus is separate from its own negative nature, i.e. from the Concept, which takes the form of the fate and necessity that unfolds 'behind' the narrative of the play. As the *Phenomenology*

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ou B was said to have led to "progress" within its eponymous journal (Debord 2009, p.265).
[62] Hussey 2002, p.163; see also Guillaume 1995
[63] Castoriadis 1974
[64] Castoriadis 1974
[65] Hegel 1977, p.445

progresses, this self-separation is superseded by the emergence of a more complete form of self-consciousness: the 'absolute knowing' attained through a philosophy able to explain the rationale and necessity that had eluded the chorus.

With Hegel, consciousness is thus required to get beyond artistic representation, and so too with Debord. Yet as we've seen, doing so for Debord entails moving beyond a society that echoes Hegel's own view of historical resolution: for Hegel's end of art is refigured as decomposition, a stage located prior to the realisation of art and philosophy in lived historical time. Doing away with representation, in this sense, entailed overcoming the separation of subject and object in favour of their unity in praxis. Hence my claim that these early concerns with art greatly inform Debord's later theory of spectacle, which replaces the separation of the artistic observer from the contemplated art object with that of the human subject from his or her life. The fact that the theory of spectacle arose from concerns with the separation of art and culture underlies the problematic abstraction that I complained of in the thesis' general introduction: for taking that separated, contemplative detachment as the template for a theory of modern capitalism led to an over-emphasis on the latter's subjective effects, i.e. on the alienation of individual consciousness. As a result, the objective causes of that alienation are overlooked, and this leads to the denigration of the importance of capitalist social relations *per se*, and thus to the reduction of the proletariat to a classless abstraction.

It thus also informs the theory of spectacle's flattening and generalisation of social practice. If all aspects of social life are as alienated and commodified as every other, then they are all equivalent (as noted, spectacular time "manifests nothing in its effective reality aside from its exchangeability"),[66] meaning that the primary importance of capital's basis in production came to be obscured by an interest in life as a whole, or rather the 'everyday'. It is to the latter that we'll now turn in chapter three. However, and whilst prefiguring the claims that will be made in part, it can be noted here that this can perhaps be seen as tantamount to a shift in focus from production to the purportedly more superficial sphere of consumption: to a critique that deals with capital's forms primarily in terms of the ways "in which they appear on the surface of society"[67] (Marx). I'll suggest later that this can be seen to pertain to the manner in which the theory of spectacle employs Marx's concepts and categories whilst moving away from the bearing that they originally had upon capital's source, mechanics and potential vulnerabilities.

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[66] Debord 1995, p.110; 2006, p.831
[67] Marx 1981, p.117

Chapter Three: The Everyday and the Absolute

Tragedy and the Everyday

As indicated in chapter two, by the early 1960's the S.I. had taken up an increasingly politicised and theoretical stance that involved a more explicit concern with modern life as a whole. Their desire to unify and art and lived experience, together with their rejection of traditional, 'orthodox' Marxisms, led them to turn towards the everyday rather than to the factory: for as the 'new' poverty that they identified ultimately stemmed from the deprivation of meaning rather than means of subsistence, the arena in which it would be contested would be life as a whole. In pursuing these issues here I'll make some further comments on the S.I.'s debts to existential philosophy and to the work of Henri Lefebvre, which will lead towards a more involved account of the constructed situation. Once again, tragedy will be used here as a useful means of establishing links within this material.

For Debord in 1961, the triviality of everyday life and the individual subject's inability to change it beyond the bounds set by social norms constituted a "scandalous poverty",[1] and one that necessitated a "reinvention of revolution".[2] Three years earlier, and in the very first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, Debord had stated that "There can be no freely spent time until we possess the modern tools for the construction of everyday life",[3] and in this respect it can be seen that the S.I.'s concern with everyday life followed directly from the premise of constructing situations, i.e. the conscious direction of one's own time. It's thus perhaps unsurprising that one can find references to the everyday within Debord's work from as early as 1953;[4] long before his friendship with Lefebvre in the early 1960's (the first volume of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* was however published in 1947). Yet whilst this concern with the everyday thus followed directly from the post-Surrealist aim of uniting art and life – and whilst it would also become inflected with the move away from an orthodox focus on production, labour and the factory described above –
I would suggest that it was also informed by the general ambiance of existential philosophy, particularly as regards the latter's concerns with human finitude and the

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[1]   S.I. 2006, p.92; Debord 2006, p.574
[2]   S.I. 2006, p.94; Debord 2006, p.577
[3]   S.I. 2006, p.53; 1997, p.21
[4]   Debord 2006, p.108

need to act within time.

The manner in which I'll approach that connection here can be illustrated by way of reference to Lukács' own early views on the everyday. Prior to his own explicit turn towards Marxist theory in the early 1920's, Lukács adopted a comparatively romantic opposition to present society. This is particularly evident in his *Soul and Form* of 1910, in which he talks of fleeting moments of authenticity within everyday life, presenting them as intimations of the 'absolute': life within present society, he claims there, "is always unreal, always impossible," until "suddenly there is a gleam, a lightning that illuminates the banal paths of empirical life: something disturbing and seductive, dangerous and surprising; the accident, the great moment, the miracle; an enrichment and a confusion."[5] Such moments, Lukács adds, "cannot last, [as] no one would be able to bear it... One has to fall back into numbness."[6] There's clearly a sense of tragedy here, in the traditional sense of the term (as Löwy puts it, "society," for the early Lukács, is "the arena of a tragic conflict between the desire for personal fulfilment and reified objective reality"):[7] a tragedy that pertains to the inaccessibility of an ineffable, unattainable absolute. I would suggest that this can be related to the themes described in chapters one and two as follows.

We've seen Bataille's contention that Hegelian philosophy presents a 'tragic spectacle' that merely 'stages' the resolution and rationalisation of a negativity that is inherently resistant to any such synthesis; we've also looked at the work of others who viewed the Hegelian absolute as an unwarranted conclusion, forced upon an otherwise open, negative process. However, I've also argued that with Debord that which Hegel describes as an end is in fact an ideal, philosophical depiction of a real historical beginning. On this view, Hegelian philosophy would not constitute a 'tragic spectacle' because of the imposition of a state of unity: rather, it would be the real unity of subject and object (as afforded by praxis) that would constitute the dangerous 'Dionysian' element. If then Hegelianism can be taken to be 'tragic' because it safely depicts such a unity whilst maintaining its real absence, then one could also contend that accounts arguing for the necessity of the continual deferral of subject-object unity and totality are themselves 'tragic' for the same reason, insofar as they present philosophies that stage a safe, aimless negativity that precludes its real instantiation. The unhappy consciousness discussed in chapter one would then not be a figure of potential emancipation, but rather

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[5]   Lukács 2009, p.176
[6]   Lukács 2009, p.176
[7]   Löwy 1979, p.98

of what Debord referred to in his 1978 film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* as "this restless and exitless present".[8] For example: whilst the young Lukács' unattainable absolute serves to illuminate the inadequacies of the everyday, its very inaccessibility undermines its instantiation within the process of transforming such a life (this would be rectified in his later work: in *History and Class Consciousness*, the Party – the embodiment of subject-object unity – effectively becomes a conduit between that distant absolute and the proletariat).[9] This can also be seen to pertain to aspects of existentialism, particularly to that of Sartre, for whom the for-itself's doomed attempt to become in-and-for-itself – an attempt that he refers to as the impossible project of becoming God, and of thus attaining the absolute – entails, as noted earlier, an explicit association with the Hegelian unhappy consciousness.[10] I'll claim below that something similar can be discerned in Lefebvre's theory of 'moments', which I'll use as a means of developing a more involved account of the constructed situation. In showing that Lefebvre's 'moments' echo the young Lukács' fleeting moments of authenticity, I'll aim to develop my earlier contentions regarding the status of time and the absolute in Debord's account.

Existentialism and the Realisation of Philosophy

Although Debord and the S.I.'s concerns with time and situations bring Heidegger to mind, there are very few direct references to his work within the pages of *Internationale Situationniste*, or indeed in Debord's broader oeuvre. One can certainly find echoes of his work, albeit seemingly accidental ones (such as the loss of authenticity that arises when Dasein "lets itself be carried along by the looks of the world"),[11] but Heidegger's relevance here lies largely in his impact upon the intellectual

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8   Debord 2003, p.165; 2006, p.1371
9   A point also made by Löwy (1979).
10   For Sartre, "The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it (Sartre 2003, p.114): it surpasses its present self towards its future self, but in doing so it continually becomes other. Like the unhappy consciousness, it continually strives towards a full resolution that is its own true self, but which it cannot attain. The for-itself is thus continually denied the necessity that would come from being its own foundation, and remains forever contingent and 'unjustified'. It desires to become "in-itself-for-itself" but cannot do so; consequently, "the best way to conceive of the fundamental project of human reality is to say that man is the being whose project is to be God" (Sartre 2003, p.587). This is an impossible project: consciousness' constant self-separation means that it can only be the foundation of its own nothingness. The famous statement that "man is a useless passion" (Sartre 2003, p.636) stems from this idea, and is an inversion of the passion of Christ: the individual sacrifices him or herself in the hope that God might be born, but to no avail.
11   Heidegger 1962, p.216

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ambiance of the time, and as the primary source of the concept of the existential 'situation'. Sartre (who also makes much of the 'look' in *Being and Nothingness*) is however a much more obvious influence, albeit one that was rejected in the strongest terms: he was variously described by Debord and the S.I. as a purveyor of "mistakes, lies and stupidity"[12]; a "nullity", "puffed up by the various authorities that are so satisfied with him";[13] a consumer and purveyor of "Stalinist illusions",[14] and as one of the prime "celebrities of unintelligence".[15] Yet as was the case with their similarly vituperative relation to Breton, the S.I. seem to have owed rather more to Sartre than they may have wanted to admit.

In Heidegger's usage, the situation is the network of relations with and within the world that Dasein 'discloses' through orienting itself towards its own future death, thereby giving meaning to itself and to its present context. Sartre's own version of the situation is similar, insofar as it denotes the context that the for-itself is located within, and which emerges through the temporality that arises from its own nothingness. Revealed not by attending to death *per se* but rather by the projects and aims that the individual posits beyond the present moment, the Sartrean situation is the universal condition of consciousness: we are always "immediately 'in situation'",[16] and our consciousness always "arises in situation".[17] Debord and the S.I. can be seen to have adopted this view to an extent, and as we'll see in a moment they certainly took on aspects of the temporality that informs it. Yet for them it implied the themes of realising art and philosophy described in chapter two: "since individuals are defined by their situation," they wrote, "they need the power to create situations worthy of their desires".[18] Consequently, they would "replace existential passivity with the construction of moments of life": alluding to Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* they claimed that whilst "philosophers and artists have only interpreted situations; the point now is to transform them".[19] Insofar as this would entail self-determination through the conscious creation of lived experience, there is perhaps a sense in which the S.I.'s project constituted an attempt to realise that which Sartre viewed as the doomed attempt to become God (a point that could be seen to be in keeping with Debord's Feuerbachian notions of

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[12] S.I. 2006, p.134; 1997, p.301
[13] S.I. 2006, p.235; 1997, p.488
[14] S.I. 2006, p.289; 1997, p.572
[15] S.I. 2006, p.413; 1966
[16] Sartre 2003, p.63
[17] Sartre 2003, p.115
[18] S.I. 2006, p.178; 1997, p.388
[19] S.I. 2006, p.178, translation altered; 1997, p.388

alienation: for "God," we remember, is "the mirror of man").[20]

As the allusion above to the *Theses on Feuerbach* indicates, it's possible to suggest that the influence of existential thought on Debord and the S.I. was analogous in some respects to that of Hegel on Marx. Hegel, for Debord, grasps what the modern age is beginning to become capable of, but does so in an alienated, separate form that reflects that era's shortcomings[21] (i.e. a 'contemplative' perspective on "a world that *made itself*",[22] stemming from the rise of capitalism), and which thus required Marx and the Young Hegelians to reconfigure it as praxis; likewise, existentialism – particularly that of Sartre – implied the conscious construction of one's own life, but did so in a manner that affirmed modern conditions.[23] The existential subject's disconnection from its factical existence recalls the alienation and separation of spectatorship: for if the investigation of 'being' entails that the negative characteristics of the subject are rooted in an ontology that prevents subject-object unity (as in Sartre, according to Dunayevskaya),[24] or if subject is effectively reduced to object (as Adorno claims is the case with Heidegger),[25] then angst, anguish, alienation and anxiety are grounded in the nature of being itself, and are thereby rendered eternal characteristics of human existence.[26] Yet existential philosophy was nonetheless credited with having contributed to the new nexus of revolutionary potential constituted by the spectacular present. In 1964 the S.I. grouped a "poor Heidegger!" and a "poor Sartre!" together with an equally 'poor' Barthes, Cardan, Lefebvre and Lukács, declaring that each offered only

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[20] Feuerbach 1989, p.63

[21] This point is also made by Korsch (1946), Lukács (1971, p.77), and Hyppolite (1969, p.73).

[22] Debord 1995, p.49; 2006, p.793, emphasis in the original

[23] Vaneigem 2003, p.48

[24] "One would have thought that Sartre, who returned to a work of philosophical rigour [with his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*] after he had become, or at least was in the process of becoming, an adherent or Marx's historical materialism, would at least in theory attempt to end the bifurcation between subject and object [which characterised *Being and Nothingness*], would concretise his project of 'going beyond' as the Subject appropriating objectivity, not *vice versa*" (Dunayevskaya 2002, p.203).

[25] For Adorno, Heidegger's supersession of the subject-object distinction takes 'being' as a primal object to which subjectivity is reduced. This not only removes the difference required for critique, but consecrates a world marked by commodity fetishism: "if men no longer had to equate themselves with things, they would [not] need...an invariant picture of themselves, after the model of things" (Adorno 1973, p.96) Lukács makes a similar point: "*Sein und Zeit* is...merely a document of the day showing how a class felt and thought, and not an 'ontological' disclosure of ultimate truth" (Lukács 1973).

[26] Remembering the links between the unhappy consciousness and Sartrean existentialism, this point can perhaps be illustrated with the following comparison. Debord makes the following remarks on the fleeting satisfactions of consumption: "Each and every new product represents the hope for a dazzling short-cut to the long-awaited promised land of total consumption", but as soon as it is purchased "its essential poverty stands revealed", and another is "assigned to supply the system with its justification" (Debord 1995, p.45, translation altered; 2006, p.790). After having likened consciousness to a donkey following a carrot and pulling a cart behind it, Sartre writes that "we run after a possible which our very running causes to appear, which is nothing but our running itself, and which thereby is by definition out of reach" (Sartre 2003, p.225).

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"caricatural fragments of the innovating ideas that can simultaneously comprehend and contest the totality of our era" (this list was followed by a dismissive "tics, tics and tics";[27] a reference to Lautréamont[28] that perhaps also illustrates the correspondence between the 'realisation' of philosophy and that of art and poetry).

Time is particularly important here, as Debord's claim that "man – that 'negative being who is to the extent that he abolishes being' – is one with time"[29] not only echoes the aspects of French Hegelianism discussed in chapter one, but also Sartre's philosophy (which was of course itself influenced by Hegel).[30] Sartre for example talks of the "nihilating structure of temporality",[31] and presents the subject as perpetually engaged in a process of negation and self-realisation (as De Beauvoir puts it: "between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when he ['man'] exists is nothing").[32] However, with Sartre this temporal process is almost an affliction: for although this negativity is a means of 'transcendence', it can only ever deliver the individual into further separation, ambiguity and angst. A stable identity between subject and object is ruled out, as indeed is that between consciousness and itself, as Sartre does away with Hegel's presentation of negativity as intrinsic to the being of the world: instead, negativity – or rather nothingness – becomes the sole preserve of consciousness, resulting in a timeless positivity on the one hand (world) and a self-negating process on the other (consciousness).[33] As self-identity cannot be attained, consciousness cannot establish its own foundation despite its compulsions to do so (for Sartre all of the values that we posit are at root our own unattainable self-identity),[34] hence the impossible project of becoming God noted above. Denied this foundation, human existence is thus forever contingent, haunted by a necessity that eludes it (as is the unhappy consciousness). Something rather similar can perhaps be discerned in the structure of authentic Dasein. Where for Sartre individuals are rendered perpetually contingent by virtue of the inescapable 'facticity' of their existence, i.e. their status as unjustifiable brute facts within the world, Heidegger can be seen to present Dasein's

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27 S.I. 2006, p.176; 1997, p.368
28 Knabb in S.I. 2006, p.483; Cf. Lautréamont 1994, p.244
29 Debord 1995, p.92; 2006, p.820
30 For a technical discussion of *Being and Nothingness*' debts to Hegel's *Logic* see Hartmann 1966; for further comments on the links between Sartre and Hegel see Butler 1999 and Bernstein 1999.
31 Sartre 2003, p.58
32 De Beauvoir 1976, p.7
33 "The self can not be a property of being-in-itself" (Sartre 2003, p.100). Hartmann writes that "What Sartre rejects is, in Hegelian terminology, the 'ingredient of negation in being'" (Hartmann 1966, pp.36-7).
34 Sartre 2003, pp.117-8

authentic being as contingent upon its own future death.[35] In order to be authentic, Dasein must orient itself towards its own death, as towards the totality of its own being, and thereby "take over in its thrownness that entity which it is itself"[36] by choosing itself as the "hero"[37] of its own totality; and although Heidegger maintains that "death is a way to be",[38] Dasein would thus seem to be grounded in its own as-yet unattained future. The link to the Hegelian themes set out above is more tenuous here than is the case with Sartre,[39] but this structure is nonetheless reminiscent of the unhappy consciousness' contingency upon and consequent pursuit of its own true, distant self.

These existential concerns with finitude thus recall aspects of the endless negativity and deferral of final synthesis that we discussed earlier in relation to the 'closure' of the Hegelian system; and rather than constituting a source of endless transgression and excession, as Bataille and Breton advocated, it seems here to result in political ambivalence (for Sartre, one is "condemned"[40] to freedom, and does not choose it; Lukács remarks that "this cynical view that there are no unfree acts has significant resemblance to the view that there are no free acts").[41] The problem lies in the difficulty of establishing necessary grounds or conditions for political action: a difficulty that Sartre struggled with from *Being and Nothingness*' seemingly nihilistic ontology onwards, and which Heidegger's own trajectory arguably exemplified. The latter's emphasis on 'home' and 'dwelling' invites obvious and frequently debated associations, and Sartre's series of engagements with ethics and attempts to link the universality of Marxist politics to his seemingly individualist philosophy raise a number of problems.[42] De Beauvoir's own attempt to take up the challenge set by *Being and*

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[35] The following remarks are indebted to Dr. Marie Morgan, who offered helpful suggestions on the contingency of Dasein.
[36] Heidegger 1962, p.434
[37] Heidegger 1962, p.437
[38] Heidegger 1962, p.289
[39] We might however recall here Koyré's views on the priority of the future over the past; his 'Hegel à Iéna' was written in 1934, seven years after the appearance of *Being and Time*.
[40] Sartre 2003, p.506
[41] Lukács 1973
[42] *Being and Nothingness* famously claimed that "the slave in chains is as free as his master" (Sartre 2003, p.570; perhaps an allusion to Hegel's equally famous comments on the indifference of stoicism: Hegel 1977, p.121); yet if all situations are equal in terms of the freedom that they afford, then there is no reason to change them. In his later *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre pursued the idea that the fruitless pursuit of becoming God might be abandoned, and that the inevitable freedom that prompts that pursuit might itself be taken as an absolute idea. He however offers little sense of what form this might take (Anderson 1993, p.64). *Existentialism and Humanism* presents the almost Kantian claim that in acting "I am creating an image of man as I would have him be" (Sartre 1973, p.30), which seems to offer little in response to the charge of relativism. The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* shows Sartre move more explicitly towards Marxism, but considers terror as a means of maintaining group unity (this point is perhaps interesting in relation to the S.I.'s views on Sartre's comments on the U.S.S.R.: see their 'Concerning an Imbecile' in the tenth issue of *Internationale Situationniste*).

Nothingness is alarmingly pragmatic at times, but seemingly commensurable with present society,[43] and whilst Debord clearly admired Kierkegaard's writing[44] the emphasis placed by the latter on knowing oneself through God once again implies orientation towards a transcendent beyond.[45] Despite these attempts at solutions, it remains the case that the emphasis placed here on the contingency of the acting, situational subject can lead towards a relativism that is perhaps best exemplified by Sartre's remark that "all human activities are equivalent," and that it thus "amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations";[46] for "nothing," he claims, "absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value. ...I am unjustifiable".[47]

In other words, and despite its purportedly radical and transgressive credentials, the rejection or deferral of resolution and synthesis in favour of a more 'open' notion of negativity – exemplified here by existentialism's concerns with ambiguity, contingency and open totality – can be seen to provide inadequate grounds for a political project (hence, perhaps, Debord and the S.I.'s description of Sartrean thought as "an intellectual dead end").[48] I would suggest that Debord's re-configuration of the Hegelian absolute as the grounds of historical action is important in this regard, as it can be seen to entail necessary conditions for action and freedom, i.e. those that allow the self-determinate subject-object unity of Situationist activity. I'll now move towards developing that

Anderson's research on Sartre's unfinished later ethics presents an almost Hegelian position: all needs and values are said to stem from the 'integral man', which is effectively a Hegelian universal that lies present, however implicitly, within existing norms and morals. I as a moral individual should therefore recognise that my ends are those of all others, as they lie in the satisfaction of universal need (Anderson 1993, p.122).

[43] For De Beauvoir, "in order to win an urgent victory, one has to give up the idea, at least temporarily, of serving certain valid causes; one may even be brought to the point of fighting against them" (De Beauvoir 1976, p.98); for "love", as she puts it, "authorises severities which are not granted to indifference" (De Beauvoir 1976, p.137). Yet in the absence of further political or economic qualifications her claim that the freedom of all rests on that of the individual (which chimes with that of Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*) would seem quite commensurable with some strands of contemporary political economy, which effectively define freedom in terms of market choice: the pursuit of capitalism means more products, thus more freedom for all, etc. This is evidenced in the problematic arguments advanced by Ernesto Screpanti, whose presentation of 'libertarian communism' entails a similar notion of market choice and an equally dubious attempt to quantify freedom. Some aspects of his account are however reminiscent of existential concerns (Screpanti 2007; see also Bunyard 2011). In connection to this notion of a quantified freedom one could also think here of the recent arguments advanced within the anarchist and libertarian communist milieus for a 'participatory economy'; see Libcom and The Project for a Participatory Society 2009 for a critical overview.

[44] Debord 1995, p.145; 2006, p.854

[45] For Kierkegaard, in relating itself to itself and in wanting to be itself, the self is grounded transparently in the power that established it" (2004, p.165). This however means wanting to be oneself whilst believing oneself to be created by a remote God in whose existence one can only have faith.

[46] Sartre 2003, pp. 646-7

[47] Sartre 2003, p.62

[48] S.I. 2006, p.233; 1997, p.487

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suggestion by way of reference to the connection and differences between the S.I.'s situations and Lefebvre's theory of 'moments', and in doing so I'll contend that one can find the beginnings of Debord's later Hegelian Marxist notions of agency within the structure of the constructed situation. Lefebvre's account is particularly apposite here by virtue of the characteristics ascribed to it in the thesis' general introduction: Lefebvre presents the goal of historical action, and indeed the instances of genuine, authentic experience that he holds to be accessed by the 'moment', in terms of the 'absolute'; an absolute, however, that would seem to be perpetually receding, and which can never be fully grasped. As signalled above, this is close to the moments of authenticity described by the young Lukács: for according to Lefebvre, "the tragic is omnipresent within the genuine moment",[49] insofar as the 'absolute' that it accesses is inherently transitory; yet where the moment is a finite instance within time, Debord and the S.I.'s situations were intended to establish the conditions for moving *with* time.

Lefebvre and the 'Moment'

Much ink has been spilt over the details of Lefebvre's relationship with Debord (it was "a love story that ended badly, very badly",[50] according to Lefebvre), so suffice it to say here that the primary bone of contention lay in mutual accusations of plagiarism over a set of theses on the Paris commune. To an extent, the question of Lefebvre's influence can perhaps be approached through that of the date when they actually met: Lefebvre, eager to claim influence, stated that their friendship began in 1957 (the same year that the S.I. was founded);[51] Hussey holds that they met in 1958;[52] Kaufmann claims that their meeting did not take place until 1960.[53] The latter claim is persuasive, and can be backed up by evidence within Debord's correspondence.[54]

There was however certainly common ground between them. Between 1960 and

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[49]   Lefebvre 2008b, p.352
[50]   Ross 2004, p.268
[51]   Ross 2004, p.267
[52]   Hussey 2002, p.138 and pp.174-6.
[53]   Kaufmann 2006, p.167
[54]   Lefebvre wrote to Debord in January 1960, saying that "I've been wanting to meet you since the beginning of your journal" (the journal first appeared in 1958, so Lefebvre's claim that they met in 1957 is immediately suspect). the following month, Debord noted in a letter to a fellow Situationist that aspects of Lefebvre's work were "very interesting; and close to us", but added that "I haven't seen him yet" (Debord 2009, p.331; see also Kaufmann 2006, p.167). Letters sent by Debord within the S.I. prior to 1960 indicate that he was excited by the similarities between Lefebvre's work and the Situationist project, but there is no prior reference to any personal meeting.

1962 mutual influence clearly took place,[55] and prior to their meeting they would seem to have been moving in the same direction. Lefebvre's concern with the everyday was greatly informed by his reconfiguration of Marxism as a form of sociology (Marxism, he claimed in his first *Critique*, is "the scientific knowledge of the proletariat";[56] it therefore "describes and analyses the everyday life of society", and is as a result "a critical knowledge of everyday life").[57] As with the S.I., the everyday for Lefebvre was both the locus and the stakes of the revolutionary project.

Lefebvre first described the 'moment' in 1959's *La Somme et le Reste*, and gave it greater clarity (notably during his friendship with Debord) in the second volume of his *Critique* (1961). He himself described the distinction between the moment and the S.I.'s constructed situation as follows:

They [the S.I.] more or less said to me..."what you call 'moments' we call 'situations', but we're taking it further than you. You accept as 'moments' everything that has occurred in the course of history: love, poetry, thought. We want to create new moments.[58]

This perhaps illustrates the sense in which Lefebvre, in the S.I.'s view, had in effect remained on the same level as Sartre's philosophical 'interpretation' of situations, and had fallen short of the task of actualising them in transforming the world. For example, in the very first issue of *Internationale Situationniste* (1958), and whilst referencing Lefebvre's 'Vers un Romantisme Révolutionnaire' (1957)[59] – a text that called for a Marxism able to revitalise the cultural as well as the economic spheres of society – Debord argued that Lefebvre's position simply indicated the need for revolutionary cultural transformation, and failed to investigate what forms it might actually take. Lefebvre, in other words, had failed to identify the importance of realising art.[60] This is perhaps understandable: given that the theory of moments seems intended to function as a form of immanent critique it is perhaps unsurprising that it merely indicates in negative the necessity and desire for an alternative society.[61] Yet for the S.I.,

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[55] For Jappe, Debord's 'Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life' (a text that was famously delivered via a tape recorder in a suitcase to Lefebvre's Group for Research on Everyday Life) and the second volume of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, both of which appeared in 1961, "correspond almost word for word" (Jappe 1999, p.75).

[56] Lefebvre 2008a, p.147

[57] Lefebvre 2008a, p.148

[58] Ross 2004, p.271

[59] A text that was written with Goldmann, Roy and Tzara, and published in *Nouvelle Revue Française* #59.

[60] A later, post-Situationist Lefebvre would however argue that "The transformation of the world is not only a realisation of philosophy but a realisation of art" (Quoted in Roberts 2006, p.68).

[61] The theory of moments "must be capable of offering a window on supersession, and of demonstrating how we might resolve the age-old conflict between the everyday and tragedy, and between triviality

who were concerned with researching and actualising a radically different future, Lefebvre had simply demonstrated the need for that future by focussing on the present.

Central to this is the finite, fleeting and thus 'tragic' character of the moment, and its relation to Lefebvre's notion of the "possible/impossible".[62] This concept refers to the sense in which the present that declares a revolutionary future to be impossible also makes that future necessary, and thus possible. However, for Debord, this meant that Lefebvre essentially affirms the present: rather than pursuing "profound cultural modification", Lefebvre had instead developed a "consciousness of the possible-impossible (still too remote), which can be expressed in any sort of form within the framework of cultural decomposition."[63] Thus where Debord and the S.I. sought to build a path towards that future from within the present, Lefebvre – in their view – was content to merely identify its necessity. I would suggest that this relates to the distinction between the forms of the 'absolute' accessed in their accounts. Where Lefebvre addresses tragic, fleeting instances of meaning and significance within the present – 'absolute' moments that collapse as soon as they arise – Debord and the S.I. can, on my reading (and in keeping with the temporality of the absolute described via Hyppolite in chapter one), be seen to present the absolute as a communion with time. The absolute thereby forms the grounds of historical action rather than its ineffable goal.

The Moment, the Situation and the Absolute

The 'impossible possibility' of the moment pertains to Lefebvre's notion of the 'total man', which I referred to in the thesis' general introduction. The total man was developed in the 1940's as part of a critical response to existentialism: against the allegedly empty, subjective idealism of 'anguished' Sartrean freedom – a freedom so indeterminate as to make any action as valid and viable as any other – Lefebvre posited the goal of a 'total', "'de-alienated' man".[64] This is a figure that denotes complete self-identity: a "living subject-object".[65] Importantly, the figure of the total man emerges via determinate negation in praxis, i.e. from the satisfactions implied by contemporary privations (hence the link to the 'possible/impossible'), and thereby provides direction and political purpose. It's thus an emergent, albeit continually reformulated 'absolute',

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and festival" (Lefebvre 2008b, p.358)
[62] Lefebvre 2008b, p.347
[63] S.I. 2006, p.54, translation altered; 1997, p.21
[64] Lefebvre 1968, p.162
[65] Lefebvre 1968, p.162

and in Lefebvre's view "only the notion or idea of the absolute gives a sense (in other words both a meaning and a direction) to historically acquired knowledge."[66]

However, the total man is himself both possible and impossible, and seems to be just as unreachable as the goal pursued by the unhappy consciousness. Again, I'm drawing from Baugh here, who notes that history for Lefebvre "has an end"[67] – the total man seems to be a definite, finite goal – but that this is a goal that would seem to be continually receding. As we saw in the general introduction, Lefebvre himself states that "the total man is but a figure on a distant horizon...a limit, an idea, and not a historical fact";[68] a "mathematical limit" to which "we are forever drawing nearer but have never reached".[69] The absolute of the total man would thus seem to be perpetually drawing away from the present, and something similar can be found in Lefebvre's 'moments'. Although the latter make contact with this absolute, it remains "ever-sought and ever-inaccessible":[70] for although moments anticipate the coming of the total man, they collapse as soon as they emerge. The moment, Lefebvre explains, "becomes an absolute"[71] because it stands above the triviality of the everyday; yet this renders it "tragic", because in "proclaim[ing] itself to be an absolute, it provokes and defines a determined alienation [from the rest of lived experience]".[72] Furthermore, to live a moment is to "exhaust it as well as to fulfil it",[73] as it is a finite instance in time (moments are "mortal"; they are "born, they live and they pass away").[74] The absolute that it accesses "cannot endure".[75]

Lefebvre does however indicate the need to consciously construct moments ("the moment is constituted by a choice").[76] In order to discuss this, and by extension its distance from Debord and the S.I.'s account, we will be obliged to take up some of Lefebvre's technical terminology; this is for the simple reason that Debord himself uses that terminology when discussing Lefebvre's work. The first terms involved here are the 'tactical' and the 'strategic' (and we might remember here that the second volume of Lefebvre's *Critique*, in which this appears, was written during his friendship with Debord). The everyday, for Lefebvre, is the domain of 'tactics' and 'strategies', as it is

66   Lefebvre 2008a, p.67
67   Baugh 2003, p.68
68   Lefebvre 2008a, p.66
69   Lefebvre 1968, p.109
70   Lefebvre 2008b, p.355
71   Lefebvre 2008b, p.346
72   Lefebvre 2008b, p.347
73   Lefebvre 2008b, p.348
74   Lefebvre 2008b, p.354
75   Lefebvre 2008b, p.345
76   Lefebvre 2008b, p.344

characterised by strategic "projects, decisions, plans for action and for the future".[77] This is closely affiliated to his views on the inevitability of chance within human affairs, and also to the free play that should characterise the future (which he also connects to tragedy: "the tragic is nothing other than gambling in all its breadth and seriousness");[78] points that bear obvious resemblance to Debord's own interest in the strategic and the ludic.[79] Secondly, Lefebvre also uses the concepts of the 'conjunctural' and the 'structural'. The latter corresponds to stability and continuity within the everyday (i.e. forms that repeat or last for a period of time), and the former denotes the links and relations between the various elements that compose a structure: relations that force the change and rupture of structures, and which thereby necessitate their "inclusion in strategies."[80] Thirdly and finally, Lefebvre's moments can be characterised and sorted into 'types' (his own favoured example was 'love').[81] This means that moments tend to correspond to structure, insofar as they are repeated types, whilst the context in which they take place corresponds to the conjunctural. Thus, in short: creating a moment entails engaging strategically with a conjuncture and 'gambling' upon it in the aim of establishing structure in the form of a particular type of moment.

However, whilst Lefebvre's moments were associated with structure, the constructed situation was deliberately less pre-ordained. In an article written one year prior to the appearance of the second volume of Lefebvre's *Critique* the S.I. explained that the constructed situation was "on the path toward a unity of the structural and the conjunctural".[82] It was to be a structure deliberately geared towards chance: "an attempt at structure of (in) the conjunction";[83] a structure that "controls (and favours)...chance instants", and which would thus be "particularized and unrepeateable".[84] Each situation would thus be different. Consequently, for the S.I., Lefebvre was said to be faced with the difficulty of providing a list of his various types of moments, whilst the only

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[77] Lefebvre 2008b, p.106
[78] Lefebvre 2008b, p.137
[79] If the importance of the ludic to Debord is to be taken in relation to the question of Lefebvre's influence, then it is perhaps significant to note that Debord became acquainted with Huizinga's seminal *Homo Ludens* (1938) as early as 1953 (Hussey 2002, pp.74-5). It's particularly relevant to note that Huizinga links play to both warfare (Huizinga 1955, p.89) and poetry (Huizinga 1955, p.132).
[80] Lefebvre 2008b, p.148
[81] "When we [Lefebvre and the S.I.] talked about [the constructed situation and the moment] I always gave as an example – and they would have nothing to do with my example – love" (Ross 2004, p.271).
[82] S.I. 1960; 1997, p.119. See also Debord's letter to Andre Frankin of the 22nd February 1960, which provides preliminary notes for this text (Debord 2009, pp.335-7).
[83] Debord 2009, p.337
[84] S.I. 1960; 1997, pp.118-9

difficulty that they themselves faced lay in "marking [the situation's] precise end"[85] ("What do I want?" asked Vaneigem; "Not a succession of moments but one huge instant").[86] Furthermore, where the moment was a discrete point in time, the situation – though finite, and 'without a future' – was described as a "direction or 'way'".[87] The situation was to be a passage within the "movement of time", and one that contained "its own negation"[88] in that it would evolve into something else. If we now adopt Lefebvre's terminology, we can also add – in keeping with my own earlier claims – that such 'passageways' towards further instances of subject-object unity (i.e. towards further situations) involved a degree of strategic agency, insofar as they would be deliberately open to chance (a point that I alluded to in chapter two when referring to Debord's note on chance of 1957).

The Absolute as the Grounds of Action

It's significant that Debord approved of the manner in which Lefebvre had cast the absolute as characterised by transition and negation. "Lefebvre," he noted, "has revealed many of the fundamental conditions of the new field of action across which a revolutionary culture may now proceed: as when he remarks that the moment tends toward the absolute and its undoing".[89] My suggestion, however, is that where Lefebvre's absolute is a perpetually receding goal – something that slips away every time one tries to grasp it – the self-negation of Debord's own absolute involves the establishment and subsequent re-establishment of the conditions and grounds of historical action.

I noted earlier that Debord avoids the phrase 'subject-object unity'. This is

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85   S.I. 1960; 1997, p.118
86   Vaneigem 1994, p.93. One could perhaps contend that this call for a single moment jars with my claims regarding progression through time. Vaneigem's remark does however reflect his association of revolutionary subjectivity with a kind of sublimity, and I will argue in similar communion with a sublime, absolute time can be found in Debord; the difference being that with the latter there is far more of a sense of finitude, temporal progression and contextual engagement. The S.I., whilst distinguishing themselves from 'diamat' (Soviet dialectical materialism), once contended that "In the [present] era of fragmentation the organisation of appearances makes movement a linear succession of motionless instants" (S.I. 2006, 159, translation altered; 1997, p.334). This could be seen to affirm Vaneigem's 'one huge instant', but I'd argue that it is in fact a critique of the abstract identity of blocks of spectacular time. Whilst the model that I'm ascribing to Debord is also 'linear' in a sense, its moments are by no means static, but are rather characterised by a degree of 'circular', self-determinate qualitative movement. Furthermore, the S.I. also add here that this "immobility" is imposed "within the real movement" (S.I. 2006, 159; 1997, p.334): an allusion to the 'real movement that abolishes the present state of things'.
87   S.I. 1960; 1997, p.118
88   Debord 2006, p.507
89   S.I. 1960; 1997, p.119; Cf. Debord 2009, p.337

perhaps because of its association with Lukács and the Party, and perhaps because of the potential assumption that it might designate historical conclusion and arrest. As was also noted, his work clearly emphasises the need for the supersession of separation and for a relation of identity between the human subject and its objective actions. Yet rather than positing that identity as a distant goal, Debord and the S.I.'s account would seem to present it as the grounds and process of such action,[90] and this returns us to my claim in the introduction that communism for the S.I. is not a discrete state, but rather a historical process. It also brings us back to the suggestions presented in chapter one as to the degree to which the Hegelian absolute could be seen as perpetual, self-determinate and temporal movement: for it would seem here that the 'absolute' spoken of by Debord and the S.I. in connection to the situation involves a form that recreates itself through negating itself; that constitutes a 'passage' or 'way' towards itself, marked by the transition of one situation to its successor. We can thus find in the S.I.'s early views on the situation the beginnings of a notion of historical agency.

If this is to be a continual process it must perpetuate itself, and if it is to perpetuate itself it must involve a structure that re-create its grounds and has itself as its own goal (a view echoed in Debord's remarks on self-determination, e.g. "the proletarian movement becomes its own product" with the result that "the producer has himself as his own proper goal").[91] This would seem to imply that such an agency relies upon and aims towards certain conditions; hence my earlier indications that one could perhaps take these themes as the basis for an ethics. The point that I want to raise here however is that it would also seem to be marked, like Hegel's absolute, with a degree of self-founding circularity.

In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord opposes the unity of thought and action afforded by Marx's inversion of Hegel to "the contemplation of the movement of the economy in the dominant thought of present-day society".[92] The latter is said to be a "*non-inverted* legacy" of the "*undialectical* part of the Hegelian attempt to create a

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[90]   This is perhaps a virtue: as an associate of Bakunin once put it, "A goal which is infinitely remote is not a goal at all, it is a deception" (quoted in Ward 2004, p.32). It's significant that Vaneigem was later criticised in similar terms. As noted, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* certainly casts revolutionary subjectivity and temporality in terms of the sublime and the absolute, but for Debord in 1970 this reflected Vaneigem's "unhappy consciousness of never really becoming the Vaneigem of his dreams" (S.I. 2003, p.165, Debord 2006, p.1182). Vaneigem's book is in fact criticised in similar terms to Lefebvre's 'possible/impossible': "The aim [for Vaneigem] being an all-encompassing one, it is viewed solely in the context of an abstract present: it is *already there* in its entirety, as long as it is thought possible to give that impression, or else it has remained absolutely inaccessible: nobody has managed to define it or get anywhere near it" (S.I. 2003, p.151; Debord 2006, p.1174, emphasis in the original).
[91]   Debord 1995, p.87, translation altered; 2006, p.818
[92]   Debord 1995, p.51; 2006, p.795

circular system",93 and this can be seen to imply the following. If there is an 'undialectical' and 'non-inverted' part of Hegelian circularity, then it would seem that there is a potentially inverted and dialectical aspect to it too; and given the opposition that this passage sets up between such contemplation and the realisation of philosophy, Debord would appear to credit that inverted circularity to the self-determinate agency prescribed by Marx (after Marx, Debord writes, theory – which Debord deliberately distinguishes from philosophy – "thenceforward had nothing to know beyond what it itself did").94 But how could Debord charge Hegel, of all people, with being 'undialectical'?

The answer to this question was touched on in the general introduction above. It would seem that the Hegelian system is undialectical for Debord because it presents the movement of the historical negative within a static, separated system of thought that remains distinct from any consciously directed and lived reality (hence Debord's comparison to the flow of alienated value). The genuinely dialectical movement implied by Hegel's philosophy would then be that of a more dynamic interaction between thought and the real. Hence my earlier claims that Debord would seem to imply establishing the Hegelian absolute as historical praxis: something that Hegel himself comes close to doing, but which many of the figures discussed here in part one avoid. Given that this state of Hegelian unity is not static repose, but rather the relatively stable conditions within which change can take place (e.g. for Hegel the Concept "pulsates within itself but does not move, inwardly vibrates, yet is at rest"),[95] its actualisation in praxis can be seen to constitute not a final eschatological end but rather a unity of process and goal. This, I would suggest, not only informs the situation's self-perpetuating movement, but can also be seen to pertain to Debord and the S.I.'s later, more overtly political positions: for example, when discussing workers' councils in 1966 they claimed that "self-management must be both the means and the end of...struggle", and thus "not only what is at stake in the struggle, but also its adequate form"[96] (this is not to claim that these ideas would lose their more playful and artistic elements: Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle* that the "*subject* of history ... can only be the self-production of the living: the living becoming master and possessor of its world – that is, of history – and coming to exist as *consciousness of its own*

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[93]   Debord 1995, p.51, translation altered; 2006, p.795
[94]   Debord 1995, p.51; 2006, p.795
[95]   Hegel 1977, p.100
[96]   S.I. 2006, p.210; 1997, p.432

activity [*conscience de son jeu*: literally, 'consciousness of its game']").[97]

The potential relevance of this interpretation can be first introduced via Debord's depiction in the *Comments* of the modern spectacle's almost Baudrillardian loss of history. The spectacle is presented there as having engaged in "*outlawing* [*mise hors la loi*] history"; as "having driven the recent past into hiding", and as having thus made "everyone forget the spirit of history within society".[98] The *Comments* is often erroneously linked to Baudrillard's hyperreality as a result of such claims, and thus taken as a vexed admission of defeat. I'll contest that reading in part three, but we can note here that if the operation of Debord's historical agency is indeed self-grounding in some sense, then it can perhaps be seen to build its own history and orientation through its own operation, thus charting and creating its own path. In the closing sections of the thesis I'll suggest ways in which this might be pursued beyond its explicit identification with the theory of spectacle.

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[97] Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.792
[98] Debord 1998, p.15; 2006, p.1602, emphasis in the original

Conclusion to Part One

Art and Time

The three chapters of part one have set out some of the principal aspects of the philosophical currents that inform Debord's work. In presenting this I've tried to provide a clearer sense of the ideas that found the theory of spectacle, particularly as regards the notions of time, history and self-determination that I presented in the thesis' general introduction. I showed the basis of Debord's concern with negativity and time in French Hegelianism and its existential echoes, and I discussed the manner in which this pertains to his presentation of Hegel's philosophy as both an arrest and an anticipation of praxis. The sense in which the spectacle corresponds to a Kojèveian end of history was also introduced, as was the importance of Surrealism's opposition to such closure. I also showed the bases of the theory of spectacle's problems within the S.I.'s views on art and culture: my contention was that their objection to the separation of observer and art object becomes, in Debord's later theory, that of the worker from his or her alienated product. This lends itself to the privileging of subjective alienation over the objective externalisation of labour. That shift from labour was also linked to the S.I.'s move towards the everyday, which was in turn connected to their re-conception of the proletariat. Through presenting differing perspectives on the nature and status of Hegelian closure I've also attempted to clarify my contentions regarding Debord's use of the Hegelian absolute. In order to further that discussion I'll now conclude part one with a more involved account of some of the Hegelian concepts referred to in the chapters above; I place these discussions here partly as they'll provide a means of developing my earlier contentions, but also because they'll serve to introduce some of the themes that will be taken up in part two.

Subject-Object Unity

As we've seen, Debord describes the "proletariat" (or rather his own and the S.I.'s version thereof) as "demanding to *live* the historical time that it creates".[1] This statement can be qualified by adding that time, according to Debord, exists independently of humanity, whilst history – as a consciousness of time's passage, both

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[1]   Debord 1995, p.106; 2006, p.829

in terms of a memory of past events and constitutive, pro-active action – only emerges with human beings.[2] Humanity thus creates 'historical time' by creating and becoming conscious of events within time. Yet as the agents that create those events can be alienated from their actions, so too can they be alienated from this historical time; conversely, the supersession of such alienation through self-determinate action affords identity with that time.

To be self-conscious is to be conscious of oneself, and for Hegel this requires that one become 'other' to oneself in order to take oneself as an object of enquiry. Likewise, self-determination entails consciously determining oneself: the subject takes itself as the object that it determines and directs. Yet in both cases – self-conscious thought and self-determinate action – the subject remains self-identical in that otherness. This differs from Sartre: consciousness, for Sartre, is always at one remove from itself, and is always denied the stability of self-identity ("the being of consciousness does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence").[3]

I'll return to Sartre shortly, but to clarify further: this notion of becoming other to oneself through action returns us to the distinction between subjective and objective alienation that I noted in the general introduction. Whilst discussing Lukács I highlighted the difference between a contemplative, subjective alienation from one's own actions (*Entfremdung*, to use Marx's term from the *Manuscripts*), and the necessary, objective alienation and externalisation of consciousness in action *per se* (*Vergegenständlichung*). Although self-determination involves making oneself 'other' through externalising oneself in action, it's possible to do so in as manner that avoids *Entfremdung*: the externalisation (*Entäusserung*) of the subject through objectification, in other words, is a necessary form of alienation and otherness within which self-identity is retained. As we saw earlier, although Debord replicates the symptoms of Lukács' conflation of *Entfremdung* and *Vergegenständlichung* (capitalist society is understood under the rubric of a separated consciousness, thus effacing the particularity of concrete social relations), he does nonetheless retain a sense of necessary objective alienation: time for Debord is "a *necessary* alienation", being the medium in which the subject realises himself while losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself".[4] Whilst Sartre's views on temporality are certainly reminiscent of that formulation, they remain distinct from it: the concept of spectacle rests on the notion

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[2]   Debord 1995, p.92; 2006, p.820; Cf. Marx 1988, p.111.
[3]   Sartre 2003, p.98
[4]   Debord 1995, pp.115-6; 2006, p.835, emphasis in the original

that the subject can be united with such objective actions, and thus differs from Sartre's far bleaker outlook. Subject-object unity for Debord – identity with one's own actions – is not a static positivity, as Sartre contends, but rather an ongoing temporal process that affords unification with the 'historical time' discussed above.

There is however a sense in which Debord's account involves traces of that Sartrean disconnection. Within Hegel's philosophy, subject-object unity pertains to an identity between the knower and the known. In the *Phenomenology* this state of self-identity is shown to be immanent to all human consciousness (the religious analogue being that each person carries a potential path to God within them). Ascending this "ladder" provides an entry point to the Hegelian system as a whole,[5] as the identity of subject and object attained at the end of the *Phenomenology* allows thought to think itself entirely immanently within the *Logic*. Debord however is no metaphysician, and the contextual aspects of his own notion of consciousness give rise to an important issue here. With Hegel, freedom comes from self-determination, but that self-determination ultimately consists in aligning oneself with the fundamental structures of a divine reason (in effect, the rational state becomes the kingdom of heaven on earth). However, with Debord there is no such eternal order, the only permanence being that of change: freedom, insofar as it is linked to historical self-determinate action, would seem to entail an ongoing process in which the conditions of subject-object unity are continually re-established. The knowledge required to effect this cannot be given in advance – hence the importance of chance and play to the situation, as noted above – but must rather be specific to each circumstance, entailing that the agency involved must be strategic to some degree. Yet this also entails that each instance of self-determinate unity would be different, as the process through which it was enacted and acted upon would be limited and determined by a given context; and whilst that affords an anti-dogmatism, it also means that where Hegel equates freedom to necessity, freedom for Debord must involve contingency (as we'll see later, he in fact states that "the real exercise of freedom ... is consciousness of *present* necessity",[6] my italics). There is thus perhaps a sense in which Debord's account presents a set of conditions within which something akin to the movement of the Sartrean for-itself (*qua* the apparent otherness of the world and the emphasis on context) might fall, and this recalls the difficulty of founding an ethics on

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5   Hegel presents the *Phenomenology* as a "ladder" to "Science" (Hegel 1977, p.14); in *The Science of Logic* he writes that the *Phenomenology* "exhibited consciousness in its movement...to absolute knowing", and writes that this "deduction" of "the Concept of pure science" is "presupposed" by the *Logic* itself (Hegel 1969, p.49).
6   S.I. 2006, p.36; Debord 2006, p.320

an existential basis.

This also raises the question of quite what that condition of unity might entail. To say that it consists of a relation between thought and practice is to say very little, as clearly all action is in some sense united with thought. If the conditions of subject-object unity cannot therefore be distinguished from capitalist or spectacular modes of behaviour, the concept of subject-object unity would lose all critical purchase. To link the deprivation of that unity to boredom or unhappiness, as Debord and the S.I. often tend to do, is also unsatisfactory: modern society is obviously not devoid of excitement or pleasure, and to cast some forms of pleasure as more 'true' than others is obviously problematic. An answer can however be found if we return to Lukács. If, as in his account, the deprivation of subject-object unity is linked to a 'contemplative attitude' (as is also the case in Debord), and if contemplation stems from reification, then its source would seem to derive from the reduction of subjects to the status of objects. This could offer a response to the apparent problem that all action, regardless of its nature, would seem to be linked to thought (one could have a unity of thought and action that was conducted in a 'thing-like' way). Yet whilst this might seem to invite tracing the problem back to an analysis of the commodity form, I would point out that Debord's spectacle, as noted in the introduction, pre-dates capitalism: its real essence lies in alienated social power, and capitalism simply provides the latter with its most adequate expression to date. But if that is the case, then one could contend that the separation of subject and object ultimately pertains not to a divorce between thought and action *per se*, but rather to a social situation in which individuals are dominated by their own externalised and objectified power. Although this is certainly present in Debord's account it is also hidden to an extent. The contemplative detachment that he is concerned with is of course connected to the commodity, and thus stems from a necessarily social alienation of collective power (or more specifically, of labour); yet as he focuses on contemplation, the separation of social power is treated under the rubric of that between thought and action.

I would suggest that this concern with alienated social power can be seen to imply an anti-hierarchical ethics: for subject-object unity would then mean a situation in which collective social power is not alienated, and is not thereby concentrated in the 'external' figures of the commodity, the state or the Party. If such concentration and alienation is to be avoided, then so too must representative power. Consequently, what arises here is a sense in which the conditions of freedom *qua* self-determination might

lie in a situation in which that power remains one with the subject despite its necessary, objective externalisation.

I signal this point here in order to note the potential interest of this material, and do so primarily as a marker for the further work that could be pursued in this vein. I will however return to the issue in part three. I'll close with some further explanatory remarks on Hegelian identity in difference.

Infinity

Any rejection of the dialectic's final synthesis, or indeed a Surrealist desire to 'liberate' negativity from the Hegelian system's circularity, would give rise to what Hegel referred to as 'bad infinity'. Hegel's actual wording for this term is *schlecht Unendlichkeit*, the contrast of which with 'genuine' (*echt*) infinity has prompted some to render it as 'spurious infinity': a phrasing that reflects the sense in which this is not a poor or inadequate version of infinity, but rather not truly infinite at all.[7]

A first example of bad infinity can be found in an endless sequence of finite elements (e.g. 1+1+1+1...etc.), as there the infinite remains wedded to the finite. The latter has not been fully negated, insofar as the infinity of this sequence involves perpetually stepping beyond the finite only to reach another finite point. Or, as Hegel puts it: "a limit is set, it is exceeded, then there is another limit, and so on without end".[8] To be 'genuine', therefore, the infinite must somehow differentiate itself from the finite. Yet the second example of infinity that this might bring to mind is similarly 'spurious': for an infinite God who existed entirely separately from the finitude of his creation would not be infinite at all; he would be limited by what he is not. The genuine infinite must therefore negate and differentiate itself from the finite, but without casting itself *as* finite.

So, what is required is a positive identity that includes within it that which it is negatively distinguished from. Or, in keeping with the previous example, this would be a means of saying that God is infinite, but that his infinitude is such that he is both different from and yet also somehow identical to his creation. This is 'the identity of identity and difference' touched on above in relation to the structure of self-

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[7]   "A bad dog is a dog, a bad painting is a painting, so bad infinity would presumably be a bad form of infinitude. On the other hand...*spurious* infinity is presumably *not really infinite*" (Martin 2007, p.170).

[8]   Hegel 1969, p.149

consciousness, and it lies at the core of Hegel's philosophical attempts to unite the positive with the negative, the universal with the particular, and the infinite with the finite.

The 'seed form' of identity in difference can be found in the opening moments of the *Logic*:[9] a text that attempts to allow thought to think itself in the absence of any given contingencies or interference from the philosopher. Each of the *Logic*'s determinations are said to arise purely immanently, as each renders explicit that which was implicit within its predecessor. It begins with total abstraction – without given data or assumptions thought can think nothing other than its own being – and its first determination is thus "being, pure being".[10] This 'being' is however so 'pure' and indeterminate as to be equivalent to 'nothing', which is thus the *Logic*'s next determination. Yet this means that 'being' and 'nothing' are identical but also distinct, as the two determinations perpetually flow into and arise from one another. Furthermore, they can only be considered as opposed by virtue of their difference from one another (i.e. the determination 'nothing' is what it is because it is *not* the determination 'being', and *vice versa*), because the abstraction of this approach means that there can be no other point of reference. We thus have a third determination, 'determinate being': particular, differentiated being (i.e. it is either 'being' or 'nothing').[11]

My point here is that Hegel, at the very outset of the *Logic*, provides himself with a notion of identity that is bound up with difference: a way of thinking that allows one to say that 'to be A is to not be B; therefore, the identity of A *involves* that of B; thus, A is A, but it is also B, albeit only insofar as A is *not* B'. The particular identities of A and B rely on their negative difference from one another, which is itself reliant on the universal, shared identity of their interrelation. Hegel has given himself a means of saying that the universal is by no means abstractly distinct from the particular, and that it is in fact the organising principle of the latter's interrelation. God, in other words, need not be distinct from his creation.

The next major determination that follows 'determinate being' is 'infinity'. Having derived finitude from the distinct identities of pure being and pure nothing, and having shown that each tends towards its other, Hegel finds true infinity in the perpetual

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[9] "It has often been claimed – and not without a certain justification – that the famous chapter in Hegel's *Logic* treating of Being, Non-Being and Becoming contains the whole of his philosophy" (Lukács 1971, p.170).

[10] Hegel 1969, p.82

[11] "Just as one needs a contrast between light and dark to see anything, so it is with Pure Being. Pure Being will require the darkness of Pure Nothing before it can be thought at all" (Carlson 2007, p.11).

flux of the return to self of identity in difference. In "going beyond itself," Hegel writes, each determination "only unites with itself. This *identity with itself*, the negation of the negation, is affirmative being and thus the other of the finite...this other is the *infinite*",[12] which "consists...in remaining at home with itself in its other, or (when it is expressed as a process) coming to itself in its other".[13]

<u>The Concept</u>

Hegel has thus developed a perpetual, negative flux within a positive totality, and in this regard these initial structures of the *Logic* can be seen to anticipate the absolute Idea, i.e. the pinnacle of the Hegelian system. The Idea can perhaps be schematised as the self-consciousness of a Spinozist God, insofar as it is the unity of the logic that underlies existence with a reality that actualises and recognises it: a God who becomes other to himself in order to become more fully himself. The motive force that drives that movement, as of that from original identity to otherness and back to self, is the 'Concept': something that I've referred to several times already, but which I'll discuss here in order to reinforce the importance of circularity to dialectical movement, and also to introduce some of the themes that will be taken up below.

The Concept is an ontological force: it is immanent to being itself, it is made manifest in the agency of Spirit, and it achieves full expression in speculative, dialectical thought. Its movement operates through the interrelation of its three aspects (universality, particularity and singularity; the latter correspond to the Christian trinity as much as they do to syllogistic reasoning),[14] and an initial example of this can be found in Hegel's views on subjective agency and will.[15] According to the latter, the willing subject is at first a self-identical universal, albeit one that contains the capacity for negative difference (*qua* specific determinations); it resolves on a course of action, determining itself and becoming other to itself through its objective actualisation (i.e. the initial universal is particularised); it then returns to original unity from that determinacy, thereby defining itself as a singular individual. An initially indeterminate subject (universal) has made itself other to itself through action (particular), thereby defining itself on the basis of that action (singular). The same pattern can be seen in the

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[12]   Hegel 1969, p.137
[13]   Hegel 1991, p.149
[14]   "God not only created a world that confronts him as an other, but...has from all eternity begotten a Son in whom he, as Spirit, is at home with himself" (Hegel 1991, p.238).
[15]   See Hegel 2005, pp.xxix-lvii

opening determinations of the *Logic* ('being' is blank and unknowable until it becomes 'determinate being' by way of its own immanent negative difference, i.e. 'nothing'), and in the structure of the Hegelian system as a whole (logic becomes other to itself as nature and returns to itself at a higher level via Spirit).

There is no abstract separation between the Concept's three moments:[16] each of its moments "is no less the *whole* Concept than it is a *determinate* Concept and *a determination* of the Concept".[17] As an illustration: when classifying things we might find that a universal type contains a particular genus, which in turn contains a singular species; yet both genus and species are themselves universals within which particular elements can be identified. Likewise, in order for a universal to be identified as a singular identity it must render itself particular by differentiating itself from other universals. The Concept is thus a pattern for limitless differentiation, and exists immanently within all of the concepts with which we think: all contain moments of universality, particularity and singularity, and thereby interconnect with one another. The Concept is the essential structure of that dialectical network, and is revealed to itself in accordance with its own pattern via the movement from logic, through nature, to Spirit.

As the particular differences that are engendered through this movement are further determinations of the universal ground from which they arise, and as all are thus ultimately elements of the whole, the movement of the Concept gives rise to totality: to a complex, interconnected organic structure. It's thus akin to the life of an organic body: a body in which each particular element is what it is through its relation to the others and to the whole. As that analogy might also indicate, this does not constitute a form of universality in which the parts are subordinated to the whole, but rather one in which the whole is an expression of their own essential identity. Thus whilst it may do little to alleviate the concerns of those who find Hegel inherently totalitarian, it's relevant to note his claim that "the universal ... takes its other within its embrace, but without *doing violence* to it"; for it is, "in its other, in peaceful communion with itself", and should thus be thought of as "*free love* and *boundless blessedness*, for it bears itself towards its other as towards *its own self*".[18]

One last point, and one that pertains to the notions of praxis outlined here in part one. A truly infinite God must be the cause of himself, and must be absolutely necessary

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[16]   See Hegel 1991, p.242
[17]   Hegel 1969, p.600, emphasis in the original
[18]   Hegel 1969, p.603, emphases in the original.

through himself alone. The Concept's circular movement, which returns to its origin at its conclusion, responds to this problem insofar as the fact that its end is also its beginning renders it "the cause of itself".[19] Because the conclusion is also the origin, the origin is shown to be necessary in and of itself.[20] Now, if the Concept's movement through self-differentiation and return to self is what actually drives Hegelian dialectics and totality, and if it is inherently circular, then from a strictly Hegelian perspective the idea of precluding circular resolution (as advanced by some of the writers considered here in part one) is nonsensical: for if each 'pulse' of the dialectic relies on the return to self that instantiates a further stage, and if each return to self is rendered possible by the overall structure of the Concept, then to reject circular resolution is to reject the very structure that drives dialectical movement itself. Circularity does not preclude endless, negative movement: rather, Hegelian circularity is in fact the condition for that infinite movement.

It goes without saying that to Hegelian eyes any Marxist (or indeed Surrealist) attempt to appropriate this movement is simply nonsensical. To take its 'rational kernel' from Hegel's 'metaphysical shell' is perhaps akin to taking the engine from a car and then expecting it to move forwards. Even so, one could suggest that basing a Marxist historical dialectic on the Hegelian absolute is more coherent in this regard than advocating its rejection. If one recognises that the absolute is not a final, eschatological closure, but rather a state of continual unrest, then one can base a model of constant, negative process on what might otherwise seem to be its positive denial.

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[19] Hegel 1969, p.582

[20] "Only this self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself...is the True. It is the process of its own becoming, the circle that presupposes its end as its goal, having its end also as its beginning; and only by being worked out to its end is it actual" (Hegel 1977, p.10)

PART TWO

Capital and Spectacle
(1962-1975 and *The Society of the Spectacle*)

INTRODUCTION

Overview of Part Two

I argued earlier that Debord's theory could be best understood as an account of an alienated relation to the construction of history. In the chapters that followed I discussed the philosophical currents that informed it, and set out the themes of time, subjectivity and history upon which it relies. I also argued that the bases of some of its problems could be found in the S.I.'s early avant-garde concerns, and here in part two I'll attempt to develop that claim further. In order to do so I'll look at the theory's Marxist components and influences, and will thereby present a more involved and critical account of the theory itself.

We've already seen the problems involved in reducing Debord's theory to a critique of the mass media. Here I'll claim that it's similarly erroneous to simply and reductively equate the spectacle to Marx's commodity fetish. Although Debord quite obviously builds on Marx's account, his theory effectively presents Marx's fetish as falling within the broader historical tendency from which the spectacle arises. To clarify: I noted earlier that Debord indicates that the spectacle pre-dates modern capitalism, and that it arises from a historical tendency towards the separation of the power to shape history from that power's producers. As argued in the thesis' introduction, this tendency was said to have been brought to an extreme and rendered a decisively identifiable problematic by modern capitalism: society had become so subsumed under the demands of commodity production that more aspects of life were shaped by human activity than ever before, whilst at the same time control over the arrangement of that activity had become more distanced and alienated than ever. The result was a new form of conflict: as technology and automation could now ensure the satisfaction of the needs of survival without a reliance on wage labour, existential poverty was replacing the material poverty that had exercised Marx; as a result, the decisive social contradiction was now no longer that between labour and capital *per se*, but rather between those who demanded more from life and those who sought to

maintain the present system. Marx's account thus falls within the historical narrative presented by Debord's own, insofar as it describes an earlier stage in the evolution of the alienated power that forms the spectacle. I'll argue, on the basis of these claims, that there can therefore be no easy, simple equivalence between the image and the commodity. This disparity will provide a means of accessing some of the theory's shortcomings as an account of capitalist society.

My focus will rest on the period between the expulsion of the S.I.'s artistic 'right wing' in 1962, and the appearance in 1975 of Debord's film *Refutation of all the Judgements, Pro or Con, thus far Rendered on the Film 'The Society of the Spectacle'*. This period thus brackets 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*, the cinematic version of the latter in 1973, the *Refutation* that followed it, and the dissolution of the S.I. in 1972.

Universality and Particularity

We've seen that Hegel's philosophy, according to Debord, "superseded separation, but *in thought only*".[1] Its account of the resolution of the ideal and the material offered only a representation of their 'real' unity in praxis; likewise, the spectacle was said to present an illusory unification that masked and arose from a real state of separation (the spectacle is a "unity...of generalised separation").[2] Given the degree to which it mirrors Hegelian resolution, and given also that to which the latter was presented as an image of real praxis, I'll suggest here that the spectacle can be viewed as being analogous to the 'lifeless' categories of what Hegel refers to as the everyday 'understanding': forms that fall short of the Concept's organic unity, insofar as the diverse elements that they bracket are united only through the abstraction of their particular differences.[3] The implication is that the forms of collectivity that would arise from the spectacle's supersession can be seen to echo the Concept's organic unity.[4] Consequently, where part one employed the trope of tragedy as a means of establishing connections between the material under consideration, part two will take as its theme the Hegelian interrelation of the universal and the particular.

[1] Debord 1995, p.49, translation altered; 2006, p.793, emphasis in the original
[2] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.767
[3] "The abstract universal of the [everyday] understanding...relates itself to the particular only by *subsuming* this particular which it does not have in itself" (Hegel 1991, p.280, emphasis in the original).
[4] Discussing the relation of parts to whole, Hegel writes that "the members and organs of a living body should not be considered merely as parts of it, for they are what they are only in that unity and are not indifferent to that unity at all. ...[They] become mere 'parts' only under the hands of the anatomist; but for that reason he is dealing with corpses rather than living bodies" (Hegel 1991, p.204).

These contentions can perhaps be substantiated by way of the following. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (1820) describes the rational state as a universality composed of particular elements, united as a singular, coherent whole: a whole that arises from the identity in difference between the elements that compose it, and which thus actualises the logic of the Idea. This notion of interrelated universality drives Hegel's opposition to social forms that merely impose a merely 'external' unity upon the particular individuals that compose them.[5] The young Marx however criticised Hegel on these very terms: in his early 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right', written between 1843 and 1844, Marx claimed that Hegel's political philosophy had offered only a philosophical illusion of the individual's unification with society. This problematic can be seen to be retained throughout Marx's work, certainly as regards his contention that the capitalist state offers a merely apparent unification of the antagonistic interests that compose it. I'll argue that these early concerns can thus be seen to inform his 'mature' account of the commodity fetish, which describes a society in thrall to the abstract, homogenised universality of its own alienated labour: a society in which a universal form becomes alienated from the particular elements that it mediates. Debord's account can be seen to echo many of these themes, but the manner in which it presents them is itself marked by a problematic relation between the universal and the particular. The theory of spectacle effectively extrapolates an equally separate universality from the figure of the alienated, occidental spectator, under which the particularities of capitalist social relations are subsumed and ultimately obscured.

The Structure and Content of Part Two

Chapter four will present a short, revised account of the theory of spectacle, in which I'll rehearse and clarify the interpretation set out in the opening sections of the

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[5] This can be introduced via Hegel's infamous claim in *The Philosophy of Right* that "what is rational is real [*wirklich*]; and what is real is rational" (Hegel 2005, p.xix). *Wirklich* can however be translated more successfully as 'actual': for whilst reality is certainly a manifestation of reason for Hegel, not all reality expresses that reason in full. Hegel makes this point in *The Encyclopaedia Logic* whilst correcting misinterpretations of that famous statement: readers, he stresses, should note his distinction between actuality and mere existence, for "what is there [in reality] is partly *appearance* and only partly actuality" (Hegel 1991, pp.29-30, emphasis in the original). This point is made in *The Philosophy of Right* itself: a state that does not fully actualise the Concept and which consists instead of a "unorganised multitude" or "formless mass" (Hegel 2005, p.181) would be irrational, for "actuality is always the unity of universality and particularity"; when "this unity is absent, the thing is unrealised, even though existence may be predicated of it" (Hegel 2005, p.138). A state is only "absolutely rational" when its existence lifts "particular self-consciousnesses...to the plane of the universal" (Hegel 2005, p.133).

thesis. In doing so I'll also make some initial remarks on the connections between Marx's commodities and Debord's images. Chapter five will then offer a reading of Marx's account of the commodity and the fetish, in which I'll discuss the connections between the latter and Marx's theories of alienation and value. Chapter six will then set out a more critical take on Debord's theory, and will begin by discussing the S.I.'s departure from Marx's account whilst also outlining some of their theoretical influences in this regard. In the second half of chapter six I'll develop my earlier contention that Debord's theory effectively bases its analysis of modern society upon consumption rather than on production, and thus upon what might be termed capital's effects rather than its causes. Having thereby argued that the theory remains at the level of the very appearances that it describes, I'll suggest that its failings in this respect can be seen to jar with Debord's strategic concerns. I'll conclude part two with some short remarks on the homologies and differences between Debord's theory and the work of Moishe Postone.

The Labour Theory of Value

As signalled above, because the theory of spectacle reflects the S.I.'s attempts to move beyond what they viewed as traditional Marxism – particularly as regards the latter's concerns with labour, union organisation and the factory – it also exhibits a tendency to depart from the classical focus on labour's status as the basis of capitalist value. In effect, and prefiguring aspects of Negri's work to a degree, Debord and the S.I. do not focus on the production of value, but rather on that of 'life' (a similar point is made by Jappe, although in a different but related context).[6] As a result, their account jars with the classical schema: for if capitalist value does stem from labour, and if labour is left largely unaddressed, then so too are the mechanics of capital. Clearly, a critique of capitalist society that aspires towards practical application (as Debord's most certainly does) without being able to ascertain quite what capital actually is faces problems, and the difficulty here lies in the fact that the theory employs Marxist concepts and categories – the commodity, the fetish, value, etc. – whilst effectively undermining the primacy of labour that they rely upon.

This is certainly not to suggest that attempting to move beyond classical Marxism is a mistake, and nor will I claim that the problematic aspects of Debord and the S.I.'s account are without virtue. Rather, they highlight some of the difficulties

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[6] "The Situationists even believed themselves to have discovered the vastest and most irreducible subject possible: 'life'" (Jappe 1999, p.136).

involved in adapting a set of 19th century ideas to present day exigencies, and they pertain in particular to one of the most widely debated aspects of those difficulties: namely, the labour theory of value. Being based around industrial production, the latter can seem challenged by forms of labour that produce 'affect' rather than physical objects *per se*;[7] arguments can also be made as to the degree to which it is undermined by the import of so-called 'symbolic value'.[8] Such difficulties can be taken to reinforce the famously problematic nature of Marx's transformation of value into price,[9] insofar as they too invite scepticism as to the existence of a value said to lurk 'behind' or 'beneath' its immediate monetary appearances.[10] This is the so-called 'transformation problem', which is often seized on by those seeking to dismiss Marx's critique: for if the basis of value in labour can be denied, then so too can the notion of surplus-value, and thus by extension the claim that exploitation is intrinsic to the structure of capital itself.

Marx's theory is able to respond to the notion of immaterial labour and symbolic value,[11] and solutions to the transformation of value into price can be found[12] (Rosdolsky, viewing the latter as a demand for harmony, asks "since when has it been the task of Marxists to prove that it theoretically possible for the capitalist economy to proceed without disturbances?").[13] Perlman argues that "Marx did not ask what determines market price; he asked how working activity is regulated",[14] and Postone makes a similar claim: Marx's "intention is not to formulate a price theory", he writes, "but to show how value induces a level of appearance that disguises it".[15] Yet it remains

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[7] See Negri's 'Value and Affect' (1999). See also Lazzrato for seminal comments on 'immaterial labour'.
[8] For Baudrillard (1993, pp.9-10), "production, the commodity form, labour-power, equivalence and surplus-value ... are now things of the past. ...we have passed from the commodity law of value to the structural law of value, and this coincides with the obliteration of the social form known as production".
[9] In volume three of *Capital* cost price – originally the value of the raw material and labour employed in the production of a commodity – becomes a price of production when this item is employed as raw material by further capitals. Marx's argument implies that the original determination of the value of the first commodity should also be reconfigured as a price of production; as a result, the connection between value and price can be seen to become strained. This is the famed 'transformation problem' (see in particular Marx 1981, pp.264-5).
[10] As Marx himself puts it in volume three of *Capital*: fluctuations in price "seem to contradict both the determination of value by labour-time and the nature of surplus-value as consisting of unpaid surplus labour" (Marx 1981, p.311).
[11] For a broad, indicative response to these issues see Aufheben 2006.
[12] See Ramos 1998 for a very useful overview of the problem, and for a response that attributes the confusion to Engels' editing.
[13] Rosdolsky 1980, p.411
[14] Perlman in Rubin 1972, p.xxx
[15] Postone moves from the correct contention that "the divergence of prices from values should...be understood as integral to...Marx's analysis" towards suggesting that as a result one shouldn't fixate on the connection between value and price: Marx's "intention is not to formulate a price theory but to show how value induces a level of appearance that disguises it" (Postone 1996, p.134). Yet if that connection cannot be demonstrated, the very concept of labour value is at risk of being cast as an

the case that the theory can seem to struggle with aspects of contemporary capitalism. Postone, tacitly admitting the difficulties posed in this regard by contemporary forms of labour and commodification, follows Negri in claiming that the seemingly anachronistic aspects of Marx's economics prove its timeliness. Both make much of Marx's claim in the *Grundrisse* that "as soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure";[16] Negri thus claims that within real subsumption labour has become 'immeasurable', and that it is therefore ready to shake off the 'parasite' of capital;[17] for Postone (and much like Debord and the S.I.), these same difficulties reflect technology's emergent potential to end wage labour.[18] Postone in fact goes so far as to claim that Marx's 'critique of political economy' should not be taken as a 'critical political economy'.[19] It does however remain the case that both the latter assertion and Perlman's indication that the relation of value to price is not a major question for Marx seem strange; particularly given Marx's extensive attempts in *Capital*'s third volume to explain the movement from value, through surplus-value, profit, price of production etc. to market price. (It might be added here that Rubin's close reading of Marx affords relevant and useful comments on the degree to which fluctuations in price alter the labour determinations of value.[20] Such an approach perhaps affords a means of reconciling the labour theory of value with some of the contemporary factors that have been said to replace its purported status as the prime determinant of price).

Thus on the one hand, with Debord, we have the problems posed by the theory of spectacle's tendency to depart from the Marxist mechanics that drive its key concepts; on the other, we have the possibility that those theoretical mechanics themselves may exhibit difficulties, or require development. I think it possible to locate both problematics within the schema that one can draw from Debord's account, particularly as regards his claim that theories are "made to die in the war of time", and "have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete" by their "victories even

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unfounded assumption.

[16] Marx 1973, p.705

[17] See Negri 2003, p.29. See also Negri 1999, and Hardt and Negri 2001.

[18] Postone 1996, p.197

[19] Postone talks of the mistaken "assumption that Marx intended to write a critical political economy" (Postone 1996, p.133).

[20] Rubin 1972, pp.250-3. "Thus the theory of production price must without fail be based on the labour theory of value. On the other hand, the labour theory of value must be further developed and completed by the theory of production price. …The labour theory of value…describes only one aspect of the capitalist economy…" (Rubin 1972, p.253).

more than by their partial defeats".[21] Such a statement obviously implies an impetus towards the critique and reformulation of theory, in accordance with changing contexts and situations. Not only does this seem to entail that the aspects of Debord's thought that I'm attempting to draw from his theory are not necessarily undermined by the latter's difficulties, but would rather seem to point towards new formulations: in addition, and insofar as this projection is marked by a strategic dimension, it would also seem to carry an obligation to address the economic mechanics of the contexts that it is to address. In other words, and by virtue of its emphasis on praxis, the model of historical agency that one can draw from Debord contains an inherent tendency towards both the 'critique of political economy' (the critical analysis of theory) and 'critical political economy' (the theoretical analysis of concrete society)

The position that I'm adopting here is intended to avoid the obvious problems that would arise from criticising Debord's theory for its departure from Marx's account *per se*. It makes little sense to present his own and the S.I.'s corpus as source material for an anti-dogmatic communism if that claim is made via the assumed validity of Marx's concepts and categories. Thus rather than measuring Debord against Marx, I will instead show that the theory of spectacle, in adopting Marx's concepts whilst departing from their bases, faces difficulties when called upon to perform the strategic analysis that it would itself seem to advocate. This provides a means of assessing Debord on his own terms, i.e. of addressing the strategic, practical efficacy of the theory of spectacle. The question that we will thus pursue is this: to what extent is the theory of spectacle able to provide a sense of quite what capital is, of what it does, and of how it might be addressed?

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[21] Debord 2003a, pp.150-1; 2006, p.1354

Chapter Four: The Spectacle

The Spectacle as Historical Arrest

In both the general introduction and the first part of the thesis I discussed some of the themes and ideas that inform Debord and the S.I.'s views on the 'new' proletariat, the realisation of art and the decomposition of culture. Here, in order to expand on the interpretation provided above, it can be stated that all of these issues can be seen to cohere around the following, rather problematic contention: namely, Debord's apparent assumption that by the middle of the 20th Century the various illusions and fetishes occluding humanity's capacity for historical self-consciousness had begun to fall away.

According to Debord and the S.I., it was now possible to recognise that history was not made by God, kings or by the economy, but rather by human beings themselves: religion was obsolete, politics an empty charade, and economic determinism and Party representation were losing their credibility. 'Actually existing communism' had proved just as capable of brutality as capitalism, and the increasing scale and banality of commodity consumption had furthered a drive towards something more. Consequently, although the revolutionary movement was said to have collapsed into its own representation in the early part of the century, Debord and the S.I. held that it was about to return at a new, 'higher' level: for it now stood fully revealed not as the demand for a fairer and more equitable mode of industrial production and distribution, but rather for a free, self-determined history. As noted, this entailed a reformulation of the revolutionary class: no longer those who were separated form the means of producing their own means of subsistence, the 'new proletariat' consisted of all those who had been separated from the means of consciously producing their own lives.

Defining the present in terms of this revolutionary crux – a potentially final dialectical juncture, brought about by the 'perfected' separation of the spectacle – entailed projecting the spectacle back in time as a retrospective explanation of all prior forms of separated social power. [1] All earlier examples of ideology, hierarchy and of the denial and deprivation of autonomy became nascent denials of the self-determination that the modern revolution would realise. [2] In addition, the present becomes figured as

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[1]   "...the spectacle makes no secret of what it is, namely, separated power developing on its own" (Debord 1995, p.20; 2006, p.772).

[2]   As we saw earlier, Debord traces the roots of the spectacle as far back as Greek philosophy, and contends that "all separated power has...been spectacular" (Debord 1195, p.20, translation altered;

the final shell from which a fully free and self-determining humanity is to emerge: a potential end of "pre-history",[3] despite its aspiration to stand as the end of history *per se*. The concept of spectacle thus rests on the contention that 20th Century commodity capitalism reveals the true nature of all prior forms of separated power, and that this fully exposed the real heart of the revolutionary project: namely, the end of "all specialisation, all hierarchy, and all separation".[4] This would result in a historical subject able to determine itself as its own object, and thus freedom. Yet if there is no *a priori* human essence or fixed notion of species-being in Debord and the S.I.'s account, why might there be specific historical conditions for the realisation of human freedom?

It's worth noting here that Marx's notion of species-being is in fact devoid of any fixed identity, but rather pertains to the full expression of human beings as historical, self-determinate creatures.[5] This is a position that can also be found in Hegel himself, contrary to popular belief,[6] and I would suggest that Debord had something very similar in mind: the capitalist economy had developed to a point where it had made wage labour and thus itself redundant, and which afforded new means of shaping and affecting lived experience. Thus although "a person's life" may well have been "a succession of accidental situations"[7] in the past, the task now – engendered by the rise of the modern spectacle – was to "try to construct situations"[8] consciously and deliberately. The construction of situations can thus be seen to involve rendering explicit our own implicit nature, i.e. allowing self-conscious control over our own existence as temporal, contextually situated beings. This then is not the full expression of a given identity or essence, but rather the realisation of the conditions for free, self-constitutive self-determination.

Reality and Representation

2006 p.772). He also holds that "power draped itself in the outward garb of a mythical order from the very beginning" (Debord 1995 p.20, 2006, p.772).

[3] Marx 2000, p.426

[4] Debord 1995, p.87; 2006, p.817

[5] "The whole character of a species – its species character – is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a *means to life*. ...Man makes his life-activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness." (Marx 1988, p.76 emphasis in the original).

[6] "For Hegel, the absolute truth of humanity is that human beings have no fixed, given identity, but rather determine and produce their identity and their world in history, and that they gradually come to the recognition of this fact in history" (Houlgate 2005, p.17). It should however be added this freedom entails the realisation and expression of true reason, which can be seen to constitute an implicit, immanent identity.

[7] S.I. 2006, p.40; Debord 2006, p.325

[8] S.I. 2006, p.40; Debord 2006, p.325

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I've also argued that the conceptual roots of Debord's 'images' and 'representations' can be found in Hegelian objections to the abstract categories of non-dialectical thinking: forms of thought that retain a distinction between thought and its referent. As noted earlier, these roots are certainly informed by Lukács' account, but also by the predominance of the *Phenomenology* within French Hegelianism: for just as consciousness remains separated throughout the *Phenomenology* from an object that is its own, albeit alienated true nature (a separation that is not present in the *Logic*, for example, in which thought thinks itself), so too is the spectator alienated from his or her own actions. The spectator merely 'contemplates' the world that he or she creates.[9] Thus the 'reality' that underlies these representations is best thought of not in terms of a material world masked by ideology – although Debord's formulations can at times suggest this – but rather as an alienated capacity and potential for self-determinate agency. The 'real' and the 'true', in other words, are ultimately the historical process itself. Thus although many have drawn attention to the links between Debord's spectacle and Baudrillard's theory of simulation,[10] within Debord's work the real has by no means disappeared or become inaccessible: it in fact always persists in the possibility for conscious negation and change.

With Hegel, subject and object are at root identical by virtue of the Concept's identity in difference. That unity can however go unrecognised, and representations of

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[9] "The spectacle's externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him" (Debord 1995, p.23; 2006, p.774).

[10] Debord does in fact use the term 'simulation' himself: in 1993's *Cette Mauvaise Reputation*, and thus long after the appearance of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* in 1985, he wrote that "everywhere, excess simulation has exploded like Chernobyl" (Debord 2001a, p.92). Bracken claims that this is a "tip of the pencil" to Baudrillard (Bracken 1997, p.227), and goes on to criticise Plant's correct view that Debord's spectacle is antithetical to Baudrillard's hyperreality: "for all we know," he writes, "Debord might've been flattered in the way [sic] that Baudrillard followed some of his interests" (Bracken 1997, p.228); in fact, and although Bracken could not have known this prior to the publication of Debord's correspondence, he viewed Baudrillard as a 'mediatic clown' (Debord 2008, p.248). Furthermore, Debord and Baudrillard's theories are quite incommensurable. For example, and again in *Cette Mauvaise Reputation*, Debord objects to a Hegelian reviewer of the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. The reviewer had contended that with the integration of spectacle and reality the very concept of spectacle must become untenable, as must the Hegelian framework that founds it. Debord's response is not entirely satisfactory, but significant nonetheless: he replies by describing this objection as a "sophism" equivalent to the contention that one could no longer be a Heraclitian within the modern spectacle, because Heraclitus had claimed that "language [or rather the *Logos*] is that which is common" (Debord 2001a, p.46). It's also interesting to note that in 1989 Debord sent thanks to his publisher for refusing, on his behalf, an invitation to an academic conference: "A cretin has written to me from the University of Montana...informing me that Baudrillard is going to get tough there ['*va y sévir*': this also carries connotations of running wild, or being out of control] and that I would do well to appear there in such good company..." (Debord 2008, p.74). Thanks are due to Jonathan Brookes for translation advice.

unity, such as religion, can be adopted in place of its full philosophical self-consciousness (e.g. religion is "the relation to the absolute in the form of feeling, imagination, faith").[11] With Debord, the subjective powers and capacities of society are alienated into the separated objectivity of an autonomous economic system, resulting in a world and a way of life that becomes 'image' *qua* its separation from those who actually live it; life thus becomes a mere representation of its "proper unity".[12] This representation has however taken on a degree of independence: the spectacle is "the world of the autonomous image";[13] it is composed of "independent representation",[14] and the spectacle thus "represents itself"[15] (see also Debord's allusion to Hegel's claim that truth verifies itself by virtue of its own necessity: in the world of the spectacle, "the liar lies to himself" insofar as a self-referential falsehood perpetuates itself according to its own false necessity).[16] The occlusion of its original referent allows it to operate as a genetic model for all social praxis ("the spectacle constitutes the dominant social *model* of life").[17]

Debord thus states at the outset of *The Society of the Spectacle* that the spectacle is best viewed as "a *Weltanschauung* that has been actualised, translated into the material realm. It is a vision of the world that has become objectified",[18] and he also describes it as 'ideology in material form'. It is a set of ideas about the world, deriving from and corresponding to the exigencies of capitalism, that has become independent and which now re-fashions the world in its own image. Through doing so, this set of ideas has also tended to encompass the world, together with the behaviours that compose the latter; thought and practice thus become alienated. Yet the ensemble that results remains located within historical time, however much it prevents the latter's conscious direction, and is as such subject to it.

Debord maintains that within the spectacle lived reality is considered only "partially",[19] insofar as consciousness is focussed on the spectacle's images. Yet as this partial view presents itself as the sole repository of validity, and as all consciousness is focussed upon it, it becomes a "pseudo-world apart".[20] Historical agency is thus

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[11] Hegel 2004, p.145.
[12] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766
[13] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766
[14] Debord 1995, p.17; 2006, p.770
[15] Debord 1995, p.22, translation altered; 2006, p.774
[16] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766; see also Debord's list of *détournements* (2006, p.862).
[17] Debord 1995, p.13; 2006, p.767, emphasis in the original
[18] Debord 1995, p.13, translation altered; 2006, p.767
[19] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766
[20] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766

separated from itself, but the spectacle still ultimately falls within the latter: the "social practice which the autonomous spectacle confronts is also the real totality which contains the spectacle", despite the fact that "the split within this totality mutilates it to the point of making the spectacle appear as its goal".[21] Reality, in other words – *qua* real historical praxis – contains the spectacle, but is subordinated and in thrall to it: it is "determined by a part of itself that places itself above the rest and is exterior to it";[22] for the "perceptible world" is "replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the perceptible *par excellence*."[23] The whole, in other words, is dominated by a part, and as the practice of the whole corresponds to the demands of that part, the life of the whole 'recedes into representation' insofar as direct self-determination is denied.

Yet the 'real' has not vanished, as Debord equates reality and truth to history, and holds that history will always exist (however unconsciously) so long as human consciousness exists within time. ("History," Debord writes, by way of a *détournement* of Marx,[24] "has always existed, but not always in its historical form... The unconscious movement of time manifests itself and becomes *true* in historical consciousness").[25] Because history consists of a conscious awareness of events and actions, there remains a sense in which consciousness is able to remain rooted within the 'real' of history and thereby view the spectacle as a distinct modality that has grown separate and autonomous.

The Concentrated and Diffuse Forms of Spectacle

The spectacle is, ultimately, "simply the economic realm developing for itself".[26] Yet the independence and autonomy of that 'economic realm' is contradicted by its own obsolescence: for whilst it had guaranteed society's survival in the past, the contemporary possibilities of automation and for new modes of social organisation had rendered that economy's survival dependent upon the continued dormancy of the 'historical consciousness' that it suppresses (for once "society discovers that it is

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[21] Debord 1995, p.13, translation altered; 2006, p.767
[22] Debord 2006, p.1064
[23] Debord 1995, p.26; 2006, p.776
[24] "Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form" (Marx 1843).
[25] Debord 1995, p.92; 2006, p.820, emphasis in the original
[26] Debord 1995, p.16; 2006, p.769

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contingent on the economy, the economy has in fact become contingent on society").[27] In consequence, the perpetuation of this obsolete mode of production is said to be reliant upon the degree to which it not only validates itself, but also masks its own redundancy. This brings us to the distinction between the 'concentrated' (bureaucratic and fascistic) and 'diffuse' (consumer capitalist) forms of spectacle, which address this problem in different ways (the 'integrated spectacle' described in Debord's *Comments*, which combines the diffuse and the concentrated forms, will be discussed in part three). Briefly: within the concentrated spectacle alienated social power is condensed within a ruling body, Party or dictator with whom society is obliged to identify; within the diffuse form it is dispersed across society through commodities, fashions, fads, behavioural models etc. – images of subjective satisfaction – and thereby actualised and rendered normative.

Particular *individuals* are thus oriented towards alienated forms of *collective* social power, with the result that the social whole comes to be mediated by alienated expressions of its own general capacities (by way of another *détournement* of Marx[28] Debord claimed that "the spectacle is not an ensemble of images, but a social relation between persons that is mediated by images").[29] Yet whilst the diffuse spectacle is able to take this mediation to a high level through its abundance of commodities, the relative "quantitative weakness"[30] of the concentrated spectacle's own mass of commodities precludes it from disseminating its merits and *raison d'être* in this way. Thus where the diffuse spectacle relies on the dispersal of "image-objects",[31] the concentrated spectacle tends to present its ruling body as the embodiment of the will, agency and identity of the social whole. An "image of the good which is a résumé of everything that exists officially"[32] thus tends to be identified with the state, the Party or even a "single man", and stands as a "catch-all of socially recognised qualities"[33] (Debord: "if every Chinese has to study Mao, and in effect be Mao, this is because there is *nothing else to be*").[34] Reciprocally, this informs the level of commodity production possible within such societies: according to Debord, the ruling bureaucracy can leave no notable margin of choice to its subjects; all valid decision must be located within the bureaucracy, insofar

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[27] Debord 1995, p.34; 2006, p.782
[28] See Marx 1976, p.932: "…capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated by things".
[29] Debord 1995, p.12, translation altered; 2006, p.767;
[30] Debord 2006, p.685
[31] Debord 1995, p.16; 2006, p.769
[32] Debord 1995, p.42; 2006, p.788
[33] Debord 2006, p.685
[34] Debord 1995, p.42; 2006, p.788

as the latter's validity relies on its supposed status and necessity as an expression of the agency and will of the whole.[35] In consequence, "any independent choice [*choix extérieur*], even the most trivial – concerning food, say, or music – is therefore the choice for [the bureaucracy's] complete destruction".[36] Production in the concentrated spectacle is thus geared towards a more traditional notion of survival than the 'gilded poverty' available within the diffuse form (hence Debord's claim that the bureaucracy within such forms "appears as the *under-developed version* of the old European bourgeoisie").[37]

The distinction between the concentrated and diffuse forms brings us to one of Debord's more puzzling assertions. In the *Comments*, when referring to the 'integrated' spectacle, he writes that "when the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small part; today, no part."[38] Yet *The Society of the Spectacle* begins with the seemingly unequivocal declaration that all life has receded into representation. How then can there be any peripheral reality surrounding either the concentrated or diffuse forms?

Because Debord's notion of history means that the real and the true are ultimately linked to self-determination, his formulation in the *Comments* – i.e. the claim that some aspects of the real exist 'outside' the concentrated and diffuse forms – would seem to indicate that this historical reality persist more directly and immediately within aspects of life that do not (yet) fall within the spectacle's bounds. This means that the spectacle can be understood as a kind of frame (*cadre*) imposed upon historical agency, through which the latter is channelled and thereby co-opted:[39] a frame that is broader within the diffuse form than within its concentrated counterpart, which is forced to make greater recourse to ideology, propaganda and police methods. Thus, activity *within* the spectacle is representation, insofar as it constitutes a territory that exactly corresponds to the spectacle's genetic map;[40] the 'real' however remains 'outside' it, and

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[35] "Exclusive owner of the entire society, [the bureaucracy] declares itself the exclusive representative of that society's superior interests. In so doing, the bureaucratic state is the fulfilment of the Hegelian State" (S.I. 2006, p.284; 1997, p.538).

[36] Debord 1995, p.42, translation altered; 2006, p.788

[37] Debord 2006, p.694, emphasis in the original

[38] Debord 2002, p.9; 2006, p.1598

[39] "There can be no freedom outside of activity, and in the context [*cadre*] of the spectacle all activity is negated – all real activity having been captured in its entirety and channelled into the global construction of the spectacle" (Debord 1995, pp.21-2, translation altered; 2006, p.772).

[40] The spectacle is a "map of this new world, a map which exactly covers its territory" (Debord 1995, p.23, translation altered; 2006, p.774). This can be compared with Baudrillard's later use of a similar image from Borges (Baudrillard 1994, p.1). Incidentally, an interesting and far earlier precedent can however be found in Nietzsche: commenting on discussion of the French Revolution, he remarks that "*the text finally disappeared under the interpretation*" (Nietzsche 1992b, p.239, italics in the original).

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cannot be subsumed by it. One might also note here that in 1966 Debord remarked that "it seems to me that the S.I. would be seriously in error were it to suggest that all life outside Situationist activity was completely reified", as were it to do so such activity would become "a mystical rescue by the concept".[41]

Generalised Separation

It should however be stressed that the spectacle is a form of mediation, as this informs the rather confusing sense in which Debord's term 'spectacle' refers to several distinct aspects of society at the same time. The spectacle is a focal point, being the body of images that model social praxis; yet it is also the mode of action and interaction that these images engender, insofar as life lived in conformity with it is alienated, and becomes representation. As a result, the spectacle is not just a part of society, but also society as a whole. Hence Debord's Hegelian and tripartite claim that "the spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification".[42] This brings us back to the structure of Hegel's Concept.

As we've seen, the Concept is composed of three primary moments – universality, particularity, and singularity – and as indicated in the introduction to part two, there is a sense in which Debord presents the spectacle as a perversion, or rather a representation of the authentic, organic unity implied by the Hegelian model. Hence his claim that the spectacle is at once a whole, parts of that whole, and the unity of the two: it is the 'images' that individuals focus upon (i.e. it exists apart from them);[43] it is the interaction between them mediated by these alienated forms;[44] in consequence, it is also a form of unification. Yet as these individuals are mediated only by images, i.e. alienated forms of their own social power, the unity that results is, as noted above, no more than a "unity...of generalised separation"[45] characterised by a "constant reinforce[ment of] the conditions of isolation of the 'lonely crowd'[46]".[47] The spectacle thus constitutes a 'false' unity that merely aggregates a collection of isolated elements.

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[41] S.I. 2003, p.138; Debord 2006, p.1167
[42] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766
[43] "As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges" (Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, pp.766-7).
[44] "The spectacle cannot be set in abstract opposition to concrete social activity... lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and repeats within itself the spectacular order while giving it positive cohesion" (Debord 1995, p.14, translation altered; 2006, p.768).
[45] Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.767
[46] A reference to *The Lonely Crowd*, an American sociological study by David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney that first appeared in 1950.
[47] Debord 1995, p.22, translation altered; 2006, p.774

Insofar as this false unity is modelled upon the Hegelian Concept, and yet clearly falls short of the latter's unity of universality and particularity, it seems reasonable to suggest that the 'true' unity posited beyond it might actualise that unity in some respect. This will be taken up in part three.

The Spectacle and the Commodity

As indicated in the introduction to part two, the reading of Debord's theory that I'm advancing here implies that not only are the spectacle's images irreducible to the mass media: so too are they irreducible to a specific economic form (hence the concentrated and diffuse forms), or indeed to a specific mode of perpetuating and validating the latter (Debord's 'images' refer equally to entertainment, activity, commodities, propaganda, behaviour, etc.). I would argue that this means that the removal of capitalism is not necessarily the removal of the spectacle, as some form of separation might be retained in a post-revolutionary future (thus Debord: "wherever there is independent *representation*, the spectacle reconstitutes itself").[48] Consequently, although Debord focuses on consumer capitalism – and although there is certainly a sense in which the latter is viewed as providing the clearest expression of spectacle, and as having rendered identifiable the defining problems of the modern revolutionary movement – Western commodity capitalism is perhaps best understood as the (best, most successful) vehicle for a tendency towards spectacle. The latter is thus not reductively and exclusively equivalent to the former: rather, commodity capitalism affords the most adequate content for the spectacles' form.

I'll build on this claim in chapter six when drawing attention to Debord's claim that the spectacle exhibits the "*principle* of commodity fetishism"[49] (my italics); a claim that I'll distinguish from the common contention that the spectacle corresponds to Marx's fetish *per se*. The 'principle' that Debord refers to here, I will argue, is that of the inversion of subject and object, and the reification and rationalisation that the latter gives rise to. Yet as indicated above, I'll also show that Debord moves away from the economic account that founds that inversion (hence the 'principle' of the fetish, as opposed to the fetish *per se*). To that end, chapter five will now set out Marx's own views on capital and the fetish. In doing so I'll demonstrate the importance of Marx's characterisation of capital as a social relation, and I'll contend that Debord's theory of

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48   Debord 1995, p.17; 2006, p.770, emphasis in the original
49   Debord 1995, p.26; 2006, p.776

spectacle falls short of the practical purchase on modern capitalism that Marx's position affords.

Chapter Five: Fetish and Appearance

Alienated Universality and Religion

I've highlighted the sense in which the spectacle can be seen as a 'false', or illusory form of social unity: an external, imposed means of cohesion within which particular individuals remain isolated and separate, but which nonetheless derives from the alienated powers of those that it relates and binds together. This of course bears obvious relation to many of the major themes within Marx's mature economics, and in order to begin tracing these connections we might start by looking at their conceptual roots. To that end, we can begin here with Hegel's early works on religion: texts that argue against religious forms in which God is held to be separate and distanced from his believers. These early writings present a seminal account of an alienated and separated universality that stands distinct from the particularities to which it pertains, and I'll show during the course of this chapter that this can be seen to inform Marx's mature economics. I'll thus start with a few words on Hegel's early religious writings before looking at their echoes in Marx's critique of Hegel's political philosophy. Having done so I'll then move on to address *Capital* itself, before outlining the connections between Marx's concepts of value and commodity fetishism.

It may be tempting to cast Hegel as a closet atheist,[1] but he remains an avowedly Christian, or more specifically a Lutheran and pietist philosopher.[2] After all, in his view "the object of religion, like that of philosophy, is the eternal truth in its very objectivity, God and nothing but God and the explication of God"[3] (it might be added that Hegel initially studied as a theologian: whilst at the Tübingen academy he took philosophy for two years before transferring to theology for a further three). Throughout the 1790's Hegel argued against forms of religion that perpetuate humanity's alienation from God, and which thus engender humanity's separation from its own true nature and essence. These works can thus be read as a template for Hegel's mature concerns with the unification of the finite and the infinite, which finds its initial resolution in the *Phenomenology* of 1807: a book that argued, as we saw earlier, that each individual consciousness contains its own "ladder"[4] to the 'absolute' (or rather God) within itself.

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1 See for example Kojève 1980.
2 For more details on Hegel's religious background see Magee 2001.
3 Quoted in Houlgate 2005, p.245
4 Hegel 1977, p.14

However, these early concerns can also be identified within Hegel's last major work, the *Philosophy of Right*, which describes the full actualisation of the "divine Concept"[5] within a rational state: a society that comprises an organic totality, the universality of which emerges from the shared identity of the elements that compose it.

Consequently, one can argue that many of Hegel's later positions can be glimpsed within his early arguments as to the benefits of 'subjective' forms of religion over their 'objective' counterparts. The former, as defined in 1793's 'On the Prospects for a Folk Religion', are linked to sentiment, feeling and lived experience; the latter are associated with dogma, ritual and the imposition of scripture as positive 'fact'.[6] Hegel's argument here is that religion should be lived and felt rather than submitted to as an external doctrine, and he reiterates this point in his 'The Positivity of the Christian Religion' (1795): a text in which he described objective religion as an 'external' truth, separated from the particularities upon which it is imposed. Against this separation Hegel would argue for the Christian model of a congregation, composed of mutually loving and forgiving believers who actualise their faith within their lived social activity. This is in effect an argument for the realisation of philosophy in praxis,[7] and it can be seen to inform Hegel's later notion of Spirit; for as Hegel's thought developed, religious love and mutual forgiveness became the mutual recognition that founds Spirit, and which ultimately finds complete expression in the rational state's organic, interacting community.

Universality and the State

Although Debord and Marx take Hegel's mature work as their principal point of reference, one can nonetheless find links to these early writings.[8] Hegel's objections to the alienated universality of a separate and detached God would evolve into his critique

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5   Hegel 1991, p.147

6   "Subjective religion is something individual, objective religion a matter of abstraction. The former is the living book of nature, of plants, insects, birds and beasts living with and surviving off each other... The latter is the cabinet of the naturalist, full of insects he has killed, plants that are desiccated, animals stuffed or preserved in alcohol..." (Hegel 1984; see also Hegel 1977, p.31 for the continuity between this view and Hegel's later work).

7   In his 'On the Prospects for a Folk Religion' Hegel writes: "my concern is with what needs to be done so that religion with all the force of its teaching might be blended into the fabric of human feelings, bonded with what moves us to act, and shown to be efficacious" (Hegel 1984).

8   For Kedourie (1995), Feuerbach – who was unaware of these texts – simply reiterates their aversion to religious alienation, unaware that Hegel had 'resolved' the problem of alienation identified in religion in his conception of the rational state. According to Kedourie Marx then compounds the error by criticising the state in similar terms to Feuerbach's critique of religion.

of the static, dichotomous concepts of everyday representational thought (religion is after all described in his mature philosophy as a mere representation of the truth grasped by philosophy).[9] This would not only inform the Young Hegelian contention that philosophy itself might be a mere *Vorstellung* of praxis: in addition, it also pertains to Marx's related criticism of Hegel's rational state. Where Hegel held the latter to be "the Divine Idea as it exists on Earth",[10] Marx viewed the *Philosophy of Right* as a philosophical representation of unity that perpetuated, by way of apology, the real division of the particular elements of bourgeois society. Furthermore, Marx also contends that Hegel's (debatable)[11] celebration of the Prussian state contradicts his philosophy's own emphasis on historical movement, flux and change.

These points can be illustrated by looking at Marx's adoption of Hegel's concept of the 'universal class'. For Hegel, the latter consisted of bureaucrats whose own particular interests lie in the mediation and reconciliation of the other diverse elements of society (their task would thus involve unifying the particular demands of civil society with the more universal concerns of political society).[12] For Marx however, as argued in his 'Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*', it was the proletariat that constituted society's truly 'universal class', as in order to "emancipate" itself the proletariat would also liberate "all the other spheres of society", thereby affording the "total redemption of humanity".[13] Marx's implication here is that the true conditions of freedom lie in the *actualisation* of these philosophical concerns with universality and particularity in collective revolutionary action ("philosophy cannot realise itself without the supersession [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot supersede itself without the realisation [*Verwirklichung*] of philosophy").[14] As we'll see later, the famously defiant words that Marx attributes to this proletarian universal class – "*I am nothing and I should be everything*"[15] – bear direct relation to Debord and the S.I.'s own existential re-formulation of the proletariat, but the salient point here is simply that Marx's concern with achieving true organic unity through the actualisation of

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[9] "Religious consciousness views the world in a more concrete, pictorial way [than Hegelian philosophy]...and so requires a positive *Vorstellung* of the essential unity of man and God [as offered by the figure of Christ] in order to be brought into the way of truth" (Houlgate 2005, p.255; see also Hegel 1977, p.479

[10] Hegel 2004, p.39

[11] For differing views on this issue see the essays collected in Stewart 1996.

[12] "The universal class, the class devoted to the service of the government, has directly in its structure the universal as the end of its essential activity. ...Only [through this class] is the actual particular in the state securely attached to the universal" (Hegel 2005, p.181).

[13] Marx 1975, p.256

[14] Marx 1975, p.257, translation altered; Marx 1999

[15] Marx early writings p.254, emphasis in the original

philosophy reflects his contention that Hegel had presented only the *appearance* and illusion of unification: a mere philosophical 'image' that served only to mask the real disunity of bourgeois society. In the main body of his critique Marx argued that Hegel had generated a model of unity from the pure heavens of the 'Idea', and that he had then imposed it upon a separate and disunited reality. The *Philosophy of Right*, he claimed, treats "the people...as *idea* [*Vorstellung*], fantasy, illusion, *representation* ...[thus occluding] the real opposition between people and government"[16] (a point that Marx would repeat in 'On the Jewish Question', also written in 1844).[17]

Marx would however go on to do rather more than just use the interrelation of universality and particularity as a means of criticising Hegel's philosophical depiction of bourgeois society. Despite his rejection of Hegelian metaphysics he would later employ this notion of unity when casting real, existing bourgeois society as an aggregation of discrete, separate individuals. This contention was framed by way of the Feuerbachian notion of humanity's submission to its own alienated self, insofar as the alien universality that binds these atomised individuals together is their own alienated social power (a view that is of course repeated by Debord, who maintained that "separation makes itself part of the unity of the [spectacular] world").[18] By the mid 1840's Marx had begun to express this in explicitly economic terms: the sale of labour for a wage, Marx contends in his Paris *Manuscripts*, causes "the product of labour" to confront its producer "as *something alien*, as a power *independent* of its producer".[19] The worker is thus alienated from his activity and product, but also from himself and from others: for insofar as work is conducted in pursuit of individual means of subsistence, each worker becomes separated from the universality of humanity's 'species-life', i.e. from humanity's collective transformation of the world[20] (or, as Debord and Lukács would later have it, from the construction of history).

Collective, universal powers and interests thus come to be articulated through the pursuit of separate, fragmentary and individual interests, whilst the results of individual activity come to appear as a power standing over and above the individuals concerned. Hence the following claims, made in *The German Ideology* of 1845-6 (a

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16 Marx 1975, p.134
17 Marx writes there that in the state the individual "is the imaginary member of a fictitious sovereignty, he is divested of his real individual life and filled with an unreal universality" (Marx 1975, p.220).
18 Debord 1995, p.13, translation altered; 2006, p.767
19 Marx 1988, p.71
20 Marx 1988, p.76

work that Debord also drew on in *The Society of the Spectacle*),[21] in which alienated social power is linked to the state and presented as a means of illusory unification:

> Just because individuals [in bourgeois, capitalist society] seek only their particular interest, which for them does not coincide with their communal interest, the latter will be imposed on them as an interest 'alien' to them, and 'independent' of them... the practical struggle of these particular interests... makes practical intervention and control necessary through the illusory 'general' interest in the form of the state. The social power, i.e. the multiplied productive force, which arises through the co-operation of different individuals as it is determined by the division of labour, appears to these individuals... not as their own united power, but as an alien force existing outside them... the origin and goal of which they are ignorant, [and] which they thus cannot control[.][22]

The universal ends of bourgeois society as a whole are thus pursued through the fragmentation and separation of individual ends via private property, the division of labour and the wage-relation. This results in the alienation of the powers and capacities of separated individual's into a universal, but no less 'alien' generality that binds particular individuals together, albeit by way of aggregation rather than interrelation: a unity that thus constitutes no more than the appearance of the genuine communality that this state of affairs denies.

'Real' Appearances and the Structure of Marx's *Capital*

It can be noted here that a trajectory of sorts can be traced through the texts discussed above, in which abstract, detached forms of universality become steadily more concrete. The mystical and religious forms with which we began became the more solid reality of the state, and when we trace these themes further into *Capital* and its account of the commodity form we'll find that this separate universality in fact constitutes the very social relations and organising principles of concrete society itself. The abstract, in other words, would seem to have become real,[23] and in order to develop that point I'll make a few comments on the relation between the structure of *Capital* and its themes of appearance.

Although Marx spent over two decades working on *Capital* only one of its projected volumes was published in his lifetime. It was not until 1894 – and thus twenty seven years after the first volume's publication, and eleven years after its author's death – that all three books finally appeared in print, the second and third having been

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[21] See Debord 1995, p.52, p.117 and p.125; 2006 p.795, p.836 and p.841
[22] Marx 2000, p.186
[23] The remarks made here that pertain to the contemporary interest in real abstraction owe much to discussions with Alberto Toscano, whose work on the subject (see for example Toscano 2005 and 2008) has also proved helpful.

reconstructed by Engels from the notes and manuscripts left to him by Marx. Even in its extant form *Capital* is a vast construction, but it was initially envisaged as being possessed of an even grander scale: according to Marx's original outline of 1857 there were to be six books in total; an initial book on capital, followed by further works on landed property, wage-labour, the state, foreign trade and crisis.[24] This was revised in the early 1860's, when Marx elected instead to create a work of four volumes, composed of three theoretical books on capital, and one on the history of attempts to theorise capitalist society (the preparatory notes to which were published posthumously as *Theories of Surplus Value*). It would thus seem that *Capital*'s existing tripartite structure conforms to Marx's original intentions, and that's an important point, as it perhaps serves to substantiate the view that the three books' homology with the movement of the Hegelian Concept was intended by their author, and not just by their subsequent editor (Engels' later enthusiasm for framing Marx through Hegel is of course the subject of much debate).[25]

As we saw earlier, the Concept's movement involves an initial, immediate starting point which becomes differentiated and other to itself before returning to self identity, albeit whilst incorporating the resultant differences into a mediated, complex totality. Likewise, volume one of *Capital* famously begins with capitalist society's immediate 'appearance' as an "immense accumulation of commodities",[26] and goes on to outline the general schema for capitalist production; volume two describes the interrelation of the various capitals within society; volume three then returns to the 'surface' of capitalist society, and develops its more complex aspects (e.g. price, interest, speculative finance) in the light of the determinations established by the previous volumes.

The debts owed here to the Hegelian Concept can be illustrated by way of reference to the opening paragraph of volume three,[27] but a more explicit discussion of Marx's approach can be found in the *Grundrisse*. There, whilst setting out the 'correct'

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[24] See Felton Shortall's *The Incomplete Marx* (1994) for useful discussions of the structure of *Capital.* Shortall's book presents an excellent overview of Marx's work and did much to inform my own suggestion that Debord's work might point beyond itself to new formulations.

[25] See Colletti 1972 for a useful introduction to this issue, and Rees 1994 for an opposing view. See also Carver 1983 and Levine 1984.

[26] Marx 1976, p.125

[27] "In volume one we investigated the phenomena exhibited by the process of capitalist production, taken by itself, i.e. the immediate production process... in the second volume... we considered the circulation process as it mediates the process of social reproduction... [this] third volume [aims] ...to discover and present the concrete forms which grow out of the process of capital's movement considered as a whole. ...The configurations of capital, as developed in this [third] volume, thus approach step by step the form in which they appear on the surface of society..." (Marx 1981, p.117).

method of political economy, Marx explains that if he was to take society as it immediately presents itself he would fail to see it as an interrelated whole, and would have only a "chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*]"[28] of the latter. In order to understand it as a totality he must first break it down through a process of abstraction until he reaches its root concepts. Having done so, he must then reassemble these concepts, noting their interrelation and tensions, and thereby conceive that society as a dynamic whole, i.e. as a totality.[29] This is echoed again in 1873, in the postface to the second German edition of volume one, where Marx explains the distinction between his mode of analysis (breaking reality down into concepts) and his mode of presentation (reconstructing a model of reality from those concepts).[30]

Thus it is in order to get past the immediate, superficial appearances of society that *Capital* develops a series of increasingly complicated and sophisticated levels of analysis from its initial root concept of the commodity. One can thus sympathise to some degree with those who argue, like Lukács,[31] that *Capital*'s opening chapter contains *in nuce* all that will follow from it; one might also note that it is this methodology that gives *Capital* its daunting scale.[32] Yet there is more to the theme of appearance than a need to theorise complexity *per se*: for capital, according to Marx, somehow generates illusions and false appearances that occlude and distort its real nature. *Capital*, with its tripartite structure and increasingly sophisticated levels of analysis, is shaped rather like a wedge, and is designed to break through them.

However – and despite Marx's frequent analogies to the 'depths' and 'surface appearances' of society – these appearances are not solely ideal and ideological, but also form real aspects of lived social reality. For example, although real, concrete labour only counts as socially necessary labour within capitalism, socially necessary labour still constitutes a concrete determination of real social practice, and forms a regulative measure to which the latter must conform. Likewise, exchange-value may well be the form of appearance taken by value when a commodity is placed in an exchange-relation, but it is no less a concrete aspect of the real exchanges that structure and shape

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[28] Marx 1973, p.100
[29] Marx 1973, p.100
[30] Marx 1976, p.102
[31] Lukács 1971, p.170
[32] Over 400 pages into the total 1026 pages of volume three – and thus after the 1084 pages of volume one and the 599 pages of volume two – Marx remarks, seemingly without irony: "as the reader will have recognised in dismay, the analysis of the real, inner connections of the capitalist production process is a very intricate thing and a work of great detail"; "it is," he adds soberly, "one of the tasks of science to reduce the visible and merely apparent movement to the actual inner movement" (Marx 1981, p.428).

society. By extension, and as I'll also argue below, the commodity fetish is not just a subjective illusion. Not only do the powers of subjects appear as those of objects: rather, those objects really do act as if they were subjects, determining real human subjects as if the latter were themselves mere objects.

The implication that this gives rise to is that the real, inner core of capitalism – the 'depth' that underlies its 'surface appearances' – is not a real, material reality that has become masked by ideology and illusion. Rather, what Marx's analysis reveals is something more akin to a logical core: the inner workings, as it were, of an operative whole. For some, such as Postone, this means that reading labour as if it were a 'natural' reality upon which the 'false' framework of capital has been imposed must be flawed, because labour is itself an integral component of the workings of this 'machine'; as we'll see later, this leads him to contend that Marx's early philosophical anthropology is rendered untenable by his mature economics. We'll also see later that Debord and the S.I. similarly rejected any identification of emancipation with labour *per se* (although it should be remembered that this does not entail rejecting the philosophical anthropology that Postone dismisses: capitalist labour is merely one alienated expression of a far broader capacity for activity). However, where Marx's account presents the reality masked by capitalist appearances as the inner workings of capitalism – the social relations that compose it, and which bind together atomised, particular individuals by way of the alienated universality of capitalist value – Debord's contention that the whole of life has become image tends towards locating the 'real' and the 'authentic' in the historical capacity that spectacular society suppresses. The 'real' thus becomes 'life', considered as an abstract and romantic potential, against which stands a 'capital' that has become equivalent to all present social existence. Hence my earlier contention that although some have held Debord to be a useful theorist of real abstraction, his theory is in fact too abstract: it tends towards viewing society as a homogeneous whole, separated from a potential that ultimately resides in the dormant subjectivity of the spectator.

These claims will be substantiated as this second part of the thesis progresses, and I'll now move to look at Marx's account in a little more depth. In order to do so I'll begin by indicating quite what capital's appearances might be said to hide.

Capital and Appearance

The very first sentence of *Capital* reads as follows: "the wealth of societies in

which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears [*erscheint*] as an immense accumulation of commodities; the individual commodity is its elementary form".[33] I've altered Fowkes' translation slightly because he employs the English word 'appears' twice: once for capitalist wealth, as in my rendering, but also when referring to the commodity's status as this wealth's 'elementary form'.[34] In losing the distinction between the appearance of wealth and the presumably surer ground of its 'elementary form', Fowkes loses the indication of illusion or performance expressed by the word *erscheint*.[35] Marx's sentence can be nuanced further by way of reference to Hegel's view that "appearance [*erscheint*]...must not be confused with mere semblance [*schein*]," or more literally with 'shine': for Hegel, the latter is merely the initial, inner determinacy of an essence that has yet to 'shine forth'; appearance, on the other hand, is the external expression of this inner form.[36] Interestingly, *vis a vis* the theme of real abstraction noted above, this leads Hegel to contend that "essence therefore is not *behind* or *beyond* appearance, but since it is the essence that exists, existence is appearance".[37] Capitalist wealth, in other words – that immense (or rather monstrous: *ungeheure*) collection of commodities – is thus indicated to be the 'external' expression of some hitherto unacknowledged inner 'logic'.

In order to illustrate the contrast between those inner workings and their outer appearances we might now compare volume one's first sentence with its last. This reads as follows: "the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore capitalist private property as well, have for their fundamental condition the annihilation of that private property which rests on the labour of the individual himself; in other words, the expropriation of the worker."[38] The book thus begins by claiming that the wealth proper to capitalist production appears as a mass of commodities, but it ends with the contention that this wealth relies upon impoverishment; for although we open the book with a great collection of private property (i.e. commodities), we learn during the course of its analyses that the production of commodities entails the *ex*propriation of their producers. In other words, capital is not just wealth, as opposed to poverty: it is a form of wealth that engenders, and which in fact relies upon poverty.

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[33] Marx 1976, p.125; Marx 1962.
[34] Fowkes has "...the individual commodity appears as its elementary form" (Marx 1990, p.125).
[35] I am indebted to Professor John Hutnyk for suggesting this reading of *Capital*'s opening sentence.
[36] "Essence is initially a totality of inward shining, but it does not remain in this inwardness; instead, as ground, it emerges into existence; and existence, since it does not have its ground within itself but in an other, is quite simply appearance" (Hegel 1991, p.199-200)
[37] Hegel 1991, p.199
[38] Marx 1976, p.940

So what then is capital? This is by no means as facile a question as it might seem, and we can begin to answer it by tracing some of Marx's statements on the subject through *Capital*'s developing stages of analysis. Marx begins by telling us that value is a quantitative measure of labour; that "this quantity is measured by its duration," and that "labour-time is itself measured on the particular scale of hours, days, etc."[39] Yet this value is not a measure of the real, physical labour conducted in order to produce the item in question, but rather of the amount of average, socially necessary labour time required given society's extant means of production.[40] Labour, in other words, has no intrinsic value, even though the social relations that articulate labour attribute value to it.[41] We are then told that the commodity is an object that represents a quantity of socially average, necessary labour, and that it thereby represents a quantity of value. It can in consequence be exchanged with others by way of the mediation of the universal commodity of money, and if the initial 'bearer' buys cheap and sells dear, then a quantity of value will transfer between the physical forms involved (i.e. from commodity to money and back again) and will grow in the process. It is in this form that capital is first identified in Marx's text: as value that has the capacity to grow through the (necessarily social) exchange of commodities that represent quantities of social labour.[42]

Yet whilst it soon transpires that mercantile exchange is not the true source of capital, exchange is nonetheless intrinsic to capital's real origin in the exploitation of labour through the extraction of surplus-value:[43] for although the price of a day's labour-power may represent the quantity of labour performed, it is by no means equal to the latter. The analysis of surplus-value and the determinations that it gives rise to leads to the contention that the very existence of capital relies upon the continued existence of a working class deprived of the means of providing for their own means of subsistence independently, and who are thus obliged to sell their labour in return for a wage (i.e. the wage relation that engenders production rests on exchange). Marx's answer to the question above, therefore, is ultimately that capital is a *social relation*:[44] a social

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[39] Marx 1976, p.129

[40] Marx 1976, p.129.

[41] "Labour is the substance, and the immanent measure of value, but it has no value itself. ...'value of labour'...is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth. These imaginary expressions arise, nevertheless, from the relations of production themselves. They are categories for the forms of appearance of essential relations." Marx 1976. p.677

[42] Marx's initial definition of capital is that of a "value" that "increases its magnitude" by passing through the successive forms of money, commodity and then money once more (i.e. the famed M-C-M' sequence); this "movement," Marx writes, "converts it into capital" (Marx 1976, p.252).

[43] "Capital, therefore, is not only the command over labour, as Adam Smith thought. It is essentially the command over unpaid labour" (Marx 1976, p.672).

[44] "capital is a social relation of production. It is a historical [i.e. contextually specific] relation of

relation marked by class antagonism,[45] and which thus holds the potential for its own supersession implicit within it.

Fetishism

Now, if capital is a social relation, then it must be contingent upon the perpetuation of a certain set of social conditions. If that is so, then capitalism is by no means a 'natural' and eternal necessity: rather, it can be superseded if those conditions are understood. The problem however is that capital tends to present itself as a *thing* (money, perhaps, or means of production), and this illusion lies at the core of the notion of commodity fetishism.[46]

This can be illustrated with one of Marx's own examples. He often follows his theoretical discussions in *Capital* with factual and historical demonstrations (e.g. the famous chapter on the length of the working day, which illustrates the drive towards surplus-value extraction theorised in the preceding chapters), and he concludes volume one as a whole with just such a demonstration of its overall argument.[47] There Marx describes capital's emergence from a historical process, driven by its own needs, towards the institution of conditions favourable to its production and growth.[48] This is followed by a demonstration *ad absurdum*: whilst quoting Wakefield, a 'bourgeois economist' greatly concerned with the tendency of workers in the colonies to abandon their employment in favour of independence, Marx writes of an unfortunate Mr. Peel who:

...took with him from England to the Swan River district of Western Australia means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000. This Mr. Peel even had the foresight to bring besides 3,000 persons of the working class, men, women and children. Once he arrived at his destination, 'Mr. Peel was left

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[45] production." Marx 1976, p.932n.

"The capitalist process of production, therefore, seen as a total, connected process, i.e. a process of reproduction, produces not only commodities, not only surplus-value, but it also produces and reproduces the capital-relation itself; on the one hand the capitalist, on the other the wage-labourer" (Marx 1976, p.724).

[46] Marx's use of the term 'fetish' is of course an allusion to elements of African religion, in which supernatural powers would be attributed to man-made objects. The word 'fetish' comes from the French '*fétiche*', which stems from the Portuguese '*feitiço*'; this is in turn derived from the Latin '*facere*', which means 'to make'. The term was used by the Portuguese as a means of describing African magical artefacts, and became popularised by Charles de Brosse's *Le Culte des Dieux Fetishes* (1785); a text that Marx, according to Wendling, "read in German translation in 1842" (Wendling 2009, p.51).

[47] Marx states in a letter of 1877 that the book's final sections are "nothing else than the short summary of long developments previously given in the chapters on capitalist production" (Marx 1968).

[48] This process is referred to as 'primitive' or originary accumulation, and is said to have taken place through the division and destruction of common land, the appropriation of society's means of production by a capitalist class, and the consequent formation of a proletariat.

without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river'. Unhappy Mr. Peel, who provided for everything except the export of English relations of production to Swan River![49]

In the new colonies, where the workers are able to abscond and meet their needs of subsistence independently, the capital relation breaks down: the resources that Mr. Peel shipped to Australia thus cease to be capital. "A mule," Marx writes, "is a machine for spinning cotton. Only in certain relations does it become capital. Outside these circumstances it is no more capital than gold is intrinsically money, or sugar is the price of sugar."[50] Nonetheless, the "capitalist soul" of such items is "so intimately wedded, in the mind of the political economist, to their material substance, that he christens them capital under all circumstances".[51] Yet why does this confusion take place, and how is it connected to the themes of universality and particularity described above? In order to respond to that question it may be useful to rehearse some of the basic aspects of Marx's account of value and the commodity form.

Time, Universality and the Commodity Form

Just as capital can only exist under certain social circumstances, so too are the principal characteristics of the commodity form similarly reliant upon specific conditions, which are delineated within the opening chapter of *Capital*. This first chapter describes a society of independent commodity producers, each of whom produces items that are of use to persons other than themselves, and each secures the items that they themselves require by exchanging their own products with those of others. Following the comments above on the structure of *Capital*, we might rehearse the fact that this initial chapter is not an historical depiction of pre-capitalist society:[52] rather, it is an abstraction, an initial schema that arises from and comprises the conditions of existence of the commodity form itself.

An entity can only be a commodity if it is to be sold to another individual. It must therefore be useful to someone other than its producer, or rather to someone other than its initial possessor, and it must therefore have a *social* use-value.[53] The commodity's location within a system of market exchange gives rise to its exchange-value: a measure in which the value of one commodity is related to that of another. Use-

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[49]   Marx 1976, p.933
[50]   Marx 1976, p.932
[51]   Marx 1976, p.933
[52]   See Arthur 2004 for a particularly clear discussion of this issue.
[53]   Marx 1976, p.131.

value and exchange-value, in other words – the two dual aspects of the commodity – presuppose the existence of the market. Furthermore, the value that comes to be expressed as exchange-value is similarly bound to the market: it does not represent the quantity of real, physical labour expended in producing the item in question, but rather the amount of socially necessary labour time that this act of production represents, i.e. the quantitative sum of the abstract, socially average labour that would need to be expended in order to produce that item given the current means of production. Such abstraction and homogeneity[54] can only arise through the generalisation of exchange between different labours, i.e. from the quantitative, abstractive equivalence of qualitative differences. The commodity form is thus peculiar to a social system in which individual, particular need is met through generalised exchange, and in which particular, qualitatively distinct labours thereby become abstract, universal labour.

What becomes apparent here is the degree to which qualitative particularity is subsumed and articulated by a quantitative generality: a generalisation that entails organising particular temporalities under the rubric of abstract social time.[55] Thus even within the terms introduced in *Capital*'s first chapter we can see that particular labours are cast as elements of the universal mass of social labour, and that the exchanges that this involves are conducted in accordance with a measure that stems from the very generality and abstraction of that same universality. In more Hegelian terms, particular individuals are thus related by way of their own universal, shared identity (i.e. abstract social labour). This however is an inherently alienated and separate form of universality. These individuals do not interact directly: the reproduction of society takes place through market exchange, and not through the direct interaction and organisation of the individuals concerned. As a result, this universality is a real, concrete aspect of society, insofar as it constitutes a relation between these individuals; yet insofar as it falls short of full organic interrelation it can be classed as a representation of a more authentic

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[54] "The total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of commodities, counts here as one homogeneous mass of human labour-power, although composed of innumerable units of labour-power." Marx 1976, p.129

[55] See Postone 1996 for a more involved discussion of this theme. As he points out, time in fact becomes tyrannical: struggles take place over the length of the working day, as capital pursues the extraction of absolute and relative surplus-value, and time, *qua* measure, dictates the movements, actions and expectations of those subject to it. Thus Marx in *The Poverty of Philosophy*: "time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most time's carcass. …the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives" (quoted in Lukács, 1971, p.89; Debord quotes the same passage, 1995, p.110; 2006, p.831). Qualitative human becoming within time comes to be subsumed by the quantitative accumulation of value. See also Hutnyk (2004, pp.55-113) for a discussion of time in Marx and Derrida, considered in relation to speed and technology.

unity, in much the same manner as the objections to the bourgeois state discussed above.

Admittedly, this latter point is not a dominant theme in *Capital* itself, but it can nonetheless be discerned therein. It can also identified in Debord's work, and it's notable that he raises it in relation to the issue of time and temporality: whilst referencing Marx's claim that "the reality, which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals",[56] Debord talks of a collectivity composed of "a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times".[57] The conditions of unity and historical action would thus seem to involve the interrelation of individual temporalities.

Fetishism, Alienation and the Labour Theory of Value

Having made these observations we can now return to the fetish. In market exchange, value appears as exchange-value,[58] because the value of one commodity comes to be expressed in a quantitative relation with that of another. Now, if the exchange-vale of linen, to use one of Marx's own examples, is equivalent to that of a coat, then the use-value, i.e. the physical body of the coat, serves as the expression of the value of the linen (x amount of linen = one coat). This is the basis of the fetish: for a value that stems from social relations (socially average labour) appears here as the objective characteristics of a product of those relations ("the coat," Marx writes, seems to be "endowed with the form of value by nature itself...just as much as its property of being heavy or its ability to keep us warm").[59] Value's origin in social labour thus becomes occluded, as it now appears as an attribute of the coat itself. When the coat is replaced with gold, or rather with money, this basis is obscured entirely, as value then appears as price.

I described above the way in which the ubiquity of exchange rendered different, particular labours equivalent by way of the universality of socially average labour; now, with the introduction of money into the analysis, the universality derived from the interrelation of particular producers becomes expressed in the form of a universal commodity – money, the general equivalent – to which each particular commodity is rendered equivalent.[60] Money, Marx writes, is "the finished form of the world of

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[56] Marx 2000, p.196
[57] Debord 1995, p.116; 2006, p.836
[58] Marx 1976, p.152
[59] Marx 1976, p.149
[60] This point is more complex: Marx goes on to note that the price of money itself fluctuates, and in

commodities" because it "conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers".[61]

Marx's opening account of the commodity in *Capital*'s first chapter thus already depicts the denigration of the producers' ability to consciously manage and organise their own affairs. As the social relations by way of which society reproduces itself "take on the fantastic form of a relationship between things",[62] each individual becomes separated from the overall organisation of the whole. Individuals become subordinated to an abstract and separate universality that arises from them, but which in fact dictates their movements ("their own movement within society has for them the form of a movement made by things, and these things, far from being under their control, in fact control them").[63] Here at the outset of volume one this simply means that individuals are related by way of the interactions of their products; later it will transpire that social activity *per se* comes to be dictated by the alienated labour involved in commodity production and exchange.

In order to move towards that claim it might be helpful to look at the connection between the fetish and the wage. Within the wage-relation the peculiarities of the commodity form – which identifies things with their prices – causes the labour performed during the working day to become conflated with the price of the labour-power sold to the capitalist. The distinction between paid and unpaid labour is masked, and capital's origin in surplus-value falls from view. In consequence, the inequality of capitalist production appears as the equality of commodity exchange: both the buyer and seller of labour confront one another as equals, possessed of the same property rights. Thus Marx: "all the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have [this] as their basis".[64] Hence Marx's famous distinction between the "sphere of circulation," where "everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone," and the "hidden abode of production".[65] Bourgeois notions of justice and right not only mask exploitation, but rather actively facilitate it.[66]

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volume three he describes the buying and selling of money as a discrete commodity in its own right. The point however is that it serves as an expression of the universality of socially average labour.

[61] Marx 1976, pp.168-9
[62] Marx 1976, p.164
[63] Marx 1976, p.167
[64] Marx 1976, p.680
[65] Marx 1976, p.280
[66] As indicated in the introduction to part two, *Capital* offers considerably more than a merely moral critique of inequality, which would remain mired within the same liberal notions of equality as the 'sphere of circulation' itself.

The subsequent determinations of the fetish presented in the further stages of *Capital* continue to mask capital's status as an antagonistic social relation. In volume two, the blurring of the price of labour with that of the finished commodity's raw materials is said to bring the fetish "to fulfilment" (as "the origin of the surplus-value present in the product [is thereby] completely withdrawn from view");[67] in volume three Marx claims that "the fetish character of capital" becomes "complete" in the form of interest bearing capital, insofar as value seems to spontaneously grow there of its own accord (it thus "appears as a mysterious and self-creating source...of its own increase").[68]

This brings to the fore the following point, which will become important when we look at Debord's own account in chapter six. It should now be apparent that the fetish is intimately linked both to Marx's labour theory of value and to his account of alienation (or rather to his mature formulations of the latter): for the fetish's occlusion of capitalist social relations furthers capital's status as an autonomous force that dictates the nature and allocation of labour and activity within society. The fetish is therefore intimately connected to *Capital*'s theme of subject-object inversion.

We first encounter the latter in Marx's initial account of the fetishistic aspects of exchange, but as *Capital* proceeds it becomes increasingly apparent that capitalism is, as Marx puts it in volume three, "production only for *capital*, and not the reverse, i.e. the [production of] ...a steadily expanding pattern of life for the *society* of the producers".[69] Human subjects, in other words, become subservient to their own objective products and alienated activity. This inversion takes various forms (for example, the subordination of the producer to the means of production[70] and the transformation of means of reducing labour into the means of prolonging the latter),[71] but it ultimately entails the dominance of the "automatic subject"[72] of capitalist value: a Frankenstein's monster, to use a suitably Gothic metaphor:[73] a "self-moving substance"[74] that is in effect the shared universal substance of society's own alienated labour.

Yet what's important here – and it can easily be missed – is the sense in which

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[67] Marx 1978, p.303
[68] Marx 1981, p.516
[69] Marx 1981, p.352
[70] Marx 1976, p.425
[71] Marx 1976, p.532
[72] Marx 1976, p.255
[73] See Wheen 2006. Wheen has great fun with the many Gothic aspects of Marx's account (werewolves, vampires, Dante, Faust, etc.), and even goes so far as to cast *Capital* as a Gothic novel.
[74] Marx 1976, p.256

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casting capital as alienated power doesn't quite capture the full nature of the situation. Rather, capital is a social relation within which that power becomes alienated. Thus Marx: "those who demonstrate that all the productive force ascribed to capital is a *displacement*, a *transposition of the productive force* of labour, forget precisely that capital itself is essentially this *displacement*, this *transposition*".[75] It's thus a mistake to treat capital as if it were a force in its own right; and as can perhaps already be seen from my earlier discussions of Debord's work, I'll go on to suggest in chapter six that one can find a tendency towards such a position in the theory of spectacle. To view capital in such terms is to further a sense in which it is a monolithic entity rather than a contingent set of social relations, and thus undermines the sense in which it might be inherently internally antagonistic. In consequence, such an approach undermines the identification of the 'weak points' that a strategic analysis might single out for attack.

We can close here by returning to Marx's unhappy Mr. Peel: the unfortunate colonialist who mistook his means of production for capital, and whose workers abandoned him when presented with the possibility of escaping from the conditions engendered by private ownership of the means of production. It can now be stated that the root of Peel's error lies in the degree to which the commodity form causes value to appear as an attribute of the commodity itself: hence his failure to recognise that money, means of production and means of subsistence "only become capital under circumstances in which they serve at the same time as means of exploitation of, and domination over, the worker."[76] With this error thus comes a consequent tendency to view the relations that it relies upon as "an eternal necessity ordained by nature".[77] Yet Mr. Peel's unhappiness also serves to illustrate a further issue. Although capital's true nature as a social relation is masked, and although that nature is shown to permeate and inform the entirety of society, Marx nonetheless retains a clear target: his analysis, insofar as it shows capital to be an antagonistic social relation reliant upon exploitation, identifies the wage-relation as the point that any engagement with capital ought to address. Whilst I won't argue for the absolute validity of that diagnosis in the chapters that follow, I will contend that Debord's differs from it, and in a manner that gives rise to a number of problems: for where Marx points to the wage-relation, Debord's own point of rupture would seem to be located within the alienation of the individual subject

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[75] Marx 1973, pp.308-9, emphasis in the original; quoted in Arthur 2004, p.48. Arthur presents a helpful discussion of this issue.

[76] Marx 1976, p.933

[77] Marx 1976, p.575

from a largely homogenised world. This, as I'll argue in chapter six, undermines a critical purchase on the actual workings of capital.

Chapter Six: Marxism and Spectacle

Debord and Marx

This chapter will highlight some of the more problematic aspects of Debord's theory by way of its relation to Marx and Marxism. I'll begin by showing the manner in which the theory of spectacle's historical and teleological dimensions cast the relation between the two writers as a Hegelian *Aufhebung*; I'll then try to put Debord's views on Marx into a theoretical and historical context. The second part of the chapter will look at the problematic aspects of the theory of spectacle in detail, primarily by way of the relation between the image and the commodity.

In the discussions above I've drawn attention to Debord's characterisation of the spectacle as a historical tendency that had been brought to its full expression by modern commodity capitalism.[1] Yet I've also argued that the spectacle is not ultimately specific to commodity capitalism *per se*: on my reading, the end of capitalism is not necessarily the end of the spectacle, as the latter is primarily the denial of historical agency. Some form of spectacle would thus continue to exist so long as some form of separated social power remained, and for this reason there can be no easy equivalence between the spectacle and the commodity. After all, it is not only commodities that are cast as spectacular, but also modes of behaviour and forms of political opposition[2] (hence the S.I.'s objection to their own 'contemplative' admirers, whom they dubbed 'pro-situs'). It would thus seem that struggle against the spectacle cannot be restricted to attempts to address capitalism alone, and that in fact entails a broader project: one that it as much ethical and aesthetic as it is economic. I'll suggest that it is for this reason that Debord's work implies its own effective supersession of Marx's classical account.

On the 21st of March, 1968, *The Times Literary Supplement* reviewed Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Admitting that "under the dense Hegelian wrappings with which they muffle their pages several interesting ideas are lurking", the reviewer made the following analogy: "M. Debord and M. Vaneigem have brought out their long-awaited major texts: the *Capital* and *What is to be Done?*, as it were, of the new movement."[3] Although misplaced, such

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[1] "The most developed [i.e. the modern spectacle] shows the origin in another light, which is *finally* its true light" (Debord 2004a, p.45).

[2] See for example Debord 2006, pp.519-20.

[3] Quoted by Knabb in S.I. 2006, p.501

comparisons are nonetheless common, and were cheerfully endorsed by the S.I. themselves. In 1964, and on the centenary of the original I.W.A.'s formation, the S.I. declared themselves to be the first international's direct successors,[4] and in 1969 they made the following allusion:

> It is known that Eisenstein wanted to make a film of *Capital*. Considering his formal conceptions and political submissiveness, it can be doubted if his film would have been faithful to Marx's text. But for our part, we are confident that we can do better. For example, as soon as it becomes possible Guy Debord will himself make a cinematic adaptation of *The Society of the Spectacle* that will certainly not fall short of that book.[5]

That film was eventually made in 1973, and it was followed it in 1975 by another: Debord's self-explanatory *Refutation of All the Judgements, Pro or Con, Thus Far Rendered on the Film 'The Society of the Spectacle'*, in the script to which Debord claimed that "there have not been three books of social critique of such importance [as *The Society of the Spectacle*] in the last hundred years.[6] Debord was also not averse to equating himself to Marx personally, albeit ironically,[7] just as he was to Hegel: having been born in the evening, when 'the shades of night are gathering', he would joke about being the owl of Minerva.[8] Much of this was of course ironic, but behind the humour there seems to be a sense in which he really did view himself and the S.I. as contemporary embodiments of the 'thought of history', and as having been afforded a 'higher' perspective than their predecessors by virtue of their historical location.[9]

In order to introduce this we might look again, very briefly, at one of the many examples of his enthusiasm for history's 'bad side'. Debord himself claimed that he had "merited the universal hatred of the society of my time",[10] and stated that he "strove to

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[4] A tract produced in celebration of that centenary featured a photograph of Marx with an added speech bubble: "On 28th September 1964 it will be exactly one hundred years since we started the Situationist International. It's really going to get going now!" (Gray 1998, p.118).

[5] S.I. 2006, p.379;1997, p.673

[6] Debord 2003, p.127; 2006, p.1310

[7] See for example Debord 1974b.

[8] Hussey 2002, p.13

[9] This should be tempered by noting that Debord and the S.I. recognised their own inevitable historical location and limitation: in his 'Theses on the S.I. and its Times', Debord wrote: "Whoever helps the present age to discover its potential is [not]... shielded from this age's defects" (S.I. 2003, p.72; Debord 2006, p.1133). Nonetheless, when describing the evolution of culture, Debord held that "as for the productions of people who are still subject to cultural colonialism (often caused by political oppression), even though they may be progressive in their own countries, they play a reactionary role in the advanced cultural centres" (S.I. 2006, p.35; 2006, p.319-20). Again, this is tempered by Debord and the S.I.'s comments on the need for a global revolution (see for example his remarks on Congolese revolutionary movement (Debord 2006, p.692)); yet even there one can still find a sense in which the 'higher' expresses the true nature of the 'lower'. When discussing Algeria he wrote that "underdevelopment must be resolved on a worldwide scale, beginning with the revolutionary domination of the irrational *overdevelopment* of productive forces in...the various forms of rationalised capitalism" (S.I. 2006, p.191, translation altered; 1997, p.458, emphasis in the original).

[10] Debord 2003, p.146; 2006, p.1349

be...intolerable".[11] He and the S.I. had enlisted in the "Devil's Party"[12] (an unattributed reference to Blake),[13] and his remarks even take on messianic overtones[14] when he casts himself and the S.I. as "emissaries of the Prince of Division".[15] Amongst such comments is his adoption of Mallarmé's claim that "Destruction was my Beatrice",[16] and if we place this in relation to one of Marx's own references to *The Divine Comedy* we can form a quick illustration of the S.I.'s purported *Aufhebung* of classical Marxism. In the conclusion to the first preface to *Capital*'s first volume Marx wrote as follows:

I welcome every opinion based on scientific criticism. As to the prejudices of so-called public opinion, to which I have never made concessions, now, as ever, my maxim is that of the great Florentine: '*Segui il tuo corso, e lascia dir le genti*. [Go on your way, and let the people talk]'[17]

Marx is quoting Canto V, line 13 of the *Purgatorio*. When beginning their climb of Mount Purgatory Dante and Virgil pass the souls of the 'late repentant': individuals who are punished for their indolence with a delay in their own ascent. When Dante pauses to listen to them marvel at his corporeal nature he is scolded by Virgil, who reminds him of the need to strive ever upwards towards the divine.[18] At each stage of the *Divine Comedy* Dante – as protagonist rather than as narrator – mirrors the nature of the circle that he passes through,[19] and in this instance he reflects the idle souls' concern with the worldly and the trivial. Given that this reflection of context and mentality and concern with developmental movement chimes with Hegelian and Marxist notions of history, one could read Marx's further literary flourishes in this preface – which are largely given over to the "iron necessity" that governs the "natural laws of capitalist

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[11] Debord 2003, p.159; 2006, p.1364
[12] Debord 2003, p.173; 2006, p.1379
[13] This is not signalled in Debord's list of *détournements*, but he seems to be referencing Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in which Blake links the artistic, the passionate and the potentially transgressive to the 'diabolical': "the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God, and at liberty when of devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake 2008, p.129).
[14] Again, this is not signalled in Debord's list of *détournements*, but it seems to be an allusion to Jesus Christ, no less: "I am come to send fire on the earth...Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, nay, but rather division" (Luke 12, 49 – 56). Debord's 'Prince' is however the historical proletariat, as it is immediately cast as "he who has been wronged" (Debord 2003, p.174; 2006, p.1383); this, according to Debord's notes to *In Girum*, was a password used by "Italian millenarists", and referenced by Bakunin (Debord 2006, p.1418).
[15] Debord 2003, p. 174, 2006, p.1381
[16] Debord 2004, p.15; 2006, p.1663
[17] Marx 1976, p.93
[18] "'Keep up with me and let the people talk! ...the man who lets his thoughts be turned aside/ by one thing or another, will lose sight/ of his true goal, his mind sapped of its strength" (Alighieri, 1985, p.49).
[19] "..the soul [in the afterlife] is fixed eternally in that which it has chosen... Therefore the reaction it calls forth in Dante can be no more than the reflection of what it has in itself" (Sayers in Alighieri 2001, p.50).

production"[20] – with a certain degree of irony: for just as Dante mirrors the idle souls' preoccupation with the present, so too, according to Debord, does Marx's "scientific-determinism" reflect "the weakness of the revolutionary proletariat of his time."[21]

Debord claims that for Marx "it is the *struggle* – and by no means [economic] *law* – that has to be understood,"[22] and he would seem to hold Marx's calls for the realisation of philosophy and emphasis on praxis to form the real, radical core of his work. Debord however also contends that the defeat of the 1848 insurrections and Commune furthered Marx's attempts to bolster that struggle with a knowledge of such economic laws, and writes that Marx thereby allowed himself to be "drawn onto the ground of the dominant forms of thought".[23] This gave rise to the "scientific-determinist side of Marx's thought", which opened a "breach" into which the process of "'ideologisation'" was able to "penetrate": "it was in this mutilated form, later taken as definitive, that Marx's theory became 'Marxism'."[24]

One could in fact contend that Debord and the S.I. viewed Marxist 'economism' as an example of the very fetishism that Marx himself had identified: for 'upward' progress, to return to the illustration above, came to be hampered by an approach that merely reflected the manner in which human history within capitalism really is shaped "by the products of men's hands"[25] rather than by the producers themselves.[26] In contrast, as we saw in part one – and as Debord's negative Beatrice might indicate – he and the S.I. advocated a constant negativity, perpetually opposed to the present moment, and thus opposed to any attribution of agency to economic or structural determination.[27] Hence the S.I.'s dismissal of Ernest Mandel as a "Trotskyist" whose *Treatise on Marxist Economics* by its title alone contradicts the whole revolutionary method of Marx".[28] Marx's account of the separated, generalised universalities of capitalism's operative abstractions – which as we saw in chapter five were said to be alienated from the particular individuals that they structure and articulate – was thus itself cast as a body of abstract law, separate from and even hostile towards the individuals whose historical self-awareness it purports to provide. In fact, its analysis of capitalism is

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[20] Marx 1976, p.91
[21] Debord 1995, p.55; 2006, p.797
[22] Debord 1995, p.52; 2006, p.795
[23] Debord 1995, p.55; 2006, p.797
[24] Debord 1995, pp.54-5; 2006, p.797
[25] Marx 1976, p.165
[26] See also Castoriadis: "some of [Marx's] views of capitalism reflect the influence of capitalist ideology itself... [and] express, in their depths, the essence of the capitalist vision of man" (Castoriadis 1974).
[27] As a slogan from May 1968 put it: "structures do not march in the street" (Quoted in Noys 2010, p.54).
[28] S.I. 2006, p.217; 1997, p.442

viewed as retaining the latter's inversion of subject and object, insofar as human agents remain subordinate to the 'laws' of their own economic creation.

In contrast, the 'enemy' for Debord and the S.I. was not just capitalism itself, but rather all separation from history; for the political failures of the 20th century were held to have revealed that "the revolutionary organisation...can no longer *combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle*".[29]

Marxism as Ideology and Spectacle

These claims can be contextualised by noting some of the influences that informed them, amongst which are Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* and Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*. Both appeared in 1923, but received French translations in 1964 and 1960 respectively (helped in part by the notoriety engendered by the Party's initially hostile reaction to these works). Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* is particularly pertinent, as it set out to combat the Second International's tendency towards social democracy and static ideology. In a sense it prefigures[the] Situationists' attempts to retrieve the communist project from its own representation, and similarly claims that Marxism should be an ongoing historical movement rather than a theoretical depiction of a particular historical moment. For Korsch, reducing Marxism to a set of economic laws entailed separating its connection to the construction of history, and thus invited reformism: for if it remains "within the limits of bourgeois society and the bourgeois state," its criticisms will "no longer necessarily develop by their very nature into revolutionary practice."[30] The official denunciations that Korsch received[31] furthered his drift towards the ultra-left,[32] and by 1950 he would be arguing that "all attempts to re-establish the Marxist doctrine as a whole in its original function" were "reactionary utopias";[33] revolutionary practice and theory should look to sources beyond Marx[34] (a position that accords with the S.I.'s views on art and poetry). Lukács has been discussed already, but we can note here *History and Class Consciousness*' contention that 'bourgeois' thought's essential error lay in its tendency to view the historical moment of capitalist society as an eternal truth: Debord seems to have viewed

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[29]   Debord 1995, p.89; 2006, p.819, emphases in the original.
[30]   Korsch 1970, p.57
[31]   See 'The Present State of the Problem of 'Marxism and Philosophy'' in Korsch 1970, pp.89-129.
[32]   See Giles-Peters 1973 for a useful overview.
[33]   Korsch 1975
[34]   Korsch 1975

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Marx's talk of the 'natural laws of capitalist production' and their 'iron necessity' as exemplars of this very error.

The purportedly subversive credentials of a Hegelian approach to Marx were also promoted by Lefebvre, whose interest in the everyday and influence on the S.I. was discussed in chapter three. It might however also be noted here that a move towards something akin to the everyday can also be found in Sartre at this time. In his 'Search for a Method' – an essay that first appeared in 1957, and which would later form part of the introduction to his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* – he objects to what he takes to be Marxism's tendency to collapse the particularity of specific individuals and circumstances into *a priori* universal categories. "For the majority of Marxists," Sartre writes, "to think is to claim to totalise and, under this pretext, to replace particularity by a universal".[35] Such a method, he claims, "has already formed its concepts; it is already certain of their truth; it will assign to them the role of constitutive schemata. Its sole purpose is to force the events, the persons, or the acts considered into prefabricated moulds."[36] Sartre's objections to classical Marxism are thus similar to the S.I.'s antipathy to abstract, universal economic 'laws', and he argues that any such universal form ought to emerge from a study of the particular elements concerned,[37] citing Lefebvre's concern with the everyday approvingly.

There are of course other influences and homologies that could be noted here, notable amongst which are the links that can be discerned with anarchist thought,[38] but Debord's take on Marx can perhaps be framed in terms of the conjunction – afforded in the early 1960's by his friendship with Lefebvre, and by his brief membership of Socialisme ou Barbarie – between Lefebvre's interest in the everyday and Castoriadis' contention that the primary contradiction of modern capitalism could no longer be conceived in classical terms. This can be illustrated by way of reference to Castoriadis' 'Modern Capitalism and Revolution': a text that was drafted in 1959, but which coincided, in terms of its publication in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, with Debord's

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[35] Sartre 1960
[36] Sartre 1960
[37] "Marxism ought to study real men in depth, not dissolve them in a bath of sulphuric acid" (Sartre 1960).
[38] Debord also seems to have drawn on some anarchist writings, particularly those of Bakunin, whose tacit Hegelianism may have furthered Debord's interest. Bakunin objected to the "disciples of the *doctrinaire* school of German Communism" (Bakunin 1970, p.55) in a similar vein to Debord's objections to economic dogmatism, complaining of the subjugation of life and the individual to abstract scientific law: "What I preach is the *revolt of life against science*" (Bakunin 1970, p.59). See theses 91-5 of *The Society of the Spectacle* for Debord's criticism of anarchism, but it should be noted that he described the Spanish anarchists of 1936 as having instituted "the most advanced model of proletarian power ever realised" (Debord 1995, p.64; Debord 2006, p.803).

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membership of the group.[39] It features a great many points of similarity with Debord's theory, not least because it emphasises subjective autonomy and claims that classical Marxism tends to replace the actions of individuals with "an objective dynamic and 'natural' law".[40] For Castoriadis, unemployment had dropped, wages and the standard of living had risen, and the working class were said to be no longer a 'class for itself'. He however also held that class struggle remained an economic determinant, and when this is viewed in connection to these new conditions it revealed, for Castoriadis, the redundancy of traditional Marxist analysis: capital's ability to support a rise in wages, he held, jars with the theory of surplus-value; and as these increases result from class struggle, individuals must be possessed of a greater degree of agency than that which he held to be allowed by Marx's laws and tendencies (or indeed by the bureaucratic forms of political organisation that he claimed Marx's account fostered). The revolutionary potential within modern capitalism could thus no longer be understood in terms of surplus-value extraction, and instead a new contradiction was identified. For Castoriadis, capitalism is obliged to both include and exclude its workers: to reduce them to mere order-takers and automatons in production, alienated from their own activity, but also to foster the subjectivity that production denies through consumption. Neither requirement can be fully satisfied, and the result is a disaffected workforce and the consequent division of society into "order-givers and order-takers".[41] This obviously chimes with Debord and the S.I.'s own views, particularly when one notes Castoriadis' claim – which I drew attention to in chapter two – that this new context might engender a revolt that would criticise "*all* aspects of contemporary life, a criticism far more profound than anything attempted in the past".[42] Thus "narrow 'economic' and 'political' issues," he claimed, were tending to become "less and less relevant".[43]

This brings us to Debord and the S.I.'s 'new' proletariat; a concept that arose in part as a response to the apparent absence from modern capitalism of the material poverty that had exercised Marx. Addressing this will bring us towards some of the problems in Debord's account.

The 'New Proletariat'

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[39] The text appeared in *Socialisme ou Barbarie* #31-33 between 1960-1; Debord was a member of S ou B from the end of 1960 to May 1961.
[40] Castoriadis 1974
[41] Castoriadis 1974
[42] Castoriadis 1974
[43] Castoriadis 1974

In chapter five I made reference to Hegel's 'universal class', as described in his *Philosophy of Right*, and I also discussed Marx's appropriation of that concept in his critique of Hegel's text. We saw that for Hegel this was a class of state bureaucrats, tasked with mediating the general and particular interests of society; for Marx, on the other hand, the true universal class was the proletariat, who had been charged with abolishing the separated, false universality of bourgeois society and with instituting a more authentic form of commonality. Thus where Hegel presented the bourgeois state as the actualisation of the Idea, Marx called for its abolition via the realisation of a new and more genuine form of social community. I also noted that the rallying cry of Marx's universal class – "*I am nothing and I should be everything*"[44] – bears marked resemblance to the existential drive of Debord and the S.I.'s own proletariat, particularly as regard the latter's drive towards a form of subject-object unity. Yet where Marx's universal class stood opposed to the bourgeoisie, and was to afford the conditions of true universality through the revolutionary supersession of that opposing class, Debord and the S.I.'s formulation involved a move away from traditional notions of class and economic categorisation. The universality of their own proletariat stems from its ubiquity, which in turn derives from its opposition to separation rather than to economic factors *per se*. Thus where the spectacle cannot be reduced to capital alone, so too is the force that would address it irreducible to purely economic determinants.

In this regard it may be helpful to note the connection between this new proletariat and Debord and Vaneigem's comments on 'survival', as this will take us back to their views on the technical redundancy of wage labour. Marx had defined the proletarian class as all those deprived of the means of independently reproducing their own means of subsistence, and thereby compelled to sell their labour-power for a wage;[45] for Debord and the S.I. however, technology and automation meant that an economic system based around labour was now an anachronism. The trajectory of capital's continued growth meant the continued development of the possibility of abolishing wage labour altogether, just as the goods and needs that capital was said to manufacture in order to mask its own obsolescence were becoming increasingly trivial and banal ("the consumption of goods," claimed Vaneigem, "carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions of its own transcendence").[46] Although

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[44]   Marx 1975, p.254, emphasis in the original
[45]   Marx 1976, p.272; see also p.874.
[46]   Vaneigem 1994, p.162

the abundance of commodities had solved the "basic problem of survival", it had done so "only in such a way that the same problem is continually being regenerated at a higher level":[47] in the midst of abundance, in other words, humanity was still continually obliged to labour not only for the essentials of survival (or rather for the basic requirements of life within such a society),[48] but for the gilded poverty of what Debord termed "augmented survival".[49]

Hence the links suggested in chapter three between spectatorship and the Hegelian unhappy consciousness: for as Vaneigem put it, "the consumer cannot and must not ever attain satisfaction: the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh needs, yet the accumulation of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of men confined with increasing difficulty solely to the status of consumers".[50] However, for Debord in 1967 the recognition and supersession of this constant pursuit of one's own alienated self was almost inevitable, because capital could never fully master and subsume human desire: it could only attempt to satisfy it with the "consumable survival"[51] of more commodities, the increasing abundance of which was inversely proportional to their ability to satisfy. Through locating revolutionary potential within this "air-conditioned vale of tears",[52] as opposed to basing it within production *per se*, the S.I. felt they'd identified the possibility of a new mode of life altogether: a revolutionary future that would not constitute a more equitable version of the present, modelled on a 'fairer' form of production and distribution, but which would instead constitute something genuinely new.[53]

The salient issue here is that the obsolescence of labour also meant the obsolescence of politics based reductively around labour, and thus precluded the restriction of the proletariat to the working class *per se*. This is not to deny the centrality of the latter within this expanded proletariat. In 1962 the S.I. claimed that those who object, based on capitalist society's increasing wealth in commodities, that "the

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[47] Debord 1995, p.28; 2006, p.778
[48] "...the number and extent of [the worker's] so-called necessary requirements, as also the manner in which they are satisfied, are themselves products of history, and depend therefore to a great extent on the level of civilisation attained by a country..." Marx 1976, p.275
[49] Debord 1995, p.28; 2006, p.778
[50] Vaneigem 1994, p.162
[51] Debord 1995, p.30; 2006, p.779-80
[52] S.I. 2006, p.103; 1997, p.246. This is an allusion to Marx: "The criticism of religion is therefore in *embryo* the *criticism of that vale of tears* of which religion is the *halo*" (Marx 1975, p.244, emphasis in the original).
[53] "...for the first time the problem is not to overcome scarcity, but to master material abundance according to new principles. ...not just changing the way it is shared out, but totally re-orienting it" (S.I. 2006, pp.198-9; 1997, p.419).

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proletariat has been integrated or that the workers are now satisfied", were "either declaring themselves satisfied [with the present]" or "identifying themselves with some category separate from the workers".[54] Such a claim would be reactionary, because the workers' demand for the supersession of wage-labour was necessarily one with a broader, more universal desire to supersede the banality of a society founded on wage-labour[55] (Dauvé is thus quite wrong to claim that "an historically insurmountable incompatibility" existed between the S.I.'s mottoes of "'Down with Work!' and 'Power to the Workers !'").[56] This point can be clarified by referring back to the sense in which both worker and capitalist are equally determined by capital. Although both are alienated, Marx states that "the worker stands on a higher plane than the capitalist ... since the latter has his roots in the process of alienation and finds absolute satisfaction in it whereas ... the worker is a victim who confronts it as a rebel".[57] Yet with the banality of spectacular life the ubiquity of alienation and external determination is rendered all the more obvious. Opposition to capital thus breaks the class divide, and ceases to be bound to industrial struggles within the workplace. It is for these reasons that the S.I. contended that the "new proletariat" was "tending to encompass everybody [*tout le monde*]."[58]

This new proletariat is clearly akin to Castoriadis' 'order-takers', opposed to whom stand society's 'order-givers'. For example, in 1963 – and thus after Debord's membership of S ou B – the S.I. wrote that "in the context of the reality presently beginning to take shape, we may consider as proletarians all people who have no possibility of altering the space-time that society allots to them," and held that the "rulers are those who organise this space-time, or at least have a significant margin of personal choice";[59] in 1965 they wrote that "a new proletarian consciousness" was emerging amongst the population, and described this as being marked by the seemingly existential concern that individuals "are not the masters of their own activities, of their own lives". This view can be seen to lead directly into 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*:

The proletariat is the bearer of *the revolution that cannot leave anything outside itself*, the exigency of the permanent domination of the present over the past,[60] and the total critique of separation... No quantitative

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[54] S.I. 2006, p.111; 1997, p.253
[55] See for example Debord' comments on May 1968 (e.g. S.I. 2006, pp.288-9; 1997, p.571).
[56] Dauvé 2000
[57] Marx 1976, p.990
[58] Knabb 2006, p.111; S.I. 1997, p.253
[59] S.I. 2006, p.141; 1997, p.309
[60] A reference to *The Communist Manifesto*: "In bourgeois society...the past dominates the present; in

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relief of its poverty, no illusory hierarchical incorporation, can supply a lasting cure for its dissatisfaction, for the proletariat cannot truly recognise itself in any particular wrong it has suffered, nor therefore *in the righting of any particular wrong*, nor even in the righting of a great many of these wrongs, but only in the *absolute wrong* of being rejected [and cast] to the margins of life.[61]

In sum, the new proletariat were simply those who wanted more from life, as opposed to those satisfied with the present or engaged in maintaining it. Thus despite Debord's concern to historically ground his claims within a specific context,[62] the defining contradiction within modern society was viewed in terms of an abstract opposition between a fixed present and a potential future. This, despite the virtues of the S.I.'s work, perhaps serves to highlight their rather limited take on capitalist social relations.

The Image and the Commodity

I've argued that the spectacle, on my reading, over-arches capitalism and includes it within itself, despite the degree to which the spectacle is itself brought to full expression by capitalism.[63] As I've also indicated, if the spectacle is not reductively equivalent to capitalism, then it would seem that it cannot be restrictively identified with the commodity and its fetish. One could also contend that to make a direct, reductive equation between the commodity and the image is in fact to contradict Debord and the S.I.'s own statements. This can be illustrated by way of reference to their 1969 article 'How Not to Understand Situationist Books', which responded to published criticisms of recent works by Debord, Vaneigem and Viénet.[64] As regards Debord's book, the review singled out for attack was a highly critical article by Claude Lefort, who was an ex-member of S ou B (albeit prior to Debord's own membership of that group).[65] Lefort's article, which appeared in the February 1968 edition of *La Quinzaine*

Communist society the present dominates the past" (Engels and Marx 1985, pp.97-8).

[61] Debord 1995, p.85, translation altered; 2006, p.816, emphasis in the original

[62] This historical location is important, and Debord can be seen to criticise a member of the Italian section for neglecting it, referring to his work as idealism (Debord 2006, p.341). A similar position can be found in his critique of anarchism, as set out in *The Society of the Spectacle*: his objection seems not to be to anarchism *per se*, but rather with the degree to which it expects its demands to be immediately realisable regardless of historical context. Debord's insistence on the difference between the S.I. and anarchism would seem to be largely due to the sense in which Situationist possibilities are bound to a specific technological, artistic and economic juncture.

[63] "[I]t is now *the hour* of the spectacle... one also recognizes the present-day moment as that of the struggle against the spectacle; the moment at which the revolution discovers its task in the general and direct realization of all historical life" (Debord 2004a, p.44).

[64] *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (1967) and *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement* (1968) respectively.

[65] As noted in chapter two, Lefort had been viewed unfavourably by Debord in the late 1950's. In the article in *Internationale Situationniste* discussed above, which was written nearly ten years later, he is

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Littéraire, is in fact interesting in its own right: although he makes a number of interpretive errors, he also presents several critical points that echo aspects of my own, and it's perhaps significant that the S.I.'s replies to these points were largely *ad hominem* and insubstantial. They were however fully justified in attacking the conclusions that Lefort draws from his contention that Debord simply changes "the commodity into the spectacle".[66]

According to Lefort, Debord is "intoxicated [*grisé*]"[67] by Marx's account of the fetish. Drunk on fetishism, Debord is said to lead us to "understand that it is not the system of commodity production to which we owe the phantasmagoric movement that inhabits [commodities]; rather, the production of the phantasmagoria governs that of commodities."[68] Lefort, in other words, seems to have read the spectacle as coterminous with the commodity fetish, or as a grand extension of the latter. He thus contends that Debord confuses the fetish with the 'self-moving substance' of value (he presumably had Debord's references to the spectacle's "self-movement" in mind).[69] His article reminds us, in a rather didactic manner, that for Marx it is value that makes commodities move and not the fetish, and in thus erroneously focussing on the fetish and obscuring its real basis Debord is said to have missed the real source of the problem. In general terms, Lefort is quite correct: Debord does indeed address a symptom as if it were a cause. However, in terms of the technical components of the theory, Lefort is wrong: the real symptom that Debord focuses on is not the fetish, but rather a far broader, trans-historical notion of alienated power; and where Lefort holds that Debord claimed that the production of the fetish governs that of commodities, Debord himself (as the Situationists were quick to point out) had in fact stated "the exact opposite": the spectacle, as the S.I. put it in their response, is "simply a moment of the development of commodity production".[70]

That statement could be taken to contradict my claim that commodity production is in fact a moment of a broader historical tendency towards the production of alienated social power. However, if one remembers that commodity capitalism brings that tendency to its full expression, thus actualising it and making it manifest, then the apparent contradiction is perhaps alleviated. Debord's own actual words in the passage

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charged with the conservatism of having cast all revolutionary organisation as doomed to collapse into bureaucracy.
[66] Lefort 1968; S.I. 2006, p.341; S.I. 1997, p.616
[67] Lefort 1968
[68] Lefort 1968
[69] Debord 1995, p.26, 2006, p.776
[70] S.I. 2006, p.341; 1997, p.616

to which the S.I.'s response to Lefort refers are in fact as follows: "The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonisation of social life".[71] This need not entail a reductive identity between the commodity and the spectacle: rather, as indicated above, commodity capitalism is simply the form that is, at present, most adequate to the economic tendency towards separated power that has given rise to the spectacle. If a different social system was introduced that replicated or even advanced that separation, then it would be characterised by its own mode of spectacle.[72]

The Spectacle and the 'Principle' of the Commodity Fetish

This returns us to Debord's claim that the spectacle exhibits the "*principle* of commodity fetishism"[73] (my italics), and to my contention that this 'principle' entails a departure from Marx's account. In order to address this we might look back to the 'augmented survival' mentioned above, and to the connection between that concept and the notion of use-value.

Within the spectacle the "satisfaction of primary human needs" is said to have been replaced by the "ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs".[74] This means that not only had the forms of use and need proper to survival *per se* been bound up within the framework of capitalist value: in addition, the spectacle was "monopolising" the "fulfilment" of "all human use-value".[75] This leads Debord to claim that the contradictory tension between use-value and exchange-value had given way to the victory of the latter over the former.[76] Use-value, he claims, having become entirely secondary to the commodity's capacity to realise capital, is now required to function as an alibi;[77] and as the commodity's real utility is eroded, it comes to function as a use-value *qua* commodity (a prime example of Debord's point can perhaps be found in the 'pet rock' fad of the 1970's).[78]

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[71] Debord 1995, p.29; 2006, p.778

[72] "[W]ill...future peoples dominate, through an emancipated practice, the *current technique,* which is globally that of the simulacrum and dispossession? Or...will they be dominated by it in a manner that is even more hierarchical and pro-slavery than today?" (Debord 2006, p.1592).

[73] Debord 1995, p.26; 2006, p.776

[74] Debord 1995, p.34, translation altered; 2006, p.782

[75] Debord 1995, p.31; 2006, p.780

[76] Debord 1995, pp.31-2; 2006, p.780

[77] "The use-value that was formerly implicit within exchange-value must now be explicitly proclaimed, within the inverted reality of the spectacle, precisely because its effective reality is eroded by the over-development of commodity production" (Debord 1995, p.32, translation altered; 2006, p.781).

[78] In 1975 an American advertising executive named Gary Dahl came up with the idea of marketing

Debord's primary concern here is with the construction of 'false' needs, but these positions do bring him close to something akin to Baudrillard's notion of symbolic value:[79] for if commodities are purchased because of their symbolic denotations, then we're extremely close to a perspective from which such denotations are viewed as key economic determinants, eclipsing that of labour. Furthermore, despite his own understanding of Marx, Debord also comes close to adopting a position akin to the common assumption that the commodity fetish simply refers to an irrational fixation on the branding, denotations, kudos etc. of an item (i.e. as opposed to the actual bearing of Marx's concept on the abdication of conscious control over the organisation of social activity). Yet just as we saw Postone present the more seemingly problematic aspects of the labour theory of value as a marker for its validity, here too Debord presents the disparity between this more superficial notion of fetish and Marx's own as a demonstration of capitalism having given rise to a purer, more concentrated form of fetishism: for here we have a sense in which the commodity mystifies not because it masks the social relations from which it arose, but rather because of the status that it confers and the desire that it attracts. Mystification, in consequence, ceases to refer anything like as explicitly to labour and surplus-value.

Debord does not explicitly reject a classical labour theory of value – the importance of alienated activity is after all crucial to his account – but the corollary of this position would seem to be that labour becomes a less important economic determinant than the images and ideas associated with its products. This however follows from his views on society's technical capacity to end wage labour: for insofar as the symbolic dimensions of the commodity pertain not to the satisfaction of 'real' material needs, but rather to the pseudo-needs and uses generated by a redundant economic system in order to ensure its perpetuity – if, in other words, useless commodities arise from labour's obsolescence – then to desire the use of these entirely useless commodities is implicitly to desire the use of a world without labour.

The sheer scale of the inversion of subjects and objects described by Marx is

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stones as pets. They were sold, wrapped in straw and enclosed in a cardboard box (complete with breathing holes) for $3.95. Whilst the real product was the packaging and manual, which instructed the purchaser on how to care for their stone, the labour value of these items was clearly very low indeed. The fad lasted six months, and made Dahl a millionaire. Again, one can respond to this by way of Marxian economics, and present it as a 'surface phenomena' supported by the broader mass of production and consumption; in volume three of *Capital* Marx himself notes the existence of commodities without value ("the exceptional cases of those commodities which have prices without having any value will not be considered here" (Marx 1991, p.292)). Nonetheless, the pet rock – antique versions of which can now be purchased on Ebay – does perhaps provide an example of the degree to which the phenomena which concerned Debord jar with the classical account.

[79] See for example Debord 1995, p.43-4; 2006, p.789.

thus viewed as having resulted in a situation in which the actual cause of that inversion, i.e. the wage relation, has become increasingly irrelevant. The problem however is this: if labour and production drop from view, then one also begins to lose a clear sense of capital's status as a social relation (or at the very least, one begins to lose sight of Marx's views on the latter); and with that loss comes that of a clear sense of quite what capital actually is, and of how it might be addressed. Instead, we end up with a position that comes extremely close to positing capital as an entity in its own right.

Production and Consumption

I've already drawn attention to the S.I.'s classification of the proletariat as all those denied the ability to organise the "space-time" that "society allots to them".[80] It might now be added here that the opposing class that these individuals stood against was simply described as "those who organise this space-time".[81] And, insofar as the rulers organised whilst the ruled received direction, Debord and the S.I. presented the revolutionary class as 'consumers' rather than as 'producers':

The vast majority everywhere consumes the odious, soul-destroying social space-time 'produced' by a tiny minority. (It should be noted that this minority produces literally nothing except this organisation, whereas the 'consumption' of space-time, in the sense we are using here, encompasses the whole of ordinary production, in which the alienation of consumption and of all life obviously has its roots.)[82]

Consumption – figured in terms of the passive experience of one's own life – thus becomes the defining paradigm for production, by virtue of the fact that reification and rationalisation now pertain to the entirety of the individual's activity and experience: one simply 'consumes' the life to which one is assigned. And, just as production is encompassed by consumption, so too does consumption become just as alienated as production: "alienated consumption," as Debord put it in 1967, had been "added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses."[83]

It might be helpful to show how this informed the S.I.'s understanding of political revolt. In 1965 the Watts district of Los Angeles erupted in a riot that lasted six days, and which resulted in 34 deaths and over 3400 arrests. The S.I. responded with a seminal essay entitled 'The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy', which they quickly translated and circulated in England and the U.S. by the end of that

[80] S.I. 2006, p.141; 1997, p.309
[81] S.I. 2006, p.141; 1997, p.309
[82] S.I. 2006, p.141; 1997, p.309
[83] Debord 1995, p.29; 2006, p.779

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year. The text links predominantly working class unrest to the "new poverty"[84] described above ("the Los Angeles rebellion," wrote the S.I., "is the first in history to justify itself with the argument that there was no air-conditioning during a heatwave"),[85] and it explicitly casts the riot as "a rebellion against the commodity, against the world of the commodity".[86] Debord and the S.I. claimed that the rioters took modern capitalist propaganda literally, insofar as they demanded "to possess *now* all the objects shown and abstractly accessible".[87] In doing so, the rioters were "challenging [the] *exchange-value* [of these objects], the *commodity reality* which moulds them and marshals them to its own ends," insofar as this was a demand to "*use* them".[88] In other words, because the spectacle must locate all 'human use-value' within its framework, the riot constituted a direct challenge to the spectacular order: an attempt to reclaim life itself. This however reflects the sense in which the contradiction that marks spectacular society is essentially that between 'life' and the "non-life"[89] of the spectacle.

According to Debord, in the diffuse spectacle the "*entirety of labour sold*" is transformed overall into "the *total commodity*," which is then "returned in fragmentary [i.e. reified] form to a fragmentary individual completely cut off from the concerted action of the forces of production".[90] Within the concentrated spectacle "the commodity [that] the bureaucracy appropriates is the totality of social labour, and what it sells back to society – *en bloc* – is society's survival".[91] In both cases the universality of the productive, historical potential of society is alienated as a whole, and returned as fragmentary, particular elements that ensure the continued atomisation of the individuals concerned. This process ensures its own perpetuity: in the diffuse spectacle one continually chases the perpetually receding satisfactions of augmented survival; in the concentrated spectacle it is survival itself that is eked out. In consequence, the Watts rioters' desire to claim *all* use-value, here and now, is implicitly a demand for unification, and a desire to break that endless pursuit; an attempt to move beyond the constant flight of the unhappy consciousness.

A revolt against the spectacle – even if limited to a single district such as Watts – calls *everything* into question because it is a human protest against a dehumanised life, a protest of *real individuals* against

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[84]   S.I. 2006 p.141; 1997, p.309
[85]   S.I. 2006 p.200; 1997, pp.419-20
[86]   S.I. 2006, p.197, emphasis in the original
[87]   S.I. 2006, p.197, emphasis in the original
[88]   S.I. 2006, p.197, emphasis in the original
[89]   Debord 1995, p.12; 2006, p.766
[90]   Debord 1995, p.29; 2006, p.779
[91]   Debord 1995, p.41; 2006, p.787

their separation from a community that could fulfil their *true human and social nature* and transcend the spectacle.[92]

Yet whilst this hints at the forms of subject-object unity discussed earlier, my concern here is with the degree to which these views depart from Marx's own. For example, towards the end of the *Capital*'s first volume Marx makes the following claim:

> The capitalist class is constantly giving to the working class drafts, in the form of money, on a portion of the product produced by the latter and appropriated by the former. The workers give these drafts back just as constantly to the capitalists, and thereby withdraw from the latter their allotted share of their own product.[93]

Where Marx emphasises opposition between classes, Debord, drawing on Marx's notion of universalised alienation, presents a generalised opposition between life and present society. So what then is capital?

The primacy of labour value would seem to have fallen away within Debord and the S.I.'s account. An emphasis on the wage relation had become anachronistic, entailing a move away from a focus on surplus-value, and economic analysis was cast as a foray into the enemy's territory. As a result, and despite its other virtues, the theory of spectacle offers little in terms of the analysis of capital. In Debord's account social existence is alienated '*en bloc*': as a result, any sense in which there might be intrinsic contradictions *within* it is replaced by an emphasis on opposition *to* it; hence the abstract dichotomy between 'life' and 'capital' (or rather 'non-life') noted above.

Cause and Effect

These claims can perhaps be clarified by way of reference to Dauvé and Lefort, who both make similar objections. Dauvé's seminal 'Critique of the Situationist International' (1979) contains a short section on Debord's theoretical problems that informs and echoes some of my own objections. According to Dauvé, for example, "the S.I. had no analysis of capital: it understood it, but through its effects. It criticized the commodity, not capital – or rather, it criticized capital as commodity, and not as a system of valuation which includes production as well as exchange."[94] Now, one could be a little pedantic here: as we saw in chapter five, the commodity is in fact intrinsic to both production and exchange, and by extension to the organisation of social activity as a whole; Dauvé's phrasing here seems to associate it with exchange alone. The point

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[92] S.I. 2006, p.203; 1997, p.423, emphasis in the original.
[93] Marx 1990, p.713
[94] Dauvé 1979

however is that he correctly identifies Debord and the S.I.'s disavowal, or simply their disinterest, in capital's basis in the exploitation of labour. "Debord," Dauvé writes, "remains at the stage of circulation, lacking the necessary moment of production, of productive labour", despite the fact that what "nourishes capital is not consumption, as [Debord] leads one to understand, but [rather] the formation of value by labour."[95]

Rather like Lefort, whom I'll return to in a moment, Dauvé reaches this correct conclusion by the wrong route. Although he claims that Debord "reduces capitalism to its spectacular dimension alone",[96] he seems, as I noted in the thesis' general introduction, to link the spectacle to the ideological and semiotic forms that perpetuate the capitalist order; Debord's 'representations' are thus treated in what seem to be rather literal terms. In consequence, Dauvé's correct complaint as to the absence of labour from the spectacle also seems meant in literal terms: on Dauvé's reading, Debord presents advertising, marketing, fashions etc. as the defining feature of modern capitalism, and focuses on them rather than attending to the mode of production that they reflect. On my reading, on the other hand, Debord is in fact describing a far broader notion of alienation. Yet despite this disparity, Dauvé's major complaints still stand. For example, he claims that the theory of spectacle is an example of the 'fetishism of capital':

In the fetishism of commodities, the commodity appears as its own movement. By the fetishism of capital, capital takes on an autonomy which it does not possess, presenting itself as a living being... one does not know where it comes from, who produces it, by what process the proletarian engenders it, by what contradiction it lives and may die.[97]

This is of course precisely what the initial account of the fetish set out in the first chapter of volume one evolves into, but again that's beside the point: the issue here is that Debord's focus on effects results in a disavowal of their causes.

Dauvé's claim is in fact also similar to Lefort's objections, which I drew attention to above. As we saw earlier, for Lefort Debord presents the fetish as the motive force of capital, ignoring value and its basis in labour. As we also noted, this is strictly incorrect: the spectacle is distinct from the fetish (if anything, Debord adopts the sense in which capitalist value is composed of separated power, but then extrapolates it beyond the bounds of value *per se*). Yet that move away from a theoretical engagement with value's real basis means that some of Lefort's objections can, like Dauvé's, be maintained: "the

[95] Dauvé 1979
[96] Dauvé 1979
[97] Dauvé 1979

society of the spectacle," Lefort writes, "is laid out before a gaze that is never troubled, and which wants to know nothing of the place in which it is made."[98] This is because alienation is "distributed according to a panoramic perspective";[99] and whilst the S.I. rightly objected to the placid vision that Lefort thus identifies ("Lefort is therefore able to reach the pleasing conclusion that 'according to Debord, all history is futile'!"),[100] this does perhaps illustrate the sense in which the absence of the antagonistic relations engendered by value production render history's re-appearance somewhat mysterious. Mocking Debord's Hegelianism (the frequency with which Hegelian sentence reversals occur in *The Society of the Spectacle* is described as "obsessional"), Lefort characterises this re-appearance as the philosopher's attainment of absolute knowing: referencing Hegel's notorious 'cunning of reason', he writes that "unreason would also seem to be cunning", as "the spectacle of society is accomplished in the spirit of Debord."[101]

True and False

By way of conclusion I'll briefly address the following. One might object, against my claims as to the existence of an abstract dichotomy in Debord's theory, that he presents the spectacle as being marked by dialectical relations. I would however contend that Debord's examples of the spectacle's dialectical characteristics can in fact be used to reinforce my argument. This can be illustrated by looking at one of *The Society of the Spectacle*'s most frequently quoted and often misunderstood statements: namely, its assertion that "In a world that is *really inverted* [*renversé*], the true is a moment of the false."[102]

Debord's claim here is in fact quite complex. It's actually an oblique reference to a passage in Hegel's preface to the *Phenomenology*,[103] in which Hegel explains that although the genuinely true subsumes the false, the false cannot be considered to be a moment of the true: the terms 'true' and 'false' rely on their distinction from one another, and thus lose their original meaning within that unity. This leads Hegel to write that "the false is no longer, *qua* false, a moment of truth."[104] However, Debord perhaps picked up on this passage through Lukács, who refers to it by way of a rather opaque formulation

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[98] Lefort, 1968
[99] Lefort, 1968
[100] S.I. 2006, p.341; S.I. 1997, p.616
[101] Lefort 1968
[102] Debord 1995, p.14
[103] Debord 2006, p.862
[104] Hegel 1977, p.23

in his first preface to *History and Class Consciousness*. Historical materialism, Lukács explains there, regards the intellectual as an aspect of the material, and thus views ideological falsehoods as parts of a real (and thus 'true': note the link to Debord's equation of history to truth) historical whole. Such falsehoods are thus not false *per se*, but rather 'true' and 'false' at the same time: for with "the pure historicisation of the dialectic" affected by historical materialism, "[Hegel's] statement receives yet another twist: insofar as the 'false' [ideology, idealist philosophy, etc.] is an aspect of the 'true' [historical reality] it is both 'false' and 'non-false'".[105] Lukács' implication would seem to be that the rigid dichotomy between 'true' and 'false' falls away when errors and falsehoods are viewed as historical phenomena.

Debord's own formulation – which he was sufficiently fond of to reference again in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*[106] – reverses Hegel's claim in a manner informed by Lukács' own 'twist' on the latter. Debord reverses Hegel's statement in two senses: firstly, he switches the position of the 'true' and the 'false' within the statement, thus implying that the false subsumes the true rather than *vice versa*; secondly, he indicates that the one really can be considered as a moment of the other (Hegel said that the false cannot be understood as a moment of the true; Debord states that the true *is* a moment of the false). The first of these two moves reflects something similar to Lukács' equation of the 'true' to material, concrete, historical reality: the point is that the 'real' (i.e. 'life') has been rendered 'false' as a result of its alienation. The second move implies that the world of the spectacle is devoid of the genuine unity of identity in difference (which would entail that the unity of 'truth' and 'falsity' has a higher meaning than that possessed by the two terms when in binary opposition), and thus implies the need for authentic unity and an end to separation.

However, if all 'true', lived practice is a moment of the spectacle's 'falsity', then the possibility for authenticity and organic unity exists only as a potential denied by present existence. This remains the case even if one attends to Debord's emphases on the dialectical interplay of subject and object. He stresses that:

One cannot abstractly oppose the spectacle to actual social activity; this division is itself divided. The spectacle that inverts the real is in fact produced. At the same time, lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, incorporating the spectacular order and thereby giving it positive cohesiveness.[107]

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[105] Lukács 1971, p.xlvii
[106] Debord 1998, p.50; 2006, p.1622
[107] Debord 1995, p.14, translation altered; Debord 2006, p.768

The spectacle is not just ideology, as we've seen: it is also real social practice. However, as this interplay of ideal and material is presented as a cyclic exchange between ideology and its actualisation, and as the spectacle is thus both thought *and* practice, it becomes evident that one cannot make recourse to the existent, present reality within spectacular society as a stable and external point of opposition to the spectacle, but only to the broader field of historical agency that encapsulates the latter (plus those few 'peripheral' areas of life that remain external to it). Thus despite Debord's claim in 1971 that "society still hasn't become homogeneous",[108] his theoretical model would seem to base opposition primarily within a dormant capacity, set against the homogenised block of the spectacular world. Opposition, therefore, becomes largely an ideal potential, and capital (or rather alienated power *qua* spectacle) becomes so wedded to present existence that it becomes almost indeterminate.

One can thus contend as follows. Debord's theory certainly does bear relation to Marxist studies of 'real abstraction', and when responding to claims that they had ignored the importance of capitalist labour the S.I. replied that "we believe that we [have] treated little to no other problem than that of the labour of our epoch; its conditions, its contradictions, its results."[109] Yet as that assertion perhaps illustrates, labour becomes coterminous with life to such an extent that despite the theory of spectacle's affinity to real abstraction it is ultimately too abstract to be of much political use.

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[108] Debord 2006, p.1064
[109] S.I. 1997, p.479

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Conclusion to Part Two

Universality and Particularity

In the first part of the thesis I organised the material under discussion – the philosophical framework of Debord's thought, its intellectual history and the S.I.'s early avant-garde beginnings – around themes pertaining to the nature and status of Hegelian 'closure', and I used the trope of tragedy in order to do so. I concluded part one by suggesting that one could find clues towards the nature of Debord's Hegelian Marxism in the temporality of the constructed situation, and suggested that it might be modelled not on the perpetual deferral of the absolute but rather on its instantiation. Here in part two, in addition to discussing the theory of spectacle in greater detail, I've attempted to take these ideas further: for if Debord's notion of historical praxis entails the actualisation of the absolute, and if the spectacle can be viewed as the latter's denial, then one can perhaps draw inferences from the theory as to what that actualisation may entail. In this regard part two has employed the Hegelian unification of universality and particularity as a common theme.

I've argued that both Marx's account of capital and Debord's theory of spectacle involve a form of universality that becomes separated from the individuals from whom it arises: a form that binds and holds those individuals in a relation that maintains their isolation, and which becomes a force that acts in their stead, subjugating their interests to its own. Both writers can be seen to imply alternative modes of collectivity.[1] However, I've also argued that the theory of spectacle can be seen to replicate the subjugation of the particular to the universal. Debord and the S.I.'s account was certainly informed by the contention that Marx's economics subordinated individual agency to that of abstract economic categories, but Debord's own stance is just as open to this charge: for in conceiving the entirety of society under the rubric of image and observer, the theory of spectacle effectively subsumes the particular differences and tensions of lived social relations under the abstract universality of spectatorial

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[1] See for example Marx's "association of free men, working together with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force" (Marx 1976, p.171); see also Debord's remarks on the "active direct communication which marks the end of all specialisation, all hierarchy, and all separation, and thanks to which existing conditions are transformed 'into the conditions of unity'" (Debord 1995, p.87; 2006, p.817; the 'conditions of unity' is an unattributed reference to a passage in *The German Ideology* (Marx 2000, p.196)).

consciousness. This gives rise to a problematic dichotomy, in that the theory tends towards the presentation of society as a homogenised mass. Thus where Marx locates opposition and antagonism *within* a set of social relations, Debord would seem to locate it within a consciousness that stands outside them. The result is an opposition between a romanticised 'life' and an equally abstract and indeterminate 'capital', which seems to have become effectively coterminous with society itself. The strategic identification of quite how capital might be addressed is thus undermined.

Universality and Representation

Insofar as this problem stems from Debord and the S.I.'s focus on individual subjectivity – which in part one I traced back to their early avant-garde concerns – it can be seen to reflect a tension between their individualist concerns and their (libertarian) communist politics, perhaps echoing Sartre's own difficulties in this regard: for the theory of spectacle grounds its account of social totality upon an almost existential model of individual subjectivity, and attempts to construct a communist politics by way of a universal history founded on that same individualistic and subjective basis. This is certainly not to deny that Debord's account is very much geared towards the importance of contexts, moments, and towards the relation between a finite subject and the circumstances in which it finds itself; yet it involves the repeated subsumption of particular, specific differences. The theory collapses the specificity of capitalist relations into a generalised whole by focussing on the individual, alienated subject; individual subjectivity is then itself collapsed under a notion of humanity in the abstract, modelled upon the figure of the alienated, Occidental 'spectator'. If Debord's theory relies on subsuming particular difference under the general equivalence of a universalised consciousness – and if in consequence it posits a hierarchical teleology in which the higher reveals the truth of the lower – then the theory can perhaps said to employ the very representation that it opposes. This of course implies a host of Derridean themes[2] which I won't pursue here (as stated earlier, my aim is to investigate Debord's attempts towards a non-representational form of universal history[3] on its own terms, and by

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[2] Gayatri Spivak's work perhaps would offer a primary point of reference here were one to pursue this line of thought. See for example Spivak 1988 for relevant notions of political representation, and Spivak 1987 for a related approach to value and capital.

[3] For example, Debord talks of "universal history" when calling for a global evolutionary movement (Debord 2006, p.698). It is perhaps interesting to relate his account to Buck-Morss' own gestures towards universal history, made by way of a problematic attempt to re-read Hegel's *Phenomenology* in

means of the resources that it itself presents), but it also means that we are now returned to my earlier proposal that the ideas that found the theory of spectacle may be of greater interest than the theory itself. For if that theory is limited as an account of capital, and addresses the latter by way of formulations that risk undermining the prohibition of representation – and if on the other hand the ideas that found it imply the strategic development of theory, and forms of non-hierarchical collective agency – then might it be possible to take those ideas further, or at least indicate where they might lead?

Self-Grounding Capital

I'll suggest in part three that this can perhaps be attempted by relating Debord's strategic concerns to the aspects of his Hegelianism discussed in part one. If the connection between the Hegelian absolute and historical process can be linked to the implications towards 'authentic' collectivity discussed here in part two – and if the notion of agency thus derived can incorporate those strategic dimensions – then Debord's work could he taken to imply a theory of collective praxis. I'll try to develop this by looking at the circular, self-grounding and self-determining aspects of the Hegelian Idea, and at its attendant notions of freedom and necessity. In order to provide an initial introduction to those ideas whilst also orienting my own use of them – and in order to also conclude some of part two's primary contentions – we might look here at Moishe Postone's 'reinterpretation' of Marx, as Postone attributes to capital some of the very same qualities that I'll try to relate to Debord's historical agency in part three.

Postone's reading of Marx can be seen to take aspects of Debord's account to their logical conclusion (a point that has not been lost on the avowedly post-Situ *Principia Dialectica* group, who've enthused that Postone's *Time, Labour and Social Domination* "is the sort of book that Guy Debord ought to have written").[4] For Postone, labour is fundamental to capitalism; but in his view this means that any political project centred around labour risks replicating capitalist wage-labour, i.e. doing away with an

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the light of the Haitian slave revolutions. Not only does she follow the Kojèveian tradition of over emphasising the lord and bondsman: in addition, she holds that the bondsman rebels, despite the fact that Hegel describes him as submitting to the lord (Hegel, in her view, neglected to tell us this for fear of censorship). She thus misses the role of the lord and bondsman within the text as a whole: Hegel is introducing the need for (self-) discipline and labour here, (i.e. one must master oneself in order to know oneself), which underlies Spirit's historical struggle towards self-consciousness. Unpleasant though it may be, Hegel is claiming that discipline and submission are necessary moments of Spirit's self-discovery. Nonetheless, her conclusions are interesting: "Is there," she asks, "a way to universal history today?" (Buck-Morss 2009, p.110-1). Her response is a "politics of scholarship" (Buck-Morss 2009, p.150); Debord however would seem to respond via political praxis.

[4] Prigent 2009a

unfair mode of distribution whilst retaining the existing form of production. This is of course close to Debord's own position, as described in chapter six, but the difference is that where Debord sets this against Marx, Postone extracts it from Marx's own words. Furthermore, where Debord and the S.I. reformulated class struggle so as to 'free' it from its traditional forms, Postone dismisses it as a functional component of the capitalist system.[5]

My interest however lies in the emphasis that he places on Marx's presentation of capitalist society as an interrelated totality. Postone stresses the foundational role of the commodity within the latter: "each commodity," he writes, "is both particular, as a use-value, and general, as a social mediation".[6] Capitalist social relations are said to be marked by a tension between this "abstract universalism and particularistic specificity".[7] In his view, "the form of domination related to this abstract form of the universal is not merely a class relation concealed by a universalistic façade",[8] as this universality does not mask the concrete reality of social relations. Rather, it is intrinsic to and actual within them.[9] The tension that thus arises between the abstract universality of value and the particular elements that it structures "points to the possibility of another form of universalism, one not based on an abstraction from all concrete specificity".[10] Like Debord and Marx, Postone thus alludes to something closer to the more organic forms of Hegelian interrelation discussed above. He also offers a real advance on Debord's theory, insofar as he presents capitalist society as an interrelated whole rather than as an effectively homogenised block. Yet because in his view this totality rests upon capitalist labour, not only does he conclude that a political affirmation of labour is problematic: in addition, so too is any philosophical view of labour as a constitutive ontological force (thus Jappe, who would seem to follow Postone here: "[the S.I.'s] refusal to make labour the basis of their theory was by no means a fault",[11] as to do otherwise risks "turn[ing] a characteristic of capitalism into an eternal ontological necessity").[12]

This leads Postone to undertake some peculiar manoeuvres. He notes that Marx, in his early writings, holds that Hegel attributed the self-determining qualities of human

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5   Postone 1996, p. 17
6   Postone 1996, p.151
7   Postone 1996, p.164
8   Postone 1996, p.163
9   Postone 1996 p.163
10 Postone 1996, p.164
11 Jappe 1999, p.151
12 Jappe 1999, p.151

subjectivity and activity to the philosophical Idea, and attempted to correct this by transposing that movement back onto human activity. Yet Postone then sets Hegel back on his head once more:[13] for where the young Marx saw Hegelian philosophy as describing human action and subjectivity in mystified terms, Postone's mature Marx realises that it is in fact capital, not humanity, that "possess[es] the attributes that Hegel accorded the *Geist*".[14] In other words, the young Marx is in effect a victim of capitalist ideology,[15] as was Hegel: both presented the properties of capital as the fundamental properties of the human subjects that create it. From this perspective Hegel's philosophy can thus be said to not only consecrate the bourgeois state, but also to cast the movement of capital as the fundamental logic of being itself. Consequently, to adopt that movement for historical agency would be, for Postone, a major error, in that it would risk replicating precisely that which it opposes. Thus despite the homologies signalled above, Postone's approach to Hegelian Marxism is almost the antithesis of Debord's own.

This becomes interesting in relation to the self-grounding movement of the Hegelian absolute Idea, which Postone draws on in relation to the operation of capital. Referring to abstract labour, and thus to value, Postone writes that "labour grounds its own social character in capitalism by virtue of its historically specific function as a socially mediating activity," which means that "*labour in capitalism becomes its own social ground*":[16] and "because such labour mediates itself, it grounds itself (socially) and therefore has the attributes of 'substance' in the philosophical sense".[17] Capital thus functions as a historical subject that creates its own conditions of existence, and which perpetually produces itself anew from that basis. It thus mirrors the movement that I've suggested Debord ascribes to historical agency.

I noted at the outset of the thesis that Chris Arthur has made a useful distinction between what he refers to as historicist and systematic Hegelian Marxisms. The former, tainted by association with Soviet 'diamat', has largely fallen from favour; the latter, in which he locates both himself and Postone,[18] seems to be growing in popularity. We've also seen that Debord shares Postone's view that Hegel's philosophy reflects the rise of

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[13] For a slightly different take on this idea see Aufheben 2007.
[14] Postone 1996, p.75
[15] See Wendling 2009 for a reading that emphasises this contention, and which seems to owe much to Postone.
[16] Postone 1996, p.151, emphasis in the original
[17] Postone 1996, p.156
[18] Arthur 2004, p.7

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capitalism, but that in his view it merely 'contemplated' "a world that made itself",[19] and thus required Marx's 'inversion'. Debord might thus have viewed the 'systematic' position as tending towards the replication of Hegel's failings: Postone could then be seen to perpetrate a form of fetishism, in that the characteristics of human agency are attributed to their capitalist results.

My interest then is in contending that Debord and the S.I. offer a means of deriving a 'historicist' Hegelian Marxism that might be able to avoid some of the authoritarian and dogmatic failings of its predecessors. I'm also interested in the sense in which Debord's work implies a way if attempting this that does rely upon the *Phenomenology*'s lord and bondsman or the unhappy consciousness, but which rather adopts the 'restless' movement of the Hegelian absolute itself. In this regard the third part of the thesis will try to link the self-founding movement that Postone ascribes to capital to the strategic dimensions of Debord's Hegelian Marxism.

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[19]   Debord 1995, p.49; 2006, p.793

Postscript: May 1968 and the End of the S.I.

In 1967, perhaps still smarting from their acrimonious split, Lefebvre wrote that the S.I. "propose not a concrete utopia, but an abstract one. Do they really imagine that one fine day or some decisive evening people will look at each other and say, 'Enough! We are fed up with working and being bored. Let's put an end to this!' And that they will thereupon proceed into endless Festival and start creating situations? Maybe it happened once, at dawn on 18 March 1871, but that particular set of circumstances can never recur."[1] The S.I. quoted this statement in the 1967 edition of *Internationale Situationniste*, and they reproduced it again in 1969,[2] with what Jappe describes as "considerable – and quite understandable – satisfaction."[3]

Debord and the S.I. viewed May 1968 as the validation of their theories, and even went so far as to claim a degree of responsibility for the insurrection.[4] However, ever sensitive to their purported historical role, they recognised that the May events not only signalled "the reappearance of history"[5] but also the beginning of their own demise. The scandal at the University of Strasbourg in 1966, which centred around the dissemination of the S.I.'s 'On the Poverty of Student Life', had brought with it a degree of fame and notoriety. Although this assisted the publication of Debord and Vaneigem's books in 1967, it also brought admirers and imitators. This tendency was furthered by the May events, heightening the number of groups and individuals that the S.I. could haughtily refer to as 'pro-situs': spectators of the S.I. (the 'pro-situs' were described by Debord as "a significant product of modern history" who in no sense "produce it in return").[6] The S.I., in other words, was starting to become a spectacle.

This caused Debord and the S.I. to withdraw, becoming even harder and clearer

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[1] S.I. 1997, p.548; also quoted in Jappe 1999, pp.100-1
[2] S.I. 1997, p.574
[3] Jappe 1999, p.101
[4] "In May there were only ten or twelve Situationists and Enragés in Paris and none in the rest of France. But the fortunate conjunction of spontaneous revolutionary improvisation with a sort of aura of sympathy that existed around the SI made possible the coordination of a rather widespread action, not only in Paris but in several large cities, as if there had been a pre-existing nationwide organization. ...a sort of vague, mysterious situationist menace was felt and denounced in many places; those who embodied this menace were some hundreds or even thousands of individuals whom the bureaucrats and moderates called Situationists or, more often, referred to by the popular abbreviation that appeared during this period, *situs*. We consider it an honour that this term...served not only to designate the most extremist participants in the occupations movement, but also tended to evoke an image of vandals, thieves or hoodlums" (S.I. 2006, p.317; 1997, p.594).
[5] S.I. 2006, p.292; 1997, p.575
[6] S.I. 2003, p.35; Debord 2006, p.1107

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in focus (like a "crystal", as Lefebvre would later put it),[7] and this in turn meant even more expulsions and vituperative denunciations. Somewhat paradoxically, this was presented as a drive towards egalitarianism: "to the losers who concoct rumours about our supposed 'elitism'," wrote Vaneigem, "we should counterpose the anti-hierarchical example of permanent radicalisation": for insofar as their organisation was to prefigure that of a future society, its minimal requirement lay in "not tolerating those people whom the established powers are able to tolerate quite well."[8] There are a number of texts and internal documents in which Debord can be found discussing the rationale behind expulsions, and letters in which he justifies his own part in them,[9] but the result was ultimately comical: by 1972, the 'International' was possessed of four members, only two of whom remained active (Debord in France, and Sanguinetti in Italy). Seventy individuals had passed through the S.I. between 1957 and 1972; of the remaining sixty six, forty five had been excluded. Nineteen had resigned, and two had split.[10]

In the years following the S.I.'s dissolution Debord produced a number of important works, principal amongst which are his cinematic version of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), *In Girum Imus Nocte* (1978), and the fourth Italian preface to *The Society of the Spectacle* (1979). The latter text reflects his interest in the tumult of Italian politics, and a growing concern with manipulation, intrigue and conspiracy that would shape 1988's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Debord had also begun to withdraw from Paris by the late 1970's – a move that his biographers have presented as a self-imposed exile from a city fallen to an enemy force[11] – but he was drawn out of this retreat in 1984 by the assassination of his friend and patron Gérard Lebovici. Speculation in the press as to whether Lebovici's death stemmed from his entry into Debord's purportedly nefarious circles led to 1985's *Considerations on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici*, which addressed these charges. The increasing disgust with society that these events prompted, together with a growing concern with its tangle of conflicting interests, conspiracy and intrigue, would all inform 1988's *Comments*. Yet the latter text was only the first of a small flurry of publications that appeared towards the end of Debord's life: the two volumes of *Panegyric* in 1989 and

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7 Ross 2004, p.275
8 S.I. 2006, pp.277-8; 1997, p.533
9 For an example of the S.I.'s publicly stated positions on the exclusions see Debord 2006, pp.874-8; as an example of internal documents see Debord 1970; for a more personal letter see Debord 2006, pp.607-9.
10 See Gray 1998 pp.132-3 for a full list of the S.I.'s exclusions, splits and resignations.
11 e.g. Hussey 2002 and Merrifield 2005.

1990, *Cette Mauvaise Réputation* in 1993, and finally the posthumous *Des Contrats* of 1985: a collection of Debord's contracts that revealed the true nature of his self-confessedly "scandalous"[12] machinations.

The growing focus on intrigue and manoeuvre that can be found in these later texts will now be addressed in part three, in which I'll try to relate these concerns to the Hegelian and existential themes considered in parts one and two. Admittedly, given the splits and exclusions that shaped and defined the S.I., one could suggest that an attempt to find such a theory within their work is inherently misguided. This is most certainly an issue that any attempt to build on this thesis' suggestions would need to take into consideration. However, part two's emphasis on universality and particularity has perhaps shown that Situationist historical agency need not result in exclusivity and separation, just as part one's discussions of self-determination and agency indicated that Situationist praxis would be antithetical to hierarchy and representation. If these themes can be related to the strategic aspects of Debord's account, it may well be the case that addressing the philosophical aspects of Debord's intellectual history not only provides a means of clarifying and correcting existing scholarship, but also serves to identify aspects of this material that warrant further research and development.

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[12] Debord 2008, p.458

PART THREE

'The Theory of Historical Action'
(1976-1994)

INTRODUCTION

Overview of Part Three

As we saw in the thesis' general introduction, Debord stated in a letter of 1974 that:

The principle work...one must engage in – as the complementary contrary to *The Society of the Spectacle*, which described frozen alienation (and the negation that is implicit in it) – is *the theory of historical action*. One must advance *strategic* theory in its moment, which has come. At this stage and to speak schematically, the basic theoreticians to retrieve and develop are no longer Hegel, Marx and Lautréamont, but Thucydides, Machiavelli and Clausewitz.[1]

Strategy and military theory had long been an interest for Debord (his *Kriegspiel*, for example, dates back to 1956),[2] but these concerns do become much more prominent in his later years. This third part of the thesis will discuss these concerns in connection to the issues presented in parts one and two, and will focus on Debord's work from the late 1970's through to his death in 1994. Yet despite an increased propensity for allusions and references to military and strategic themes, the man who once declared "I will never give explanations"[3] remains true to form: little clue is given as to quite what this 'theory of historical action' might be. This however has not arrested writers keen to pronounce on the issue. Giorgio Agamben wrote in 1990 that Debord's books "should be used ... as manuals, as instruments of resistance or exodus",[4] and many others have followed suit. Yet almost all such commentary can be reduced to re-phrased versions of Agamben's claim, or simply to observations that note the existence of Debord's interest in this regard. Very little is said as to quite what that interest might mean or entail in relation to Debord's theoretical concerns and to his

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[1]   Debord 1974a

[2]   Cf. Debord 2006, p.285. The *Kriegspiel* was patented in 1965, developed in 1976, released as *Le Jeu de la Guerre* in 1987, and published in English as *A Game of War* in 2007 (Becker Ho and Debord 2007, p.7). Some sections of it were however first published in English as an appendix to Len Bracken's *Guy Debord: Revolutionary* (1997, pp.240-51).

[3]   Debord 2006, p.70. The line is taken from a 'clarification' of his *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*, directed at the French Federation of Film Clubs.

[4]   Agamben 2000, p.73

work as a whole, or indeed as to what it might allow us to draw from the latter.

I'll argue that the ideas and influences set out in the general introduction and first part of the thesis afford a means of rectifying this lack. I will however do so only as a means to an end: for having contended in part two that the concept of spectacle is problematic, my intention is not to present Debord's books as field guides to the terrain of modern capitalism (although I will offer suggestions as to his own intentions in this regard). Rather, my aim is to address the notions of strategic agency that can be inferred from this material, and to outline the possible approach to Hegelian Marxism that can perhaps be drawn from it. Consequently, where part one adopted the trope of tragedy as a common thread, and where part two employed that of universality and particularity, the material presented here in part three will be focused around historical, strategic agency.

The Strategic and the Ludic

I've argued that the spectacle constitutes the apex of a line of evolution towards the separation of social power, and that its 'perfected' separation constitutes the final dialectical juncture from which a free, self-determining history was to emerge. I also argued in part one that the structure of Situationist subjectivity was not only informed by the Hegelian absolute, but also by the negotiation of chance and contingency. Noting the significance of the departure from Hegel that this entails, I pointed out that Debord's model of subjective agency is always characterised by finitude, and that it is contextually specific; that it would seem to be obliged to continually recreate further conditions of subject-object unity, and thus new situations, by negotiating the chance and contingency brought by time. It must therefore be characterised by a degree of bad infinity (insofar as it is limited and contingent upon that which it is not; its successive stages cannot therefore fully negate finitude), despite the links that I've ascribed to the circular, self-determinate movement of the Hegelian absolute. I also indicated that this emphasis on chance pertains to the ludic dimensions of the situation, and argued that it can be seen to connect to Debord's strategic concerns.

In developing these claims here I'll try to advance my earlier suggestion that Debord's views on history and praxis constitute a framework within which the theory of spectacle itself can be located. The latter, as noted earlier, becomes just one tactical intervention amongst others; an intervention that ought properly to be superseded by

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subsequent responses to a changing present. This gives rise to two further corollaries. Firstly, that attending to these themes might offer insight into how Debord himself thought the spectacle might be overcome; but secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it means that this model of historical agency could be seen to become more important than the instances of theory that it supports. Consequently, in pursuing it we might not only be able to shed light on Debord and the S.I.'s extant work, but may also derive a set of ideas that could be developed in their own right.

The Structure and Content of Part Three

The suggestions that I'll make in that regard will be relegated to chapters eight and nine. Chapter seven will be dedicated to Debord's *Comments*, and will address its account of the modern spectacle whilst highlighting and discussing the important connection that the book makes between strategy and history. Chapter eight will then build on this by relating these strategic themes to some of the notions of temporality and subjectivity set out in part one. Through doing so I'll indicate what would seem to be the more significant features of Debord's Hegelian Marxism. Having set out the importance of contingency and strategy to this model, and thereby its departure from Hegel himself, I'll then look in chapter nine at the degree to which the self-grounding aspects of Hegel's absolute might be perhaps be used to take these themes further.

Strategy in the Existing Literature on Debord

We saw in the general introduction that Debord's biographers have often employed his interest in strategy as a means of characterising their subject, but here we might note that others have attempted rather more detail at times. Wark, for example, has recently tried to "think about Debord in a slightly different light" by casting him as a "strategist".[5] Making reference to Gramsci's distinction between a 'war of position' (which he links to Leninist forms of organisation) and a 'war of manoeuvre' (linked to Luxemburgist ideas and syndicalism), he argues that the *Kriegspiel* "refutes" the former by showing the importance of deriving strategy from tactical operations, as opposed to dictating tactics "from above".[6] His implication would seem to be that political conflict thus becomes more fluid and less hierarchical (perhaps a reasonable response to those

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[5]   Wark 2008, p.28
[6]   Wark 2008, p.32

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who would question Debord's seemingly outdated focus on Napoleonic warfare).[7] These claims are rendered particularly interesting by Wark's suggestion that the *Kriegspiel* is "really a diagram of the strategic possibilities of spectacular time",[8] although this remark is unfortunately left largely undeveloped.

Jappe presents Debord's interest in strategy as nostalgia for a pre-spectacular past ("this interest," Jappe writes, "could be interpreted as a desire to remain moored to a world still essentially intelligible...and to a high degree predictable").[9] I would argue against this: strategy is an attempt to think and act *with* chance and uncertainty, not against it (as Clausewitz himself puts it, "no other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance").[10]

Kaufmann picks up on the sense of pathos and occasional touches of sublimity attributed to the experience of time in Debord's later works; issues that are often linked to Debord's allegedly more melancholic perspective in his later years, and which I'll connect to part one's discussion of temporality in chapter eight. As a result, he joins Jappe in viewing Debord's interest in strategy in terms of nostalgia. Admirably, he attempts to connect the various aspects of Debord's work together; but rather than establish those connections through the theoretical and philosophical content of this material – as I noted earlier, he will have no truck with "the myth of Debord the 'theoretician'"[11] – he reads Debord's comments on time in terms of poetic melancholia. Debord was concerned with "war and loss", he claims, because "they are two faces of the same hunger for the irrevocable, for experiences that are lost forever".[12] One could perhaps argue that Situationist temporality thus suffers an inversion of sorts, as the actualisation of negativity becomes the tragic acceptance of a time that simply happens to us. Debord's Hegelian Marxism would then echo the theodicy of pantragedism, thus resulting in stoic contemplation.

In this regard Kaufmann's view is close to that of Stone-Richards,[13] who has claimed that Debord's work can be seen to express a form of noble, aristocratic stoicism. In this regard he makes links to thinkers such as the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* does indeed often echo the tone of some of Debord's remarks on temporality (e.g. "remember...that each of us lives only in the present, this

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7   See Jappe 1999, p.114; see also Prigent 2009b
8   Wark 2008, p.28
9   Jappe 1999, p.114
10 Clausewitz 1993, p.96
11 Kaufmann 2006, p.204
12 Kaufmann 2006, p.209
13 Stone-Richards 2001

fleeting moment of time";[14] "The art of living…must stand ready and firm to meet whatever besets it, even when unforeseen").[15] I would however argue that Hegel's objections to stoicism are pertinent here. Hegel points out in the *Phenomenology* – by way of oblique reference to Marcus Aurelius – that the stoical consciousness is "indifferent" as to whether it is "on the throne or in chains".[16] Stone-Richards' claims are persuasive, particularly in connection to the withdrawal from public life that is often said to characterise Debord's later years, but despite the homologies Stoicism's emphasis on enduring and accepting the present moment seems to jar with Debord and the S.I.'s concern with proactively changing it.

Bracken offers a few remarks that come close to addressing Debord's Hegelianism. He describes Debord's ideas about time and history by way of analogy to Vico,[17] and even states at one point that "for Debord [the] apprehension of time was coloured with the Hegelian preoccupation with the self-conscious creation of history with acts of negation".[18] Yet like Wark he leaves these promising assertions undeveloped, and he ultimately seems to view Debord's interest in strategy in terms of Machiavellian (in the crude sense of the term) manoeuvring: as a means of achieving ends on "the battlefield of everyday life".[19]

To an extent this is undeniable: Debord's correspondence is replete with comments on strategems, ruses and speculations as to the intentions of others, and it can at times present an ultimately saddening picture of someone seemingly compelled to view others in terms of conflicting, antagonistic interests. Yet on a theoretical level there remains far more to be said here. The temporal dimensions of Debord's notion of subjectivity entail the constant obligation to make choices on the basis of limited knowledge, entailing that the construction and negotiation of life becomes an existential, strategic project. Hence Debord's fondness for works such as Baldesar Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* and Gracián's *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*: works that describes the 'artistry' of dealing with the world.[20] Art, in other words, when realised as life, could be seen to take on a strategic dimension: one can live well or

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[14] Aurelius 1997, p.20
[15] Aurelius 1997, p.65
[16] Hegel 1977, p.121
[17] Bracken 1997, p.94
[18] Bracken 1997, p.105
[19] Bracken 1997, p.217
[20] "You must pass through the circumference of time," Gracián writes, "before arriving at the centre of opportunity" (Gracián 2000, p.24). His observation that "we have nothing that is ours except time, which even those without a roof can enjoy"(Gracián 2000, p.100) is used as the epigraph to Chapter Seven of *The Society of the Spectacle*, and Debord also refers to Gracián in the *Comments* as "great authority on historical time" (Debord 2002, p.85).

poorly, and Debord was under no doubt that his own had been anything less than exemplary.[21] Perhaps of more interest however is the degree to which these ideas might inform notions of political praxis, and in order to introduce this I'll make reference to Ben Noys' own recent comments on Debord and the S.I.

In *The Persistence of the Negative* (2010)[22] Noys argues that much contemporary political philosophy and theory is marked by what he calls 'affirmationism': a tendency to assert creativity, desire, productive potential and the importance of novelty as forces opposed to capitalism. For Noys, this trend constitutes a problem, in that it has led to theoretical models that mirror capital's own dynamics (e.g. philosophical accounts of displacement, nomadism and flows, and theoretical discussions of the creative potential of 'immaterial labour'). He thus argues for the importance of negativity, and sets out to "excavate" a politically relevant negative through an immanent critique of contemporary theory, arguing that this should serve as "the condition for re-articulating a thinking of agency".[23] Noys thus serves to bring us back to the theme of negativity discussed in the first part of this thesis.

As the negativity that Noys argues for is 'strategic' and linked to oppositional agency (a term that he adopts in favour of 'subjectivity'), his arguments clearly pertain to the suggestions that I'll advance here. Debord and the S.I. in fact number amongst the authors that he uses in order to make his case: the S.I.'s "strategic thinking", he writes, can offer a "means for thinking interventions into real abstractions".[24] And, although Noys' desire to "take the negative further through a *traversal* of Debord and the S.I."[25] would seem to require separating Debord's interest in strategy from its Hegelian and existential framework – Noys wants to avoid both dialectical negativity and Sartrean nothingness[26] – the politicised negativity that he calls for is, nonetheless, strikingly close to Debord's own. For example: Noys reads Debord and the S.I.'s interest in time through Bergson rather than Hegel (a connection to Bergson is also suggested by Jappe),[27] and views it as constituting a pure, negative flow. Against this, he argues that "negativity can never be pure, but must always be thought of as a relation of rupture, mixed in with and continually contesting positivity".[28] I would argue that this is

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[21]   See for example Debord 2004b, p.6; 2006, p.1658.
[22]   See also Bunyard 2011c
[23]   Noys 2010a, p.13
[24]   Noys 2010a, p.100
[25]   Noys 2010a, p.98
[26]   Noys 2010a, p.17
[27]   Jappe 1999, p.137
[28]   Noys 2010 a, p.100

precisely what Debord's Hegelian, negative and dialectical time provides. It should however also be noted that Noys' antipathy to modes of thought that echo the dynamics of capital would perhaps lead him to follow Postone's contention that the self-founding, circular movement of the Hegelian absolute corresponds to that of capital.

Nonetheless, it is this self-founding movement that I'll pursue in chapters eight and nine. This third part of the thesis will thus return to the claims advanced in part one, as regards the sense in which negativity might persist within the Hegelian absolute, and might thereby render it a form of continual self-determinate process. Following Debord and the S.I.'s own indications that communism should be seen as just such a process, part three will consider whether the forms of praxis and collectivity that they called for could be re-considered by way of these connections.

Chapter Seven: The Integrated Spectacle

The Integrated Spectacle

My primary focus here will rest on the 'integrated spectacle' described in Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* of 1988. I'll show that the latter book is rather less defeatist than some have claimed, and I'll illustrate this by discussing some of the peculiarities of the mode of presentation that Debord adopts there. Through doing so I'll also emphasise his identification of historical and strategic thought, and I'll suggest that this can be used as a key towards interpreting some of the *Comments*' more opaque assertions. This will serve to highlight some of the themes that will be addressed in chapters eight and nine, but I'll also show that Debord's views tend towards replicating the subjectivism ascribed to the theory of spectacle in chapter six.

The *Comments* contends that the spectacle continued to develop and evolve after 1967's *The Society of the Spectacle*. According to Debord, this evolution had given rise to certain "practical consequences"[1] which are presented, almost from the outset, by way of military metaphors. The spectacle is "an active force"; Debord will analyse its "*lines of advance*"; it is an "invasion" with which some "collaborate"[2] (Bracken points out that Debord's view of modern society may be inflected by the occupied France of his childhood).[3] This is said to have resulted in the 'integrated' spectacle: a new form that combines the diffuse and concentrated spectacles that I discussed in chapter four. Their apparent political opposition during the cold war had resolved itself into a higher form, based upon the subsumption of the concentrated spectacle by its more advanced, diffuse counterpart.[4] The integrated form thus blends the unification of state and economy, police power and surveillance with diffuse commodity consumption. Debord however also qualifies his use of the word 'integrated' with the following remarks:

> For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is that it has integrated itself into reality even as it spoke [of] it, and that it was reconstructing as it spoke. So this reality now no longer stands in front of it as something alien. When the spectacle was concentrated, the greater part of surrounding society escaped it; when diffuse, a small [*faible*] part; today, no part. The spectacle is mixed into all reality, and irradiates it.[5]

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[1] Debord 1998, p.3-4; 2006, p.1595
[2] Debord 1998, p.4; 2006, p.1595, emphasis in the original
[3] Bracken 1997, p.5-6
[4] It's worth noting here that *Comments* was written just prior to the fall of the Berlin wall, and also before Fukuyama's notorious account of the end of history. The latter was first presented in a lecture at the University of Chicago in 1989; *Comments* was written between February and April 1988.
[5] Debord 1998, p.9, translation altered; 2006, p.1598

This would seem to put Debord very close to Baudrillard. Yet in order to differentiate the two accounts we can return to the points raised in chapter four, where I made reference to this mention of 'surrounding reality'. I pointed out that this statement might seem to contradict *The Society of the Spectacle*'s opening declaration that the entirety of life had collapsed into representation, but I also argued that this need not be the case. The spectacle is a particular formation within the totality of historical practice, and it channels lived reality through its paradigms and models, thereby reducing lived practice to 'representation'. Thus whilst the spectacle of 1967 is a "map which exactly covers its territory"[6] (a metaphor that Baudrillard also employed),[7] peripheral areas external to that 'territory' can still remain 'outside' (i.e. areas of life that fall outside the spectacle's paradigms). With the integrated spectacle, however, all such areas have become just as "polluted"[8] as everything else. Yet despite this, Debord keeps his distance from Baudrillard: for just as the concentrated and diffuse forms are ultimately located within historical reality, so too is the integrated spectacle. As Debord put it in 1972: the spectacle is "a period swept along by the movement of historical time",[9] and as we've also seen, history in Debord's view exists (however implicitly) so long as human consciousness exists within time.

This however is not to deny that the integrated spectacle poses problems for Debord's conception of 'historical consciousness'. This new form of spectacle is said to be characterised by five primary features: "incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalised secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present."[10] The first two correspond to the rationalisation and autonomy of the spectacular economy described in 1967, albeit taken to a higher level: 'technological renewal' furthers spectacular domination through the refinement of modes of 'cybernetic' control and increased specialisation, whilst the 'integration of state and economy' aids the construction and enforcement of a mode of life tailored to commodity production and consumption. The three further features of the integrated spectacle are effects of this new level of spectacular domination and stem, on my reading, from the spectacle's denial of history.

6   Debord 1995, p.23, translation altered; 2006, p.774
7   Baudrillard 1994, p.1
8   Debord 1998, p.10; 2006, p.1598
9   S.I. 2003, p.22; Debord 2006, p.1100
10 Debord 1998, p.11-12; 2006, p.1599

For Debord, "people who lack all historical sense can readily be manipulated".[11] The suppression and management of history thus aids the propagation of "unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning";[12] hence the profusion of the integrated spectacle's third feature, 'unanswerable lies'. The fourth, 'generalised secrecy', is similarly linked to that deprivation of 'historical sense': it pertains to the spectacle's capacity to manage knowledge, but also to the generalisation of the need, brought about by the tangle of conflictual interests that compose the integrated spectacle, to pursue, guard and falsify information. The fifth feature, that of an 'eternal present', is more obviously connected to the spectacle's end of history: for its denigration of the means by which one might independently verify or respond to stated 'facts' is exacerbated by the degree to which its presentations of the past and the future come to be determined by the exigencies of the present.[13]

The point that I want to stress here is that the primary characteristics of the integrated spectacle pertain to the subjective loss of history, which for Debord means the loss of independent, critical thought. History's suppression, in other words, entails the removal of a common basis and reference point, and thus pitches spectators into a groundless hyperreality. Yet as history cannot be abolished or ended, but only managed, it may return; and that means that the following, enigmatic claim becomes particularly significant: "To the list of the triumphs of power," Debord writes, we should "add one result that has proved negative: a state, in the management of which is lastingly installed a great deficit of historical knowledge, can no longer be led strategically."[14] Those who manage the spectacle are thus tasked with managing an entity that is antithetical to historical direction. In the sections that follow I'll attempt to illustrate the importance of Debord's linkage of the strategic and the historical, and I'll begin to do so by looking at the peculiar mode of presentation that Debord adopts in the *Comments*. First however it's worth noting the manner in which that book is often interpreted.

The *Comments* has often been described as exemplifying the melancholic perspective said to characterise Debord's later years: Hussey writes that by 1988 – the year in which the book appeared – "there was clearly a sense of defeat in Debord's thought and demeanour";[15] Merrifield notes the *Comments*' "dark undertow",[16] and

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11 Debord 1998, p.25, translation altered; 2006, p.1607
12 Debord 1998, p.16; 2006, p.1602
13 "When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist" (Debord 1998, p.20; 2006, p.1604).
14 Debord 1998, p.20, translation altered; 2006, p.1605
15 Hussey 2002, p.353

Crary describes it as "deeply pessimistic";[17] "as pessimistic", according to Plant, "as the age in which it arises".[18] Yet as can perhaps already be seen from the discussion above, the book is less defeatist than these statements would indicate. In a letter that makes reference to his preparatory research for the *Comments*, Debord jokes that "the work of revolutionary critique is assuredly not to lead people to believe that the revolution has become impossible!",[19] and as Jappe also points out,[20] Debord's later remarks on the *Comments* in *Cette Mauvaise Réputation* show any notion of total resignation to be quite false.[21]

This is particularly evident in the book's epigraph, which is taken from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*:

> However desperate the situation and circumstances, do not despair. When there is everything to fear, be unafraid. When surrounded by dangers, fear none of them. When without resources, depend on resourcefulness. When surprised, take the enemy itself by surprise.[22]

Sun Tzu's dialectical emphasis on the reversal of opposites stems from the Taoist principles that inform *The Art of War*,[23] and the *Comments* itself can be seen to follow his advice that one should attempt to turn strength into weakness and *vice versa*. One must "use the enemy to defeat the enemy",[24] according to Sun Tzu. Given the nature of the spectacle that statement is perhaps significant in relation to Sun Tzu's attendant emphasis on the need for inscrutability: "Be extremely subtle," he counsels; thereby "you can be the director of the enemy's fate".[25] I'll suggest in the following section that the form of writing adopted in the *Comments* can be seen to pertain to these recommendations.[26]

'I Must Take Care not to Give Too Much Information to Just Anybody'

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[16] Merrifield 2005, p.123
[17] Crary in McDonough 2004, p.462
[18] Plant 1992, p.153. Plant however adds that "the picture [the book] paints is by no means closed and hopeless."
[19] Debord 1986c
[20] Jappe 1999, p.146n
[21] Debord 2001a, p.31
[22] Debord 1998, p.vii; 2006, p.1593
[23] The affinity that these principles afford with Hegelian dialectics clearly appealed to Debord, who noted and praised the links between *The Art of War* and "the dialectical thought of Machiavelli and...Clausewitz" (Debord 2008, p.204).
[24] Sun Tzu 1988, p.64
[25] Sun Tzu 1988, p.104
[26] See Rabant 1997 for an alternative and more literary interpretation of these aspects of Debord's work.

We're thus brought to the way in which Debord's work attempts to unify its form and content, and this, I would suggest, is his primary response to the problem of articulating a critique of the spectacle within the spectacle's own discourse.[27] *The Society of the Spectacle*, for instance, makes extensive use of *détournement* and thus actualises its critique through its enunciation; many similar examples can be found throughout Debord's work.[28] However, this technique was rendered rather more complicated in the *Comments* as a result of its account of the spectacle's 'integration' into society: for where *The Society of the Spectacle* had described the negation of spectacular society, the *Comments* responds to the emergence of the spectacle within that negation.

We saw in the afterword to part two that the latter issue informed the S.I.'s dissolution. In his 'Theses on the S.I. and its Times', in which he reflects on the group's demise, Debord remarks that "When subversion invades society and spreads its shadow in the spectacle, present-day spectacular forces also emerge within our party".[29] By 1988, having experienced the assassination of a friend and having become invested in the violent intrigue of Italian politics, Debord had reached the conclusion that "the highest ambition of the integrated spectacle is ... that secret agents become revolutionaries, and revolutionaries become secret agents".[30] Thus in order to truly express the spectacle's immanent negation he was obliged to highlight the spectacle at work within the latter, albeit without denigrating its negative characteristics.

Attendant to this was Debord's apparently presumptuous (but surprisingly prescient)[31] concern that his work could be studied and used by those "who devote themselves to maintaining the spectacular system of domination".[32] Thus despite the scale of the book's print run he wrote that he expected it to welcomed by an elite readership of "fifty or sixty people,"[33] half of whom strive to maintain the spectacle

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[27] As Debord himself acknowledged, "to analyse the spectacle means talking its language to some degree – to the degree, in fact, that we are obliged to engage the methodology [*pass sur la terrain méthodologique*] of the society to which the spectacle gives expression."(Debord 1995, p.15; 2006, p.768)

[28] To pick a few: Debord's cinematic works are similarly composed of *détourné* elements; *Comments on the Assassination of Gérard Lebovici* refuses to treat the media's "jumbled pile of nonsense" in "an orderly fashion" (Debord 2001b, p.3; 2006, p.1540); Debord would later remark that his self-eulogising autobiography, *Panegyric*, had sought to show through its "subjective extravagance", the "non-value of current society" (Debord 2008, p.228).

[29] Debord 2003a, p.31; 2006, p.1106

[30] Debord 1998, p.11; 2006, p.1599

[31] See Eyal Weizman's work on the Israeli Defence Force's use of Debord, Deleuze and other such writers as means of re-conceiving urban combat (Weizman 2006).

[32] Debord 1998, p.1; 2006, p.1593

[33] Debord 1998, p.1; 2006, p.1593

whilst the other half attempt quite the opposite. As a result, he explained, he "must take care not to give too much information to just anybody".[34] This statement is followed by an even more peculiar passage, which I'll quote in full:

Our unfortunate times thus compel me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. One will be able to encounter there, like the very hallmark of the era, certain lures. As long as certain pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear; just as secret clauses have very often been added to what treatises may openly stipulate; just as some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others. However in this brief work there will be only too many things which are, alas, easy to understand.[35]

The book is thus presented as a kind of puzzle (perhaps an appropriate unification of form and content in its own right: when commenting on his explanatory diagrams to the *Kriegspiel*, Debord remarked that "the figures looked like a truly daunting puzzle awaiting solution, just like the times in which we live").[36]

However, whilst this 'puzzle' is often noted in the literature on Debord, it remains unsolved. Plant, for example, observes that "there is a great deal more to the *Comments* than sits on the page",[37] but holds that "it is evidently up to the twenty-five or thirty revolutionary readers to put the text together for themselves".[38] "The secret clauses must be made to manifest themselves somehow," writes Brown; but what," he asks, "is the missing ingredient?"[39] Kaufmann goes so far as to claim that in order to negotiate a society in thrall to a multiplicity of secret services Debord became "a kind of ironic Hercule Poirot",[40] but gives little indication as to quite what the great detective has hidden.

I would suggest that one can find a clue in Debord's indication that the book's 'lures' might lie in its plan or structure, and that the 'hallmark of the era' might be an 'encounter' with them:[41] a 'hallmark' that would then reflect the reader's own susceptibility to such deceit. This can be qualified by the following statement, taken from a letter of 1989 to a reader of the *Comments*:

One can call 'lure' anything that misleads rapid reading or computers. In any case, there isn't

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[34] Debord 1998, p.1; 2006, p.1593
[35] Debord 1998, p.2, translation altered; 2006, p.1594
[36] Becker-Ho and Debord 2007, p.9
[37] Plant 1992, p.152-3
[38] Plant 1992, p.153
[39] Brown 1991
[40] Kaufmann 2006, p.264
[41] "*On pourra y rencontrer, comme la signature même de l'époque, quelques leurres*" (Debord 2006, p.1594). Imrie's translation of the second sentence ('readers will encounter certain decoys, like the very hallmark of the era', Debord 1998, p.2) renders Debord's indefinite 'one will be able to' as an inevitable 'will', and loses the sense in which those 'decoys' may lie in the book's plan or structure.

a single inexact or deceptive piece of information [in my book]. I suggest another hypothesis to you: what if, in this book – for a reader capable of understanding dialectical, strategic thought (Machiavelli or Clausewitz) – there are in fact no lures? What if the only lure is the very evocation of the possibility of there being lures?[42]

A very similar point is made in *Cette Mauvaise Reputation*,[43] and again in a letter to a Spanish translator of the *Comments*.[44] What is perhaps most important here is the relation between the 'dialectical, strategic thought' that Debord requires of his readers and the lack of strategic capability that he attributed to the integrated spectacle itself (as noted above), for this has two implications: firstly, that a failure to decipher the *Comments* exemplifies the symptom's of the spectacle's eradication of history; and secondly, that the skills required to thread one's way through the book would seem to connect to those needed to traverse the integrated spectacle itself. We thus perhaps have the beginnings of a response to Agamben's proposal that Debord's works can be read as 'manuals' of resistance.

My claim, in other words, is that the *Comments* tries to use the spectacle's own nature against it. The book's critique presents itself as containing 'lures' and hidden meanings, thus evoking the confused and illusory nature of the spectacle. It thereby expresses the spectacle's integration into its own opposition, and through doing so it guards its own content with the same gesture that mirrors the true nature of its object. This interpretation may seem forced, but it can be substantiated by some of the remarks that Debord makes elsewhere. In several letters he states that his aim was to create a book "intended to paralyse a computer"[45] (elsewhere he writes that computers "cannot understand dialectics";[46] the rigid opposition of binary language is presumably not suited to the identity of opposites), or indeed any superficial reading: to create a book that was "deliberately confused",[47] and which thus expresses the true nature of a world in which "surveillance spies on itself, and plots against itself",[48] by "evok[ing] its]…disorder" through a "disordered style"[49] (it's perhaps also relevant to remember Debord's interest in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938) which, as noted earlier, he had read in the early 1950's; Huizinga not only links play to war and strategy, but also

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[42] Debord 2008, p.78
[43] "Perhaps [the suggestion of lures] is a lure? Perhaps the only one?" (Debord 1993, p.33).
[44] "I do not believe," Debord writes, "that one must translate 'lures', originally a term used by hunters and that evokes a lost trail, by the brutal *trampa* [trap] (there is no false information, which might make the reader 'fall into error', in my book)" (Debord 2008, p.93).
[45] Debord 1990
[46] Debord 2001a, p.102
[47] "I will summarize the chapter in question, deliberately confused" (Debord 1989).
[48] Debord 1998, p.84; 2006, p.1643
[49] Debord 1992a

to poetry, which he in turn connects to riddles and puzzles).[50]

There are any number of objections that one might want to make here, not least because this runs entirely counter to any notion of popular appeal or intelligibility (although Debord was never one to make concessions to his audience).[51] Yet however problematic it may be, it is perhaps of broader interest than its status as a hermeneutic peculiarity: for if the means of interpreting the book are also those of negotiating the spectacle, then we perhaps have an illustration of the sense in which Debord really did believe his peculiarly Hegelian association of history and strategy to afford some kind of critical purchase on modern capitalism.

History and Agency

I'll outline the ways in which the above might allow us to read the *Comments* in a moment, but first I'll make a few further remarks on the purported effects of the integrated spectacle's denial of history, and thereby on the reasons why Debord may have been so concerned with the need for strategic thought. The first point to make here is that the passivity of spectatorship was viewed as detrimental to critical dialogue, and thereby to independent thought. Because there is now "no room for any reply"[52] to spectacular discourse, spectacular society suffers a "dissolution of logic".[53] This is due in part to its technical mediation: Debord contended in 1967 that the instant communication celebrated and furthered by the spectacle is "essentially *unilateral*"[54] or one-way, i.e. part of a cybernetic system of control; in the *Comments* this is augmented by a distinct antipathy to computers, which foster "unreserved acceptance of what has been programmed according to the wishes of someone else".[55] Society's absence of logic, "that is to say loss of the ability to perceive what is significant and what is...irrelevant", turns theorists and philosophers into ideologues: such individuals – and Debord would seem to be referring to the figures associated with postmodernism here, insofar as these problems are rooted in the loss of universal history – have proven

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[50] "Only he who can speak the art-language [of poetic riddles] wins the title of poet. This art-language differs from ordinary speech in that it employs special terms, images, figures, etc., which not everybody will understand" (Huizinga 1955, p.133).

[51] See Kaufmann 2006, pp.232-8 and passim for comments on this tendency. See also the opening lines of *In Girum*: "I will make no concessions to the public in this film..." (Debord 2003a, pp.134-43; 2006, p.1334)

[52] Debord 1998, p.29; 2006, p.1610

[53] Debord 1998, p.27; 2006, p.1609

[54] Debord 1995, p.19, translation altered; 2006, p.772, emphasis in the original

[55] Debord 1998, pp.28-9; 2006, p.1609

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themselves committed to overcoming "the entire operational field of the dialectical logic of conflicts", and thus "logic...at the level of strategy".[56]

In other words, the loss of history results in the denigration of critical thought and agency, insofar as it undermines the solid basis for opposition and critique constituted by historical knowledge. Thus the loss of history also involves that of the capacity for strategic thought. Consequently, although the spectacle's expansion and the increasing redundancy of its economic basis engenders antipathy, boredom and the demands of the 'new proletariat', it also entails that the individuals concerned are less and less able to act on this disaffection. The result is a set of circumstances in which "no one really believes the spectacle"[57] (Debord quotes *Le Monde* as having announced "That modern society is a society of the spectacle now goes without saying"),[58] but in which any alternative seems increasingly impossible.[59]

Debord's contentions are thus characteristically dialectical: the growth of spectacular society has, as predicted in 1967, furthered disaffection; by the same token, the very conditions that prompt that disaffection have exacerbated the subjective effects of spectacular domination, rendering political change all the more difficult. Yet as the loss of history denigrates the capacity for strategic thought, it also renders the direction of spectacular society an increasingly difficult task.

Strategy and Tactics in Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*

This brings us to the final sections of the *Comments*, which are almost as cryptic as the book's opening passages. Debord begins here by quoting Clausewitz's classical definition of strategy and tactics, according to which "tactics teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war".[60] Following a long discussion of the "changes in the art of war"[61] brought about by new weaponry in the Napoleonic era, Debord indicates that the spectacle's development and 'integration' will engender revelations on the part of its rulers as to the advantages offered to them by the spectacle's new, integrated features. Musketry, Debord explains, quickly proved to be more effective in skirmish formations, even though military

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[56] Debord 1998, pp.30-1; 2006, p.1611
[57] Debord 1998, p.60; 2006, p.1629
[58] Debord 1998, p.5; 2006, p.1596
[59] See Marx Fisher's recent *Capitalist Realism* (2009) for relevant contemporary commentary on this issue.
[60] Clausewitz 1993, p.146; Debord 1998, p.85; 2006, p.1644
[61] Debord 1998, p.85; 2006, p.1644

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thought continued to insist on its use in massed volleys from fixed lines; until, that is, the exigencies of warfare necessitated the acceptance of the relative inefficiency of such formations. Likewise, the establishment of spectacular domination has "radically altered the art of government" to such an extent that "those who serve the interests of domination" will be obliged to "see what obstacles they have overcome, and of what they are capable."[62]

This might seem to contradict the emphasis that I've placed on Debord's claim that the spectacle can no longer be led strategically. However, on my reading, Debord's point here is that whilst it might foster a degree of *tactical* awareness amongst its managers, it does not give rise to *strategic* thought.

These closing claims are preceded by a long discussion of the importance of conspiracy, surveillance and manipulation within the integrated spectacle. Countries and companies alike now spy on one another, extracting information and presenting falsehoods: "thousands of plots in favour of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere, as the overlap of secret networks and secret issues or attitudes grows ever more dense".[63] Political opposition, meanwhile – the nominal subject of surveillance and restricted information – has largely disappeared, or is at least subject to manipulation. Surveillance and intervention now "operate on the very terrain of this threat in order to combat it *in advance*."[64] This is alluded to again when Debord draws attention to Napoleon's "strategy ... of using victories *in advance*": his victories were used "as if acquired on credit", Debord tells us, insofar as he was able to "understand manoeuvres ... from the start as consequences of a victory which while not yet attained could certainly be at the first onslaught".[65] Debord would thus seem to be indicating a link between the spectacle's manipulation of its own opposition and Napoleon's ability to dictate the actions of his enemies.[66]

Significantly, Debord's comments on Napoleon's skills in this regard would seem to derive from Clausewitz, who claims in *On War* that "Bonaparte could ruthlessly cut

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[62] Debord 1998, p.88; 2006, p.1646
[63] Debord 1998, pp.82-3; 2006, p.1642
[64] Debord 1998, p.84, emphasis in the original; 2006, p.1643
[65] Debord 1998, p.86, emphasis in the original; 2006, p.1644
[66] Rejecting fixed, geometric formations in favour of skirmish lines, smaller divisions and mobile artillery, Napoleon adopted a far more fluid approach to combat. The *Grande Armée* was able to live off the lands that it conquered, and its flexibility entailed that large manoeuvres could be used as an element of battlefield strategy rather than as its prelude. For example, Napoleon's *Manoeuvre De Derrière* involved crossing the enemy army's supply lines, and thereby forcing a situation in which it was forced to either run away or fight whilst weakened and demoralised. The enemy's total annihilation was not only pursued through decisive action that dictated the nature of the battle, but also through economic and political means.

through all his enemies' strategic plans in search of battle, because he seldom doubted the battle's outcome".[67] Because strategy is influenced by events on the tactical level, tactical superiority can sabotage the enemy's strategy; and as Clausewitz stresses, Napoleon's success stemmed from allowing tactical events to shape his own unfolding strategy and to confound that of his opponents.

The implication is that the spectacle's 'integration' into society involves a similar ability to 'ruthlessly cut through' an enemy's strategy, as it eradicates historical knowledge and thus strategy. Hence Debord's connection of Napoleonic "changes in the art of war"[68] to spectacular "changes in the art of government."[69] Yet as we've seen, he also maintains that history's eradication has resulted in a lack of coherent organisation and continuity, and that this undermines the spectacle's own strategic operation. Thus although the spectacle is able to organise its own opposition 'in advance', its 'strategy' is dictated purely by the momentum of its own tactical victories. One might note that this same momentum has been described by military historians as both the strength and the weakness of Napoleon's approach: according to Handel, its danger is that "instead of becoming the driving force in war, strategy becomes a mere by-product or afterthought"[70] (notably, Lukács makes similar points in *History and Class Consciousness* as regards the limits of bourgeois thought).[71]

For Debord, "*precisely what defines these spectacular times*" is that "an all-powerful economy" has become "mad"[72] and now ploughs on towards self-destructive situations. Whilst discussing ecological issues,[73] he remarks that it "has now come to declare open war against humans; not only against their possibilities for life, but against their chances of survival";[74] even "science," which Debord claimed in 1972 to be "in thrall to the mode of production," cannot "imagine a real overthrow of the present

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[67] Clausewitz 1993, p.462
[68] Debord 1998, p.85; 2006, p.1644
[69] Debord 1998, p.87; 2006, p.1645
[70] Handel 2006, p.354
[71] "...capitalism is the first system of production able to achieve a total economic penetration of society, and this implies that in theory the bourgeoisie should be able to [attain]...an (imputed) class consciousness of the whole system of production. On the other hand, the position held by the capitalist class [entails]...that it will be unable to control its own system of production even in theory" (Lukács 1971, p.62).
[72] Debord 1998, p.39, emphasis in the original; 2006, p.1616
[73] In 1971 Debord devoted an entire essay to pollution and ecological damage ('La Planète Malade'), and further remarks on the subject can be found throughout his late work. In the 1971 text he writes that the slogan "'Revolution or death'" is "no longer the lyrical expression of the consciousness that revolts, it is *the last word of the scientific thought* of our century" (Debord 2006, p.1069).
[74] Debord 1998, p.39, translation altered; 2006, p.1616

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scheme of things", and is thus "quite unable *to think strategically*".[75]

　　We might also note that Clausewitz's comments on Napoleon's approach to strategy are made during a discussion of the art of defending against enemy invasion. Referencing Napoleon's Russian débâcle of 1812,[76] Clausewitz stresses that the further an attack progresses the weaker it becomes. It would seem that for Debord the spectacle's absence of strategic guidance entails that it too will advance beyond what Clausewitz refers to as its 'culminating point', i.e. the point beyond which an attack's decreasing momentum is outweighed by its resistance.[77] Again, this may seem like a rather forced reading, but it might be noted that the S.I. made almost precisely the same point in 1969: in a short paragraph entitled 'The Culminating Point of the Spectacle's Offensive', they cast the events of the preceding May as inaugurating a movement that would confirm "the dialectical thought of Clausewitz".[78]

Good Taste

　　This perhaps serves to highlight the sense in which Debord, in these later years, still held to a dialectical model of emergent consciousness and revolt (Merrifield's suggestion that one can identify an Althusserian "epistemological break"[79] in Debord's thought is thus quite wrong). He still maintains that the increasing abundance of spectacular commodities is inversely proportional to their ability to satisfy,[80] and he also seems to hold that the spectacle's development into the integrated stage has caused its veneer to wear increasingly thin: "the same question," he wrote in 1992, "is about to be posed again everywhere: how can the poor be made to work once their illusions have been shattered, and once force has been defeated?"[81] The problem however lies in the manner in which this opposition was to arise. Because these weakening illusions were coupled to an alleged increase in the quasi-existential poverty described above,

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[75]　S.I. 2003, p.22; Debord 2006, p.1100

[76]　In 1812 the *Grande Armée* advanced into Russia. Alexander's forces retreated, and employed a scorched earth policy as they did so. When the exhausted and starving French finally reached Moscow Napoleon was able to claim the city. However, as three quarters of it had been burned, and as the Tsar would not come to terms, Napoleon had no choice but to abandon Moscow and retreat back to Poland. During the course of this retreat he was forced to fight again at Beresina. When the returning army finally entered Poland its original force of 420,000 had been cut down to 10,000 (Handel 2006, p.194; see also Fuller 1970, pp.117-8).

[77]　Clausewitz 1993, p.639

[78]　S.I. 1997, p.618

[79]　Merrifield 2005, p.99

[80]　See for example Debord 2008, p.233.

[81]　Debord 1995, p.10; 2006, p.1794

Debord's later writings bring the problematic aspects of his earlier work to the fore.

This can be illustrated by making reference to his views on the 'adulteration' of food, as set out in his 1985 essay *Abat-Faim* (literally: 'hunger-abater'). Once, Debord tells us, an *abat-faim* was a dish served to one's dinner guests prior to the main meal; today, the totality of the food consumed by modern society is no more than a mere 'hunger abater'. We thus have a subsequent image of the unhappy consciousness' links to spectatorship: here, food is viewed in the same terms as the hopeless pursuit of 'augmented survival' described in 1967. In this essay Debord links the absence of history to the absence of taste – "each person no longer has an individual history in and through which he discovers and forms his own tastes"[82] – and in a related text from the same period he writes that "taste and knowledge have both disappeared"[83] from modern society. Yet following the pattern described above, he seems to hold that their deprivation will engender their return; and as before, this is a movement that would emerge from the effectively classless *ennui* of spectacular consumption, and not from the oppositional relations and antagonistic experiences of capital itself. However, what we have here is a sense in which this revolutionary demand is not driven by an abstract desire for 'more', or indeed by a desire for self-determination, but rather by the pursuit of individual 'taste'. In fact, in a letter of 1991 in which he dismisses "the immense efforts that have been made by the 'practical men' of our era to manage to not understand what is most important", Debord simply concludes that "it is only necessary to know how to love".[84] It would thus seem that the response to Agamben's comment about reading Debord's books as manuals is ultimately rather banal: the confusion of the integrated spectacle can be superseded simply by discovering what, who and how one loves.[85]

To "consider everything from the standpoint of oneself, taken as the centre of the world"[86] (the approach promoted by Debord in his autobiographical *Panegyric*, and thus in his own personal history) is to adopt a somewhat solipsistic approach to the

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[82] Debord 1985

[83] Debord 1986a

[84] Debord 2008, p.284. Rabant (1997, p.181), by way of his argument about Debord's status as a 'guardian' of an archive of a 'true' common language, implies a link between this statement – which is taken from Debord's *Panegyric* – and the unfinished 121st line of Plato's *Critias*: "So [Zeus] gathered all the gods in his most honourable residence, even that that stands at the world's centre and overlooks all that has part in the world's becoming, and when he had gathered them there, he said…" (Plato 1961, p.1224).

[85] This claim can be traced all the way back to 1958: "Each person," wrote the S.I. in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, "must seek what he loves, what attracts him" (S.I. 2006, p.49; 1997, p.11)

[86] Debord 2004, p.7; 2006, p.1659

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return of history, and entails that individual subjectivity becomes not only the basis of strategic engagement but also its defining content. The analysis of capital cannot therefore help but be given over to an account of its subjective effects. This is not only detrimental to economic analysis, as noted in chapter six, but perhaps even antithetical to it. For example, in November 1985 (and thus after that summer's Live Aid event) Debord makes the following, rather disturbing comment:

[T]he planet produces enough cereal that no one should suffer hunger, but what troubles this idyll is that the 'rich countries' abusively consume half the world's cereals in feeding their cattle. But when one has known the disastrous taste of butchered meat which was thus fattened on cereal, can one speak of 'rich countries'? It's not to make us live like Sybarites that part of the planet is dying of famine; it's to make us live in the mud.[87]

Although in keeping with the concerns of the 'new proletariat', this passage perhaps shows what little relation the latter bears to the actual mechanics of capital. Debord's own comments on the links between strategy and subjectivity can therefore be seen to imply the same problems as his theory of spectacle. In fact, given that the analysis and traversal of a historical context becomes undermined by an individualistic focus, one could perhaps venture that if the spectacle can be said to possess the tactical to the detriment of the strategic, then perhaps Debord's own account can be seen to privilege the strategic (i.e. subjective history) over the tactical (i.e. the study and engagement of capital). However, I'll suggest in chapters eight and nine that this need not be the necessary outcome of these ideas.

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[87] Debord 1985; 2006, p.1585

Chapter Eight: Strategy and Subjectivity

History and Autonomy

The claims set out here in chapter eight will attempt to synthesise some of the positions advanced in the first and second parts of the thesis, with reference to the links between history and strategy discussed in chapter seven. Whilst drawing on some of the ideas presented in part one, I'll try to set out the primary attributes of Debord's Hegelian Marxism. I should stress that the claims made here at the end of the thesis are more tentative than those presented in its earlier sections, and should be seen primarily as indications towards the possibilities that the reading presented here might hold for future work. It might also be noted that Debord gives us very little to draw on when it comes to investigating these aspects of his oeuvre, and as such my attempts at reconstruction will inevitably give way to speculation at times. Consequently, chapters eight and nine and the conclusions drawn from them could be seen as supplements to the thesis' primary intended contribution, i.e. its attempt to read and critique Debord's work through the philosophical dimensions of its intellectual history. However, as I will remain close to textual evidence throughout, I think it possible to suggest that the model presented here may not be too dissimilar from Debord's actual views.

I'll begin by revising some of my earlier comments on the degree to which Debord's account implies an immanent form of political agency that avoids hierarchy and representation. From this I'll move towards noting the similarities between the unity of means and ends implied by the S.I.'s comments on organisation and historical process, before discussing the degree to which this echoes the circular self-determination of the Hegelian absolute. I'll then work through some of the more literary and poetic elements of Debord's various comments on time and history, before presenting a theoretical model that may serve to explain them.

We've seen that Debord's concern with history and agency is marked by an emphasis on autonomy and self-determination, and by the rejection of all forms of separated power. In this respect his own and the S.I.'s work should be located within the ultra-left tradition, and indeed it often is placed alongside libertarian communism, council communism and anarchism. This of course sets Debord apart from Lukács, despite the debts owed to the latter; for where Lukács' claim that "the proletariat has

been entrusted by history with the task of *transforming society consciously*"[1] bears obvious relation to the material that I've emphasised throughout this thesis, it also differs from Debord in that Lukács locates the full expression of that historical consciousness within the Party. This for Debord is tantamount to "directing the proletariat from *without*".[2]   This is not to suggest that Debord and the S.I. were unequivocally opposed to the idea of a historical vanguard. Their early status as an artistic avant-garde was inflected with the desire to stand at the forefront of history ("Are we an avant-garde?" asked Vaneigem in 1963; "If so, to be avant-garde means to move in step with reality"),[3] and their concern with expressing an historical negative or tendency certainly chimes with the contention that the Party should make explicit that which is implicit within the class as a whole. The difference is simply that the identity, consciousness and direction of that mass should not be localised in a hierarchically elevated and thus representational (*qua* the alienation and abdication of social power) form. Hence, as we also saw in the general introduction, the S.I. claimed that they "did not 'put our ideas into everybody's heads'", but rather "gave voice to ideas *that were necessarily already present* in these proletarian heads"[4] (this however bears relation to some of Marx and Engels' claims in the *Manifesto*, which Lukács, despite his distance from the S.I.'s views, no doubt also drew upon).[5]

Yet for Debord, what Lukács described as the virtues of the Bolshevik Party (i.e. its function as a form of practical mediation between theory and practice) were in fact everything that it "*was not*."[6] Despite the merits of his theoretical work, Lukács was said to be an "ideologist" in the service of the "power that was most vulgarly external to the proletarian movement": for Lukács, according to Debord, gave the impression that he'd "found himself, his entire personality, within this power as if within *his own proper self*",[7] even though the terror inflicted by that power and the self-repudiations that it would later demand from him revealed that what he'd in fact identified with was the very "*opposite* of himself, and of all that he had argued for in *History and Class*

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[1]   Lukács 1971, p.71, emphasis in the original
[2]   Debord 1995, p.68; 2006, p.805, emphasis in the original
[3]   S.I. 2006, p.159; 1997, p.334
[4]   S.I. 2003, p.9 translation altered; Debord 2006, p.1089, emphasis in the original.
[5]   The communists are "the most advanced and resolute section of the working-class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others," and have "the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate results of the proletarian movement" (Engels and Marx 1985, p.95).
[6]   Debord 1995, p.80; 2006, p.814, emphasis in the original
[7]   Debord 1995, p.81-2, translation altered; 2006, p.814, emphasis in the original

Consciousness"[8] (comments that might usefully be put in relation to Feuerbach's views on religion: "Man" for Feuerbach, as we saw earlier, first sees his [own] nature as if out of himself, before he finds it in himself").[9] In fact, and whilst Debord's 'new' proletariat is problematic as regards its bearing on the analysis of capital, its implications as regards direct councilist organisation are perhaps more consistent than Lukács' own views on the Party's embodiment of historical self-consciousness: for if subject-object unity is in essence an agency that is at the same time a self-determining process, and if it arises from a common attribute of those that compose it, then Debord's emphasis on direct, collective self-determination perhaps makes more sense – in theoretical terms, at least – than Lukács' insistence on the Party as a controlling hub.

Two points can be drawn from these distinctions. Firstly, 'authentic' historical agency would seem to entail finding and identifying oneself within a collective power that is not separate from one's own individuality, but which is rather an expression of the particular identities that compose it. Secondly, the manner in which the production and dissemination of theory is cast as an historically specific intervention receives a further qualification: for if theory is the expression of a shared circumstance, or rather a consciousness of what is required to change that circumstance, then it would seem that the real measure of a theory's validity lies in the degree to which it affects practical change, and is adopted by those to whom it purports to give voice. This last point not only invites distinction from Leninism (*What Is to Be Done?*[10] provides an obvious point of reference here), but it also raises a set of difficulties that I'll treat towards the end of the thesis. Here however we can sum up these opening remarks by simply stating that what Debord seems to imply here is a collective force that arises immanently from its members; a point that bears direct relation to the themes of organic unity and alienation discussed in part two. In the following section I'll show that the operation of this form of agency would also seem to recall aspects of the Hegelian Concept.

Circularity and Unity

As we saw earlier, the Lukács of 1967 – concerned by the interest that *History and Class Consciousness* had garnered amongst "French Existentialism and its

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8   Debord 1995, p.81-2, translation altered; 2006, p.814, emphasis in the original
9   Feuerbach 1989, p.13
10   Lenin 1988

intellectual ambience"[11] – held that "labour, the mediator of the metabolic interaction between society and nature," was "missing" from that book:[12] the subjective alienation of consciousness had been blurred with the necessary alienation of its objectification in action, and as a result his attempt to present the proletariat as "the identical subject-object of history" could be viewed as an "attempt to out-Hegel Hegel".[13] We also saw that Debord avoids this problem, and that he emphasises the necessity of self-objectification in activity: "As Hegel showed," he writes, "time is a *necessary* alienation, being the medium in which the subject realises himself whilst losing himself, becomes other in order to become truly himself."[14] The supersession of alienation and separation in Debord's account does not entail overcoming 'otherness' and externality altogether, but rather involves an identity in difference between the subject and its objective actions and their results. What then arises is a sense in which subject-object unity emerges as a set of conditions for self-determinate action, and I indicated above that this could be taken to imply an ethical dimension[15] (insofar as this agency is to extend beyond capitalism, basing it solely upon economic determinations would seem to be unsatisfactory); or, if ethics seems too dogmatic a term, it could be read as implying a connection to notions of general will, as both the latter and the ethical pertain to the legitimation of a set of social relations. Yet these conditions are presented not only as the grounds of action, but also as their goal: hence the sense in which that which lies beyond the spectacle is not a discrete social form, but an open history. Communism, *qua* the self-determination and interrelation of the individuals involved, thus becomes an historical process rather than an economic formula[16] (for "history", as we saw earlier, "has no goal [*n'a pas d'objet*] aside from whatever effects it works upon itself").[17] I would argue that this is linked to the sense in which the S.I. advocated the unification of the form and content of political organisation: for example, when discussing workers' councils, the S.I. stated that "the means of their victory are already

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[11] Lukács 1971, p.xvi
[12] Lukács 1971, p.xvii
[13] Lukács 1971, p.xxiii
[14] Debord 1995, pp.115-6; 2006, p.835
[15] This is necessarily schematic, but one could venture that if freedom means self-determination, *qua* the absence of the external determination of alienated social power – and if the organisational means of attaining freedom are an end in themselves, insofar as means and ends are one – then this would seem to imply an ethics, as pursuing one's own freedom would entail perpetuating that of others.
[16] "Theoreticians who examine the history of [the Paris Commune] ...from a divinely omniscient viewpoint... can easily demonstrate that the Commune was objectively doomed to failure, and had no possible supersession [*dépassement*; alternatively: sublation]. It must not be forgotten that for those who really lived it, the supersession was *already there*" (S.I. 2006, p.401, translation altered; Debord 2006, emphasis in the original).
[17] Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.792

their victory".[18]

I think it possible to connect this unity of means and ends, and of process and goal, to the self-movement of the Hegelian absolute. When discussing this earlier I referred to Debord's remarks on the "*non-inverted* legacy" of the "*undialectical* part of the Hegelian attempt to create a circular system",[19] and suggest that this could be taken to imply that there is, potentially, a dialectical and inverted version of such circularity. I also suggested that Debord's description of the Hegelian Idea as 'undialectical' stems from the self-contained nature of the Hegelian absolute: like the flow of value in the economy, the movement of the negative within the Hegelian system stands apart from those from whom it truly arises, and appears only as an object of static contemplation. A genuinely 'dialectical' version thereof would, presumably, actualise that negative in lived practice, thereby 'inverting' and realising the unity of the absolute as free, self-determinate historical agency.

This connection is however rendered difficult by the degree to which Debord's account would seem to require the incorporation of chance and contingency intro this movement, as this jars with the free self-founding necessity of the Hegelian absolute. Yet before making that claim I'll first present some examples taken from Debord's work that may serve to strengthen my case. Drawing on the more poetic and literary references to temporality that can be found in Debord's later work, I'll show that his account can be seen to associate communion with time with sublimity; that this link with time involves decision and choice; and that identity with time, despite its apparent connection to an absolute, requires some form of strategic process.

Strategy and the Sublime

Verso's 2004 edition of the latter includes a note by Debord on the difficulties of translating the text. It is, he explains, a rather more complex work than it may at first seem (a point that perhaps also substantiates my earlier remarks on the subtleties involved of the *Comments*): not only is it "crammed with traps";[20] in addition, it exhibits a "continual *shift* of meaning"[21] modelled upon the Situationist *dérive*.[22] This

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[18] S.I. 2006, p.362; 1997, p.641
[19] Debord 1995, p.51, translation altered; 2006, p.795
[20] Debord 2008, p.218
[21] Debord 2004, pp.172-3; 2006, pp.1686-7
[22] "If *Comments* was made to paralyse a computer, then *Panegyric* is made to partially escape good political minds, counting on their rarity, and also on diverse principles of the *dérive,* which modern art

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shift of meaning can be seen in the themes treated by its chapters: for where the first, appropriately, deals with writing through the issue of strategy, the second chapter deals with the passing of time through alcoholism.[23] It is here that Debord makes the following, frequently quoted statement: "At first, like everyone, I appreciated the effect of mild drunkenness; then very soon I grew to like what lies beyond violent drunkenness, once that stage is past: a terrible and magnificent peace, the true taste of the passage of time."[24]

This remark can be illuminated by way of reference to the eighth century Chinese poet Li Po, whom Debord references in *Panegyric* and indeed throughout the period under discussion here in part three. Li Po's work is much given to reflections on time, as the Taoist principles that characterise it entail an emphasis on moving in step with the world;[25] and in keeping with other classical Chinese poets, he held alcohol to offer greater spontaneity and a deeper unity with time.[26] Yet whilst the romanticism of Li Po's communion with time and the eternal can be appealing (legend has it that he died drunkenly falling from a boat whilst attempting to embrace the moon's reflection), what's important here is the degree to which Debord too presents affinity with time as something akin to the sublime; a point that accords with the negative, moving 'absolute' afforded by the 'passageways' of the constructed situation (as discussed in chapter three).

Time and alcohol feature heavily in *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, which Debord also references throughout these later works. Khayyám presents the flow of time as life, and links it to alcohol that is to be consumed and enjoyed. There's an existential current to the *Rubáiyát*, and indeed a degree of hedonism (from the Fitzgerald translation: "Ah, fill the Cup – what boots it to repeat/ How Time is slipping underneath our Feet"),[27] but also a touch of fatalism: for example, in the *Comments* Debord quotes Khayyám as having described human agents as "puppets" of the "firmament", destined to be put back into the "box of oblivion".[28]

It's significant to note that those last lines are quoted in a small, separate section

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introduced into the deployment of texts" (Debord 2008, p.218).

[23] Debord 2004b, p.173; 2006, p.1687

[24] Debord 2004b, pp. 30-1; 2006, p.1669

[25] See Hinton in Li Po 1998, 2006, pp.xi-xxiv

[26] "Three cups and I've plumbed the great Way [the Tao],/ a jarful and I've merged with occurrence/ appearing of itself. Wine's view is lived:/ you can't preach [Taoist] doctrine to the sober" (Li Po 1998, p.44).

[27] Khayyám 1993, p.51

[28] Debord 1998, p.85; 2006, p.1644; there is no direct correspondence between the lines that Debord quotes and the Fitzgerald translation, although its 49th quatrain may be the one in question (Khayyám 1993, p.63).

of text, which is located immediately prior to the *Comments*' suggestion that the spectacle's managers will become aware of the possibilities afforded by the integrated spectacle's new terrain (as discussed in the previous chapter). The quotation is placed alongside another from Baltasar Gracián, whose words can be traced to a section of *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* headed 'Live for the Moment'. This advises its readers to "Act when you may, for time and tide wait for no one".[29] Debord is of course as opaque as ever here, but the two quotations can perhaps be read as offering the choice between two different forms of temporality: acting in and with time (Gracián), or being acted on by time (Khayyám); a choice made all the more important by the spectacle's dawning tactical (although not strategic) self-consciousness. We thus have a sense in which time is not only associated with sublimity, but also with strategy.

The existential dimensions of the latter theme can be found in the work of the 15th Century Spanish poet Jorge Manrique, which Debord translated into French in 1980. In his notes to the translation Debord commends the emphasis on the flow of time that can be found in Manrique's work, and claims that the latter's "most beautiful lesson ... is that he must fight for 'his true king', which is that which one has made oneself".[30] Yet in order to 'fight' successfully one is obliged to know how to act at the right time, and to thus possess a degree of 'historical consciousness'.

As we've seen, this becomes an increasingly difficult task within the integrated spectacle. Yet given the nature of the latter, Debord's unpublished notes on Poker[31] of 1990 seem particularly apposite: he advises there that when others are presenting illusions and assuming all others to be doing the same, acting opportunely on the basis of known facts confers an advantage. To play well, "one must know how to employ the *kairos* of one's forces at the right moment."[32] *Kairos* is a classical Greek term referring to the opportune moment: the right time to act, but a time that cannot be measured. *Kairos* is inherently qualitative, as opposed to the quantitative sequence of *kronos*, or 'clock-time', and not only does it transcend the latter, but it also impinges upon it and disrupts it with its demands for apposite action. This concept can be seen to pertain directly to some of Debord's claims in *In Girum*: there, referencing both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz, he writes that "you have to act with what is at hand... the moment you see a

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[29] Debord 1998, p.85; 2006, p.1644; Gracián 2000, p.116
[30] Debord in Manrique 1996, p.73
[31] Debord claims to have played Poker as a means of supporting himself financially at some points in his life.
[32] Debord 2006, p.1790

favourable opportunity",[33] contending that "those who have chosen to strike with the time know that [the time that is] their weapon is also their master; and they can hardly complain. It is also the master of those without weapons, and a much harder master [to them]."[34]

It would seem that the self-determinate agency that Debord advocates relies on choice and decision: on knowing how and when to act both with and within one's own time. Yet time and choice are also linked to beauty. In 1955 Debord claimed that the only things that could rival the beauty of the Paris Metro map were Claude Lorrain's two paintings of harbours at dusk, which he had seen in the Louvre. They depict ships and people coming and going, and with the setting of the sun they also show the passage of time: "I am not, of course, talking about mere physical beauty [*la beauté plastique*]", he wrote, for "the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation", but rather "simply about the particularly moving presentation, in both cases, of a sum of possibilities".[35]

Identity with time is thus linked to contextual action, beauty, and is even accorded a degree of sublimity. Returning to the claims advanced in part one: when discussing the constructed situation we saw that for the S.I. both Lefebvre's 'moments' and their own situations tended "towards the absolute, and [towards] its undoing"; both, they claimed, were the "proclamation of the absolute and consciousness of the passage [*conscience du passage*; alternatively, 'consciousness of transitoriness']".[36] As I noted then, this use of the term 'absolute' was perhaps intended in a primarily aesthetic sense, but given the correspondence between Debord's early views on the situation and his later indications of the subjectivity denied by the spectacle it is possible to use this 'passage' through the 'absolute' as a means of pursuing his Hegelian Marxism.

The situation was to offer a degree of permanence and continuity to its communion with time (I argued earlier that where the Lefebvrian moment was an instance *within* time, the situation attempts to move *with* time). We also saw that Lefebvre claimed that creating moments entailed shaping 'structure' from 'conjuncture' (i.e. establishing a specific type of moment from a shifting, changing context). Yet Debord, borrowing Lefebvre's terms, presented the situation as "an attempt at structure of (in) conjunction":[37] as an attempt, in other words, to establish a state of self-directed change that involved the deliberate creation and traversal of chance, and thus, on my

[33] Debord 2003a, p.180; 2006, pp.1387-8
[34] Debord 2003a, p.174, translation altered; 2006, pp.1380-1
[35] S.I. 2006, p.11; Debord 2006, p.208
[36] S.I. 1997, p.119
[37] Debord 2009, p.337

reading, a degree of strategic agency. I also referred in chapter two to an unpublished note on chance, written by Debord in 1957, in which he writes that "In known conditions the role of chance is conservative", although all "progress, all creation, is the organization of *new conditions of chance*".[38] Situationist practice would thus seem to be involved in the constant creation, negotiation and subsequent re-creation of successive fields of chance. This would then be both a historical and strategic project, characterised by constant, negative movement (*qua* its identity with time), and I think it possible to contend that these characteristics of the constructed situation would later be attributed to revolutionary and post-revolutionary subjectivity: for the Situationist revolution would inaugurate a "collective" time, as Debord put it, "which is playful in character",[39] and in which, for Vaneigem, "the game that everyone will play [will be] 'the moving order of the future'".[40] Prior to the actualisation of such a future this movement would presumably be characterised by a more strategic concern with attempting to supersede the spectacle.

I'll now try to offer some speculations as to the mechanics that this model would seem to involve, and this will involve highlighting issues pertaining to bad infinity and contingency.

Bad Infinity and Contingency

Whilst Hegelian circularity entails permanent process, within Hegel's own account it can ultimately only give rise to further modulations of itself. Hegel is, after all, claiming to express the inner logic of being, and thus any changes that occur within being do so within the parameters set by that logic. Debord of course makes no such claims: the subject-object unity that he describes is not that of the Idea, but rather far more human-scale. As such it is always contextual, and is obliged to recreate itself as it moves through time and through the contexts and situations with which it is faced. Thus where time and negativity move through the Hegelian circle as current through a circuit, and are contained therein, Debord's own model of unity would seem to be obliged to continually reform itself around the more linear stream of time that passes through it. So although one could suggest that the links between praxis and the absolute render time in

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[38] Debord 2006, p.296
[39] Debord 1995, p.116
[40] S.I. 2006, p.173; 1997, p.343

Debord's account equivalent to the "universal blood"[41] of the Concept's negativity – the constant interplay of subject and object being analogous to its "life-pulse"[42] – the process by which the ensemble moves through time must entail limitation, and thus bad infinity. It is however this persistence of the bad infinite that allows for the chance elements and strategic dimensions of the model, insofar as consciousness remains limited and subject to the unknown. In addition, insofar as the consciousness that would arise form these contexts would be determined by them, it would also be contingent to some extent; it could thus not claim to be necessary in and of itself alone, but rather only necessary in relation to its own project and given circumstances. Consequently – and although this falls beyond the scope of this present study – there is thus a degree to which Debord's Marxism perhaps invites future attempts to use his work as a vehicle towards a more politicised take on the links between Hegelian metaphysics and Sartrean ontology.

I'll try to clarify these suggestions by way of the following. Hegel's views on contingency merit serious study in their own right, but they can perhaps be sketched by way of the following. For Hegel, if something is contingent it "has the ground of its being not within itself but elsewhere".[43] This means that it cannot, for Hegel, be genuinely free. True freedom in his view means necessity, and his position here is very close to Spinoza's claim that "That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone".[44] If something is free it must be the cause of itself, and thereby necessary; that which is contingent upon something else cannot therefore be free.[45] For Hegel, everything ultimately has its basis within the Idea, although not everything that exists fully actualises and expresses this common nature. As it is the Idea alone that is truly, absolutely necessary, genuine human freedom can be found in recognising ourselves to be its expressions, and in shaping ourselves and our world in conformity with it (hence the importance of the state to Hegel's philosophy; hence also his claim that the goal of Spirit is freedom). This can be illustrated by returning to the structure of the Hegelian system. The *Logic* allows pure being to unfold of its own immanent nature, by way of which process it reveals itself to be reason and ultimately nature. Nature, in *The Philosophy of Nature*, gives rise to life

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[41] Hegel 1977, p.100
[42] Hegel 1969, p.37
[43] Hegel 1991, p.218
[44] Spinoza 1996, p.2
[45] "When people speak of freedom of the will, they frequently understand by this simply freedom of choice, i.e. will in the form of contingency... " (Hegel 1991, p.218).

and ultimately Spirit, which then ascends in *The Philosophy of Spirit* to the point where it takes up the immanent philosophical study of pure being. The physical, natural world is thus part of a circle that is grasped by human consciousness, and which reveals itself and all that to which it gives rise to be both necessary and free. Nature, as follows given its location within this circuit, is the reason developed in the *Logic* whilst in a state of otherness to itself. Consequently, nature exhibits *un*reason and contingency. Yet by the same token, because nature is part of the movement of the whole, those contingencies are themselves located within a grander necessity and constitute expressions of the freedom of that whole. My point then (following Houlgate, and as opposed to Beiser),[46] is that for Hegel contingency falls within necessity, as within its own logical conditions of existence.

With Debord however, freedom cannot be pure, self-referential necessity. In fact, in his 'Report on the Construction of Situations' of 1957,[47] he writes that "the real exercise of freedom" is "consciousness of *present* necessity"[48] (my italics). This is then not the pure self-determination of a divine Spirit, but rather self-determination in situation. Every formation and moment of subjectivity is thus finite, contingent on its predecessor and on the factors that inform it. It thus involves bad infinity.

This would seem to invite reference to Sartre once more, whose "circuit of selfness" could be seen to echo some of these themes.[49] Within that circuit I project myself into the future, giving meaning to my present by defining it on that basis; but when I reach myself in the future I have become different, and the totality that would arise from my founding of my own being (i.e. from my future self founding my present self) is forever left 'de-totalised'. Like the unhappy consciousness, I continue to chase my own receding self. Furthermore, with Sartre there can be no sense in which freedom is 'consciousness of present necessity', as one is always already free. It is in fact in order

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[46] Beiser suggests that contingency may be a major problem vis a vis its location inside or outside the system: "If it is inside...[it] has only a subjective status, so that there is no explanation of real contingency"; if outside, "it then limits the absolute" (Beiser 2005, p.79; in contrast, see Houlgate 2005 pp.112-5).

[47] The context of the following statement is a discussion of Zhdanovism, named after Andrei Zhdanov, a Soviet proponent of Socialist Realist art who argued artists should be "engineers of human souls" (Zhdanov 1977). Debord argues here that whilst a rejection of Socialist Realism in the East tended to pursue the greater creative freedom offered by Western artistic currents, this cannot be an adequate response: rather, a negation of Zhdanovism was said to entail a negation of the Zhdanovist negation of bourgeois art, i.e. the genuine supersession of art that would realise it as praxis. Freedom therefore was not to be confused with creative licence *per se*, but was rather to be linked with a conscious awareness of the means towards actualising conditions made necessary by present exigencies (and ultimately of the requirements of actualising a condition of subject-object unity).

[48] S.I. 2006, p.36; Debord 2006, p.320

[49] "We shall use the expression *Circuit of selfness* for the relation of the for-itself with the possible which it is" (Sartre 2003, p.126).

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to escape that freedom that the desire to found oneself arises, i.e. the impossible desire to become God. In Sartre's view, subject-object unity – or in his terminology, being in-and-for-itself – would erase freedom altogether, instituting the end of consciousness and a flat, undifferentiated positivity.[50] Yet with Debord the issue is more to do with identity with one's own objectified, externalised power (the nuances of which as regards alienation and collectivity were touched on at the end of part one), not identity with being *per se*,[51] and Hegelian philosophy certainly involves a sense in which identity does not entail the erasure of difference. Thus where Sartre posits an impossible desire to become God, linking ethics to the renunciation of that desire – and where Hegel in effect purports to *be* God – Debord's own account has a more Feuerbachian take on the problem: subject-object unity becomes not a cosmic, metaphysical truth or the reduction of the self to the status of an object, but rather a social condition that affords the

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[50] Sartre 2003 p.164

[51] This issue could be taken as a means of pursuing the question of whether Debord followed Engels and diamat in ascribing dialectics to the natural world, and not just to the human sphere. The problems of diamat are often traced to Engels, particularly his *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature* (Engels 1987), which validated Marxism as science by casting science itself as dialectics. From such a position one could claim the ascendancy of the Party to be as 'natural' and inevitable as that of the stars in the sky (Stalin endorsed 'dialectical materialism' as "the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party" (Stalin 1976)), and it is thus perhaps attractive to distance Debord from these positions. The import of contingency, limitation and chance would seem to point to a rejection of a dialectics of nature, but hints towards its acceptance van however be found in some of Debord's writings: for example, and somewhat peculiarly, in a letter of 1986 he describes the 19th century German physician Christian Hahnemann as "resembl[ing] a Hegelian dialectician by conceiving of homeopathy" (Debord 1986b). Furthermore, it might also be noted that some of the claims that Lukács makes when arguing for a dialectics of nature in his 'Tailism and the Dialectic' (written in the mid 1920's, lost, discovered in the 90's and published in 2000 as *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*) do bear marked relation to Debord's apparent views on the limitations of consciousness (e.g. compare Lukács 2000 pp.102-3 with the opening pages of *Panegyric*). It might also be noted here as an aside that Lukács' views on nature are famously confusing. *History and Class Consciousness* seems at times to deny that dialectics can be ascribed to nature, arguing that it should be restricted to society and culture (Lukács 1971 p.24n); the book also objects to Engels' view that scientific experimentation on the natural world might serve as a model for understanding society. Yet elsewhere in the same book Lukács indicates that both nature and society are dialectical, albeit whilst noting that nature, though dialectical, is devoid of the active human consciousness that characterises society (Lukács 1971 p.207; for helpful comments see Rees in Lukács 2000, p.21; see also Vogel 1996 for a useful overview of the problems). The initial claim that nature is not dialectical can then be read as contending that nature cannot be understood in terms of the dialectics of society. This explains his objection to Engels: scientific experiment, in which an observer merely 'watches' the operation of nature, is unsuitable for understanding the active process of human history, and leads towards contemplation and determinism. In 'Tailism and the Dialectic' Lukács goes some way towards clarifying these positions, but they remain very unclear. His major point seems to be that reality should be considered as a historical process; that our knowledge is mediated by society; this then shapes our knowledge of nature (e.g. Lukács 2000, pp.102-3). Hence, nature is a 'social category'. This then tempers Lukács' 1967 complaint that his earlier book had tried to 'out-Hegel Hegel'. He is not claiming that describing nature as a social category was a mistake, because to do so might imply a dialectics of nature: rather, he holds that his book's stance on alienation makes such a dialectical understanding of nature all the more difficult, because it views nature in terms of society, thereby denigrating Marxism's status as a "theory of nature" (Lukács 1971, p.xvi).

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supersession of a collectivity's alienated powers and capacities.[52]

The degree to which this involves bad infinity and contingency (i.e. the constant re-creation of that condition of unity) cannot however be avoided. But if it seems a contradiction to contend that Debord's account is modelled on the Hegelian absolute and yet falls short of true infinity, one could look at Arthur, who ascribes the same features to capital itself (remembering here that for Debord the capitalist spectacle is a distorted mirror of its producers).[53] For Arthur, capital's movement through the phases of commodity – money – commodity can be viewed in terms of identity in difference: "The truly infinite character of capital", he writes, "is that it returns to itself in its circuit".[54] However, Arthur also points out that there is "no realisation of absolute wealth no matter how much capital is accumulated",[55] as this movement continually produces a succession of finite amounts. Furthermore, for Arthur, capital must always remain contingent upon material reality, despite its attempts to subsume the latter.[56] It is thus marked by the bad infinite, despite its circularity and self-grounding, self-perpetuating process. He then contrasts this with one of Marx's comments in the *Grundrisse* on post-revolutionary society, in which Marx claims that humanity does not strive "to remain something [it] has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming";[57] and "what," Arthur asks, "is this, if not true infinity?"[58]

The question of whether Marx's own philosophical anthropology really can support a notion of true infinity falls outside of our current concerns, but for the reasons given above I'd argue that Debord's cannot. As the actions undertaken by the subject must be contingent upon elements external to that subject, the latter cannot be possessed of the complete, self-enclosed necessity of the Hegelian absolute. Nonetheless, there are still elements of the 'good' infinite perpetual process: for what one finds here is a peculiarly existential, and indeed quite literal gloss on the Trotskyist notion of 'permanent revolution' (this is in fact a point made by the S.I. themselves: the "new revolutionary movement", they remarked in 1961, was to involve "the passage from the

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[52] This could in fact be seen to be close to what Sartre actually advocates. Anderson's explanation of this point puts Sartre close to the position that I'm attributing to Debord: "by choosing my freedom and justifying my own existence [as opposed of running from it in the hopeless desire to become in-and-for-itself] ... I become, Sartre says (in a weak sense), God as *causa sui*, for I will myself to be the absolute cause and foundation of the meaning of my being as well as the cause of the world's meaning" (Anderson 1993, p.61).
[53] See for example Debord 1995, p.16; 2006, p.769
[54] Arthur 2004, p.148
[55] Arthur 2004, p.146
[56] Arthur 2004, p.107
[57] Marx 1973, p.488; referenced in Arthur 2004, p.149
[58] Arthur 2004, p.149

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old theory of limited permanent revolution to a theory of generalised permanent revolution").[59] In what follows I'll attempt to develop quite what that theory might entail, and indeed what it might mean for the theory of spectacle.

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[59] S.I. 2006, p.86; 1997, p.203

Chapter Nine: Freedom and Praxis

Tactics, Strategy and the Theory of Spectacle

In this final chapter I'll try to make good on my earlier suggestion that the notion of praxis that could be drawn from Debord's work might be of greater interest than the theory of spectacle. In chapter eight I developed some of part one's claims as to the sense in which Debord's account can be seen to cast the Hegelian absolute as the grounds, rather than as the goal – or indeed the arrest – of historical agency; here in chapter nine I'll try to take this further, by way of recourse to the self-grounding and self-legitimating movement of the Hegelian Idea. Through doing so I hope to show that Debord's claim that Situationist subjectivity entails "going with the flow of time [*miser sur la fuite du temps*; literally, 'to gamble on the escape of time']",[1] when taken with his interest in strategy, affords a means of addressing the statement with which I began the thesis' general introduction: "Man – that 'negative being who *is* to the extent that he abolishes being' – is one [identique] with time".[2] I'll try to show that the themes outlined above may afford a means of taking that statement in conjunction with Marx and Engels' famous contention that "communism" is "the real movement that abolishes [*aufhebt*] the present state of things"[3] (a line that *The Society of the Spectacle* links, notably, to the movement of a self-conscious history, and to the dissolution of "all separation").[4]

According to Clausewitz's definition, which I noted in chapter seven and which Debord adopts in the *Comments*, tactics is the use of engagements to win a battle; strategy is the use of battles to win a war. I also suggested in chapter seven that it might be possible to relate this to the model of agency advanced here: one could link 'tactics' to the thought and practice required to negotiate a given context, and 'strategy' to the ongoing historical project within which such attempts are located. Such associations may seem a little facile, but they can be useful in terms of relating the material set out in part one of the thesis to the criticisms advanced in part two.

Towards the end of chapter seven I remarked that if the *Comments* can indeed be read as implying that the spectacle's managers will gain a tactical advantage to the

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[1] S.I. 2006, p.42; Debord 2006, p.327
[2] Debord 1995, p.92; 2006, p.820
[3] Marx 2000, p.187
[4] Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.792; Cf. 2006, p.866

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detriment of strategic awareness, then perhaps Debord's own emphasis on individual subjectivity privileges the strategic over the tactical: an emphasis on personal history and 'taste' takes precedence, at least initially, over an engagement with the mechanics of capital. Yet as I've also suggested, such individualism need not be the necessary result of this model. If one takes it on its own terms, it would seem that if the task is to remain in step with one's own time, and to re-create the conditions of a self-determinate history, then any denigration of the 'tactical' part of the 'strategic' process risk bringing the entire enterprise to a halt (hence my earlier claims that this model provides an impetus towards the critique of political economy).

Admittedly, one may well find this emphasis on military metaphor distasteful (*In Girum*'s use of the charge of the light brigade as an image for historical revolt is particularly disquieting), but it serves to reinforce the sense in which the theory of spectacle's inadequacies oblige the formulation of new theories and analyses. It thus also underscores the tension between the ideas that found Debord's theory and his own claims as to its enduring validity. As a result, it provides a more involved framework into which we can set Debord's claims that "Theories are only made to die in the war of time", and that they "have to be replaced because they are constantly being rendered obsolete":[5] for theories, on the interpretation suggested here, would be cast as elements within a contextual, tactical 'battle', located within a larger strategic and historical 'war'. This also gives rise to the following. If theory is above all an attempt at a practical intervention, then theoretical truth becomes practical truth. This in turn would seem to mean that historical agency becomes the ultimate arbiter of theoretical validity. A whole host of difficult issues regarding truth and falsity immediately arise from this, and I'll touch on some of them below, but the main point here is simply this: for Debord, it would seem, historical agency becomes an ongoing process within which the theory of spectacle must be merely one moment amongst many others; a moment that thus invites its own supersession.

In this regard that my earlier claim that the ideas that found the theory of spectacle may be of greater import than the theory itself can perhaps be viewed as stronger than the simple assertion that one element of this corpus is more intriguing than another: for it would seem that these notions of praxis are in fact the real core of this material, and that the theory of spectacle – somewhat ironically, given its emphasis on appearance – is just a particular manifestation of something more important.

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[5]   Debord 2003a, pp.150-1; 2006, p.1354

Once again, however, the problem here is that Debord gives us very little to work with. As could be seen in the previous chapter, one is obliged to speculate and reconstruct these ideas by drawing links between extant statements; in consequence, some of the latter, by virtue of their scarcity, will also be forced to carry more weight than may seem advisable.

Spectacle and Foundational Philosophy

My aim is to develop the model that I outlined in the previous chapter by way of recourse to the 'self-movement' of the Hegelian absolute, and I'll begin by indicating the potential relevance of doing so. This point that can be made by referring to William Maker's *Philosophy Without Foundations*, in which Maker uses the self-founding movement of Hegelian logic to respond to some of the apparent problems posed by 'postmodernism'.

The "latest fashion in philosophy," claims Maker, writing in 1994, "is to be against foundations",[6] and to thus undermine philosophy's pretensions towards providing a stable basis for truth. Maker however contends that Hegel, despite being a prime target for such attacks, actually took this very critique to its extreme. The *Phenomenology*, on Maker's reading, shows that consciousness cannot provide a basis for truth at all. Hegel himself presents the *Phenomenology* as the entrance into his system, and for Maker the identity of subject and object reached at the book's conclusion eradicates the distinction between knower and known, thus precluding conscious awareness as a starting point for the *Logic*; the latter is thus shorn of the need to deal with the conscious awareness *of* beings, and can thereby take up the immanent, self-determinate study of being itself in its purity (a point that chimes with Sartre's view that to attain the status of in-and-for-itself would entail the demise of consciousness). The unfolding of the Hegelian system then reveals the logic inherent within being, and does so purely immanently by way of thought thinking itself. Upon returning to its starting point at its conclusion it founds its own assertions whilst providing a stable, self-sufficient claim to truth. The *Phenomenology* thus negates conscious awareness, undermining all claims to stable foundations via the self-undermining of its successive stages, but in doing so it also provides its own foundation from its own movement. Postmodernism and deconstruction are thus said to merely echo the scepticism that the

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[6] Maker 1994, p.2

Phenomenology answers, and from the conclusion of the latter an internally consistent truth is said to arise, offering not only a curative to postmodern relativism but also, according to Maker, a means towards reconstituting the legitimacy of modernity itself.[7]

Maker is no Marxist, but the fact that he presents the 'anti-foundational' trends within philosophy as apologia for contemporary society[8] is relevant to the concerns introduced in chapter seven. For if postmodernism is akin to modern society, and if the movement of Hegelian logic can chart a path out of its apparent relativism, then Hegel's views on the self-determination of reason may pertain to Debord's views on the need for a self-determining historical agency that could build a way out of the loss of history engendered by the modern spectacle.

Freedom and Presuppositionless Thought

In order to make that case I'll need to say a little more about these aspects of Hegel's work, and we can begin by returning to his association of freedom and necessity. For Hegel, "If I am dependent, my being is referred to something else which I am not... [but] I am free, on the contrary, when my existence depends upon myself."[9] Freedom is thus self-determination, and ultimately self-causation, as genuine independence entails the absence of external contingency. This can be seen to relate to Hegel himself. He equated his philosophical project to the Christian obligation to come to know God,[10] holding that a genuine knowledge of the absolute entailed not its description and representation, but rather identity with it (one must find oneself in God, etc.); and this is important here, because if the true nature of the absolute relies on a philosophical spokesman, then it cannot be strictly necessary. To be genuinely necessary, it must express itself. Hegel's philosophy cannot therefore be a description or representation of the absolute, and nor can the latter's exposition rest on the contingent whim of an individual. Rather, there must be something within the absolute that leads to its articulation within a body of philosophy, and this brings us back to the circular motive force of the Concept: for the completion of its movement is a return to self, made after a process of generating and then subsuming otherness. If a body of philosophy can lay claim to embody that return to self, then that philosophy can claim

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[7] Maker 1994, p.14
[8] Maker 1994, p.12
[9] Hegel 2004, p.17
[10] Hegel 2004, p.14

to be not a representation, but rather a direct expression of the absolute.

The salient point here is simply this: the full expression of the absolute cannot be predicated on anything *other* than itself. If it was contingent on something other than itself, then 'God', in effect, would be limited, unnecessary, and finite. This is why Hegel is so preoccupied with circles: for if the truth expressed by his philosophy is to be genuinely absolute and necessary, then it must reveal the necessity of its own starting point. The starting point must be sublated by the conclusion.

Hegel's purportedly 'presuppositionless' approach to the study of reason allows him to make this claim, and this can be introduced by returning to Kojève's 'end of history'. I noted earlier that for Kojève Hegel "reconcile[d] himself" through writing the *Phenomenology*" with all that is and has been, by declaring that there will never more be anything new on earth";[11] I also noted that in the first few pages of the *Phenomenology*'s preface Hegel states that "it is not difficult to see that ours is a birth-time and a period of transition to a new era"[12] (the same point is made in the *Logic*, where Hegel writes of "the new spirit that has arisen in the sciences no less than in the world of actuality").[13] History was not about to come to an eschatological end: rather, what Hegel has in mind is far closer to a process of fruition. The world was said to be pregnant with something new: namely – and I follow Houlgate's persuasive reading here – a growing awareness of the nature and necessity of freedom.

Houlgate, like Maker, also works on Hegel's 'presuppositionless' approach, and he offers the following explanations here.[14] If freedom is self-determination, then true freedom cannot be granted: we cannot be truly free if we have been *made* to be free by an external force. Likewise, we cannot simply *be* free by dint of our own natural constitution, as if so our freedom would be contingent upon whatever had shaped that constitution. If freedom is self-determination, we can only attain it by determining ourselves to be self-determining; and that means that in order to be free, we must make ourselves into genuinely free creatures: not by making ourselves into something other than ourselves (as if so what we became would be contingent on what we were), but rather by making ourselves *explicitly* into what we already were *implicitly* ("The essence of Spirit," Hegel claims, "is freedom", and its history is a process in which it "make[s] itself *actually* that which it is *potentially*").[15] If our true nature necessarily

11 Kojève 1980, p.168
12 Hegel 1977, p.6
13 Hegel 1969, p.26
14 Houlgate 2005, p.17
15 Hegel 2004, p.17

arises from such a process, then in rendering our true nature explicit we must also reveal the necessity of that process itself. If the process is the self-movement of the absolute, then in effect, in comprehending that process we come to know ourselves as the self-consciousness of God. Hence the sense in which Hegel views his philosophy as a clarification of the 'truths' accessed by religion.

Returning to the issue of freedom: the culmination of this drive towards liberty must entail an understanding of the true nature of reason: for if we do not know the true nature of thought, Houlgate argues, we cannot be certain that our thinking is not subject to error. Errors would mean that our judgements are contingent on factors outside of our control, entailing that we would be un-free. For Houlgate, Kant's critical philosophy is thus a key aspect of the 'birth-time' described in the *Phenomenology*'s preface,[16] as it sought to derive truth from reason's own self-legislating operation: Kant, according to Hegel, had "set [reason] free from all authority."[17] However, if one is to discover the true nature of reason, then one is obliged to use reason in order to make that discovery; and if one is not already in possession of the true nature of reason at the very outset of this project, then one has no way of knowing whether its result is in fact 'true' at all. For Hegel, this amounts to "the mistaken project of wanting to have cognition before we have any cognition, or of not wanting to go into the water before we have learned how to swim".[18] Instead, for Hegel, Kant should have adhered further to his own emphasis on the self-legislating operation of reason, and allowed it to validate its own determinations through its own immanent operation.[19]

Hegel's approach in the *Logic* is an attempt to ensure that "the forms of thinking...are the object and the activity of the object itself."[20] This requires all prior presuppositions – assumptions as to what reason might be, and given determinations

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[16]   Houlgate 2006b, pp.12-6
[17]   Hegel 1991, p.107
[18]   Hegel 1991, p.82
[19]   Houlgate (2006b, pp.17-8) draws attention to the following. Kant assumes that divine and human thought are distinct: human thought is said to be "discursive" (Kant 1996, p.121), and thus distinct from the "intellectual intuition" (Kant 1996, p.103) of a (hypothetical) divine intuition able to access objects in themselves, without the mediation of the categories. Houlgate's point is that this is an assumption (however reasonable it may seem): any such view should properly be derived from the operation of reason alone. If it is instead derived from 'given' experience, then our knowledge of pure reason must be contingent on what we find, and thus cannot be entirely self-sufficient and necessary. Houlgate also draws attention to Kant's claim that "our ability to judge" is "equivalent to our ability to think" (Kant 1996, p.132). Kant identifies twelve basic types of judgement, and then deduces the categories that make those judgements possible; his categories are thus predicated on the judgements that he himself found, and he can give no reason as to why we have the number and functions of judgement that we do (Kant 1996, p.187; referenced in Houlgate 2006b, p.19). Kant also adopts much of Aristotle's own table of categories.
[20]   Hegel 1991, p.82

that might affect its operation – to be disregarded and bracketed out. This is not to deny that the actual motivation of conducting this operation stems from a whole host of historical developments (the modern desire for freedom, as expressed in the American and French revolutions, philosophical developments, the evolution of the German language, etc.),[21] yet at the outset of the *Logic* all are to be put to one side. This however renders it difficult to find a starting point. We must begin somewhere, but to begin *somewhere* is to begin with something specific; and if Hegel is to study the way in which thought mediates itself and produces its own determinations, then he cannot start with a determinate concept, as if he did so everything that follows would then be founded upon – and thus contingent upon – that initial determination. His study of reason cannot therefore begin with an assumption as to what reason or thought actually are. Likewise, he can have no assumptions as to what – if anything – will arise from this starting point, and this, notably, means that there can be no such thing as an *a priori* 'dialectical method' (reason may prove itself to be dialectical, but we cannot know this in advance, and nor can its movement be directed in accordance with an assumed dialectical pattern, e.g. the hackneyed 'thesis-antithesis-synthesis' schema). He must therefore being with what he refers to in *The Encyclopaedia Logic* as "a consummate scepticism": his 'science' is to be "preceded by *universal doubt*, i.e. by total *presuppositionlessness*", entailing "the resolve of the *will to think purely*."[22]

The *Logic* thus begins with the purest, most abstract starting point possible: the simple fact that thought *is*. Its first category is thus "*Being, pure being*, without any further determination"[23] (this is similar to Descartes' own sceptical method, albeit stripped of the ego).[24] Thought then begins to move of its own accord, through rendering explicit that which is implicit in each formation. Because the 'being' with which the *Logic* begins is devoid of any determinations whatsoever, it's illegitimate to claim that this is solely the being of thought: rather, what unfolds is the inherent logic of being *per se*. Hence the sense in which this is an ontology as well as an epistemology, and hence also its expansion (in *The Philosophy of Nature*) into the natural world. And, as this movement returns to its own origin at its conclusion, revealing being to be a process that determines itself towards its own full expression and self-consciousness, being, for Hegel – i.e. all existence – is revealed to be a self-determinate subject

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[21] See Houlgate 2006b for useful comments on the relation between presuppositionless thought and language.
[22] Hegel 1991, p.124
[23] Hegel 1969, p.82
[24] Descartes 1968, p.103

(alluding to Spinoza in the *Phenomenology*'s preface, Hegel writes that "the living Substance is being which is in truth *Subject*, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself").[25]

One can see why Postone, Arthur and others might be intrigued by the possibility of emphasising the Hegelian aspects of *Capital*, and of thereby using the self-movement of the absolute as a way of thinking about the operation of capital. We have here the identity of ends and means, a tendency towards subsumption, and self-perpetuating movement. However, as I indicated in the conclusion to part two, it may also be attractive to relate these themes to a model of praxis. Hegel's presuppositionless thought is rendered anti-dogmatic by virtue of its 'consummate scepticism', and recognises no authority other than itself; furthermore, if it could be connected to the notions of subjectivity and situation described earlier, then it might also be amenable to the 'strategic' task of addressing emergent contexts and problems (we might note here, with reference to Hegel's claim that Kant tried to learn how to swim without getting wet, that for Clausewitz teaching strategic theory in the absence of praxis is akin to learning to swim on dry land).[26]

This can be facilitated by returning to the themes of universality and particularity considered in part two. As we saw, Hegel's philosophy claims not to impose a universal structure on the particular elements that it articulates, but rather derives such universality from them. If that sense of organic unity can be viewed in relation to the operation of collective praxis, and if the agency of the latter can be connected to the immanent self-realisation described above, then we may arrive at a model able to sustain and develop Debord and the S.I.'s claims as to the unity of form and content within political agency. Rather than thought thinking itself, we would then have historical agency directing itself.

The Problem Posed by Presuppositionless Thought

There is however a very obvious problem here: how can one go about applying this 'presuppositionless' approach to the given, contingent data of material reality, and to the equally given orientation of a political project? The difficulty is in fact greater than it might seem. Those within the Marxist tradition may not be overly troubled by a

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[25] Hegel 1977, p.10, emphasis in the original
[26] Clausewitz, p.139

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philosophical prohibition of engaging with the material and the political, but the presuppositionless challenge is worth taking seriously: for its very lack of presuppositions invalidates any attempt to incorporate it into a different model by automatically invalidating anything other than itself. For Houlgate, "any criticism levelled at Hegel from a position other than that of radically presuppositionless thought will necessarily stem from a thinking that is *less* self-critical and so more dogmatic than presuppositionless thought itself", because "any such thinking by definition will uncritically presuppose some principle or other."[27] This is significant in relation to Marx's critique of Hegel, as any attack made upon the determinations derived from presuppositionless thought will involve more presuppositions, and will thus be more contingent and less necessary than presuppositionless thought itself.

This does not mean that Hegel is above criticism, and nor does it mean that he must be absolutely correct (he himself admits that given more time he would have revised the *Logic* "seven and seventy times").[28] It does however mean that if we accept the terms of these arguments, then the only criticism that can be levelled at Hegel is that he is not presuppositionless *enough*, i.e. that the transitions in the *Logic* do not follow each other immanently, but rather reflect Hegel's own external intervention.[29] In fact, Houlgate's reading suggests that after Hegel all philosophy ought properly to be Hegelian philosophy: where Kant hoped to leave to his "descendants nothing more that the task of arranging everything in the *didactic* manner...without their being able to increase the content",[30] Houlgate's Hegel only leaves his own descendants the task of refining the *Logic*'s determinations, so as to ensure that its transitions are genuinely immanent.[31]

Maker presents a similar challenge, but in a rather different manner. Where Houlgate indicates that Hegel can only be criticised on his own terns, Maker goes so far as to argue that genuine reason cannot engage with the world in any way. I've claimed, following Houlgate, that Hegelian logic is both epistemology and ontology. Yet for Maker, the *Phenomenology* does not show that consciousness and its object are one and

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[27] Houlgate 2006b, p.37
[28] Hegel 1969, p.42
[29] This would of course certainly seem to be the case. Magee (2001) points out the influence of alchemy, mysticism, magic and hermeticism on Hegel's work; if the correspondences with such bodies of thought are derived from the nature of thought itself, then Hegel's books really can be viewed as grimoires (see Bunyard 2009 for a review of Magee's book).
[30] Kant 1996, p.13, emphasis in the original
[31] "Strange though it may seem to say, most, if not all, post-Hegelian philosophy is thus in fact logically *pre-Hegelian* in that it has still to carry out the radical self-criticism demanded of any modern philosophy and that Hegel endeavours to carry out in his *Logic*" (Houlgate 2006b, p.39, emphasis in the original).

the same – thus providing a "ladder"[32] to the Hegelian system's onto-logic for all those unwilling to give up the presupposed distinction between the ideal and the material – but rather shows consciousness to cancel itself out as a solid ground for philosophical truth: for if the identity of knower and known is complete, then neither term makes any sense, as the distinction that defines them is lost (a point also made by Carlson,[33] but one that seems to jar with Hegel's concern with identity in difference). For Maker, the *Logic* cannot therefore be an ontology at all: for if it described a form of reason that was also inscribed in a world of objects, it would remain within the "perspective of consciousness",[34] i.e. engaged in establishing truth through the relation of subject to object. In marked contrast to many of Hegel's own statements – and in a manner that requires some gymnastics when dealing with *The Philosophy of Nature*[35] – Maker thus holds that Hegel's philosophy "is most definitely not an idealist metaphysics",[36] but rather a normative, regulative body of categories and laws derived from pure reason alone.

Hegel's presuppositionless approach, for Maker, thus generates an entirely pure measure of truth, but one that cannot incorporate any reference to that which it is to measure. It cannot in consequence contain any prescriptions as to how it might be applied to specific circumstances (as if so it would be tainted by the given). This means that any attempt to 'use' its determinations must fall outside it.[37] Maker thus claims that "for Hegel, unlike Marx, there can be no strictly philosophical theory of praxis",[38] as philosophy is to be a purely self-contained system of pure reason alone. In this respect, Maker's reading perhaps exemplifies what Debord would perhaps view as the problem of this entire approach: namely, the contention that truth might be found in the seemingly static, self-referential dimension of a thought separated from action.

A Possible Response to the Presuppositionless Claim

This can be explained as follows. For Hegel, "Reason is the Sovereign of the

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32 Hegel 1977, p.14
33 Carlson 2007, p.10
34 Maker 1998
35 Maker 1998
36 Maker 1994, p.121
37 "In strict terms, questions of what can be actually established by modes of cognition which assume givenness and which take account of given in their actual employment fall outside of the system" (Maker 1994, p.39).
38 Maker 1994, p.44

World".[39] On Houlgate's reading, which I would suggest accords with Hegel's own claims, reason is the truth of the world because in effect it ultimately *is* the world (Hegel himself states that "Reason is the *substance* of the Universe").[40] According to Maker, on the other hand, reason is a detached sovereign: it constitutes an absolute truth towards which the world is to aspire, and against which it can be measured. Maker thus highlights the assumption (perhaps, if it's not too trite: the presupposition) upon which this approach rests, because he takes it to an extreme: namely, the contention that truth and freedom are linked to a necessity that stands over and above the contingencies of lived reality, and that genuine, Hegelian reason is an eternal absolute, and thus not contingent upon the economic and cultural determinants of its era. In other words, Maker's account brings to light the sense in which Hegelian presuppositionless thought, from what might be posited as Debord's perspective, could be viewed as *separated* thought: a thought that operates in abstraction from real historical praxis.

That in itself does little to rebut Houlgate's claim that all non-Hegelian philosophy can be viewed as being more contingent, and thus less valid than Hegelian philosophy itself. Yet as noted, the entire enterprise of presuppositionless thought can be seen to rest on the contention that freedom equates to necessity; and as we've already seen, with Debord freedom is linked to a consciousness of *present* necessity, i.e. an ability to negotiate chance and contingency. Truth and necessity are linked to self-determination with Debord, but always in terms of the need to address a particular circumstance. Consequently, the truth that affords historical freedom cannot reside in an unchanging, separate system: such a system might rather be viewed in terms of the Feuerbachian alienation of practical power into a heaven of pure thought, there to be contemplated as an unchanging, static order. Whilst this does not refute Houlgate's demand directly, it does posit an alternative claim: the assertion that truth can only derive from the pure, immanent necessity of presuppositionless thought could thus be countered by the opposing contention that truth is in fact connected to a more practical, embodied, and *strategic* notion of necessity. Thus the sense in which the model outlined in the previous chapter retains bad infinity and contingency – which entails that it falls short of Hegelian true infinity – means that one can, perhaps, adapt some of these notions of self-determinate process to it.

Presuppositionless Praxis

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[39] Hegel 2004, p.9
[40] Hegel 2004, p.9

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In order to illustrate the ways in which that might be possible we can look at some of Lefebvre's own related objections to Hegelian philosophy. In his *Dialectical Materialism* of 1940, which Debord would certainly have read – and whilst noting that Hegel "claims not to admit any presupposition at all" – Lefebvre writes that "Hegelianism, being a system, involves one essential presupposition": namely, that a philosopher might "grasp the entire content of human experience".[41] This claim is in fact inaccurate (Hegel does not claim omniscience, and nor does he aim to detail every contingent aspect of reality), but the idea that informs it is relevant. Lefebvre continues: "If this content [of the absolute] is, as Hegel says it is, infinitely rich", then it "will be attained only through the joint efforts of many thinking individuals, in a progressive expansion of consciousness."[42] Admittedly, this notion of 'expansion' evokes the perpetually receding goal of the 'total man', but it is pertinent; partly because Debord shares a degree of bad infinite progression with Lefebvre,[43] but also because the latter's remarks bring him close to the position that I've attributed to Debord. If, as with Lefebvre, the infinite 'content' of the Idea is linked to an infinite historical process, then the absolute in effect becomes that process, and not a discrete point reached at its conclusion. This view recalls the reading of the absolute that I presented in chapter one by way of reference to Hyppolite. As we saw, for Hyppolite history does not end at the attainment of absolute knowing, and Spirit does not retreat into pure self-referentiality: rather, what emerges is a perpetual movement of self-conscious self-determination (as indicated earlier, on this view the Concept's continual self-separation can only become present to itself in consciousness if that consciousness is itself temporal).

Furthermore, Lefebvre also contends that the unfolding determinations of that process "dissolves" the "static determinations attributed by Hegel to the Idea, [and] to knowledge, to religion and to the state".[44] This would seem to be especially true with Debord, given the importance of chance and contingency to that process. The collective

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[41] Lefebvre 1969, p.48
[42] Lefebvre 1969, p.48
[43] In his 'Conscious Changes in Everyday Life', a paper delivered in 1961 (via a tape recorded in a briefcase) to Lefebvre's research group on everyday life, Debord made the following claims: "if we regard everyday life as the frontier between the dominated and undominated sectors of life [a distinction made by Lefebvre between areas of life that are consciously controlled and those that are not], and thus as the terrain of chance and uncertainty, it would be necessary to replace the present ghetto with a constantly moving frontier; to work ceaselessly towards the organisation of new chances" (S.I. 2006, p.95; Debord 2006, p.578). This constantly moving frontier is close to Lefebvre's receding goal, but I would propose that each instance of that process, insofar as it is a Situationist engagement with chance, is itself a moment of that goal.
[44] Lefebvre 1969, p.104

dimension of this historical subjectivity become particularly important in this regard, and can be seen to pertain to the issue of representation and separated power. If in order to function strategically such collective agency is obliged to reformulate itself in accordance with the exigencies with which it is faced, and if it is set against separation and marked by a unity of form and content in that respect (Debord's proletariat "demands a universal critique of separation", obliging it to "assume a form adequate to [that] task in its action"),[45] then the forms that it adopts in response to these exigencies would seem to be required to arise from the movement and interrelation of the particular individuals involved. Thus in contrast to the themes of alienated universality discussed in part two we might then have a more organic, dynamic social totality.

My suggestion then is that if, as Debord states, the agency discussed here "has no goal [*n'a pas d'objet*] aside from whatever effects it works upon itself",[46] then Hegel's account of a thought that thinks itself could perhaps be linked to a historical agency that shapes itself and its world. In place of a lack of presuppositions we might instead have a lack of fixed structure, dogma and representation;[47] and rather than the immanent self-determination of pure reason, we would have an emergent, immanent political will. My earlier contention that Debord would seem to cast the absolute as the grounds rather than the goal of action could then be qualified with the following.

With Hegel, the famed restlessness of the negative is a process of change that takes place within a relatively static, eternal structure (i.e. that of being). With Debord on the other hand, subject-object unity moves by way of its identity with the negativity of time, thus changing its world and itself in the process. The absolute thus becomes a 'passageway', to use the S.I.'s own terms, rather than a state of being, and requires strategic engagement with the contexts and situations that it works upon. Thus where with Hegel the immanent, self-determinate movement of reason takes place according to its own sovereign necessity, and accepts no determinations other than those that it generates from itself, with Debord we would seem to have a political movement that shapes itself, and which accepts no external authority, nor the establishment of fixed dogma and hierarchy within itself. Hence my earlier contention that the reading advanced in this thesis might be able to re-cast Debord's work as a basis from which one

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[45] Debord 1995, p.85, translation altered; 2006, p.816
[46] Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.792
[47] Debord stated as early as 1957 that "eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts" (S.I. 2006, p.41; Debord 2006, p.326), and for the S.I. no revolutionary organisation could last beyond its period of relevance: following the events of May 1968 Debord commented that "from now on we are sure of a satisfactory consummation of our activities: the S.I. will be superseded" (S.I. 2006, p.325; Debord 2006, p.963).

could pursue an almost anarchistic approach to Hegelian Marxism.[48]

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[48] This would be in marked contrast to contemporary trends in anarchist thought, as the recent move towards 'post-anarchism' (named after post-Marxism, and characterised by the adoption of postmodern philosophies) is also a move away from philosophers like Hegel. As the editorial to a recent post-anarchist journal puts it: "I believe that we are living through a post-anarchist moment. ...one of the many great things about post-@ is that it means we can be done, finally, with Hegel" (Call 2010, p.9). See Noys 2008 for useful comments on Badiou and post-anarchism.

<u>Conclusion to Part Three</u>

<u>A Theory of Praxis and a Theory of Spectacle</u>

I introduced the possible relevance of Hegel's presuppositionless thought at the outset of chapter nine by way of reference to the *Comments*' description of modern society, and in connection to the problems that the spectacle's loss of history poses for political agency. Whilst making reference to Maker's contention that these aspects of Hegel's work might offer a means of charting a way out of postmodern relativism, I suggested that linking these ideas to Debord's views on historical, strategic agency might also offer a way out of the integrated spectacle. I would not pretend that Debord would necessarily have framed these ideas in the same way, or indeed approached them by the route that I've taken, but I would suggest that what I've outlined here is perhaps close to what he may have had in mind when indicating that "history" might "return to us" after its spectacular "eclipse".[1] As I pointed out at the beginning of this thesis, history for Debord is not a catalogue of past events, but rather something to be consciously made. Thus, with reference to the points indicated above, one could contend that what we've arrived at is a model of political agency geared towards creating its own history; and whilst Debord's own recommendations in this regard favoured the pursuit of individual 'taste', the ideas that I've sketched here in part three are more oriented to collective praxis, and imply detailed engagement with the 'terrain' that this agency is required to cross. It would, in other words, seem to be obliged to generate theoretical analyses of the contexts and situations with which it is faced. Whilst Debord and the S.I.'s desire to move beyond Marx's 19th century account corresponds to this need, the abstract subjectivism that resulted from their rejection of economic determinism and structuralism does not. Hence my suggestion that the ideas that underlie the theory of spectacle would seem to point beyond it.

Yet as is no doubt apparent, we've moved in these last sections from an attempt to use Hegel as a means of illuminating Debord towards noting the possibilities that Debord might offer as regards an approach to Hegel. To an extent, this has been present throughout the thesis: as I admitted in the preface, Debord does not state explicitly that he is taking the Hegelian absolute as the template for praxis; I myself have drawn this

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[1] Debord 1998, p.73; 2006, p.1636

inference from the many statements that would seem to imply it. I could in consequence be accused of overstating my case. However, I've done so in order to set out a broader argument as regards the possibilities that this material might hold for further work, and I would suggest that the problems that I've identified within the theory of spectacle render this approach permissible: for it seems far more productive (and indeed in keeping with the material itself) to pursue what might be taken from Debord's work rather than to simply study it as a static object. With that in mind the conclusion to the thesis will now outline some of these implications, particularly *vis a vis* the degree to which Debord's account could serve as a means of considering collective political will.

Conclusion

Validity and Will

I think it can be suggested that the claims set out in chapters eight and nine point towards something akin to a notion of general will. Rousseau himself maintains that the general will "cannot be represented",[1] and the ex-Situationist T.J. Clark one commented, albeit without further qualification, that "the Debord-Rousseau comparison is inescapable".[2] I would suggest that the most interesting aspect of this link is the connection between the self-legitimating operation of a Rousseauian general will and that of the model of agency described above (which I've suggested to be just as self-validating as the Hegelian logic that serves as its template). In order to bring the thesis as a whole to a conclusion I'll make a few further remarks on this subject before summarising some of the thesis' central claims.

The most obvious point of reference here is *The Philosophy of Right*. There Hegel equates right to the conditions of freedom, and derives the latter by examining the concept of a will that wills itself, and which thereby wills the conditions for its own full expression. As noted earlier, political freedom for Hegel cannot be found in the individual's submission to the dictates of a separate, universal law, but rather in each individual finding him or herself 'at home' within a system of laws and conditions that derive from the necessary, intrinsic nature of their own free will. Hegel does not pretend that everyone will recognise that state as embodying their own freedom, and he acknowledges that some may see it as an imposition upon their own individual 'caprice'. He does however maintain that such individuals would be mistaken if they did so, and this claim pertains to his departure from Rousseau. Like Hegel, and indeed like Debord, Rousseau (as Rose puts it) casts freedom as "communal social activity".[3] Yet for Hegel the Rousseauian will has no necessary tendency towards a specific formation (such as the rational state): it has only "the particular individual in their particular caprice" as its "primary and substantive basis".[4] Rousseau's general will, for Hegel, does whatever it wants, and whatever it wants and does is right; its directions and formations are steered

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[1] Rousseau 2008, p.127
[2] Clark in Jappe 1999, p.viii
[3] Rose 2007, p.48
[4] Hegel 2005, p.xlvi

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only by the whims of its members. In contrast, Hegel attempts the immanent philosophical derivation of the necessary, logical content of will itself. This leads him to conclude that free will can only fully exist in specific circumstances, i.e. within a state derived from "what the will must will in order to be free (even thought it may not always realise it), not from mere opinion or choice."[5]

As I suggested in chapter four, it may be possible to infer something similar from Debord's account. The historical agency that can be drawn from his own and the S.I.'s work is bound to act towards the perpetuation of its own conditions of existence, and is thus in this sense also a 'will that wills itself'. Of course, from a strictly Hegelian perspective Debord could be seen to repeat Rousseau's 'errors', as his account precludes fixed structures and formulations. Yet there is a sense – supported by the teleological dimensions of Debord and the S.I.'s work – in which the full expression of freedom lies in the conditions that render free, open-ended self-determination an actual possibility: namely, the end of capital, the abolition of work, the re-appropriation of society's technical capacities, and (certainly in the S.I.'s earlier years) the realisation of art in the construction of situations. I'll return to this in a moment, as regards the possibility of deriving an ethics from Debord and the S.I.'s work; first however I'll indicate the reasons why it might be important to do so.

If the agency modelled here is obliged to re-create the grounds of action as it negotiates its various contexts, and if this operation entails negotiating chance and contingency – i.e. making choices and acting on the basis of limited knowledge – then surely there's a sense in which it may go awry. Whilst that may be less of a problem in the S.I.'s post-revolutionary future of endless play (although certainly not an absent one), it does matter within the present context, i.e. in terms of the actual practicalities of a political movement. For what becomes particularly important here is not so much the issue of choosing badly, but rather that of identifying whether this will might will something *other* than itself. For by what criteria might such an error be identified? Addressing this may offer a response to the following question: how might one identify an 'authentic' as opposed to an 'inauthentic' political agency, and by what merit could it be accorded the rather grand title of 'historical'? These are questions that bring us back to the issues attendant to subject-object unity that I raised in the conclusion to part one (i.e. the degree to which that unity does not simply refer to an identity between thought and action, but rather to a context in which objectified social power is not alienated

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[5] Houlgate 2005, p.209

from its producers).

To a degree, Debord actually has a similar response to the question of validity as that of Rousseau. When discussing majoritarian democracy the latter makes the following, perhaps unsettling claim (for a relevant critique of which see Wolff):[6]

When ... the opinion contrary to my own prevails, this proves only that I have made a mistake, and that what I believed to be the general will was not so. If my particular opinion had prevailed against the general will, I should have dome something other than what I had willed, and I should not have been free.[7]

This perhaps echoes Lukács' views on the Party to a degree.[8] Adorno, in his lectures on negative dialectics, recounts the following:

Lukács...told me that his Party was – with regard to him – in the right, even though he was, in his thoughts and arguments, against the Party, since the Party after all embodied the objective historical situation, whereas his own advanced position (based only on himself and the mere logic of thought) had trailed behind this objective situation.[9]

As we saw earlier, Debord objects to Lukács' views on the Party, and opts instead for a far less hierarchical rejection of all forms of representation. Yet allied to this is the sense in which validity lies in the absence of representation and external determination, and this leads Debord to accord the revolutionary proletariat the same legitimating function that Lukács attributed to the Party.

This can be seen in an important letter from 1971, in which Debord discusses the possibility that his theory might be wrong. Highlighting the sense in which its legitimacy would be validated retrospectively and by the movement of history (a point that would seem to be greatly informed by his reading of Clausewitz),[10] Debord writes:

If the concept of spectacle is *radically false* (because it can indeed be relatively 'false' – and thus 'true' for historical thought – in that it is only 'the maximum of possible consciousness' at this moment in society, which one will explain much better after one has left it behind or when one will be more advanced in the endeavour to leave it), *then* I have said a thousand other things in my book that are just (of which 995 come from comrades from the past), but they all contain *something erroneous,* because I have not understood or reassembled them on the basis of this concept.[11]

He then continues, in a passage to which I referred earlier:

But if the concept of spectacle is an error, fuck! The whole book collapses. However, I do not know *a better one* on the subject that occupies us, which is a detail that leads us to the fundamental question of consciousness in history and what it does in it. For example, [Marx's] *Capital* is obviously true and false:

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[6]   Wolff 1998, pp.50-7
[7]   Rousseau 2004, p.127
[8]   For an example of Lukács' rejection of Rousseau see Lukács 1971, p.237
[9]   Adorno 1965
[10] For example, compare Debord 2004b, pp.3-5; 2006, p.1657 with Clausewitz 1993, p.192 and *passim.*
[11] Debord 2004a, p.456

essentially, it is true, because the proletariat *recognised* it, although quite badly (and thus also let its errors pass), etc.[12]

Debord seems to indicate that the real measure of truth lies in the degree to which it is 'recognised' and acted upon by the 'proletariat'. Yet doesn't this provide a justification for *any* political project that achieves a degree of 'recognition'? For example, is it not the case that the German proletariat of the 1930's 'recognised' National Socialism in some sense? The Nazis gained power by expressing the dissatisfactions of the day, in however distorted a form. How then could one claim that the adoption of Marx's *Capital* was an act of recognition, whereas the acceptance of National Socialism was an act of *mis*recognition?

The Validation of Theory

The second of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* includes the following claim: "The question [as to] whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory", but rather a "practical question"; for "Man must prove the truth — i.e. the reality and power...of his thinking in practice."[13] A static, reflective identity between thought and world is thus replaced by an emphasis on establishing their identity through action, or rather through the actualisation of thought in praxis. This no doubt informs Debord's position, but it doesn't resolve the problem: for if thought becomes 'true' when realised in action, then presumably *any* thought pushed through into reality would be just as 'true' as any other. It can however be qualified by way of reference to Marx's famous letter to Ruge of September 1843 (to which Debord alludes in *The Society of the Spectacle*),[14] in which Marx warns against confronting the world in a "doctrinaire way" ("Here is the truth, kneel down before it!").[15] Here Marx advocates "develop[ing] new principles for the world out of the world's own principles", as through doing so it becomes possible to "show the world what it is really fighting for".[16] In other words, the task of the critic is to identify immanent historical tendencies and direction in society. Phrasing this in a Hegelian vein, Marx writes that "Reason has always existed, but not always in a reasonable form";[17] in other words, the

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12 Debord 2004a, p.457
13 Marx 2000, p.171
14 Debord 1995, p.92; 2006, p.820; see 2006 pp.868-9
15 Marx 1843
16 Marx 1843
17 Marx 1843

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course and direction of historical movement exists implicitly within social reality, but needs to be rendered explicit so that it can be identified and understood. Through identifying such tendencies, Marx explains, the critic would "develop the true reality as [existing reality's] obligation and its final goal."[18] 'True' reality is thus the immanent negation of present reality.

If this second statement on truth is used to qualify the first, truth can then be seen as a practical process in which the theory that identifies that negation is actualised in the attempt to realise such change. This, I would suggest, bears direct relation to Debord and the S.I.'s own views. Theoretical truth, in their work, seems to lie in its practical efficacy,[19] although this is qualified by the sense in which such theory cannot offer entirely arbitrary formulations, but must rather identify and articulate the 'bad side' of history at work within the present.[20] So, truth lies in history; history is marked by developing tendencies;[21] these tendencies, and indeed history *per se* are shaped and created by the revolutionary proletariat (understood in Debord's broad sense of the term as all those with a desire to advance the present moment). Hence Debord and the S.I.'s readiness to claim that they expressed a set of concerns immanent to their times: for if theory is to clarify and articulate such a movement,[22] it cannot be imposed upon it from without (a position that perhaps echoes, in suitably 'inverted' form, Houlgate's contention that anything other than presuppositionless thought must be less valid than such thought itself: here immanent historical praxis alone can claim validity). Yet if the avoidance of separation stands as a criteria for legitimacy, then we may have the beginnings of a response to the problems indicated above: for whilst one could contend that one might just as easily 'give voice' to a popular fascist movement, the latter, insofar as it fosters separation and hierarchy, would be less valid than a movement that did not.

The implication would then be that truth lies not only in praxis, but rather in a

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[18] Marx 1843
[19] e.g. "The truth of a concept is...revealed...by the coherence of its use in theory and in practical life" (S.I. 2006, p.239; 1997, p.494).
[20] Following the events of May 1968 Debord claimed that he and the S.I. "had prophesied nothing. We had simply pointed out what was already present... The merit of the Situationists was simply to have recognised and pointed out the new focuses of revolt in modern society" (S.I. 2006, p.290; 1997, p.572).
[21] See S.I. 2003, p.123; Debord 2006, p.1158 for remarks on predicting the evolution of such tendencies; doing so is said to become easier at insurrectionary moments, which for Debord concentrate diverse processes into a nexus of possibility.
[22] It is in turn clarified and tested by it: "Historical struggles...correct and improve all theory of this kind" (S.I. 2003, p.30; Debord 2006, p.1105).

form of praxis that aims at the supersession of separation.[23] As I've indicated, this in fact follows from the very concept of spectacle itself, insofar as the latter's falsity stems from the separation that it fosters. Thus whilst a body of theory may be 'recognised' and acted upon, perhaps even achieving practical success, it only merits the term 'historical' if it forms part of a drive towards the actualisation or further expression of the conditions of freedom, i.e. the supersession of hierarchy, separation and of the alienation of social power. Marx's talk of 'developing new principles for the world from the world's own principles' could then be taken to pertain not to the identification and furthering of any arbitrary tendency, but rather those that accord with a drive towards freedom.

As I've indicated several times in the thesis I would suggest that this could be seen to imply a form of ethics,[24] in that it pertains to the legitimation of social relations

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[23] See for example Debord 1995, p.48; 2006, p.793

[24] Given the importance of Spinoza's own ethics to Negri's account, and following M.Beatrice Fazi's persuasive claim that *The Ethics* deserves its name in that it presents a theory of constitutive relations, this point provides an opportunity to make note of the similarities and distinctions between his work and that of Debord; something that I simply do not have room to treat in the thesis proper. It is however important: partly because of Debord's interest in Italian politics in the 1970's and 1980's (for more on this see Kinkle 2010), but also because it offers the opportunity to set Debord's Hegelian paradigm against Negri's Spinozism (Macherey 1997 would provide a useful framework for such a discussion). The following remarks are intended only to orient my reading of Debord *vis a vis* Negri's views on time, political opposition and the critique of capital. In *Empire* Hardt and Negri described *The Society of the Spectacle* as "perhaps the best articulation, in its own delirious way, of the contemporary consciousness of the triumph of capital" (Hardt and Negri 2000, p.427); a claim that was no doubt due to the echoes between Debord's spectacle and Negri's version of 'real subsumption'. In Marx's original formulation, the formal subsumption of labour denotes the adoption of existing forms of production as means of producing capital, whilst real subsumption refers to the reformulation of these means in accordance with the demands of surplus-value extraction. Yet just as is the case with Debord and the fetish, Negri's extension of Marx's concept jars with its original formulation: explicitly rejecting the labour theory of value (Negri 2009), Negri claims that within conditions of real subsumption there is no longer any 'outside' to capital. For example, in his quite astonishingly opaque 'The Constitution of Time' (2003) Negri inserts an 'aporia' into Marx's value theory. Marx holds that time serves as the measure of labour value, insofar as socially average labour time reduces particular labours to the common, general substance of abstract labour; for Negri, the only way in which complex forms of labour can stand as aggregations of more simple labour is by reference to the reality of that complex labour, i.e. to its concrete difference; thus something 'external' to the measure of value is used to explain what should properly be fundamentally 'internal' to it. Within real subsumption this 'aporia' is resolved: because there is no longer any 'outside', labour and life blur (echoes of Debord once again). This is connected to Negri's adoption and development of the concept of 'immaterial labour'. Labour comes to be considered in broad terms as a 'power to act', and being less associated with discrete commodities and forms of labour it becomes increasingly 'measureless'. The difficulties met by classical Marxism in theorising forms of immaterial labour are thus taken not as a sign of a theoretical failing, but rather of the degree to which social production, or 'life' – now viewed in terms of a primary, Spinozist 'substance' – is ready to slough off its old capitalist skin. The similarities to Debord's theory are of course particularly evident here, but so too are the problems: Negri collapses the entirety of society into a kind of monism, rendering capital largely indeterminate (See Noys 2010 pp.106-25; see also Aufheben 2006). Negri's interest in time as the ground of oppositional politics is also similar to that of Debord, but Negri's Spinozist positivism affirms rather than negates, and is oriented towards 'being' rather than 'becoming' (See Negri 2004); arguably, it loses the adaptive and strategic dimensions of the latter that can be found in Debord. One might also wonder if Spinozism is best suited to the linkage of time to political opposition: Spinoza states that substance "must be

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aimed at a common good. I must however be careful here, as Debord and the S.I. consistently described morality in terms of ideology, and frequently denounced individuals who'd warranted their disfavour as 'moralists'.[25] Nonetheless, one could contend that these aspects of Debord's work might serve as a means towards considering the problem of establishing a politics on an existential basis (one might also add that Debord, albeit as early as 1952, once stated that a "science of situations" would need to "incorporate...morality" amongst its other elements).[26] De Beauvoir's own answer to the problem set by Sartre's philosophy was to contend that "freedom wills itself genuinely only by willing itself as an indefinite movement through the movement of others".[27] As I noted in chapter eight, Debord can perhaps be seen to have adopted something rather similar. For example, when discussing the organisation of the S.I. and the forms of social relations that the group were working towards, he referenced Marx and Engels' call in the *Manifesto* for "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all"[28] (notably, Bakunin makes a similar point: "Man", he writes, "is truly free only among equally free men";[29] one might also add that the degree to which Marx himself recognised similar issues is itself open to debate).[30]

Debord's comments on the acknowledgement of theory do often involve a notion of recognition. Yet as there is no *a priori* human essence involved, the commonality to which this pertains must presumably stem from the sense in which all such human subjects are, or at least should be, 'one with time': all are potentially free, self-determining creatures. If the creation of conditions in which that self-determination might flourish are also those in which the alienation of collective power is abolished, then each has common cause in instituting conditions amenable to this state of affairs.

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conceived without any relation to time, but [rather] under a certain species of eternity" (Spinoza 1996, p.60), and presents its manifestation as political will as an expression of God's (timeless) nature (Spinoza 2004, p.292). Following Noys, I'd thus suggest that the positivity of Negri's account can be taken to undermine the critical, oppositional and strategic dimensions of political agency; the more negative and Hegelian framework of Debord's own views on temporality might lend itself to a resolution of some of these problems.

[25] "Stirner", according to the S.I., was "not wrong" in saying that "moralists sleep in the bed of religion" (S.I. 1997, p.553).

[26] Debord 2003a, p.4; 2006, p.63

[27] De Beauvoir 1976, p.90

[28] S.I. 2003, p.83; Debord 2006, p.1135; Engels and Marx 1985, p.105

[29] Bakunin 1866

[30] Arthur writes the following: "Marx only dimly perceived that class interest as a universal stands over against the members and hence needs ethical mediation. This universal…must be actualised theoretically and practically for effective action against capital. But what sort of universal is this? It is not to be conceptualised *abstractly*, that is to say as transcending difference, but *concretely*, as including difference…" (Arthur 2004, p.238, emphasis in the original).

This position could perhaps be developed via comments such as the following:

The revolutionary project of a classless society, of a generalised historical life, is also the project of a withering away of the social measurement of time in favour of a playful model of the irreversible time of individuals and groups, a model in which *independent* [but] *federated times* are simultaneously present. It is the programme of the total realisation, within the medium [milieu] of time, of the communism that abolishes 'anything that exists independently of individuals'[31].[32]

This is of course not to replace a critique of capital with ethics. As we saw in part two, Marx does not offer a merely moral critique of capitalism: he shows that the inequality that it engenders cannot be remedied by a more equitable means of distribution, but is rather intrinsic to capital itself; thus, to offer a merely moral critique is in some sense to remain on the level of the 'sphere of circulation', and within its liberal framework of "Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham".[33] Rather, the ideas outlined here, if taken with their connections to what would seem to be akin to a notion of general will, give added impetus to the critique and supersession of capital. This accords with my earlier attempt to cast the theory of spectacle and its failings as a moment within a broader historical agency.

A Theory that Points Beyond Itself

Having discussed the validation of theory within Debord's account we might now ask how his own theory might itself be validated by these criteria. Firstly, insofar as they sought to identify trends and tensions within their present era, he and the S.I. were undoubtedly successful, and perhaps even prescient to a degree: they unquestionably saw May 1968 as a validation of their claims, and Debord's comments on the integrated spectacle's fusion of its diffuse and concentrated predecessors came one year prior to the fall of the Berlin wall.[34] Yet as regards its ability to be used in any practical sense the theory falls short.[35] Debord was certainly right to try to move beyond Marx's 19th century account, but the manner in which he and the S.I. attempted this gave rise to the problems detailed in part two. As we saw in part one, the romantic and avant-

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[31] Cf. Marx 2000, p.196: "The reality, which communism is creating, is precisely the true basis for rendering it impossible that anything should exist independently of individuals".

[32] Debord 1995, pp.116-7, translation altered; 2006, p.836, emphasis in the original

[33] Marx 1976, p.280

[34] See Debord's preface to the third French edition of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1992) for further remarks on this topic.

[35] On an admittedly anecdotal level: I was once told by someone involved in the Situationist-inspired Reclaim the Streets movement that Debord and the S.I.'s work made for great slogans, but were of little further use. For comments on this movement see Meaden 2009.

garde aspirations of the S.I. were not an ornament to an otherwise traditional ultra-left critique, but rather indications of the real scale and militancy of their ambitions; yet as argued, the subjectivism that founds that romanticism undermines the theory's efficacy.

Thus perhaps even on its own terms this is a theory that invites is own supersession: for if one draws out the ideas that inform and underlie it, one can measure it against what would seem to be its own criteria for validity and find it wanting in some respects. Yet these same ideas also imply its further development and advancement. If one does adopt such a perspective it is perhaps possible to find a whole set of ideas here that may be worth developing and advancing in their own right; ideas that are very different from the visual cultural and media studies approaches to which Debord's account is most often subjected.

Précis of the Thesis' Primary Arguments

I began by setting out the importance of time and history to Debord's work, and showed that attending to these themes can serve to illuminate his theory of spectacle: a point that I then illustrated by way of reference to some of the existing readings of his work which tend to take his visual terminology in a reductively literal manner. In contrast, I argued that the spectacle is the culmination of a line of historical development towards the separation of social power from those that constitute it; yet in the same respect, it is also a point at which the conscious unity between that power and its producers might be achieved. Thus whilst the concept of spectacle is modelled on a (Kojèveian reading of) Hegel's end of history, it is also presented as a potential end of *pre*-history.

I also argued that this pertained to some of the peculiarities of what would seem to be Debord's Hegelian Marxism. For Debord, the conscious awareness of historical praxis that was to emerge from the spectacle was given its first formulation by Hegel, but in a manner that reflected the limitations imposed by his own historical context; what Hegel took to be an 'end' is in fact a beginning, as the self-determinate circular identity of thought and practice, subject and object that Hegel places at the apex of his system is in fact the grounds of self-determinate historical action (albeit conceptualised in ideal, cosmological terms). Marx's inversion of Hegel is thus understood not as the transposition of ideal categories onto economic phenomena, but rather as the reversal of perspective involved in replacing Hegel's retrospective, contemplative stance with

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future-oriented, pro-active agency.

This Hegelianism is however also inflected by existential ideas. There is no intrinsic, a priori identity to the human subject: rather, the latter is 'one with time', and this entails that there is no necessary telos to history other than a desire for freedom. Yet rather than contending that there are 'no un-free acts', Debord's Hegelianism entails that real freedom lies in the conditions of self-determinate activity, i.e. in the subject-object unity that Hegel mistook for history's end. Yet because the subject is finite and located in time, any such moment of unity must aim at another, so as to perpetuate that freedom. Historical agency thus becomes an agency that aims at itself, and which is obliged to negotiate the present in order to do so. This is therefore also a strategic agency: a point that can be qualified by noting the importance of the finitude and contextuality implied by Debord's concerns with time.

These claims were introduced in part one by way of a discussion of Debord and the S.I.'s early years, in which I used the theme of tragedy to unite the material in question. In chapter one we looked at some of the salient aspects of French Hegelianism, particular as regards its association with time, consciousness and negativity, and I argued by way of reference to Bataille that the Hegelian system's 'closure' could be seen to be a 'tragic spectacle': for it afforded a safe, neutered communion with a negativity that remains detached and separated from its observers. In chapter two we looked at the sense in which the S.I.'s early avant-garde concerns built on the Surrealists own desires to release that negativity, and to realise it in lived praxis through the unity of life and art; in chapter three we then saw that those concerns bore direct relation to the S.I.'s interest in the everyday, and also to the import of existentialism. However when looking at the latter I suggested that the continual rejection of the dialectic's resolution could be seen to be just as tragic as its instantiation, and by way of a discussion of Debord's relation to Lefebvre I argued that his account based the 'openness' of his own dialectic on a form of circular closure, i.e. the subject-object unity discussed above.

Part two, which focussed on the years surrounding *The Society of the Spectacle*, then took up the theory of spectacle itself in some detail, reading it through the connections that it and Marx's account share with Hegel's antipathy to forms of universality that stand abstractly opposed to the particular entities that they unite. In chapter four I presented a more detailed reading of the spectacle, arguing that it could not be reductively equated to the commodity fetish; in chapter five I discussed the

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commodity fetish itself, and in chapter six I demonstrated Debord's departure from the latter. These differences were shown to be closely connected to Debord's shift away from the labour theory of value, which I argued presented problems for Debord's work, insofar as the latter uses Marxist concepts whilst undermining their bases; this results in difficulties as regards identifying quite what capital is, and thus how it might be addressed.

Having thereby argued that the theory of spectacle jars with the strategic aspects of the ideas that inform it I then set out in part three to reconstruct Debord's notion of historical agency, particularly *vis a vis* his later emphasis on strategy. In chapter seven we looked at Debord's *Comments*, and I showed how that text could be interpreted in the light of the themes of time, history and subjectivity set out in part one. Chapter eight then offered some speculations on the connections between Debord's interest in strategy and his Hegelian Marxism, in which I returned to my earlier contention that it can be seen to link a focus on the Hegelian absolute to an existential notion of self-constitution. This was then developed in chapter nine, where I suggested that linking this to the 'presuppositionless' aspects of Hegel's philosophy might offer a response to the apparent problems posed by the integrated spectacle. Through doing so I also reinforced my earlier claim that the theory of spectacle could be located as a specific, historically contextual moment within a broader notion of strategic, self-determinate agency.

Conclusion

Towards the end of part two we looked at the work of Moishe Postone and Chris Arthur, whose 'systematic' dialectic departs from the 'historicist' dialectic favoured by Debord and the S.I. As I indicated there, their departure from a historicist approach is perhaps informed in part by the deeply problematic history of Hegelian Marxism, and by its association with Stalinism and Party orthodoxy. I hope however to have shown that Debord's work can be seen to indicate a rather different, non-dogmatic and anti-hierarchical version of 'historicist' Hegelian Marxism; one far closer in spirit to anarchist, libertarian communist and councilist approaches. I've claimed that it implies a form of collective agency that involves the contextual development of theory, and the supersession of any static structure; particularly, and perhaps most importantly, those within its own forms of organisation. Debord's critique of representation, when related to such agency, implies the rejection of all hierarchy and centralisation. I've thus argued

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that it perhaps implies a theory of collective political will, broader in focus than the machinations of an avant-garde elite, and perhaps, albeit more tentatively, an approach to existential ethics. To develop those claims further would be to go beyond the scope of this present work, but I hope to have shown that they are perhaps deserving of further investigation.

In this respect I'll close by returning to my opening remarks, where I made reference to Debord's claim that "the S.I. is like radioactivity: one speaks little of it, but one detects traces of it almost everywhere, and it lasts a long time."[36] I suggested that the theory of spectacle might be amongst the least 'noxious' aspects of this material, or at least advanced in its process of decay. Yet the ideas that inform it may have a longer half-life, and may be of greater resource as regards this material's contemporary relevance. Having set out those ideas in detail, having presented a critique of the theory of spectacle and having also made some provisional indications as to the ways in which they might be developed, I hope to have substantiated my opening contentions in this respect. We might then close with the following statement: addressing the theory of spectacle through its basis in Debord's concerns with time and history not only serves to clarify the meaning of the theory, but also highlights the themes from which it arises and which perhaps point beyond it.

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[36] Debord 1979b

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