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Marginal Notes on Comments on the Society of the Spectacle. (2)

Giorgio Agamben

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6 August 1990

Dear Giorgio

I was a little worried when you recently asked me if I did not like the text that you added to my *Comments*, and I was especially angry because I remained unable to respond to you. No doubt you had difficulty believing that SugarCo still had not yet sent me a copy of the book, published in March [1990] and, moreover, did not send me one, despite an appeal from my Parisian publisher. It was indeed a quite surprising insolence.

I have just received a copy, and only because an Italian friend has judged it useful to communicate it to me, along with the other edition (Agalev) from Bologna.

Of course I was completely charmed as I read your Glosses. You have spoken so well, in all of your texts, of so many authors, chosen with the greatest taste (about which I am reassured, with the exception of several exotics of whom I am very regrettably ignorant and four or five contemporary Frenchmen whom I do not want to read at all), whom one finds inevitably honored with figuring in such a Pantheon.

I was happy to have attempted -- in 1967 and completely contrary to Althusser's sombre denial -- a kind of "salvage by transfer" of the Marxist method by adding to it a large dose of Hegel, at the same time as it reprised a critique of political economy that wanted to bear in mind the Marxist method's ascertainable developments in our poor country, as they were foreseeable from what preceded them. And I greatly admire how you have very legitimately reached back to Heraclitus, with respect to the effectively total expropriation of language, which had previously been the "communal"! This is assuredly the right direction to take up the true task again, which had previously been called "putting the world back on its feet" and "philosophizing with a hammer."

Quite amicably,
Guy Debord

Strategist

GUY DEBORD's books constitute the clearest and most severe analysis of the miseries and slavery of a society that by now has extended its dominion over the whole planet - that is to say, the society of the spectacle in which we live. As such, these books do not need clarifications, praises, or, least of all, prefaces. At most it might be possible to suggest here a few glosses in the margins, much like those signs that the medieval copyists traced alongside of the most noteworthy passages. Following a rigorous anchoring intention, they are in fact separated from the text and they find their own place not in an improbable elsewhere, but solely in the precise cartographic delimitation of what they describe.

It would be of no use to praise these books' independence of judgment and prophetic clairvoyance, or the classic perspicuity of their style. There are no authors today who could console themselves by thinking that their work will be read in a century (by *what kind* of human beings?), and there are no readers who could flatter themselves (with respect to what?) with the knowledge of belonging to that small number of people who understood that work before others did. They should be used rather as manuals, as instruments of resistance or exodus- much like those improper weapons that the fugitive picks up and inserts hastily under the belt (according to a beautiful image of Deleuze). Or, rather, they should be used as the work of a peculiar strategist (the title *Commentaries*, in fact, harks back to a tradition of this kind) a strategist whose field of action is not so much a battle in which to marshal troops but the pure power of the intellect. A sentence by Karl von Clausewitz, cited in the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, expresses perfectly this character:

In strategic critiques, the essential fact is to position yourself exactly in the actors' point of view. It is true that this is often very difficult. Most strategic critiques would disappear completely or would be reduced to minor differences of understanding if the writers would or could position themselves in all the circumstances in which the actors had found themselves.

In this sense, not only Machiavelli's *The Prince* but also Spinoza's *Ethics* are treatises on strategy: operations *de potentia intellectus, sive de libertate*.

16 February 1990

Dear Giorgio:

I send you a copy of my Italian preface from 1979. I have marked in it the various passages that, to me, best express the meaning of the book. And thus my consistency, which many could indeed call cynicism. This depends on the values that they accept and the vocabulary that they use. If in passing you evoke this preface in your preface, this would sufficiently compensate for its absence from this kind of collection of my writings about the spectacle, which would otherwise risk being noted and perhaps interpreted badly.

We were charmed to meet you, and I propose that we dine together as soon as you communicate to me the moment of your return here.

Amicably,
Guy

Phantasmagoria

Marx was in London when the first Universal Exposition was inaugurated with enormous clamor in Hyde Park in 1851. Among the various projects submitted, the organizers had chosen the one

by Paxton, which called for an immense building made entirely of crystal. In the Exposition's catalog, Merrifield wrote that the Crystal Palace "is perhaps the only building in the world in which the atmosphere is perceivable ... by a spectator situated either at the west or east extremity of the gallery, where the most distant parts of the building appear wrapped in a light blue halo." The first great triumph of the commodity thus takes place under the sign of both transparency and phantasmagoria. Furthermore, the guide to the Paris Universal Exposition of 1867 reinstates this contradictory spectacular character: "Il faut au [public] une conception grandiose qui frappe son imagination... il veut contempler un coup d'oeil feerique et non pas des produits similaires et uniformement groupes" [The public needs a grandiose conception that strikes its imagination ... it wants to behold a wondrous prospect rather than similar and uniformly arranged products].

It is probable that Marx had in mind the impression felt in the Crystal Palace when he wrote the chapter of *Capital* on commodity fetishism. It is certainly not a coincidence that this chapter occupies a liminal position. The disclosure of the commodity's "secret" was the key that revealed capital's enchanted realm to our thought - a secret that capital always tried to hide by exposing it in full view.

Without the identification of this immaterial center -in which "the products of labor" split themselves into a use value and an exchange value and "become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social"- all the following critical investigations undertaken in *Capital* probably would not have been possible.

In the 1960s, however, the Marxian analysis of the fetish character of the commodity was, in the Marxist milieu, foolishly abandoned. In 1969, in the preface to a popular reprint of *Capital*, Louis Althusser could still invite readers to skip the first section, with the reason that the theory of fetishism was a "flagrant" and "extremely harmful" trace of Hegelian philosophy.

It is for this reason that Debord's gesture appears all the more remarkable, as he bases his analysis of the society of the spectacle -that is, of a capitalism that has reached its extreme figure- precisely on that "flagrant trace." The "becoming-image" of capital is nothing more than the commodity's last metamorphosis, in which exchange value has completely eclipsed use value and can now achieve the status of absolute and irresponsible sovereignty over life in its entirety, after having falsified the entire social production. In this sense, the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, where the commodity unveiled and exhibited its mystery for the first time, is a prophecy of the spectacle, or, rather, the nightmare, in which the nineteenth century dreamed the twentieth. The first duty the Situationists assigned themselves was to wake up from this nightmare.

Champot, 24 August 1989

Dear Sir:

Thanks for the press clippings that you transmitted to me. I am happy to learn that Italy, despite certain quite serious obstacles, is better informed than France and several other countries, which are still at the moment of "Nashist"-museographical falsifications, laughably inaugurated by the burlesque "Pompidou Center."

And most particularly because I myself have had the chance to learn much in Italy.

I send you a very recent book to complete your intelligent documentation.

Quite cordially,
Guy Debord

...

24 January 1990

Dear Giorgio Agamben:

I consent to the idea of publishing the two books in a single volume, but on the condition that they are in this order: Comments... (1988), followed by The Society of the Spectacle (1967), the first being printed in a slightly larger type.

Your preface will be very useful, at least in explaining the apparent paradox; and of course many other points, I have no doubt.

Since you will be in Paris in February, I propose that we get together on Monday the 12th at 5 pm at the bar of the Lutetia, which is at the far end of the hotel's hall.

Quite amicably,
Guy Debord

Addendum: Letters to Giorgio Agamben, 1989-1990

Guy Debord

Walpurgis Night

If there is in our century a writer with whom Debord might agree to be compared, this writer would be Karl Kraus. Nobody has been able to bring to light the hidden laws of the spectacle as Kraus did in his obstinate struggle against journalists - "in these loud times which boom with the horrible symphony of actions which produce reports and of reports which cause actions." And if someone were to imagine something analogous to the voice-over that in Debord's films runs alongside the exposure of that desert of rubble which is the spectacle, nothing would be more appropriate than Kraus's voice. A voice that -in those public lectures whose charm Elias Canetti has described- finds and lays bare the intimate and ferocious anarchy of triumphant capitalism in Offenbach's operetta.

The punch line with which Kraus, in the posthumous *Third Walpurgis Night*, justified his silence in the face of the rise of Nazism is well known: "On Hitler, nothing comes to my mind." This ferocious *Witz*, where Kraus confesses without indulgence his own limitation, marks also the impotence of satire when faced by the becoming-reality of the indescribable. As a satirical poet, he is truly "only one of the last epigones inhabiting the ancient home of language." Certainly also in Debord, as much as in Kraus, language presents itself as the image and the place of justice. Nevertheless, the analogy stops there. Debord's discourse begins precisely where satire becomes speechless. The ancient home of language (as well as the literary tradition on which satire is based) has been, by now, falsified and manipulated from top to bottom. Kraus reacts to this situation by turning language into the place of Universal Judgment. Debord begins to speak instead when the Universal Judgment has already taken place and after the true has been recognized in it only as a moment of the false. The Universal Judgment in language and the Walpurgis Night in the spectacle coincide perfectly. This paradoxical coincidence is the place from which perennially resounds his voice-over.

Situation

What is a constructed situation? A definition contained in the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* states that this is a moment in life, concretely and deliberately constructed through the collective organization of a unified milieu and through a play of events. Nothing would be more misleading, however, than to think the situation as a privileged or exceptional moment in the sense of aestheticism. The situation is neither the becoming-art of life nor the becoming-life of art. We can comprehend its true nature only if we locate it historically in its proper place: that is, *after* the end and self destruction of art, and *after* the passage of life through

the trial of nihilism. The “Northwest passage of the geography of the true life” is a point of indifference between life and art, where *both* undergo a decisive metamorphosis *simultaneously*. This point of indifference constitutes a politics that is finally adequate to its tasks. The Situationists counteract capitalism -which “concretely and deliberately” organizes environments and events in order to depotentiate life- with a concrete, although opposite, project. Their utopia is, once again, perfectly topical because it locates itself in the taking-place of what it wants to overthrow. Nothing could give a better idea of a constructed situation, perhaps, than the bare scenography in which Nietzsche, in *The Gay Science*, develops his thought’s *experimentum crucis*. A constructed situation is the room with the spider and the moonlight between the branches exactly in the moment when -in answer to the demon’s question: “Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?”- it is said: “Yes, I do.”⁶ What is decisive here is the messianic shift that *integrally* changes the world, leaving it, at the same time, *almost* intact: everything here, in fact, stayed the same, but lost its identity.

In the *commedia dell’arte* there were cadres instructions meant for the actors, so that they would bring into being situations in which a human gesture, subtracted from the powers of myth and destiny, could finally take place. It is impossible to understand the comic mask if we simply interpret it as an undetermined or depotentiated character. Harlequin and the Doctor are not characters in the same way in which Hamlet and Oedipus are: the masks are not *characters*, but rather *gestures* figured as a type, constellations of gestures. In this situation, the destruction of the role’s identity goes hand in hand with the destruction of the actor’s identity. It is precisely this relationship between text and execution, between power and act, that is put into question once again here. This happens because the mask insinuates itself between the text and the execution, creating an indistinguishable mixture of power and act. And what takes place here -both onstage and within the constructed situation- is not the actuation of a power but the liberation of an ulterior power. *Gesture* is the name of this intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular, text and execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as a moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis. The gesture is neither use value nor exchange value, neither biographic experience nor impersonal event: it is the other side of the commodity that lets the “crystals of this common social substance” sink into the situation.

Auschwitz/Timisoara

Probably the most disquieting aspect of Debord’s books is the fact that history seems to have committed itself to relentlessly confirm their analyses. Twenty years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, the *Commentaries* (1988) registered the precision of the diagnosis and

irresolvable disjunction between whatever singularities and the state organization.

This has nothing to do with the mere demands of society against the state, which was for a long time the shared concern of the protest movements of our age. Whatever singularities cannot form a *societas* within a society of the spectacle because they do not possess any identity to vindicate or any social bond whereby to seek recognition. The struggle against the state, therefore, is all the more implacable, because this is a state that nullifies all real contents but that -all empty declarations about the sacredness of life and about human rights aside- would also declare any being radically lacking a representable identity to be simply nonexistent.

This is the lesson that could have been learned from Tiananmen, if real attention had been paid to the facts of that event. What was most striking about the demonstrations of the Chinese May, in fact, was the relative absence of specific contents in their demands. (The notions of democracy and freedom are too generic to constitute a real goal of struggle, and the only concrete demand, the rehabilitation of Bu Yaobang, was promptly granted.) It is for this reason that the violence of the state’s reaction seems all the more inexplicable. It is likely, however, that this disproportion was only apparent and that the Chinese leaders acted, from their point of view, with perfect lucidity. In Tiananmen the state found itself facing something that could not and did not want to be represented, but that presented itself nonetheless as a community and as a common life (and this regardless of whether those who were in that square were actually aware of it). The threat the state is not willing to come to terms with is precisely the fact that the unrepresentable should exist and form a community without either presuppositions or conditions of belonging (just like Cantor’s inconsistent multiplicity). The whatever singularity -this singularity that wants to take possession of belonging itself as well as of its own being-into-language, and that thus declines any identity and any condition of belonging- is the new, nonsubjective, and socially inconsistent protagonist of the coming politics. Wherever these singularities peacefully manifest their being-in-common, there will be another Tiananmen and, sooner or later, the tanks will appear again.

(1990)

supranational police state, in which the norms of international law are tacitly abrogated one after the other. Not only has no war officially been declared in many years (confirming Carl Schmitt's prophecy, according to which every war in our time has become a civil war), but even the outright invasion of a sovereign state can now be presented as an act of internal jurisdiction. Under these circumstances, the secret services -which had always been used to act ignoring the boundaries of national sovereignties- become the model itself of real political organization and of real political action. For the first time in the history of our century, the two most important world powers are headed by two direct emanations of the secret services: Bush (former CIA head) and Gorbachev (Andropov's man); and the more they concentrate all the power in their own hands, the more all of this is hailed, in the new course of the spectacle, as a triumph of democracy. All appearances notwithstanding, the spectacular-democratic world organization that is thus emerging actually runs the risk of being the worst tyranny that ever materialized in the history of humanity, against which resistance and dissent will be practically more and more difficult - and all the more so in that it is increasingly clear that such an organization will have the task of managing the survival of *humanity in an uninhabitable world*. One cannot be sure, however, that the spectacle's attempt to maintain control over the process it contributed to putting in motion in the first place will actually succeed. The state of the spectacle, after all, is still a state that bases itself (as Badiou has shown every state to base itself) not on social bonds, of which it purportedly is the expression, but rather on their dissolution, which it forbids. In the final analysis, the state can recognize any claim for identity - even that of a state identity within itself (and in our time, the history of the relations between the state and terrorism is an eloquent confirmation of this fact). But what the state cannot tolerate in any way is that singularities form a community without claiming an identity, that human beings co-belong without a representable condition of belonging (being Italian, working-class, Catholic, terrorist, etc.). And yet, the state of the spectacle inasmuch as it empties and nullifies every real identity, and substitutes the *public* and *public opinion* for the *people* and the *general will* - is precisely what produces massively from within itself singularities that are no longer characterized either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging: singularities that are truly *whatever* singularities. It is clear that the society of the spectacle is also one in which all social identities have dissolved and in which everything that for centuries represented the splendor and misery of the generations succeeding themselves on Earth has by now lost all its significance. The different identities that have marked the tragicomedy of universal history are exposed and gathered with a phantasmagorical vacuity in the global petite bourgeoisie - a petite bourgeoisie that constitutes the form in which the spectacle has realized parodistically the Marxian project of a classless society.

For this reason -to risk advancing a prophecy here- the coming politics will no longer be a struggle to conquer or to control the state on the part of either new or old social subjects, but rather a struggle between the state and the nonstate (humanity), that is, an

expectations of that previous book in every aspect. Meanwhile, the course of history has accelerated uniformly in the same direction: only two years after this book's publication, in fact, we could say that world politics is nothing more than a hasty and parodic mise-en-scene of the script contained in that book. The substantial unification of the concentrated spectacle (the Eastern people's democracies) and of the diffused spectacle (the Western democracies) into an integrated spectacle is, by now, trivial evidence. This unification, which constituted one of the central theses of the *Commentaries*, appeared paradoxical to many people at the time. The immovable walls and the iron curtains that divided the two worlds were wiped out in a few days. The Eastern governments allowed the Leninist party to fall so that the integrated spectacle could be completely realized in their countries. In the same way, the West had already renounced a while ago the balance of powers as well as real freedom of thought and communication in the name of the electoral machine of majority vote and of media control over public opinion - both of which had developed within the totalitarian modern states.

Timisoara, Romania, represents the extreme point of this process, and deserves to give its name to the new turn in world politics. Because there the secret police had conspired against itself in order to overthrow the old concentrated-spectacle regime while television showed, nakedly and without false modesty, the real political function of the media. Both television and secret police, therefore, succeeded in doing something that Nazism had not even dared to imagine: to bring Auschwitz and the Reichstag fire together in one monstrous event. For the first time in the history of humankind, corpses that had just been buried or lined up on the morgue's tables were hastily exhumed and tortured in order to simulate, in front of the video cameras, the genocide that legitimized the new regime. What the entire world was watching live on television, thinking it was the real truth, was in reality the absolute nontruth; and, although the falsification appeared to be sometimes quite obvious, it was nevertheless legitimized as true by the media's world system, so that it would be clear that the true was, by now, nothing more than a moment within the necessary movement of the false. In this way, truth and falsity became indistinguishable from each other and the spectacle legitimized itself solely through the spectacle.

Timisoara is, in this sense, the Auschwitz of the age of the spectacle: and in the same way in which it has been said that after Auschwitz it is impossible to write and think as before, after Timisoara it will be no longer possible to watch television in the same way.

Shekinah

How can thought collect Debord's inheritance today, in the age of the complete triumph of the spectacle? It is evident, after all, that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity and linguistic

being of humans. This means that an integrated Marxian analysis should take into consideration the fact that capitalism (or whatever other name we might want to give to the process dominating world history today) not only aimed at the expropriation of productive activity, but also, and above all, at the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings, of that *logos* in which Heraclitus identifies the Common. The extreme form of the expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, in other words, the politics in which we live. But this also means that what we encounter in the spectacle is our very linguistic nature inverted. For this reason (precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good), the spectacle's violence is so destructive; but, for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility - and it is our task to use this possibility against it.

Nothing resembles this condition more than the sin that cabalists call "isolation of the Shekinah" and that they attribute to Aher - one of the four rabbis who, according to a famous Haggadah of the Talmud, entered the Pardes (that is, supreme knowledge). "Four rabbis," the story goes, "entered Heaven: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher and Rabbi Akiba.... Ben Azzai cast a glance and died.... Ben Zoma looked and went crazy.... Aher cut the branches. Rabbi Akiba came out uninjured."

The Shekinah is the last of the ten Sefirot or attributes of the divinity, the one that expresses divine presence itself, its manifestation or habitation on Earth: its "word." Aher's "cutting of the branches" is identified by cabalists with the sin of Adam, who, instead of contemplating the Sefirot in their totality, preferred to contemplate only the last one, isolating it from the others- thereby separating the tree of science from the tree of life. Like Adam, Aher represents humanity insofar as, making knowledge his own destiny and his own specific power, he isolates knowledge and the word, which are nothing other than the most complete form of the manifestation of God (the Shekinah), from the other Sefirot in which he reveals himself. *The risk here is that the word -that is, the nonlatency and the revelation of something- might become separate from what it reveals and might end up acquiring an autonomous consistency.* The revealed and manifested-and hence, common and shareable- being becomes separate from the thing revealed and comes in between the latter and human beings. In this condition of exile, the Shekinah loses its positive power and becomes harmful (the cabalists say that it "sucks the mille of evil").

The isolation of the Shekinah thus expresses our epochal condition. Whereas under the old regime the estrangement of the communicative essence of human beings substantiated itself as a presupposition that served as the common foundation, in the society of the spectacle it is this very communicativity, this generic essence itself (that is, language as *Gattungswesen*), that is being separated in an autonomous sphere. What prevents communication is communicability itself; human beings are kept separate by what unites them. Journalists and the media establishment (as well as

psychoanalysts in the private sphere) constitute the new clergy of such an alienation of the linguistic nature of human beings.

In the society of the spectacle, in fact, the isolation of the Shekinah reaches its final phase, in which language not only constitutes itself as an autonomous sphere, but also no longer reveals anything at all -or, better yet, it reveals the nothingness of all things. In language there is nothing of God, of the world, of the revealed: but, in this extreme nullifying unveiling, language (the linguistic nature of human beings) remains once again hidden and separated. Language thus acquires, for the last time, the unspoken power to claim a historical age and a state for itself: the age of the spectacle, or the state of fully realized nihilism. This is why today power founded on a presupposed foundation is vacillating all around the planet: the kingdoms of the Earth are setting out, one after the other, for the spectacular-democratic regime that constitutes the completion of the state-form. Even more than economic necessities and technological development, what drives the nations of the Earth toward a single common destiny is the alienation of linguistic being, the uprooting of all peoples from their vital dwelling in language. But exactly for this reason, the age in which we live is also that in which for the first time it becomes possible for human beings to experience their own linguistic essence -to experience, that is, not some language content or some true proposition, but language *itself*, as well as the very fact of speaking. Contemporary politics is precisely this devastating *experimentum linguae* that disarticulates and empties, all over the planet, traditions and beliefs, ideologies and religions, identities and communities.

Only those who will be able to carry it to completion -without allowing that which reveals to be veiled in the nothingness it reveals, but bringing language itself to language- will become the first citizens of a community with neither presuppositions nor a state. In this community, the nullifying and determining power of what is common will be pacified and the Shekinah will no longer suck the evil milk of its own separateness. Like Rabbi Akiba in the Haggadah of the Talmud, the citizens of this community will enter the paradise of language and will come out of it uninjured.

Tiananmen

What does the scenario that world politics is setting up before us look like under the twilight of the *Commentaries*? The state of the integrated spectacle (or, spectacular-democratic state) is the final stage in the evolution of the state-form - the ruinous stage toward which monarchies and republics, tyrannies and democracies, racist regimes and progressive regimes are all rushing. Although it seems to bring national identities back to life, this global movement actually embodies a tendency toward the constitution of a kind of