

CHAPTER 6

The Network Spectacle

Networks of promotion/control slide imperceptibly into networks of surveillance/disinformation.

Guy Debord (1988, 74).

This chapter takes up the issue of whether more of us are being caught up in a kind of network spectacle whereby all that is digitally networked must, by definition, be good – including social life. Moreover, online social capital becomes a kind of lure to entice more participation, where obtaining signs of approbation through social buttons and incremental increases is built into the platform as a means of perpetuating this spectacle. To carry this out, it will be important to explore the nature of the spectacle as theorised by Guy Debord, applying this to the digitally networked world that he might not have foreseen. In having focused on the theories of Marx and Veblen regarding alienation, it is time to complete this book's 'triad' by including Debord's often prescient – and sometimes gnostic or oracular – statements on technology and alienation as it pertains to online social capital. The goal will be to discuss the movement from the notion of the spectacle and simulacrum to that of the social algorithm, and in this way provide more of a 'meta' understanding of the implications of online social capital as it operates on platforms powered by networks and the 'digital sublime.'

Neoliberal capitalism, having made technological innovation its exclusive instrument, develops more effective ways of perfecting social separation. This, combined with the perversion of cybernetics and the compression of both time and space in digital environments, gives the illusion of connective immediacy and proximity. However, despite the collapse of spatial distances and the ease by which connections can be made speedily in larger quantities, the social ties may be weak and contingent upon mediating through the devices sold by capital. More than simply neutral devices, the devices themselves exist in a

How to cite this book chapter:

Faucher, K. X. 2018. *Social Capital Online: Alienation and Accumulation*. Pp. 109–133. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book16.g>. License: CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

spectacular commodification network that promotes their adoption and use as the prerequisite for many forms of our social connection.

The network *as* spectacle conceals the rate of exploitation, or surplus value generated by a large prosumer audience, behind a veil of optimism, novelty and stimulus. It extols the values of speed, efficiency, convenience, and connectivity. Dissolving the nature of labour in digital walled gardens that appear to privilege play and creativity. The network spectacle presents itself as sublime, and within its apparatus all who are participants within it are enjoined to support and reinforce the spectacle as good, for which there are no other viable alternatives. With the lionisation and fanfare associated with the information age and the network society, overly optimistic pronouncements about how digital technology would revolutionise everyday life have been heavily oversold. There is no denying that there have been significant changes in the speed of transactions, connecting more people over larger distances, and even disruptive technologies in the form of ride-sharing services such as Uber or finding places to stay via Airbnb, but ecological, sociopolitical, and economic problems remain. Only when these new technologies lose their mythic lustre and become normalised do they present options for real change:

the real power of new technologies does not appear during their mythic period, when they are hailed for their ability to bring world peace, renew communities, or end scarcity, history, geography, or politics; rather, their social impact is greatest when technologies become banal—when they literally (as in the case of electricity) or figuratively withdraw into the woodwork (Mosco 2004, 19).

Digital representation becomes the active process and product of this milieu, a hyperreal environment that subordinates the now impoverished value of the non-digital to the production of images that are destined for digital re-production. The network spectacle is presented as unassailably good, perfect, and the primary source of the positively represented values decanted from neoliberalism such as efficiency, speed and connectivity. However, it is those very values that not only speak directly to issues of exchange value and commodity fetishism, but also physically impoverishes those who labour to support the spectacle. In that sense, there are those who labour to produce the content via their own digital representations who now may have an impoverished sense of the non-digital world, which is now subordinate to the aims of the network spectacle (as a kind of raw material of experience that must be refined and processed into digital content representation); and there are those who labour in the extraction of actual raw materials, sweatshop manufacture, and precarious work in the service industry to provide the network spectacle with a steady supply of labour time.

Just as the rise of large corporate social media was able to plug in the social function into its network, today the network has succeeded in being plugged into daily life where sophisticated algorithms monitor online behaviour are

then used to serve up more of what users want in terms of what will make them happy and comfortable, creating islands or bubbles where competing or alternative perspectives never intrude. This kind of walled garden functions to channel online behaviours and clandestinely restrict social interactive opportunities. Such 'matching and pairing' mechanisms of the algorithm on these networks is hardly new, as they are largely based on principles of homophily and powered by cybernetic thinking. Such thinking assumes sameness or similarity is socially generative and desirable. Today, that principle of group conformity is still active, be it in recommender services for products, or in what appears in one's news feed that the network deems 'relevant' to the user.

It is the unceasing monologue of the network spectacle in presenting what is good that contributes to generalised separation. As Debord states (2000, 28), the technology 'is based on isolation, and the technical process isolates in turn.' More than simply being 'alone together,' this isolation and separation operates at the heart of production – in this case the production of the digital 'worker' who is, in effect, reproducing his or her own experience as an image to be exchanged on the social market to increase online social capital.

In the very first aphorism of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord provocatively modifies the first sentence of Marx's *Capital* by claiming that life is the accumulation of spectacles as opposed to commodities. This proceeds from a telling quote from Feuerbach where illusion's increasing power over truth inverts the relationship between the sacred and profane. This inversion of truth and illusion threads through much of Debord's sustained critique of the spectacle. One might immediately point to some of the symptoms of the power and allure of illusion in the ways by which social media users may compete for attention and online social capital in creating artificial representative images of themselves online in visual and textual forms, the rise of fake news that unapologetically appeals to belief over facts, or that the incremental increase in various forms of counting using social buttons has a direct correlation with perceived human value.

In the place of capital, the spectacle is the social relation between people – not mediated by commodities or money, but by images. The images are autonomous insofar as they exist separately from the commodities they refer to. It is to the extent that one purchases the image of the product as an experience, and only receives in exchange the product: the vehicle and not the breathtaking winding road, the clothing or technology item and not the fun the image seems to promise. The images are perpetuated in a society with all the assumptions that they are true aspects of reality, but they are but mere representations of the dominant language of spectacular society. The language of the spectacle promises unification (we can all traffic in the same imagistic references to brands and standardised experiences) and delivers separation: from ourselves, each other and the world. All of these relations have been inverted, and so our alienation emerges from this kind of detachment from the real. That which resides on the outside of the spectacle may be seen as a threat, obscured from view, or filtered as yet another image. A kind of availability heuristic is empowered by

the language of the spectacle, and operationalised by the algorithm's tendency to create filter bubbles.

Examples of the availability heuristic on social media can operate in more automated or clandestine ways given the depth to which the social aspect is integrated into the platform as part of a high-trust culture that lumps more user content according to what is likely to conform to set beliefs, values and customs. If we take the example of adolescents in particular who are arguably at a very formative stage in social and cultural development in terms of their identity, they may be treated to online status updates and stories depicting users who live a life of constant leisure, glamour, excitement and whose carefully curated self-images appeals to unrealistic beauty standards.

The spectacle is positioned in Debord's work as the social relation between people hijacked by capitalism. The accumulation of commodities has been demoted by an accumulation of images that refer to these commodities. Owning the object being sold, or having and experience is secondary to being seen doing so, and documenting it for public display. However, when social media users dedicate so much of their time trying to gain online social capital by posting images of their possessions or experiences, in some cases the main goal of this form of conspicuous display is simply to increase online social capital in the like economy. Even the most sacred or personal moments may not be directly lived as such, and one only needs to think of that person who will say that their wedding is not official until it is posted on Facebook, or those who rush from one historical monument to the next snapping pictures without taking the time to appreciate them. Until these are posted online, they seem to have little value.

Debord's claim is that the world of the spectacle is ideology materialised: the correspondence between dominant ideology and individual worldviews is enshrouded in a mythology of optimism. The ubiquity of the spectacle and the practices that arise in the construction of social software architecture are manifest in unseen algorithms that facilitate connection and use as products of this ideology materialised as 'datapolitik.' This is supported by the way in which economic activity and communications technology are frequently touted as neutral, thus insulating both from critique. This effectively naturalises both economic and technological discourse as neutral and objective, and the ideological intent of these is obfuscated by instrumental reason. Debord pushes the Marxist line further by claiming that it is not just the producer or labourer that is alienated from his or her labour, from other members of their class, and from life which has been inverted by a capitalist model to appear as though it were the only viable option, but that this also holds true for the consumer. The consumer is caught in this inverted life of the spectacle, capable only of unilateral communication by doing the work of the spectacle through constant reification of its aims. 'Behind' this spectacle is economic determinism and algorithmic control that has only its own power and growth as its goal, and thus requires that the economy be in a constant state of crisis in order to properly function.

This kairoic dimension is facilitated in part by the blurring of the traditional binaries of producer and consumer (the 'prosumer'), the discrete aspects of the digital and the continuous field of the analogue, and the subordination of the problematic under highly standardised social media software regimes that control the flow of social economies online. The social in this way becomes a representation by information where power is articulated, reticulated, distributed and mobilised as packets and segments in multiple bitstreams. Social meaning itself becomes vulgarised by the apostate defenders of a technical information-theoretic perspective that is focused on developing multiple channels at the expense of meaning production, which is always secondary.

Baudrillard as Postmodern Interruption?

There are some apparent similarities between Debord's concept of the spectacle and Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal. In the hyperreal, the real has been condemned to a proliferation of signs and their exchange that seem to operate in a world governed by illusion. For Baudrillard, this disconnection from the real – due to the way we mediate our experiences – creates a simulacrum that precedes the real. Our own self-representations of experience already point to this simulacrum. In taking a picture of a trip to Paris to see the Eiffel Tower and posting it on Facebook, this is a representation of the event of being there and seeing the object, but the form-copy relationship is disturbed as that 'event' bears no relation to that distinction, but instead is something other – a simulacrum. One might have an idea of Paris, the Eiffel Tower, leisure, travel and so forth as depicted through media. This representation has already broken an alliance with the real, and as a result we may have a highly mediated image of the reality of place and objects that we may seek to recreate and represent by placing ourselves in the frame. One might go a step further to say that social media itself becomes an environment of simulacra where social relations have broken their alliance with what is real about being social, and that others behave in ways where social relations become co-opted by the expectations of being in these environments that are indexed heavily on increasing online social capital through its dominant signs of social buttons. Online social capital itself is a kind of simulacrum of capitalist accumulation where the increase in the like economy is only an apparent resemblance to actual capitalist accumulation (which occurs in the background between the social media site and its partners).

Baudrillard's view of capitalism and consumption practices does not restrict itself to speaking only of alienation, since that is to court an unacknowledged moralism which speaks more to the alienated moralist. Yet, it is clearly identified in Debord what the spectacle and economic determinism has made of social relations: they are entirely dominated by commodity exchange where alienation becomes a central commodity for the society of the spectacle. This idea continues to be restated in several forms, or rendered in a manner that

suggests that our communication is dominated by a pervasive economic mysticism that both quantises and etherealises social relations. This shares a zone of overlap with Debord's notion that we never acquire the object itself, but only its particular manifestation that we hope will bring our desire in contact with unity and transcendental reward. Whether we call this failure to achieve the oceanic bliss ideal where goods answer all needs, a progression of alienation or the slippage of signs in the Lacanian register, we are faced with a deficit on the order of meaning, fulfilment and contentment. This deficit is transformed into its own meaning, and perpetual lack of fulfilment operates as a principal driver in consumer behaviour.

In a system that has co-opted the methods of religious awe and reconstructed the real according to its own inverted, self-styled image, both Debord and Baudrillard demonstrate that the pursuit of happiness or contentment is itself misguided, and this for reasons endemic to a system with its own functional logic that is also rife with contradictions and tautologies (such as 'individual' and 'celebrity' that do not have definitional criteria with a stable reference). The rampant hyper-capitalism of today continues its progress to achieve its exclusive aim: growth for growth's sake, and this is also reflected in the dogged pursuit of online social capital where one can never have enough friends, followers, likes, retweets and up-votes. This growth is achieved through orchestrated crises, the increase in wealth that is also an increase in wealth disparity, the further disequilibrium of a system that seeks to dominate with no other purpose or final design than to expand itself.

One of the principal concerns of hyper-capitalism is the continued erosion or even wide-scale eradication of community-mindedness. The failure to conduct social relations without the intermediary of commodity images makes social relations dependent upon an economic determinist model that permits all that may be possible in our social relations as customisable preconditions. It is not the objects themselves that function as the conduits of social expression, but their signs, the broader commodity culture meanings they are burdened with. Our social relations become thoroughly infused by commodity culture's semio-capitalist code.

The spectacle, powered by capitalist economy, is able to produce the very objects that promise connection but actually continue to exacerbate isolation and alienation. In autocratic societies such as Germany under Nazism and Soviet communism, the one unifying yet alienating product produced to gratify desires was ideology. All productive forces were committed to the production of ideology reified in images of the dictator, symbols, and the ideological message. In order to make that effective, it required constant reinforcement by vertical integration by authority figures and the strategic surveillance and detention practices of police. In our spectacular society, we do not need a secret police or army to reinforce our obedience: commodities possess an ambient regulatory effect that function as proxy conditioners. It is the economy whose major productive means and ends is alienation.

Debord holds to the view that the commodity system will only develop, and along with it, alienation. One cannot expect to stage a revolution against it from within. This strikes off one of two of Marx's possible solutions: liberation from the economy and liberation from within the economy. '*Separation* is the alpha and omega of the spectacle' (Debord 2000, 25). Although referring to exacerbating class divisions, there are other cleavages by which this separation unites segmented groups across racial, gender and political lines, thus feeding a kind of tribalism that is partially supported by self-selective network connections and selective exposure. 'From the automobile to television, all the goods selected by the spectacular system are also its weapons for constant reinforcement of the conditions of isolation of 'lonely crowds' (Debord 2000, 28).

If, as Debord tells us, life is presented as an accumulation of spectacles, and that everything 'that was directly lived has moved away into representation' (Debord 2000, aph 1), with respect to time scales, we are barred from the past since what is presented is merely representational, and these representations are convened, manufactured or designed by the spectacle itself. However, one wonders if even the present moment can attain to any significant value if it is simply a remediation of a representational past that is disseminated by way of images that carry the cultural messages via its visual channels. In a telling interview, when then-presidential candidate Donald Trump was confronted with an error in the statistics he presented about race-based violent crimes, he replied, 'all I know is what is on the internet.' This kind of chamber or echo-effect of selective exposure is highly problematic for a variety of reasons, not least of which being that confirmation bias has an impact on decision-making and the possibly narrow or distorted worldview one may embrace. When it comes to what people choose to believe, this may also be on account of the narrow selective process of hidden algorithms. The tautological nature of the spectacle's 'truth' forecloses the possibility of seeking beyond it to mount a significant or resonant challenge:

The spectacle proves its arguments simply by going round in circles: by coming back to the start, by repetition, by constant reaffirmation in the only space left where anything can be publicly affirmed, and believed, precisely because that is the only thing to which everyone is a witness. (Debord 2000, 19)

Given the emergence of the prosumer, the work of the spectacle is increased, as well as its ability to permeate and colonise all social relations as now the 'spectator' can be a more active worker in the proliferation of the spectacle. The images by which so many live by, conform to and subordinate their subjectivity, are capable of being transmitted much faster and with less need for direct intervention by the state, mass media and advertising. This horizontal form of social reinforcement of the spectacle decreases costs for capitalists, and crowdsources the reinforcement of these imagistic messages. It further retrenches Debord's claim of a true proletarianisation of the world.

Baudrillard's concepts provide some useful connections to understanding social media as a simulacrum, but they may fall short of understanding the broader mechanics at play in the way the spectacular society operates.

The Integrated Spectacle

Debord had identified two forms of the spectacle, each pertaining to geopolitical divide during the cold war. The *concentrated* spectacle was the domain of the Soviet Union where the entire social and political reality concentrated power and belief in the celebrated, almost religious figure of the dictatorial autocrat. The *diffuse* spectacle was the domain of Western values, and primarily with 'Americanisation' in the lead whereby American values pegged onto consumerism, the image of democracy, an image of freedom and the sacred value bestowed upon private property and were aggressively exported around the globe. In effect, the two forms of the spectacle correspond to two functions: the one inbound in its communications, and the other outbound. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, to these two forms Debord adds a third: the *integrated* spectacle, which adopts certain features of the previous two in dialectical fashion. The nature of the integrated spectacle is still to concentrate power, but to do so in an ambiguous fashion where it remains unclear what the reigning ideology might be, who heads up the transnational corporation, and so forth, as a kind of apparent decentring of power. Yet, power and wealth continue its concentration into fewer hands – even if it may not be as obvious to whom those hands belong. In terms of the diffuse spectacle, we still see the aggressive attempt to export particular values and ideas, but these are not the outputs of production on a global scale, but carried in products themselves. In its diffusion, the integrated spectacle undersigns all social products in such a way that what it describes as reality is merely itself.

This integration is total and ubiquitous, making it nearly impossible to assess the spectacle as something foreign to reality, as if some external object that can be critically analysed; instead, all the tools of analysis that make up the discourse are provided by the spectacle. Anything we can say about this spectacle is already prefigured by the spectacle's constraints on our social vocabulary.

There are two examples of the integrated spectacle worthy of mention here: one that is concrete and cloaked by the abstract, and the other that is abstract and concealed by apparent materiality. The first concerns the economic order, the stage of neoliberal capitalism that far more resembles transcendent forces united with a distorted Darwinism. Economics appears as a science if only because it makes use of models to predict market behaviour (as though a market is a hybrid living organism and computer program), supported by a roughshod application of mathematics, and spurred on in its enterprise by specious and unscientific axioms that point to the unquestionable rationality of human beings as calculating agents of self-interest. Tied up with this are hyperbolic

values that speak of ‘freedom’ as the greatest of all possible goals, even if the economic system does more to control and limit the freedoms of others, and justifies growing inequalities in the name of this freedom. Another example might be the more abstract notion of the network as a form of social integration of activity, and the network epistemologies that become integrated within the new so-called ‘digital reality’ of our information age. The materiality of the network can be found in the popularisation of the network architecture, websites, and the devices required to access them.

The integrated spectacle would not have prevailed as it has without the steady rise of ICTs. It is precisely the entanglement of the integrated spectacle with the highly regimented network technologies and their valorisation as the greatest public good that leads to the network spectacle. It is useful here to provide Debord’s five cardinal aspects of the integrated spectacle to infer how this progression has since materialised: constant technological innovation, the entwining functions of the state and economy, generalised secrecy, unanswerable lies and an eternal present.

The Integrated Spectacle: Spectacular Innovation

Debord makes only a brief comment on how technological innovation is part of the capitalist repertoire and dominated by specialists. There is, of course, much more to the story, and one that can be traced to Veblen’s warnings on not confusing the interests of technologists and finance. But it can also be seen to address how such technology facilitates the increasing power of neoliberalism’s gospel of borderless trade, efforts at deregulation, labour-displacement through self-service models, microsecond market trading, increased state potential for mass surveillance, the extraction of surplus labour through crowdsourcing initiatives under the guise of ‘community participation,’ the discursive framing of the spectacle as being the only permitted answer for which there are no alternatives, the obligation to purchase the newest devices at regular intervals, the obligation to be connected to the networks and the proliferation of proprietary hardware and software as opposed to open source and modifiable forms.

The entwining functions of the state and economy become more readily apparent when we consider the current state of neoliberal governments with their view that borderless trade, deregulation and creating laws that favour private enterprise are all part of a strategy to downshift risk and responsibility to citizens (who become ever more viewed as consumers). In terms of social media, and its enormous impact on both social relations and economic development, there may be very little oversight on how these major online social networks operate. Although there are moments of friction, such as in getting sites like Facebook to comply with government requests for user information, the relationship is far from being a complicated one. Given the benefits social media provides for corporations, and as a valuable tool for governments

to conduct surveillance, there would appear little appetite for more stringent regulation. Both the state and economy have the goal of domination through power and wealth as the means of perpetuating more of the same. Markets have much to gain in this close relationship with government. As Debord tells us, it is 'the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign' (2000, 2).

The Integrated Spectacle: Generalised Secrecy, Lies, and the Eternal Present

Generalised secrecy points to the fact that such secrecy is less about secret services attempting to silence dissent and remove 'inconveniences' from spectacular discourse, but that more agents of the spectacle emerge to perform this function. For example, there are a considerable number of grassroots movements that optimise their use of social media to carry out their agenda in support of the spectacular status quo. In addition, celebrities and specialists can become the conduits of these agendas, more powerfully facilitated by the size and reach of social media.

The fourth aspect of the integrated spectacle points to unanswerable lies, which 'have succeeded in eliminating public opinion, which first lost the ability to make itself heard and then very quickly dissolved altogether. This evidently has significant consequences for politics, the applied sciences, the legal system and the arts' (Debord 1998, 13). We might question if this has come to pass given social media's affordances for providing the public with a forum to provide their opinions. Yet, the mixture of the availability heuristic via algorithmic sorting and the coordinated efforts of the vocal few to dominate the online conversation may have altered the impact of public opinion in ways that 'dialogue' continues to be one of spectacular domination. By adding the use of astroturfing clandestinely operated by government agencies and corporate entities to promote various agendas such as climate-change denial or the protection of brand reputation in the face of scandal, this fosters an environment that only *appears* to reflect the majority public opinion by sheer numbers of users alone. As Jodi Dean (2005) has argued, the mass profusion of opinion symbolises the fantasies of abundance and participation very well and thus devalues the *content* of political discourse, as well as working against unity.

In the final aspect of the integrated spectacle reside the notion of an eternal present and the negation of history. Debord's statement is worthy of being quoted in full:

The manufacture of a present where fashion itself, from clothes to music, has come to a halt, which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in a future, is achieved by the ceaseless circularity of information,

always returning to the same short list of trivialities, passionately proclaimed as major discoveries. Meanwhile news of what is genuinely important, of what is actually changing, comes rarely, and then in fits and starts. It always concerns this world's apparent condemnation of its own existence, the stages in its programmed self-destruction (1998, 13).

Debord refers specifically to how the May 1968 movement in France was conveniently revised. Taken in other contexts, the control or negation of historical facts grants power to those who seek spectacular domination. Politicians, for instance, who run on platforms that campaign on nostalgic images and sentiments are among numerous examples. Debord points to an almost Orwellian historical revisionism where the 'truth' of any past event is contingent upon the present needs of those in power, even if it contradicts a past statement.²⁴ Even politicians who are called to task over statements made in campaigns can readily dismiss or deny those statements and change the conversation by attacking the media for engaging in 'gotcha' journalism and discrediting the source.²⁵ It is also Debord's somewhat prescient warning that seems to speak to social media's fixation on novelty as dangerous:

When social significance is attributed only to what is immediate, and to what will be immediate immediately afterwards, always replacing another, identical, immediacy, it can be seen that the uses of the media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance. (1998, 15).

The negation or revision of history is hardly new, be it the destruction of libraries by various rulers, or the rampant revisionism in the Stalinist Soviet Union and Maoist China, or even in the attempts by the previous Harper administration in Canada to privilege the country's military history with a view to create a vision of glory to be associated with the ruling government's values. The one chief difference with the emergence of social media is its emphasis on novelty, and the ability to reconstruct the past – even one's own. 'With the destruction of history, contemporary events themselves retreat into a remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning' (Debord 1998, 16). Perhaps no better proof exists than the proliferation of fake news stories.

In this process of revisionism and an eternal present may stand the individual who may abdicate personality as 'the price the individual pays for the tiniest bit of social status' and that it leads the individual to 'a succession of continually disappointing commitments to false products. It is a matter of running hard to keep up with the inflation of devalued signs of life' (Debord 1998, 32). In the pursuit of online social capital, the sale of the self is what authenticates value, measured in part by incremental social buttons. Engaged in such pursuits, and valorised by any number of services that promise for a fee to increase number of hits, likes, etc., this in turn transforms the social component into a kind of

network of falsification where these numerical 'values' hold sway, and online users adopt the strategies provided by online social networks to falsify themselves in order to compete.

One has only to think here of the ubiquitous presence of digital devices that facilitate the recording of events to be consumed as images later. This accumulation of representations of a lived event, leveraged as a status object to be trafficked on social networking sites as 'proof of presence' is ensconced in the practice of self-alienation. These images detach from life and join a 'common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be re-established' (Debord 2000, 2). These images merge into an autonomous image of the world which is an inversion of the real. However, in our current informational and communicational predicament of nonlinear processing and self-organising algorithmic pressures that determine the representation of online behaviours, the quasi-dynamical aspect of self-selecting and customisable software has produced a closed system where the images and the objects are united and displace life: first as a supplement, and then as a 'master token' that replicates the very conditions of existence as a productive mode of constant mediations.

Debord tells us that the spectacle postures as all society, part of society and the instrument of unification. As part of society it is the sector responsible for concentrating gazing and consciousness. This sector traffics in the 'official language of generalized separation' (Debord 2000, 3). The spectacle is not derived from propaganda or advertising or mass media. It is the objectified *Weltanschauung*. This is to say that the spectacle is the driving force behind propaganda, advertising and mass media. Debord relegates mass media as a form of equipment by which society can be administrated: 'if the administration of this society and all contact among men can no longer take place except through the intermediary of this power of instantaneous communication, it is because this "communication" is essentially *unilateral* [and the] concentration of "communication" is thus an accumulation' (Debord 2000, 24).

The spectacle is the end product as well as the very purpose of the current system of production. The 'spectacle is the present *model* of socially dominant life.' It is affirmed even after the choice was already made on behalf of others. What might seem like active choice is passive consent. The spectacle presents itself as its own justification, the alpha and omega of life. The unity of the world was already based on a fundamental separation of reality and image. The spectacle inherent in social life has convinced us that the spectacle is the only goal. 'The language of the spectacle consists of *signs* of the ruling production' which produces signs, while the spectacle produces this negation of life as part of its monopoly on appearance: 'In a world which *really is topsy-turvy*, the true is a moment of the false' (Debord 2000, 8). What is taken now as being the real is only the real as generated by the totalising force of the spectacle. Furthermore, the spectacle is the affirmation of appearance and human social life as mere appearance. This negates human life, and what truly appears is this negation. Social relations become little more than flattened signs in a vicious commodity

exchange. The spectacle is the main production as seen in its objects, the alleged rationality of the system, and the economic sector that develops image-objects. This perspective aligns in part with Baudrillard (1998) in *The Consumer Society*:

The usage of signs is always ambivalent. Its function is always a conjuring – both a conjuring up and a conjuring away: causing something to emerge in order to capture it in signs (forces, reality, happiness, etc.) and evoking something in order to deny and repress it ... the generalized consumption of images, of facts, of information aims also to *conjure away the real with the signs of the real*. (33)

This is a slight deviation from Debord's idea of accumulated images to that of a semiotic system. Debord's images may imply this semiotic system, one that operates in a tautological loop where signs or images function as the basis and output of signs and images. For Baudrillard, 'Affluence' is, in effect, merely the accumulation of the *signs* of happiness' (1998, 31). These signs of happiness are the mirror image of the signs of ruling production. Affluence takes on the role of signifying the bliss to be achieved through hyper-production and hyper-consumption, both practices tied to a form of labour. This promise of affluence bequeathed by the spectacle or the simulacrum, is nothing more than an image or sign, and much of it is propagated by the equipment of media. As Baudrillard reminds us, '[w]hat mass communications gives us is not reality, but the *dizzying whirl of reality*. [...] So we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real... The image, the sign, the message—all these things we "consume"—represent our tranquillity consecrated by distance from the world' (2008, 34).

Between Debord and Baudrillard, there is a similarity on how they view alienation and the inversion of truth. For Debord, the spectacle is powered by the false taken as the true, whereas for Baudrillard the simulacrum becomes a disconnected and specialised play of an excess or overabundance of signs constructing a new context that plays the role of the real. That is, the simulacrum divests itself of all referentials, purging any stable connection between one sign and another. Signs become, in the postmodern fatalism of Baudrillard, aleatory. However, what Baudrillard may neglect to consider in this excessive production of signs is that new non-linear dynamical systems colonise this excess sign production and arrange them within a metastable system that allows for flexible production. Moreover, the step beyond is to simply unmask the simulacrum (which is neither real nor its opposite) to find the true relation, which is alienation itself. Alienation exists as a 'bond' insofar as it can function as a relation between an individual and the world, an individual and the self, and between individuals. The economic system, which is based on isolation, exacerbates isolation. Even our technology and the technological processes are isolating, alienating, serving to reinforce that alienation. The unity is indeed built on separation, and can be pithily expressed: 'the spectacle is nothing more than an image of happy unification surrounded by desolation and fear at the tranquil centre of misery' (Debord 2000, 63).

The optimism and novelty surrounding the opportunities of social media do not cease. The dominant language of the spectacle includes the use of social media as the means to participating in good faith in the market economy. With an emphasis on a false sense of sovereignty, self-expression and novelty, there are any number of authors who will proselytise somewhat uncritically on the many virtues of social media. Under this effect of the network spectacle that dominates online social life, banishing the past, implicitly encouraging disinhibition that might lead to more Id-like behaviour, there may be a process of infantilisation occurring where the promise of play conceals the reality of social media work, and social media is portrayed as something always liberating. As an example of such a view, Paul Levinson focuses strictly on the positive:

Adults become children—usually in the best sense of the word—when we encounter and adopt a new mode of communication, especially one such as Twitter, which with a few keystrokes can open new vistas for our personal and professional lives. (Levinson 2009, 139)

Thus in contrast with the more pessimistic views of Lewis Mumford who was writing at the very beginning of the era of electronic communications, whose statement may very much apply today:

[M]ore commonplace thoughts, events, and scenes, transmitted only to keep the deprived senses from starvation, by giving the illusion of life, do not deserve such enlargement [...] To be aware only of immediate stimuli and immediate sensations is a medical indication of brain injury. (1970, 298)

The spectacle's domination over social life appears to demand and privilege novelty, the eternal present, and constant chatter – with a bulk of that chatter being indexed on commodities. Equally disturbing is how quickly the transition moves from non-alienated subjectivity to alienation in full force as part of representation. Debord points to this historical progress as moving from being (I am), to having (property as defining identity) to mere appearing (I am the image of myself, represented in a series of objects, which are also imagistic). What the spectacle demands is compliance and passive acceptance, while it also offers a false unity through its techniques of separation, as well as an inverted world stripped of complexity, composed of static images of happiness through consumption. In a way somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche's notion of passive nihilism, the 'spectacle is the guardian of sleep' (Debord 2000, 21). The relation between self and world is reconfigured through the reduction of the self to mere image whereby the 'acceptance and consumption of commodities are at the heart of this pseudo-response to a communication without a response.' (Debord 2000, 219).

Online appearance is one of the most important games of strategy as the shift in emphasis from offline significance to online increases. Much is said about

maintaining an online presence almost as though the failure to achieve this will result in failure as an individual or a business, conjuring a totalising opposition: online presence or irrelevance. Capitalising on this zeitgeist are thousands of firms dedicated to increasing web presence using many of the strategies of the public relations field. Effective web presence is very much part of the spectacular process of promising a personal transcendence through the unity provided by participation. One must be in 'good faith' and thus show fidelity through online communicative acts that attempt to occupy the digital space with one's representative marks of presence. Behind this is the strategy, itself built on a principle of competition—an online pursuit to gain attention at the expense of attention being invested elsewhere.

This applied online narcissism requires strict discipline to produce and sustain. Given that such presencing mirrors the principles and strategies of the economic market under the spectacle, it has a duty to optimise its exchange value in a regime of signs. The strategy involves minimum investment with an expectation of maximum return. Investing the sign of one's self online does entail risk, but also comes with this expectation that the digital realm's social feedback mechanism will increase the value of the initially invested sign. The result is that the digital version of the ego takes on an accumulated value much higher than that of the initial ego that invested the sign, thus increasing the disparity of value between off- and online self, which incidentally increases self-alienation. Much of the same logic applies to celebrity culture with regard to the PR mechanisms that facilitate the production and inflation of value. The individual can no longer live up to the online representation of web presence, and thus finds his or herself a slave to it. The intrinsic value of ego is crushed by the spectacular value of the representative image. The cult of celebrity and the belief in the easy acquisition of prestige has increased in the last century, creating the conditions of transforming ideals into live-in illusions. Some have become their own most fiery promoters attempting to market the product of a self that may have not been marketable. Devoid of substantive, profound, or significant content (such as developing and manifesting talent in some industry like the arts or knowledge or craft, etc.), it is simply the act of selling for selling's sake. This is not particularly unheard of given the raft of objects that are devoid of any significant use value.

Much of digital-social relations are modelled on economic transaction. We do not enter into human relations without sharing commodities, and thus some may be alienated from each another by trading in representative images of life. But all of this is over-coded by an economic determinism that is antagonistic to life. We are left with desire as lack, as the fantasy, which brings together the two streams of psychoanalysis' study of desire and Debord's spectacle. The spectacle fulfils the need for the fantasy, even if that satisfaction is temporary. Individuals become locked into a common cultural alphabet of celebrity gossip and commodities in a loop since the spectacle monopolises communication.

The spectacle has two major aims: constant technological renewal and the integration of the state and economy. In Debord's assessment, the state and

economy are dominating forces in the spectacle, and there is no public sphere. Rational debate would involve access to the past and orientation to the future, but as we see in mass media, the past is reduced to the spectacle of retro-philia and nostalgia (and so therefore transformed into an image that becomes real because all of reality becomes simply an image) and the future simply deferred. So, in this way, we live in an eternal present, a kind of *epideictic* moment. What this means is that the only ‘power’ – which is no power at all – is to like or dislike the images put before us. There is a lack of critical engagement and no shades of grey in the eternal present. The spectacle serves up a constant series of images that, like a Facebook post, can be ‘liked’ or ignored. In this movement of the commodity to render its own version of the world visible, it is also the movement of further estrangement of people ‘among themselves and in relation to their global product’ (Debord 2000, 37).

It is the trick of the spectacle, to reinvest in reality by providing its inversion, its reconfigured conception of it, in order to change our entire social relationship to the world so that all our actions are performed under the direction of serving the economy and believing with an almost religious faith in the salvation the end that is production will provide. The crisis model is wedded to that of capitalist economy since it operates best by alternation between market highs and lows. It is a machine of unstable excesses, a system that can only work by means of overstimulation since the real has long ago become inert and unresponsive. Baudrillard tells us ‘if it was capital which fostered reality, the reality principle, it was also the first to liquidate it in the extermination of every use value’ (1983, 43). Use value is effaced and only exchange value remains, even in social relations where the transactional model online is conducted by way of signs. The commodities become intangible, as they are simply images in the accelerated play of perpetual simulation. Further, Baudrillard says, ‘[w]hat society seeks through production, and overproduction, is the restoration of the real which escapes it’ (1983, 44). So, salvation and reunion with the real is conditional on participating as much as possible in the acts of production. Reward can only be gained through this production, but this reward is impossible to achieve since it exists only as a transcendental image outside of the ability to grasp it. All that is obtained from the image of the real (which is inverted in the spectacle) is its impressions, a bit of the glitter and dust from the shaking of the angel’s wings. This alienation from ourselves and reality occurs through the prism of production’s demands, and so the new opiate of the masses is the myth of achieving transcendence at the end of overproduction.

Although Baudrillard also tells us that ‘[w]e become obsessed with the game of power, its death, its survival. A holy union forms “around the disappearance of [true] power... in fear of the collapse of the political”’ (1983, 45). But what has really happened is that the traditional form of the political sphere has already collapsed and is replaced by the phantom image of political power. It is now economic power, embodied by transnational corporations and the demands of overproduction, that prevails.

Simulacrum? Spectacle? Both or Neither?

Best and Kellner (1999) point to a new stage of the Debordian spectacle as the *interactive spectacle*. Rather than be complicit with Baudrillard's critique that simulation in a postmodern age renders Debord's concept of spectacle moot, Best and Kellner indicate where both terms retain their relevance as interconnected.

The relationship between Baudrillard and the Situationists is a complicated one. Although both Debord and Baudrillard were concerned with the effects of rampant consumerism and the use of media and communications through technological mediation to further the interests of those in power, Baudrillard began to break away from the Situationist and neo-Marxist viewpoint considering these outmoded. For Baudrillard, the concept of the spectacle no longer applied to a world where the real had been replaced by the virtual in a regime of simulacra, and the failure to understand the new post-modern nature of signs:

Baudrillard sometimes spoke of the 'spectacle,' but only provisionally. He rejected the term for two reasons: because it implies a subject-object distinction which he feels implodes in a hyperreality, and because the Situationists theorize the spectacle as an extension of the commodity form, rather than an instantiation of a much more radical and abstract order, the political economy of the sign, or as the semiological proliferation of signs and simulation models (Best and Kellner 1999).

For Debord, the issue can be traced in the inversion of appearance and reality where the true is a moment of the false, and vice versa, governed by the spectacle. Baudrillard instead advanced the idea that a world of objects becomes replaced by a world of signs that no longer refer to the real; all we are left with are self-referential signs, serial copies mediated by technology.

And yet the spectacle endures, and social media is a prime example where the spectacular nature of consumer society is embedded and integrated into what are ostensibly social spaces. Sidebars and promoted content on social network sites reflect back a personally customised series of advertisements based on algorithmic prediction and selection. Topical news stories become bite-sized headline feeds, and these too are preselected and customised according to the data collected from each user. Niche social media audiences seek to spectacularise their own lives by depicting a life of glamour and decadence, carefully curating personal images using filters and other software enhancements. Distinctions between labour and leisure, social and commercial space, marketing and speaking, and identity construction and self-branding become ever more blurred. Moreover, social media is seen by ever so many as not only a necessity and inevitable, but as inherently good.

It appears in the society of the spectacle that a life of luxury and happiness is open to all, that anyone can buy the sparkling objects on display and consume the spectacles of entertainment and information. But in reality only those with sufficient wealth can fully enjoy the benefits of this society, whose opulence is extracted out of the lives and dreams of the exploited (Best and Kellner, 1999).

The *interactive* spectacle reflects a change in the audience. No longer the passive viewer that consumes content in the old hypodermic model of mass media, the audience become active producers of content while still remaining consumers. In this way, Best and Kellner signal that the distinction between passive object who consumes and the active subject who produces media content is effaced, and thus shows fidelity to Baudrillard's claim that the subject-object dichotomy is at an end. Yet, at the same time, this interactive activity online is still structured, coded and dominated by the network owners. If, say, Facebook still controls what content is visible and engineers its user interface to skew discourse in favour of producing more usable data that can be commodified, we are still operating within a society of spectacle. Social media's use of automated prompts, recommendations, reminders and suggestions effectively guide or manipulate social behaviour with a goal to making it productive and thus profitable to the network owner. The interactive spectacle differs from the traditional spectacle by way of one of Baudrillard's key insights of a thoroughly cyberneticised communication platform of command and control, albeit cloaked in the spectacular discourse of social play, positivity, the sale of experiences, and the enticement to compete for personal gain and instant celebrity status by leveraging potential popularity.

The Social Algorithm as the Successor to the Simulacrum and the Spectacle

Key to understanding the social trend toward online self-disclosure would be the refinement of the interactive media environment (IME) that facilitates real-time exchanges which increase the possibility of online feedback with respect to possible immediate gratification for utterances made. Feedback is essential to mechanical devices that rely on external or internal processes to supply corrective information. The cybernetic aspect of feedback, coupled with Shannon's mathematical theory of communication, is an important factor in preventing entropy. However, when the same feedback mechanism model is applied to the social domain of online interaction, what is presented is a crude mechanistic analogy that presupposes an inherent mechanistic process to social interaction by virtue of the fact that it is being conducted digitally. This is evidenced by the reliance on the conduit metaphor embedded in the mathematical theories of communication that suffuse all machine-mediated language (Day 2001). And

yet, at the same time, the architecture of social media software underwrites this mechanistic process through its largely invisible methods of organising information. For example, Facebook's algorithm determines on the basis of 'relevance' and quantitative inputs what information is presented to each user (thus 'personalising' each user's experience) according to estimated relevance. 'Top stories' in one's news feed speaks to a concealed sifting and organising process that is algorithmically determined. Users are encouraged to fine tune this feedback mechanism by providing added inputs; i.e., to click on a tab that gives the user an option to remove posts by certain users from appearing in the 'top stories' in the news feed, but also through the more quiet collection of data in tracking each user's navigation, browser cookies and what buttons they interact with. Left on its own, the algorithm will continue presenting stories on the basis of its most current calculation of user inputs. In the same way, ratings, rankings and likings are additional inputs that function as feedback mechanisms to 'personalise' the user experience. What is not seen, however, are the stories that have been selectively omitted from the news feed. The choice function with respect to information in such cases becomes largely hidden from the user who provides indirect feedback to the site by clicking on particular users, postings, links and images. In essence, the user is not making direct choices about what content is visible, nor are these choices being made on the user's behalf transparent.

Algorithms for information sifting and content display decisions might have 'resolved' the problem of a user being presented with too much social media information, and assist in focusing on what the user would find more relevant on, say, a Twitter feed. The personalisation of the user's experience that is furnished by input-determined activity is part of the algorithm's ability to record, process, and produce a particular output commensurate with specific inputs.

Despite the highly personalised appearance of a user's news feed, we are not dealing with a simple correspondence of one-to-one user communication. Instead, the social relations would best be visually depicted as a complex array of Venn diagrams (the overlap zones representing shared information content). One user's input does result in a feedback response in the form of the news feed (organised according to relevance in its sequence). However, user input does not stop at simply providing the user with organised content: the social software itself prospers from these inputs to better construct a large data-portrait of usage trends which can be applied as a corrective model to refine the algorithm. These inputs will have value if they are taken over a longer period of time to show trend-based changes for each user, and for large groups of users according to how the demographic pie is cut up (for example, the sum of all inputs among 15–17 year olds in urban areas may suggest that these users favour stories about kittens rather than puppies).

At bottom, the algorithm mechanistically determines online social activity by taking on the choice or selection function for all displayed information. Users are then more likely to engage with the information selected, thus reinforcing

the idea that the algorithm is a useful predictive tool for online social activity. The sequence of events that emerge from algorithmic selection to user interaction, at first simply a sequence, transforms into a causal relationship on the basis of ad hoc inputs that are designed to appear as though anterior to selection. This is aided further by user inputs that confirm the selection. In a way, this is a game of forced choice within a restricted number of options. Or, just like a video game where the options are limited by the programming: one can shoot, run or hide, but there is no option for negotiation or any other action.

Since social media infrastructures are predominantly owned, designed and operated by corporate entities, it should come as no surprise that said digital environments will reflect capitalist biases either explicitly through the commodification of data or implicitly through the sift-sort-separate algorithm that treats social relations as an economic problem. Debord's claim that the spectacle controls all that we see, and how we can see it, is reflected physically in architecture – a point which Debord himself initially expounded but seemed to abandon in his later works. Transpose the idea of physical architecture in urban planning to the social software architectures of the web in the move from the analogue to digital conceptions of space, and we may come to view this new social space as effectively deterministic in much the same, ostensibly neutral or obscured, way. However, the one trick the spectacle must perform is that it must both be totalising as well as supplying the myth of freedom; that is, it must be totalising without alerting the public that it is.

Network Spectacle and the Alienation from Self

What is troubling in this age of social software is how social connectivity may actually function as a barrier to self-reflection. When so much emphasis is placed on self-promotional activities, chasing after numerical benchmarks for social approbation, and the steady increase in screen time spent in this digital environments, one may pose the question: what time is left for critical self-evaluation? Ultimately, we may need to question if beneath all this ostensible social activity there is not a further entrenchment of alienation from the self. The interactive image of the social may prove to be anti-social or non-social in character.

The neoliberal ideology has been successful in decanting itself in everyday discourse so that its objectives have been naturalised. This in itself lionises the individual who can attain wealth and celebrity effortlessly, to become a hero by means of the ideals of self-reliance and a surreptitious war of the one against all. The individual in this climate, mediated by the ubiquitous devices of the web and their carnivals of frivolity and banality, pandered to by means of excessive perks of 'customisation' and 'personalisation' to render all uniform features with the appearance of individualism, has had to embrace a mercenary or ruthless character of self-promotion and selfishness. There is little to no self-reflection involved in this behaviour: only an urge to succeed at all costs and

to envy the entitlements of others by voting for populists who preach an end to welfarism and unionism. The Id is well catered by a steady flow of violent sport spectacles, convenient consumerism abetted by wireless technologies, and the transformation of the political process into a game of aggression and hostility where campaign debates increasingly take on the form of a wrestling match with repetitive slogans where the object is to be perceived as wittier, more polemic than the opponent.

The spectacle enchants as it enchains. It dominates and dictates while doling out tiny, inconsequential pleasures. Social activity operates as a mimicry of economic activity. Production of the online self functions as an agent of separation in a field thoroughly disposed to processes of segmentation. Socio-technological activity is already an embodiment and reflection of spectacular ideology. The misery and fear of the digital social order is camouflaged by the fabric of rapid, giddy communication and the pursuit of readily available novelties. This flash-migration of alienated discontents moves from one digital milieu to another, their time subtracted from self-reflection in the need to personalise or customise new network profiles. Before them is a diffuse catalogue of icon-identities little different from a catalogue of consumer items on display. The network analyst, topographically viewing these migrations, measures the symptoms and activity migrations.

It is the image of the social that governs social relations on social media, a newly organised territory by which the dictatorship of the mobile device reveals its authority in a network of flows that make social relations possible. Just as physical architecture can be said to be inherently ideological, so too can software architecture that has as its goal the compression of space: 'The society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally as spectacular separation' (Debord 2000, 167). In Debord's analysis, the more space and time become compressed into commodity-space and commodity-time, the more the individual is alienated from space and time itself, those becoming foreign. One has only to note how space and time are reconfigured by Facebook in terms of 'timelines' where one can record the moment of one's birth (now underwritten by Facebook as a colonisation of individual history, its absorption of the individual into its own spectacular enclosure) or in the use of geolocation software that converts space into places, a map of commodity sites where particular products and services can be purchased.

A new abundance arises in the form of social labour, itself a disguised version of commodity time, whereby 'the concentrated result of social labour becomes visible and subjugates all reality to appearance, which is now its product' (Debord 2000, 50). In the spectacle's total occupation of social life, it is the spectacle that reconstitutes itself at every interval of social interaction. The earth, now stitched together in the most abstract form of social relations as mere images in network flows, becomes a global market. Every action or production has its goal in the growth of the spectacle, which is the image of the dominant economy and its motivation to grow for growth's sake.

By representing themselves as leisurely individuals, social media users engage in an emulative exercise of reproducing situations that may not accord with offline reality. As the spectacle serves a purpose of maintaining a program of perfecting separation, it does so through an illusory reunification: in this case, all being 'equal' in the happy banality of social media that speaks in a single voice, that being the univocal expression that justifies the current economic society. It is the spectacle itself that grants meaning to every individual user's ideas, feelings and experiences. This can be observed in the collection fetishism that motivates the taking of pictures of travel and social events that are taken solely for posterity and in service of display as a form of conspicuous prosumption. This type of alienation may replace the motivation for achieving recognition in an offline world. For some users, an experience may be considered a non-event unless it is uploaded to social media. The intrinsic use-value of the experience is demoted to the exchange-value that can be generated for the purposes of social capital. However, it is the false use-value of posting the content online for gaining validation and approval by others that appears to satisfy a social need. In reality, the representations of experience and the self, now digitised, take on a kind of autonomous reality.

We might characterise such autonomous images of the self as posted online with an appeal to Goffman's (1969) distinction between expression and communication. For Goffman, expression occurs in simply being present, whereas communication is tied to a message that is made with intention, such as a writing or a vocal message. Although social media users are not perpetually present, their representations are in the form of the accessible profile page that will continue to express on their behalf. The initial act was one of communication; that is, a user constructed a profile and posted content such as a personal photo and an 'about' section, expressing the individual on the individual's behalf.

The false and spectacular unity afforded by social media allows for the trafficking of social value as homogenised units, while at the same time inscribing the users' new relationship to space and time as an abstract image of the spectacular society where commodities reign. These homogenised units of approbation, such as the thumb-icon, effectively represent a sign or token of social worth. Or, to quote Veblen (1919):

to sustain one's dignity – and to sustain one's self-respect – under the eyes of people who are not socially one's immediate neighbours, it is necessary to display the token of economic worth, which practically coincides pretty closely with economic success. (67)

Spectacular Digital Labour

If social capital, however construed, is a formal cause, its final cause is desire, the material cause is nature in the form of the devices and networks, and the

efficient cause that realises the telos of the capital is labour. Desire, on the other hand, is the 'goal' of social capital insofar as the individual or group seeks gratification according to the demands of desire as a motivational force; that desire may be satisfied by achieving a certain level of status.

Social labour is measured by the objective value of time just as economic capital can be measured as accumulated labour time. As Veblen recognised, the upper classes found labour irksome, and thus preferred unproductive uses of their time as a mark of their status. If social media is cast as a leisure activity, it would then fall under the domain of unproductive time; however, the actual labour being performed does benefit the network and its affiliated advertisers, and the quantity of time expended checking in, posting new content, and managing one's profile does suggest it is not exactly leisure. As Debord tells us: 'All the consumable time of modern society comes to be treated as a raw material for varied new products which impose themselves on the market as uses of socially organized time' (Debord 2000, 151).

The alienated labour of social capital occurs in the unwaged space of self-development writ digitally, much of it contrived for a market audience of other entrepreneurs of the digital self. The user, in conducting labour under the auspices of social entertainment, never truly owns the manicured profile or the digital self-portrait as much as 'rents' a workspace. Nor does the user own the representation directly for it is the alienated product of the projected ego ideal that can never be fully integrated in the actual self. Neoliberalism's devolution of risk in the form of extreme responsibilisation of subjects assigns all the *duties* of ownership without the *benefits*. The user performs his or her labour only ostensibly for the self, but the online self is little more than an accessory and an access point for the advertising narrative and the appearance of enjoyment that is essential for the network to promote itself. Social media has true ownership of the tools and the space in which social interactivity occurs, and it is contingent upon its subscribers to supply their own content and generate the appearance of enjoyment that indirectly performs the function of advertising the network to others whilst also maintaining the belief in its social value in the form of constructed communities.

Just as industrial capitalist production fragmented the life-world of the worker, informational-capitalism abetted by neoliberalism fragments the social-world of the prosumer in a new regime of compressed and discrete time as actual fragments in the form of the tweet, the status update, and social buttons. Social time becomes commodified as discrete intervals of quantised social value. The production is no longer indexed on goods, but on the capitalised subject whose digital representative must maximise positive attention as expressed through quantifiable measures.

The stated advantages of a decentralised entrepreneurial model of content production and consumption via sharing and collaboration does not result in a return to the pre-industrial practices of craft production. Instead, the system of desire in economic expansion as a quantitative one simply fragments

labour which is still under the domination of the network. Whereas the shift ‘transformed human labour into commodity-labour into wage-labour’ (Debord 2000, 40), the labour of the entrepreneurial subject is effectively pittance or unwaged labour. This continues to be in the service of the more general economy: ‘The economy transforms the world, but transforms it only into a world of economy’ (Debord 2000, 40), to which the now unwaged, entrepreneurial social capitalist continues to serve under the illusion of self-direction, and without institutional supports. This allows Facebook to substantially profit from users seeking to increase their status through production in a hyperactive environment governed by competition: ‘surplus labor is transformed by relentless technological activity, and the means of virtual production produce abuse value’ (Armitage 1999, 3).

If the network spectacle is certainly an instance of the ‘world of vision’ triumphant, inverting the relationship of truth and illusion, what else can numeric social capital be but yet another symptom of the positive assumptions tied to a drive to accumulation that follows a similar logic to capital? Would it not also be the spectacular production and proliferation of images by which social relations are mediated that the promise of ‘social riches’ by accumulation is what partially drives increasing social media participation as a kind of reward? By giving it a standard measure, the social quantified can better align itself with other markers of wealth such as money.

All that appears on social media is good, and all that is good appears on social media. Even those offline experiences might seem to require validation by their conversion into photos, blog posts, status updates so that they may be conferred with a value by other social media users engaged in similar acts of conversion from analogue experience to digital representation.

Main Points

- The artificial economy of online social capital, which resides within the very real economy of social media sites, is a product of the network spectacle where the network discourse and epistemology dominates.
- The network spectacle inverts the relationship between truth and illusion, moving from being to having to mere appearing. Much of social media’s production is caught up in a relay circuit of images that come to replace the real.
- The network spectacle controls the space in which the discourse occurs, as well as the discourse itself. The networks themselves are seen as positive or value-neutral. Discourse that is critical of the networks still uses the language of the network, and is generally subsumed within its logic.
- Online social capital becomes but an image of the economy, while the network itself converts the all that is social into economic terms. This creates the conditions of a totalising economic determinism with its ‘virtues’ of

growth for growth's sake, competition, and the endless pursuit of the signs or images of happiness.

- The network spectacle via social media promises unity, but only provides separation. It is a unification of all users as being alienated from each other and themselves as they pursue mere images that are largely devoid of meaning.
- Ideological domination of space can now be automated, courtesy of sophisticated algorithms that sustain the spectacle's ceaseless monologue of itself. What is made visible or relevant is pre-selected on behalf of the algorithms that deliver the spectacular discourse.

