

Book Review

“Life in the shadow of show” or “the end of situationist society”

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French anarchist, thinker, and film-maker Guy Debord is one of the founders and most influential representatives of situationist movement which affected the entire world from late 1950s to early 1970s. Throughout his life, he preferred to live away from media civilization and “show”; with his humble personality and opponent attitudes, he struggled against the society of wealth, which was in the rise, and tried to strengthen the “theory of constructing situations “ with a number of thinkers who thought and lived like he did (Matthews et al., 2008: 20). The fight of creating individuals with a potential to undertake the control of their own space and time against the universe of metas and shows of the capitalist society that kills passion for living has ended with the organization of a radical mass student and worker movement that could turn into an effective cooperation in late 1960s. Throughout this entire process, the basic arguments that situationists took as their basis were constructed on revitalizing through revolutionization again of their situations in global society which is devoid of wealth and freedoms. For this purpose, the framework of situationist movement which was shaped in 1957, gained an international character with participation of some political and artistic organizations; it also conducted several activities with political content which could revitalize artistic praxis. This movement was organized based on the effective synergy of these organizations (“International Movement for an Imaginative Bauhaus”, “The Lettrist International”, “The London Psychogeographic Society”), and tried to destroy the raw living spaces which lack emotions, passion, and freedom, which was purposefully constructed by capitalist way of thinking and restructure them on aesthetic and philosophical foundations; on the other hand, it declared war against the reality of capitalist world, particularly exhibition of wealth and richness at show level, since its early beginning. In this sense, as expressed by Matthews, Debord et al. “seriously criticised the capitalist world surrounding them, which was developing, and felt huge discontent with the promotion of consumer materials and “high living standards” promised by these products” (2008: 34). Capitalist wealth society is a society which positions all individuals as “customers”, regardless of their qualifications and roots, and makes the invisible exploitation of their bodies and minds under the disguise of “show” in leisure and entertainment industry, which is a part of a bureaucratized functioning; it is clear that an internationally-organized struggle would be fought against this society. Nevertheless, according to Debord, this movement which was fed by the previously accumulated political culture in its core, had to fight a non-bureaucratic war, as “situationist international was born from a political culture which came from a long anarchist resistance tradition, which was against both private and bureaucratic struggle” (Debord, 2008: 30). The anarchist resistance tradition mentioned by Debord is a rooted tradition represented by rich historical experiences of European anarchists. This tradition opens the political struggle in daily life to a collective opposition spirit as well as the direction of individual passions, which thus does not underestimate the individual demands for freedom and happiness. In the anarchist war fought against capitalist society, the theoretical films made so much so that he did not see any harm in filming the infamous Show Society in addition to his several intellectual products and conferences given by Debord, most of which were recorded to a recorder with the concern that possibly a communicative and conditioner environment could exist which could make the audience and speaker dependent on each other and the writings, books and declarations written by him, all gave examples of the fact that individual freedom could not be replaced by anything under any condition. In this context, Debord first produced the concept of “Show Society” which replaced the daily life show which dominated relations between people and made our society one of its customers” (Matthews et al., 2008: 34). Show, as defined by Debord, is just another name for the meta-fetishism of capitalist society. The impact of show in this sense is the effect of personality, ethics and daily living practices established through metas owned which alienate individuals to the realities of daily life and events. Show society is the society of restricting, reducing and in time eliminating the intervention of existence felt in mind and heart to life in exchange for material and physical satisfaction just as in this declaration made by Situationist International in 1959 which presents a general critique of capitalism defined as “a society without culture”: “as production equals disaster in the dominant ethical schema, real life must be found in consumption, consuming products properly (...) the world of consumption is in fact the world where everyone is perfected in a common manner, where everyone is detached, alienated, not involved (in worldly events and problems) (Debord, 2008: 48). This detachment and alienation inevitably leads to individual carelessness and insensitivity, which has turned into a show experienced as a dominant form that exerts absolute control on each space and time in which people communicated with each other. According to Debord,

except the images of capitalist show that accompanies mass consumption activities, one of the most concrete and widespread examples that it manifests itself in daily life are modern mass tourism. Debord says "modern mass tourism presents cities and landscapes, but not with the purpose of satisfying such passions as living in humane and geographical environments; it presents them as pure, serial and shallow shows (which earn respect to the people who tell memories about them) (Debord, 2008: 50). In this sense, the show presents perspectives which differentiate the passion for living from instant ambiances of life, and destroys the effort for living with a meaning and opportunities for freely initiated experiences. The inferiority of consumption is made invisible under the artificial light of show which penetrated to the entire geographical environment, whereas the conscious or unconscious arrangements of geography open to show creates a new psychology that puts its stamp on individual emotions and behaviours in an effective manner. This reality briefly labelled as "psycho-geography" by situationists tells the story of the function of an excessively visualised and mediatised physical environment conditioning and organizing conscious and behaviours of people in the direction of consumption. There are some notions that international situationists (IS) is offered in order to create a mass resistance for breaking this and similar conditioning effects. The first of these notions is "evasion". This phenomenon is briefly defined by situationist as follows: "Attributing images and opinions to one's self and changing their original meaning in a way that they can challenge dominant culture. One good example popularized by situationists is the caricatures in which the phrases of characters were replaced by revolutionist slogans and ideas" (Matthews, 2008: 63)." The concepts of "derivation" and "détournement", which symbolize the two tools of a life independent from show, are attached vital attention by situationist movement. The concept of "derivation" represents the free outings of situationists in different districts of the city. However, these outings must not be confused with *flâneurs* (roaming about) of Benjamin. Flâneur in its simplest form means the "wanderer-thinker" which is seen in Baudelaire and Kerouac and is mostly attributed to travelling, seeing, listening and interpreting, and from time to time wandering lazily and using the right to laziness; in this sense, it is different from the derivation of situationists. Situationist outing represents breathing outside the modern show city or a derivation from the physical environment imposed on individuals. Such an outing which aims at minimizing psycho-geographic determination is, in Debord's terms, "one of the fundamental situationist practices." "Derivations, which are fast passage techniques between different environments, involve a playful-constructive attitude and the awareness of psycho-geographic impacts; thus, it is rather different from classical concepts of travel or wandering" (Debord, 2008: 42). "Déroutement", which is another concept envisaged by situationist movement for overcoming the situations constructed by the society of detachment and alienation between individuals, namely the show society, is the name given to earning a new content or changing its meaningful orientation of the meanings given by the indicators and symbols of show society in its essence. By reversing the advertisement slogans, this trend which represents the revolutionist tendency of the attempt to pass from a show society to a situationism society, which is its structural opposite, also represents an anarchist struggle against the alienating forces which were made acute by the labour and consumption ethic of capitalist society. The same struggle is also one way of reckoning with a series of specialization activity fields which is turned into a spectacular and attractive show by capitalism from human labour and time. As stated by Matthews, "capitalism creates a series of experts (psychologists, professors, scientists etc.) who work for its sustainability. We usually do not prefer being dependent on experts, but this system is established. Whether people want it or not, the reign of experts called "politicians" who represent the people is a good example of this phenomenon" (Debord, 2008: 66). Expertise involves individual leaving the control of his/her life to the ideological devices of information society. It is the price paid to have good parents, a good spouse, and a good appearance. Diet-fashion experts, marriage counsellors, "incentives" in working life, psychiatrists etc. are the ideological supervision and monitoring devices in this sense; these devices only secure the survival of individual rather than "leading a real life". Then, survival is another important concept in the struggle fought by situationist movement against capitalist show society. In show society, "life is the approval of passions and creative skills of individual, whereas survival is working, consuming, watching television etc." (Matthews, 2008: 68). Therefore, as can be understood from this explanation, show is stepping outside the values which are products of life-related activity and consuming the ready-made values presented by the world of images / metas. In one sense, show is the holistic circulation of commodified values, therefore it sends to the system of societal relations established by individuals through metas and images. In this system of relations, one can speak of materialised ethic that conforms to the logic of capital accumulation rather than a certain ethical attitude between individuals. As stated by Matthews, "according to Marx, the money which transcends a certain threshold becomes capital. Debord believes, on the other hand, capital which transcends a certain threshold turns into images. Thus, Debord applied the idea of materialization to all fields of social life and updated and extended Marx's theory of commodity fetishism" (2008: 75). Nevertheless, what underlies the commodity fetishism valid in show society and in general the loyalty to the image of metas is the same dependency to consumption. As Knabb states, in such a society "show represents the secret agent who tells at what degree a sake should be served and presents the exotic methods of living to polished tastes to masses, which were before confined to the upper classes. Show (...) entertainments proliferate and the number of attendants can increase, but meta foundations are inevitably kept under pressure in the template of consumption" (Debord, 2008: 106). Then, the world of show is the world of metas and it is almost impossible to prove that in this world of metas a life is being led with a reasonable image. For this reason, Debord et al. and other situationists conceptualise the show in the form of visual exhibition of the meta before anything else. In this context, as stated by Debord, "the world, visualised by the show, which both exist and not exists, is the world of meta(s) that dominate on everything experienced" (2006: 50). The dialectical relation established by Debord between

accumulation of information based on images and actual societal activities displays the deep intellectual cleavage between understanding the reality and “thinking about reality”. Debord says “the show which reverses reality is produced *de facto*. The reality, which is also being lived concurrently, is materially invaded by viewing the show and adopts the show and adds the show order in its structure. There is objective reality in both sides (...). The reality appears within the show instantly, the show is real. This mutual alienation is the essence and foundation of the existing society” (2006: 38). The show witnesses the historical instant of a society which alienated to its own reality, or, in other words, it is nothing more than the temporal utilization of reality. The opinions presented by Debord on the show society is full of the testimony of this historical instance which includes the experienced moments with all their “vitality”. If the reality of the image claims that it can reveal all other parts of the reality that is worth appearing, then “everything which is seen is good, and everything which is good is seen” (Debord, 2006: 39). This optimism is the only one that alienated mediatic society can adopt. This inference naturally ends with aggrandizement of the visible reality of the moment instead of the holism of life that blends both the good and the bad. As a matter of fact, in the final instance, “the foundation of show rests upon the loss of the unity of world” (Debord, 2006: 46). To sum up, the books that we attempted to review in detail in this paper, is strongly recommended to everyone who feel that controlling the time and space of their own lives is a virtue in the midst of a global consumption society where the dark shadow of “show” loomed over like a nightmare on our lives.