

## The Society of the Spectacle REDUX #1: Augmented Capitalism

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Jeff Bezos one of the world's richest men with a personal fortune of over \$130 billion, devoid of altruistic ways to distribute his wealth, launches a penis-shaped rocket named New Shepard into space. Possibly the most expensive phallus in history, the 10-minute flight cost \$5.5 billion, Bezos the founder of Amazon, one of the world's wealthiest companies, notorious for low pay and poor working conditions, called it "the best day ever".<sup>1</sup> Established as an online bookselling platform, Amazon is now a major player in commissioning and distributing media content across a range of platforms. Perhaps for Bezos, space and media are the final frontiers. Guy Debord's 1967<sup>2</sup> description of the spectacle as capitalism's instrument for distracting and pacifying the masses seems more prescient than ever. The commodities of late consumer capitalism have been augmented by both platform and computational capitalism. This is the society of the spectacle of augmented capitalism.

The video essay can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/700448479>

Debord's film *The Society of the Spectacle*, released in 1974 as 'a cinematic analysis of consumer culture' based on his influential 1967 book of the same name, uses found footage and détournement in a radical Marxist critique of mass marketing and its role in the alienation of modern society. A 1959 essay published by Situationist International describes détournement as, 'the reuse of pre-existing artistic elements in a new ensemble', and that this 'confers on each element its new scope and effect'.<sup>3</sup> Debord argued that détournement has a double purpose: on the one hand, it must negate the ideological conditions of artistic production, the fact that all artworks are ultimately commodities; but on the other hand, it must negate this negation and produce something that is politically educative.<sup>4</sup> It achieves negation in two main ways: either it adds details to existing works, thus revealing a previously obscured ambiguity, or it cuts up a range of works and recombines them in new and surprising ways.

This 2022 REDUX is a contemporary détournement of Debord's film, using footage appropriated from the video sharing social media platform YouTube and the music and voice over used in the English dubbed version of the original. The footage includes promotional videos produced by Amazon, Bezos's space company Blue Origin, Tesla, owned by the world's wealthiest man Elon Musk, and Apple, the world's most successful commodity brand and richest company producing an annual cycle of incessant technological renewal, driving the market economy. Additional footage was found via searches using keywords such as selfie, platform, social media, autonomy etc. The piece simultaneously introduces détournement and is détournement. Debord and Wolman declared that 'the distortions introduced in the détourned elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main impact of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements'.<sup>5</sup> At points, works of fiction, *Bladerunner 2049*, *Black Mirror Bandersnatch* and *Mr. Robot* interject to blur realities and unrealities, truth and untruth, factual fiction and fictional fact.

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<sup>1</sup> Luscombe, R. (2021). *Jeff Bezos hails 'best day ever' after successful Blue Origin space flight*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/jul/20/blue-origin-launch-jeff-bezos-space-travel-latest> [Accessed 15 April 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Debord, G. (1967). *Society of the spectacle*. Black & Red, Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>3</sup> Situationist International (1959). *The Situationist International Text Library/Détournement as Negation and Prelude*. [Online]. Available at: <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/315> [Accessed 11 April 2022].

<sup>4</sup> Debord, G. and Wolman, G., J. (1956). *A User's Guide to Detournement (Guy Debord & Gil Wolman)*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/detourn.htm> [Accessed 9 April 2022].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

This REDUX utilises the cut-up technique, an approach first explored by the DADA movement in the 1920s, and then as 'découpé' by Gil Wolman in 1950s France. The technique is perhaps most popularly associated with the author William Burroughs, who was introduced to the method by the artist Brion Gysin in 1959.<sup>6</sup> Burroughs himself would cite T.S. Elliot's 1922 *The Waste Land* as an early example of the cut-up method, one of the most significant works of post-war high modernist literature, the poem fuses a diverse range of literary, cultural, and vernacular references<sup>7</sup>. Elliot's work was a product of his personal angst and Burroughs' an experiment in the conscious and unconscious. Debord's was firmly situated in the political sphere, the overlap with Burroughs, if it exists at all, is one of cultural resistance. But then again, resistance is futile.

Using the video editing software Adobe Premiere Pro, it is possible to add (potentially) limitless tracks or layers of video that can be cut up with the 'razor tool', randomly, or deliberately. The non-destructive aspect of non-linear editing facilitates a certain freeing approach to the process, it is easy to undo, redo and undo again, ad infinitum. Debord said 'truth is not like some finished product in which one can no longer find any trace of the tool that made it'<sup>8</sup> and in that sense, we see traces of both the tool and the process evident in the finished piece. The danger with non-linear editing is to over-edit, the layers of meaning rendered meaningless by overuse of the razor, the non-destructive tool destroying the previously rendered context, whether implicit, implied or happenstance.

One of the dominant commodities present throughout the piece is the mobile phone, that seemingly omnipresent affirmation of all human life, part living and part existence, a very extension of being. No longer attached to our ears, the use of the device is predominantly a head-down experience, more visual than aural, augmented by connections to platforms, rhizomatic assemblages with strata defined by algorithms. 'As we modify and extend "our" technologies and "our" media, we modify and extend ourselves and our environments'.<sup>9</sup> By curating our lives via social media we contribute to the spectacle, and at the same time consume it. We are spectator and spectacle, on the precipice of the transition of post-human to non-human modes of production, simultaneously the producers, products, and consumers of augmented capitalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Skau, M. (1981). The Central Verbal System: The Prose of William Burroughs. *Style* Vol. 15, No. 4, Speaking the World into Order (Fall 1981), pp. 401-414 (14 pages) Published by: [Penn State University Press](#)

*Style*, 15 (4), pp.401–414. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42945357> [Accessed 19 April 2022].

<sup>7</sup> Parker, J. (2014). *The Junkie Genius*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/04/the-junkie-genius/358635/> [Accessed 22 April 2022].

<sup>8</sup> Debord, G. (2003). *Complete cinematic works : scripts, stills, documents*. Ak Press, Oakland, Ca, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Kember, S. and Zylinska, J. (2015). *Life after new media: mediation as a vital process*. (MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts), 13.