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The SAGE Encyclopedia of Surveillance, Security, and Privacy, 2018

Bruce A. Arrigo, ed.



Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. "The Naked City." (1957).

### **Situationists, the (spectacle, history, techniques, and diagrams)**

The *Situationist International* (1957-72) and the groups that preceded it, such as the *Lettrist International* (1952-57), understood control and surveillance as a principle of organization in the modern world. Their social and spatial theory is most fully developed in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), by Guy Debord, their self-proclaimed leader, and in his subsequent *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988). Debord argued that everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation, encapsulated by *the spectacle*, which mediates social relationships through images. The Situationists conceived of two practices, *dérive* and *détournement*, which serve to recognize the spectacle, and resist the control it exerts. More recently, the pervasive electronic gathering of personal data by companies and intelligence services has brought renewed attention to the linkage between commodification and surveillance that was theorized by the Situationists.

### **Spatial Surveillance**

In 1954, the Lettrist International, which was later to dissolve into the Situationist International, explained surveillance in spatial terms. *Potlatch #5* thus invoked the boulevards cut through Paris' dense urban fabric by Baron Haussmann as means to facilitate military transport and police control. Simultaneously, if somewhat contradictorily, the Lettrists accused the architect Le Corbusier of wanting to abolish streets altogether, in order to divide life into closed, isolated units, into societies under perpetual surveillance; thereby abolishing

any opportunities for uprisings or even for meaningful encounters, and imposing automatic resignation. Both conceptions, the street as a means of state control, and the absence of streets as a means of isolation and perpetual surveillance, are diagrammatic; they recur throughout the writings of both the Lettrists and the Situationists and anticipate another diagram of control, that of the Panopticon. This diagram is embodied in a prison building designed by the English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. The circular design of Bentham's Panopticon divides its prison inmates by walls from each other, but renders them visible to an official invisibly positioned in the central tower. The French philosopher Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975) extended this diagram into the social theory of Panopticism. Foucault argued that contemporary society individualizes its subjects, and by placing them in a state of constant visibility, inscribes power relations that continue to operate even without surveillance actually taking place. While Foucault famously remarked that our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance, and that modern social relations are the exact reverse of the spectacle, more recent debate has questioned the Foucauldian antinomy between spectacle and surveillance and recognizes the topicality of Guy Debord's conception of *the spectacle* as a set of techniques for the management of attention, using procedures of partitioning and cellularity in which the individual is reduced as a political force. Television and the Internet constitute a further perfecting of panoptic technology, convergent with Debord's notion of the spectacle.

### The Society of the Spectacle

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Debord described a modern society in which social life has been replaced with its representation. Social life ceases to be about living, instead it comes to be about having; the spectacle uses images to convey what people need and must have. Debord draws on the first section of Karl Marx's *Capital*, entitled *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret thereof*, which is further developed by György Lukács in his book *History and Class Consciousness*. Marx had observed that in the capitalist mode of production things are no longer valued according to their intended use (use value), but instead are appraised by the market (exchange value). In analogy, Debord observed that things that were once directly lived are now lived by proxy, and argued that once an experience is taken out of the real world it becomes a commodity. The society of the spectacle expands commodification beyond the material world to experience and to perception. In order to survive, the spectacle must maintain control over society and defuse threats to the social order. It does so through an automatic process of surveillance and control that Debord termed *recuperation*. Recuperation intercepts socially and politically threatening ideas and images, which it appropriates and commodifies, in order to then restore them to mainstream society and everyday life.

*The society of the spectacle* distinguished between two types of spectacle, concentrated versus diffuse, which differ in their exercise of surveillance and control. Debord identified Stalinist bureaucracy and fascist totalitarianism with a *concentrated spectacle*, in which the bureaucracy holds on to the totality of social labor; it cannot leave the exploited masses any significant margin of choice. The concentrated spectacle usually is concentrated in a singular leader, and must be accompanied by permanent violence. In the advanced capitalism of the Western countries, Debord recognized a *diffuse spectacle*, which is accompanied by the abundance of commodities. Every given commodity fights for itself and attempts to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one. While the concentrated spectacle operates mostly through violence, the diffuse spectacle relies on seduction. Debord concluded that the diffuse spectacle is more effective at suppressing challenges. Later, in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord surmised that in modern capitalist countries and liberal democracies, pioneered by France and Italy, the diffuse and concentrated spectacle form a

new synthesis, the integrated spectacle, which is characterized by incessant technological renewal and the fusion of state and economy.

### The *dérive* and its diagram

The *dérive* is a technique of exploring the city through walking, passing through varied ambiances in rapid succession. In a *dérive* one or several persons drop their usual activities and habits in order to let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The *dérive* is devised to free its practitioner from the increasingly predictable and monotonous experience of everyday life in advanced capitalism, but simultaneously it also provides a critical tool for the ecological analysis of fissures in the urban network, for psychogeographical mapping of microclimates and centers of attraction, independent of administrative boundaries. As such, it proposes an alternative format of mapping that replaces physical distance with maps of influences, measurable boundaries with *unities of ambience*, and thereby resists reification, commodification and the control these exert. In *The Theory of the Dérive* (1958), Debord cited the sociologist Chombart de Lauwe, who in 1952 had diagrammed the journeys undertaken by a student living in the 16th Arrondissement during the course of one year, forming a triangle between her place of study, her home, and that of her piano teacher. Debord proclaimed that such examples capable of provoking sharp emotional reactions, outrage at the fact that anyone's life can be so pathetically limited, will prove useful in developing *dérives*; indeed, Debord's and Asger Jorn's diagram of Parisian *dérive*, *The Naked City* (1957) alluded to Chombart's earlier visualization. However, when Chombart included aerial images amongst the methods allowing a better understanding of the different kinds of urban textures that characterize urban quarters, the Situationists countered that the use of aerial views transforms sociologists into disengaged and omniscient observers; they protested this voyeuristic position of disentanglement from the immediate urban experience at ground level. In this vain, Gilles Ivain's *Formulary for a New Urbanism* labeled an aerial photograph *New Theater of Operations in Culture*, the military term purposefully chosen to discredit the disengaged position of surveillance endorsed by Chombart. By contrast, the *dérive* reflects on pedestrian experience and purports to identify with the everyday user of the city.

### Détournement

The second oppositional technique of the Situationists, *détournement*, is a strategy of diversion originally borrowed from the Surrealists. *Détournement* alters the meaning of a found element by combining it with a new element in a new ensemble. Prominent examples are Constant Nieuwenhuys' projects for *détourned* sculptures; and Debord's *détourned* documentary film, *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Period of Time*. In 1967 the Situationist René Viénet established what has since become a prototypical example of *détournement*; he explained how it is possible to *détourn* advertising billboards by pasting pre-prepared placards onto them. Strategies of *détournement* have since been adopted and extended by numerous oppositional groups and individuals. *The Surveillance camera players*, a group of activists from New York City, perform skits in front of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras in the subway system and on the street corners. Unlike other theories of surveillance, the Situationists' practices amalgamated analysis with resistance, theory with action, and it is their refusal to assume a disengaged stance that ensures their continuing relevance in a digital society of the spectacle.

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**See Also:** Marxism; Panopticon; Bentham, Jeremy; Foucault, Michel; Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix; Corporate Surveillance; Mass Media.

### **Further Readings**

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