

# **Guy Debord | Comments on Society of the Spectacle | 1988**

## **On Disinformation**

### **Section XVI.**

#### **Part One**

1. The relatively new concept of disinformation was recently imported from Russia, along with a number of other inventions useful in the running of modern states. It is openly employed by particular powers, or, consequently, by people who hold fragments of economic or political authority, in order to maintain what is established; and always in a counter-offensive role.

2. Whatever can oppose a single official truth must necessarily be disinformation emanating from hostile or at least rival powers, and would have been intentionally and malevolently falsified. Disinformation would not be simple negation of a fact which suits the authorities, or the simple affirmation of a fact which does not suit them: that is called psychosis.

3. Unlike the straightforward lie, disinformation must inevitably contain a degree of truth but one deliberately manipulated by an artful enemy. That is what makes it so attractive to the defenders of the dominant society.

4. The power which speaks of disinformation does not believe itself to be absolutely faultless, but knows that it can attribute to any precise criticism the excessive insignificance which characterizes disinformation; with the result that it will never have to admit to any particular fault.

5. In essence, disinformation would be a travesty of the truth. Whoever disseminates it is culpable, whoever believes it is stupid. But who precisely would this artful enemy be? In this case, it cannot be terrorism, which is in no danger of 'disinforming' anyone, since it is charged with ontologically representing the grossest and least acceptable error.

6. Thanks to its etymology and to present memories of those limited confrontations which, around mid-century, briefly opposed East and West, concentrated spectacle and diffuse spectacle, the capitalism of today's integrated spectacle still pretends to believe that the capitalism of bureaucratic totalitarianism—sometimes even presented as the terrorists' base camp or inspiration—remains its fundamental enemy, despite the innumerable proofs of their profound alliance and solidarity.

7. But actually all established powers, despite certain genuine local rivalries, and without ever wanting to spell it out, never forget what one of the rare German internationalists after the outbreak of the First World War managed to recall (on the

side of subversion and without any great immediate success):  
“The main enemy is within.”

8. In the end, disinformation is the equivalent of what was represented in the nineteenth-century language of social war as ‘dangerous passions.’ It is all that is obscure and threatens to oppose the unprecedented happiness which we know this society offers to those who trust it, a happiness which greatly outweighs various insignificant risks and disappointments.

9. And everyone who sees this happiness in the spectacle agrees that we should not grumble about its price; everyone else is a disinformant.

## Part Two

10. The other advantage derived from denouncing a particular instance of disinformation in this way is that it wards off any suspicion that the spectacle’s global language might contain the same thing. With the most scientific assurance, the spectacle can identify the only place where disinformation could be found: in anything which can be said that might displease it.

11. It is doubtless by mistake—unless it be a deliberate decoy—that a project was recently set in motion in France to place a kind of official label on some parts of the media guaranteeing them ‘free from disinformation.’ This wounded certain media professionals, who still believe, or more

modestly would still like it to be believed, that until now they had not actually been subject to censorship.

12. But the concept of disinformation must never be used defensively, still less as part of a static defense, building a Great Wall or Maginot Line around an area supposedly out of bounds to disinformation. There must be disinformation, and it must be something fluid and potentially ubiquitous.

13. Where the language of the spectacle is not under attack it would be foolish to defend it, and the concept would wear out very fast indeed if one were to try to defend it against all the evidence on points which ought on the contrary to be kept from public view.

14. Moreover, the authorities have no real need to guarantee that any particular information does not contain disinformation. Nor have they the means to do so: they are not respected to that extent, and would only draw down suspicion on the information concerned. The concept of disinformation is only valid for counter-attack. It must be kept in reserve, then rapidly thrown into the fray to drive back any truth which has managed to get through.

15. If occasionally a kind of unregulated disinformation threatens to appear, in the service of particular interests temporarily in conflict, and threatens to be believed, getting out of control and thus clashing with the concerted work of a

less irresponsible disinformation, there is no reason to fear that the former involves other manipulators who are more subtle or more skilled: it is simply because disinformation now spreads in a world where there is no room for verification.

16. The confusionist concept of disinformation is pushed into the limelight immediately to refute, by its very name, any criticism that has failed to be eliminated by the diverse agencies of the organization of silence. For example it could one day be said, should this seem desirable, that this text was an attempt to disinform about the spectacle; or indeed, since it is the same thing, that it was a piece of disinformation harmful to democracy.

### Part Three

17. Contrary to its spectacular definition, the practice of disinformation can only serve the state here and now, under its direct command, or at the initiative of those who uphold the same values.

18. Disinformation is actually inherent in all existing information; and indeed is its main characteristic. It is only named where passivity must be maintained by intimidation. Where disinformation is named it does not exist. Where it exists, it is not named.

19. When there were still conflicting ideologies, which claimed to be for or against some recognized aspect of reality, there were fanatics, and liars, but there were no ‘disinformers.’ When respect for the spectacular consensus, or at least a desire for spectacular kudos prohibits any honest declaration of what someone is against, or equally what he wholeheartedly approves; and when at the same time he needs to disguise a part of what he is supposed to acknowledge because for one reason or another it is considered dangerous, then he employs disinformation, as if by blunder or negligence, or by pretended false reasoning.

20. In political activity after 1968, for example, the incompetent recuperators known as ‘pro-situs,’ became the first disinformers because they did their best to hide all practical manifestations which confirmed the critique they claimed to have adopted; and, without the slightest embarrassment at weakening its expression, never referred to anything or anyone, in order to suggest that they themselves had actually discovered something.

## **Section XX.**

### **Part One**

21. For any intelligence service, following Clausewitz’s accurate theory of war, knowledge must become power. From

this these services derive their contemporary prestige, their peculiarly poetic quality.

22. Whilst intelligence itself has been so thoroughly expelled from the spectacle, which prohibits action and says very little about the actions of others, it seems to have taken refuge with those who analyze and secretly act on certain realities.

23. The recent revelations that Margaret Thatcher tried in vain to suppress, and in fact confirmed by the attempt, have shown that in Britain these services have already been capable of bringing down a prime minister whose politics they deemed dangerous. The general contempt created by the spectacle thus, for new reasons, restored the fascination of what in Kipling's day was called 'the great game.'

24. 'The conspiracy theory of history' was in the nineteenth century a reactionary and ridiculous belief, at a time when so many powerful social movements were stirring up the masses. Today's pseudo-rebels are well aware of this, thanks to hearsay or a few books, and believe that it remains true for eternity. They refuse to recognize the real praxis of their time; it is too sad for their cold hopes. The state notes this fact, and plays on it.

## Part Two

25. When almost every aspect of international political life and ever more important aspects of internal politics are

conducted and displayed in the style of the secret services, with decoys, disinformation and double explanations (one may conceal another, or may only seem to), the spectacle confines itself to revealing a wearisome world of necessary incomprehensibility. This tedious series of lifeless, inconclusive crime novels has all the dramatic interest of a realistically staged fight between blacks, at night, in a tunnel.

26. When television has shown a fine picture and explained it with a brazen lie, idiots believe that everything is clear. The demi-elite is content to know that almost everything is obscure, ambivalent, 'constructed' by unknown codes. A more exclusive elite would like to know what is true, hard as it is to distinguish in each particular case, despite all their access to special knowledge and confidences. Which is why they would like to get to know the method of truth, though their love usually remains unrequited.

## **Section XXVIII.**

### **Part One**

27. Networks of promotion/control slide imperceptibly into networks of surveillance/disinformation. Formerly one only conspired against an established order. Today, conspiring in its favor is a new and flourishing profession. Under spectacular domination, people conspire to maintain it, and to



guarantee what it alone would call its well-being. This conspiracy is a part of its very functioning.

28. Provisions for a kind of preventive civil war are already being made, adapted to variously calculated future projections. These are the ‘special squads’ responsible for local interventions according to the needs of the integrated spectacle. Thus, for the worst scenarios, a tactic has been planned under the name ‘Three Cultures,’ a witty reference to a square in Mexico City in October 1968—though this time the gloves would be off and the tactic applied before the revolt occurred.

29. Such extreme cases apart, to be a useful tool of government, unexplained assassinations need only be widely influential or relatively frequent, because simply knowing that they are possible complicates calculations in many different fields. Nor is there any need to be intelligently selective, *ad hominem*.

### Part Two

30. The entirely random application of the procedure may well be more productive. The composition of certain fragments of a social critique of rearing has also been arranged, something which is no longer entrusted to academics or media professionals, whom it is now preferable to keep apart from excessively traditional lies in this debate: a

new critique is required, advanced and exploited in a new way, controlled by another, better trained, sort of professional.

31. In a relatively confidential manner, lucid texts are beginning to appear, anonymously, or signed by unknown authors—a tactic helped by everyone's concentration on the clowns of the spectacle, which in turn makes unknowns justly seem the most admirable—texts not only on subjects never touched on in the spectacle but also containing arguments whose forte is made more striking by a calculable originality deriving from the fact that however evident, they are never used. This practice may serve as at least a first stage in initiation to recruit more alert intellects, who will later be told more about the possible consequences, should they seem suitable.

32. What for some will be the first step in a career will be for others with lower grades, the first step into the trap prepared for them. In some cases, with issues that threaten to become controversial, another pseudo-critique can be created; and between the two opinions which will thus be put forward—both outside the impoverished conventions of the spectacle—unsophisticated judgment can oscillate indefinitely, while discussion around them can be renewed whenever necessary. Most often this concerns a general discussion of what is hidden by the media, and this discussion can be strongly

critical, and on some points quite evidently intelligent, yet always curiously de-centered.

33. Topics and words have been artificially chosen, with the aid of computers programmed in critical thought. These texts always contain certain gaps, which are quite hard to spot but nonetheless remarkable: the vanishing point of perspective is always abnormally absent. They resemble those facsimiles of famous weapons, which only lack the firing-pin.

34. This is inevitably a lateral critique, which perceives many things with considerable candor and accuracy, but places itself to one side. Not because it affects some sort of impartiality, for on the contrary it must seem to find much fault, yet without ever apparently feeling the need to reveal its cause, to state, even implicitly, where it is coming from and where it wants to go.

### Part Three

35. To this kind of counter-journalistic false critique can be added the organized practice of rumor which we know to be originally a sort of uncontrollable by-product of spectacular information, since everyone, however vaguely, perceives something misleading about the latter and trust it as little as it deserves. Rumor began as something superstitious, naive, self-deluding. More recently, however, surveillance has begun

introducing into the population people capable of starting rumors which suit it at the very first signal.

36. It has been decided here to apply in practice the observations of a theory formulated some thirty years ago, whose origins lie in American sociology of advertising—the theory of individuals known as ‘pacemakers,’ that is, those whom others in their milieu come to follow and imitate—but this time moving from spontaneity to control. Budgetary, or extra-budgetary, means have also been released to fund numerous auxiliaries; beside the former specialists of the recent past, academics and media professionals, sociologists and police.

37. To believe in the continuing mechanical application of past models leads to just as many errors as the general ignorance of the past. “Rome is no longer in Rome,” and the Mafia are no longer thieves. And the surveillance and disinformation services are as far removed from the police and informers of former times—for example, from the *roussins* and *mouchards* of the Second Empire—as the present special services in all countries are from the officers of the army general staff’s Deuxieme Bureau in 1914.

#### Part Four

38. Since art is dead, it has evidently become extremely easy to disguise police as artists. When the latest imitations of a

recuperated neo-dadaism are allowed to pontificate proudly in the media, and thus also to tinker with the decor of official palaces, like court Jesters to the kings of junk, it is evident that by the same process a cultural cover is guaranteed for every agent or auxiliary of the state's networks of persuasion.

39. Empty pseudo-museums, or pseudo-research centers on the work of nonexistent personalities, can be opened just as fast as reputations are made for journalist-cops, historian-cops, or novelist-cops. No doubt Arthur Cravan foresaw this world when he wrote in *Maintenant*: "Soon we will only see artists in the streets, and it will take no end of effort to find a single man." This is indeed the sense of the revived form of an old quip of Parisian loafers: "Hello there artists! Too bad if I've got it wrong."

### Part Five

40. Things having become what they are, we can now witness the use of collective authorship by the most modern publishing houses, that is to say, the ones with the best commercial distribution. Since their pseudonyms are only authenticated by the newspapers, they can swap them around, collaborate, replace each other, take on new artificial brains. Their task is to express the ideas and lifestyles of the epoch, not because of their personalities, but because they are ordered to.

41. Those who believe that they are truly independent, individual literary entrepreneurs can knowingly vouch for the fact that Ducasse has had a row with the Comte de Lautreamont, that Dumas isn't Maquet, that we must never confuse Erckmann with Chatrian; that Censier and Daubenton are no longer on speaking terms. It might be best to say that this type of modern author was a follower of Rimbaud, at least in so far as "I is someone else."

### Part Six

42. The whole history of spectacular society called for the secret services to play the pivotal role; for it is in them that the features and force of such a society are concentrated to the highest degree. Moreover they are always also the arbiters of that society's general interests, despite their modest title of 'services.'

43. There is no corruption here, for they faithfully express the common morals of the spectacular century. Thus do watchers and watched sail forth on a boundless ocean. The spectacle has brought the secret to victory, and must be more and more controlled by specialists in secrecy who are certainly not only officials who have to different degrees managed to free themselves from state control; who are not only officials.

## Section XXX.

### Part One

44. Surveillance would be much more dangerous had it not been led by its ambition for absolute control of everything to a point where it encountered difficulties created by its own progress. There is a contradiction between the mass of information collected on a growing number of individuals, and the time and intelligence available to analyze it, not to mention its actual interest.

45. The quantity of data demands constant summarizing: much of it will be lost, and what remains is still too long to be read. Management of surveillance and manipulation is uncoordinated. Indeed there is a widespread struggle for a share of the profits, and thus also for favoring the development of this or that potential in the existing society, to the detriment of the other potentials, which nonetheless, so long as they are all tarred with the same brush, are considered equally respectable.

### Part Two

46. This struggle is also a game. Each controller comes to over-value his agents, as well as his opponents. Each country, not to mention the numerous supranational alliances, currently possesses an indefinite number of police and

counter-espionage services, along with secret services, both state and para-state.

47. There are also many private companies dealing in surveillance, security and investigation. The large multinationals naturally have their own services; but so do nationalized companies, even those of modest scale, which will still pursue independent policies at a national and sometimes an international level. A nuclear power group will fight against an oil group, even though both are owned by the same state and what is more are dialectically united by their interest in maintaining high oil prices on the world market.

48. Each particular industry's security service combats the threat of sabotage, while organizing it, when necessary, against their rivals: a company with important interests in undersea tunnels will be favorably disposed to the hazards of ferries and may bribe newspapers in financial trouble to ensure they spot these hazards without delay and without too much reflection; a company competing with Sandoz will be indifferent to underground springs in the Rhine valley.

49. Secrets are subject to secret surveillance. Thus each of these organizations, all subtly united around the executives of *raison d'état*, aspires to its own private hegemony of meaning. For meaning has been lost along with an identifiable center.

### Part Three



50. Going from success to success, until 1968 modern society was convinced it was loved. It has since had to abandon these dreams; it prefers to be feared. It knows full well that “its innocent air has gone forever.”

51. So it is that thousands of plots in favor of the established order tangle and clash almost everywhere, as the overlap of secret networks and secret issues or activities grows ever more dense along with their rapid integration into every sector of economics, politics and culture. In all areas of social life, the degree of intermingling in surveillance, disinformation and security activities gets greater and greater.

52. The plot having thickened to the point where it is almost out in the open, each part of it now starts to interfere with, or worry, the others, for all these professional conspirators are spying on each other without really knowing why, are colliding by chance yet not identifying each other with any certainty. Who is observing whom? On whose behalf, apparently? And actually?

53. The real influences remain hidden, and the ultimate aims can barely be suspected and almost never understood. So that while no one can be sure he is not being tricked or manipulated, it is rare for the string-puller to know he has succeeded. And in any case, to be on the winning side of manipulation does not mean that one has chosen the right

strategic perspective. Tactical successes can thus lead great powers down dangerous roads.

#### Part Four

54. In the same network and apparently pursuing similar goals, those who are only a part of the network are necessarily ignorant of the hypotheses and conclusions of the other parts, and above all of their controlling nucleus.

55. The reasonably well known fact that all information on whatever subject under observation may well be entirely imaginary, or seriously falsified, or very inadequately interpreted, complicates and undermines to a great degree the calculations of the inquisitors. For what is sufficient to condemn someone is far less sure when it comes to recognizing or using him. Since sources of information are in competition, so are falsifications.

56. It is in these circumstances that we can speak of domination's falling rate of profit, as it spreads to almost the whole of social space and consequently increases both its personnel and its means. For now, each means aspires and labors to become an end. Surveillance spies on and plots against itself.

#### Part Five

57. Its principal present contradiction, finally, is that it is spying on, infiltrating and pressurizing an absent entity: that

which is supposed to be trying to subvert the social order. But where can it [subversion] actually be seen at work? Certainly conditions have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments who think so.

58. Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago. Because of this, it remains only a vague, yet highly disturbing threat, and surveillance in its turn has been deprived of its preferred field of activity.

59. Surveillance and intervention are thus rightly led by the present exigencies, which determine their terms of engagement, to operate on the very terrain of this threat in order to combat it in advance. This is why surveillance has an interest in organizing poles of negation itself, which it can instruct with more than the discredited means of the spectacle, so as to manipulate, not terrorists this time, but theories.