Peter S. Barker
The Fall of Communism, the Society of the Spectacle and Prostitution
1993

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June-August, 1992:

In total, Cheryl stayed with me for three more months, until her eighteenth birthday. During that time, she continued much as before, but took advantage of an offer by her mother of airfare for a visit to the east coast where the mother had moved. It was the first time in four years that she and her mother got along. In Toronto, a month later, she was working the streets again. She seemed more confident of herself than she had been in the past. Her boyfriends were different. For one thing, they were not the pimps with whom she usually went out. She had given up believing in their phoney promises.

She asked me to save her money for her. Every night, at one or two in the morning, I would meet her downtown and take the night's earnings before her friends started pressuring her to buy them drinks or loan them money. I could tell from the amount of police surveillance I was attracting that I was coming perilously close to being mistaken for a pimp myself. By the end of the month, she had enough for her own apartment.

Cheryl shares the apartment with a girlfriend from her school days. Because she is attractive and articulate, she found it fairly easy to get a job as a receptionist in the east end of the city. When I visit her, we talk about what she can do to free herself from dependence on her employer and the rut of a nine-to-five job. Her plan is to open a used furniture store to recycle the furniture her boyfriend keeps bringing home on trash nights. She may have to go back on the streets for a while to raise the capital. Stupidly, on hearing this, I offered to lend her as much as I could.

I just know I'm going to lose my shirt on this deal.

residents, paints signs for local businesses, makes wall decorations and sells T-shirts in the local clothing outlets. In any other part of the city, he would have to get a 'real' job.

The critique that reaches the truth of the society of the spectacle aligns itself, with Sir Philip Sidney and John Milton, firmly on the side of man the artist. As artist, all his creations, from his tools to his relations with his kind, are contrived. Man's unnaturalness arises from his ability to shape the world in which he lives, from a vision of what could be and should be, instead of surrendering to the natural would of instinct and necessity.

The critique that reaches the heart of the spectacle rejects fatality and the utilitarian view of man, rejects expediency and economic efficiency, and reveals that no other power, but the willingness of people to blindly follow their instincts and let others make rational decisions for them, enslaves the citizenry of the modern state. Such a critique recognizes that the contemplation of images, illusions and ideologies alienates the individual from his own powers when these are separated from social action and human relationships. Nothing more is needed for the individual to win back his freedom than a willingness to stop trying to discover self-respect in images and objects and start undertaking the creative action which gives man his dignity. Failing to do so, the modern individual is nothing more than a sophisticated rat in the behavioralist's maze. Unable to fend for himself, reassured that he is free of the responsibility of making his own decisions, taught to squeak in unison with the others, "I'm an individual, yes I am," the trained rat is lead through the social mazes created by his own stupidity on the promise of a bit of cheese if he reaches his goal. In the light of his voluntary compliance with the maze-maker's specifications, there is little the social critic can say that will liberate him. Words are not enough.

> To effectively destroy the society of the spectacle, what is needed is men putting a practical force into action."
>
> — Guy Debord

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She has quite a few bad habits: She is slovenly. She runs up the telephone bill. She refuses to look for work or go to school. She parties at after-hours clubs until six in the morning with hooker friends. She borrows money without returning it and ruins my sweaters or trades them with her girlfriends for other clothes. Her male friends steal things from my home.

I am not paid to be a social worker and do not consider myself terribly good at it. I suffer the aggravation of neighbors angry at the noise, visits form the police and being met by strangers when I come to the door — to say nothing of financial losses. My friends think my actions are self-destructive or lunatic. They worry about my 'self-esteem'. Co-workers suspect me of sleeping with the girl.

My neighbors, on the other hand, are more forgiving. The practice of deferring immediate gain in order to achieve a higher quality of community life comes more naturally. They ignore prices and patronize local merchants, frequently personal friends, over the chain stores downtown because the local merchants contribute to their children's sports teams. They habitually pick up litter found lying on the ground in local parks. They know the names of their children's classmates and their parents. They take an interest in local gossip and read the local weekly to find out what acquaintances met at the bar are doing. They adhere to an unspoken code of behavior, and idea, that holds the community together but ostracizes those who consistently break it. Helping out streetkids, even when it brings a dubious, and potentially 'criminal', element into their neighborhood, does not violate the code.

I shouldn't make too much of small deviations from the general rule, but I am encouraged that the community in which I live has begun to extricate itself from the society of the spectacle. The accessibility of the local paper and of gossip in neighborhood pubs gives each one of its members access to a larger public than that provided to those who rely on the established media for their information. A tendency to take into account factors other than price when shopping, such as benefits derived from keeping money in the community, has generated a somewhat independent local economy. With this support from their neighbors, local artists and artisans make a living producing unconventional goods. A cartoonist with a shop on the main street sketches greeting cards for

May, 1992:

During the summer, I put the news on the back burner. My immediate concern was for Cheryl, a streetkid who had returned home after an absence of four months. Since she was fourteen, Cheryl had been using my apartment, off and on, as a safe haven from pimps and others to whom she owes money.

I dread her visits because of the demands she puts upon me. She ties up the telephone, rarely picks up after herself and has friends over at inconvenient hours. On her side of the fence, I know, she would not be putting up with the constant nagging unless the alternatives, offered by the Children's Aid Society or by her pimps, were worse. Most adults with whom she has contact do not tolerate her independence. She has made it fairly clear, though, by repeatedly running from her mother or from the group homes in which the C.A.S. regularly places her, that she values her freedom. If she is to be influenced by an adult at all, it will have to be by example and through the strengthening of her ability to make rational choices of her own. She sees no point in obeying rules simply because they are there.

We talk about her future. She would like to have her own apartment and be able to travel. She has been promised these things often enough by pimps who know more than her about travel agencies, shuttle buses and allied subjects and who are old enough to sign the leases. I point out that many people would be willing to help her if she would only save her money long enough to pay the rent at the end of the month. When I relate her failure to save her own money to the fact she is leaving herself open to manipulation by those doing the saving for her, she remembers there is a program on television she wants to watch and cuts the conversation short. To have survived on the street for years, she had to be self-sufficient and tough and this reminder of her dependent status tells her she is not tough enough. I'm glad she is embarrassed, though, and wants to avoid the topic of her boyfriends. In the past, she would simply have denied giving money to anyone, or reasserted her illusion that these men really do love her and mean to keep their promises. The frankness means I have gained her respect.

The Fall of Communism, the Society of the Spectacle and Prostitution
By Peter S. Barker

"Considered in its own terms, the spectacle is the affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life, namely social life, as mere appearance. But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle exposes it as the visible negation of life, as a negation of life which has become visible."

— Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

January, 1992:

The Devil's Dictionary defines the state of being free as one in which the price is concealed. For millions of Russians who woke on New Year's morning of 1992 to discover the price of even the most basic foodstuffs had tripled or quadrupled under the market system, the hidden costs of socialist freedom, the freedom of the workers to direct their own economy, were revealed in the concrete reality of bread and cheese. Socialist freedom had been based on a lie which had forced party bureaucrats to dress up as workers and play the role of the proletariat directing a socialist revolution. With the advent of capitalism, the old freedoms were momentarily exposed as a massive theatrical performance.

A Russian widow interviewed by CNN reporters remarked that nothing had changed. If she had formerly waited in line for days to buy a piece of sausage from the bare shelves of the statebrun butcher shop, she would now wait at home until she had saved enough to buy the same piece of sausage from a privately-owned shop. The queues are gone and it is necessity — instead of bureaucratic indifference — that keeps her waiting. But the reality of waiting to be fed remains. She misses the conversations she had with her neighbors while standing in line.

As presented by the western media, the Russian trauma took on the character of a giant morality play or a modernized version of Israelite historiography. The Russians had strayed to alien gods, to Lenin and Stalin, and were suffering the wrath of Yahweh for their apostasy. The

mighty are fallen. The offices of the KGB are ransacked by common citizens seeking the truth. Tearful mothers wait in line for milk they can no longer afford and cry out against the men who had their way with them and left them destitute with hungry mouths to feed. The unemployed march on the streets demanding bread.

To make these momentous events more accessible to the dull-witted capitalist masses, the complexities of social change in Russia were given a Manichean cast. Seth, the god of socialism, is cast down by Amon-Ra, the god of capitalism. After an eclipse of eighty-five years Ra's light shines again on the Russian Republic. During the subsequent victory parade, the atrocities of the former regime are paraded across the television screens of all nations.

The voice of the Russian widow is lost among the hoots and whistles of western news commentators. The anomaly of her waiting to be fed, regardless of the political system that holds sway in Russia, inspires no analysis.

> "The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance."
>
> — Guy Debord

February, 1992:

In the month following, I rode to work on the streetcar watching out the window at the Sherbourne stop as scruffy men trooped out of the Salvation Army hostel each morning to line up at a temporary employment agency in the hope of receiving work and cash at the end of the day. Around the corner, both sexes wait in front of a church offering free food and clothing. Their resemblance to the queues for food in the Russian Republic is only superficial, I am told. But it is near enough to leave me with the vague sense of d,j . . . vu experienced while watching an old movie forgotten some twenty years after the original viewing. The scenes are familiar, but I can't remember how the story ends.

alone. Under these conditions, the real consumer of products, or political policies, is a consumer of images and illusion rather than one whose needs are met by the goods being delivered.

In the society of the spectacle, daily life takes on the character of an immense operatic performance. The audience takes part by singing from a script in a foreign language none of them understands. They are ignorant of the purpose of the performance and have lost the directions that would have told them how to return to the real world. They wander the stage aimlessly, overhearing snatches of the arias sung by other characters in the play. They exchange scripts only to find that the story line of each character is much the same. A choir of workers with hammers keeps the economic tempo of the performance going, while prima donnas dressed in business suits or the polka-dot pants of politicians shriek the lyric line over the heads of other singers. All voices unite in a chorus of pathos and inevitability.

The occasional phrase heard in the cacophony of voices hints at the sense of unreality being felt by all the actors. A traveller at the Holiday Inn remarks, "This is the life, eh?" — more in doubt than as an expression of enjoyment. The survivors of a plane crash are interviewed on television telling how "it was just like in the movies." They know no other reference point to bring home the reality of their personal tragedy but that provided by a Hollywood film. For a moment, private life is revealed to be more unreal than the life described in fiction. Somewhere, the audience knows, hidden in the orchestra pit, or disguised as one of the performers, lies the evil director who dreamt up this melodrama, but to find him is more difficult than ridding the Beirut streets of terrorists or the American Senate of adulterers. The crowd accuses first one person and then another, and still the performance continues as before, its tempo unabated.

> "The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality. The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe."
>
> — Guy Debord

the drinking establishments in which their workers congregate, is one of countless examples of the calculated demolition of freely-associating groups occurring throughout society.

A corollary to the undermining of individual freedoms is the concentration of all power in the hands of those who alone claim the right to wear the costume of the common citizen and play the role of the people directing a free society. As Alexis de Tocqueville predicted, unrestrained individualism and passion for equality has led to an administrative despotism of those who govern on the strength of real or imagined political or economic mandates. Whether appointed to their posts to carry out the will of the people, or raised to them by the economic vote of consumers in a free market, the professional administrators of state and corporate bureaucracy have taken charge of all significant social activity.

Market researchers and advertising executives manage consumer demand and public opinion, human relations specialists direct the lives of workers on and off the worksite, social welfare agencies negotiate rights and duties within the family, the state allocates jobs according to quotas set by interest groups, and urban planners and developers turn public thoroughfares into shopping malls the better to control — through floor layout and security regulations — the movements of the public in public places.

When his own powers have been alienated and are represented back to him as belonging to an autonomous spectacle, the individual has no choice, if he is to retain his dignity, but to resign himself and slip into interior monologue and fantasy. The tendency of individual citizens to assert their desire for respect exclusively in the realm of the imagination has made public image the main commodity produced by the autonomous economy. Lifestyle advertising has replaced usefulness, as a determinant of a product's value, with signification. The value of a pair of jeans or a bottle of shampoo is measured, on a ratio of ten-to-one, by the designer label, or the elaborate packaging, over the product's applicability to the task of covering the buyer's ass or washing his hair. The preference for a million-dollar home or a Porsche has little to do with anything but a desperate desire to possess the respect normally accorded to images

I am not disturbed by the content of the CNN report, but by my readiness to accept the image of reality it presents and exclude the evidence of my own senses. The knowledge that the CNN report is being watched by thousands of other North Americans implies some sort of consensus on its version of events. Was anyone but myself bothered by the report? No one I knew raised a challenge to the interpretations of CNN commentators. All the news sounded as if it had been written by the same committee of ten. In the light of the apparent consensus, my qualms about curiosities like the comments of the Russian widow or the queues for food and work in Canada must have been private, matters of merely personal opinion, having no bearing on the objectivity of CNN's reporting.

The sense of déjà vu persists, though, colored by Marshall McLuhan's observation that freedom of speech, in a society where the means of access to public opinion is in the hands of the few, is a fool's freedom. It is the freedom to say whatever you like within the confines of your own home but, in the public realm, it amounts to no more than "the freedom to put up and shut up." The individual who relies upon his experience for knowledge about the world knows that the odds are against him. Without thought or analysis, he resigns himself unconsciously. Even the revelation of deliberate campaigns of disinformation, such as that perpetrated by the military during the Gulf War, does not alter his confidence in the basic objectivity of the media. Hadn't the media honestly reported that the truths they had been repeating throughout the war had turned out, on closer examination, to be a pack of lies? Lacking the means to compare reality and fiction, substance and myth, true and false, the viewer has no choice but to accept an occasional falsification as the price of freedom from the responsibility of finding out for himself.

Where the spectator's personal experience provides no point of comparison against which the validity of televised news can be measured, the distinction between public information and public entertainment vanishes like a coin in the hands of a conjurer. News of the far-away and exotic, unlikely to affect any but the few, is as significant as coverage of local events having a direct bearing upon the life of each citizen. Clowns, geeks, dwarves, bearded ladies, strongmen and other sideshow marvels

flicker across the screen while the machinations of entrepreneurial bureaucrats enlarging their domains or the card tricks of financial wizards flensing a company of assets needed for a plant expansion go unreported. Throughout, the public assumes the character, in the words of McLuhan, "of a kept woman whose role is expected to be one of submission and luxurious passivity."

The recasting of public information as sideshow diversion is so complete in the end that the selection of items for the network news is made by the entertainment director. On a night when a made-for-TV movie about child abuse is being aired, the number of reports of child abuse shown on the evening news triples. The blurring of the line between fiction and reality befuddles the more stupid politicians. The Vice-President accuses television character Murphy Brown of contributing to the Los Angeles riots. Meanwhile, the program's heroine issues fictional news reports about an imaginary Vice-President of the United States named Dan Quayle. No dissenting voice, no merely private experience, disturbs the spectacle of public debate long enough to initiate a critical review of intelligence from the front.

> "The spectacle, grasped in its totality, is both the result and the project of the existing mode of production. It is not a supplement to the real world, and additional decoration. It is the heart of the unrealism of the real society."
>
> — Guy Debord

April, 1992:

The condition of chronic spectatorship develops when social reality is accepted as a given rather than as the end result of the efforts of particular social actors. Television viewers take it as a given that 'news' will not be information relevant to their immediate lives — oblivious to the censorship imposed by elite control of the media. Singles take their isolation from meaningful human relationships for granted — unaware of their power to change the situation. In both cases, the impulse towards

action is redirected, by the ostensible inflexibility of the social world, into the realm of the imagination.

The feature which most differentiates the contemporary society of the spectacle from human societies of the past is the marginalization of man the creator, and his idealization, God the Creator, in the social drama. His place at center stage is usurped by the narcissistic spectator, while God is withdrawn from the play entirely and sits in the wings trying to pare his fingernails out of existence.

The drama being enacted for the spectators gives the illusion that the events of the drama have a life of their own. The autonomous economy expands and contracts, inflates and deflates, moves form manufacture to services and back again, out of all control of the workers, consumers and investors whose decisions it represents. The autonomous political process sees voters select one political party after another which, once in power, make the same speeches about restraint and the need to stimulate investment as their predecessors. All attempts of the electorate, every four or eight years, to veto the process by switching to another party, fail. The endless game of musical chairs played by the candidates is shown on television year after year, while on the streets of the nation, nothing changes.

As the spectacle invades the lives of all citizens in a democracy, it melts their former rights and freedoms into air and brings them face-to-face with their real powerlessness in relation to their own kind. Freedom of speech and freedom of information are made meaningless by the citizen's lack of access to the public and by the absence of information relevant to the public's needs. Freedom of choice in the marketplace is spurious when the consumer is manipulated by advertising and limited to choosing between fifty different brands of breakfast cereals, but not between the production of breakfast cereal and the creation of housing for the homeless. Freedom of association cannot be exercised in an intellectual climate dominated by an ideology that discourages anything but the individual pursuit of gain, an economy that disrupts freely-associating communities and a morality that provides no illustration of the principles which, at other times in history, bound individuals together. The decline of unionism in those industries, like the Post Office, where management has deliberately moved the factory away from the neighborhoods and