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## **The City as Spectacle: A Debordian Critique of the City as Commodity and Brand**

Conference paper presented at *Spectacular/Ordinary/Contested Media City*, Helsinki, 15-17 May 2013

In his *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La Société du Spectacle* [1967]), Debord argued that capitalism's demand on perpetual growth, and the consequence that various aspects of society and nature is increasingly given exchange values in order to circulate on a market, reduces human existence to an empty *reflection* of the commodity form. In this paper, I argue that the nature of the contemporary city is illuminated by Debord's two separate (albeit connected) uses of the term "spectacle". Through its more Marxist meaning, we observe how the city on the one hand, in an era characterized by "city-branding" to an increasing extent assumes the shape of a commodity – a product to be displayed, compete and allure – the city *reflects* the logic of the commodity. This brings along, on the other hand, the fact that the city is turned into a spectacle in its more lexical-etymological sense of "visually striking display" (Oxford Online Dictionaries) – here, Debord argued that "the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence." (Thesis 36). This, he held to be the society of the spectacles' "most glaring superficial manifestation" (Thesis 24). In what follows I seek to provide a perspective on the emergence, logic and consequences of "the spectacle of the city" (Thesis 65).

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In times of fast and volatile changes and restructurings of the human condition, long-term "meta-processes" emerge as useful categories allowing for understandings of the contemporary conditions that are anchored in historical sensitivity (Krotz, 2007). In this paper I focus on how two such "meta-processes" – mediatization and commercialization – express themselves in relation to the city, how they conflate and condition the nature of the city. The thesis is that, even though the "productifying" (Ek & Hultman, 2007: 13) of the contemporary city can seem new and strange, it is a process that can be traced back to these long-term and overarching meta-processes. Mediatization means, on the one hand, that the presence of various technologies of communication and media institutions have become ubiquitous, leading social life to not only become unthinkable without them, but also to becoming dependent upon their *modus operandi* – or logics (Hjarvard, 2008). Commercialization, on the other hand, suggests not only that "the economy becomes more important" (Krotz, 2007: 258) but also that all dimensions of society is

pulled into a historical process of commodification – what Harvey called ”the commodification of everything” (Harvey, 2005: 165).

In this paper I argue that the contemporary city, located in-between these increasingly intensified and conflated meta-processes is given a narcissist and reality-detached nature. An intensified commercialization and the logic of the global market have created the need of the city to distinguish itself, to forward its “collective symbolic capital” (Harvey, 2012) in order to, as it is often argued “stimulate growth and secure welfare” (Ek, 2007: 106). As such the city becomes a brand and dependent upon the logic of the media and the symbol: the contemporary city is a “realm of the sign” (Teschfahoney & Schough, 2009: 142). The appealing flare beaming from the city’s mediated image – the city-as-brand – is juxtaposed to the actual crises taking place in the city-as-such (segregation, unemployment, criminality) and constitute the contours of the double nature of the contemporary city. It is taken to be “commonsense” that also the city should become a product in times of increasing competition on the global market (see e.g. Matson, 1994; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Anholt, 2007; Dinne, 2011). In *Comments to the Society of the Spectacle* (1988), Debord updated his analysis of the spectacle and argued that “reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien /.../ Society has officially declared itself to be spectacular.” (Debord, 1988: 4, 7). For some, the notion of the city as commodity has become so taken for granted that any criticism and resistance directed at it is considered “irrational” (Olin in Falkheimer, 2006: 129). Here, we need to remind ourselves that what is considered “commonsense” is not always “good sense”: the former is often deeply ideological and risk, as in our case, conceal real problems (Gramsci, 2005: 325-326).

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Among others (for example Baudrillard) Debord argued for ”the tendency of use value to fall” (Thesis 47). ”Exchange value is the [mercenary] of use value who ends up waging the war for himself.” (Thesis 46). This “new model” of the commodity, argues Naomi Klein, works in such a way that the use value, that is, the actual product and the need it satisfies always “backs off from the real product, the brand” (Klein, 2004: 47). For Klein, commodities have become “empty containers for the brands they represent” (ibid: 54): we remind ourselves through Debord that in the society of the spectacle ”the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence.” (Thesis 36). Thus, Feuerbach seemingly described the contemporary society when he in the mid 19th century observed that in the:

/.../ present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane. (Feuerbach in Debord)

This division and increased separation between elements of use and exchange in the commodity is given a unique expression in our commodity, the city. At its most extreme, as in the case when a lap of the sailing event *Americas' Cup* was bought and arranged by the city of Malmö during the fall of 2005, the logic of the dual nature of the commodity transferred to the city meant that 100 million SEK of tax payers money were spent on managing the city's brand while parts of the segregated communities were used as "volunteers" (Ek, 2007). The mediatized and commercialized city is no longer viewed by decision makers as polis (ibid), a place where decisions are made by citizens – but a commodity in need of a great image financed by the very welfare system it falsely represents.

The two-fold nature of the city-commodity experiences a separation and increasingly antagonistic relation between its constitutive elements – the city-as-such ("use"/"real" element) and the city-as-brand (exchange/symbolic element): the "container" may be in crisis but the brand promises salvation – what Jameson referred to as "the optical illusion of social harmony" (Jameson in Greenberg, 2010: 120).

## **Display Window 2.0**

The irony in focus in this paper is that, in an era characterized by "the commodification of everything" (Harvey, 2005: 165) it is not only more and more aspects of social life and nature that is reduced to reflections of the commodity, but also that "place" and the city itself is commodified (Ek & Hultman, 2007) and partake in the process of imitating the logic of the commodity. There is not only more and more commodities on display *in* the city – the city now displays itself. On the question of "what can be a brand?" the answer is an enthusiastic "anything: products, services, organizations, places and people. Even you." (Healy 2008: 6). Here, Corvellec observes how "windy places" are commercialized, branded and used for private profit in an increasingly deregulated energy market (2007: 127).

As a result of what Kavaratzis & Ashworth (2005), Anholt (2007) and Dinne (2011) describes as the increased competition between places and cities on the global market, the city must be "performed" (Makeham, 2005), become an aesthetic object (Zukin, 1997) and "implement a competitive identity" (Anholt, 2007: ch 5). In short, it must "image" itself in various display windows – display windows 2.0 – in order to, as Lorentz puts it – compete with other cities for

consumers' attention on a "global catwalk" (2009: 843). The affix 2.0 thus, refers not only to the obvious fact that "new media" and "web 2.0" are deployed in sophisticated attempts at managing the city's brand. The new display window has an ironic nature. We have known the city as an increasingly commercialized *medium*: "Everything is facade and display windows" (Tesfahuney & Scough, 2009: 133). Here Rem Koolhaas analysis of New York shows that the city is the place where "fantasy, synthetic feeling and pleasure" is cultivated so as to inspire people to consumption. But the analysis cannot stop there. The place which for Benjamin constituted various "miniature worlds" (1973) in its capacity as a medium becomes, in the development towards "display window 2.0" itself mediated as a commodity. The role of the city is no longer to just care for the circulation of capital but also to display itself in the best possible way, and take place in the display windows next to increasingly obscure commodities. In a quote directed to urban decision makers, marketing researcher Matson holds:

*Yes – a city can market like Pepsi and Coke – as consumer marketing techniques have worked for Pepsi and Coke – they can work for you! (Matson 1994: 41. Italics in original).*

### **Postpolitics and the New Display Window**

The city has become as commodity – the logic of the commodity is now the logic of the city. The fetish character of the commodity, Marx argued, is constituted by the fact that it presents itself as something banal and trivial when it, in fact, conceals social relations (Marx, 1990: ch 1:4). As regards the social relations of the city – the city-as-such – it is the place where market fundamentalism exist in its most intensified form. Harvey holds that:

*We increasingly live in divided, fragmented, and conflict-prone cities. /.../ which increasingly become cities of fortified fragments, of gated communities and privatized public spaces kept under constant surveillance. (Harvey 2012: 14-15).*

Contemporary discourses on the exclusion of political alternatives (Zizek, 1999: 198) and the consolidation of the idea that society has reached its "end station" (Tesfahuney & Dahlstedt, 2010: 11) is embodied in the fact that the city-as-such can be located in crisis (unemployment, segregation, criminality, gentrification) while the city-as-brand banter about possibilities, security, work and attractions. The idea of the city as a political, public arena is hollowed out (Thörn, 2006: 75). The process in which the communicative affordances of the new "social" media landscape are utilized as new display windows managing an image of seemingly utopic

cities signifies the subtle but highly political effort to ascribe the city as non-political (cf. Ek, 2007).

”In all its specific forms”, suggests Debord, ”the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life.” (Thesis 6). The image of the city, continues Ek (2007), is political and ideological in the sense that it claims to “represent the city when it in fact represent a strongly selective and partial (ideal) image” (2007: 97). The poor, as noted by Short & Kim is “seldom discussed and never presented” (Short & Kim in Mukhtar-Landgren, 2009: 158). But the image of the city – the city-as-brand – is also political in the sense that it consolidates the city as a *non-political* utopia. The city as spectacle – the city that became a commodity that became a brand and lost itself in its own mirror image like Narcissus embody an extreme commodity fetishism as regards the extent to which the social relations of the “commodity” systematically are pushed aside. In this respect the city is stronghold of postpolitics. The public resources by urban decision makers spent on “city-branding” – the “self-portrait of power” (Thesis 24) – (Ågren shows that in 2009 the city of Stockholm spent 47 million SEK on various marketing campaigns to strengthen the image of the “The Capital of Scandinavia”) establishes an image of the city as the “ultimate space of experiences” (Tesfahuney & Schough, 2009: 120) while neoliberal structural transformations pan out behind the curtains. During one of the worst years of the crisis years of New York City, 1977, serial killer “Son of Sam” roamed the streets, one out of four New Yorkers lived in poverty and unemployment rates were the highest in the country (Greenberg, 2008) the first institutionalized city-branding campaign “I Love New York” was launched and a new “hegemonic vision” was established in the media and “out-of-towners” (ibid: 7). Debord observes that ”the tendency to replace the real with the artificial is ubiquitous /.../ Everything will be more beautiful than before, for the tourists’ cameras. (Debord, 1988: 19).

### **The Spectacle of the City**

A conflation of the meta-processes mediatization and commercialization (Krotz, 2007) can be observed in the fact that the city has turned into a commodity: the city has been ”productified” (Ek & Hultman, 2007). The city becomes a *reflection* of the commodity form. In order for the city to compete with other, similar products it must distinguish itself “from other products in the same line” (Bernays, 1928: 86). Within ”city-branding” the argument is that the increasing competition of the global market leaves the city with no choice: in order to use Anholt’s analogy – nobody cares about the content of the ”book” – it is the cover that counts – the city must acquire a ”competitive identity” (Anholt, 2007: 1; see also Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Like other commodities witnessing the fall of their use value (Thesis 47) in relation to the

exchange- and symbolic value, the city must mobilize its collective symbolic capital (Harvey, 2012) and become a brand. The city, previously a medium for commodities is mediated as a “visually striking” postpolitical arrangement in the new display windows – the city is a spectacle.

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