



Photo: Daniel Bertolic

Bread & Circuses

Without doubt the most important event to have occurred this century, and the one for which the fewest explanations have been ventured.
Guy Debord on 'The Spectacle', 1988

WHEN FRENCH PHILOSOPHER Guy Debord's seminal text of the Situationist movement, *The Society of the Spectacle*, was published in 1967, there were no personal computers, no smartphones, no social media, no video games or streaming services, no remote conferencing or email. The foundations of the internet were barely in development, and it wouldn't be widely available for another three decades.

If you wanted to converse with someone, you either called them on the phone or met with them in person. If you wanted to take a 'selfie,' you set up your film-loaded camera on a timer or asked someone else for help.

Arguably, however, Guy Debord saw it all coming—six decades ago. Moreover, in the intervening years since *The Society of the Spectacle* was published, his unsparring critique of capitalism and consumer culture has only become more relevant.

The term 'bread and circuses' was first mentioned in the *Satires* of the early second century Roman poet Juvenal. Juvenal coined the term *panem et circenses* to describe "the only remaining interest" of a populace no longer involved in political life, having been placated by government-supplied free wheat, along with circus games and other forms of mass entertainment.

A well-known example of the latter are the Roman Colosseum's gladiator contests, chariot races, and other spectacular events—which may have even included mock sea battles in the artificially flooded stadium.

The Colosseum compared favorably in capacity with most large, modern football stadiums, with seating for up to about 80,000 spectators, but it was not the largest stadium in the Roman world—a distinction which went to the fittingly named Circus Maximus, which could hold over 250,000.

In 1967—the year Debord’s book was published—the first large outdoor rock concert, the Monterey Pop Festival, was held. And while Jimi Hendrix setting his guitar on fire and smashing it onstage might not compare as a spectacle to the 1,000 public executions that were held annually in the Colosseum, neither could the attendance records in Roman times compare to the size of communal spectacles made possible by the advent of live television. (An estimated 180 million people, for example, watched the state funeral of John F. Kennedy.)

It’s instructive to our own times to ponder what precipitated the institution of *panem et circenses* during the Roman Empire.

The construction of the Colosseum began in 72 CE under order of Emperor Vespasian. Political unrest was rife at the time, with the six preceding emperors having either been murdered or forced to commit suicide. In contrast, Vespasian died of natural causes, and arguably ‘bread and circuses’ played a large part in helping to curb the violence.

The Roman Empire’s power depended on the resources of its far-flung colonies, its lucrative trade routes, and above all, its well-trained and provisioned legions.

All of these were collapsing at the time, and in a sense the spectacles offered to the impoverished populace were representations of a Roman power that no longer existed beyond the high walls of the amphitheater. ‘Bread’ was intended to keep people working and ‘circuses’ to keep them from revolting.

If this sounds a lot like the present day, especially in America—the home of Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and Silicon Valley, and the birthplace of television, the Internet, and many other wonders of the Electronic Age—it’s hardly a coincidence.

Once confined to periodic orgies of patriotism and violence, ‘The Spectacle’ is now so ubiquitous as to be all but invisible—found in TV, the internet, and virtually (pun intended) every screen you gaze at.

While such innovations certainly bring positive benefits to society, by their very nature they distance people from reality and the real world, substituting representation for substance and image for experience. As Debord wrote, we gradually become “spectators of our own lives,” alienated not only from others but from ourselves.

Capitalism’s multifarious means of distracting and pacifying the masses may have evolved immensely since Roman times, but it has the same ultimate goal: preserving the dominance of those in power.

Arguably, technology has even usurped the position religion once served in society, as what Marx called the ‘opiate of the masses.’ Moreover, just as religion made the power structure appear to be ordained by God Himself, technology makes it appear to be the natural, inevitable result of evolution.

Ironically, in his later years, Debord not only despaired that his nightmare vision of a completely ‘intermediated’ world seemed to be coming to pass, but he began to suspect that the exploitation of his ideas by others had helped ‘The Spectacle’ assimilate them.

In 1994, at age 62, Debord succumbed to chronic alcoholism and depression and committed suicide—a sad, unwitting victim, one is tempted to conclude, of the very ‘Spectacle’ he sought to warn us about. ■