The Spell of Capital
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‘Revolution makes the sunshine’, Guy Debord (2008, p. 94) writes in A Sick Planet (La Planète Malade). At first sight, the latter appears as a rather peripheral text in Debord's oeuvre. Written in 1971, its dozen or so pages were intended to figure in the thirteenth volume of The Situationist International that never saw the light of day, due to the dissolution of the SI shortly before its projected publication. A Sick Planet was published posthumously in 2004. However, this short text constitutes a key moment in Debord's oeuvre. A Sick Planet brings to the fore Debord's thought as ‘environmentalism’ that is as constant as it is complex. That is to say, the crucial significance of A Sick Planet is not that it is, at first sight, literally, a reflection of the state of ‘the environment’. In it, Debord, in fact, dismisses the emerging ‘green’ movement: its lamentations of ‘pollution’ are themselves part of a spectacle that does not hesitate to mesmerize us with images of its auto-destruction, the ultimate tautology of the spectacle’s own disintegration. Rather, what emerges in A Sick Planet is the intricate entanglement of seemingly mutually exclusive discourses: on the one hand, a vitalism (or a vitalist materialism) and on the other, and less surprisingly, a historical materialism; with a third discourse spanning these two: that of anthropology. I use the notions of ‘vitalism’ and ‘anthropology’ here in fairly broad strokes. Obviously, Debord's thinking does not explicitly proceed from or engage with a (Francophone) vitalist tradition (that would span from Bergson to Canguilhem to Deleuze)—at least evidently not to the extent that his thinking is rooted in historical materialism. Nor does he engage extensively with contemporary anthropological theories (e.g. Levi-Strauss or Leroi-Gourhan). However, in this chapter I argue that Debord's thinking—in particular in his conceptualization of ‘environmentalism’—does,
and significantly so, dovetail with figures of thought that are at the heart of philosophical vitalism and modern anthropology (i.e. notions of ‘life’, ‘becoming’, ‘transience’, plural humanity, to name but a few). It is in the light of such perhaps surprising parallels that I approach Debord’s work here. Debord’s analyses of the environmental catastrophe reveal the set of Borromean rings (the interlocking of vitalism-historical materialism-anthropology) that is at the heart of his thinking and that is vital to its understanding, in particular that of the ‘later’ Debord of the 1970s–1990s (i.e. his very last televisual work, the 1994 ‘documentary’ Guy Debord, son art, son temps that is foremost a montage of news footage showing the devastation of the human eco-system and its psycho-pathological costs). In what follows, I will provide a chiasmic reading of Debord’s canonical The Society of the Spectacle and the lesser-known, but nonetheless crucial short essay A Sick Planet that shows the peculiar intersection of the vocabularies of vitalism, historical materialism (in particular the concept of reification), and anthropology in Debord’s work.

In this chapter, I will tentatively trace the central narrative of Debord’s work: that of the history of modernity as the history of reification, which, for Debord, ultimately signifies the reification of life itself. As we will see, this narrative runs as follows: the spectacle signifies reification in its absolute form, the materialization of the world of commodity relations, or better still: commodity relations made world. The spectacle does not so much refer to the image as mediator between man and his world, but to the image-as-commodity turned into man’s very environment. Debord’s notion of reification dovetails with Lukács’s analyses in History and Class Consciousness (quotes from which serve as an exergue in The Society of the Spectacle). As Lukács argues, the dominant form of commodity exchange influences ‘the total outer and inner life of society’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 84, emphasis in the original); the extent to which commodity exchange determines the totality of (social) life is not merely a quantitative matter: the reifying effect of the commodity form ‘permeat[es] every expression of life’ (p. 84). Foremost, the reification that results from commodity relations is a qualitative matter: it touches upon ‘the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression’ (p. 86). Commodity exchange thus becomes man’s ‘second nature’ (p. 86). As Lukács writes: ‘reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange’; reification implies that all ‘natural relations, which exhibit human relations’ are replaced with reified relations (p. 91). Reification comes at the price of generalized separation: of producer and means of production, of primary social relations, and, ultimately, of the
human subject and life itself. In Debord, this history of reification, the vocabulary of historical materialism, is grafted upon, and perhaps paradoxically so, anthropological and vitalistic thought. The history of reification is the history of life itself: ‘life’ is negatively revealed insofar as it falls prey to reification; yet, it is within this same history that life can be restored to its (a-historical) quintessence, as pure transience. The history of life itself—of *bios*—reveals itself as the history of man—of the *anthropos*—insofar as man, as the producer of (his own) irreversible temporality, reflects on life as pure transience: man is the consciousness of life as pure becoming, Debord thus makes a very complex (tripartite: vitalist, historical materialist, and anthropological) claim that, if taken seriously, forces us to rethink Debord’s work as a sustained and fundamental work of *bio-politics*: on the reification and subsequent politicization of *bios*. Such a reading of Debord allows us to shed a new light on the Situationist Debord (as it allows us to think of Situationism as a radical environmentalism positing the primacy of the environment over the subject, and as a bio-political project: of living versus dead time, of living environment). Moreover, it allows us to avoid reading the later Debord merely as a melancholy writer, deploring the passing of the *enfants perdus* of Parisian bohemia, the waning of historical knowledge, of poetry, of ‘good wine’—but as a radical environmentalist who proposes a wholly original holistic vitalism against the spectacle’s automated catastrophe.

Finally, as we will see throughout this chapter, such a reading also situates Debord in close proximity to the German-speaking proponents of Western Marxism. In particular, *The Society of Spectacle* echoes Adorno’s (posthumously published) *The Idea of Natural History* (Adorno, 1984). In it Adorno attempts to ‘dialectically overcome the usual antithesis of nature and history [...] [by] pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference’ (Adorno, 1984, p. 111). He does so by tracing such mediated differences in his contemporaries Lukács and Benjamin. In Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, according to Adorno, we find the notion of a ‘second nature’. The second nature that environs modern man is a commodified world—a world of things, world of convention—created by man, yet, as such, lost to him for its intrinsic meaninglessness (‘this world supplies neither a meaning for the subject in search of a goal nor sensuous immediacy as material for the acting subject’, Adorno paraphrases Lukács, p. 117). For Adorno, Lukács demonstrates a dialectics similar to his own undertaking. The petrified life of Lukács’s ‘second nature’ is thoroughly historical; inversely, what appears as nature is nothing but petrified history (p. 118). It is Benjamin, who, in *The Idea of Natural History*, solves the riddle
of the chiasmic relation between history and nature: nature, in Adorno’s reading of Benjamin, ‘carries the mark of transience’ (p. 120, emphasis added). Because nature is transitory, ‘it includes the element of history’ (p. 120). The passage of time reveals itself to be the minimal unit of history: history itself is rooted in ‘the basic quality of the transience of the earthly’ (p. 121). Thus, ‘all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being’ (p. 121). In Debord, we see how, in a sense, Adorno’s aborted project of reformulating the idea of natural history is picked up and completed: in *The Society of the Spectacle* and *A Sick Planet*, the spell of the young Lukács’s ‘second nature’ (history as the history of reification) can only be broken by means of recognizing the irreducible transience of life (of human life as transience), which, as the *conditio sine qua non* of history, is alone capable of negating history’s petrification under the capitalist mode of production.

1. Dialectical Vitalism: *The Society of the Spectacle*

In the opening section of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that ‘any critique of the spectacle must expose it as a visible negation of life’ (1995, p. 14, emphasis added). In fact, Debord’s insistence throughout *The Society of the Spectacle* on the notion of ‘life’ is significant: the critique of the spectacle is a truly titanic task in that it faces the spectacle dubbed by Debord as ‘the autonomous movement of non-life’ (p. 12). At the heart of *The Society of the Spectacle* we find the ultimate antagonism life/death whereby the spectacle ‘in its generality is a concrete inversion of life’ (p. 12). For Debord, the spectacle thus signifies ‘the absolute denial of life’ (p. 18, emphasis added). As such, it is not so much a pseudo-theology—a purely contemplative askesis, a false idolatry or belated idealism—as a fully materialized negation of life that is ‘no longer projected onto the heavens, but finds its place instead within material life itself’ (p. 18). The spectacle’s negation of life is not a form of transcendence of life, it is as concrete as it is absolute in that it introduces the negation of life within life itself. Debord is categorical: spectacle is not mere ideology, it is the *materialization of ideology, Weltanschauung* made flesh*’ (p. 150). As the autonomous movement of non-life, the spectacle parasitizes, drains, and in the end completely phagocytizes material life. If, as we will see, for Debord, the spectacle signifies the reification of life, it can only do so if it simultaneously signifies nothing less than the negation of life itself.

How to read the notion of ‘life’ in Debord? Perhaps surprisingly, we find in Debord’s work a peculiar vitalism, an oxymoronic ‘dialectical vitalism’
that affirms life and historicizes it. On closer inspection, this vitalism consists of three main, apparently conflicting, components. Firstly, we might claim that, in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord remains faithful to the anthropological project of the young Marx: he poses the life of the human species as that of social being. Secondly, it is man’s sociality, as we will see, that makes him a historical being. Thirdly, by a dialectical reversal of fortune, it is this historicization of life that allows for a consciousness of ‘life’ as it occurs beyond the realm of human existence, and crucially for Debord, as enjoyment or consummation of life as such, that is to say: of the life of man as irreversibly transient, as becoming. It is at the latter point where Debord departs from Marx: he heralds a vitalism that is emphatically non-productivist. *The Society of the Spectacle* demonstrates the ontology behind the Situationist slogan *Ne travaillez jamais*: ultimately, the significance of the life of human beings does not reside in collective production, but in the seizing and subsequent enjoyment of ‘life’ as pure transience, as the pure passing of time. From *A Sick Planet* onwards, Debord will move more and more towards a holistic vitalism: once ‘life’ exceeds human life in Debord, it is seen by Debord as part of its living environment. That is to say, Debord does not so much abandon a dialectical or historicist perspective, but in fact demonstrates that the historical development of the spectacle, as the acme of the history of the capitalist mode of production, culminates in the antagonism life/death, vital transience/reification, and leaves no other formula for resistance than a holistic vitalism. The latter is reflected in Debord’s political project, outlined in *The Society of the Spectacle* and explicitly articulated in his later writings: the properly bio-political affirmation of the consummation of life against the spectacle, which consists of environmental, anthropological, as well as epistemological positions. As we will see, in particular in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord emphasizes the concurrence between the spectacle, as the reification of life itself, and Western philosophical modernity. In that sense, Debord’s (later) work can be read as a vindication of the singular (and singularly finite) life of the *anthropos* against the universalist abstractions of the *humanitas* (and a critique of reification as universalizing reified universality).

For Debord, the spectacle is an automaton: ‘the spectacle is simply the economic realm developing for itself’, he concisely argues in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995, p. 16). The spectacle is foremost the separation of the realm of power located in economic production from its living environment. At the root of the spectacle we find the specialization of power. The spectacle is fundamentally fetishistic: ‘thus the most modern aspect of the spectacle is also at bottom the most archaic’, Debord writes (p. 18). In
Debord we thus find at the same time a historical narrative (the spectacle as the dialectical development of reified power), as well as an anthropological narrative: the spectacle, in all of its stages, repeats a foundational moment of cleavage within the life of the society of man. This moment of ‘self-cleavage’ (p. 18) of the anthropos is a double-bind: it gives birth to modern, Vitruvian man (as universal subject) and heralds his inevitable extinction, since the condition for his coming into being ultimately is the reification of life itself. Debord here resonates with Horkheimer and Adorno’s narration of Odysseus’s estrangement from nature: ‘Odysseus, they write, like the heroes of all true novels after him, throws himself away, so to speak, on order to win himself’. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 38). In Dialectic of Enlightenment, man, as personified by Odysseus, pays the ultimate price for his cunning triumph over nature, since it is only by denying himself as nature that Odysseus domesticates its powers. Odysseus thus ‘saves his life by making himself disappear’ (p. 47); after his neutralization of the Sirens, he re-emerges as Nobody: he has exchanged himself as living being for the mere token ‘man’. Therefore, Horkheimer and Adorno conclude:

With the denial of nature in human beings, not only the telos of one’s own life becomes confused and opaque. At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive—social progress, the heightening of material and intellectual forces, indeed, consciousness itself—become void and the enthronement of the means as the end. (P. 42)

Horkheimer and Adorno point to a fundamental moment of cleavage between man and nature, or better still: between man and man-as-nature. The price Odysseus has to pay is, in a sense, death by reification.

Throughout his work, Debord scrutinizes (historical) opportunities to restore this (self-) cleavage, to restore the anthropos as that being that mirrors life itself through his enjoyment of it. In this sense, for Debord, the spectacle is inseparable from the rise of the modern state and modern philosophy’s complicity with it, in its attempts at universalizing the Western humanitas. The Hobbesian moment is the spectacle’s foundational moment: it is precisely in Hobbes that ‘life’ in the state of nature is famously defined as the absence of society, of industry, of knowledge ‘and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’ (Hobbes, 1998, p. 84). Debord performs a détournement of Hobbes’ anthropological narrative: the state is edified
against life, the state is the automatization of non-life against man and his living environment. Debord argues:

The spectacle is self-generated, and it makes up its own rules: it is a spurious form of the sacred. And it makes no secret of what it is, namely, hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness, thanks to an increasing productivity based on an ever more refined division of labor, an ever greater communication of machine-governed gestures, and an ever-widening market. (Debord, 1995, p. 20)

The complicity of Western philosophy with the unbridled development of state power, for Debord, lies in the fact that modern philosophy provides the epistemological matrix for the profoundly tautological character of state power. The spectacle is nothing but the state, insofar as the state culminates and consolidates the capitalist mode of production, presenting the spectacle of its own power. The state offers nothing but the spectacle of reification: reification of power, reification through the production of commodities, reification of social relations, reification of life itself. By privileging vision, modern thought posits the subject as a contemplative subject (p. 17). At the same time, post-Cartesian philosophy offers the epistemological matrix for the reification of the lifeworld and a naturalization of the separateness of state power. The isolation of Vitruvian man from his living environment is co-extensive with his unconditional acceptance of state power. The universal subject of Western modernity, the humanitas, thus universalizes the reification of and by state power.

2. Time’s Crooked Arrow

The anthropological narrative in The Society of the Spectacle is doubled with the historical narrative of the reification of the life of the anthropos. Debord’s peculiar ‘dialectical vitalism’ consists of the minute analysis of the stages of an ever-tightening [dialectics of the] reification of life. That is to say, Debord scrutinizes the latter’s self-contradicting logic: in The Society of the Spectacle he appears to be on the outlook for those moments where the history of reification, as the history of the negation of life, finds itself, in turn, negated. It is in those moments (the sumptuous banquets of the Renaissance, the proliferation of leisure time of the post-war years) that he identifies potential modes for the resurgence of a vitalism that is potentially revolutionary. At the basis of the reification of life, according to Debord,
we find what he calls ‘the temporalization of man’ (p. 92). Again, he starts from the triad anthropology-dialectics-vitalism: the ‘temporalization of man’ refers to the socio-cultural history of man doubled as ‘natural history’ (p. 92). It is the anthropological a priori of the socialization of man that turns him into a temporal being. It is as a social being that man becomes endowed with a consciousness of time, that is to say, for Debord, a consciousness of life as transience. Social life, for Debord, originally is organized according to distinct temporalities: cyclical, eschatological, etc. It is thus social life that installs the collective consciousness of time’s passing as the proper mode of being of man. In this sense, the history of man, the history of the *anthropos* as a social being, is always already ‘natural history’: *bios* reflecting (upon) itself. ‘Time’s natural basis, the sensory data of its passage, becomes human and social in so much as it exists for human beings’, Debord writes (p. 116). In *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord underlines the dialectics of this ‘natural history’. Time bifurcates, on the one hand, into history as the history of reification; on the other hand, into the understanding, and foremost consummation of life as irreversible transience, as the pure becoming of temporality. As such, the latter resists reification by becoming a *plurality of times*.

Debord’s dialectical vitalism reveals itself to be profoundly bio-political in that what might joyously await us at its outcome is a ‘communism’ that is understood as the ‘withering away of the social measurement of time, socially necessary labour time, in favour of an individual and collective irreversible time which is playful in character and which encompasses, simultaneously within it, a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times’ (p. 116). For Debord communism heralds the end of reification: insofar as communism heralds the end of the history of reification, it discards the (falsely) universalizing aspirations of reification. In doing so, communism restores the *anthropos* to the immediate enjoyment of *bios* for *each according to his own*. That is to say: under communism, the immediate enjoyment of life takes the form of a necessarily plural becoming. The history of political modernity can thus be read as ‘the tireless pursuit of a monopoly of historical life’, first by the absolute-monarchist and later the bourgeois state (p. 103). For Debord, the narrative of political modernity is the monopolization of irreversible time, of the conversion of transience into history understood as the history of state and reification.

Pnce more, the peculiar logic of Debord’s dialectical vitalism demonstrates that the struggle over the ‘ownership of history’ (p. 96) is a tortuous one. It is within the history of reification that we encounter epochs within which the cleavage between *anthropos* and *bios* is restored, albeit
momentarily. The pivotal example of such an epoch, for Debord, is the Italian Renaissance ‘in the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the arts of the festival, life came to recognize itself as the enjoyment of the passing of time. But this enjoyment of transience would turn out to be transient itself’ (p. 103, emphasis added). Over and again time’s crooked arrow turns against life itself. The very movement that temporarily re-unites bios and anthropos in the Renaissance festival, at the conjunction of a power formation that is not quite the state and a mercantilism that is not quite capitalism, that is to say: the movement of reification itself, finally paves the way for the emerging bourgeoisie. ‘The victory of the bourgeoisie was the victory of a profoundly historical time’, Debord argues (p. 104). The decisive dialectical ruse of the bourgeoisie consists of the reification of irreversible time, of the reification of the time of life itself via the production of commodities. ‘The irreversible time of production is first and foremost the measure of commodities’, Debord claims (p. 107). According to Debord, this appropriation of life’s defining temporality is twofold. On the one hand, the production of commodities signifies the rationalization of the production process, the breakdown of the transient temporality of life into measurable, exchangeable, and thus universalizable units. Again, Debord finds himself at Lukács’s side, who makes a similar case in History and Class Consciousness. In it, Lukács sketches the transformation of (man’s consciousness and use of) time in an environment constituted by the reifying effects of commodity production: in such an environment ‘time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable things’ (Lukács, 1971, p. 90). Essentially, Lukács argues, time becomes space: it is ‘transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space’ (p. 90); time’s fundamental fluidity and transience are morphed into a static juxtaposition of exchangeable, quantifiable units: the reification of time entails its, literal, objectification.

On the other hand, the consumption of commodities, the generalization of commodity fetishism, subsumes any remaining or freed up irreversible time: ‘the development of capitalism meant the unification of irreversible time on a world scale’ (Debord, 1995, p. 107). In The Society of the Spectacle Debord underlines the profoundly antagonistic character of the leisure time that is freed up in consumerist capitalism: as the time liberated from the impetus of production it holds the promise of the amalgamation of anthropos and bios, of the enjoyment of life’s transience; however, leisure time, rather than being devoted to the consummation of life, is entirely devoted to the consumption of commodities. Perversely, as Debord argues, in the society of the spectacle, it is time itself that becomes consumable.
‘The consumable disguise of the time-as-commodity’ effectively suppressed any qualitative dimension of time, that is to say: any potential for a non-reified consummation of life. Again, the spectacle shows its blatant tautological nature. What is ultimately consumed in the society of the spectacle is the spectacle of the consumption of time, and consequently of life itself” (p. 112). In the society of the spectacle, we consume images of a reified life: ‘all that once was directly lived has become mere representation’, famously says the very first thesis from The Society of the Spectacle (p. 12). It is through the reification of the temporality of bios that the spectacle becomes, in Debord, the ultimate incarnation of bio-power: the reified time of the spectacle signifies ‘that augmented survival in which daily lived experience embodies no free choices and is subject, no longer to the natural order, but to a pseudo-nature constructed by means of alienated labor’ (p. 110). Spectacle is the perfection of the management of life itself in that it creates a pseudo-time and thus a pseudo-life that is perfectly contained within a perfectly reified lifeworld. It constitutes a properly spectacular bio-politics insofar as it sells off as the image of authentic life the very life of the anthropos that it has negated. In particular, it is the falsely ritualistic ‘pseudo-cyclical’ time of leisure (holidays, fashion, sports events, etc.) that is crowned with the aura of authenticity: yet even in such special moments, ostensibly moments of life, the only thing being generated, the only thing to be seen and reproduced, is the spectacle ‘and what has been passed off as authentic life turns out to be merely a life more authentically spectacular’ (p. 112). Despite a difference in tone (Debord’s axiomatic formalism hardly resembles Adorno’s melancholy), Debord appears to be in close proximity to the Adorno of Minima Moralia. ‘Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer’, Adorno writes (2005, p. 15). For Adorno, too, ‘life has become appearance’: the relation between life and production, in the contemporary mode of production, has become irreversibly dissymmetrical; life itself has been debased to a mere ‘ephemeral appearance’ of production, which has now become ‘absolute’ and by consequence ‘monstrous’ (perhaps foremost in the sense of: living a life of its own, a life independent from man—the life of the artefact that has become the automaton) (p. 15, emphasis added).

For Debord, the spectacle holds one final, devastating contradiction: the more man’s environment is man-made (that is to say, reified, supplanted by the infinite procession of commodities), the more man becomes separated from his living environment and ultimately life itself. ‘Though separated from his product’, Debord writes, ‘man is more and more, and even more
powerfully, the producer of every detail of his world. The closer his life comes to being his own creation, the more drastically he is cut off from that life’ (Debord, 1995, p. 24). As automaton, the spectacle congeals ‘everything that in human activity exists in a fluid state’ (p. 26), that is to say, for Debord life itself as pure transience. As ‘self-movement’ (p. 26) the spectacle expropriates the anthropos from his world and the living environment, is supplanted by the morbid fruits of dead labour. ‘The spectacle is a map of this new world’, Debord claims (p. 23). ‘We already live in the era of the self-destruction of the environment’, we read in The Society of the Spectacle (p. 123): the reification of the environment irreducibly signifies the negation of ‘environment’ as such.

The Spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed; it likewise erases the dividing line between true and false, repressing all directly lived truth beneath the real presence of the falsehood maintained by the organization of appearances. (P. 153)

The spectacle simply is the environment of the false, and as we will see, will also hold up a false environmentalism. Debord’s peculiar environmentalism, as laid out in A Sick Planet, thus proceeds from his peculiar vitalism: the disappearance of the lifeworld is the ultimate logic of spectacle, the outcome of a long and tortuous dialectics. Life has a history: ‘natural history’ as the history of man insofar as he represents foremost life reflecting (upon) itself. Yet that history remains grafted upon a fundamental vitalism that proves to be the driving force behind any fundamental contestation of the spectacle: to live without dead time.

3. **A Sick Planet: Life as Revolutionary Wildcard**

In A Sick Planet Debord draws environmentalism, insofar as it encompasses biopolitical and vitalist assumptions, as a revolutionary wildcard. As Debord argues in The Real Split in the International, the stakes are high in the years that immediately follow 1968: these represent a rare and precarious syncope in the dialectics of reification (Debord and Saguinetti, 2003). A Sick Planet argues for the politicization of bios as a means of resistance (and perhaps the only viable resistance left) against the spectacle’s morbid politics of reification. It is this wager that continues to be the ground of Debord’s later polemics, films, and writing. A Sick Planet addresses the
issue of environmental ‘pollution’, as the idiom of the early 1970s has it. Debord’s modest text is in fact contemporary with the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* and uses much of its terminology. In it, Debord stresses the fundamental antagonistic nature of ‘pollution’: the ‘struggle against pollution’ becomes an intrinsic part of spectacle’s subsistence—albeit as a palliative of sorts—and it refers to a ‘real process’ that effectively rips through the seamlessness of that ideology (Debord, 2008, p. 77). Even though, in perfect line with his analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord again and again emphasizes the eminent *materiality* of the impending ecological catastrophe, environmental pollution is in fact caught up in a dialectical process. Or perhaps better: what goes under the name of ‘pollution’, for Debord, is *the* dialectical moment that exposes the mutual entanglement of history and living matter (and brings both of them to their conclusion). The ecological catastrophe exposes the spectacle as an eminently biopolitical project. ‘Pollution’ is the name for two fundamentally antagonistic movements between which ‘the current moment’ oscillates. ‘The current moment’ is that of ‘the supreme stage of commodity production’ and, simultaneously, ‘the project of its total negation’. The latter movement for Debord is again bifurcated: the historical-revolutionary project of the negation of spectacle runs parallel to the negation of spectacle through the environmental catastrophe. ‘Pollution’ becomes a veritable revolutionary wild card. As a keen gambler, for Debord, the question is to know how to use the wild card. This is, I argue, exactly what is at stake in *A Sick Planet*: how to play the wild card of environmental catastrophe in the revolutionary critique of spectacle; how, as good dialecticians, to draw lessons from the idiom of vitality, materiality and *Umwelt* that imposes itself in ‘this historical moment’. The ‘historical moment’ Debord refers to, is the post-68 momentum: ‘the moment when it becomes impossible for capitalism to carry on working’ (p. 77). This moment is antagonistic in its own right. On the one hand, spectacle, along historical-dialectical lines, produces the new proletariat (of disgruntled consumers, workers, youth, minorities and women) in opposition to its totality; on the other hand, there is reification’s perhaps unanticipated offshoot of ‘pollution’ that negatively affects proletariat and spectacle alike—a different totality: the totality of living matter. Since Debord remains a cunning dialectician, in *A Sick Planet* this cleavage folds back onto itself: it exposes the spectacle as a self-contradictory process that colonizes life and its inestimable habitats, only to ultimately negate these. As the ultimate stage in the history of reification, the spectacle turns the tables on historicity itself.
Therefore, Debord underlines that the environmental critique of the spectacle should not be confused with an essentially conservative aestheticism, heralding quality-of-life issues. Debord writes in *A Sick Planet*:

The problem of the degeneration of the totality of the natural and human environment has already ceased to present itself in terms of a loss of *quality*, be it aesthetic or of any other kind; the problem has now become the more fundamental one of whether a world that pursues such a course can preserve its material existence’. (2008, p. 79, emphasis added)

He vehemently rejects the analyses of those whom he brands ‘backward-looking gas-bags’—the ‘staunch defenders of good cooking’—who offer nothing but an *aesthetic critique* that remains firmly within the logic of reification of the spectacle. In *A Sick Planet*, Debord continues the critique of the society of the spectacle as the critique of the *totality* of commodity relations; yet, this totality now in fact comprises its own material possibility of existence. As the materialization of ideology, the spectacle produces the environmental catastrophe that threatens to destroy the very possibility of ideological embodiment itself. The materialization of the spectacle comes at the expense of the material conditions of life itself. It is the metabolism of the spectacle itself, the process of reification that pumps life into the spectacle itself that threatens to short-circuit its own material survival. In its ultimate stage, the spectacle touches upon the limits of the future of organic life per se.

In *A Sick Planet*, Debord apparently has recourse to *The Blue Marble*, the iconic photograph of the Earth taken by the crew of Apollo 17, which plays such an important role in the spectacle’s own imaginary: from the space race to the notion of a unified humanity to its palliative use of the spectre of pollution. He presents to us our sick planet to demonstrate how the spectacle now dictates the ‘transformation of the conditions of life on Earth’ (p. 78). Just when spectacle effectively ‘globalizes’ our world by reifying it, as exemplified in the poster of *The Blue Marble*, it simultaneously lays bare the Earth as a *living ecosystem*. Once more, the spectacle appears as fundamentally alien to an original vitalism. The world of the society of the spectacle is determined by a part of itself that ontologically remains exterior to it (p. 81). Over and again, Debord asserts the self-negating logic of the spectacle: it kills the social organism upon which it is grafted, thereby revealing its own irreducible materiality. (Debord’s assertion of the spectacle’s ‘limits to growth’ has nothing moralizing: it is to be taken in dead earnestness.)
For Debord, ‘our moment’ simply proves that the history of reification has reached its limits. That is to say, the impending ecological catastrophe shows that its limits are not so much quantitative—in fact, the search for new markets is limitless, as Debord contends—but qualitative: as the ultimate stage in the history of reification, the spectacle is simply at odds with life. Thus, in *A Sick Planet*, Debord describes what he calls the ‘terrors of the year 2000’: the pollution not just of the atmosphere and waters, but also the ubiquity of noise, plastic debris, modified food, urban sprawl and proliferation of mental illness (p. 80). Debord paints a psycho-pathological *Umwelt* of social relations now irreparably damaged in their very materiality. The ‘qualitative’ here does not refer to the ‘aesthetic quality’ mourned over by the aforementioned ‘backward-looking gas-bags’: the qualitative simply is the material according to Debord. ‘The qualitative is the most decisive dimension of real progress’ (p. 82), he argues. The spectacle, as the ultimate stage in the history of reification, recomposes the world as false environment. Debord writes: ‘a society that is ever more sick, but ever more powerful, has recreated the world—everywhere and in concrete form—as the environment and backdrop of its sickness: it has created a sick planet’ (p. 81).

In *A Sick Planet* Debord attempts to formulate an equally entangled proletariat whose agency is crucially grafted upon its *bios*. This is what, for Debord, constitutes a properly *materialist demand* for revolutionary change: the ecological catastrophe represents ‘an immense motive for revolt, a material requirement of the exploited just as vital as the struggle of nineteenth-century proletarians for the right to eat’ (p. 82). The ‘materialist demand’ is that of an environmental justice or sustainability in the literal sense of the very possibility of the material subsistence of life and its manifold environments. As we have seen, such a vitalist-materialist demand is no less engrained in a historical-dialectical movement since it is in the spectacle that the process of reification, as the completed negation of man ‘has reached its perfect material conclusion’ (p. 84). ‘Negation’ and ‘conclusion’ here take on the double sense of end of a dialectical as well as a vital-biological endgame; the spectacle reveals itself as a life-negating force through the slow phagocytizing of man’s milieu. Consequently, in *A Sick Planet* Debord presents the environmental catastrophe not so much as an event, but as the general result of alienated labour. The spectacular, late capitalist mode of production drags the environment itself into the sphere of commodities, and not just literally by turning water and even clean air into sellable goods or by cluttering our planet with ever more stuff. As we have seen in our analysis of *The Society of the*
Spectacle, the spectacle foremost signifies the production of a milieu. In A Sick Planet this production of a milieu has lead to its self-contradictory conclusion (spectacle has crossed the last threshold of its progress): the completed materialization of the spectacle's false milieu affects its material subsistence (the very possibility of any milieu). As Debord writes: from the ‘production of [mediated] non-life’, ‘a final threshold’ has just been passed: ‘what is now produced, directly, is death’ (p. 85). In this context, politics equals bio-politics. Debord argues: ‘that the management of everything has become directly political, right down to the herb of the fields and the possibility of drinking water, sleeping without pills or washing without developing sores’ (p. 86). For Debord such a moment heralds the end of specialized politics: the concern of any contemporary emancipatory politics is none other than the milieu; any true politics is environmentalist in the dual sense of the word. ‘The enemy at its gates of historical consciousness’, Debord writes, is not illusion but the death of consciousness itself (p. 86). Consequently, the environmental catastrophe equally heralds the end of voluntarist politics: there is no managing poisonous riches (p. 87). The ecological catastrophe cannot be warded off through bureaucracy (again, the battleground is the qualitative and not the quantitative). As an example of such a ‘voluntarist politics’, the ‘fight against pollution’ (not yet named ‘green politics’ in A Sick Planet) can only be part of the spectacular machinery: it merely serves the creation of new types of employment, advancing the proliferation of spectacle's own toxic milieu; the high tech industries (or cognitive capitalism) that accompany it can only be palliative for the pollution that results from the mode of production of which they are intrinsically part (pp. 82–83). If ‘seizing the means of production’ has any meaning left, in A Sick Planet, it signifies taking hold of the means of production of a milieu or lifeworld (the qualitative reconstruction of the totality of the world taken in its material sense). Debord is equally keen to point out the incompatibility between representative democracy and truly environmental politics: any representative system is by its very nature conservative—that is to say, geared towards the conservation of the existing status quo (‘qua voters, they would not change even if the world was coming to an end’, Debord writes [p. 89]). Environmental politics is thus played elsewhere: in the opposition to the automated process of late capitalist production. If anything, environmental politics is thus a politics against reification, of which it shows its entangled historical and material sense—this, for a start, constitutes the enduring significance of Debord’s modest treatise on A Sick Planet.
'The immune system has had its time on earth', Debord proclaims in his very last documentary, *Guy Debord, son art son temps* (1994) (2006, p.1875, my translation). For Debord, the current, and final, stage of the spectacle, that of the ‘integrated spectacle’ that no longer faces any noticeable opposition (and, in an unprecedented bio-political project that effectively raised and ‘moulded to its laws’ a whole generation born after 1968), has turned life against itself: the ultimate form of reification. The world of the ‘integrated spectacle’ is characterized by the *generalized breakdown of the immune system*: at its very core life, in all its aspects, becomes defenceless against reification—or in its ‘contemporary’ euphemism: pollution. In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, Debord writes that ‘there remains nothing, in culture or in nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted, according to the means and interests of modern industry. Even genetics has become readily accessible to the dominant social forces’ (1998, p. 15). The integrated spectacle has succeeded in its main and only objective: it ‘is mixed into all reality and irradiates it’ (p. 9). According to Debord, the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s and nuclear catastrophes such as the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 have become emblematic of the spectacle’s radical inhumanity (its fundamental anti-anthropology and anti-vitalism): ‘the economy has now come to openly make war on human beings, not only on our possibilities for life, but also those of survival’, he argues (p. 39). The breakdown between spectacle and environment, which resulted from this history of reification, has resulted in the breakdown between man and environment: only this time, the ‘environment’ is already reified, already signifies the direct production of non-life. The integrated spectacle completes Debord’s narrative of the spectacle’s appropriation of human temporality and through it the temporality of life itself: the integrated spectacle heralds the irreparable reification of the irreversibility of life’s transience by turning life into non-life, *bios* into *thanatos*. ‘Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago’, Debord laments in his *Comments* (p. 84). Negation, as the weapon of choice of dialectical thought, has been falsified by a now integrated spectacle. As the later Debord’s incessant writing as well as his insistence on the veracity of materiality (really lived time, real city life, real history) demonstrate: what remains at the heart of his thought, after the stratagems of historical materialism, is not so much negation, but what has always been his main project: the revolutionary affirmation of life’s transience.
Bibliography
