

Globalisation and its Impact on Human Interaction through the Spectacle.

Globalisation is a process by which individuals get interconnected with people across large distances. The idea of distance itself gets metaphorically smaller due to a surge in innovation and technologies; airplanes make travel relatively easier and quicker while smart phones make connectivity and interaction a breeze. The concept of distance has become one that is now compressed, time is now considered a commodity.

Modernity and Globalisation are both transformative processes for societies all over the world bringing about a change in the way humans mentally perceive objects and interactions – with a certain sense of plurality. This is a direct outcome of the fact that our world and society is now in an ever changing state of constant flux. The flux would be better described as fluidity in our personas and presence, and fluctuation in our sense of realities and shifting perspectives.

Social Media is an important factor when discussing interaction in today's era; that's because the Social Network is the Global – meaning more than 4.5 billion people now use the internet, while social media users have passed the 3.8 billion mark. This means that virtual platforms provide opportunities and recognition and do so without any biases. There are little to no systems of hierarchy online unlike the real world making connectivity an easier task. People now inhabit social media and make homes and communities out of virtual spaces while simultaneously consuming new information. Information which is then consumed by the persons online has boundaries blurred between politics, news, advertising and entertainment.

Guy Debord, a Marxist philosopher, coined the term Spectacle to emphasize all forms of advertisements, ranging from posters on public transport to pop up ads on our Instagram feed; everything that is marketed in a manner which allows us to consume fragments of information while encouraging us to focus on keeping up appearances. Debord saw it as a way of appeasing and diverting the masses' attention and changing the perception of reality to an endless supply of commodifiable bits and pieces. His fourth thesis claims the following; "The Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images." This encourages us to understand how imagery in the spectacle works by giving birth to new desires and ambitions. How narratives are shaped by the praxis of reductionism to divide the populace between two opposing groups of leftist values and right wing conservatism. The constant bombardment of imagery of often the same things makes people have the same experience and bring about this notion of universal connectivity, through memes and viral videos. The replication of one similar experience for the audience brings about the idea of uniformity also and a form of control that encompasses most people on social media. Furthermore, the idea of consumption on social media comes from activities of liking a friends picture, putting ones thoughts and opinions out for someone else and posting on Instagram to keep up Debord's idea of keeping up appearances (while constantly generating content for consumption).

However, it is interesting to know that the Spectacle performs in a manner which allows itself to be positive and inaccessible – the appearance itself is the most attractive element alongside the clout it holds, thus it's put on a pedestal. Instead of individuals introspecting as to why this standard is something to achieve, who set it there and what it provides, there comes an air of passive acceptance. This passivity of acceptance is encouraged from media apps like

Instagram and Facebook where the Spectacle holds a monopoly of appearance and pops up without engagement.

This begs the question of how much individuals understand their position and relationship in regards to social media and virtual reality? How much of it is consensual and how quickly do we consume the Spectacle? Furthermore, how does the Spectacle engage with politics?

Walter Benjamin explored the notion of aestheticization of politics, diving deep into the ideology and analyzing how “society was moving from the consumption of material goods to the consumption of fantasies and the productions of desires.”

Benjamin argued that art is subordinate to politics, yet politics employs art to further its causes because of the very nature of art being political itself. He argues with an example of Fascism, the proletarian masses aim to remove the authoritarian structure, and the Fascists give them a right to express that notion. Now while the right of expression is there, it brings no change in the structure of the relationship in regards to the hegemony. The limited amounts of rights are not recognized instead there is a focus on expression, speech and ideas. This produces desires and invites consumption via the Art or the Spectacle while doing limited amounts change physically to overthrow the dominating party.

In the same manner, Jean Baudrillard argues about the Spectacle as a means of porn, inaccurate information floating around that seems believable and inviting. In terms of an international event, the terrorist attack on the twin towers is a good example. It provided the American population and international media with the shock value of an incident which was relayed multiple times due to free exchange of videos and photographs through social media and no censorship – due to democracy and technology. In this manner, the Spectacle engages with an incident and gives birth to a new set of ideas formed by an entire demographic – which paints a religion, Islam, and its followers as dangerous. Fear functions as a governing factor, sinking deep into the societal fabric, dictating government policies. This further branches out and transforms America from a democratic state to one which is authoritarian. Linking this back to Benjamin’s idea of art, imagery and constant engagement, and Baudrillard concept of digital war porn, we can understand that events like 9/11 were more so about the floating of images and video footage (regardless of whether there is any truth to them) and their consumption rather than the event itself and its ties. Following the tragedy, there was little discourse in regards with the alleged ties the American army had to Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan during the Cold War, but simply his portrayal as a lone standing and impulsive terrorist. History was not revisited, America as a nation was the victim (which invited sympathy) and this allowed the world to paint a religion and its following countries with a broad stroke of terrorism.

In a local context, the Spectacle most consumed is the local news on television in Pakistan. Marina Warner, a novelist, explains; “The images we circulate have the power to lead events...the new technical media have altered the experience and become interwoven with consciousness itself.” Locally, there is a birth of a culture which thrives off of the circulation of intense images depicting violence, terror and suffering. Fear becomes a governing principle of visual representation. While this continues to strike fear into the hearts of civilians, it is important to know that too much exposure to the local Spectacle on TV gives birth to an entire population desensitized from violence and suffering. In fact, the TV serves as a reminder that the terror exists somewhere far away, it is only being viewed, not experienced.

This allows individuals to turn away and enjoy the comfort of their own homes creating a desired alienation – which also links in to Jean Baudrillard’s essay “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.”

An example from the local context would be The Baloch Missing Persons. From the neglected province of Balochistan, there have been many instances of abductions of political men who have been campaigning for rights and separation – their mutilated bodies are soon dropped off at random locations in an attempt to silence the community as a whole. For decade this tragedy has prevailed. The entirety of Pakistan is aware of this mass injustice, genocide and targeted harassment against our Baloch counterparts, yet we as a nation turn a blind eye to such atrocities. While we may sometimes engage with the terror and pain inflicted upon those families, we prefer the shelter of our homes and safety as Baudrillard predicted.

While we live in a postmodern time and our experiences of reality are wholly different from each other, with much more duplicity involved, one experiences remains the same, which is that of Consumption. The phone screen acts as an intake of information, overtaking the physical and converting it to an online experience, and thus the individual’s attention is focused in a rectangle - much like watching a movie in a Cinema. Steven Shaviro writes; “The darkness of the movie theatre isolates me from the rest of the audience, and cuts off any possibility of ‘normal’ perception. I cannot wilfully focus my attention on this or that. Instead, my gaze is arrested by the sole area of light, a flux of moving images. I am attentive to what happens on the screen only to the extent that I am continually distracted and passively absorbed by it. I no longer have the freedom to follow my own train of thought...The unstable screen image holds my distracted attention captive; I do not have the ability to look away. There is no way to watch a film without allowing this to happen; I can resist it only by giving up on the film altogether, by shutting my eyes or walking out. But as I watch, I have no presence of mind; sight and hearing, anticipation and memory, are no longer my own. My responses are not internally motivated and are not spontaneous; they are forced upon me from beyond.”

His comparison is similar of watching a film to checking one’s phone. Behavior is also being moulded accordingly, one is likely to become a slave to the notification sound and, like Pavlov’s experiment of classical conditioning with his dog, our attention too gets diverted in a split second to our social media activity. We do not choose, we are most certainly not in control, and opting out seems extremely difficult to impossible.

It is also interesting to note that the more one engages with social media through the internet the more they unintentionally feed their data into the hands of data brokers who then further sell private information to other third party provider in a bid to make money off of individuals interests. The Spectacle that Debord spoke of is now targeted to individuals specifically keeping in mind their activities, hobbies, interests and so on. How do companies and providers get access to this information? Individuals willingly give it to them when they sign up to their sites. The terms and conditions box which has tough legal lingo makes the average person not understand and therefore skip past it. What many people do not understand is that their search history, their likes, and most form of internet activity is being monitored and put into categories and labels and later sold to businesses who advertise their products that align with your newly created identity. Furthermore, because we live in the time of Consumer

culture, products that we wear equate to our identity and self. If we support Veganism we must have a poster, a t-shirt, a button, or some form of product that highlights that. The same goes for activism through social media (or slacktivism as one might say), for movements such as Feminism or BlackLivesMatter. The simple notion of belief is not enough and one must prove the integrity of support via the products they buy and wear.

Georges Bataille, a philosopher, argued that needs are constructed, rather than innate. He stressed that all purchases always signify something socially. Objects always, drawing from Roland Barthes, "say something" about their users. Marketing via Social Media is formed on the very basis of this theory. This forms a cycle so consumers continuously engage with the advertisements shown on social media, buy the products, and open themselves up to new hobbies and interest via the adverts they see. In all of this, constant engagement is absolutely futile. This form of a modern surveillance forces us to interact in a Black Box which acts as a space to exchange data regarding ourselves but the engaging party has absolutely no clue where their private data may reach. This comes under Social Media Mining.

This gives birth to companies like Cambridge Analytica which was a data collection firm that influenced the 2016 US Presidential elections as well as the Brexit elections in the UK, through personal biases on Social Media. These companies understand how opinions and views work and the malleability of perception is what they aim to work with. Learning and unlearning behavior is a human trait and if one company can change perception, they can introduce new ways of looking at people, things, objects and institutions. Positive Propaganda will be ensued and individuals will believe what they see – what they see is their mobile screens feeding them information to consume through the Spectacle. The notion of fragmenting society where individuals don't have shared experiences or shared understanding can be susceptible to a lot of harm and damage. A society cannot operate and function if our understanding and perception of reality is not the same. Conversely, when propaganda starts, it acts as a rolling ball and till it stops, the consumption will continue till the results are not achieved i.e. a political leader is elected, a government is not over thrown, or worse a genocide is committed.

All of these actions, from the mass consumption to the duality of experiences, leave us with a limited amount of control, an illusion that we are in charge, and a tool like our mobile phones and social media – which are just means of expressing our thoughts, opinions and feelings. To whom are we expressing these opinions? Are we as a race shouting out opinions into a virtual void? Will it ever make a difference?

Maimnat Batool
Global Modernities: Art in an Age of Network
Madyha Leghari

References:

<https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=l5sv5aqVN3MC&pg=PA1365&lpg=PA1365&dq=Benjamin%27s+concept+has+been+linked+to+Guy+Debord%27s+1967+book+The+Society+of+the+Spectacle.&source=bl&ots=abDOW-EO16&sig=ACfU3U2Ut5L86o1HGgQgImL5-HfP3b8CyQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjoycmtnPtpAhXqzIUKHRIJB7gQ6AEwDHoECA8QAQ#v=onepage&q=Benjamin's%20concept%20has%20been%20linked%20to%20Guy%20Debord's%201967%20book%20The%20Society%20of%20the%20Spectacle.&f=false>

<https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media>).
<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/5729/1846>

[file:///C:/Users/hp/Downloads/1602990_2_the-globalization-of-social-media%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/hp/Downloads/1602990_2_the-globalization-of-social-media%20(1).pdf)

Encyclopedia of Consumer Culture, Volume 1

edited by Dale Southerton

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED502078.pdf>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gulf_War_Did_Not_Take_Place

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Baudrillard

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/147041290600500107>

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/mar/07/guardianobituaries.france>

<https://www.dawn.com/news/694708>

<https://www.google.com.pk/amp/s/www.thenews.com.pk/amp/584801-the-logic-of-the-spectacle>
