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All That Glitters..

The Imagery of Consumerism in a Capitalist Society

By
Sarah Grounds

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All That Glitters….

The Imagery of Consumerism in a Capitalist Society

"Undoubtedly our era prefers the image to the thing, the copy to the original, the representation to the reality, appearance to being… for in these days illusion only is sacred, truth profane"
(**Feuerbach**, 1957)

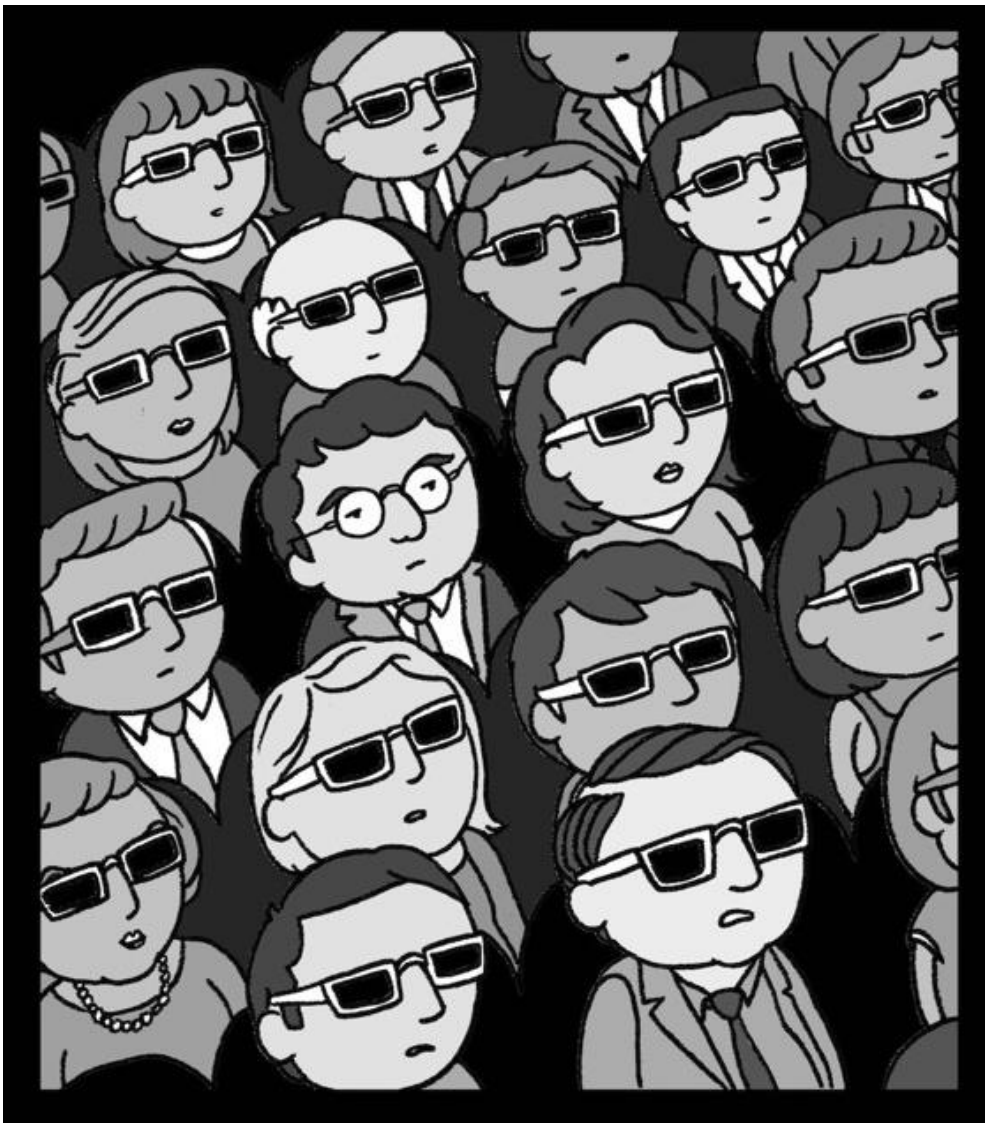
(Fig. 1)

The foundation of our Capitalist society is based on the constant need to consume. Guy Debord, film-maker and writer, started his famous book, *Society of the Spectacle* with the statement "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation."(Debord,1967, p7)

Almost a hundred years earlier, Karl Marx's, *Capital* started with a very similar statement, "The Wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities," (Marx, 1887, p1)

Marx's 'commodities' were physical things. Debord took this a step further and stated it was not physical things that were controlling peoples' lives but the *idea* of physical things.

The actual object itself has no bearing to the spectacle. It is the idea of what having that object will do to change one's life that is the important thing. The Spectacle was defined by Debord as "autocratic reign of the market economy." (Debord, 1967)



(Fig. 2)

For him the Spectacle was the tool of Capitalism for distracting and pacifying the masses. The Spectacle presents itself in the forms of advertising, celebrity, television, film and social media. (Morgan and Purji, 2016) Debord believed that the Spectacle changed the way humans interacted with each other and how they made relationships. The media simplifies the World for us, neatly interpreting and reducing the world. Television and Movies give us a false sense of connectivity with time and space. Images affect our beliefs and decisions daily, advertising creates new things we then desire and think of ourselves as wanting to be. "The Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, *mediated by images*." (Debord, 1967, p7)

This whole concept of selling a dream has grown more and more through the twentieth century. Now, in the twenty first century, we are bombarded with images of what we need, what we are lacking and telling us why we surely cannot be happy with our lives as they are.

(Fig. 3)

As soon as we open our eyes in the morning, looking at our phones, papers, walking down the street, there are Adverts and media everywhere. (Berger, 1972, p129-130) We see these images so much now, that we no longer *see* a lot of these images and are not aware of the psychological impact of their messages. (Bull, 2010)

Advertising of products and lifestyles is one of the fundamental bases of maintaining a Capitalist society (Berger, 1972, p154) I am going to explore how this evolved through the last one hundred years and how artists have been complicit in this mass control of people. I will also look at how some artists have tried to point out the Spectacle and what methods they have used to do this.

Advertising as we know it really started coming into fruition with the advance of photography. Before the 1930s most advertising was a drawing of the product with a long explanation about how the product works. (Bull, 2010) This radically changed when photography started being used in advertisements. Companies could now say so much more with a photograph then they could with words. This message was portrayed

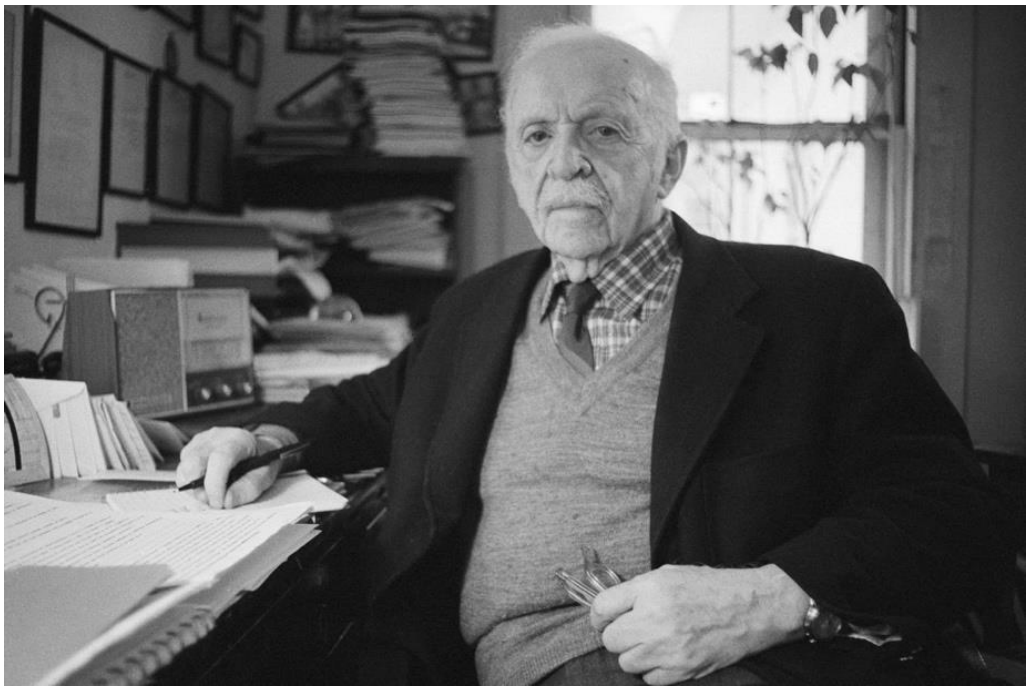
instantly without the need for the Spectator to interact with the advertisement by having to read. (Berger, 1972, p155) Note the difference in the two Maybelline advertisements below. The first from the 1920s and the second from the 1950s.

(Fig. 4)

(Fig. 5)

We can see a radical reduction in the number of words used in the advertisement.

This simplification continues throughout the twentieth century. To the point where a lot of advertising today does not even have the product being advertised in the imagery. What was realised in the advertising industry was that it was not a product that they were trying to sell but the idea of a product and the lifestyle that entails. One of the main people driving this new style of advertising was Edward Bernays.


(Fig. 6)

Bernays, born in Austria and raised in New York, was known as ‘the Father of Public Relations’.

(Gunderman, 2015) In his book ‘Propaganda’ he wrote,

> *“The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are moulded, our tastes formed, and our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of…. It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind.”*
> (Bernays, 1928)

He used this theory to become a very successful publicist. One of his most famous PR Campaigns was his ‘Torches for Freedom’ campaign in 1929.

(Fig. 7)

Bernays carefully organised a publicity stunt at New York’s Easter Parade in 1929. On the 31st of March Bertha Hunt, Bernays’s secretary, stepped out onto Fifth Avenue at the parade and proudly lit a Lucky Strike Cigarette. This was not advertising for the cigarette brand though, this was PR. At the time, women who smoked were looked down on and seen as ‘fallen women’. Bertha stated to the press that it was time that women empowered themselves to be able to smoke in public without prejudice. Ten women, Debutants carefully scattered through the parade by Bernays, followed Bertha down Fifth Avenue, holding their ‘Torches of Empowerment’ (McNamara, 2019)

Bernays managed to persuade the women of America that a cigarette was not just a cigarette but was the symbol of women's rights and equality. Ironically, he also persuaded women that smoking was glamourous and would make them lose weight too.

(Fig. 8)

What Barnay's and others realised is that rather than show people what others are with advertising. They had to get the public to think about who they could be, with the help of their products. Advertising never talks about the now. Sometimes it may talk about the past, but it always talks about the future. (Berger, 1975, p130)

This is one of the biggest differences between painting and photography. Most paintings of affluent people were painted in the now. Showing the wealth and respect the person in the painting commands. Charles II was famously known for using art in this way. When he came to the throne of England in 1660, Charles had to reinstate the monarchy from the short period of Republican rule that had occurred after his Father's death. Charles commissioned over 200 pieces of painting, writing and sculpture that talked of his regained power of the realm. (Katz, 2017)

(Fig. 9)

Charles commissioned this portrait from John Michael Wright. He is sat in splendid robes, holding his sceptre made for his coronation with a large tapestry of the royal arms behind him. The Royal Collection Trust calls this ‘an enduring image of monarchy restored’ (Royal Collection Trust, 2017)

Advertising uses a lot of the main themes in painting, such as objects of luxury, landscapes, female stereotypes and male power. Even old paintings are used in adverts to connote tradition and excellence. But the fundamental message that is being given is completely different. (Berger, 1975, p139) In advertising the viewer is asked to imagine themselves in the main role in the image.

> *“The purpose of publicity is to make the spectator marginally dissatisfied with his present way of life. Not with the way of life of society, but with his own within it. It suggests that if he buys what it is offering, his life will become better. It offers him an improved alternative to what he is.”*
> (Berger, 1975, p142)

At the same time as advertising starting to change its approach, the rise of the celebrity began and so celebrities started endorsing products. One of the first celebrities to endorse a product was Babe Ruth, a professional baseball player in America. He started advertising products in the 1930s, starting with Red Rock Cola. His image ended up advertising cigarettes, to soap and was particularly used to advertise products for children. Encouraging them to eat the same cereal as their hero.

(Fig. 10)

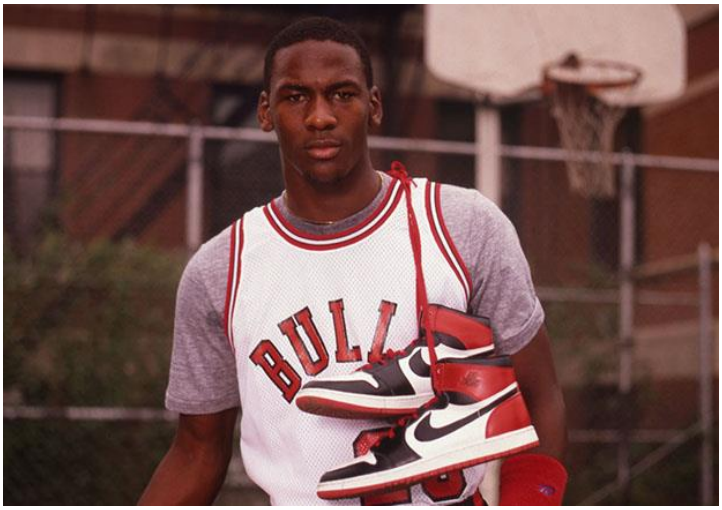
(Fig. 11)

(Fig. 12)

Babe Ruth was a prolific adulterer but his clean hero image in advertising encouraged the press to gloss over his transgressions and helped keep his image squeaky clean.

In the 1940s Movie Stars started endorsing products and then in the 1970s, with the rise of colour tv, tv celebrities. In the 1980s, products started being designed around the celebrity. One of the most famous

examples of this is Nike and Michael Jordan, the basketball player.



(Fig. 13)

Debord said “The agent of the Spectacle who is put on stage as a star is the opposite of an individual: he is as clearly the enemy of his own individuality as of the individuality of others” (Debord, 1967, p29)

It is hard to think of our world without celebrities, they are now completely merged with our age of consumption and desire for more. Many photographers make a great deal of money from this and themselves, have also become celebrities.

One of these photographers is Annie Leibovitz. Leibovitz started off as a journalist working for Rolling Stone but moved onto Vanity Fair in 1983. She also added Vogue to her roster in 1998. (Riefe, 2019)

(Fig. 14)

She is famous for her court style montage Front cover Vanity Fair photos of celebrities, especially women. Leibovitz’s work shows nicely how classic themes in painting have been taken and used in publicity photography. Leibovitz commonly presents women barely dressed or naked next to dominant men fully clothed. (Colberg, 2021) In the photo Fig.15 Leibovitz has photographed two actors, Scarlett Johansson and

Keira Knightley with the fashion designer Tom Ford for the front cover of Vanity Fair in March 2006.

(Heritage, 2016)

(Fig. 15)

(Fig. 16)

Both women are naked and Ford is wearing a suit. The women are passively looking out towards the camera, looking at the spectator, looking at them, echoing classical nude art. (Berger, 1975, p50-53)

"In the average European oil painting of the nude the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man" (Berger, 1975, p54)

Leibovitz has based her career on depicting the ideals of capitalist America. You would never find her photographing the true heroes in our society, people that normal people could aspire to be like such as nurses. The main themes running through Leibovitch's work are: a very narrow view of the male, with the man practicing traditional ideas of sexuality and dominating over women, regardless of age; young women are sexually available and this is their main feature; and all rich, powerful people are portrayed as heroes.

(Fig. 17)

"A different way to view Vanity Fair and Vogue magazine covers would be to say that they express capitalism's id." (Colberg, 2021, p21)

Andrew Gursky is probably the most famous photographer of our times. He produces large scale images with a lot of digital post-production. His print ‘Rhein II 1999’, in which he edited out all buildings and people of the famous stretch of the Rhine, is the most expensive photo to sell in auction. Selling for a staggering $4,338,500 at Christie’s New York in 2011. (Jokkel, 2021)

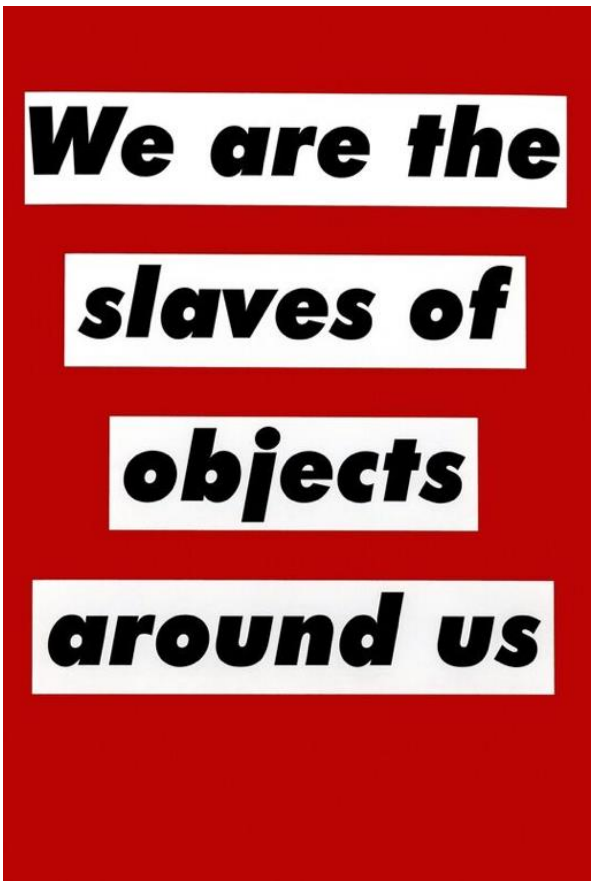
(Fig. 18)

His work is generally presented very large and depicts the epic landscapes of modern society, such as the Tokyo Stock Exchange, and the Amazon distribution centre. Gursky’s work, like Leibovitz’s, has been linked to classic painting techniques. His style echoes 19th Century landscape painting with a God like, see all, panopticon viewpoint. But Gursky takes this further, by then heavily editing the image to create imaginary landscapes. (Colberg, 2021, p27)

(Fig. 19)

Gursky’s work represents Capitalism’s ultimate identity. Untethered by limitations, including those of money, he takes rich landscapes of the rich and turns them into visions even rich men cannot afford. His photos are all encompassing, individual-destroying, monuments to capitalism. Leaving us in awe and feeling powerless to do anything about it (Colberg, 2021, p28)

But there are artists out there who are reacting against the Spectacle.



(Fig. 20)

Barbara Kruger is an American conceptual artist who has spent her career commentating on feminism and consumerism. She has a bold style, utilising mass media images and placing bold text in black, white and red, over the top. Her work is very simple and striking and she uses this to great affect by presenting her work on T-shirts, photographs, posters and billboards. (Artnet, 2021)

(Fig. 21).

(Fig. 22)

(Fig. 23)

Kruger uses the same language as the mass media with hard hitting, sensational, short statements. Using the pronouns of you and I, she enables the viewer to imagine themselves as a part of the artwork. Inviting them to ask the questions in her work to themselves. This is a very clever use of modern PR tactics turned back on itself (Selvin, 2020)

Much of Kruger's later work is very large and site specific. Her Untitled (Skate) work of 2017 at Coleman Skatepark in Manhattan's Lower East Side, stands out to me as a work to ignite questions from normal people about the state of our society.

(Fig. 24)

Another example of artists using Billboards to get their message across is 'Led by Donkeys', Ben Stewart, James Sadri, Oliver Knowles and Will Rose. They had the idea whilst discussing their despair at all the lies that the Government were telling about Brexit in the UK, sat in a pub in North London in 2019. The original idea was to take a 2015 quote by David Cameron on Twitter and place it on a large Billboard. (Sherwood, 2019)

(Fig. 25)

The poster was covered up within a few hours, but the group shared a photo of the billboard on social media and unexpectedly to them, the image went viral. This encouraged them to make seven more, which were all quickly covered up. They then decided to do a Crowdfunder so that they could place the work on bought

space which would not be removed. Their Crowdfunder was extremely successful, and they managed to raise £458,047 (Crowdfunder, 2019) This has allowed the group to improve the quality of their work and keep it in the public eye.

(Fig. 26)

They are now expanding their commentary to Politics in general in the UK, especially the contradictions of Government, the private sector, and the environmental crisis.

Guy Debord spoke of the Spectacle having two strands, the Concentrated and the Diffuse. (Morgan & Purji, 2016) The concentrated is the Socialist Realism of a totalitarian "Stalinist' regime, implemented through force and the cult of a personality. The second is much more complicated and is based on the abundance of commodities we have in wealthy democracies. The diffuse spectacle is very good at placating the masses and convincing them that their freedom of choice means that they have fundamental freedom.

Debord then added a third strand in his follow up text 'Comments on The Society of the Spectacle' in 1988. This is the Integrated Spectacle which is a merging of the Concentrated and the Diffuse.

"There remains nothing, in culture or nature, which has not been transformed, and polluted according to the means and interests of modern industry," (Debord, 2011)

The Spectacle is now so large and all encompassing, that it is difficult to see if there is anything left in our lives that is not a part of the Spectacle. What would Debord have thought of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter? Companies that have refined the art of turning people and their emotions into a

commodity. I question whether an artist can truly commentate on the Spectacle. By doing so, they themselves have to become a part of the Spectacle.

(Fig. 27)

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