

Contemporary spectacle of society through the philosophical lens of Plato

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Table on contents:

Figure list	3
Introduction	4
Barbara Kruger's 'Who owns what?'	5
Woody Allen's 'Deconstructing Harry'	7
William Kentridge's 'Shadow Procession'	9
Ambrosius Bosschaert's 'A still life of flowers in a wan-li vase'	12
Rachel Ruysch's 'Still life of roses...'	13
Conclusion	14
Reference list	15
Bibliography	16

Figure list:

Figure 1. Kruger, B. (2012) who owns what? [Digital print on vinyl]. Available at:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/display/media-networks/barbara-kruger#:~:text=In%20Who%20owns%20what%3F%2C%20a,and%20answered%20in%20many%20ways>. (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Figure 2. Allen, W. (1997) Deconstructing Harry [film]. Available at:

<https://www.woodyallenpages.com/2014/08/votw-robin-williams-in-deconstructing-harry/> (Accessed: 12 December 2024)

Figure 3. Kentridge, W. (1999) Shadow Procession [Short animated film]. Available

at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/head-load/william-kentridge-shadow-processions> (Accessed: 10 December 2024)

Figure 4. Bosschaert, A. (1609-1610) A Still Life in a Wan-Li Vase [Oil on copper].

Available at: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/ambrosius-bosschaert-the-elder-a-still-life-of-flowers-in-a-wan-li-vase> (Accessed: 11 December 2024)

Figure 5. Ruysch, R. (1710) Still life of roses, tulips, a sunflower and other flowers in a glass vase with a bee, butterfly and other insects upon a marble ledge [Oil on

canvas]. Available at: <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/rachel-ruysch-still-life-of-flowers-in-a-glass-vase-on-a-marble-ledge> (Accessed: 11 December 2024)

This essay will discuss the contemporary spectacle of society through the philosophical lens of Plato. This will be achieved by explaining both Guy Debord's and Plato's views on the world, and how they relate to art.

These theories will be supported by looking at the work of Barbara Kruger specifically exploring the vinyl prints that she has been making throughout her career, Woody Allen's film 'Deconstructing Harry', William Kentridge and his work with shadows as well as Ambrosius Bosschaert and Rachel Ruysch's still life flower paintings.

The concept of 'the spectacle' is an ancient one however the term and idea were explained and popularised by Guy Debord in his book 'The Society of the Spectacle' (1967). This book is a collection of 221 short theses examining how the media affects our interactions, relationships and perceptions of the world as well as the connection between mass media and the economy. The spectacle is simply Debord's term for the everyday marketing that is all around us, from the advertisements companies put on billboards and bus stops that we see on the street, to the opinions that people post on social media that we read in our homes and everything in between. Despite Debord living in a time before social media, the spectacle applies so clearly and accurately to it. All of these things that we see every day shape our perceptions and opinions on the world which therefore affects how we interact with the people around us, for example, if we see an advert for Zara we want to buy the clothes the models are wearing, or if we watch a video on social media of someone telling us their opinion on something, we either agree or disagree with them immediately, without knowing anything else about the context of the situation and that forms our perspective on it. We do this so much in our everyday lives without even realising it and because we are so influenced

by all the media that we see all the time it influences how we view objects, situations and people which in turn affects how we interact with other people and our relationships with them.



Figure 1. Who owns what?

Barbara Kruger is an American conceptual artist who creates collages in the style of magazine covers to comment on mass media and the control that corporations have over us, especially women. She also uses her art to challenge how we make a spectacle of and assign meaning to the things that we see. Her work 'Who owns what?' (figure 1) is a comment on product advertising and encourages us to question property and ownership and the influence that these things have on our lives. This piece is a black and white digital print on vinyl, exactly like a magazine, and Kruger has used a striking bright red on the box as a border around the image, which creates an incredible contrast and means that the red sections really stand out against the

greyscale. This immediately draws the viewers' attention to the bright red box and subsequently the words written on it, 'Who owns what?'. This is exactly what magazines do; they use bright colours to draw the attention of viewers to the catchy titles on the cover in order to make them want to buy them. Kruger uses this style that immediately reminds us of the media in order to comment on and criticise the culture surrounding mass media and advertisements, specifically how it treats women and controls every aspect of our lives, even if we don't realise it. This is exactly what Debord's spectacle says is the problem with mass media.

Debord said in his book, 'the spectacle is a social relation between people that is mediated by an accumulation of images that serve to alienate us from a genuinely lived life' (Debord, 1967), meaning that because we spend so much time looking at and being influenced by media, we do not form our own opinions on things. We are more concerned with the way that things look rather than how we actually feel about them because this is what we have been taught to do by the media, which means companies, other people and images have complete control over us which stops us from genuinely living and enjoying our lives. Kruger's work confronts us with the power and all-encompassing influences that the media has over society and her art implores us to challenge this. We are also completely unable to escape all of these images being thrust upon us controlling our views and the way we live our lives as 'the spectacle is the nightmare of imprisoned modern society which ultimately expresses nothing more than its desire to sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of sleep'(Debord, 1967).

We see so much art every day as it is readily available for us to click on and scroll through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok. This means that we don't even give it a second thought, we look at them so quickly from a split-second opinion and then scroll away without even giving it a second thought. This means that we don't feel the need to go out and experience art by seeing it in galleries and museums. This results in people not experiencing it. They don't get to feel the presence of it or experience its actual size and detail; they just see all art as a pixelated mess on their screen for a few seconds, which probably results in them forming a different opinion of it than they would if they saw the physical artwork. 'The poor image is an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image' (Steyerl, 2009) meaning that a replication of an original image or painting that has been shared around is also a much worse quality than the original and does not do it justice.



Figure 2 still from film 'Deconstructing Harry'

Woody Allen is an American director, screenwriter, filmmaker, actor and comedian who is best known for his award-winning films. One of which is called 'deconstructing Harry' in which the main character gets a disease that causes him to become out of focus. This becomes a major issue for him and even causes him to be unable to find work.

This is a perfect example of decreased image quality in media and likens it to a disease that has major consequences on the character's life, interactions, relationships and how he is perceived. 'Being out of focus lowers one's value as an image' (Steyerl, 2009) which is exactly what Debord talks about in his 'spectacle' theory despite proposing it before the internet and even before the first ever film was made.

The idea of our lives, perceptions, and interactions being controlled by something (a spectacle) is not a new one though; it goes back to the beginning of humanity. Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher during 300 B.C. when most people around him believed in the Greek Gods he, however, did not, and was looking for the answer to the age-old question 'What is true?' He wrote extensively about this in his book 'Republic' and answered that truth is eternal and unchanging therefore, he believed that truth cannot exist in this world as it is in a constant state of change, meaning we can't rely on matter to give us truth.

Due to this, he said that we can't rely on our senses, and we can never know real truth in this world because if the physical world is constantly changing, we can never attain true knowledge from it, as the objects we are trying to gain knowledge from are never the same from one moment to the next therefore we cannot gain certain universally valid truths from them. Due to these beliefs, he thought that we must use our reason alone to learn the truth and true knowledge. To solve this problem, he proposed that there are other eternal and unchanging realities that contain certain knowledge, he called these the 'realm of the forms'. He said that we have an understanding of them from birth, but forget and can access these through the practice of philosophy and reason.

He also believed that the physical and material things that we see in our world are given their reality by the forms, we just see shadows or reflections of the forms. To help explain this theory and show the contrast between the realm of the forms and the realm of appearances (our world), he proposed the 'allegory of the cave'. This says imagine there are three people chained in a cave looking at the wall, with a fire behind them and things moving past behind them, creating shadows on the wall in front of them. This is all they know of the world: shadows. One day, a prisoner escapes and leaves the cave and sees the outside world and the things that have been creating the shadows, he learns the truth and becomes enlightened. Plato's 'realm of the forms' and Debord's 'spectacle' have quite similar ideas, despite the different ideas and reasonings, they both believe that the world around us is not truly real, for Debord this is due to the control that media has on us and for Plato this is due to the fact that our world is constantly changing so cannot hold truth.



Figure 3 Shadow Procession

William Kentridge is a South African drawer, printmaker and filmmaker who is especially well known for his animated films made from his drawings. He often uses his animated films to comment on politics or history. 'Shadow Procession' is a short film that depicts a procession of shadowy figures, refugees, walking across the screen one after another, carrying all their belongings and their children. The film is in black and white with more shadowy figures moving across the background. This instantly reminds me of Plato's cave as in the analogy this is exactly how the prisoners see the world. Therefore, this film is an incredible visual representation of our world in Plato's theory as he believed that all we see in our world is shadows of the forms.

Along with proposing theories about the universe, Plato also spoke extensively about art. He was fascinated by aesthetics and believed that the concepts of 'good' and 'beauty' only actually existed in the world of the forms and that the good and beauty that we see in our world are reflections of these forms. Plato believed that there was a hierarchy to the forms, and 'good' and 'beauty' were at the top. Plato wrote about art in his books 'The Republic Book 3' and 'Book 10' he believed that art is a copy of the things we see in the world and what we see are just reflections of the forms therefore, art can never be true as it is based on things that are not real. He also said that because art shows and represents the illusions that are all around us, it has the danger of leading people further away from learning the truth about the world. He said that 'art can be used to help mould the character of the young' (Plato, 375BC), so should be carefully monitored to make sure that it does not stop people from using their reason to seek out the realm of the forms and therefore the real truth in the universe. Plato was concerned that art would keep us living in a world of nothing but shadows like what is

depicted in William Kentridge's work instead of seeking out the truth in the realm of the forms.

In Debord's 'spectacle' theory, the readiness of mass media causes us to be bombarded by what companies and other people want us to see, which controls our thoughts, feelings, interactions, relationships and therefore our lives. It also means that we only see lots of bad quality art on our screens rather than actually experiencing it, which is exactly how Plato views our whole world and therefore, art; however, their opinions on this and art in general differ. Plato says that because we only see shadows and reflections of the forms and therefore art is a representation of these shadows and reflections, which also controls our thoughts, feelings, interactions, relationships and, therefore, our lives because seeing these representations of these things that are not truly true stops us from questioning and trying to find real universal truths. 'The artist provides reinforcement for the attitudes considered right' (Rupert Clendon Lodge, 1953) this means that art suggests to the viewer that what we see in the world is true and real, which Plato believed is a lie that art is reinforcing.



Figure 4 A still life of flowers in a wan-li vase

Ambrosius Bosschaert was a Dutch still-life painter and was one of the earliest painters to paint exclusively still-life flowers. He had a unique style to his paintings that has influenced many artists since. He used layers of glaze to 'hide his brush strokes in a limpid sheen' (Mitchell, 1973). At the time that he was painting, it would be impossible to have this bouquet of flowers together in the same vase as they all bloom at different times, and there was no way to preserve them. Therefore, he had to draw references for all of the different flowers while they were blooming and then use those reference drawings to paint the paintings. 'a still life of flowers in a Wan-Li vase' depicts a multitude of different flowers all in a beautiful ceramic vase with a gold vase. Bosschaert used bright colours for the flowers against a dark background, which

creates an incredible contrast, causing the flowers to stand out and immediately draw our attention to them. Plato would believe that this painting is a false representation of our false world as it is a depiction of nature, of flowers. He would, therefore, think that this painting is dangerous to the viewer because it reinforces what we see every day and he was concerned that paintings of our false world would stop people from looking further and figuring out the truth.



Figure 5 Still life of roses, tulips, a sunflower and other flowers in a glass vase with a bee, butterfly and other insects upon a marble ledge

Rachel Ruysch is another Dutch painter who became fascinated with drawing flowers as a child and then grew up to be an incredibly well-known still-life flower painter. She has a similar style to Bosschaert as she also used bright vivid colours to paint the

flowers against a dark background, creating a beautiful contrast. Another similarity between the two works is that she also painted a wide variety of flowers in one vase. However, her painting style is less structured and freer than Bosschaert's creating incredible movement within her paintings. 'Still life of roses, tulips, a sunflower and other flowers in a glass vase with a bee, butterfly and other insects upon a marble ledge' depicts exactly what the title says it does. It is an incredible painting however Plato would also consider this painting a depiction of falsity and would therefore be concerned that it would stop people from seeking out the truth of the universe and the realm of the forms that hold true, eternal, unchanging truth.

Through this investigation, it can be seen that we live in a society of the spectacle. Debord proposed his theory in his book 'The Society of the spectacle' in 1967 before the internet was invented however it completely applies to our use of social media and the internet as a society. The way that it influences and controls every aspect of our lives. Additionally, there is something ever-present about Plato's way of thinking, even though he was writing over 2300 years ago, his beliefs and theories about the universe and art still have an impact. Regardless of what you believe, religious or otherwise, his initial observation of our world being in a constant state of change is true and easily evidenced by flowers. They grow, and they die fairly quickly before our eyes, but their roots remain so that they can regrow. However, we cut them at the stems and stop them from growing so that we can display them in our houses because we like to look at them. We also put them on our loved one's graves and at the sites of tragic accidents, making a spectacle of the deaths to show that we care.

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