The Ambivalent Spectacle: A Critical Inquiry on Web 2.0 Media and Alienation

Ailesha Lynn Ringer and Marco Briziarelli
University of New Mexico

ABSTRACT In this paper we test the limits of one of the more influential critical inquiries linking media to Marx's notion of alienation: Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as applied to web 2.0 media landscapes. While in need of qualification and historicization to interpret web 2.0 media, we argue that the idea of the Spectacle provides a useful holistic perspective capable of reconciling the ambivalent phenomena of alienation that can be found in this new context. Thereafter, by exploring how web 2.0 media practices are consistently tied to labour and value creation, we argue in favour of a materialist approach to media, which treats means of communication as a means of production. Furthermore, we contend that in the new media landscape, Debord's Spectacle becomes a useful heuristic for understanding (new) mediation as alienation, what we term, 'Spectacle 2.0.'

KEYWORDS: new media, Guy Debord, Karl Marx, alienation, spectacle

Introduction

A consistent body of critical literature has steadily drawn on Marx's concept of alienation to examine mediated communication as one important manifestation of the dialectics of modernity, i.e. being capable of connecting and simultaneously isolating individuals, emancipating and coercing them, and finally democratizing the polity and commodifying/trivializing culture. In this context, mediation, understood as the social and technological process of mediating social relations via communication, becomes a powerful example of how alienation prevents people from experiencing 'genuine' social relations, which in Marxian terms, consists of people relating to one another by "free conscious activity" (Marx 1978:77).

In the specific context of the web 2.0 landscape – referring to Internet based platforms such as blogging and social networking – media are considered the foundational ground of new social movements, radical democracy and the renewal of the public sphere (Castells 2009). Co-currently, media are also examined as a congenial capitalist platform, a new subsuming level on which the audience is exploited by digital labour. This happens through highly ambiguous practices, which are synthesized by Terranova's (2000) concept of "free labor," which we understand to be the voluntary expression of subjectivity and gratuitous production.

Examining the context defined by web 2.0 media, Marxist media scholars have dealt with alienation mostly in relation to media audiences and the paradoxical ambivalent understanding of agency that emerges. This notion of agency is linked to productive practices such as user-generated content: The higher the agency in freely producing content, the greater the risk of finding a level of estrangement

from the real productive process, other users and the content produced. For instance, in the prototypical case of Facebook, the user is unaware of the extent of their unpaid work and subsequent exploitation of how their private life, and the social networks they belong to, have been commodified.

In fact, web 2.0 media exemplify ways in which the mediation of the Spectacle (Debord, 1967) could run shallower, and also run deeper. On the one hand, web 2.0 media appear to give back to the audience what traditional mass media have subtracted: sociability and control over the production of media content. Yet, on the other hand, web 2.0 media appear to alienate users from the means, tools and ownership of production, and from each other. We call this the 'dilemma of ambivalent spectacle,' and suggest that it is a powerful heuristic for understanding our increasingly mediated lives.

The media mentioned in Debord's corpus – newspapers, TV and radio – adopted a functionalist broadcast logic of "one to many." By contrast, new social media offer a much wider variety of social relational forms, variously described as "many to many," "few to few," and "many to one." These differences have important consequences for the study of alienation. Consider that if traditional 'mediated alienation' dissolves the subject, the object and the process of producing meaning via communication, then web 2.0 media, with its proverbial free labour, provides qualitatively thicker kinds of communicative relations that build on high interaction, participatory culture, and the agency of linking the moment of production to the consumption of media content. In fact, in such a media scenario, surely there is room for both alienation and exploitation (Fuchs 2010), because in the porous boundaries established by web 2.0 media, the "active" user of social media freely generates content and value, which is then appropriated by media corporations such as Facebook and YouTube.

Reflecting on that ambivalence, in this paper we test the limits of one of the most influential critical inquiries linking media to Marx's notion of alienation: Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle as applied to web 2.0 media landscapes. This is because, relative to existing literature, Spectacle more effectively conciliates the humanist and structuralist implications of the concept of alienation.

Building upon a political economic approach to media, we demonstrate how social media can simultaneously be understood as alienating and de-alienating social experiences. While in need of qualification and historicization to interpret web 2.0 media, we argue that the idea of the Spectacle provides a useful holistic perspective capable of reconciling the ambivalent phenomena of alienation. Thereafter, by exploring how web 2.0 media practices are frequently tied to phenomena of alienation and exploitation via the notion of the Spectacle, we argue in favour of a materialist approach to media, which treats means of communication as a means of production.

While there is a long tradition that has understood communication as a means of production (cf Gramsci 1971; Althusser 1971; Volosinov 1973; Williams, 1977) this remains a minority view. Instead, as Peck (2006) claims, most of media research still operates by the idealist assumption that 'consciousness determines social being' which assumes that mediated alienation is limited to 'alienated ideas,' ideology and false consciousness. While, not necessarily disagreeing in identifying media mostly as semiotic agents, we are convinced that the effectiveness of the media spectacle can only be understood when grounded in the concrete ways in which it mobilizes labour and creates and extracts value out of it.

To advance our argument, we briefly show how a consistent body of literature tends to treat mediation as tightly related to alienation. Then, we concentrate on the Spectacle as one of the most accomplished synthesis of such a critical view on media. Finally, in the second half of the essay, we test the limits of the Spectacle by contextualizing it in the web 2.0 media environment. With important differences in mind, we introduce "*Spectacle 2.0*," and use it to describe how web 2.0 media practices offer an important qualification of the relation between mediation and alienation that reveals the complexity of the post-Fordist, information driven, and capitalist productive system.

Ultimately, by the operationalization/historicization of Debord's spectacle we mean to provide an understanding of alienation as it materializes in media

phenomena and practices. We consider this endeavour particularly timely in a context in which, while currently functioning as powerful metaphors of the social process as well as the material sphere in which current forms of valourization, exploration of labour, power structures, ideological practices as well as counter-hegemonic social struggles find their condition of possibility, information and communication technologies remain incredibly ambiguous in its overall social significance. Indeed, by using the spectacle we try to recover a concept that can articulate the complexity of a media saturated world in which mediation represents both the source of aspiration to form some kind of (dis-alienated) general intellect characterized by absolute awareness and absolute socialized agency through "hyper-connectivity," but also the constant threat of being completely insulated from it, being overwhelmed by "too much" information and of being controlled by a capillary kind of surveillance.

Mediation and the Alienated Spectators

We understand Marx's conception of alienation as a compound account of the breach that estranges people from their practical activities, material processes of social (re-)production and other people. For Marx, history always partially escapes us because we make history but not under the condition of our own making, so alienation leads to a contradiction between an anthropological condition of human beings and particular historically determined circumstances.

Such a tension between 'nature' and 'history' becomes evident for Marx when one examines the different kinds of productive activities, particularly, the distinction between (waged) 'labour' and 'work.' In *Capital*, Marx maintains that "Labor which creates use-values and is qualitatively determined is called 'work' as opposed to 'labor'; labor which creates value and is only measured quantitatively is called 'labor', as opposed to 'work'" (1867:138). The two aspects contradict each other when it comes to alienation because while work is an expression of our free, conscious, imaginative practical activity, waged labour frequently requires coercion, abiding to oppressive rules and being placed in a system of production that detaches the worker from their own product, colleagues and individual assertion.

Consequently, waged labour causes multiple kinds of alienation to the workers, thus disrupting the moment of genuine creative activity intrinsic in the experience of "working:"

> This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor's product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. Under these economic conditions this realization of labor appears as *loss of realization* for the workers; objectification as *loss of the object and bondage to it*; appropriation as *estrangement*, as *alienation*. [Marx 1867:22]

With these comments in mind, alienation represents for the humanist Marx of the *Manuscripts* a way to critically evaluate the (lack of) authenticity of the relationship that a given subject has with an object as well with other subjects. An alienated condition subverts the nature of social relations to the paradoxical point that "the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates" (Marx 1867:22). Even more paradoxical is the estrangement materialized in the phenomenon of commodity fetishism:

> The commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labor within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. [Marx 1867:165]

This assessment of human relations naturally leads to the question of mediated communication, for in contemporary societies it is one preponderant way in which people come into relation with each other. Mediated communication represents a modernity promise of sociability via means of communication, which, like labour, is constantly felt in highly ambiguous ways.

While the analytic category of alienation was originally mostly applied to labor, for some it may appear less intuitively applicable to media. However, we are convinced that media should be considered as material means of production at two different united, but also distinct, levels. This is for two reasons. First, media are involved in the production, distribution and consumption of cultural commodities. Second, because of their preeminent role as cultural agents in shaping the collective imagery of a given society, media are also responsible for the production, distribution and consumption of ideas, values and beliefs. Together, this process controls the production, distribution and consumption of socially shared meanings that materially reproduces a given society by mobilizing social practices such as consumption.

Mediation as Alienation

Alienation represents both an outcome and a precondition for reproducing a capitalist system. In this sense, media as means of production and (re)production of such a system can become a powerful agent as well as a metaphor of alienation, a conceptualization of modernity understood in its contradictory nature (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). In fact, mediating human communication via technology has also consistently produced fear, anxiety and dystopic images, which materialize in different forms, as the literary and scholarly tradition of mass society theory confirms, that is, mediation as the loss of contact with nature (Peters 1999).

In the limited media literature that specifically covers alienation, the concept has frequently been deployed to study the loss of signifying and interpreting the agency of the media audience. Herein, from a cultural critique point of view, 'mediated alienation' has been mostly understood as an impoverishment of people's capability to critically understand and produce ideas. Accordingly, 'mediated alienation' may concern the estrangement of the TV viewer, the radio listener or the newspaper reader from the text at the level of determining its content, and its significance. This is evident in critical media literacy projects where the "culture industry" estranges people by providing escapist diversion, and consistent distraction, which is then enacted through the cultivation

of false psychological needs that strip people of the intellectual autonomy and individuality needed to understand their predicament. While the culture industry thesis mostly implies a level of passivity of the alienated audiences, Althusser (1971) offered an alternative reading of mediated alienation based on his idea of the "ideological state apparatus" (ISAs). ISAs, which include media, school, religion, family, law, politics, economics, communication and culture, function through a dialectics of coercion and consent to interpolate subjects into ideology. Mediation in Althusser functions as both alienation from real social relations as well as enrollment into imaginary social relations. This is because, through media, audiences are alienated from the material processes that produce a given reality, but paradoxically find a moment of identity building and de-alienation in the ideologically mediated environment. In other words, interpellation entails a contradictory process of alienation by which individuals acknowledge, respond to, and therefore consent to ideologies, which leads them to understand themselves as subjects (cf Durham and Kellner 2001).

While much political economy scholarship on media provides a needed materialist analysis of media, diametrically opposed to culturalist notions of alienation, it tends to dismiss the humanist dimension of the workers' consciousness and the concrete ways they experience estrangement. For instance, Mosco (2009), McChesney (2008), and Herman and Chomsky (1988) all provide a structural analysis of media institutions, which are created by alienating and exploitative systems already in place and create the conditions of possibility for alienation, but without necessarily dealing with concrete phenomena of alienation. Smythe (1981) argues that, "the principal product of the commercial mass media in monopoly capitalism [is] simple: audience labor power" (26). Watching TV requires the audience to do emotional and cognitive work, which lends itself to, "learning to desire and buy particular brands and commodities" (Fisher 2012:172). Smythe's thesis has been both advanced and problematized mainly by Jhally and Livant (1986) who focus on the act of watching as labour itself and argue that the surplus-value comes from "extra-watching," i.e. watching more commer-

cials than are required to pay for the program. Still, there is much value in Smythe's observations as it relates to alienation.

In quick summary, mediation can be considered as a way to reconceptualize alienation from the specific perspective of technology of communication. While this has a long history of emphasis, when they do occur, more often than not studies that attend to media and alienation confine their efforts to alienation from ideas and 'meaning,' or alienation from social institutions. In the former (culturalist), alienation is reduced to a humanist concern, in the latter (structuralist) it is reduced to a structuralist concern of the creation of value and exploitation. For this reason, we consider one conceptualization of mediation that seems to conciliate those two important dimensions into one synthetic framework, and therefore more effectively secure the relation between mediation and alienation: Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

The Spectacle

Almost fifty years ago, Debord (1967) in *The Society of the Spectacle* claimed that under the conditions of late capitalism, "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles: everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (thesis 5). Drawing on Marx's ideas of commodity fetishism and alienation, Debord claims that, "the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (thesis 4).

The alienating power of the Spectacle partially derives from reification, where, according to Lukács (1971), a historically determined social structure comes to be considered as natural, universal, ontologically existing as an object. The taken for granted nature of the Spectacle allows the paradox of consistent inevitable presence and the capability of being undetected. The Spectacle constitutes a formidable mediation, which alienates the spectators by standing in between people's "actual" life and how they perceive it:

> The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence

of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life. Materially, the spectacle is 'the expression of estrangement, of alienation between man and man'. [Thesis 215]

Debord associates the Spectacle to a particular stage of capitalism, "when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life" (thesis 42). This ruling of the commodity form is linked to the fundamental shift in the twentieth century from a production-oriented economy to a later configuration organized around consumption, media and information:

> In all of its particular manifestations – news, propaganda, advertising, and entertainment – the spectacle is the model of the prevailing way of life. It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production. [Thesis 7]

This quote demonstrates that the Spectacle represents a pre-constituted gaze of the world that is mainly propelled by mediated visual communication, "when the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior" (thesis 18). Alienation derives then from *the impossibility of experiencing reality in its true nature*, as the Spectacle works as a cognitive interface between the mind and reality. This is indeed a powerful form of mediation.

To elaborate, the Spectacle does not dominate through 'hypnosis' or 'subliminal' propaganda but through a totalizing social organization in which social control is built upon a flexible mix of force and consent. Hence, it is a tool of social pacification more than social oppression, a kind of "ubiquitous opium for the masses" (thesis 44). Consequently, similar to the Gramscian notion of hegemony, institutions such as schools, media, the parliament, and similar, are considered as organic components of the Spectacle. The Spectacle rules by "mobilizing all human use value and monopolizing its fulfillment, exchange value ultimately succeeded in controlling use" (thesis 46). Its force consists in its pervasiveness and in being able to mediate any aspect of social life.

However, unlike Gramscian hegemony, the Spectacle is not a deliberate distortion, the outcome of a class based political project. Rather it is a, "*weltanschauung* that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into a material force" (thesis 5). To be clear, the subaltern, the dominant group, and society as a whole, experience the alienating effects of the Spectacle.

To sum up, Debord provides rich analyses of how a media saturated society translates specific sets of social relations, proper of late consumer capitalism, into spectacular representations abstracted from real vital processes of people. In this sense, Debord has advanced Marx and Lukács's study of alienation phenomena, by focusing on the moment of consumption, and exploring at the level of images and re-presentation, the condition of fragmentation within the totality of the Spectacle. Much like Debord uses 1960's capitalist development to historicize Marx and Lukács's analysis of alienation, we turn to web 2.0 media to historicize Debord's Spectacle.

Spectacle 2.0: Mediated Alienation

While several decades distance us from the original development of Debord's theses, the interest for the Spectacle has remained constant, if not augmented. Especially in media studies, the work of Debord was advanced by the self-titled critical and cultural tradition, and by semioticians such as Baudrillard's postmodern study of signs as the new commodity in a later stage of the Spectacle (Best and Kellner 1999). Indeed, given CNN's coverage of the 1991 Gulf War, 9/11 as a televised event, and the global iconography of desperation and dispossession, eviction and protest, linked to economic crises, it is difficult to deny the heuristic value of the Spectacle.

Nevertheless, the social historical circumstances that originally produced Debord's scenario have changed in substantial ways. Therefore its capability to alienate people may have changed as well. Subsequently, we have decided to use web 2.0 as a lens to test the limits of the Spectacle, because, compared to traditional media examined by Debord, newer media are considered by many popular media pundits to have a positive social effect at a revolutionizing scale. Contrary to these pundits and

commentators who understand this to be 'Spectacular Emancipation,' we think there is good evidence to understand it as 'Spectacular Alienation.'

Therefore, based on such a perception, it is worth giving attention to whether web 2.0 media demystify the Spectacle, whether the criteria defined by Debord are applicable in this new media, and lastly whether, web 2.0 media contradict the previously stated tight relationship between mediation and alienation.

In his rhetorical essay, Halloran (2001) describes the emancipatory potential of the Spectacle in its ability to enhance lived experiences and create a sense of togetherness, or a collective spectacular experience. Studying the 1927 anniversary pageant of the Saratoga Battlefield, Halloran defines the spectacle as, "a public gathering of people who have come to witness some event and are self-consciously present to each other as well as to whatever it is that has brought them together" (5). For Halloran, the Spectacle is more than the visual and auditory creations of a cultural event; rather, it is a collective experience, "In gathering to witness a spectacle, I become part of it. … together we experience something, and in that shared experience is the germ of a public" (6). Located within this collective experience is the emancipatory potential of the Spectacle, for if we all create shared meaning by becoming a part of the Spectacle, then we can be emancipated from alienation from others, which is produced under a capitalist system. Breaking from Debord's emphasis that the power of the representation subsumes the power of lived experience, Halloran articulates that lived experience is actually more spectacular than the "text" and is able to "overwhelm" it, thus generating potential ground for emancipation. Halloran is careful to note the ambivalence of the Spectacle though, stating that,

> much of the rhetorical power of any spectacle may come from this very quality of being 'on the verge,' of being so ambitious in concept that it turns out to be impossible to realize fully and in actual performance teeters on the boundary of the sublime and the ridiculous. [Halloran 2001:9]

It is within this ambivalence that we approach the Spectacle, and agree with Halloran that lived experi-

ence is paramount to understanding the Spectacle. Yet we depart in a key way: the text, specifically, the production and control over the production of media 2.0, complicates this over-reliance on lived experience; one cannot be formed without the other.

Social media are not exempt from broader modernist assumptions about the possibility of human emancipation. Indeed, with their lower barriers of entry, in some respects, they are a more pronounced exemplification of it. For instance, based on current political economic analysis of media, the notion of informational capitalism (Castells 2009) confirms the original intuition of the increasingly central role of media in our economic system. In fact, "the process of capitalist restructuring undertaken since the 1980s that describes the increasing prominence of information and communication within capitalism under conditions of globalization and rapid technological development" (18) seems to be in line with Debord's primordial description of a society of the Spectacle, in which "social life has been replaced by its representation" (thesis 1).

Under such a perspective, the spectacle of web 2.0 media seems to have enhanced both its representational power and its capability to reproduce consumer capitalism by reinforcing the functional relation between entertainment and value creation pointed out by Horkheimer and Adorno's culture industry (1972). In this sense, several scholars have scrutinized new media practices from the perspective of value creation (e.g. Dyer-Witheford 1999; Fuchs 2010; Scholz 2008); from the perspective of the ambivalent exploiting of the internet user (Terranova 2000); from the idea of surveillance through monitoring of personal media practices (Willcocks 2006); and finally, from the idea of invasively intruding into people's private sphere (Dalsgaard and Paulsen 2009).

Uniting these studies is a rejection of the depiction of social media as enhancer of social and individual freedoms. Instead they find this depiction to be an instrumental ideology. In practice, what has occurred is the creation of value in digital environments by commodifying user-generated content. Subsequently, the overall argument states that the Internet has been incorporated into a dominant corporate model of capital accumulation, which is grounded on the exploitation of unpaid labour based on the activity of creating content by users while involved in blogging or social networking (Cohen 2008).

In this context, what makes the web 2.0 spectacle even more pervasive is that in practice web 2.0 links the moment of production and the moment of consumption, turning the 1960s spectator into a producer/user, or a "prod-user" (Bruns 2008:i). At this point it is worth recalling Debord's claim that

> With the advent of the so-called second industrial revolution, alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses. The *entirety of labor sold* is transformed overall into the *total commodity*. [Thesis 42]

With these remarks in mind, the Spectacle 2.0 enhances the commodity form logic by overlapping the moment of production and consumption, to the point in which the user consumes their content. In fact, the liminal position between production and consumption of the 'prod-user' reveals the extensiveness of a spectacle that develops simultaneously, "in the cultural social commercial, intellectual, economic social realms" (Bruns 2008:5). In the case of Facebook, this particular phenomenon is becoming a functioning representation of a much larger political economic project that provides a renewed liberal model for the public sphere, private associationism (Briziarelli 2014), as well as providing the social and cultural capital necessary to function in the current informational capitalism (Fuchs 2010).

It is within such porous boundaries of producing/consuming that the active user of social media "freely" generates content for media corporations' interests. In fact, an extreme level of alienation can be found in the paradox of voluntary production of user-generated content and the invisible dimension of labour associated to it. This corresponds to the conceptual distance between the creative and subjective expression of an individual updating their Facebook Wall, and the unpaid labour of producing content and being active around the Facebook platform. At the level of labor needed to sustain the material infrastructure of the Internet, scholars argue that exploitation and alienation happen because audience's work on digital media is alienated from

itself, and from the tools, products and objects of labor (Fuchs 2014). Andrejevic (2014) argues that the new media form of this is the "digital shadow," or our profiles and data that are, "increasingly being used to determine our life chances, our access to resources and benefits, even our mobility, in the digital era" (182). However, alienation also takes place in the way in which the material labor and resources needed to run the Spectacle 2.0 remain mostly invisible: from the mineral extraction industry necessary for ICT, to labour practices at Indian software companies and to Google in Silicon Valley (cf Fuchs 2014).

To sum up, social media can be examined for their capability to facilitate capital subsumption of previously un-commodified aspects of people's lives. As Debord argues, "capitalism's ever intensifying imposition of alienation at all levels makes it increasingly hard for workers to recognize and name their own impoverishment" (thesis 122). Moreover, we contend that in Spectacle 2.0 media exploitation, the associated degree of alienation is more pronounced compared to traditional media of Debord's original Spectacle. That is because if, for instance, TV audiences worked by watching media and in exchange received media content as a kind of wage, in social media, the audiences' work of paying attention to advertisements is not exchanged with media text because in many web 2.0 platforms the users create content.

In the end, the Spectacle 2.0 goes back to the idea of mediation as a corruption of genuine social relations that uses the rhetoric of neoliberal freedom of producing and consuming to hide multiple forms of exploitation and the alienation of web 2.0 workers. To put it in Debord's words:

> What spectacular antagonisms conceal is the unity of poverty. Differing forms of a single alienation contend in the masquerade of total freedom of choice by virtue of the fact that they are all founded on real repressed contradictions (thesis 63).

The Heuristic Value of a Historicized Spectacle

While not necessarily disagreeing with scholars such as Caraway (2011), who criticize the Autonomist Marxist theories for not being able to discern alien-

ation and exploitation from emancipation, making the Marxist category of labour opaque, we think that those perspectives effectively exemplify the ambivalence of what we have defined as the Spectacle 2.0. In fact, the ambivalent spectacle can be seen as a working manifestation of the mutation in the productive and extractive logic of post-Fordist capitalism, according to which apparent contradictions such as alienation/conscious free activity, exploitation/emancipation, subjectivization/objectification are consistently sublated into capital accumulation. That is indeed one of the most eloquent examples of what Harvey defines as flexible accumulation (Harvey 1992:141).

In this sense, this essay meant to accomplish two intertwined objectives. First, we highlighted the value of the notion of the Spectacle as a framework to understand alienation that can conciliate 'culturalist' and 'structuralist' tendencies of a political economic approach to media. Our project aimed at testing whether Debord's account of media and alienation could still be useful to understand the context characterized by web 2.0 media. We are indeed convinced that a historicized adaption of the Spectacle still holds considerable heuristic value. Kaplan (2012) claims that Debord's account still "serves up a severe indictment of contemporary capitalist culture. Isolation, fantasy, ideological blindness, manipulation have come to absolutely define our shared social world" (458). The idea of the Spectacle functions as a synthetic representation of a world made up of representations in which reality seems more grounded by its semiotics than its material concrete field.

Second, the application of the analysis of alienation in the context of web 2.0 media also allowed the assertion of a materialist perspective of media that treats it as means of communication, signification and production. In fact, casting light on how web 2.0 media can re-assert and aggravate the alienating effects of the Spectacle gives visibility to how the political economy of mediation provides new dialectical ways to consider alienation. Alienation takes place at the level of production, distribution, circulation and consumption of cultural commodities as well as collectively shared representations.

Conversely, by highlighting how the Spectacle 2.0 can also provide occasion of de-alienation, we

meant to point out that the concept of alienation needs to be re-contextualized in much more dialectical terms. According to this dialectic, the same dynamic that alienates Facebook users at one level may simultaneously reinforce affective relations or a re-familiarization of civil society with the political process.

Finally, the Spectacle also contributes to define a method of analysis that we consider extremely useful when it comes to examining contemporary societies: The idea of social whole. Debord's Spectacle reminds us of the importance to interpret capitalism in holistic ways because the critique of the Spectacle must be "integral" (thesis 121), refusing to examine phenomena in isolation and abstraction from the social whole. In this respect, now more than ever we need to reactivate the interest on alienation understood in its 'spectacular' totality and enrolling interpolating people into new forms of labour.

In fact, as a holistic and dialectic perspective of capitalism, the spectacle provides a framework to critically explore how in the context of web 2.0 media, subjects produce, consume and reproduce both processes of subjectification as well as precarious forms of (digital) labour, which is incorporated within by the commodity form and organically produced by means and practices of communication. In this sense, two important aspects of contemporary capitalist phenomenology seem to confirm the pervasiveness of the spectacle, in both its alienating and dis-alienating sides. On the one hand, the increasingly salient perspective of what could be defined as boundless work, which describes how productive activities – previously confined by specific spaces, specific times, specific modalities – colonize every aspect of our life: effective relations, entertainment that turns diversion from work to the implementation of work, and the fact the same media metaphors are used for labour and leisure.

On the other hand, the ambivalent context of the so-called Spectacle 2.0, produces subjects and a sense of sociability that indissolubly combine exploitation, informal and affective relations, utopic aspirations, perceived freedom, the will to share, and the undefined boundaries between free time and 'free" labour. The subjectivities created by the spectacle are thus not simply 'spectators' but also 'actors' who actively manage social impression, moralize neoliberal logic by re-signifying current informational capitalism through the idea of the gift economy, and replace the hetero-directed productive logic typical of the Fordist model with an apparently dis-alienating self-directed one (Salecl 2010).

The combination of those features creates a neoliberal subjectivity, which is both created as spectator and at the same time actively reproduced by the very subjects operating in the context of knowledge work as actors. Byung-Chul Han (2015) makes sense of such an ambiguity through the notion of a transparent society. He notices how transparency in the context of new media has become a normative trope dominating public discourse that calls for increased translucence of the political process and the freedom of information. While the author considers transparency as a condition of possibility for a true democracy, its positive (as opposed to negative) dialectics also created a major exposition to collective control and exploitation in current capitalist societies. Accordingly, media-powered transparency, becomes a false ideal, which leads to an insatiable appetite for performance, disclosure, and uncovering, a process that for Byung-Chul Han operates with the same logic of pornography: as an immediate display without meaning. Thus transparency, as a manifestation of the Spectacle 2.0, creates an alienating experience in which the subject is subjected to a performance that adds to the picture but he/she does not actually make it. At the same time, the social interaction occurring in social media may exemplify the condition of dis-alienation through the promise of hyper-connectivity, sociability and transparence.

References

Althusser, L.
1971 Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (notes towards an investigation). *In* Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. L. Althusser, ed; B. Brewster, trans. Pp. 85-126. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.

Andrejevic, M.
2014 Alienation's Return. *In* C. Fuchs and M. Sandoval (Eds.), Critique, Social Media and The Information Society (pp. 179-190). New York, NY: Routledge.

Best, S. and D. Kellner
1999 Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle Substance. Thesis 90:129-156.

Briziarelli, M.
2014 The Ideological Reproduction: (Free) Labouring and (Social) Working within Digital Landscapes. tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society, 12(2):620-631.

Bruns, A.
2008 Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage. New York, NY: Peter Lang

Caraway, B.
2011 Audience Labour in the New Media Environment: A Marxian Revisiting of the Audience Commodity. Media, Culture, and Society 33(5):693-708.

Castells, M.
2009 Communication Power. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, N.
2008 The Valorization of Surveillance: Towards a political economy of Facebook. Democratic Communiqué 22(1):5-22.

Daalsgard, Christian and Morten Flate Paulsen
2009 Transparency in Cooperative Online Education. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning 10 (3):1-22.

Debord, G.
1967 The Society of the Spectacle. London: Verso.

Durham, M. G., and D. Kellner
2001 Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.

Dyer-Witheford, N.
1999 Cyber-Marx: Cycles and circuits of struggle in high-technology capitalism. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Fisher, E.
2012 How Less Alienation Creates More Exploitation? Audience Labour on Social Network Sites. Triplec: Cognition, Communication, Co-Operation 10(2):171-183.

Fuchs, Christian
2010 Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet. The Information Society: An International Journal 26(3):179-196.
2014 Digital labor and Karl Marx. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gramsci, Antonio
1971 Selections from the Prison Notebooks. New York, NY: International Publishers.

Halloran, M.
2001 Text and Experience in a Historical Pageant: Toward a Rhetoric of Spectacle. Rhetoric Society Quarterly 31(4):5-17.

Han, B.C.
2015 The Burnout Society. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Harvey, D.
1992 The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change. Cambrige, MA: Blackwell.

Herman, E. and Noam Chomsky
1988 A Propaganda Model. Media and Cultural Studies 257.

Horkheimer, M. and T. W. Adorno
1972 Dialectic of Enlightenment. New York, NY: Herder and Herder.

Jhally, S. and B. Livant
1986 Watching as Working: The Valorization of Audience Consciousness. Journal of Communication 36(3):124-143.

Kaplan, R
2012 Between Mass Society and Revolutionary Praxis: The Contradictions of Guy Debord's Society of The Spectacle. European Journal of Cultural Studies 15(4):457–478.

Lukács, G.
1971 History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

McChesney, R.

 2008 The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.

Marx, Karl

 1867 Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol.1. B. Fowkes (Trans.). London, UK: Penguin Classics.

 1978 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844. *In* The Marx-Engels Reader. R. Tucker, ed. Pp. 66-125. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

McChesney, R.

 2008 The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.

Mosco, V.

 2009 The Political Economy of Communication. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Peck, J.

 2006 Why We Shouldn't Be Bored With the Political Economy Versus Cultural Studies Debate. Cultural Critique 64(1): 92-125.

Peters, J.

 1999 Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication IL: University of Chicago Press.

Salecl, R.

 2010 The Tyranny of Choice. London, UK: Profile Books.

Scholz, T.

 2008 What the MySpace Generation Should Know About Working for Free. Collectivate.net. Retrieved from http://collectivate.net/journalisms/2007/4/3/ what-the-myspace-generation-should-know-about-working-for-free.html.

Smythe, D.

 1981 On the Audience Commodity and its Work. *In* Dependency Road: Communication, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada. D. Smythe, ed. Pp. 22-51. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Terranova, Tiziana

 2000 Free labor: Producing culture for the digital economy. Social Text 63, 18(2):33-55.

Volosinov, V. N.

 1973 Marxism and the Philosophy of Language. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, R.

 1977 Marxism and Literature. London: Verso.

Willcocks, L. P.

 2006 Michel Foucault in the Social Study of ICTs: Critique and Reappraisal. Social Science Computer Review 24:274-295.