The *spectacle* and its implosion in today's society: the Italian case of *Blob*

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INTRODUCTION

"The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." [1]

Images mould our ideas, memories and perceptions. Through repetition they can fix scenes in our minds more thoroughly than any written word, shaping the social imagery and the collective memory. Current times are characterized by a dangerous contingency of appearance, power and social amnesia, which shape the individual and society in general. Appearing has become the only means to express existence and media have turned into platforms to achieve this. Power has taken the form of a mesmerizing network of half-truths, where the public discourse is weaved according to the tale of those in control. Within this environment, memory adapts to the general discourse diffused by mass media. The current era is founded on immediacy and concision and leaves no space for critical thought. In fact, we do not need to metabolize information, since we are constantly given a selection of what we are supposed to know through the media we consume. Though the past serves to understand the present and to envision the future, what is produced and consumed today is nothing but an eternal perpetuation of the present: we live in a time without history. An era that lives in the impermanence of the instant, depletes the distinction between truth and fiction. In this framework, the persistence of memory has become crucial in order to restore the possibility of a past and create new paths of consumption. The trend of redigisting archival material - which is spreading dramatically across a broad spectrum of media - is inevitably shaping the individual and its imagination.

Though the phenomenon of reuse in itself has been subject of many art pieces of the 20th century,

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1   Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014 [1967]),10

never has its production and consumption been as conventional and accessible as today. Nowadays, anyone can take possession of images via the internet and change their context and new aim. What first was a means to oppose the standardization of art and society as a whole, has later become an accustomed practise on the web. On social media in particualr, images intercede between people, constantly enslaving these to the dynamics of the social spectacle.

A broad analysis of *the spectacle* should take into consideration the process, through which an audio visual sign moves from the path of signification it was realized for, to role within the social imagery. Any image starts from being an independent unit of signification, to a system of self-regulating relations within social consumption. Ultimately, images (static and moving) become part of a bigger system of consumption, imagination and re-production, which is hard to describe if not through rhizomatic or auto generative structures, namely blobs. Such structures bring a certain work or movie into a social blobs, a pastiche of images, music and acting performances inserted in the general culture.

Guy Debord's theories on *the Society of the Spectacle* as well as the Italian TV program *BLOB* [2], could help us to understand more about these dynamics. The latter program, broadcasted on Italian public television since 1989, in particular is a peculiar actant within this process. This programs, which consist of the re-use of images such as news, TV programs, series, films, documentaries, cartoons and the internet, tries to unveil the hidden mechanisms of society and media through an operated re-digestion of archive footage. It established a moment or a recursive programming window, where the different nuances of the process of "blobization" can be observed. Variegated and heterogeneous types of content are assembled assiduously and the juxtaposition of different types of content, audience and artistic value creates new paths of consumption.

In this thesis the idea of "the spectacle"[3], will be analyzed and applied to contemporary phenomena that echo and deepen its body of understanding and applicability. Guy Debord's life and oeuvre have largely contributed to a critique of media and society in general. Particularly his theories envisioning society as an accumulation of spectacles have shed a new light on the dynamics of consumption of capital in contemporary society. In a time on the verge of technological and social transformations, Debord applied

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2   *BLOB*. Enrico Ghezzi and Marco Giusti. (Italy, RAI 3, 1989 -)
3   The notion of "spectacle" was developed by Guy Debord in 1967 in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*. It is one of
         the central notions of the Situationist International movement, active between 1957 and 1972 in Europe

Marxist theories of commodity fetishism to mass-media in order to deconstruct the production and consumption of visual material in contemporary society. In combination with Ranciere's theories on the "passive spectator"[4], he discussed the alienation of the audience by means of isolation and subjugation through mass media. At the heart of his observation lies the consumption of images in contemporary society, which nowadays not only mediate between individuals, but also corrupt their leisure time, substituting any sense of reality.

At the dawn of this process the Situationist International (SI) movement - headed by Debord - was actively revolting against society both on a theoretical and a practical level. *The Society of the Spectacle*, founding texts and film of the movement, employed cinema to oppose and evade the spectacle, adopting détournement as a strategy of subversion. Through the use of deviated material, edited together and illustrated by a voice-over, the film questioned the signification mechanisms of images, the alienation of individuals, and the commodification of society, deconstructing this as a whole, while simultaneously constituting a space to oppose and resist the spectacle.

Debord's pioneering theories and films will be the starting point of this thesis. Their applicability to contemporary media will be analyzed. The narrowing down of society's views over the the past fifty years will be presented against to the growing media environment and increasing visibility of the individual. Both have been central matters of many ominous theories. Particularly in recent decades, Debord's ideas have been at the cutting edge; they represent a disenchanted premonition of present society. As such they have been repeatedly quoted in both written and filmic form throughout time, demonstrating their utter resilience to an accelerating and mutating civilization. To elaborate on their relevance and renewability, a case study and its role and development within the Italian media environment, will serve as a primary example for this argumentation. How far is the accumulation of spectacles nowadays? Can a line between these and reality still be traced?

While at the time of Debord's first draft of *The Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle could still be evaded by means of subversive actions and thoughts, at a later stage of its evolution, this possibility dissolved. In particular, this has happened through the technological development and the subsequent commodification of private life as a whole through the arrival of television. By the end of the 1980s the spectacle had permeated every facet of society and life in general. According to Debord, the Italian

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4   Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009)

panorama in particular served as a prime example of this dystopian accomplishment. Within the fully integrated spectacle[5], escape was no longer possible.

In Italy television entered the privacy of the living rooms during the years of ideological and political fights. Through this new appliance the public discourse aligned towards one truth, which served the interests of the political panorama more than that of the nation. As a result, television changed its aim from public service to entertainment, becoming the open air unconscious of its society. Its diffusion resulted in a shift in mass media consumption as well as a change in the representation of Italy: it became the "beautiful country". Accordingly the celebration of individuality and of appearance, pervaded every field of the medium and of reality itself. Television became a reflection of its audience, and viceversa.

Within the completely flattened and unified discourse of Italian television, *BLOB* - a program running on the state television - and its creators, employ the memory of the country through the use of its national archive, as the ultimate act of obstruction against the spectacle: to deconstruct television and society in general. *BLOB* uses the language of TV but the aesthetics of cinema to infuse its critique from the heart of the spectacle. Since the program was created in response to a spectacle that could no longer be circumvented, it attempted instead to subvert it from within, offering a critical angle for those eyes and ears that are willing to embrace it. However, the rapidly mutating mediatic panorama, in particular its augmenting accessibility, has tightened the noose of the spectacle. Nowadays images are consumed constantly y, not only through traditional media, but vastly and most importantly through the web. In this way, users gradually move towards a digital counterfeit of reality in which they are absorbed to a greater extent the more of it they consume. Images not only mediate between individuals, they substitute any reality, becoming identities in themselves, which spread through the worldwide networks of the internet, where they circulate ad infinitum. Within this digital pool they increasingly shape the collective imagery, while progressively targeting and controlling the individual.

In the following chapters the above-mentioned theories will be elaborated through an analysis

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5   In his *The Society of the Spectacle* Debord outlined two main forms of spectacle. On one side its *concentrated* form, visible in societies with counter-revolutionary dictatorships, such as Nazism and Stalinism, where every aspect of life is identified with the political leader, who keeps the power through terror and violence. On the other hand its *diffuse* form expressed in consumer societies and advanced capitalism, such as the American Society. The use of seduction instead of violence in the *diffuse spectacle*, made this more subtle and effective then the concentrated one. In his later book *Comments on the society of the spectacle,* Debord described a third form of spectacle, manifested mainly in Italy and France, the *integrated spectacle.* This new state, combined the previous two forms (concentrated, diffuse) into one all-permeating and invading structure.

of extracts from the film *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973), an excerpt of an episode of *BLOB,* as well as some examples from the social media page of the same program. The comprehension of the spectacle, which today has pervaded every sphere of society, will be the guiding threat of this disquisition.

Is it possible to understand *BLOB*'s critique of media, and its development over time through different platforms, as a form of resistance to the integrated spectacle, or is it rather as a perpetration of this? This question will be analyzed in terms of Debord's original critique to the society of the spectacle.

The first chapter will give a general overview of the work of the Situationist International as well as an insight into Guy Debord's life, art and philosophy. In this section, amongst other works of the intellectual, the film *The Society of the Spectacle* will be employed to illustrate the critique of society, and of media in general, that he exerted between the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1990s.

The synthesis and conclusion of Debord's ouevre will serve as a starting point to discuss the state of the spectacle in contemporary societies. In the second chapter Italy - defined as the prime example of the integrated spectacle by Debord himself - and the role of television within the country, will illustrate such development. An analysis of the TV program *BLOB* - through one of its episodes - will illustrate both the state of the spectacle in Italian society as well as the attempt of its subversion.

Finally, the third chapter will reflect on the shift of television and of society in general towards online platforms. To understand the implications of this development, the theories on the spectacle and the impact of the internet on its evolution, will be illustrated through the presence of *BLOB* on social media. The employment of two examples taken from the facebook page of the program will be embedded within a larger discussion to describe the implosion of the spectacle onto itself.

CHAPTER I
COMMODIFICATION IN *THE SOCIETY OF THE SPECTACLE*

"Le spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images." [6]

The "spectacle"[7], mediates between people. It subsitutes any sense of reality and truth. It arises in a new stage of advanced capitalism, in which consumption, leisure time and appearance, reach their peak in the economy of social and political life. Images become the only means through which people communicate, the only channel through which they experience a form of life. Life itself is nothing but a simulation, with which the audience interacts from a distance. With these thoughts, Guy Debord elaborated on Jacques Ranciere's ideas regarding the "passive spectator" - for whom the act of watching - "spectare"- was opposed to that of knowing and acting. Though in reality Ranciere opposed the Marxist idea that the spectacle stultified the masses and believed in the possibility of an emancipation of the spectator, Debord theorized that the "spectacle" of society, would not only make the spectators passive, but furthermore alienate them from life itself. In his view the spectacle was a terrain to exert the new forms of power, but also as a means to employ strategies of subversion. Going back to the Marxist notions of "fetishism" and "reification"[8], Debord maintained that within the society of the spectacle the commodity and the image had become identical[9]. Capitalism lead to an overabundance of goods, which had not freed man from necessity, but had instead imposed a new urgency: that of consumption.

While one hand images can create new social relations between individuals, they simultaneously impose a detachment. Spectators are made to believe that they are part of the spectacle, whilst in fact, they are reduced to nothing but passive observers. Images transpose the viewer to

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6   Debord, *The society of the spectacle*, 2 : *"The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."*

7   from latin *spectare*, to observe from the outside, translates the idea of passive gazing onto something/someone, which will become the founding principle of Debord's eminent theory.

8   Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*: Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie. Dritter Band. (Hamburg: Akademie Verlag, 2004 [1894])

9   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 16-20

a fictitious reproduction of reality. It is within this that the spectators are tamed, elevated to the spectacular whilst being endlessly dominated by this. As part of this spectacle, individuals are connected through images, but also placed in a distance through them. The alpha and omega of the spectacle is represented by the separation of individuals from society and from themselves.[10]

As Debord predicted, the objects of consumption today are no longer those of an industrial society, but the products of a caustic media environment[11]. Images dominate everyday life. Noticeably, the relation of individuals to objects and to media products, such as consumer goods, social media, mass media, differs substantially from the means and times in which these are consumed. Images can be consumed to a greater extent at any time of the day. They can give visual and physical pleasure, allowing the mind to travel while tricking the body into believing what it sees. In fact, as part of this mechanism, individuals are constantly torn between the picture as a physical object and the "picturing" within their head, beyond the frame of the image. As a result, this consumption allowed the level of control over individuals to make a qualitative leap, rendering the subjects politically passive and socially isolated. In this notion, today Marx's industry workers are "corrupted" even in their time of non-work. Leisure, through consumerism, is transformed into a way to promote capitalist accumulation and to give vent to the superabundance of commodities. The apotheosis of this prediction could be seen in the recent explosion of sponsorship through social media. Nowadays, Instagram influencers are payed to sell their free time. Images produced in leisure time, become pieces of merchandise like any other good, that individuals ingest during their working hours.

Debord's visionary ideas have had an important impact on the mass media critique of the 20th century where *"everything that was once lived has receded into a representation"*[12]. His theories have set the foundation for a comprehensive understanding of social and mediatic mechanisms nowadays. After fifty years "the spectacle" has not only permeated every aspect of the everyday, but has substituted it. Marshall Mcluhan predicted that artefacts would mediate communication, becoming almost languages themselves[13]. Debord further developed this idea, suggesting that images were not only the means through which we communicate with each other, but rather the end product of communication itself. The spectacle does not simply coincide with the sphere of images or with what we call media: it

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10   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1-12
11   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2
12   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2
13   Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994 [1964])

mediates between people, through images, expropriating and alienating human interaction. Images do not represent reality, they substitute it[14]. We are if we appear. We arise through the images we create, use and reuse. In the time we live in, many individuals prefer the replica to the original[15]. Accordingly, they perform themselves through a flow of images. As a consequence, photographs and videos cease to be representations of the mundane: they become a foundation of the everyday. This realm of images not only consists of an endless flood of material quoting itself, but also of reuse and repetition of preexisting elements. An example of this could be seen in the phenomenon of "memes" on social media: images are taken from the internet archive, deprived of their original context and given new meaning. This emergent phenomenon of diversion, could be read as a contemporary example of the Debordian "détournement", the act of reusing pre-existing material in favor of a new semiotic device, which will be elaborated further in this chapter.

The reality of the current image consumption could be read as the acme of what Walter Benjamin described as the erosion of the aura of an object. In his analysis, the auratic quality of a work of art was closely linked to its connection within a time and space, which could not be represented through technological reproduction[16]. Mass circulation of images annihilates their auratic content and reduces them to what they are; means of visual communication. The value of an image is not anymore given by its presence within a unique space and time, but rather by the opposite: its ability to be everywhere simultaneously. Value is directly dependant on visibility and distributability. As a result, the image can be monetized and its value becomes proportional to its visibility. Under those circumstances, the authenticity of the work of art is substituted, through technological reproduction, by saturation. Within this new media environment, the aura becomes a buzz[17], changing the assessment system of the image: what matters is the greatest adaptability of the image into new patterns of communication.

The understanding of society as an accumulation of spectacles, should help us to see not only a movement which is bringing us closer and closer to a fake and predetermined experiential life, but is also bringing our temporality to a place where, as in theaters, you can rewind or repeat an act, or go forward in the story in the interest of the drama. At the center of this analysis, there is indeed the

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14   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1-12
15   Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1990 [1988]), 51
16   Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility" (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2008 [1936])
17   David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 16-19

interest in seeing a correlation between the increasing use of archival footage and repetition of images we are exposed to, and the mechanization of imagination. When an event occurs, one that shapes the course of history, such as 9/11, how many times do we see the same clip, showing us the spectacularity or brutality of what has happened, again and again? If a section of a movie becomes cult, or strongly iconic, how many times do we see it re-digested on the web or social media? Therefore, especially looking at the past, imagination is being strongly influenced by the images we repeatedly see. This would not constitute a change in essence, if these images were not - in a certain way - controlled. As a matter of fact, even in pre-mediated lives, we could argue that you were exposed over and over to certain natural, recursive events. A clap of thunder, a crashing wave, a raindrop that touches your skin, the changing seasons, day and night. All these rhythmic paths are of course part of human imagination since the dawn of time.

As will be analysed in the following chapters, the consumption and power of images have been connected even before the emergence of mass media 2.0. Film history has a lot to teach us in this perspective. But what is worth pointing out at the end of these lines, is how much the SI has foreseen the role of images in the complexities linked with the emergence of the societies of control[18]. The imagination of individuals is controlled, forcing their individual capacity of imagining into a single, unified capitalist mindset.

1.1_Guy Debord and the Situationist International

The SI - a group of politically committed avant-garde artists, headed by Guy Debord, were active in many European cities during the 1960s. The movement emerged in opposition to contemporary society, which it viewed as the complete commodification of everyday life[19]. To oppose the systematic sublimation and passivity of individuals, the SI theorized and practiced behaviors of subversion. Through a network of "situations", they attempted to attack the establishment of the institutions. On a private level, they opposed capitalism by their own means, such as refuting employment - *"ne travaillez jamais"* is still one of the ideas associated with the controversial figure of Debord. On a public level, the SI were not only artistically active, but also politically committed. Through the creation of "situations" - which gave origin to their name - they attempted to ferment class struggle

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18   Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1977 [1975])
19   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 16

and mobilize the masses. Through the creation of "constructed" situations, the SI tried to subvert the conditions of commodified everyday life and to oppose the passivity of the spectator. The aim was to create awareness regarding the level of control and conditioning of the everyday life and to rehumanize the urban centers. For instance, the idea of "psychogeography", was meant to challenge the perception and use of the urban space. By romantically strolling around the city, the act of "dérive" ("drifting") invited individuals to free themselves from usual encounters, activities and transfers, for the sake of a new and playful use of the urban environments[20]. The SI not only criticized the structure of cities, but also explored possible designs for Situationist cities.

Besides challenging the idea of geography and urban space they were actively involved in the political discussions pervading 1960s society. In fact, in the early political phase of this artistic movement (1962-1968), we find works such as *Abolition du travaillé aliené[21]*, that primarily shows and reflects on material alienation. The movement evolved and expanded these notions in works where students were called to react in front of the obligations of an alienated society[22]. Not by chance, it is presumed that *The Society of the Spectacle* - published in a more advanced phase of the movement - has been one of the triggers of the 1968 student uprising in Paris (of which the members of the SI were active participants)[23]. Within this manifesto societies were described as an accumulation of spectacles[24] in which consumption becomes nothing but a necessary and consequent part of each spectacle. As constituents of the spectacle of society, we constantly produce images which slowly substitute the real world. In this view, it is not by chance that the SI emerged in parallel to the explosion of mass media. Alienation only works if there are technological tools that direct individual paths of subjection towards a unified conception of life. The more society and communal life can grant tools that mediate messages, the easier it gets for a massified consumption to spread across every aspect of life. In this sense, the SI movement was able to start from post-Marxist notions, such as the one of alienation, and extend the understanding of them, by reading mass-media and television from that perspective. Debord and the SI had a key role in foreseeing the risk of letting

20   Situationist International Online, "Theory of the Dérive." CDDC.vt.edu.
21   Oil on Canvas (1963), Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, english title *"abolition of wage labor"*. This artwork is a revolutionary demand for a redistribution of wealth: everyone can obtain enough to support himself, provided that they contribute with their labor power for the good of humanity.
22   Situationist International, *On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual, and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy* (Detroit: Black & Red, 2000 [1966])
23   Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh and Joselit, *Arte dal 1900* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 2006), 391-397
24   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2

mass media have such an influential role on social imagery. If media had a certain impact in the second half of the 20th century, where channels and messages were still mono-directional and controlled by public entities, what impact do they have today?

1.2_Détournement and *The Society of the Spectacle* (film)

1.2.1_Détournement, memory and montage

By the end of the 1940s, national as well as individual identity had been obscured by the destructive domination of totalitarianism over Europe. Collective memory required rehabilitation. Throughout the decades under fascist and communist domination, film had been used as means of political propaganda as well as an instrument of sublimation. As a result, cinema seemed to have lost its identity. However, during the post-war time, cinematic production progressively reclaimed the political function of film for subversive aims[25]. In this framework, cinema represented the means through which a broader public could be reached, without losing the authority - or elitism - of high art. Film offered to recover a common identity and to construct a historic memory. Memory and repetition have shown contiguities in their capacity to restore the connection with the past[26]. By accessing the past, the presence of it is made possible. Going back to Bergson's notion on memory and the relation of this to the realm of images, the notion of cinema as a healing and recovering mechanism becomes intelligible. Filmographic images can be treated like memories, able to affect the viewer with the appearance of something that once was and no longer is. This has to do with the link that exists between cinema and history, which is related to the experience that images offer[27]. Images are not only objects: they can disclose worlds and offer viewers experiences of reality. Once the spectator engages with them, reading patterns and meaning in the collage of images and sounds that scroll on screen, falsehood can be exposed and truth disclosed. Under those circumstance, the medium of film could become a savior both of itself and of the spectators who were no longer asked only to watch a film, but to respond to it.

As an example of this, in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988/1998), Jean-Luc Godard attempted to narrate the (hi)story of cinema whilst understanding how this had failed during the war, first unable to avoid and then to portray the atrocities carried out during those decades[28]. In this documentary

25   Francesco Casetti, *Filmic experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 61
26   Giorgio Agamben, *Image et mémoire* (Paris: Hoëbeke, 1998)
27   Agamben, *Image et mémoire*, 34-36
28   Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988/1998, Motion picture

series, Godard edited together material from films, historical footage and photographs, recalling the visual style of previous avant-gardist productions. In fact, throughout the second half of the twentieth century various film directors - like Debord, Vienét, Pasolini - reacted to a society saturated by images by reusing existing material instead of producing new one. Plagiarism appeared as a necessary operation implied by progress, to enact a critique of the consumer society as well as to question the film medium itself.

As one of the main active resistances to the society of the spectacle, the SI adopted the technique of "détournement". "Détourner" literally means to deviate, in this case it refers to the recycling of elements of capitalist society, to create a new meaning within a different context. Within a society that communicates through fetishized images, the ultimate act of subversion is the use of this language against itself. Accordingly, in order to exert a critique of capitalism, it is necessary to start with a thorough deconstruction of the conventional notion of language[29]. Détournement became an "anti-ideological" language[30], employed to exert critique and to expose the ideological nature of mass media images. Similarly, to the collage and hijacking techniques of the Dada and other avant garde movements of the 20th century, détournement aimed to deviate from certain alienating and despotic cultural mechanisms, especially those linked to mass communication. However, contrary to contemporary art movements like Pop-art - which quoted and appropriated the products of capitalist society - détournement aimed to place these within a dialectic re-valuation. By means of collage and editing, two or more fragments were juxtaposed within a new framework. Montage represented the syntax of this visual language.

Debord aimed to reveal the lie at the core of the spectacle and find the truth behind this by using the language and images of the dominant power. If images are the means through which communication flows, then concepts are, in turn, images of thoughts[31]. As such, their symbolic value needs to be read within the cultural setting they have stemmed from and could not be understood intuitively outside of this[32]. As a consequence, when images are "detourned", the original is emptied of its meaning, while its elements obtain a readable re-connotation; a new significance. Through the synthesis of two or more opposing elements, détournement authenticates itself. By means of contrast,

29   Agamben, Vimo, et al., *I Situazionisti* (Roma: Manifestolibri, 1991), 19-26.
30   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 110
31   Gilles Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)
32   Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*

annihilation and reinvention of the detourned images, the means of the spectacularized life can be exhibited. What medium could better be used to exert a critique to the society of the spectacle, than one that suggests a loss of reality and then resumes it in the form of the spectacle? Thus, film represented this medium whilst detourned material served as the the content of this subversion. Through the use of "deviated" elements cinema became a platform of political and social propaganda. Various visual materials - such as comic strips, advertisement, movies etc - were torn from their usual context and inserted into a new, unusual relationship, to start a process of critical reflection.

Though Marxism is central to Debord's film, it must be pointed out that the aim and editing choices of this, are very different to other politically committed films. In particular those of leftist orientation, such as the soviet school, also had a very strong political commitment (as propaganda films) but contrasting approaches and ambitions[33]. However, while *The Society of the Spectacle* is a highly political and critical film, the aim of this "anti-documentary", was to exert a critique of media and to society in general, not with a hope for redemption or change, but as an ultimate surge against the spectacle. Debord took a stance against society as whole - which allows it to be widely understood even nowadays - and did not aim to disclose truth, but rather the opposite: to expose the spectacle. On the other hand, directors like Vertov and Eisenstein, believed in the power of film as a means of propaganda, using montage as a language to express their loyalty to the Soviet Union. Their films were made for a specific social group at a specific time. This limited their target - namely to the soviet proletariat of the first half of the 20th century - but made their films very accessible to this. The use of montage was fundamentally different in *The Society of the Spectacle*, where the most important aspect is the voice-over. The choice and editing of images was secondary to the content of this, since the former were adapted to the latter[34]. As Debord himself expressed in a later film, *"many blame this film for being difficult to understand. According to some, the images prevent the words from being understood, if it's not the other way around"*[35]. The relationship between the voice-over and the images is not representational

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33   Both Debord, with his "anti-documentary" and directors like Dziga Vertov and his *The Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), reflected on the idea of film, the former through the use of detourned material and the latter through the exposure of the filmic process. However this reflection was used for opposite reasons in the two cases: subversion for one and propaganda for the other.

34   The film (1973) was made various years after the publication of the book (1967). The critique of media conformity expressed in the book is translated through images in the film. Where the former translated Marxist concepts, the latter used the expressions of these in society. Cinema, the means of alienation and isolation by definition, becomes the channel of Debord's visual critique.

35   Guy Debord, *Réfutation de tous les jugements*, 1975, Motion picture, 00:07:25

but in a sense critical: they distract the audience from the content of the film.

The spectators are inundated by visual inputs, alienated and made passive, while Debord speaks to them "ex cathedra", outside of the spectacle. Through the editing of the film, Debord was able to reproduce the alienation he described in the book: people who went to see *The Society of the Spectacle* (and his other films) where meant to be alienated and stultified by it, just like the spectacle itself does.

1.2.2_ *The Society of the Spectacle* - film extract analysis

The Society of the Spectacle used détournement to assemble scenes from both fictional and documentary origin, in a provocative and ironic way. Historical clips of revolts, strikes and political events, were opposed to softcore porn, advertisement, commercials and feature films. In combination with this assemblage of images, the voice-over recites passages from Debord's *Society of the Spectacle -* his earlier book with omonimous title, which, in turn, adopts and develops Marxist and machiavellian theories. Though on first sight the choice of images and their embedment within a narrative flow might seem arbitrary, an in depth analysis of the montage discloses many layers of reading.

The Society of the Spectacle opens up to the sound of Baroque music[36], while scenes of nudity and of pornography intermingle. In this framework, the female body is objectified and presented as a good, ready to be consumed by the eager eyes of the audience[37]. Pornography and eroticism point beyond themselves, outside their own limits, deluding the viewer into knowing that there is nothing more left to see. Pornography, like advertising, is the ultimate negation of the process of signification of an image[38]. Both allure the spectator, requesting an involvement with the narrative they construct: the former offers visual and physical pleasure, the latter seduces the consumptionist desires of the audience. Though the image itself beholds no intrinsic property nor value (it is not the porn it shows, nor the product it advertises), it awakens the cravings of its audience, who now ignore the absence of any reality beyond the image and hold onto its significance as representation.

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36   Noticeably the music stems from a period emerging from the renaissance and culminating in the french revolution, shortly after the perspective was first applied to paintings. In his *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Mcluhan discussed how the invention of perspective had been one of the means through which the individual, its perspective and its way of communicating had changed. In particular it would have suggested the capitalist ideas of repetition and homogeneity, as well as imposing a single point of view (premonition of the commodification and flattening of individuality later outlined by Debord)

37   Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and narrative cinema". University of California, *Press: Screen 16.3:* (1973). In this influent article Mulvey applied the freudian concepts of fetishistic scopophilia and voyeurism to the representation of the women in film as "sexual object" and "to-be-looked-at-ness"

38   Agamben, *Image et mémoire*, 75

Once the attention of the spectators is seduced, the soundtrack is substituted with a dry and aseptic tone. The narrating voice - Debord himself -, delivers a thorough critique of the global system, while playing with images that represent this. In this framework, the scenes of space and astronauts scroll on screen, while Debord denounces society as an *"immense accumulation of spectacles"*[39]. The 1969 moon landing was not only one of the biggest media events of the 20th century - watched by millions of people simultaneously all around the world - but it had also played a major role within the war between two global forces, the United States and the Soviet Union. Within this armwrestling for power, media played a central role: everything needed to be broadcasted. Due to their sublimatory potential, media became one of the means of power within the conflict. Media events were central, since images mediate between people and the world, shaping their ideas and negating almost any direct experience of life.

In the spectacle presented by Debord, the implications and risks of the space race are opposed to a pornographic theater: a half-naked woman, dressed like a cave-dweller performs an erotic show within a distinctively fictitious set. The erotic theater combined with Debord's words: *"the images detached from any aspect of life, merge into a common stream in which that unity of life, can no longer be recovered [...]"*[40] send back to the greek myth of Dionysus [41]. The myth, described the illusory nature of the world, whilst also excluding any possibility of creation, will or action. Individuals are fragmented by their daily life, the rules they establish, the habits they follow, and lack individual expression and concreteness[42]. Masses are controlled, surveilled.

The images that follow this collage are not by chance scenes of surveillance, which emphasizes this absence of individuality and freedom within society, where *"the spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the non living. [...]"*[43]. Death and atrocities drag the audience, as they are one of the moving forces of the spectacle. Thus, in the subsequent scene, Lee Harvey Oswald - who murdered J.F. Kennedy, the first televisual president, - is in turn assassinated in the basement of the Police station, while flashes and live television capture the scene. Violent events resonate in the public

39   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2
40   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2
41   Dionysus is associated with the emergence of theater - the greek tragedy -, which represents the first fictitious detachment from reality as well as primary cause of the fragmentation of the individual. The myth, narrates how while Dionysus was looking at his reflection in a mirror, which showed him a "reality", he was unknowingly torn to pieces by the tytans.
42   Carmelo Bene, "Modi di vivere - Giorgio Colli. Una conoscenza per cambiare la vita", Youtube video. 0:57:36
43   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2

space by becoming viral through media.

The clip is followed by two extracts showing public figures, presumably politicians, who, speaking to the crowds, pursue the *"language of universal separation"*[44]. This quote refers back to *Critique de la Separation* (1961), an earlier film by Debord, in which he describes the world of the rulers as one of spectacle[45]. Distance and separation are prerequisites of this society, which aims to make individuals passive and alienated. Alienation is one of the main concepts according to Marx's theories, and the factory is understood as the traditional field of alienation in his terms. It is not surprising then, that the scenes following the political spectacle revolve around the factory, specifically the 1968 strikes that occurred in various French cities. At the very core of the parallel between Marxist and Debordian theories, the concept of alienation (Marx) is here equated with the separation induced by the spectacle which is *"not a collection of images, it is a social relation between people, that is mediated by images"*[46].

At this point, Debord introduces one of the peaks of the world of appearance: fashion photography. It is the apotheosis of counterfeit, the absolute negation of signification of an image, *"the very heart of this real societies irreality"*[47]. The society of the spectacle, in all of its expression, is nothing but the negation of real life.

The density of the first five minutes - out of a total running time of eighty-seven - examine some of the fundamental inclinations and inconsistencies of this society. Image saturation and the subversive use of archives, media events and media sublimation, the problem of signification of images, the spectacularization of politics, the alienation and separation of individuals from reality, from each other and from themselves are only some of the main themes addressed in this deconstructive analysis. All this is expressed within the dialectic montage of images, which colliding with Debord's words, separates them from the spectacularized life. It is through this sum of elements that meaning is created and truth revealed. Through the voice-over, Debord appealed to the spectator from an "external" point of view with a tutorial and authoritative tone. Interestingly, though his critique comprised all aspects of society, Debord still conceived the possibility of stepping out of the spectacle.

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44   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2
45   Guy Debord, *Critique de la séparation*, 1961, Motion picture.
46   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2
47   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 3

1.2.3_Towards a society of integrated spectacle

The prospect of stepping out of the spectacle - plausible during the concentrated and the diffuse spectacles - becomes impossible within the later "integrated spectacle". Debord describes the latter, in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* - written twenty years after *The Society of the Spectacle* itself - where *"the society whose modernization has reached the stage of the integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalized secrecy, unanswerable lies; an eternal present."*[48] In this stage, the diffuse and the concentrated spectacle had moulded into one, becoming a totalizing form of life. In this new stage, any possibility of escape and subversion falls back into the spectacle itself. In fact, the spectacle has now become reality, it is everywhere at any time and accordingly, impossible to eradicate. Even living a subversive life, disregarding the schemes, had become nothing but the perpetration of an existing system. In this sense Debord's vision moved towards Foucault's analysis, who conceives no escape from society and its dynamics[49]. However, in his view, society was not dominated by spectacle but rather subjugated by surveillance, and individuals were not only made passive, disciplined to bend their own will, as well as that of others for the sake of those in power[50]. In this perspective, spectacle and surveillance had collapsed onto each other through the medium of television.

Debord noticed how by the end of the 80s, the phenomenon of "integration" had been thoroughly accomplished in Italy. Within its media scene and in particular its television, being "outside" or "inside" had lost its meaning: everything aligned towards the same discourse. Just before committing suicide in 1995 - as a final political act against the spectacle of society - Debord co-directed, with Brigitte Cornand, one last film: *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (1994) [51]. Through this "anti-television" film, they denounced the social and economic reality of the spectacle once more, using its ultimate medium: television. The film is composed of texts, photographs and videos in black and white, chosen from recent or old television news, and punctuated by Guy Debord critical reflections. It discusses the powers and knowledge that the society of the spectacle overflows as values and

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48   Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 8-12
49   Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia* (London: University of
   Minnesota Press, 2005 [1987])
50   Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*
51   *Guy Debord, son art et son temps (*1994) was broadcasted on a french national channel, shortly after Debord's
          death, together with the most influential films of his cinematography.

dogmas to humanity.

Is it still possible to oppose a society in which spectacle and surveillance have folded in upon each other within the nation to become one of integrated spectacle? Can there still be critique if everything falls back onto the spectacle itself? What language can such critique use for its message to be perceived and understood?
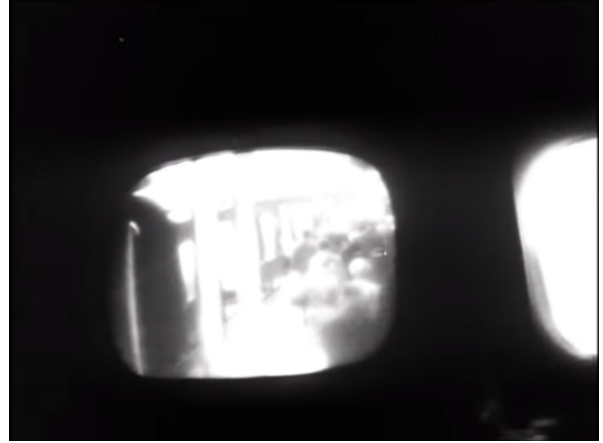
CHAPTER II
THE STAGE OF INTEGRATED SPECTACLE: IL BELPAESE

Up until the 20th century, cinema represented one of the main forms of entertainment in Italy[52].

Within the history of cinema, its cinematographic production has been one of the most influential

and consistent ones. Film was mainly considered a form of entertainment, which offered a

momentary escape from the real world. Through this, spectators could travel space and time, live

unique experiences and see the world from new perspectives, without leaving their armchairs.

Cinema offered simultaneously a sense of community and an individual experience of the film,

enabled by the darkness of the room. Caught up in this illusion, masses could easily be influenced.

This power was particularly used in totalitarian states, when cinema became a means of political

propaganda[53]. In the Soviet Union, film and montage became means to promote the state and its

values. Later, totalitarianism like fascism, used movie theaters as platforms to divert reality, in order

to separate the masses and trigger them against the "enemy". Cinema evolved into an instrument to

rewrite truth.

Between the dark decades under fascist domination and the immediate postwar time,

the cinematic movement known as Neorealism, arose in Italy. Jean-Luc Godard defined Italian

Neorealism as the only true post-war cinema[54]. After being suppressed by totalitarianism and

flagellated by an atrocious war, the country needed to rebuild itself. Neorealism succeeded in giving

back an identity to its population[55]. It went back to the roots of the nation, underlying the tragedy

and triviality of everyday life and problems. Precisely this mix of simplicity and realism allowed

common people to identify with the stories portrayed on screen. After serving the interests of an

autocratic and villain state, cinema was slowly reclaiming its constructive function. It helped the

recovery and unification of a nation, torn apart by decades of abuses and injustices. As a result,

52   Carlo Freccero, *Televisione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2013)
53   Michael Glenny and Richard Taylor, *Selected works. Volume 2: Towards a theory of montage Hjzenštejn, Sergej, 1898-1948* (London: I. B.Tauris, 2010)
54   Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988/1998, Motion picture.
55   Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 1988/1998, Motion picture.

many of the most influential Italian productions, like Roberto Rossellini's war trilogy[56], arose from the ashes of a postwar nation. In a period of absolute desolation and loss, Italian cinema reached its golden age.

In those years, Italy went through an economic, social and political shift. The economy was recovering from the disaster of the war and offered new job opportunities and social securities. On a political level, the nation had left its totalitarian status as well as its monarchy behind[57], opening up to the first Republic. Simultaneously, the industrial and agricultural fields were recovering and required labour. These factors, combined with a consistent internal migration, facilitated the economic boom of the nation. However, the population was still fragmented into many micro realities with particular cultural and linguistic traces. The country still needed to be unified in one language and one identity.

At that time, the exponentially increasing and accelerating technological progress brought new electric appliances into private houses. Between these, television quickly and silently affirmed its monopoly as a source of information for most of the Italian population. At its genesis, television was thought to have an enormous social potential. The medium seemed to respond to the urgency to consolidate the country linguistically as well as to the necessity to educate the population. It was considered a public service, which could unite a country that had been separated culturally, linguistically and historically for centuries[58].

Together with the technological and economic optimism of the postwar period, the 1960s movements brought a wave of progress, innovation and hope. Ideological fights were the leading force of the decade. During the "hot autumn"[59], students and workers striked and demonstrated side by side for the recognition and execution of their rights. At the time, ideologies were strong and so where actions. However the following decade slowly took in what had been strongly contested in the previous one. Between the heavily opposed trends, the market globalization was now fully embraced,

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56   *Roma cittá aperta* (Rome, open city), *Paisá* (Paisan) and *Germania anno zero* (Germany Year Zero) were released between 1945 and 1948 and transformed the postwar cinema aesthetics.

57   Though starting from the Middle Ages several monarchies proclaimed Italy as a Kingdom, the most important was the one proclaimed in 1861 after the second war of independence, to achieve Italian national unification. The monarchy lost an institutional referendum in June 1946, after which the kingdom become an Italian Republic.

58   Freccero, *Televisione*

59   The "hot autumn" ("autunno caldo") is a period in the 1960s in (Italian) history, marked by a great mobilization of workers' unions, is considered the prelude of the historical period known as "years of lead". It was caused by an expiration of the employment contracts in many areas, but especially the category of metalworkers.

which allowed Italy to become one of the leading economic powers of the time. As a response to these changes cinema slowly shifted its interests and its representation of the "beautiful country"[60]. Films produced in those years have contributed to shape the idea of "Italianism" within the collective imagery[61]. Italy entered the cinemas as the country of beautiful landscapes, food and women, a nation of good taste and excess. The country was constructing and selling itself to the world in a form of cultural capital and was using cinema to do so[62].

Simultaneously however, the polarization of the political dialectic between the left and right parties, was tearing the nation apart. While Italy was growing on a global scale, its internal balance was put under pressure by the "years of lead"[63], which were revising its political panorama. In the next two decades, the political debate, escalated into street violence, armed struggles and acts of terrorism. All of this, aided a strategy that aimed at spreading a state of tension and fear within the population,with the ultimate goal of justifying political developments of authoritarian nature. The kidnapping and killing of the ex Prime Minister Aldo Moro in 1978 - as well as the ambushes, killings and terrorist attacks that followed - were all broadcasted through the national channels. Television became a means to spread terror. This raised questions regarding the role of mass media in atrocious events. Up until what point is the promotion of these events really educational, or it is rather a thirst for sadism? Following the decades of lead the questions raised by the events that stained those years, undermined social and ideological battles, which had now lost vigor. As a result, the new decade relied on a looser lifestyle, individual happiness and personal affirmation[64]. The socio-political and mediatic panorama in Italy was drastically changing.

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60   e.g. Federico Fellini, *La Dolce Vita*, 1960, Motion picture

61   Alessia Ricciardi, *After la dolce vita: a cultural prehistory of Berlusconi's Italy.* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2012)

62   Ricciardi, *After la dolce vita*, 19

63   In Italy the "years of lead" represent a historical period (approximately between the end of the sixties and the beginning of the eighties of the twentieth century) in which the political dialectic lead to extremisms, which resulted in street violence, in the implementation of the armed fights as well as acts of terrorism

64   Freccero, *Televisione*

2.1_Society, Politics and the Media in Italy: from film to broadcast

As mentioned, the arrival of television represents an important milestone in the development of contemporary Italian society. Besides its role within the social and political development of the nation, it also impacted the mediatic panorama. Within a handful of years from its diffusion, television became the main form of entertainment and source of information in Italy. Television spoke to the audience differently then cinema did: while the latter offered a gaze onto a fictional world, the former identified as a glance onto reality. Entertainment slowly moved from the public space of movie theaters, to the intimacy of private living rooms. As a result, cinema attendance dropped by almost 50 percent[65].

Identity ceased to be transmitted through the thoughtful scenes of films, projected in dark and crowded movie theaters and was instead constructed in the TV studios around the nation. The search for identity, turned into a consumerist drive, which aimed at establishing Italy as a brand[66]. All discourse gravitated towards that of television , which became the only truth for and about Italy[67]. Particularly with the arrival of commercial television in the 1970s, the content and aim of television changed. The attendance drop of cinema, combined with the mutating programming of television, roused different intellectuals of the media environment. Aware of the possible implications of this tendency, they tried to raise awareness over the danger of the path that (Italian) society had taken. While on a global scale, Marshall Mcluhan had an optimistic approach seeing media as an extension of man, later intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini, opposed commercial television and tried to warn the spectators of the risks of bending to the dynamics of this. Pasolini considered television a fierce instrument of power, which would keep public opinion imprisoned and thus resemble the fascist radiophonic communication[68]. Recalling Debord's skepticism, Pasolini considered television as a means to mercify and alienate the audience[69].

Not by chance, the visionary entrepreneur and soon to be president Silvio Berlusconi, was able to build his empire in that period, first and foremost through his investments in commercial

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65   Freccero, *Televisione*
66   Ricciardi, *After la dolce vita*, 19
67   Freccero, *Televisione*
68   Pier-Paolo Pasolini, "Pasolini - La TV, i mass media e l'omologazione", Youtube video.
69   Pier-Paolo Pasolini, "Pasolini - La TV, i mass media e l'omologazione", Youtube video.

television. The mogul recognized the sublimatory and commercial potential of a medium that could communicate "one to one" with the public, within the intimacy of their homes. He carried out a business practice which promoted a consumerist and spectacularized approach towards the everyday[70]. In fact, starting in the '80s, Berlusconi purchased a consistent number of TV channels under the Fininvest Society, which offered a catchy combination of American movies, commercial products and undressed women. While initially television was missing any medium awareness, as it moved towards an American scheme - where television emerged solely for commercial aims - it slowly produced its own visual style[71]. With the arrival of the easily digestible entertainment of the private and commercial channels of Berlusconi, the Italian television started an inexorable decline towards superficiality and nothingness, losing its quality of public service. Instead, the medium turned towards a looser and more appealing programming, adopting comedians, pornstars, magicians and other showbusiness figures as entertainers. It proposed a "verité" model, starting to concentrate on the everyday life of the Italians. The audience was not required to sit passively, but instead to watch their own reflection in television and identify with it. The spectators could recognize themselves in what they saw and feel close to what was broadcasted[72]. However, contrary to the neorealism of a few decades before, which aimed to thematize the simplicity and drama of the everyday, "reality television" (TV verità) broadcasted the most grotesque aspects of it. With the birth of the reality TV, television stopped being a window and started being a mirror instead[73]. The "beautiful country" ceased looking at its ideal projection, with its traditions and values, and started to laugh about the worst possible caricature of itself.

This had a dual mediatic consequence, where on one side the type of programs broadcasted was shown according to the taste of the viewers ("on demand TV") while on the other, the protagonists of these became progressively "normal". As a result, showing flaws, fights, raw emotion of both common and notorious people became normality. In this way, television substituted the square - the "agorá" - and being recognized became more important than being famous[74]. Within this new constellation, the relation between appearance and content became inversely proportional:

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70   Freccero, *Televisione*
71   Freccero, *Televisione*
72   Freccero, *Televisione*
73   Freccero, *Televisione*
74   Umberto Eco, *Pape Satàn Aleppe: cronache di una società liquida* (Milano: La nave di Teseo, 2016), 31

the stronger the former, the looser the latter. Through commercial television, the consumer society was slowly flattening and homogenized particular realities[75]. As suggested by Debord, the era of the integrated spectacle was pervading Italian society[76].

Berlusconi's political ascent occurred whilst the Italian political sphere was shaken by a judiciary scandal known as "tangentopoli"[77]. In those years, the entire ruling class and entrepreneurial panorama had been "cleaned", after an extensive investigation involving the heads of it. The entire inquisition was broadcasted on national channels, offering a "transparent" and up to date portrayal of its legal implications. However, in the twenty years of his presidency and since, illusion and reality intermingled through television. Sex scandals, nepotism and corruption are not just the highlight of a TV series, but the content of everyday Italian society. Former celebrities - showgirls, comedians, actors, singers - have entered parliament and represent the Italian population. Figures from show business have become actors in the spectacle of politics. Television shows have come to substitute the square, becoming political arenas to discuss the problems of the beautiful country. In this framework, the political discourse has come to embody the mis-en-scene of communication while television its ultimate message.

TV has ceased to be a means to communicate with, instead it has become a stage to appear on. The new foundation of the 21st century is precisely this: appearing is being. Dionysos mirror has nowadays been shredded into infinite and individual realities, which are all equally true. As part of this, politicians, actors, common people, whoever appears on the spectacular stage of television, can say anything and the opposite of anything. Television represents a cross-section of the social identity of a country and of an era: the open-air unconscious of our society[78]. It is a permanent flux of fragmented information, that turns reality into a mouldable blob.

Within this new logic, simulation, facts and reason became interchangeable concepts[79]. Contrary to cinema, which restored the possibility of a past, television and its illusion of "liveness"

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75   Eco, *Pape Satàn Aleppe*, 201
76   Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 8-12
77   Tangentopoli, from the word tangente "kickback" and poli "city", was a nationwide judicial investigation enacted during the "First Republic", against the political corruption in Italy. In the 1990s the entire political spectrum was "cleaned" within the so called "Mani pulite" inspection, which led to the collapse of many political parties as well as the suicide of some of the imputed industrial leaders.
78   Freccero, *Televisione*
79   Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra* (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1994 [1981]), 16

offered a continuous present[80]. Not by chance, since the   diffusion of this medium, politics

has been inevitably linked to it. This absence of a memory of its own allows television to shape

reality according to the interests of those in power[81]. As an example of this, mediatic presence and

judgement about politicians often overlap. In fact, the image and headlines of Italian politicians

precede their political agendas around the world. Silvio Berlusconi's scandals and bad jokes have

resonated in the news worldwide, while the rhetoric of the ex comedian Giuseppe "Beppe" Grillo,

has wrinkled more than a nose. Historically, satire and comedy have been used to criticize power,

while now comedians have become politicians: power and laughter are one. In this framework, the

terms media populism and videocracy (or telecracy) were coined to describe the close tie between

politics and media in Italy[82]. In a state of spectacularized politics, credibility has substituted reality[83].

Through the spectacle of politics, built around individual political figures and their humanity and

empathy with the public, a new model of information arises, that of "infotainment"[84]: information and

entertainment are nowadays inevitably interlinked. Not by chance, propaganda has become central to

the political discourse and television has emerged as an instrument of consent[85]. Berlusconi and his

smile symbolize the crossroad between these powers.

When Guy Debord defined Italy as the country of integrated spectacle he was pointing to the

intermingling of the real and its reflection, which had become completely interchangeable in Italian

society. Here, the medium has ceased to be the message and has instead imploded onto itself and later

exploded towards the real[86]. Just like the cultural capital sold to the world through its films, Italy has

used television to sell to itself its own image. *"The medium is the metaphor"*[87], wrote Neil Postman, and

in the truest sense, television has become the metaphor for Italian society's flaws. TV has shown Italy a

reflection of itself, which has become part of the collective imagery. In this view, television offers an idea

of memory. In fact, though TV is devoid of any reminiscence: it can only reflect onto viewers, who then

80   Agamben, *Image et mémoire*, 65-75
81   Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business.* (New York: Vikings, 1985), 107-13
82   William Kaizen, *Against Immediacy: Video Art and Media Populism.* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2016), 17
83   Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 107-108
84   Freccero, *Televisione*
85   Freccero, *Televisione*
86   Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, 82
87   Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 84

recall their own memories. It is within this collective imagery that visual records, commercial jingles and slogans, as well as film quotes and even sporadic expressions, form a ground of common knowledge within the nation. This state of interpenetration between the spectacle and reality - enhanced by a mass medium like television - is what Debord defined as spectacular integration. Before taking his own life in 1995, he left his spiritual testament behind on an "anti-television" film: *Guy Debord, son art et son temps*. Considering the work, thoughts and testament left by Debord - which allow no redemption or liberation from the integrated spectacle - and given that an "outside" to this seems to have dissolved completely with the arrival of television, could a critique to the society of integrated spectacle, still be exerted? Could perhaps mediatic doppelgänger of a nation be used as a self-reflexive and reflective tool to deconstruct the spectacle of society and exert a critique from within?

2.2_Italian television and *BLOB*

2.2.1_*BLOB* and the Society of the (integrated) Spectacle

BLOB is an Italian TV show which is a parasitic of television. It is entirely made of archival material and uses the memory of a nation, to talk back to this. The program was conceived in 1989 by Enrico Ghezzi and Marco Giusti, two Italian film critics, essayists, TV authors and directors. Most probably the program was created in a direct response to the Situationist thought; Ghezzi himself, was fascinated by Guy Debord and by the SI in general and published books and articles in which he discussed their lives and works. One of them is entitled *I situazionisti* (the situationists), written with other Italian philosophers, thinkers and critics and published in 1991, where Situationist theories were applied to the society of the '90s.

Thus, since 1989, *BLOB* has maximized the televisual experience, compressing its content into fifteen to twenty minutes episodes, that run every evening around dinner time on the national public broadcasting channel RAI 3. It consists in the recapitulation of current events, which might or might not have already been broadcasted and are useful to (re)state. Through the use of the RAI archives[88] it combines documentary and fictional material from different sources (cinema, television, the internet), into one (in-)coherent narrative.

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[88]   RAI teche was established in 1995, to catalog and preserve the material (second only to the BBC) that - throughout diverse media - documents the years of television history. This catalog contains everything that went on the air since 1954. The Rai Teche Catalog has been included by UNESCO in the register of the "memory of Italy". http://www.teche.rai.it/chi-siamo-2/

The program takes its name from the 1950s American sci-fi horror film with the same title[89]. Just like the film's alien blob, that invades the world by reaching and choking its vital spaces, the TV program represents the shapeless mass (the blob), that Italian television and Italian culture, have become. It embodies one of the fundamental paradigms of contemporary society, TV and the media in general, namely postmodernism.

The assembly and montage of images in *BLOB* is an example of a fusion between the language of film and that of television: a hybrid. *BLOB* uses the language of TV: it overloads us with messages without any organization, putting the futile and the dramatic, serious news and gossip on the same level[90]. In this way, it deprives of meaning any image, in order to create new meaning through the juxtaposition of multiple images. On the other hand, it also contrasts the founding aspects of television, namely its quality as a present time medium. In fact, it does not generate any new material, but reuses what has already been created and puts it into a different context. *BLOB* acts in a self reflexive way, both about the medium and about its textuality. It uses the eternally renewing flow of television to ridicule Italian society through its most diffused and grotesque medium. It maximises the televisual experience by deconstructing television and editing it back together in a caricatured way. For instance, the videos of Bin Laden absconding in the Pakistan mountains is combined with the famous children's fiction soundtrack "Heidi"[91], which gives the scene a parodistic impression. Also, in Berlusconi's famous video-speech to the Italians, in which he first announced his political ascent, his head is moved around the screen to the rhythm of slow music, while the soon to be president declares the *"need of Italy to be lead by people with their heads on their shoulders"*[92]. This montage makes a clear mockery of Berlusconi and his televisual rhetoric.

Hence on one hand *BLOB* resembles the Debordian strategy of détournement, since it uses existing visual material created for other aims and embeds this into a new discourse and meaning through the use of montage. However, on the other hand, it differs from it due to its mainly national Italian focus. In fact, it questions the way in which television, specifically broadcast, is consumed in Italy. By assembling and reproposing the way in which television is viewed in Italy, it emphasizes its

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89   in *The Blob* (1958) an alien life form arrives on earth, where it nourishes itself by engulfing anything it encounters, which makes it grow exponentially.
90   Freccero, *Televisione*
91   BLOB, "Speciale BLOB 25 anni il meglio dal 1989 al 2014" Filmed [2014]. Youtube video.
92   BLOB, "Speciale BLOB 25 anni il meglio dal 1989 al 2014" Filmed [2014]. Youtube video.

flaws, mocking not only the medium, but the entire nation it appeals to. This redigestion of content makes it meta-televisual: it is a program about television and how this is viewed. On a daily basis, *BLOB* reminds the viewer of the dynamics of television and of society in general, which draw in the uninterrupted flow of both. By cutting this flux into pieces and collaging it back together, it actualizes Debord's critique, proving its uttermost relevance. It is a machine of truth to discover and question the mechanisms of communication and unveil the falsehood of TV. As a result, it offers a televisual memory, an archive of the archive of Italian television, serving as a living museum of itself[93]. Using a medium that lives in the present, *BLOB* plays with a perpetration of the immediate past. In this way, it appeals to the memory of its audience inviting it to rethink the medium of television as well as their relation to it. The program employs irony and skepticism to reject the rationality and idea of "truth" connected to television. To do so, it uses off-air material and extracted scenes in which journalists and speakers fall out of the "expected" flawlessness of live television. For instance, a female Italian television host and journalist - Antonella Clerici -, is immortalized as she asserts that she *"loves the dick"[94]*, other newsreaders are caught while smoking or eating chicken between two TV reports.

BLOB fragments pieces of information and edits them together with images from different and often diverging sources. For instance, a news report could be followed by an advertisement or a film extract. As an example of this, in one of the episodes the scene of a news reader announcing the imputation of Bettino Craxi - at the time Prime Minister of Italy - , is followed by an extract of a western film, where a cowboy closes the metal door of a prison (hinting to the forthcoming imprisonment of the politicians)[95]. The editing speed and choices embed the act of "zapping" through TV channels. In this way it both recalls the role of the spectator - of jumping through channels - while simultaneously overloading this with the diversity and density of the programs, information and visual inputs transmitted through the device. These montage choices articulate a silent satire on multiple levels. On a first viewing, *BLOB* appears as a casual clutter of images, which report the latest events, peaks and lows of Italian - and sometimes international - media. However, on closer inspection, the montage choices can reveal more than initially perceivable.

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93   Dieter Daniels and Stephan Berg, *Tele-Gen: Art And Television* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2015), 45
94   BLOB, "Speciale BLOB 25 anni il meglio dal 1989 al 2014" Filmed [2014]. Youtube video.
95   BLOB, "Speciale BLOB 25 anni il meglio dal 1989 al 2014" Filmed [2014]. Youtube video.

BLOB picks up the tradition of Debord, fragmenting the critique of *The Society of the Spectacle* over a daily and diluted basis. In his critique of the spectacle, Debord had a hypercritical and destructuring attitude towards society. Initially, he considered the presence of the spectacle as consistent but not totalizing. In fact, the SI found ways to distance themselves from the dynamics of the spectacular society through attitudes and actions. Thus, in most of his films, such as *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord spoke to the viewer from an external point of view, "from above". Through his monotone and dry voiceover, superimposed upon the images of the spectacular society, he placed himself outside of these. The contrast between the eloquence of his voiceover and the triviality of the images, is a further aspect that allowed him to take distance from the world he was criticizing. In this way, Debord expressed a critique in being. In fact, though fifty years have passed, it still is incredibly relevant. His critique deconstructed and criticized the entire social substrata, allowing no escape nor absolution from it. Debord's aim was not to offer a solution to or to raise awareness about this condition, but rather to express the uttermost bitter commentary on society. As a result, the density and elitism of his films as well as his distribution and projection choices, did not aim at reaching the general mass, but rather selected few. *"I am not making a film for those who do not understand"*[96], rather those who have the time, will and education to lend an ear to his deconstruction and understand its critique.

What the creators of *BLOB* adopted from Debord, is first and foremost its visual style. It appropriates montage, which is specific for film and does usually not belong to the visual vocabulary of television. In this sense, *BLOB* moves closer to the artistic expression of cinema: it becomes a language, a discourse. It does so by using détournement, by editing together pre existing material in an apparently casual way, in order to appeal to the collective imagery of the spectator. By taking archival material and depriving it of its original context, it is able to show patterns and establish new links between them. In this way, it expresses a meta-critique of mass media. *BLOB* does not offer an external judgement, instead it shares an observation with the viewer. What differs from Debord is the aim, which is destructive in the latter case, whereas it is creative and communicative in *BLOB*. In this way, it sheds light onto a collective imagery, expressing a critique in becoming. Contrary to Debord's films, *BLOB* is fed by television itself and requires no further knowledge than that transmitted

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96   Guy Debord, *Réfutation de tous les jugements*, 1975, Motion picture, 00:09:33

through this medium. It does not appeal to an elite, but to the average person. Anybody who watches Italian television can understand *BLOB* at least on a primary and superficial level. Though to comprehend the satirical aim of *BLOB*, after this primary understanding is achieved, further analysis is required. Thus, while the former unfolds its critique in a direct way and requires a certain degree of attention and education to understand this, the latter is subtle and can only be perceived with a critical eye. In this sense, *BLOB* is closer to Ranciere's ideas of spectatorship: the spectator is not fed information in a passive way - given the facts from an external point of view -, but invited to reflect during the act of watching[97].

Since *BLOB* is alimented by television it can run as long as the medium itself exists, constantly renewing its material as television does. No voice-over accompanies the images but material from television itself. Besides the choice of images and the synthesis that the combination between them create, the titles given to the segments guide the viewer. *"Language is détournement, a borrowing of borrowing"*[98] wrote Debord. Language was another means that the thinker used to distance himself from the spectacle. Detourning Marx and other philosophers served as a way to dissociate himself from this.

BLOB started only a year after the publication of the second essay of Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*[99], in which he first described how society - in particular the Italian and French societies - had reached a level of complete commodification, where the real and the mediatic could not be distinguished anymore, the spectacle had already pervaded every aspect of Italian society, allowing no escape anymore. Thus, Ghezzi and Giusti accepted the impossibility of stepping out of the spectacle and found instead a way to use the mass medium itself to deconstruct it from within. *BLOB* communicates through the language of the spectacle both visually and linguistically. It becomes itself a writing system that attempts to unravel and deconstruct the mechanisms of (mass) communication[100]. Thus, the sound is either from excerpts themselves (diegetic and nondiegetic), or from an additional source (song, advertisement, interview, film).

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97   Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*
98   Mckenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages Out of the Twentieth Century.* (London: Verso, 2013), 168
99   *BLOB* started only a year after the publication of the second essay of Debord's "Comments on the Society of the Spectacle", in which he first described how society - in particular the Italian and french societies - had reached a level of complete commodification, where the real and the mediatic could not bedistinguished anymore
100   Enrico Ghezzi and Marco Giusti, *Il libro di BLOB* (Torino: Edizioni Rai - Radiotelevisione Italiana, 1993)

Ranciere asserted that the humanistic approach of treating the audience as a mass of imbeciles could not but distance this from the art itself[101]. However, he also stated that any situation could be subverted from the inside[102]. *BLOB* uses the state archive - created to preserve the memory of the state, after a time in which knowledge was reshaped and history rewritten - and plays with titles that reflect on the content of its episodes. The spectacle is now simultaneously concentrated and diffused, the end and lie of society. The state of the spectacle is the absolute owner of memory and with this, the shaper of the most distant future[103]. *BLOB* uses détournement as the ultimate act of obstruction against the spectacle.

2.2.2_*BLOB* - episode extract analysis

BLOB often targets politicians and journalists, who become objects of ridicule and mocking through montage. The use and juxtaposition of these sort of sequences, strips the characters of their usual appearance in front of cameras, showing the mismatch between these and their real beings. Besides politicians and journalists, TV shows and personalities often feature as material of satirical deconstruction. All this is combined in the mash-up of *BLOB,* and its editing choices lie within the interpretation of the spectator. The spectator is given the freedom to think and decode the montage without anyone suggesting a unilateral interpretation of it. Different individuals watching the same episode can have completely different understandings of it. Going back to the example of Dyonis mirror: there is not one dominant view imposed on the audience, rather a fragmented and partial one that enables individuals to elaborate on what they see. The following analysis reflects the idea that any interpretation of the montage and understanding of it, is personal.

The episode of *BLOB* released on the 25th anniversary of the program[104] sums up bites of history and role of the television in the past two and a half decades. Religion, politics, news, economy, sport, culture, science, entertainment and consumer culture are narrated through both fictional and documentary material, of national and international sources. The result is a mash up, a blob, of the

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101   Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*
102   Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*
103   Ghezzi and Giusti, *Il libro di BLOB*
104   *BLOB* is one of the most long-lived programs of Italian TV, this is probably due not only its popularity between the population, as well as to the cost of it: being entirely composed by archival material, it is an extremely "cheap" program for the time (primetime) and channel (one of the 3 main stately sponsored channels) that hosts it.

main historical events since 1989, presented to the viewer without a set viewpoint. No voice-over guides the viewer through the episode and no explicit critique is made. In fact, the common thread relies on the single elements of the episode, which are supposed to give a truthful depiction of Italian television and, through this, of society. Despite this, the montage achieves a specific effect, which will be analyzed in the following extract taken halfway the selected episode.

The scene of Pope John Paul II kneeling in prayer in front of the holy door during the Great Jubilee, is interspersed with various images that break down the solemnity of the event. In this brief extract, religion, politics and culture intermingle through the editing play of the authors. The first image that interrupts the celebration of God's mercy and forgiveness of sins shows a flying statue of Jesus, taken from Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960). This film not only depicted the superficiality and inconsistency of the beautiful country, but it also raised controversies regarding its representation of religion, which had led to polarized opinions within the political and religious world. In fact, the film on one side touched upon ambiguity, fanaticism and religious falsification, while on the other it thematized mercy and redemption. Playing around with a Kuleshov like montage, the same scene of the praying pope is alternated first with the collapse of a church roof, then with a statue leaking blood. Then again, with the word "amare" ("to love"), followed by emaciated cadavers of the holocaust victims. This not only represents a very strong critique to the crimes exerted in the name of religion or against certain religious groups, but also questions the role of the Vatican during the Jewish genocide. Can there be any forgiveness for atrocities of that kind? Can the church itself ask for redemption[105]?

Though the sequence of *BLOB* does not articulate an explicit critique - potentially transmitted through a voice-over or a subtitled comment - the montage suggests a strong statement. The juxtaposition of the Holocaust and the pope's prayer, together with one of the staples of christianity expressed in the action of loving "amare", inevitably awakens a critical mind. However this understanding can not but remain open to interpretation precisely because no unambiguous perspective is imposed by the authors, who prefer leaving the audience to decide and interpret the editing.

By contrast, another exchange is alternated between the pope and a scene from the American

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105   This opposition also leads back to Godard's bitter critique of the media (specifically cinema), which in his
        Histoire(s) du cinéma (1988/1998) he considered unable to denounce or/and represent the Holocaust.

western *The Searchers* (1956), showing the moment of redemption of the protagonist, during his reunion with his niece Debbie. To follow, one of the most iconic images of all times, namely that of the man standing in front of the tanks in Tiananmen square in 1989. Everyday heroes (tankman) is opposed to the fictitious characters of films (Ethan). After seeing the pope one last time, now being helped to get up by two priests, the footage switches to Jack and Rose - on the wrecked *Titanic* (1997) - moments before the ship is submerged under water. On this note, Paul II approaches the entrance to the Holy See.

This sequence in particular is able to suggest a position and hint a critique just by juxtaposing concepts and images of divergent nature. The fictitious nature of film and the values that it transposes - in this case eternal love (*Titanic*), morality and redemption (*The Searchers*) - are counterposed to the mythical principles of the catholic church. Having shown throughout history how malleable the catholic cornerstone principles can be - in particular within their entanglement with fascist regimes in the past - their preached values appear as artificial as those of American cinema. As opposed to this, the reality of facts - the Holocaust and the Tiananmen protests - confront the viewer with documents of what has been and how morality and values act out in real life.

Following the intense montage of the pope, the subsequent extract, entailing the Italian journalist Michele Santoro, kept from being broadcasted before the national elections of 2001. This choice might hint to the fleeting freedom in Italian press, which narrows down considerably during the election period. To follow, a man expresses vulgarities in TV, the Italian singer Gianni Morandi performs with the ex prime minister Massimo D'Alema, a naked woman walks around a TV program, a journalist discusses the problem of corruption and politics on Italian television, followed by an Italian politician being stopped by the police in Berlin. Vulgarities are not only expressed verbally but they are also enacted in a superficial and more severe way. This can be seen in in the recurrent scenes of female nudity, as well as those of corruption within television.

To follow these minor vulgarities, scenes from the G8 of 2001 in Genova and the atrocities committed by the authorities are interchanged with those of the president of the Republic calling for "institutional dignity" and then by a scene from *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and more clashes between civilians and the police during the manifestations. Political, authoritarian and civil brutality

are opposed to the cinematographic ferocity of Kubrick's masterpiece[106]. Also the ape of *2001: A space Odyssey* (1968), that discovers the use of tools and violence in a famous sequence of the film, echoes and ridicules the brutality of actions exerted by authorities on civilians during the G8 manifestations. Scenes of the clashes and images of wounded people are shown, while a hit song of the 2000s[107] accompanies the death of one of the protester, Carlo Giuliani, during the riots. His is one of the most controversial, and still unsolved death cases in Italy, due to the involvement of the authorities in it[108]. This scene is interrupted after the word "merde!" ("you shits!") is pronounced by the person filming, when the montage jumps to a showgirl bringing a tray of excrements to the satirist Daniele Luttazzi. In this case the editing is given by a semantic play - from the word ("you shits!") to the object (excrements) - between the scenes.

This sequence emphasizes the spectacularization of violence through media, which transposes facts into a guided construction. The violence between civilians and authorities edited with the one staged in Kubrick's films, further reiterates this vehiculated mediatic performance. In fact, through the spectacularization of violence - also expressed through the hit song accompanying the scenes of brutality - mass media become means of power and terror[109]. News report are shaped according to the interests of those in power, who decide which angle needs to be shown and emphasized in order to guide the attention of the audience in the desired perspective. This juxtaposition instead aims to activate the spectator, questioning on one side the supposed neutrality of news reports, while simultaneously criticising the broadcasting of brutality through television channels.

On that note but following a completely different logic - the choice of images depends on the movement and composition of the scenes -, the subsequent montage mocks the sensationalization of terror attacks (specifically and vastly most importantly that of the 9/11). In fact, the movement of the football player Materazzi, falling after being headbutted by Zidane, is echoed by the fall of

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106   In Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, society is devoted to exasperated violence and systematic thinking is used as a conditioning. This choice of dystopian film is not casual, as it refers to the conditioning and essential state on "imprisonment" of society. Using Anthony Burgess words: "When a man cannot choose, he ceases to be a man."

107   Rossi, Valeria. *Tre parole*. Song. (Germany: BMG & Ariola, 2001). https://lyricstranslate.com/en/tre-parole-three-words.html

108   The personal interest of the authors of *BLOB* in the G8 and death case of Carlo Giuliani is shown in the documentary *Bella ciao*, directed by Marco Giusti and Roberto Torelli in 2001, which the evolution of the clashes in Genova are reconstructed, through the use of archival material shot by Rai operators and independent media. Just like BLOB, the film is presented with no other soundtrack then a musical one (no comment, nor voice-over)

109   Eco, *Pape Satàn Aleppe*, 157

the first twin tower hit by the plane. Perhaps the authors used this montage on one side to criticize the spectacularization of terror attacks through broadcast, on the other side to echo the flow of new channels and of television in general, which level out their content by putting futile and important information together. Football matches as well as the "global" war on terrorism initiated by the US in 2001, have been scrupulously reported throughout their perpetration, becoming part of the daily consumption of the audience. Accordingly, bombings and raids in the middle east - or terror attacks in the western world - are shown back to back to an act of violence in the FIFA finals, acquiring the same visibility. The soundtrack accompanying the two scenes is that of the West Side Story, linked to the 9/11 both for the setting (New York) and in a way the content of the musical (a fight between two groups of different ethnic backgrounds). The montage choice of combining the soundtrack of a well known American musical with the tragedy of 9/11, makes the content of the scenes terribly cinematic, while simultaneously mocking their representation. The attack on the Twin towers, just like other major mediatic events (like the killing of Aldo Moro in 1978 in Italy), have been broadcasted for months all around the globe. During and after tragic events, mass media become instruments of promotion and perseveration of atrocities and thus, a means to exert power and terror on the masses.

The attack on New York started a worldwide tendency for terrorism to feature prominently on prime time news. If this prominence was paid for as an advertisement, it would would cost billions of Dollars/Euros, as explained by Umbeto Eco in his *Pape Satan Aleppe*[110]. Today's Islamic extremism is a clear example of this process, as it uses media to establish a state of fear and tension within society. Atrocities are nowadays cinematicized by the perpetrators and by the mass media that repeatedly show killings and terrorist attacks, which one one side inform the masses while on the other they spread social neurosis. *BLOB*'s montage choice anticipates and questions this trend by bringing its spectacularization to the extreme.

BLOB exhibits in a pre-monitary way the dynamics of reuse and consumption of visual archival material. Its daily fragmentation and redigestion of contents, make it possible to observe the dynamics of television programs on the collective imagery. By seeing repeatedly the same images outside of their original context, these can be fixed in the memory of the spectator. It could be argued that the

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110   Eco, *Pape Satàn Aleppe*, 157

"Buzzification"[111] of media, did not only extend or reinforce a specific type of marxist alienation, but also created new kinds of individual obliviousness or distortion. In fact, since knowledge and intellect work in a dialectical relation with reality : we take, extrapolate and edit moments of the past and the future within our memory. In this framework, watching moving images is nothing but observing a mechanical transposition of our imaginative capacity, it is hard to deny that being increasingly exposed to them is affecting or limiting the way in which the collective society imagines. If we think of the explosion of mass media and the 24/7-like rhythm of image consumption, it is clear that the Debordian spectacularization does not affect solely society, but in a deeper sense, it affects the individual notion of imagination and temporality. The integrated spectacle has permeated all of reality, flattening the public discourse and rendering it homogeneous and consentient.

Within an environment of integration between the state and its economic interests, the truth conveyed to its citizens is shaped by these powers. The state of eternal present induced by contemporary media, and the lack of memory that these cause, seem to negate any critical opinion. As a result, stepping out of the spectacle has become impossible. Accordingly, *BLOB* follows Debord's tradition, elaborating his critique in relation to contemporary society. It diverts the integrated spectacle from within offering a critique of it by means of this spectacle. However, now that media attention is slowly shifting towards the internet, this critique needs to be employed and adapted to this new channel.

What happens to the collective imagery once it is decentralized, digested and re-digested by each individual independently on the internet ? What occurs once the spectacle disintegrates through the "buzzification" of new media ?

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111   Joselit, *After Art*, 16-19

CHAPTER III
BUZZIFICATION AND DISINTEGRATION OF THE SPECTACULAR SOCIETY

3.1_From a single blob to a fragmention of the consumption of archival images

The Society of the Spectacle adopted détournement as an act of appropriation and reinterpretation, aiming at deconstructing society and its spectacle. Images were stolen, deprived of their original meaning, and applied to Debord's discourse. In this way, they served as a meta-level critique of his deconstruction, which was let down onto the spectator. The reinterpretation of existing material, first exhorted by Debord, was later redigested by Ghezzi and Giusti in their program *BLOB*, which slashes against social amnesia by using the stately archive to reiterate the memory of its nation. Within a newly assembled discourse, it calls into question the dynamics of spectatorship and of television programming in general in order to emancipate the spectators from their state of alienation and subjugation. By showing certain images in an unexpected way - deprived of their original context - it helps to insert these into the collective imagery, where they can be replicated anew.

In the wake of Ranciere's "emancipated spectator"[112] *BLOB* questioned the dynamics of spectatorship, suggesting the possibility of a more participatory audience. Besides anticipating the necessity of a more interactive information flow, the buzzification of existing material could be read as a pre-cursor to the dynamics of the image consumption on social media. Through this, "détournement" has ceased to be the instrument of subversion and means of emancipation, and has instead been embedded into the language of the internet. Anybody can use and reuse images taken from the web, within their own or a new context.

This points to the most fundamental difference between social media and the previously discussed case studies *BLOB,* and *The Society of the Spectacle:* the origin of content production. In the two latter cases the choice and montage of the images is controlled by the authors, who create a heterogeneous unit of content within their pieces of visual material. On social media, images are reinterpreted in a decentralized and uncontrolled way - in most cases without undergoing censure

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112   Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*

- following a rhizomatic structure[113]. Within certain limits, depending mainly on regulations and laws in different countries, individuals can freely and legally utilize the largest existing archive, namely that of the internet. Whatever has entered cyberspace, becomes an infinitesimal but eternal element in it, augmenting its archive. Its boundless structure enables its users to access, store and share data. Information is reinterpreted and shared individually with a largely "bottom up" structure (users creating content for other users). Vice-versa, television's unidirectional structure brings the outside world into the privacy of peoples homes, allowing neither response nor interaction. As such, it invades the private realm like an external element that speaks to the televiewer "from above". To the contrary, the internet in general, and social media specifically, have a much subtler and amorphous pretence. They encourage a participatory culture, inviting users to create and share content themselves. In this way, they simulate subjectivity in a manner that allows them to become extensions of individuals[114] rather than external elements.

This fundamental difference has been described by Henry Jenkins in his book *Spreadable Media*, in which he distinguishes between the stickiness and spreadability of information on media platforms[115]. The former term refers to media practices that use the consumers by first attracting their attention and then directioning it in the way that serves their (commercial) interests (e.g. broadcasting). With *spreadability*, he refers to the participative and proactive quality of information sharing on the web. Initially coined as a positive term - referring to the simple and fast sharing methods enabled by the internet that allows users to interweave media content according to their wishes - *spreadability* could be viewed as a counterproductive praxis, rather than a constructive one. In fact, due to the acceleration in the transmission of information enabled through the web, the content of this can not but become a buzz. As a result users need to filter the flow of information they scroll through, becoming less perceptive and less sensitive towards it and thus more exposed to functional illiteracy[116]. By not taking the time to metabolize information, we are losing the ability to exert critical thinking. The metabolization time of what is produced and consumed through social

113   Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 3-25
114   McLuhan, *Understanding Media*
115   Jenkins, Green and Ford, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture.* (New York: New York University Press, 2013)
116   Presadiretta Rai. "Verso un nuovo Fascismo. Analfabetismo e propaganda.", 2018, video. http://www.presadiretta.rai.it/dl/portali/site/puntata/list/ContentSet-c0c4448d-fc68-46c6-b4fb-4ada503d89e2.html, 2018

media is diluted. As a result, we become unable to distinguish between true and false information. In fact, even though the internet has an infinite memory that allows one to store and access anything at any point, its mostly unfiltered and uncensored state gives users the freedom to mould the information shared on its channels. As a result, incautious consumers can easily fall into the trap of fake news.

In this framework, the web appears to be perhaps less emancipatory than first thought, since its freedom is equally proportional to its risks and its structure submits to power regimes. As an example of this, users can be targeted for political aims, such as prograpanda, adherence and control. In fact, many cases in the past decade have shown how (silently) politicized the nature of the Web can be. For instance, ISIS has used social media to propagandize their belief and to radicalize adepts[117]. On a different note, Facebook is involved in the Cambridge Analytica data investigation, in which Cambridge Analytica is said to have gathered and used personal data of social network users for political campaigns[118]. It is not surprising then, that within this state of resilient truth and "unfiltered" representation, politics, and in particular populist parties, find the ideal stage for their propaganda[119]. The internet addresses the masses, but interacts with its users individually[120]. This direct relation between politicians and populations, shrinks the usual separation between them. Politicians make use of direct messaging to reach out to the public, sharing their opinions in an apparently unmediated way.

Never has communication appeared as direct and unfiltered as today: reactions can be expressed in synthetic tweets or through extensive posts, often accompanied by pictures or videos. The aim is to stage a communication which appears as subjective as possible, and as close as possible to the audience and their problems, needs and wishes. However, communication of this sort can not but be staged and is thus socially destructive if it bends to the dynamics of an environment that fragments and falsifies the individual. Within this era of "direct" democracy, the concept of majority rule has superseded that of truth. The power dynamics that have served mass media have constantly

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117   The self proclaimed Islamic State, has promoted its belief, through social media such as Twitter and Facebook as well as through platforms such as Youtube and Liveleaks. Through written posts and videos, the terrorist group has advertised their actions and ideology.

118   The Cambridge Analytica Scandal has been followed and reported by the main newspapers worldwide, such as The Guardian, The New York Times, The Times of India et. al., where the employment of Facebook users data for political aims has been discussed.

119   Mihailidis and Viotty, "Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture: Civic Expression, Fake News, and the Role of Media Literacies in "Post-Fact" Society". *SAGE Publications*, Vol. 61(4) (2017), 441–454.

120   Freccero, *Televisione*

been allowed to deceive the spectator in order to assure control and reliance[121]. What occurs then, when the production of content is decentralized and unregulated? Can the emancipation suggested by Ranciere occur through a medium that gives freedom to its users? Or is the internet just another means to remediate old messages and mechanisms?

3.2_Social Media and social imagery through the Aesthetic of the individual

Debord and the SI have been precursors in the idea of consumption of visual footage as a means of mediation between people. At the dusk of the technological race, Debord could already envision how dystopical this would become in developed societies. In his prediction, *"The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images"*[122], he envisioned how society would have eventually turned into that of today. Now more than ever, any relationship is mediated by images, by the unmissable presence of the digital, recording and sharing of the most intimate moments of our lives. Everything is immortalized to be shown within the digital communities that know us through our cybernetic other. *"The decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing"*[123] is probably his uttermost fulfilled prediction applied to social media. Our century is the century of the individual, so that the object of the spectacle is not society anymore, but our own ego[124].

The tendency observed in the previous chapter of commercial television thematizing the banality and triviality of the everyday, has nowadays reached its peak on social media. The designing of social media requires participation of users, offering a space for them to appear. It provides the spotlight onto the most intimate thoughts, actions and images of its users. They can choose who to be, how to perform, and towards whom to direct their voice. As a result, a new space has come into being: an environment in which our digital double can act. The apotheosis of this spectacular society, lies in these avatars, which are shaped according to the desires of the consumers and later exposed to potentially millions of eyes. The internet allows one to build their ideal self and share it with the world. Media have turned from objects into surroundings, which anyone can be a part

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121   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*
122   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* 2
123   Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* 5
124   Freccero, *Televisione*

of[125]. Constantly walking around with their smartphones, users are able to capture and share in real time - sometimes even live - the events of their everyday lifes. As a result, the boundaries between inside and outside, public and private, blur. We are moving towards a perception of individuality and spectacularization of the private that recalls Foucault's understanding of society. In this new space individuals are deprived of any distinction between private and public, unable to draw a line between them[126]. Everything faces the outside, everything can be public.

On social media, the popularity of an individual is rated by the amount of 'likes' one receives for images portraying goods, travels and selfies. Overall the production of images could be seen as unpaid labour that sums up to the internet archive. In some cases though, users are paid to become advertisers. In this new state, the commodity has colonized social life, rendering it shallow and inauthentic. Individuality is more than ever fragmented through this game of representations, in which everyone is watching everyone else, as well as oneself, through the lense of the web. We are more connected than ever, but lonely and polarized in the prison of our digital self. We live, as Debord wrote, in a vicious circle of isolation, in which the goods serve the system as weapons for constantly reinforcing the "lonely crowds"[127]. The more audiences identify with the spectacle through their "presence" on social media, the more they get alienated and isolated by it. Influencers do not mind advertising goods for the brands of others, using themselves as channels. As was anticipated by Pop-art and their serial reproduction of images - which deprived the originals of their meaning and reduced them to counterfeits - social media follow the mechanism of capitalist labor and consumption. Accordingly, the bodies and leisure time of influencers, become well paid tools for consumption. On the web, promotion does not follow moral or ethical beliefs, but economic and social tendencies.

The internet has turned into a platform to direct and enhance consumerist drives - anything can be bought on it at any time and users are constantly targeted to address them with specific advertisement - while social media have evolved into a stage for ostentatious consumption. Leisure time has been almost completely corrupted by capitalist image consumption, nothing is private anymore, and everything is documented and shared. Users do not question nor object to this

125 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*
126 Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot: The thought from the outside* (New York: Zone books, 1987)
127 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 10

tendency, instead they bend to its dynamics. McKenzie Wark noted this in his book *The Spectacle of Disintegration* - in which he adopts Situationist theories to deliver a critique of contemporary society -, *"where once the spectacle entertained us, now we must entertain each other"*[128]. Looking at the luxurious and filmlike lives of others is enough to visually and figuratively consume part of it. The eyes of users feed their minds with images of the lives of others, which are re-digested and re-proposed by these same users. In fact, the visual style, contents and headings of pictures posted on social media follow trends in a recurrent way. What matters is not to be original and showing new perspectives, but rather to imitate and re-photograph places and styles. In this framework the idea of repetition, and of reuse, appears again. However, this time, as previously suggested, the détournement does not oppose but rather endorse the capitalist society.

Surprisingly, the activities that flourish in this new social media environment may resemble at first sight those used by the situationists to resist the spectacte. Take the case of memes. This phenomenon forms an engaging example of how the spectacle plays out within digital culture and how this appropriates and reuses cultural commodities[129]. A meme cites cultural symbols, ideas and practices, which are then transmitted and spread on the internet through visual means (images, GIFs, videos). They speak to the group of people that create and share them, namely those belonging to a specific social media community. Referring once more to *BLOB*, which talked back to the consumers of Italian television, memes usually need no further knowledge then that which can be acquired on social media. Though they generally use existing images from films, advertisements, social media, television, and spread them through the internet, they deprive these of their original content and combine them instead with a new headline that provides them with a new meaning. Variegated and heterogeneous types of content are assembled, creating by means of juxtaposition, unexpected or totally new paths of consumption. We are connected more than ever before, but as such, by means of images, which are not created by us. This tendency can be observed in different expressions around the internet. It shows how the aesthetic of the individual - the way one imagines - is socially and mediatically constructed. The social imagery as such, results from the consumption of images pertaining to the social media and web archive. In this context forms of, détournement have become

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128   Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration*, 6
129   Mihailidis and Viotty, "Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture", 445

common practices. During Debord's times the consumption of images was something passive, since the spreading of images took place by means of one-way mass media like cinemas and television. Because of the advent of internet, users have become part of the general media consumption. Images lose their source and ownership, turning into common properties, which anyone can use in a new form and context.

Once détournement has ceased to be the language of subversion and has instead been embedded into the spectacular discourse, once the integrated spectacle has reached its largest spreadability through the web, once Debord's and Foucault's dystopian theories seem to resonate within society and its inhabitants, can a critique spoken from the eye of the storm still be heard? The Italian case of *BLOB* and its attempts to unveil the hidden mechanisms of media and society in general, through an operated re-digestion of archival footage, represents an attempt at showing the collective imagery on the screen. Simultaneously, it represents an infinite hermeneutic circle around certain programs and their influence on contemporaneity. This latter role can be observed particularly through its participation on social media.

3.3_Redigesting archival material: from *BLOB* to Social Media

Through the advent of decentralized information production and spreading, "big media" have slowly been losing their authority[130]. A general suspicion towards official texts - which are far too often politicized and subjugated to power games - leads to the escape of the most autonomous members of public to the internet, where everyone can access a custom blend of information. The younger generation in particular, has chosen the web as its primary source of information, perhaps to escape the talk show dynamics of politics and society on television (not aware yet, that they would find similar dynamics also on the younger sibling of television)[131].

Through this maelstrom of images and texts that pervade cyberspace, the memory of the medium is constantly reiterated through the use and reuse of its archival images. Within this, spectators are given the means to emancipate themselves and to advocate their own destiny. However, to the same extent to which they are given such tools and freedom, their perception and critical thought are moulded and influenced by the collective imagery, constructed through the web and

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130   Shoshana Zuboff, "The dominion of the smart machine", (New York: Basic books, Inc. publishers, 1984), 245-285
131   Freccero, *Televisione*

social media. In order to be recognized and remembered, one needs to do so through the eternal memory and language of the cyber world.

Given the 'participative' nature of its critique of the media, it is perhaps no surprise that *BLOB* acquired a presence on social media. *BLOB* currently has both a Facebook page and a Twitter feed. In fact, through its social media presence, it continues its participative approach to the spectacle, moving from the *flow* of television to the *spreadability* of the web. Wark suggested to use détournement as a means to turn the disintegrating spectacle into a critique of, which would reinterpret an image within a counternarrative, in order to join the dispute over ownership and control of web images[132]. It is not the intrinsic meaning of an image that matters, but rather the extrapolated connotation given to it at a later stage, namely the rhizomatic development[133] of image consumption and distribution.

In a way similar to that of the television program, *BLOB*'s social media pages select visual and textual citations from different sources - the internet, television, printed press, radio - combining them into one gigantic amalgamation of material. The substantial difference, however, is the fact that while the TV program respond to the main information broadcast on television that day - allowing the viewer to have an overview onto the essential facts - with insertions from other sources and times, the social media posts have a much more desultory structure. The posts have no narrative, but offer an amalgamation of images and texts from different times, places and sources in a rhizomatic rather than converging structure. In this framework, not only visual material is detourned, but language is as well. Both are deprived of their original meaning and put in a new context, where they adopt a new signification. Within its own tradition and through the dispersability of the web, *BLOB* diverts material from both public and private sources of fictional and archival value[134]. The images are used both in original and edited form (photomontage, retouching, merging, superimposition), generally accompanied by a main title and a quote. The headings are mostly word games, that recall famous titles, expressions, sayings, terms and quotes in which a word is added or changed for it to assume a new meaning. The title can either refer directly to the picture - to direct its meaning - or it can relate to the

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132   Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration*, 189-204
133   Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus,* 3-25
134   BLOB uses sources such as: historical photographs, comics, book/magazine/CD covers, official photographs and documents, illustrations, advertisement, paintings, social media posts, cinema posters, newspapers and ` television.

quote by which it is followed in the post. These citations are taken from newspapers, interviews, social media posts, TV outtakes and official statements of figures pertaining to the political, mediatic or cultural field. Noticeably, all of the posts refer back to the upcoming episode of the *BLOB*, inviting the user to follow it on television.

The following statement of the current prime minister Giuseppe Conte, which regards the latest financial manoeuvre of the nation, has been published alongside an image of the Costa Concordia shipwreck, stranded at the Giglio Island. The heading states:

"The (expansive)"maneuver".

"We are creating the future of Italy now [...] We have launched an expansive manoeuvre, we are not naive [...] Being pessimistic would not be a form of realism but one of sabotage" [135].

Hence, the machination that has led to the disaster of the Costa Concordia, which resulted in 34 deaths and considerable economic costs, is here compared to the economic procedure planned by the state. The prospect of an economic recovery through the planned manoeuvre appears as naive and disastrous as the physical manoeuvre that has led to the Costa Concordia disaster. After being deprived of their original meaning and merged into one, the combination of the photograph, the quote and the title, sheds a new light onto the latter two. In a larger sense it could be argued that this "static montage" creates a third meaning in the heads of the users, just as experimented by previous cinematic movements - such as Soviet Cinema.

In another interesting post, montage is used as a means to emancipate the audience. The vice president Luigi di Maio - Minister of Economic Development, Labour and Social Policies - is edited as a marching figure within the famous pianting *Il Quarto Stato* (the Fourth State) by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. The 1900 painting, portrays a crowd of striking labourers, guided originally by three - four with di Maio - characters. It states:

"The fourth "istate". ('the technical recession')"

"Istat data show that those who were at the Government before lied to us, they never brought us out of the crisis"[136].

The word game in the title refers both to the painting and to the "Istat", the National Institute

135   *BLOB*. 2018. "La manovra (espansiva)." Facebook, February 2nd, 2018, accessed February 3, 2019,
            https://www.facebook.com/mito.BLOB/
136   *BLOB*. 2018. "Il Quarto Stato." Facebook, February 1rst, 2018, accessed February 3, 2019,
            https://www.facebook.com/mito.BLOB

for Statistics, to which di Maio refers in the quote. Minister di Maio marches with the workers, breaking the fourth wall by waving off the imaginary audience of the painting, while naively smiling. The lower right text applied on the image recites *"di Maio - did he do things"*: perhaps echoing the popular wish that politicians and in particular those of populist parties, would actually do things for their nation instead of only speaking about doing them. Accusing the previous Government of the problems burdening the nation, has been the headline of every administration of the recent decades in Italy. Particularly through social media the tendency of appealing for direct democracy has found its largest expression: politics has become about talking instead of doing. This montage connects the populist five star movement to the actual proletariat, that guided by hunger and poverty striked for their rights in the 1900. Politics may seem "closer" than ever to the people, by interacting with them on social media, but it is effectively completely detached from real problems and real individuals.

At a pace of between five and twelve posts a day *BLOB* discusses political, religious, social and cultural themes in a satirical way. In its televisual version, it brings together any file that can be found on the web, from different periods and sources, which it puts into a new combination to add meaning to it. Once the elements are deprived of their original connotations, they can only be understood within the context of the post. Sometimes even within posts, their denotation evades the users. Though most of its content comes from sources that pertain to the "general knowledge" of the population the relations created through their combination can remain hidden. These conglomerates of material echo the overwhelming and fragmented amount of information available on the web, where everything is accessible at any time, which seems to flatten all data onto one surface. *BLOB*'s social media posts imitate this dynamic, compressing a consistent amount of information into one post. They reiterate the idea of fragmentation and overstimulation that merges any perception into one undefined blob of data. However the question arises: is it really useful to overload the viewer in this way? The speed with which information is viewed online and in particular on social media, does not allow one to grasp the meaning of such dense posts. While some connections are immediately and logically graspable, others need to be researched and put into context. In this way, on one hand participation is encouraged, while on the other the viewer is sent back to television, around which these posts revert to. However, while the broadcasted episodes of *BLOB* simply requires an active use

of television to understand them, the social media posts demand a much higher comprehension of their language and general content: one needs to know the original connotation of which the images have been deprived to understand why they have been put within their new context. Meaning is not suggested, nor implicit, but fluctuates between the layers of data merged together. The paradox of this lies in the spreadability of the web that on one side dismantles visual material, while on the other enables a new understanding. In *BLOB*'s case the latter depends on the former meaning of the image, without which the signification of many combinations remain obscure.

This paradox points to the conclusion that the spectacle and its disintegration might be the only critical response possible on the Web. In its current state, the spectacle can only be reiterated and echoed. Having reached a point in which the capital has become irreversible and ineluctable, there can be no more hope for meaning[137]. *BLOB* acts in the wake of this thought, offering a spectacle of decomposition through its social media channels. On these, détournement destroys any significant by dismantling its own self. By going round in circles, quoting again and again the same discourses within an endless hermeneutic circle, that the spectacle proves and destructs itself: namely through the implosion of any meaning and of the spectacle itself[138]. What is left then of the spectator and of the spectacle, if their stage becomes their own prison?

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137   Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, 79-83
138   Baudrillard, *Simulation and Simulacra*, 152

LA "MANOVRA" (ESPANSIVA)

"Il futuro dell'Italia lo stiamo creando adesso... Abbiamo varato una manovra espansiva, non siamo degli sprovveduti...Essere pessimisti non sarebbe una forma di realismo ma sabotaggio". (Giuseppe Conte presidente del Consiglio a 'Povera Patria' Rai2) Alle 20.00 su #Rai3 #CompagniDiStrada, Gino&Claudio 'versus'... Sanremo..

THE (EXPANSIVE)"MANEUVER"

"We are creating the future of Italy now [...] We have launched an expansive maneuver, we are not naive [...] Being pessimistic would not be a form of realism but one of sabotage". (Giuseppe Conte prime minister at 'Povera Patria' Rai2) Alle 20.00 su #Rai3 #CompagniDiStrada, Gino&Claudio 'versus'...Sanremo..

IL QUARTO "ISTATO"

("La recessione tecnica")

"I dati Istat dimostrano che chi stava al governo prima ci ha mentito, non ci ha mai portato fuori dalla crisi" (L.Di Maio ministro del Lavoro e dello Sviluppo Economico). Alle 20.00 su #Rai3 la nuova puntata di #BLOB

THE FOURTH "ISTATE"

("the technical recession")

"Istat data show that those who were at the Government before lied to us, they never brought us out of the crisis" (L.Di Maio Minister of Economic Development, Labour Policies).
At 20.00 on #Rai3 a new episode of #BLOB

CONCLUSION

The notion of the spectacle, developed in the era of traditional media, represented a sharp and accurate prediction of the society to come. Debord envisioned the alienation and separation of individuals from each other and from themselves by means of images, as well as the commodification of life. At their time, the Situationist International opposed in words and deeds the trend society had embarked upon with a dual hope: that the tendency could be reversed and that those able to understand it would get agitated and react to the system. The latter ambition reverberated during the uprising of the 1960s. It dissolved however once the ideological fights faded away, leaving capitalist and technological obsolescence to take over.

In retrospect Debord's visionary critique might have been premature for his time, even besides the fact that his elitist expedient to evade the spectacle - presenting the spectacle through dense and complicated text recited with a dry and didactic voice-over - made the critique inaccessible to many. Debord decided not to bend to the dynamics of the spectacle (both through his montage and distribution choices[139]) and instead chose to play by his own terms, conscious that only few would be able to follow his discourse. When Debord commited suicide at the end of the '90s as an act of refutation against the spectacle, television was one of the most dominant and controversial forms of mass media in society. It converged the gaze of entire populations onto one single point of perspective, working as an inverted panopticon[140]. In this way, the public and the private realms merged into one conglomerate of spectacles that slowly became the sole truth known to society. Even when the spectacle was at its inception there could be no winning against it, and once it slowly integrated every element of life, turning from a recognizable and (partly) opposable entity into a reality pervading and shaping every atom of society, the echoing of Debord's analysis proved to be strikingly accurate.

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139   While since the very publication of them, his films where hardly accessible, after the mysterious death of his
        mentor and publisher Gerard Lebovici in 1984, Debord withdrew his films from cinemas. Up until his death
        in 1995, when his widow Alice Becker-Ho published the work of her husband, the films remained in the shadow.
140   Freccero, *Televisione*

At the time Debord developed his critique of the spectacle, the internet was at its dawn, but would soon provide a platform for the social media that came to fragment reality and individuality into innumerable pieces. The visionary thinker descended the stage of life without giving in to the spectacle, opposing it up until the end with his final feature length work - *Guy Debord, son art et son temps* (1994) - in which, interestingly, he abandoned his external position indicated by the use of a voice-over. This choice is an acknowledgment that the spectacle offered no other reality than its own.

In the wake of Debord's oeuvre and poetic testament, Ghezzi and Giusti set out to develop his thoughts about television. They did so, however, with one major difference: they used the images the spectacle itself provided as their foundation and building blocks. They did not need to include an external point of view in their televisual detrournement, since there were none left. Since the spectacle offered no escape, the authors followed its flow, but as they did so they took a step back which gave the audience the chance to construct its own criticism, giving their spectators the freedom to think for themselves, rather than lecturing and stultifying them. Thus, they adopted the critique and the visual style of Debord's films, but using the content of (Italian) television. Their program represents a unique example of metacriticism on Italian television and television in general, which could potentially be transposed to any nation with similar outcomes. It demonstrates how a meta-critique of the spectacle by means of the spectacle itself is not only possible, but even viable on a daily basis. Accordingly, the program suggests the possibility of a subversion of the spectacle from within, through its own means and language.

BLOB works as a mole within television, with the ambition to awaken minds and encourage critical thinking, in order to emancipate the individual. By choosing satire over an aseptic commentary and by employing a modest language and medium to disclose it, it aims to enlighten the dormant audience. Productions like *BLOB* offer a counternarrative to the general discourse without adding anything new to its stream.

However, being bound to the content and format of television, *BLOB* is also bound by its destiny, namely a shift towards the internet. In its attempt to follow such a trend, whilst also moving closer to the telespectator, the program went online and became part of the social spectacle promoted through social media. The symbiotic quality that made *BLOB* so groundbreaking and metacritical on television, was embedded within the language of social media, sinking in to the flow and speed of online

information exchange. In this, instead of questioning the use of social media and the spreadability of images, it echoes their trends, amplifying it to the nth-degree. As such, it collects elements and visual vocabulary from the internet and compresses them into one image. It perpetuates and adds up to the evanescence and buzzification of images, and the shallowing and incoherence of their content, rather than opposing the trend. The user is confronted with an accumulation and superimposition of information, rather then with a critical selection of it. As a result, there is no real joining in, no exchange with the users, and no emancipation from the spectacle: it is not requested nor expected. Instead, the social media accounts appear as an allurement to send users back to the TV program, which is the true beholder of meaning and critique. Accordingly, the participation of the social media users remains the same as that of the telespectator, namely that of an audience. As such the audience's role is to make a mental endeavour in order to decipher the meaning behind the montage of words and images, not a further reflection or action: it became a rebus.

BLOB entered the spectacle of social media and was swallowed by it. The language of subversion (détournement) became that of the spectacle (memes, re-photography etc), and the potential emancipatory nature of the platform proved to be a mirage. The medium that allows the most interaction and freedom does not lead to emancipation, but rather it works as a palindrome where *"we turn round in the night and are consumed by the fire"*[141]. In this perspective there can be no subversion of the spectacle, which reaches and ingurgitates everything that pertains to this society. How then, can one find genuinity, truth and freedom? What remains of humanity when everything is lived through a screen? What is left of the individual if everything seems to fold back onto the spectacle itself? What emancipation is still possible in this society?

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141   Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978, Motion picture

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