

# Reality, representation, images, and society through Debord and Anders' lenses<sup>1</sup>

Filippo Ursitti\*

## *Abstract*

L'articolo tratta della dipendenza che l'umanità ha sviluppato rispetto alla tecnologia e delle potenziali conseguenze che ciò potrebbe avere sulla sua coscienza. In tal modo, si prenderà in considerazione sia la "Società dello Spettacolo" di G. Debord che la filosofia di G. Anders. Questo saggio è articolato in quattro sezioni: la prima introdurrà brevemente la "Società dello Spettacolo" di Debord e la sua argomentazione. La seconda riguarderà l'analisi di Anders sulla radio e sulla televisione, in particolar modo rispetto all'idea della produzione di fantasmi e della matrice. La terza sezione affronterà gli effetti che la tecnologia ha avuto sul comportamento umano e sulla psiche. La parte finale utilizzerà le categorie introdotte nelle tre sezioni precedenti e le applicherà all'esempio di social media.

*Parole chiave: Anders, Debord, fantasma, matrice, social media.*

The article discusses the dependence that humanity has developed on technology and the potential consequences this may have on its consciousness. In doing so, this article looks at both G. Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" and G. Anders' philosophy. This paper is articulated in four sections: the first one will briefly introduce Debord's "Society of the Spectacle" and his argument. The second one will look at Anders' analysis of radio and television, which revolves around the idea of the production of phantoms and the matrix. The third section will address the effects that technology has had on human behaviour as well as its psyche. The last part will utilise the categories introduced in the previous three sections and investigate the latest example of social media.

*Keywords: Anders, Debord, phantom, matrix, social media.*

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\* PhD Candidate, Goldsmiths, University of London, e-mail: [fursi001@gold.ac.uk](mailto:fursi001@gold.ac.uk).

## I

«In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation»<sup>2</sup>. With those words, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* reveals a fundamental element of the post-modern epoch: the gap between representation and reality. In Western post-modern society, this gap seems to manifest itself in every occurrence of political power. This power, regardless of its form – democratic, socialist, or fascist – has to confront the fact that the reality it aims to control is a continuum of transformative processes, making it slippery and hard to categorise according to fixed categories. Behind this phenomenon of the liquefaction of the post-modern world, we find the never-ending process of techno-scientific development. Rapid scientific advancement has pushed power to develop new means of control aimed at legitimizing its actions within a reality in which its non-solid dimension plays a significant role in the lives of all individuals. In contrast to previous epochs, we are witnessing the emergence of a social order where power, in the exercise of its rule, scarcely needs to resort to physical violence to impose socio-political decisions. Instead, it relies on a new form of totalizing control through the process of indirect influence over the real. This totalizing control is so fluid that it manages to colonise both the empirical and symbolic dimensions of human life. To achieve this new form of control, power employs an immeasurable production of well-displayed images of the world through the technological potential of mass media, such as television, journals, and the internet. Through these influential means of mass conditioning – which act on a suppressed level, not directly comprehensible to human consciousness or reason – power spreads ideas, often of contradictory nature, according to its needs in each scenario to promote the desired *Weltanschauung*. In this manner, power produces positive images of itself (representations that sometimes mystify reality itself) allowing it to gain consensus and extend its influence over the lives of more people by conditioning the choices of both collective and individual realities.

This is what Debord understood over half a century ago: he realised that he was living in a society where individuals were gradually becoming passive spectators of a continuous stream of images carefully produced and selected by a spectacular power that was slowly replacing reality itself. At first glance, the term “Spectacle” might seem unsuitable to describe this phenomenon, as it generally refers to the mass media’s dimension of audience entertainment. However, Debord goes beyond this superficial aspect of the term. In his analysis, the spectacle represents the most advanced product of modern capitalism, with the economic sector evidently being the dominating force<sup>3</sup>. However, Debord, fully aware of the socio-political and

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<sup>2</sup> G. Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, tr. by K. Knabb, Rebel Press, London 1995, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> The spectacle becomes that which falsifies reality but, nevertheless remains a real product of that reality. «Real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing

cultural differences present in the Cold War era, identified two different spectacular models: one “concentrated” and the other “diffuse”. The first, typical of modern communist dictatorships, involved the presence of a single decision-making centre from which all directives were radiated. Due to the low development of the industrial sector, this model relied on ideology and identification with the supreme leader (dictator) to gain consensus. On the other hand, the second spectacular form, characteristic of Western democracies, relied on the consumption of goods as a form of social narcotization, thanks to its high economic development. The decisions made by those in power were no longer imposed on the citizen-spectator through ideology or, if necessary, violence but through images designed to illusorily present a world where individuals felt free to choose what to consume, desire, or think. In both models, the reality and the imagery of the spectacle constituted distinguishable entities: it was still possible to glimpse the reality of life beyond the different ideologies conveyed by those in power. However, nothing escapes what the French thinker later defined as the “integrated” spectacle. Unlike the previous two types, which were unable to exert total social control, the integrated spectacle blends with reality without leaving any dark areas, presenting itself as both concentrated and diffused. As a result, society becomes completely spectacularized. Reality and imagery thus inscribe themselves within a sort of “stage” where individuals are simultaneously actors (active agents) and spectators (passive agents), thereby erasing the subtle line of separation between life (reality) and spectacle (representation). In a world dominated by this illusory system, everything except the spectacle can be called into question: it justifies everything, and in turn, everything finds its justification in it. The spectacle presents itself as both the “end and means” of the mechanism that generated it, making it indisputable.

Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* primarily argues against reification, with its central premise being that the spectacle, represented visually, adds an additional layer of objectivity stemming from the initial commodification process. This process involves abstracting objects from their inherent processes and prioritising a naturalised “being” over historical “becoming”. Essentially, the spectacle becomes a static reproduction and affirmation of the world shaped by commodities. Instead of fostering collective self-formation, it promotes a self-perception based on objectified and individualised reality. Debord’s concept of the spectacular capitalist system encompasses the glorification of the consumerist self in its fragmented and atomised form. This includes the commodified focus on lifestyle and social differentiation, as well as techniques for self-promotion. Separation is described as an integral part of the world’s unity and the essence of the spectacle, while simultaneously contributing to an ideology that reinforces the «proletarianisation of the world»<sup>4</sup>. This is rooted in

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it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society». Ivi, pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 21.

the logic of commodities themselves and the social relations among commodity owners. Debord contends that each individual commodity fights for its own interests<sup>5</sup>, whereas proletarian struggle aims to dissolve all forms of separation<sup>6</sup>. His philosophy is heavily influenced by strategic considerations and frequent comments on the historical developments within the socialist movement. Workers' councils are seen as organisational mechanisms that enable direct self-governance and political transparency in a spontaneous and disruptive manner. Debord envisions a self-transparent collective that transcends political alienation through institutional forms, rejecting the idealist notion of subject-object identity. One crucial aspect of Debord's theoretical and political endeavours that merits attention is the exploration of the philosophical and programmatic implications of his political ontology. He proposes a shift from an ontology centered on facts, objects, and commodities to one based on social labour and political constitution. Through the spectacle, power shapes the imagination of the individual via the deployment of images distributed by mass media. Such practice has been significantly enhanced through the techno-mediatic development of modern media, which has encouraged the production and distribution of images to an extent never witnessed before. Today, we find ourselves in a society in which the pervasive character of images, in all of its possible expressions, constitutes an element of fundamental importance for many people.

## II

On the spectacularized society, the entertainment industry, and their effect on the human consciousness, wrote also the German (naturalised Austrian) philosopher G. Anders. In the entertainment industry, according to Anders, the world is "served" to us in its liquid state. Sometimes it is not even served, but rather provided in a totally direct mode to be immediately used and consumed; by being liquid, the commodity is, in the act of its consumption, liquidated<sup>7</sup>. In both radio and television, the objective of our modern efforts – that is, the suppression of time – seems to be completed because, in both, the reception of that which is transmitted happens in the same moment in which the broadcast begins<sup>8</sup>. Thus, space and time are replaced, through the omnipresence of man, by the simultaneity of the events. There is not a "there" anymore, everything is here – but if everything is here, then there is no space<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Ivi, p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> The author of this paper has conducted all translations of Anders' works presented herein, as no extant English translations are presently available. G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II: *Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution*, C.H. Beck, München 2002, p. 253.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 347.

<sup>9</sup> Id., *Der Blick vom Mond. Reflexionen Über Weltraumflüge*, C.H. Beck, München 1970, p. 131.

In an article titled *Spuk im Radio*, published in 1930 in the magazine *Anbruch*, edited by T.W. Adorno, Anders maintained that the radio, by allowing reproductions of the same musical piece to multiply simultaneously in different places, destroyed the unity and essence of the artwork, making it malleable. Anders expressed in this short article – just two pages long – his opinion regarding technical means: it is extremely strange and in need of interpretation that techne can create phantoms [*akzidentiell Spuke*]<sup>10</sup>, which are musical pieces that he heard coming from every window of nearby houses, like phantoms. According to Anders, a “programmatically mankind” [*programmatische Humanität*] can only arise when one ignores the products of techne and tries to adapt to the intrinsically immeasurable hidden in them. If a person attempts to convert to these products, she becomes inhuman [*unmenschlich*]. Radio was not the only media put under analysis by Anders; television was also questioned under the same premise of creating phantoms. TV broadcasts redefine the relationship between people and reality by creating a “new medial situation”, where singularity consists in its ontological ambiguity. The happenings broadcasted are both present and absent, real and apparent; they are phantoms<sup>11</sup>. The basic principle of transmission is to deliver that which is simply simultaneous and make it appear as genuine presence<sup>12</sup>. The images shown are phantoms because they are neither traditional images – characterised by a time difference in regard to the represented object, which disappears in the simultaneity of the broadcast – nor do they possess materiality as they are presented as forms<sup>13</sup>. This causes two significant effects: 1) The attenuation of the perception of the difference between reality and fiction in the spectator, where life is considered a dream and dreams are considered life, as every reality is presented as a phantom, giving the impression of being real beings<sup>14</sup>. 2) The transformation of our way of experiencing. The broadcasts obliterate the difference between direct experience and indirect information for the receiver<sup>15</sup>. The broadcasted object appears on the TV screen in its reality, not in the form of, for example, a relation or news about itself. Yet, this reality has the same ontological status for Anders as news – an interpreted reality, not reality itself. This happens because the “news” is a judgement, a proposition with a double structure (Subject S and Predicate P), which affirms something about an absent object, e.g., “the wallet is full”, that, to the receiver who acquires it, does not give the object itself or its image (the full wallet) but “something about it”, a third object, a fact (*Tatsache*)<sup>16</sup>. Of this “something”, the important and truly meaningful aspect for the receiver is the Predicate (P) because it allows her to decide how to behave. For example, in the case

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<sup>10</sup> G. Stern, *Spuk Im Radio*, in «ANBRUCH», 12, n. 2, 1930, pp. 65-66: 66.

<sup>11</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I: *Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, C.H. Beck, München 2002, p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Ivi, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 159.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 154.

of the wallet, she needs to withdraw money from an ATM or not, depending on whether the predicate is true or false. In this sense, the predicate enables the receiver to dispose of something that is absent, incorporating it into her practical dispositions. For Anders, the news, as a form of communication, becomes a form of freedom due to its ability to provide this information. However, the news is also a form of unfreedom because it communicates only a part of the absent object<sup>17</sup>, highlighting only one aspect of it. It presents the object as if it could be consumed solely through its predicate, which can be either true or false. This partial supply of information becomes a prejudice<sup>18</sup>, limiting the addressee and depriving her of autonomy and independence. In summary, while the news allows for a certain level of freedom by providing information that can influence actions, it also restricts freedom by offering only a partial view of the absent object, leading to preconceptions and limitations on the receiver's choices and understanding.

If the common distinction between mediated learning (through news) and immediate learning (through the senses), which were kept apart in the case of the radio, is obliterated by TV broadcasts because it is not clear whether we are in front of a thing or a fact<sup>19</sup>. The ontological “doubleness” of television relies on two aspects: 1) Its elusiveness, which causes TV images to eliminate the difference between things and news, blurring the line between the actual fact and its partial and perspective reproduction. 2) Its presentation as immediate, deceiving the viewer into thinking it is a preselected aspect of a possible fact, a judgement upon it, a news to persuade the consumer that it has no intention to persuade her. The judgement, transformed into an image, renounces its judgemental form<sup>20</sup>. There is no judgement that could be as beyond suspicion, as little striking, and as seductive as that which is presumed to be nothing else than the thing itself<sup>21</sup>. The usage of the recording camera, the choice of images, their editing, and every passage of a TV transmission already constitutes a choice presented only from one side, a face of a happening, a fact, and never its totality. Consequently, television exonerates the receiver from giving her own judgement and, by freeing the addressee from the necessity of having a direct experience, it forces her to accept as reality the judgement that is given<sup>22</sup>. TV deprives the spectator of her independence and autonomy of thought. The broadcasts not only condition the way in which the subject makes experience by eliminating the difference between thing and news, but they also reverberate on reality itself. TV exercises a true performative effect on reality, where only the image gives reality its “being”<sup>23</sup>. The relation between reality and its transmitted form is characterised by the fact that the happening acquires more social importance in its reproduced form than in its

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<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 158.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, p. 162.

<sup>20</sup> Ivi, p. 161.

<sup>21</sup> Ivi, p. 160.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> K.P. Liessmann, *Günther Anders*, C.H. Beck, München 2002, p. 91.

original<sup>24</sup>, forcing the original to conform itself to its reproduction, to become its matrix, deleting or better overturning the difference between being and appearing, reality and fiction. It is not reality that determines the simulation of the TV transmission, but the technical possibilities – according to which the broadcasts are produced – that determine reality<sup>25</sup>. The real becomes the reproduction of its own images<sup>26</sup>.

To understand this process, Anders delves into the specific relation between model and reproduced commodity. Since transmissions themselves are commodities, they hold meaning only in their reproduced form (the more meaningful the commodity, the more copies are sold) as the event is elaborated and modelled to be supplied and consumed as a serial product – i.e., as a broadcast. Thus, Anders observes that “being” exists in the plural, while the singular exemplar is not<sup>27</sup>. Additionally, the real – the so-called model – must be adapted to its eventual reproductions, transformed according to the copies of itself.

The events of the day unfold in accordance with their duplicates, as certain events occur either due to a desire for them or out of necessity, like transmissions. This situation makes it difficult to distinguish where reality ends and the game starts<sup>28</sup>, much like what often happens in the case of sports events. As there is no image that does not act at least partially as a model, our world is founded on images of the world, an inverted imitation<sup>29</sup>. The role played by the matrix – the system that produces and controls these transmissions – is twofold: 1) it shapes actual events; 2) it outlines the “soul” of the consumers. The intersection of the reality’s structure and the subject (the consumer), both predetermined by the matrix, gives rise to outcomes that shape the character of our era. A vicious cycle is established, eradicating the resistance between humanity and the world, aligning the former with the latter. In this way, the world becomes tailored for mankind<sup>30</sup>, losing its character as an independent object. As the resistance, on which the relationship between humanity and the world was grounded, vanishes<sup>31</sup>, the world becomes an “edible commodity”, a “Land of Cockaigne”. The reciprocal connection between humanity and the world transforms into a two-way process involving two pre-established entities: a reality shaped by a matrix and a consumer model structured by a matrix. It becomes a spectral affair<sup>32</sup>. Anders refers to the unreality of the world, now reality, and asserts that the totality is less true than the entirety of its partial truths. In other words, by modifying Hegel’s

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<sup>24</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> W. Drews, *Die Grenzen von Vorstellung Und Darstellung*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2006, p. 69.

<sup>26</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 191.

<sup>29</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 251.

<sup>30</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 193.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 194.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 197.

famous proposition, he posits that the falsity is the whole, and only the whole<sup>33</sup>. The pervasive influence of the matrix and the consumption of transmitted images have intertwined and distorted the relationship between reality and its representations, leaving the world increasingly constructed by these images and turning it into a realm of simulated and fragmented truths.

With this statement, which reverts Adorno's maxim – «the whole is the false» [*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*]<sup>34</sup> – Anders underscores that his critique is not targeted solely at individual broadcasts, but rather at television as a whole, as it forms a new connection between humanity and its environment<sup>35</sup>. The image of the world in its totality is what is shaped, which is the result of the conjunction of singular transmissions, together with the type of individual who exclusively consumes phantoms and illusions. Even if each broadcast were transmitted according to the truth, the fact that many real things could not be shown might allow the broadcast to turn them into the totality of an “already-made” world and the consumer of such totality into an “already-made” man<sup>36</sup>. Consequently, the combination of the broadcasts produces a distorted picture of the world, a “pseudo-model” of the world<sup>37</sup>, which becomes the sole condition of the experience. It represents a useful tool, a manner of training, which aims to shape our way of acting, enduring, behaving, omitting, and even our taste – in other words, our entire praxis. This tool, by concealing its duty, appears “dressed” as the world<sup>38</sup>.

The transmitted world then becomes an “inductor model”, a fixed scheme, an a priori determining form that not only standardised our way of living, our intellect, and our feelings but also the manner in which people behave and operate<sup>39</sup>. According to Anders, this presents a regression to the mentality of primitive people who lived in an environment limited by codified conceptions and morals. As a result, a totality of representations takes over the world, and it belongs to the latter only because it is forced to be so<sup>40</sup>. The world becomes a representation in a sense that even Schopenhauer could have never dreamed of<sup>41</sup>, as it is transformed into a “representation of me”<sup>42</sup>. In other words, it becomes a manipulated and controlled image that shapes the perception and behaviour of individuals, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion.

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<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 164.

<sup>34</sup> T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, tr. by E.F.N. Jephcott, Verso, London 1978, p. 50.

<sup>35</sup> W. Kramer, *Technokratie Als Entmaterialisierung Der Welt. Zur Aktualität Der Philosophien von Günther Anders Und Jean Baudrillard*, Waxmann, München 1998, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 164.

<sup>37</sup> E. Schraube, *Auf Der Spuren Der Dinge. Psychologie in Einer Welt Der Technik*, Argument, Hamburg 1998, p. 131.

<sup>38</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> Ivi, p. 169.

<sup>40</sup> Ivi, p. 170.

<sup>41</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 252.

<sup>42</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 113.



The idea of the world is abolished, and the world is no longer presented as the external world in which we exist but as our own world<sup>43</sup>. On television, it is crucial that events are supplied to us in a spectral state, devoid of reality, replacing the consumption of phantoms with the illusion of experiencing the real world<sup>44</sup>. Anders believes that in the consumption of radio and television, there is a decisive loss of experience, as the spectator is deprived of humanity's principal need – exploring the world – which, in turn, grants them real experience<sup>45</sup>. This loss of experience is attributed to the absence of distance towards reality, a sense of immediacy, which is simultaneously manipulated. Instead of finding our own path in the world, the world is shaped for us; instead of being in the actual place where events take place, they are merely reported to us<sup>46</sup>. By bringing the world closer to humanity, the world no longer offers any resistance, and it is through this resistance that genuine experience is achieved<sup>47</sup>. Television ultimately erases the possibility of genuine exploration and discovery, leaving the viewer disconnected from the real world. The experience of the world becomes curated and pre-determined, creating a paradoxical sense of estrangement from the true reality [*Weltfremdheit*].

### III

Thus, a strict dependence between humanity and fetish objects is created, as one is excluded from the communicative and mediatic stream that surrounds everyone without them. Without developing the necessary “antibodies”, there is a plausible risk of being engulfed in a narcotic dimension characterised by passively accepting the technological non-neutral *Diktat*. As Anders discovered, technological means are non-neutral in their interaction with the user, influencing them both through content and form. This constant influence could have serious repercussions on the human *forma mentis* (way of thinking): there is a hypothesis that we are currently undergoing an anthropological change in how we, as humans, interact with our own consciousness due to our technological devices. In other words, every new technological tool, irrespective of the message transmitted, becomes a *modus operandi* of elaborating information capable of redefining the structure of the human mind. This has inevitable effects on how we perceive and process information and stimuli from the outer world. As we have seen through the insights of Debord and Anders, the effects on the conscious and unconscious psyche of modern humans are manifold. Every person becomes addicted to the infinite stimuli willingly or unwillingly subjected to them, facing a situation where the vision of the world represented in media dominates over the real world.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>44</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 218.

<sup>45</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 114.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> C. Dries, *Günther Anders*, Fink Verlag, Paderborn 2009, p. 49.

However, it is essential to emphasise the profound difference between the perspectives of the two philosophers. Debord anchors his politico-philosophical analysis in the basic categories of Marxist theory, namely fetishism and alienation produced by the capitalistic economic structure in which the spectacle is ingrained. On the other hand, Anders, while occasionally still using the classical distinction between two “classes”, is fundamentally interested in the ontological condition of humanity within the boundaries of a technologically determined world. For Anders, technology is the dominant force shaping the current epoch, not the economy. He argues that «it would be misleading to affirm that technology exists in our epoch, rather our epoch is built on technology»<sup>48</sup>. This difference in mindset becomes evident when Anders writes: «technology is our destiny in the same way that one hundred and fifty years ago Napoleon affirmed it about politics, and one hundred years ago Marx said about economy»<sup>49</sup>. This reveals how, for Anders, technology has become the central determining factor in human existence and the shaping of the world. One consequence of this difference between Anders and Debord is their mutual understanding of the structure of the commodity world. As observed above, Debord firmly believes that each individual commodity fights for its own interests, as they compete against each other to capture the attention of the same public. Conversely, Anders maintains that in the technologically determined world, all commodities work in accordance with the same principle – i.e., the matrix – for the expansion of the same macro-technological apparatus built around the connection between every single micro-technological device (radios, televisions, computers, smartphones, etc.)<sup>50</sup>. As a result, while Debord can still advocate for the liberation of the “proletariat” from the “bourgeois spectacle”, Anders can only hope for a situation in which humanity is not entirely annihilated by technology and its all-encompassing apparatus. For Anders, the struggle is not just against a specific socio-economic class but against the pervasive influence of technology that shapes every aspect of modern life. The focus shifts from class struggle to the struggle for human agency and preservation amidst the ever-expanding technologically determined world.

Nonetheless, Debord’s and Anders’ philosophies share several analogies, one of which is their similar idea of a “human essence”. Although Debord does not construct a proper ontology, he does present his readers with a definition of a “human object”. Drawing inspiration from Marx’s theory, Debord conceptualises the idea of a human essence quite similarly to Anders’ early philosophical anthropology. Both philosophers argue that humanity does not possess a fixed essence; instead, it is constantly engaged in a process of appropriating its historical existence. «Man [...] is one with time»<sup>51</sup>. Anders believed that humanity’s essence lies in its lack of a fixed a priori, leading to a constant creation of new societies with new values and aims. Similarly, the emergence of the society of the spectacle and the era of technology are

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<sup>48</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 287.

<sup>49</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 120.

<sup>51</sup> G. Debord, *The Society of Spectacle*, cit., p. 125.

two significant historical events that attempt to produce a radical change in the “human essence”. They aim to alienate and manipulate humanity. According to Debord, the «spectacle society must deny history, because history proves that laws are nothing, whereas process and struggles are all. The spectacle is the reign of an eternal present that claims to be history’s last word»<sup>52</sup>. The spectacle strives to eliminate opportunities for people to share experiences directly without intermediaries because such direct experiences could lead individuals to identify with their actions and their consequences. The elimination of a direct experience with the world produces «atomised individuals with no choice but to contemplate the seemingly unalterable progression of blind forces»<sup>53</sup>. If the spectacle aims to destroy both the notions of “history” and “experience”, then Debord’s solution is quite obvious, humanity must re-find its historicity, he writes «community [...] is the true social nature of man, human nature»<sup>54</sup>. Unfortunately, genuine community has been corroded by the commodification and the triumph of exchange-value over use-value through capitalist economy. Therefore, genuine community can only exist when each person has direct access to experiencing reality without the mediation of the spectacle and commodification.

For Anders, machines, in their perfection and ultimate adaptability, turn humanity’s experience of its *humanitas* into the “*malaise of unicity*”<sup>55</sup>, implying that humanity begins to feel inferior to its machines because they seem to outperform humans in every aspect. The core of Anders’ thought revolves around the progressive detachment of humanity from the awareness of its praxis, encompassing both working activity and “doing”. He calls this pivotal concept the Promethean Gap, which emerged from his profound reflection on the devastating experience of the deployment of atomic bombs in Japan. Anders believes of having characterised the *conditio humana* of our time and of all the ulterior epochs<sup>56</sup>. With the Promethean Gap, Anders first refers to the discrepancy between humanity’s productive ability (*Herstellen*) and its capacity to imagine (*Vorstellen*) the consequences of its own production<sup>57</sup>. The producer becomes disconnected from the produced object already in the process of production. Second, there is an ever-increasing asynchrony between humans and the world of their products, rendering our souls incapable of keeping up with our own production. This situation turns humans into outdated beings, akin to prehistoric animals<sup>58</sup>. It is an overturning of Platonism and the result of a dialectical process in which “imagining” loses its anticipating character and trudges behind the produced objects while “producing” is emancipating itself from the guiding image of

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<sup>52</sup> A. Jappe, *Guy Debord*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1999, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> Ivi, p. 35.

<sup>54</sup> Ivi, p. 39.

<sup>55</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 56.

<sup>56</sup> Id., *Mensch ohne Welt. Schriften zur Kunst und Literatur*, C.H. Beck, München 1993, p. 69.

<sup>57</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 67.

<sup>58</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 16.

the representation positing it in front of the *fait accompli*<sup>59</sup>. With Anders' words: the expression imagining [*Vorstellen*] loses in this case its own reason, because through its prefix [*vor*] it defines that planning anticipation, which in its everyday production, proceeds the realisation. Here, on the contrary, we face an inverted-platonic situation in which the realised objects come before their *eidōs*, in which they appear before they are imagined [*vorgestellt*] in their own magnitude and in their consequences. Hence, he who "imagines" [*der Vorstellende*] becomes now the person who "registers" [*der Nachstellende*] because tries to stay update with what he has done and with the incalculable power – which dominates him – that he has gained through his *praxis*<sup>60</sup>. Thus, the fundamental dilemma of our epoch: we are inferior to ourselves, we are incapable of making an image of what we have done. In this sense we are "inverted utopians", while the utopians cannot produce what they imagine, we cannot imagine what we produce<sup>61</sup>. Anders calls this gap Promethean because of the fact that we are not good enough for the Prometheus within us<sup>62</sup> overturning the revolutionary emancipatory connotation of the mythical Titan. Prometheus, lauded by Goethe in a hymn by his name and considered by Marx, has truly freed humanity with his gift (the fire, prefiguration of the *techne*) from the condition of subjugation of the natural world, but he chained mankind to a new servitude, that one of the products. Prometheus, celebrated by Goethe and revered as «the noblest of the saints in the calendar of philosophy»<sup>63</sup> by Marx, did liberate humanity with his gift of fire (prefiguration of technology) from the subjugation to the natural world. However, he simultaneously bound humanity to a new form of servitude, that of the products we create and are dominated by.

Anders observes that the gap between different human faculties, where one lags behind the other<sup>64</sup>, creates a sense of schizophrenia and internal division within individuals. This gap is not limited to the producing-imagining dimension but also extends to three other dimensions. Firstly, there is a moral dimension, where the larger the effect of human praxis, the bigger the gap, and the weaker the inhibitory mechanism of individuals becomes<sup>65</sup>. Secondly, an anthropological dimension exists, represented by the gap between what humans produce and what they can use or what they truly need<sup>66</sup>. Lastly, there is a linguistic dimension, reflecting the discrepancy between the language that lags behind and the enormity of our products, which we should be able to linguistically master. Any difficulties arising from new inventions were addressed through emotional and rational adaptation strategies. However, with

<sup>59</sup> H. Hildebrandt, *Weltzustand Technik. Ein Vergleich Der Technik- Philosophien von Günther Anders Und Martin Heidegger*, Metropol, Berlin 1990, p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> G. Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt*, cit., p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Id., *Der Mann auf der Brücke. Tagebuch aus Hiroshima und Nagasaki*, C.H. Beck, München 1963, p. 74.

<sup>62</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 48.

<sup>63</sup> K. Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1997, p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 137.

<sup>65</sup> G. Stern, *Die Atomare Drohung: Radikale Überlegungen*, C.H. Beck, München 1981, p. 97.

<sup>66</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. II, cit., p. 18.

the technological revolution, this gap has become insurmountable, particularly the one between producing and imagining (as described by Anders) and the one between experiencing and what is possible (as discussed by Debord). Anders emphasises that we cannot connect our present selves to the emotional level of the past and expect to experience emotions greater than what we currently feel. Similarly, scientists and engineers base their work on past discoveries but are equipped to respond to events that were once overwhelming for earlier generations. The technological revolution has drastically increased the distance between humanity's imaginative capacity and the performance of its objects<sup>67</sup>.

Through the technological revolution has dramatically increased the distance between humanity's imaginative faculty and its objects' performances. That which should be set in motion today is not a process for re-gaining omnipotence and omniscience, but, on the contrary, we should understand that in comparison with what we know, can produce, and we can experience, we can imagine and express too little. That, in feeling, we are inferior to ourselves<sup>68</sup>.

#### IV

In the context of social media, both Anders' and Debord's analyses of reification and the spectacle remain relevant. Anders' notion of human obsolescence finds expression in the way products and technologies, including social media platforms, «assume the guise of pseudo-persons»<sup>69</sup>. Social media algorithms determine the content users see, blurring the lines between human-generated and machine-generated information, visibility, and attention. Debord's observations about the spectacle also apply to social media. With the rise of capitalist economy and the spectacle, individuals are increasingly dependent on intermediaries to interact with reality. Social media platforms act as intermediaries, curating and presenting information to users based on algorithmic determinations. This semi-automated process shapes the users' experiences, reinforcing power asymmetries in communication and concentrating attention and power in the hands of an elite. Social media, like traditional media, relies on audience engagement. However, unlike traditional media, social media users not only consume content but also contribute to its production through user-generated content, data, and social connections. This user-generated content and data make users' interests, relationships, and behaviours traceable and controllable. The platform's algorithms use this data to create personalised experiences, which may inadvertently lead to echo chambers and information bubbles, limiting users' exposure to diverse perspectives. In this sense, the promise of social media democratising communication and empowering the masses is not fully realised. While users have the potential to be both consumers and

<sup>67</sup> Id., *Mensch ohne Welt*, cit., pp. 122-123.

<sup>68</sup> Id., *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 268.

<sup>69</sup> Id., *Der Mann auf der Brücke*, cit., p. 45.

producers of content, the algorithms and data-driven processes often manipulate and control the flow of information, shaping users' experiences and influencing their behaviours. In conclusion, the advent of social media has introduced new dimensions to the concepts of reification and the spectacle. Social media platforms, with their algorithms and user-generated content, have amplified the complexities of how information, visibility, and attention are shaped, often reinforcing existing power structures rather than challenging them. Both Anders and Debord's philosophical insights can help us critically analyse the impact of social media on contemporary society and communication.

Anders suggests that the TV broadcasting is a realm that exists half-present and half-absent, while Debord argues that the spectacle obscures the experience of reality. Within the flood of images (real and fake alike) showcasing the world on social media, true reality becomes veiled. This blurring of appearance and existence eliminates the distinction between the former and the latter, thus making each event a reproduction of the same superimposed "matrix" and whoever posts or talks about it is a mere phantom who disseminates the same matrix. «We are thereby constrained by the social media we use (notice that saying social media makes the claim easier than saying radio or television) to create ourselves in the image and likeness of the media»<sup>70</sup>. Reality is transformed into the reproduction of its own images. Anders asserts that broadcastings lead to the banalisation and neutralisation of politics and criticism. These forces are not purely technological but hold political-economic roots, Debord could have said that the fundamental neutraliser is the commodity character of all phenomena. Social media manufacture reality by presenting events that are "social-media-worthy" as the TV did with its broadcasts. Banalisation and simplification become a necessity for selling any commodity, even on social media. «Since the broadcast is a commodity, it too must be presented in a manner that pleases our eyes and ears, optimally ready for consumption, alienated, detached from its core, and assimilated. In other words, it must address us as our likeness, custom-made, as if it were a part of us»<sup>71</sup>. The same principle can be seen on the multitude of posts on the diverse social media, they must be concise due to space and data limits, uncomplicated for dissemination purposes, and most of the time catchy for they must be re-posted. The relationship between people and the world as experienceable on social media becomes one-sided due to the unilateralism of the communication that takes place on each platform. Anders uses the term "unilateralism" to describe a flow of information that is one-sided, depriving individuals of their own language, opportunities to speak, and the pleasure of speaking. This concept resembles the many arbitrary regulations used by social media to regulate how much and what can be posted. Moreover, as in the case of the TV broadcasting, social media preserve the dualistic essence of what they show since they present the real as the virtual and vice versa. Because of this dualism, the average user of social media cannot focus on either,

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<sup>70</sup> B. Babich, *Günther Anders' Philosophy of Technology*, Bloomsbury, London 2022, p. 202.

<sup>71</sup> G. Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Bd. I, cit., p. 195.

and therefore, she transitions from being an individual to being a “di-vidual” because he is divided into a multiplicity of functions<sup>72</sup>. The example given by Anders to describe the movement from individual to dividual can still be applied to social media, it only needs a few changes. Anders writes: «the man who sunbathes, getting his back tanned while his eyes scan an illustrated newspaper, while his ears participate in a sports match, and his jaws chew gum – this figure of the passive simultaneous player and the unproductive multitasker is an international daily phenomenon»<sup>73</sup>. If we change the illustrated newspaper to an online newspaper on the web and the sports match, which is probably listened to on the radio, to an online podcast, the situation remains the same: this man engages in multiple activities simultaneously without specifically focusing on any of them.

However, we could argue contra Anders and Debord, that on social media, all opinions can be posted, and all content can be evaluated and commented on in real-time. Nevertheless, due to visibility and attention asymmetries caused by factors like sponsored content, targeted advertising, and reputational hierarchies, non-trivial, complex, and critical voices face several challenges. Even in the case of providing a simple reply to something we posted on a social media we can showcase the limitations imposed by social media on the freedom of the individual. For instance, when we want to respond to someone on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, the quantitative and qualitative nuances of our responses often result in merely clicking the like button, acknowledging that we have seen and received the message, or using a limiting number of characters to express ourselves. Sporadically, we may amplify our answer through retweeting already-made posts, alongside existing replies, leading to a range of possibilities for miscommunication. Contemporary social media platforms operate at an exceedingly fast pace, publishing a vast amount of content. In the world of big and rapidly generated content and data, attention becomes a scarce resource. In order to capture attention online, today’s content tends to be compressed, short, superficial, and transient, reflecting the limitations imposed by certain social media platforms (number of characters and/or the impossibility to add pictures and/or videos). The domain of engagement, publication, and debate in the age of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat has taken the form of a new reproduction of super-imposed matrices for social media phantoms who are forbidden to experience a genuine sense of community. Social media appear to democratise the public sphere through user-generated content, but in essence, they reproduce and disseminate pre-digested matrices. The ideological strategies of banalisation, unilateralism, di-vidualism, sensationalism, and anti-sensationalism have persisted in social media, while new forms have also emerged.

The monopolistic voice of broadcast media has been shattered, and now almost everyone can speak, broadcast, post, comment, etc., online. The computer acts as a universal machine, facilitating the production, dissemination, and consumption

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<sup>72</sup> Ivi, p. 141.

<sup>73</sup> Ivi, p. 138.

of information which both television and radio could not achieve. However, the new social media world of simultaneous production and consumption (called by Fuchs prosumption)<sup>74</sup> remains far from democratic since it is driven by the logic of accumulating profits and attention. Online attention is equated with time, and time is money. The online world is stratified, with celebrities, corporations, and other privileged few dominating visibility and the material distributed on every platform. Together, they constitute the online elite which produces both content and attention. Conversely, the overwhelming majority of users have the ability to express themselves and share content (which most of the time consists in content produced by the few but highly visible users), but their voices are scarcely heard. This creates a discrepancy between online “influence-users” who amass and thrive on attention, and online “influenced-users” who are impoverished within the “attention economy” of the internet and social media. In the era of social media, the concept of the individual has become outdated, evolving into a “multi-vidual”<sup>75</sup> since we are constantly bombarded with an engulfing abundance of commodities, opinions, options, latest announcements, updates, messages, and more. The predicament lies in the fact that this vast information multiverse largely consists of superficial data, diverting attention away from information and communication that truly matters and can bring about meaningful change in the world. Critical and dialectical information often remains concealed and unrecognised amidst the immense flow of the content thus produced.

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<sup>74</sup> C. Fuchs, *Günther Anders' Undiscovered Critical Theory of Technology in the Age of Big Data Capitalism*, in «TripleC», 15, n. 2, 2017, pp. 582-611: 594.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*.