

The Society of the Spectacle

In the dystopian societies of Orwell and Huxley, a crucial role is played by the technologies of **mass media** which have come to occupy a dominant space in the contemporary world. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the mass media are primarily an instrument of fear, a dispenser of propaganda and a tool of surveillance. *BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU*, say the omnipresent wall posters; the citizens must watch Big Brother and listen attentively to his propaganda machine. Huxley's *Brave New World*, on the other hand, presents us with a softer version of totalitarian order, based on the systems of organisation that were already coming to influence Western democracies, where the compliance of citizens to the ruling order is ensured by keeping them constantly distracted from social reality by means of sophisticated but meaningless entertainment. In their different ways both writers anticipate what French theorist **Guy Debord** would call 'the society of the spectacle', the title of a key essay written in 1967.

For Debord the society of the spectacle delineates a world in which we are completely alienated from ourselves, our labour and our desires and in our relations with others because in our minds reality has been completely replaced by its '**spectacular**' representation. We have now reached the stage where we are no longer able to perceive or experience things or people except through the language and categories given to us by the media which also have the function of telling us what we should or should not desire or be interested in at any given time. As Debord writes: "The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears'."

This formulation is a modern version of the words of Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty. That is all/ye know on earth and all ye need to know". For Debord, TV is the **modern world's Grecian urn**. Only what appears in spectacular form seems worthy of our attention. We can identify and sympathise with the sufferings of a TV character or even of a real person who appears in a documentary more than we can with those of real people. The only things capable of arousing our curiosity are those which are promoted or endorsed by the media, advertising and fashion industries. So, being constantly filled with needs, desires and beliefs that are not our own, we are no longer able to understand either who we are or what we really need or want. The alienation of the spectator, to the profit of the contemplated object, is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognising himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. Since the publication of Debord's essay, the technologies and power of the mass media have grown exponentially as have their concentration in the hands of a few powerful multinational corporations.

Moreover, the alienation Debord speaks of has reached the point at which it is no longer even necessary to have 'stars' to dream about or identify with. As the success of webcams and 'reality TV' shows like *Big Brother* demonstrates, we can equally be persuaded to watch the formlessness, emptiness and boredom of our real lives, providing it appears on a screen.

TIME IN MOTION

- 1 **Your turn!** What do you think of reality TV shows in which the spectator becomes the spectacle, and the fans become the stars? What do they say about contemporary society?