A Debordian Analysis of Facebook.

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Abstract

Facebook, the second largest social network on the Web with around 6 million members, is one of the fastest-growing and best-known sites on the Internet today. With the U.S. now accounting for only about a third of all Facebook users, we are starting to see a gradual shift away from its original demographic of college-age users. Very surprisingly, indeed, in the past months Facebook has been literally invaded by Italians, Which is the reason for this huge success of Facebook? One of the reasons is that clearly young Italians' discontent (as it is young people who mainly inhabit Facebook) and frustration with the current political situation and with their political representatives is finding in the Web a channel to let youth voice be heard. Facebook is also a media for channelling Italians' emotions, self representation, and symbolic environment at the same speed of their telefonino (mobile phone): indeed Facebook not only provides multimedia content and a high interactive environment, but it also provides personalised features. In other words, it is my personal content which is available on the web and it make me feel as if I was in the centre of a virtually worldly networked stage. We will argue Facebook is realizing what Guy Debord calls "the invasive forces of the 'spectacle' - "a social relation between people that is mediated by images": Facebook is seen as an alternative tool able to amplify an individual's alienation and narcissism, which, are a consequence of the mercantile form of social organization which has reached its climax in capitalism. Under Marxist theory, Facebook does not appear what Jaron Lanier claims to be collaborative communities. We finally argue that Facebook is not (as Tapscott and Williams claim) a promising example of a new shift from capitalism to a new form of economy based on openness, peering, sharing and global action – which they called Wikinomics; but rather new disguised forms of advanced capitalism aimed at eroding space to more challenging modes of Internet collectivism.

The Facebook Phenomenon

Facebook, the second largest social network on the Web with around 6 million members, is one of the fastest-growing and best-known sites on the Internet today. With the U.S. now accounting for only about a third of all Facebook users, we are starting to see a gradual shift away from its original demographic of college-age users (18-25): 46% of all users are 18-25 years old, down from 51% in late May 2008. The number of users in the 18-25 segment is growing, but at a slower pace than the other age groups. Among the major Facebook age segments, the fastest growing are teens (13-17) and young (26-34) to middle-age (35-44) professionals, with the growth in teens driven by non-U.S. markets. Also it is worth noting the strong growth in the much smaller 45-54 and 55-59 age groups (Ben Lorica, 2008). Looking closely at the top 30 countries, a few European countries have grown more than ten percent over the last four weeks

2008 (France, Spain, Germany, Italy), with France having the most number of users (approx. 2.5 million). Italy, in particular, is a country which still has one of the lowest rates of Internet use in Europe (35.6% according to a 2006 Istat report); but, very surprisingly, in the past months Facebook has been literally invaded by Italians, quickly helping Italy reach first place for the greatest (and fastest) exponential growth in adoption of Facebook by a country (see box below). Italians seem to have a natural affinity with Facebook – they are not only joining in huge numbers (Facebook is now the fifth most popular site in Italy) but they seem to have seamlessly integrated this technology in their everyday life: Facebook is fast becoming the most used accessory in their beloved "telefonino" (mobile phone) (see Di Gennaro, 2008).

Month	FB Subscribers #
January 08	216000
February	238000
March	265000
April	305000
May	355000
June	465000
July	573000
August	802420
September	1294000
October	2215000
November	4152380
December	5587006
January 09	6481280
Number of Italian subscribers to Facebook 2008-2009. Source: http://manyeyes.alphaworks.ibm.com/manyeyes/datasets/facebook-users-in-italy-january-2009/versions/1	

Which is the reason for this huge success of Facebook? One of the reasons is that clearly young Italians' discontent (as it is young people who mainly inhabit Facebook) and frustration with the current political situation and with their political representatives[4] is finding in the Web a channel to let "youth" voice be heard. In fact not only Italian media are not giving enough voice to the younger Italian generations, but also Italy is actually experiencing a strong lack of generational replacement in its leadership (it is worth notice that the average age of Italian leadership is

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around 70 years old) (See II Rapporto LUISS, 2008). The main channel of information in Italy is still the obsolete TV broadcasting: Italians indeed like to get multimedia information (mainly images) and almost stream chats, rather than word-content information, even thought the kind of information supplied is not networked, but broadcasted: few or no interaction is allowed. On the contrary, Facebook not only provides multimedia content and a high interactive environment, but it also provides personalised features.

The most active people on Facebook are those already having a public exposure such as politicians, writers (journalists and novelists), and TV entertainers or actors not fully engaged with TV shows. I have used Facebook from October 2008 to April 2009. I have observed people interacting with me, and have taken notes about their behaviour by means of ethnographic methods. In particular, I have observed behaviour of the following very active persons in my friends list[5]:
- a successful writer (SW)[6];
- a major of an important Italian city (IM);
- a journalist (IJ);
- a popular TV entertainer and actor (EA).

All of them had a quite huge number of personal photos on display in their Facebook personal webpage and a large cohort of friends (more than 1000). Their behaviour on Facebook is quite different. SW for example exhibited a quite narcissistic behaviour based on continuous search of agreement and acknowledgment of his popularity writing down on his personal page first parts of his novels which "the audience" had to finish according to the actual novel. Usually the audience would not only complete the requesting piece but also added their (favourable, of course!) impressions and feelings. Major IM on the contrary, used to display his personal everyday life to public exposure through several everyday pictures made using his mobile phone and tagging persons pictured in his photo[7]; he not only used to tagged people but also used Facebook along the lines of a poll, asking to citizens their opinions about a regulation proposal, an issue about his community or a recently issued law to test trends among his citizens. An actor and TV entertainer EA raised questions among his friends on political views and opinions about recently happened problems or facts. His strategy is that of proposing his own opinion or idea to her FB-friends and waiting for a response in order to be sure such idea is widely agreed. While her ideas were challenged by other FB-friends, even through rational arguments (or also by ideological arguments), TG used many deceptive techniques (such as *Ad Hominem*, *Red Herring*, *Asking for Support*, and *Appeal to Ridicule*) to induce her opponent into error, or to disappear from such discussion, or to change his mind. Journalist IJ, used Facebook for self-advertisement and for discussing about topics related to his generation (the '68, recent political mysteries, the Italian Red Brigates). All these people, with similar political viewpoints (they are not supporter of Italian Centre-Right Parties) started very harsh debates (with a huge number of discussants that often lasted long time) over Facebook.

Therefore, Facebook appears to be a new kind of arena, apparently open for debate but led by new technological opinion-makers (people who are already opinion makers because they have

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[5] My friends list was populated by 18 person by 14.04.2009

[6] I will only use their initials for protecting their privacy.

[7] In Italy and EU legislation is still matter of debate whether tagging is a breaking of personal privacy.

had popular prominence through other media) who uses Facebook to amplify their narcissism and which relegates other less popular individuals to gregarious or even passive audience roles (a Facebook user even said they use to watch Facebook). No famous people only way to be the centre of attention is by means of their personal content available in their Facebook profiles. In particular photo sharing between friends and virtual gifts sharing let them feel in the centre of their symbolic, networked, virtual stage. Facebook, in this very sense, realizes what Guy Debord calls "the invasive forces of the 'spectacle' - "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1992): or the last ultra-capitalistic Trojan horse (that is using an obsolete cold war logic) to stop the new peer-sharing economy envisaged by open source methodologies. In the following paragraph I will first explain some concepts useful to understand the framework in which the concept of "spectacle" has originated before trying to parallel the old logic of "spectacle" with a new, more refined logic hidden into the networked technologies.

Marxist Theorists

Guy Debord is one of the most known French situationist Marxists. We will analyse the Facebook phenomenon in Italy with the help of his fundamental concepts regarding *the society of spectacle*. However in the next paragraphs we will first analyse some fundamental tools from authors who started their analysis of contemporary culture by means of Marxism: such as the Frankfurt School (notably H. Marcuse), Postmodernism school (such ad Lyotard and Baudrillard) and in the last paragraph we will deal with Debord's Situationism. Debord's theory cannot indeed be fully understood if not placed within the context of Marxist theories. Marxist theories too will offer in turn some useful tools to better understand computer mediated communications (CMCs), and in particular Facebook.

H. Marcuse: A general criticism of technology

H. Marcuse was a very trendy philosopher at the beginning of the 70s: his works such as *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) were largely read and discussed, and were the conceptual framework for '68 students' movements. According to Marcuse the typical modern trait of contemporary civilizations is the way in which it is able to suffocate those needs which should be freed and at the same time it breads and forgives rich societies destructive power and their repressive function: both in west than in east countries. In a similar way, technology would have helped to reduce timework (that is – in Marxian terms – alienation) but actually (1) it has increased an individual's production potentiality and (2) at the same time technology has created a diffusive, high level system of control over humans in which is no possible real criticism neither opposition to central power. Such control is not violent and dictatorial (such as in Nazism and Fascism), but "a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom [which is prevailing] in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress." (Marcuse, 1964, ch.1) .
Very importantly, Marcuse continues:

> "In the face of the totalitarian features of this society, the traditional notion of the «neutrality» of technology can no longer be maintained. Technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of techniques. The way in which a society organizes the life of its members involves an initial *choice* between historical alternatives which are determined by the inherited level of the material and intellectual culture. The

choice itself results from the play of the dominant interests. It *anticipates* specific modes of transforming and utilizing man and nature and rejects other modes. It is one "project" of realization among others. But once the project has become operative in the basic institutions and relations, it tends to become exclusive, and to determine the development of the society as a whole." (Marcuse, Id., Intro).

In other words, no opposition is possible within this kind of society; but whenever such an opposition would arise, it would be de facto outside any symbolic universe accessible to humankind and therefore rejected as alien.

"As the great words of freedom and fulfillment [orig.] are pronounced by campaigning leaders and politicians, on the screens and radios and stages, they turn into meaningless sounds which obtain meaning only in the context of propaganda, business, discipline, and relaxation. This assimilation of the ideal with reality testifies to the extent to which the ideal has been surpassed. It is brought down from the sublimated realm of the soul or the spirit or the inner man, and translated into operational terms and problems. Here are the progressive elements of mass culture. The perversion is indicative of the fact that advanced industrial society is confronted with the possibility of a materialization of ideals. The capabilities of this society are progressively reducing the sublimated realm in which the condition of man was represented, idealized, and indicted. Higher culture becomes part of the material culture. In this transformation, it loses the greater part of its truth" (Marcuse, op.cit. §3)

J.F. Lyotard: Information as commodity, Information and exchange value

In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), the French philosopher and literary theorist, J.-F. Lyotard – who coined the word *postmodern* - claimed that

"These technological transformations can be expected to have a considerable impact on knowledge. Its (orig.) two principal functions – research and the transmission of acquired learning-are already feeling the effect, or will in the future. With respect to the first function, genetics provides an example that is accessible to the layman: it owes its theoretical paradigm to cybernetics" (Lyotard. Id., ch.1).

In particular, digital technological transformations will lead to a change into the humankind cognitive sphere. That is the first important step in order to producing and re-producing the reality. Everything which is not translatable through the logic of the digital will be marginalised and time by time expunged from the social body. According to Lyotard, indeed,

"The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information. We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of its eventual results being translatable into computer language. The "producers" and users of knowledge

must now, and will have to, possess the means of translating into these languages whatever they want to invent or learn. Research on translating machines is already well advanced. Along with the hegemony of computers comes a certain logic, and therefore a certain set of prescriptions determining which statements are accepted as "knowledge" statements" (cit.).

In other words, the very nature of digital technologies is based on the logic of simulation (or *as-if model*) which becomes fundamental for digital rationality. No analogical information is provided into the digital, therefore, digital information will always be operationalised under a "simulation" or "self reproduced symbolic universe" form. No other levels of realities are accessible outside this paradigm. Lyotard concludes

> "We may thus expect a thorough exteriorisation of knowledge with respect to the "knower," at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process. The old principle that the acquisition of knowledge is indissociable from the training (*Bildung*) of minds, or even of individuals, is becoming obsolete and will become ever more so. The relationships of the suppliers and users of knowledge to the knowledge they supply and use is now tending, and will increasingly tend, to assume the form already taken by the relationship of commodity producers and consumers to the commodities they produce and consume – that is, the form of value. Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange."

J. Baudrillard: Simulacra and Consuption

The concept of simulation (that is charged with symbolic meanings, the very fabric of reality) is now embedded in a digital technology context. Simulation, in such technological context, becomes a simulacrum. According to J. Baudrillard, modern society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that the human experience is of a simulation of reality rather than reality itself. The simulacra that Baudrillard refers to are signs of culture and media that create the perceived reality; Baudrillard indeed believes that society has become so reliant on simulacra that it has lost contact with the real world on which the simulacra are based:

> "An alter-action which tends to diminish with increasing information and which will, in the end, be eliminated by absolute information; the world's equivalence to the world – the final illusion, that of a world which is perfect, fully realized, fully effectuated, a world which is consummated and has attained the height of existence and reality, and also the furthermost extent of its possibilities. It is God (this we cannot hide) who stands at the end of this process of increasing information and complexication, of verification of the world in real time. It is God who presides over this dissolution of the world as illusion and its resurrection as simulacrum and virtual reality, at the end of a process of extenuation of all its possibilites by the real" (J. Baudrillard, 1996, p.8).

In other words, media and digital technology, because they are based on imaginary (which is not just a .jpg photo format, but mainly a symbolic universe conveying a "picture" of reality and/or even an individual's reality), have absorbed the actual reality. Baudrillard continues,

> "So long as an illusion is not recognized as an error, its value is exactly equivalent to that of reality. But once the illusion is recognized as such, it no longer is one. It is therefore the concept of illusion itself, and this alone, that is the illusion"(Baudrillard, op.cit., p. 51).

In this way digital technologies take reality's place creating a destabilizing short-circuit. A simulacrum is therefore what is generated by such short-circuit: something which is not constructed according to truth and falsity. Digital technology itself is indeed creating reality. Baudrillard (1985) theorizes the lack of distinctions between reality and simulacra originates in several phenomenon; in particular, in contemporary media including television, film, and the Internet, which are responsible for blurring the line between goods that are needed and goods for which a need is created by commercial images. On the contrary, we will see in the last paragraph that simulacra, finally, is annihilated in the knowledge economics productive lifecycle as commodity and therefore itself become a consumable good.

Debord: The Society of Spectacle

Debord, as well as Baudrillard, starts his analysis of immaterial societies with Marx's analysis of fetishism of goods. According to Marx a good is a mix between use value and exchange value. While the first is the material consumption of a good, the latter is a good circulation power. In advanced capitalistic societies use value is less important than its exchange value. Any object counts not as such but as a good. A good symbolic characteristic takes advantage, so to speak, over its material characteristics and the very nature of production is changing. Therefore the concept of good becomes even more an abstraction. Marx attributes goods a fetish characteristic or even a magical one: similarly to religion in which gods socially created become others than humanity, become aliens and even human-independents.

Debord agrees with Marcuse (see above), that technology rationality is, so to speak, holding as hostages both communist and capitalistic political-social models; in this way technological rationality homogenizes everything it is able to enclose. According to Debord pre-digital analysis such homogenization takes the form of a spectacle:

> "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… The society based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is *fundamentally spectaclist* [in text]. In the spectacle — the visual reflection of the ruling economic order — goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself … The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point that it becomes images." (Debord, cit., §1)

For Debord, spectacle is not what we see through media (that is what in English we mean with "show"), he says:

"The spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images." (op.cit.)

There are three kinds of "spectacles": *concentrated spectacle*, that

> "belongs essentially to bureaucratic capitalism, even though it may be imported as a technique of state power in mixed backward economies or, at certain moments of crisis, in advanced capitalism. In fact, bureaucratic property itself is concentrated in such a way that the individual bureaucrat relates to the ownership of the global economy only through an intermediary, the bureaucratic community, and only as a member of this community. Moreover, the production of commodities less developed in bureaucratic capitalism, also takes on a concentrated form: the commodity the bureaucracy holds on to is the totality of social labor, and what it sells back to society is wholesale survival. (cit., ch.1 §64).

The *diffused spectacle*, on the other hand,

> "accompanies the abundance of commodities, the undisturbed development of modern capitalism. Here every individual commodity is justified in the name of the grandeur of the production of the totality of objects of which the spectacle is an apologetic catalogue. Irreconcilable claims crowd the stage of the affluent economy's unified spectacle; different star-commodities simultaneously support contradictory projects for provisioning society: the spectacle of automobiles demands a perfect transport network which destroys old cities, while the spectacle of the city itself requires museum-areas." (cit., Ch.1 §65).

A third form of spectacle, Debord concludes, has been established, through the rational combination of these two, and based on a victory of the form that had showed itself stronger: the diffuse. This is the *integrated spectacular,* which has since tended to impose itself globally. The integrated spectacular

> "shows itself to be simultaneously concentrated and diffuse, and ever since the fruitful union of the two has learned to employ both these qualities on a grander scale. Their former mode of application has changed considerably. As regards the concentrated side, the controlling center has now become occult, never to be occupied by a known leader, or clear ideology. And on the diffuse side, the spectacular influence has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the totality of socially produced behavior and objects. For the final sense of the integrated spectacular is that it integrates itself into reality to the same extent that it speaks of it, and that it reconstructs it as it speaks. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacular as something alien" (Debord, 1976, § IV).

Conclusions
Facebook is an alternative tool able to amplify an individual's alienation and narcissism, which, according to Debord are more than an emotive description or an aspect of individual psychology: rather, they are a consequence of the mercantile form of social organization which has reached

its climax in capitalism. The development of modern society in which authentic social life has finally been replaced with its whole representation: "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord, id.); life is actually meaningful life if and only if it is described and shared on Facebook. Debord argues that the history of social life can be understood as "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing" (Debord, id.) which is finally concluded with Facebook, in which private and public spheres are finally melted together. This condition, according to Debord, is the "historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Debord, id.). In a similar way, Jaron Lanier claims that similar collaborative communities such as Flickr, MySpace, and Wikipedia represent a new form of "online collectivism" that is suffocating authentic voices in a muddled and anonymous tide of mass mediocrity (quoted in Tapscott and Williams, 2008). In these cases such as Facebook and MySpace we cannot follow Howard Rheingold when he claims that "Collectivism involves coercion and centralized control; collective action involves freely chosen self-selection and distributed coordination." (Quoted in Tapscott and Williams, 2008)

The Italian example shows how Facebook (but also MySpace, and even YouTube) cannot be compared – as Tapscott and Williams (op. cit.) claim – to other open-source, collaborative and participative endeavors that Tapscott and Williams call "Wikinomics". They rather are – according to my Debordian analysis – the latter development of advanced capitalism, leading to individuals' further alienation and narcissism by means of social relations between people mediated by (self-created) symbolic imaginary. It is not enough that Facebook is opening its platform to users and external developers when most people are, as in Italy, still using Facebook just to join networks, and to connect and interact with other people or adding friends and send them messages, and update their personal profile to notify friends about themselves. Directly parallel to Marx's notion of commodity - for Debord (op.cit.) – The *spectacle* (and in our particular case Facebook) making relations among people seem like relations among images/symbols (and vice versa). The spectacle is the form taken by society once the instruments of knowledge production have become wholly commoditized and exposed to free circulation. To sum up, much cases provided by Tapscott and Williams (op. cit.) (such as Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, Second Life and similar) are not promising any new shift from capitalism to a new form of economy based on openness, peering, sharing and global action – what they called Wikinomics; but they must carefully be distinguished from genuine new forms of peer economy such as Open Source or Wikipedia. Facebook and similar are rather new disguised forms of advanced capitalism that is trying to colonize the Internet by reducing the networking model to a more controllable (for old advanced capitalism) broadcasting model. Facebook model can be labeled, using Debord's terminology as *distributed spectacle* where the spectacle function is shared or distributed amongst those with the ability and experience necessary to ensure the function is carried out to the benefit of the most traditional organisations.

Such a distributed view of spectacle seems to be an attempt to colonize the web using an hidden form of *integrated spectacle* (based on the broadcasting model), into an intricate and complex web of spectacles (working on the network model), which appear to be an *integrated spectacle* in which simulacra of individuals become consumable goods into a capitalistic logic rather than being a new way for collaborative efforts.

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