

Seduced by the Image of Reality

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When I would look through magazines as a small child, I used to think that there must be a magical world somewhere where everything looked—and was—perfect. I could see pictures from it in those pages, the smoky air of dimly-lit rooms heavy with drama as the young models lounged in designer fashions. That is where excitement and adventure is to be found, I thought, in the world where every room is flawlessly decorated and every woman's wardrobe is picked and matched with daring and finesse. I resolved to have an adventurous life of my own, and began looking for those rooms and women right away. And though I've discovered since then that romance and excitement rarely come hand in hand with the images of them that are presented to us—usually the opposite is true, that adventure is to be found precisely where there is no time or energy for keeping up appearances—I still catch myself sometimes thinking that everything would be perfect if only I lived in that picturesque log cabin with matching rugs.

Whatever each of us may be looking for, we all tend to pursue our desires by pursuing images: symbols of the things we desire. We buy leather jackets when we want rebellion and danger. We purchase fast cars not for the sake of driving fast, but to recapture our lost youth. When we want world revolution, we buy political pamphlets and bumper stickers. Somehow we assume that having all the right accessories will get us the perfect lives. And when we construct our lives, we often do it according to an image, a pattern that has been laid out for us: hippie, businessman, housewife, punk.

Why do we think so much about images today, rather than concentrating on reality, on our lives and emotions themselves? One of the reasons images have attained so much significance in this society is that, unlike activities, images are easy to sell. Advertising and marketing, which are designed to invest products with a symbolic value that will attract consumers, have transformed our culture. Corporations have been spreading propaganda designed to make us believe in the magic powers of their commodities for generations now: deodorant offers popularity, soda offers youth and energy, jeans offer sex appeal. At our jobs, we exchange our time, energy, and creativity for the ability to buy these symbols—and we keep buying them, for of course no quantity of cigarettes can really give anyone sophistication. Rather than satisfying our needs, these products multiply them: for in order to get them, we end up selling parts of our lives away. We keep going back, not knowing any other way, hoping that the new product (self-help books, punk rock records, that vacation cabin with matching rugs) will be the one that will fix everything.

We are easily persuaded to chase these images because it is simply easier to change the scenery around you than it is to change your own life. How much less trouble, how much less risky it would be if you could make your life perfect just by collecting all the right accessories! No participation necessary. The image comes to embody all the things you desire, and you spend all your time and energy trying to get the details right (the bohemian tries to find the perfect black beret and the right poetry readings to attend—the frat boy has to be seen with the right friends, at the right parties, drinking the right beers and wearing the right informal dress shirts) rather than pursuing the desires themselves—for of course it's easier to identify yourself with a prefabricated image than to identify exactly what you want in life. But if you really want adventure, an Australian hunting jacket won't suffice, and if you want real romance, dinner and a movie with the most popular girl at your school might not be enough.

Fascinated as we are by images, our values have come to revolve around a world we can never actually experience. There's no way into the pages of the magazine, there's no way to be the archetypal punk or the perfect executive. We're "trapped" out here in the real world, forever.

And yet we keep looking for life in pictures, in fashions, in spectacles of all kinds, anything that we can collect or watch—instead of doing.

WE LOOK FOR LIFE IN THE IMAGE OF LIFE

Watching from the Sidelines

The curious thing about a spectacle is how it immobilizes the spectators: just like the image, it centers their attention, their values, and ultimately their lives around something outside of themselves. It keeps them occupied without making them active, it keeps them feeling involved without giving them control. You can probably think of a thousand different examples of this: television programs, action movies, magazines that give updates on the lives of celebrities and superstars, spectator sports, representative “democracy,” the Catholic church.

A spectacle also isolates the people whose attention it commands. Many of us know more about the fictitious characters of popular sitcoms than we know about the lives and loves of our neighbors—for even when we talk to them, it is about television shows, the news, and the weather; thus the very experiences and information that we share in common as spectators of the mass-media serve to separate us from one another. It is the same at a big football game: everybody watching from the bleachers is a nobody, regardless of who they are. They may be sitting next to each other, but all eyes are focused on the field. If they speak to each other, it is almost never about each other, but about the game that is being played before them. And although football fans cannot participate in the events of the game they are watching, or exert any real influence over them, they attach the utmost importance to these events and associate their own needs and desires with their outcome in a most unusual way. Rather than concentrating their attention on things that have a real bearing on their desires, they reconstruct their desires to revolve around the things they pay attention to. Their language even conflates the achievements of the team they identify themselves with with their own actions: “we scored a goal!” “we won!” shout the fans from their seats and sofas.

This stands in stark contrast to the way people speak about the things that go on in our own cities and communities. “They’re building a new highway,” we say about the new changes in our neighborhood. “What will they think of next?” we say about the latest advances in scientific technology. Our language reveals that we think of ourselves as spectators in our own societies. But it’s not “They,” the mysterious Other People, who have made the world the way it is—it is we, humanity ourselves. No small team of scientists, city planners, and rich bureaucrats could have done all the working and inventing and organizing that it has taken for us to transform this planet; it has taken and still takes all of us, working together, to do this. We are the ones doing it, every day. And yet most of us seem to feel that we can have more control over football games than we can over our cities, our jobs, even our own lives.

We might have more success in our pursuit of happiness if we start trying to really participate. Rather than trying to fit images, we can seek exciting and rewarding experiences; for happiness does not come from what you have or how you appear, but from what you do and how you feel. And instead of accepting the role of passive spectator to sports, society, and life, it is up to each of us to figure out how to play an active and significant part in creating the worlds around us and within us. Perhaps one day we can build a new society in which we can all be involved

together in the decisions that affect the lives we lead; then we will be able to truly choose our own destinies, instead of feeling helpless and left out.

What's the point of doing anything if nobody's watching?

We all want to be famous, to be seen, frozen, preserved in the media, because we've come to trust what is seen more than what is actually lived. Somehow we've gotten everything backwards and images seem more real to us than experiences. To know that we really exist, that we really matter, we have to see ghosts of ourselves preserved in photographs, on television shows and videotapes, in the public eye.

And when you go on vacation, what do you see? Scores of tourists with video cameras screwed to their faces, as if they're trying to suck all of the real world into the two-dimensional world of images, spending their "time off" seeing the world through a tiny glass lens. Sure, turning everything that you could experience with all five senses into recorded information that you can only observe from a distance, detached, offers us the illusion of having control over our lives: we can rewind and replay them, over and over, until everything looks ridiculous. But what kind of life is that?

"What's the point of watching anything if nobody's doing?"

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