

The Criticism of the Spectacle in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Crack-up

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Abstract: *The Crack-up* is a record of Fitzgerald's insights and critiques of life experiences late in his writing career. By documenting different landscapes in American society, it exposes the money-worship, consumerism, materialism, and blind admiration for celebrity in American society during the Jazz Age, which was so prevalent that people became spiritually empty and anxious, even to the point of confusion and disillusionment. This paper aims to explore the typical societal spectacles in *The Crack-up* through Guy Debord's theory—the society of the spectacle and analyze its causes and consequences. Thus, it exposes a cycle of “materialism beginning- consumerism boosting materialism- social pressure stimulating anxiety - treating material things more cynically.

1. Introduction

1.1 About *The Crack-up*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's anthology, *The Crack-Up*, published in 1936, is a collection of personal essays that offer an introspective exploration of the author's struggles with identity, success, love, and the changing cultural landscape of the early 20th century. The title itself, *The Crack-Up*, encapsulates the disintegration of Fitzgerald's self and the disillusionment he experienced during a tumultuous period in his life.

The essays in *The Crack-Up* hold significant historical and cultural relevance, capturing the spirit of an era characterized by rapid social and cultural change. The 1920s, known as the Jazz Age, was a time of excess, optimism, and societal transformation. However, the subsequent Great Depression in the 1930s brought about a stark contrast, exposing the fragility and disillusionment underlying the seemingly glamorous facade of the previous decade [1]. Fitzgerald's personal experiences during this period significantly influenced the essays in *The Crack-Up*. Facing personal turmoil, financial difficulties, and the decline of his literary reputation, he candidly explores his flaws, failures, and moments of despair. Through his introspective writings, Fitzgerald grapples with the disintegration of traditional values, the elusive pursuit of the American Dream, and the profound impact of societal pressures on the individual.

This anthology provides readers with an intimate glimpse into Fitzgerald's struggles and the pressures he faced as a writer and as a person. It offers a searing critique of the cultural and societal forces that shaped his generation. By examining *The Crack-Up* through the lens of Guy Debord's

theory of the spectacle, it leads to the manifestation of societal spectacle in Fitzgerald's writings and the profound consequences of living in a materialistic and image-driven culture.

1.2 The Theory of the Spectacle

Guy Debord's theory of the Society of the Spectacle, presented in his seminal work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), critically analyzes contemporary society and its dominant mode of social organization. Debord argues that modern capitalist societies have undergone a profound transformation, where images and representations have increasingly mediated social relationships and lived experiences [2]. The spectacle, according to Debord, is not merely a collection of passive images but a social relationship mediated by these images. It commodifies human experiences, reducing them to consumable and superficial forms. In the society of the spectacle, individuals are alienated from authentic lived experiences, immersed in a world of illusions and mediated representations. Debord identifies the spectacle as a mechanism of social control and domination, where the ruling class exercises power through the production and dissemination of images and the manipulation of desires [3].

Guy Debord proposes the society of the spectacle to explain the relationship between people and society. Based on the logic that when society holds too many products produced in the assembly line, the consumption cannot fully cover the production. Thus, there creates a surplus in the industry [4]. When capitalists ponder the profits, they tend to rule out more ways to prompt their commodity by advertisement or other methods. Images always accompany advertising, the prelude of spectacle—the final abstract collection of images appearing in production and society. Debord regards the essence of spectacle as the latest form of the development of contemporary capitalism. It is the representation of social existence. People lose the requirement of reality due to their obsession with spectacles set by capitalism.

1.3 The Relation between Spectacles and *The Crack-up*

The Crack-Up provides a vivid portrayal of American society from the 1920s to the 1930s, a period commonly referred to as the Jazz Age, during which individuals were heavily influenced by various spectacles fabricated by capitalists. In comparison to Fitzgerald's fictional works, *The Crack-Up* represents his attitude toward American society more directly and cynically. The anthology exposes the demoralization of New York City through different societal spectacles. Within the spectacle's production mode, ideological power emerges, and individuals become engrossed in vanity fairs and the cult of celebrity. Consumerism proliferates, and Fitzgerald himself was once caught up in this trend. However, as his career progressed, he developed a profound understanding of the illusory nature of the American Dream and the hidden traps it conceals. *The Crack-Up* serves as Fitzgerald's critical response to these societal spectacles. In this paper, we will analyze Fitzgerald's anthology through the lens of Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, examining how societal spectacles manifest in the author's writings.

2. Faddish of Wealth and Status Worship

2.1 Depiction of Spectacles Relating to Wealth and Status

One salient theme in F. Scott Fitzgerald's anthology, *The Crack-Up*, is the relentless pursuit of wealth and social status, which aligns with the ethos of the Society of the Spectacle. Fitzgerald's essays shed light on how the spectacle influences and shapes these aspirations within a modern capitalist society.

Fitzgerald presents an unflinching portrayal of the extravagant lifestyles and parties of the wealthy elite during the Jazz Age. The author depicts a world where individuals strive to amass material wealth and engage in conspicuous consumption to attain social recognition and validation. Fitzgerald's vivid descriptions of opulent mansions, expensive cars, and lavish parties serve as spectacles. These grand displays become symbols of social status and success, perpetuating society's competitive pursuit of wealth. "Passing it Together" exemplifies the spectacle's impact on pursuing wealth and status. Fitzgerald recounts his personal experiences with the excesses of the Jazz Age, where material accumulation and the pursuit of financial success dominate social aspirations. The spectacle of wealth becomes entwined with notions of personal value and self-worth, leading individuals to prioritize the acquisition of material possessions over other aspects of life.

Fitzgerald's essays convey the spectacle's ability to transform the pursuit of wealth into a form of the spectacle itself. The opulent parties, extravagant lifestyles, and displays of luxury serve as visible symbols of social status. Individuals within the spectacle-driven society engage in conspicuous consumption, perpetuating a cycle of desire and emulation. The acquisition of material possessions becomes a means of self-expression and validation, reinforcing the spectacle's influence on individuals' aspirations.

Drawing on Guy Debord's theory, the anthology sheds light on how the spectacle permeates modern capitalist societies, shaping individuals' aspirations and behaviors. The spectacles cast a critical reflection on the all-encompassing desire for financial success and societal recognition. Fitzgerald exposes the spectacle's influence on individuals' relentless pursuit of wealth, which becomes intertwined with their sense of self-worth and social standing. Within the anthology, Fitzgerald provides rich narratives highlighting the consequences of the spectacle's dominance. He portrays characters who sacrifice personal well-being, happiness, and authenticity in their quest for wealth and social status in "Ring." Through introspective introspection, Fitzgerald presents a critique of the emptiness and disillusionment that often accompany the pursuit of material wealth.

2.2 Formation of the Spectacles

Wealth is the pursuit of every capitalist for their inherited and inborn trait of pursuing their interests [3]. During the Jazz Age, people had just overcome the panic in wars, and society welcomed a new trend of "laissez-faire," either in the societal atmosphere or in economic policies. Dispelling farewell to wars and realizing the limited one's life could be, more and more youngsters would rather be racketeers and speculators to accumulate more wealth regardless of moral requirements—as fortune can directly bring them entertainment in real life. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age," Fitzgerald pointed out that "It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all [5]." This was a common situation then. For one thing, people were stimulated to accumulate fortunes. For another, the capitalists, or, more specifically, the monopolists, instigated people to consume, carouse, and extravagantly squander their fortune under the façade of seizing every minute to enjoy—as nobody knows what will happen tomorrow [6]. To bid boldly and to squander boldly was the creed and was made as the fetter and spectacle by the monopolists.

Following the trend and becoming profiteers, many people succeeded quickly but perished quickly as well. As they funder the fortune they get and due to a lack of educated knowledge, they need more experience to make bold investments or manage their assets. Bankruptcy was as easy as drinking water. They were capitalized by the phantom of opulent parties and had little awareness of the risks. Fitzgerald went rival tremendously and lost his popularity very quickly. The entertainment he enjoyed, infamy he suffered until he died. The good-looking and prosperous orgies were just foams, and the fistfuls of cash incessantly went into the pockets of the monopolists who initiated the parties to paralyze people in the era.

2.3 Ramifications of the Materialistic Spectacles

The consequences of the spectacle's influence on the pursuit of wealth and status in *The Crack-Up* are multifaceted [7]. Fitzgerald exposes the alienation and disconnection that arise from the relentless pursuit of material success. The characters in his essays often find themselves isolated, lacking genuine human connections and meaningful relationships. The spectacle's emphasis on external markers of success erodes the fabric of authentic social interactions, resulting in loneliness and disillusionment [8].

Moreover, Fitzgerald examines the psychological effects of the spectacle's emphasis on wealth and social status. He delves into the emotional toll of constantly striving for societal recognition, highlighting the anxieties, pressures, and inner conflicts faced by individuals within this framework. Fitzgerald's introspection reveals the toll that the pursuit of wealth and status can have on one's well-being, leading to emotional distress and personal fragmentation. Debord's theory of the spectacle provides a lens through which to understand these dynamics. The spectacle, as Debord argues, transforms social relations into a spectacle, where appearances and images dominate over authentic experiences. The pursuit of wealth and social status becomes a central focus, overshadowing deeper human connections and personal fulfillment.

Those who Fitzgerald narrated and recorded (including himself), influenced by the spectacle's allure, become prisoners of their desires and aspirations. Their constant pursuit of material wealth and social standing serves as a testament to the power and allure of the spectacle in shaping their lives. As Debord argues, the spectacle manipulates desires and commodifies experiences, reducing them to consumable and superficial forms. This commodification of human experiences within the spectacle not only perpetuates a culture of materialism but also distorts the perception of what it means to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life.

The depiction of the faddish pursuit of wealth and status in Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* illuminates the far-reaching implications of materialistic spectacles within society. Through his introspective essays, Fitzgerald reveals the consequences of this relentless quest, including alienation, disconnection, and emotional distress. Drawing upon Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, the essays provide insights into the dynamics at play [9]. The portrayal serves as a cautionary reminder, prompting readers to critically examine societal values and priorities. By emphasizing the toll of materialistic pursuits and the erosion of authentic human connections, Fitzgerald invites individuals to reflect on their own aspirations and redefine what truly constitutes a fulfilling life. *The Crack-Up* stands as a poignant reminder that genuine fulfillment lies beyond the superficialities of wealth and status, urging individuals to seek meaningful relationships and a more profound sense of purpose.

3. Culture of Celebrity and Commodification

3.1 Depiction of Spectacles Relating to Celebrity Culture and Commodification of Individuals

The culture of celebrity and the commodification of individuals are explored extensively, offering a critical examination of their allure and consequences. Fitzgerald vividly portrays spectacles related to celebrity culture, revealing society's fascination with fame and the idealized image of success perpetuated by the spectacle. Through his characters and personal experiences, he challenges the notion that fame equates to true worth, exposing the superficiality and artificiality that often accompany celebrity culture. In "Early Success," Fitzgerald depicted how people in his era grew famous and suddenly fell down to earth because of the demagoguery and hype through the media. Some of his friends even committed suicide for not accepting the huge gap between loss and success. Fitzgerald himself even faced different castigations from his early friends like Hemingway and Dos Passos, who criticized his works on *Esquire* as "shamelessness of defeat [7][10]." That is why

Fitzgerald generated that it was an age of miracles, an age of art, an age of excess, and an age of satire [5].

3.2 Formation of the Spectacles

The formation of spectacles related to celebrity culture and the commodification of individuals involves various factors intricately intertwined. Fitzgerald delves into these factors, shedding light on the interplay between media, consumerism, and societal demands in shaping and perpetuating these spectacles.

Though Hemingway and Dos proclaimed their dissatisfaction towards Fitzgerald out of the position as Fitzgerald's old fellows, desiring better works from the one who is the author of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was defamed as many readers referred to their comments to purchase books [11]. People follow movie stars to live their life dissolutely and hinge their beliefs and taste on any celebrity in a field. Everything can be measured quantitatively and thus has its visible value—the price tag. As for media and advertisements are both products during production and commerce; the media naturally present things from their value so that they give people a clear notice of how one thing weighs and is worth. Media plays a central role in constructing and disseminating the spectacle of celebrity culture. Fitzgerald examines the power of the press and the emergence of tabloid journalism, which thrive on sensationalism, gossip, and scandal. By providing constant coverage of celebrities' lives and subjecting them to relentless scrutiny, the media fuels the public's insatiable appetite for escapism and vicarious living. The author highlights how personal narratives are commodified, transformed into marketable products for public consumption [11].

Consumerism also contributes significantly to the formation of these spectacles. Fitzgerald portrays a society driven by the pursuit of material wealth and social status, where individuals define their worth through conspicuous consumption. The spectacle intertwines with consumer culture, creating an illusion that the acquisition of material possessions and social recognition leads to fulfillment and happiness [4]. This perpetuates a cycle wherein individuals willingly participate in their own commodification, striving to attain a celebrity-like status. Furthermore, societal demands and expectations play a crucial role in the formation of these spectacles. Fitzgerald explores how societal values and norms shape the idealized image of success [1], fostering a desire for recognition and validation. The pressure to conform to these standards, combined with the fear of being left behind, propels individuals to pursue fame and public recognition, thus fueling the spectacle further.

3.3 Ramifications of the Commodified Spectacles

The commodification of individuals within the spectacle has profound ramifications on both individuals and society as a whole. Fitzgerald delves into these consequences, revealing the superficiality, alienation, and loss of authenticity accompanying the commodified spectacles. One significant ramification is the erosion of genuine human connections and authentic social interactions. Within the spectacle, external markers of success take precedence over intrinsic human worth, leading to a culture of surface-level relationships. Individuals are valued primarily for their image and status, hindering the formation of meaningful connections based on shared values and genuine intimacy. The commodification of individuals takes a toll on personal well-being and mental health. Fitzgerald delves into the psychological effects of constantly striving for societal recognition and validation. The relentless pursuit of fame and social status becomes all-consuming, resulting in emotional distress, self-doubt, and personal fragmentation. Individuals find themselves trapped in a cycle of seeking external validation, often at the expense of their own happiness and inner fulfillment.

4. Pressure of Alienation and Disillusionment

4.1 Depiction of Spectacles Relating to Alienation and Disillusionment

Within F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*, spectacles relating to alienation and disillusionment permeate the narrative. Fitzgerald skillfully portrays the pressures and consequences of these spectacles, exploring the profound sense of disconnection and disillusionment experienced by individuals in a society driven by materialism and the pursuit of success.

Through vivid descriptions and introspective accounts, Fitzgerald exposes the alienation that arises from the relentless pursuit of material wealth and social status. His essays depict characters who find themselves isolated, lacking genuine human connections and meaningful relationships. The spectacle's emphasis on external markers of success erodes the fabric of authentic social interactions, resulting in a sense of loneliness and disillusionment. By illuminating the profound emotional and psychological toll of this pursuit, Fitzgerald presents a poignant critique of a society driven by spectacle-induced alienation.

4.2 Formation of the Spectacles

The formation of spectacles related to alienation and disillusionment is a complex process influenced by various societal factors. Fitzgerald delves into the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the creation and perpetuation of these spectacles, shedding light on the interplay between societal values, cultural norms, and individual aspirations.

One factor contributing to the formation of these spectacles is the societal pressure to conform to predefined notions of success and happiness. Fitzgerald explores how individuals, driven by societal expectations, adopt a facade of achievement and happiness while struggling with internal disillusionment. The spectacle exacerbates this pressure by presenting an idealized image of success that is often unattainable and inherently isolating [12]. Another factor is the influence of cultural norms that prioritize materialistic pursuits over deeper human connections. Fitzgerald depicts a society where pursuing wealth and social status precedes genuine relationships and personal fulfillment. The spectacle glorifies the acquisition of material possessions and societal recognition, creating a culture of anxiety and disillusionment for those who are unable to meet these expectations.

4.3 Ramifications of the Anxious Spectacles

The anxious spectacles of alienation and disillusionment profoundly impact individuals and society. Fitzgerald delves into these consequences, exposing the detrimental effects on mental well-being, social fabric, and the pursuit of genuine happiness.

One significant ramification is the erosion of individuals' sense of self and identity. The spectacle's relentless focus on external markers of success and validation leads individuals to define their worth based on societal standards rather than intrinsic value. This disconnection from one's true self engenders a profound sense of alienation and inner emptiness. Additionally, the anxious spectacles perpetuate a culture of anxiety and constant comparison. Individuals constantly measure themselves against societal ideals, leading to feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and an unending pursuit of unattainable standards. This perpetuates a cycle of discontentment and disillusionment, where personal fulfillment is sacrificed to pursue an elusive and shallow version of success.

Fitzgerald's exploration of the ramifications of these spectacles underscores the urgent need for reevaluating societal values and priorities. By exposing the pressures of alienation and disillusionment, he invites readers to reflect on the consequences of a society driven by spectacle-induced anxieties. In doing so, Fitzgerald offers a sobering critique and implores individuals to seek

genuine connections, personal authenticity, and a redefined notion of success beyond materialistic pursuits [13].

Overall, Fitzgerald's portrayal and analysis of spectacles relating to alienation and disillusionment in "The Crack-Up" provide profound insights into the detrimental effects of societal pressures. By depicting the formation and ramifications of these spectacles, he prompts readers to critically reflect on their participation in a culture that perpetuates alienation and disillusionment, urging a shift towards a more authentic and fulfilling existence [14].

5. Conclusion

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's anthology, *The Crack-Up*, the author provides a searing critique of the spectacle and its influence on American society during the Jazz Age. Through reflective essays, Fitzgerald explores the relentless pursuit of wealth, the culture of celebrity, the commodification of individuals, and the anxiety amidst society. Drawing upon Guy Debord's theory of the spectacle, the anthology exposes the consequences of living in a materialistic and spectacle-driven culture. It reveals the emptiness, disillusionment, and loss of authenticity that often accompany pursuing wealth and status. Fitzgerald's writings serve as a cautionary reminder, urging individuals to reflect on their aspirations and redefine what constitutes a fulfilling life beyond the superficialities of societal expectations.

The worship of money and status makes people more easily confused by celebrities, and under the guidance of celebrities, people, in turn, fall into countless consumption traps. In constant consumption, people constantly want to satisfy their material desires. People are used to measuring the value of things with clear and definite figures, commodifying everything, and even people themselves become commodities, thus neglecting the unquantifiable spiritual world and moral values [15]. The general public could not grasp wealth for long and fell into endless emptiness after money was squandered, at first with anxiety and finally with disillusionment and despair. In such a mood, people's slavery to money becomes deeper and deeper.

Money is the starting point of people's tendency to profit, and celebrity and commerce magnify and even exaggerate its value. People fall into the trap of anxiety and even become desperate, but still greedily submit to materialism in the trap weaved by different spectacles. The social of the spectacles exploits human nature, causing such a tragic cycle that constitutes the theme of *The Crack-up*. Such tragedies were common in the 1920s and 1930s and are not even outdated in the present day. Fitzgerald inspected the deception behind the American dream, groveled into it, and recorded the experience to warn and to ask for help with sobriety and pain.

Considering the limit, this paper must have many shortages. For instance, the employment of the theory is not deft and accurate enough. Also, rarely do people combine the theory with literary works. The bold act in this paper might not be explicit, but it is out of sincerity and tenuous work. In the future, it is expected that more and more people will realize the relatively less famous work by Fitzgerald and attach more interesting and profound theories to analyze and criticize it.

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