*The Spectacle of Disintegration* by McKenzie Wark seeks to explain the Situationist International (SI) movement that occurred between 1957 and 1972. Although history states that the movement is over, he argues that is it present in everyday modern life- people just do not realize it. The situationists wanted to uncover the world for what it really is, why it is so, what it should be, and how it should be changed. They centered around this concept known as the spectacle, which can be described as the mass media of images that surrounds the modern person as well as some of his predecessors.

The spectacle has changed over time, but overall, it has remained the same. The concentrated spectacle was prominent toward the first half of the twentieth century, and in some places, such as North Korea, it still exists today. It focused around centralized states such as Germany and the Soviet Union during these times, and how citizens were forced to obey what they were told. In this case, the media were the communist leaders, and the people were forced to believe that what they were told was true. Later, it became the diffuse spectacle- rather than leaders telling the people what to do, the mass media produced a set of prominent images that society convinced itself it needed to follow. Needs became synonymous with desire, and the world became false- what the people believed was necessary was only necessary because the spectacle told them that it was. Today, the spectacle is disintegrated- not centralized, but in our everyday lives. Advertisements, television shows, clothing- it is all part of the spectacle. Once we see it, we absorb it into our lives.

Wark’s purpose in writing this novel was to show how the spectacle persists even four decades after the movement “officially” ended. He uses revolutions in France during the 19th century and in Thailand in 2010 as an example (Wark 27). In both cases, the peasantry staged a revolution against the leadership. Mass media was used to spark these revolutions- in 1848 Paris, through artwork, and in 2010 Bangkok, through radio stations.

This book requires at least some knowledge of the SI movement before reading it. While Wark explains the basics of it in the early chapters, it helped me to do some research on the movement as well as the spectacle itself before moving further into the book. If you understand the main concepts as you are reading it, you are better able to connect his examples to the goals of the movement, which explains why he uses the examples in the first place. However, if you were to pick up the book with no prior knowledge of the movement (keep in mind, the book is a sequel), it would be quite challenging to comprehend the material as well as the overall point of the novel. The issue I have with his examples is that he does not ease the reader into them- he throws a random situation at you that seems completely random, but only after finishing the explanation of that situation does he relate it to the SI movement and participatory culture.

Despite some of the book’s odd examples, it allowed me to look at participatory culture through a movement that aimed to change the world. This is related to our final project in the sense that our goal in doing research and creating a website is to spark a sense of alarm in the public sphere that there is a problem with the world that needs to be fixed. After all, activism only follows exposure.

Perhaps the most important thing I learned from reading this book was that I am participating in participatory culture much more often than I thought- not through Facebook, as Standage says, but through the spectacle. When society is exposed to a new object, it is led to believe that the object is desirable, is good, and is necessary. For example, every time I use or walk around with a smartphone, I am conveying the message that smartphones are necessary for survival. In previous times, as recent as ten years ago, people survived without these devices. My ultimate question for Wark is: what would he like me to do about this? Does he believe that if one person puts down their smartphone, others will follow until the point where society reverts back to a point where this technological need will not be necessary anymore? More importantly, how would society be any better without this technology? Has anything created by the spectacle been harmful to society?