

Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle

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Razón y Palabra, 39 (2004)

During the past decades, the culture industries have multiplied media spectacles in novel spaces and sites, and spectacle itself is becoming one of the organizing principles of the economy, polity, society, and everyday life. The Internet-based economy deploys spectacle as a means of promotion, reproduction, and the circulation and selling of commodities. Media culture itself proliferates ever more technologically sophisticated spectacles to seize audiences and increase their power and profit. The forms of entertainment permeate news and information, and a tabloidized infotainment culture is increasingly popular. New multimedia that synthesize forms of radio, film, TV news and entertainment, and the mushrooming domain of cyberspace, become spectacles of technoculture, generating expanding sites of information and entertainment, while intensifying the spectacle-form of media culture.

Political and social life is also shaped more and more by media spectacle. Social and political conflicts are increasingly played out on the screens of media culture, which display spectacles like sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and the explosive violence of everyday life. Media culture not only takes up expanding moments of everyday life, but also provides ever more material for fantasy, dreaming, modeling thought and behavior, and identities.

Of course, there have been spectacles since premodern times. Classical Greece had its Olympics, thespian and poetry festivals, its public rhetorical battles, and bloody and violent wars. Ancient Rome had its orgies, its public offerings of bread and circuses, its titanic political battles, and the spectacle of Empire with parades and monuments for triumphant Caesars and their armies, extravaganzas put on display in the 2000 film *Gladiator*. And as Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga (1986 and 1997) reminds us, medieval life too had its important moments of display and spectacle.

In the early modern period, Machiavelli advised his modern prince of the productive use of spectacle for government and social control, and the emperors and kings of the modern states cultivated spectacles as part of their rituals of governance and power. Popular entertainment long had its roots in spectacle, while war, religion, sports, and other domains of public life were fertile fields for the propagation of spectacle for centuries. Yet with the development of new multimedia and information technologies, technospectacles have been decisively shaping the contours and trajectories of contemporary societies and cultures, at

least in the advanced capitalist countries, while media spectacle also becomes a defining feature of globalization.

In this study, I will provide an overview of the dissemination of media spectacle throughout the major domains of the economy, polity, society, culture and everyday life in the contemporary era and indicate the theoretical approach that I deploy. This requires a brief presentation of the influential analysis of spectacle by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, and how I build upon this approach.

Guy Debord and the Society of the Spectacle

The concept of the "society of the spectacle" developed by French theorist Guy Debord and his comrades in the Situationist International has had major impact on a variety of contemporary theories of society and culture [1]. For Debord, spectacle "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (Debord 1967: #10). Debord's conception, first developed in the 1960s, continues to circulate through the Internet and other academic and subcultural sites today. It describes a media and consumer society, organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events.

Building on this concept, I argue that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture which embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to enculturate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas, sports events, political happenings, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call news -- a phenomena that itself has been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the media sensationalism, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, and the new phenomenon of Terror War. Thus, while Debord presents a rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle, I engage specific examples of media spectacle and how they are produced, constructed, circulated, and function in the present era.

As we enter a new millennium, the media are becoming more technologically dazzling and are playing an ever-escalating role in everyday life. Under the influence of a multimedia image culture, seductive spectacles fascinate the denizens of the media and consumer society and involve them in the semiotics of a new world of entertainment, information, and consumption, which deeply influence thought and action. In Debord's words: "When the real world changes into simple images, simple images become real beings and effective motivations of a hypnotic behavior. The spectacle as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch

was for other epochs (#18). According to Debord, sight, "the most abstract, the most mystified sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society" (ibid).

Experience and everyday life are thus shaped and mediated by the spectacles of media culture and the consumer society. For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" (#44) which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life -- recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice. Debord's concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation and passivity, for in submissively consuming spectacles, one is estranged from actively producing one's life. Capitalist society separates workers from the products of their labor, art from life, and consumption from human needs and self-directing activity, as individuals inertly observe the spectacles of social life from within the privacy of their homes (#25 and #26). The Situationist project, by contrast, involved an overcoming of all forms of separation, in which individuals would directly produce their own life and modes of self-activity and collective practice.

The correlative to the spectacle for Debord is thus the spectator, the reactive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the cultivation of marketable difference. The concept of the spectacle therefore involves a distinction between passivity and activity and consumption and production, condemning lifeless consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination. The spectacular society spreads its wares mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture. This structural shift to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life. Parallel to the Frankfurt School conception of a "totally administered" or "one-dimensional" society (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Marcuse 1964), Debord states that "The spectacle is the moment when the consumption has attained the total occupation of social life" (#42). Here exploitation is raised to a psychological level; basic physical privation is augmented by "enriched privation" of pseudo-needs; alienation is generalized, made comfortable, and alienated consumption becomes "a duty supplementary to alienated production" (#42).

Spectacle Economy

Since Debord's theorization of the society of the spectacle in the 1960s and 1970s, spectacle culture has expanded in every area of life. In the culture of the spectacle, commercial enterprises have to be entertaining to prosper and as Michael J. Wolf (1999) argues, in an "entertainment economy," business and fun

fuse, so that the E-factor is becoming major aspect of business. [2] Via the "entertainmentization" of the economy, television, film, theme parks, video games, casinos, and so forth become major sectors of the national economy. In the U.S., the entertainment industry is now a \$480 billion industry, and consumers spend more on having fun than on clothes or health care (Wolf 1999: 4) [3].

In a competitive business world, the "fun factor" can give one business the edge over another. Hence, corporations seek to be more entertaining in their commercials, their business environment, their commercial spaces, and their web sites. Budweiser ads, for instance, feature talking frogs who tell us nothing about the beer, but who catch the viewers' attention, while Taco Bell deploys a talking dog, and Pepsi uses *Star Wars* characters. Buying, shopping, and dining out are coded as an "experience," as businesses adopt a theme-park style. Places like the Hard Rock Cafe and the House of Blues are not renowned for their food, after all; people go there for the ambience, to buy clothing, and to view music and media memorabilia. It is no longer good enough just to have a web site, it has to be an interactive spectacle, featuring not only products to buy, but music and videos to download, games to play, prizes to win, travel information, and "links to other cool sites."

To succeed in the ultracompetitive global marketplace, corporations need to circulate their image and brand name so business and advertising combine in the promotion of corporations as media spectacles. Endless promotion circulates the McDonald's Golden Arches, Nike's Swoosh, or the logos of Apple, Intel, or Microsoft. In the brand wars between commodities, corporations need to make their logos or "trademarks" a familiar signpost in contemporary culture. Corporations place their logos on their products, in ads, in the spaces of everyday life, and in the midst of media spectacles like important sports events, TV shows, movie product placement, and wherever they can catch consumer eyeballs, to impress their brand name on a potential buyer. Consequently, advertising, marketing, public relations and promotion are an essential part of commodity spectacle in the global marketplace.

Celebrity too is manufactured and managed in the world of media spectacle. Celebrities are the icons of media culture, the gods and goddesses of everyday life. To become a celebrity requires recognition as a star player in the field of media spectacle, be it sports, entertainment, or politics. Celebrities have their handlers and image managers to make sure that their celebrities continue to be seen and positively perceived by publics. Just as with corporate brand names, celebrities become brands to sell their Madonna, Michael Jordan, Tom Cruise, or Jennifer Lopez product and image. In a media culture, however, celebrities are always prey to scandal and thus must have at their disposal an entire public relations apparatus to manage their spectacle fortunes, to make sure their clients not only maintain high visibility but keep projecting a positive image. Of course,

within limits, "bad" and transgressions can also sell and so media spectacle always contains celebrity dramas that attract public attention and can even define an entire period, as when the O.J. Simpson murder trials and Bill Clinton sex scandals dominated the media in the mid and late 1990s.

The Culture of the Spectacle

Entertainment has always been a prime field of the spectacle, but in today's infotainment society, entertainment and spectacle have entered into the domains of the economy, politics, society, and everyday life in important new ways. Building on the tradition of spectacle, contemporary forms of entertainment from television to the stage are incorporating spectacle culture into their enterprises, transforming film, television, music, drama, and other domains of culture, as well as producing spectacular new forms of culture such as cyberspace, multimedia, and virtual reality.

For Neil Gabler, in an era of media spectacle, life itself is becoming like a movie and we create our own lives as a genre like film, or television, in which we become "at once performance artists in and audiences for a grand, ongoing show" (1998: 4). On Gabler's view, we star in our own "lifies," making our lives into entertainment acted out for audiences of our peers, following the scripts of media culture, adopting its role models and fashion types, its style and look. Seeing our lives in cinematic terms, entertainment becomes for Gabler "arguably the most pervasive, powerful and ineluctable force of our time--a force so overwhelming that it has metastasized into life" to such an extent that it is impossible to distinguish between the two (1998: 9). As Gabler sees it, Ralph Lauren is our fashion expert; Martha Stewart designs our sets; Jane Fonda models our shaping of our bodies; and Oprah Winfrey advises us on our personal problems. [4]

Media spectacle is indeed a culture of celebrity who provide dominant role models and icons of fashion, look, and personality. In the world of spectacle, celebrity encompasses every major social domain from entertainment to politics to sports to business. An ever-expanding public relations industry hypes certain figures, elevating them to celebrity status, and protects their positive image in the never-ending image wars and dangers that a celebrity will fall prey to the machinations of negative-image and thus lose celebrity status, and/or become figures of scandal and approbation, as has indeed happened to some of the players and institutions that I examine in *Media Spectacle* (Kellner 2003).

Indeed, sports celebrities have often been caught in gambling or crime scandals including the infamous 1919 Chicago so-called Black Sock baseball team accused of fixing the World Series to superstars like baseball player Pete Rose and NBA icon Michael Jordan caught up in gambling scandals. In July 2003, Los Angeles Laker superstar Kobe Bryant, previously an icon of wholesomeness and virtue was accused of sexual abuse, a fate that many star athletes have brought

upon themselves. In a tabloid culture of the spectacle, its stars and icons are particularly subject to scrutiny and the publicity that their fame and salaries depend upon.

Sports has long been a domain of the spectacle with events like the Olympics, World Series, Super Bowl, World Soccer Cup, and NBA championships attracting massive audiences, while generating sky-high advertising rates. These cultural rituals celebrate society's deepest values (i.e. competition, winning, success, and money), and corporations are willing to pay top dollar to get their products associated with such events. Indeed, it appears that the logic of the commodity spectacle is inexorably permeating professional sports which can no longer be played without the accompaniment of cheerleaders, giant mascots who clown with players and spectators, and raffles, promotions, and contests that feature the products of various sponsors.

Sports stadiums themselves contain electronic reproduction of the action, as well as giant advertisements for various products that rotate for maximum saturation -- previewing environmental advertising in which entire urban sites are becoming scenes to boost consumption spectacles. Arenas, like the United Center in Chicago, America West Arena in Phoenix, on Enron Field in Houston are named after corporate sponsors. Of course, after major corporate scandals or collapse, like the Enron spectacle, the ballparks must be renamed!

The Texas Ranger Ballpark in Arlington, Texas supplements its sports arena with a shopping mall, office buildings, and a restaurant in which for a hefty price one can watch the athletic events while eating and drinking. [5] The architecture of the Texas Rangers stadium is an example of the implosion of sports and entertainment and postmodern spectacle. A man-made lake surrounds the stadium, the corridor inside is modeled after Chartres Cathedral, and the structure is made of local stone that provides the look of the Texas Capitol in Austin. Inside there are Texas longhorn cattle carvings, panels of Texas and baseball history, and other iconic signifiers of sports and Texas. The implosion of sports, entertainment, and local spectacle is now typical in sports palaces. Tropicana Field in Tampa Bay, Florida, for instance, "has a three-level mall that includes places where 'fans can get a trim at the barber shop, do their banking and then grab a cold one at the Budweiser brew pub, whose copper kettles rise three stories. There is even a climbing wall for kids and showroom space for car dealerships'" (Ritzer 1998: 229).

Film has long been a fertile field of the spectacle, with "Hollywood" connoting a world of glamour, publicity, fashion, and excess. Hollywood film has exhibited grand movie palaces, spectacular openings with searchlights and camera-popping paparazzi, glamorous Oscars, and stylish high-tech film. While epic spectacle became a dominant genre of Hollywood film from early versions of

The Ten Commandments through *Cleopatra* and *2001* in the 1960s, contemporary film has incorporated the mechanics of spectacle into its form, style, and special effects. Films are hyped into spectacle through advertising and trailers which are ever louder, more glitzy, and razzle-dazzle. Some of the most popular films of the late 1990s were spectacle films, including *Titanic*, *Star Wars -- Phantom Menace*, *Three Kings*, and *Austin Powers*, a spoof of spectacle, which became one of the most successful films of summer 1999. During Fall 1999, there was a cycle of spectacles, including *Topsy Turvy*, *Titus*, *Cradle Will Rock*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *The Insider*, and *Magnolia*, with the latter featuring the biblical spectacle of the raining of frogs in the San Fernando Valley, in an allegory of the decadence of the entertainment industry and deserved punishment for its excesses.

The 2000 Academy Awards were dominated by the spectacle *Gladiator*, a mediocre film whose garnishing of best picture award and best acting award for Russell Crowe demonstrates the extent to which the logic of the spectacle now dominates Hollywood film. Some of the most critically acclaimed and popular films of 2001 were also high-tech spectacle, such as *Moulin Rouge*, a film spectacle that itself is a delirious ode to spectacle, from cabaret and the brothel to can-can dancing, opera, musical comedy, dance, theater, popular music, and film. A postmodern pastiche of popular music styles and hits, the film used songs and music ranging from Madonna and the Beatles to Dolly Parton and Kiss.

Other 2001 film spectacles include *Pearl Harbor*, which re-enacts the Japanese attack on the U.S. that propelled the country to enter World War II, and that provided a ready metaphor for the September 11 terror attacks. Major 2001 film spectacles range from David Lynch's postmodern surrealism in *Mulholland Drive* to Steven Spielberg's blending of his typically sentimental spectacle of the family with the formalist rigor of Stanley Kubrick in *A.I.* And the popular 2001 military film *Black-Hawk Down* provided a spectacle of American military heroism which some critics believed sugar-coated the actual problems with the U.S. military intervention in Somalia, causing worries that a future U.S. adventure by the Bush administration and Pentagon would meet similar problems. There were reports, however, that in Somalian cinemas there were loud cheers as the Somalians in the film shot down the U.S. helicopter, and pursued and killed American soldiers, attesting to growing anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world against Bush administration policies.

In 2002-2003, a series of comic book hero spectacles were among the most popular films. *Spiderman* (2002) was one of the most popular films ever and has spawned planned sequels and played in a cycle of films presenting comic book heroes like *Hulk*, another of the *X-Men* series, and the comic book-like *Matrix Revisited* and *Terminator 3*. These films embody fantasies of attained spectacular powers that enable the protagonists to conquer enemies and prevail in hi-tech

environments. These cinematic spectacles are an expression of a culture that generates ever-more fantastic visions as technology and the society of the spectacle continues to evolve in novel and surprising, sometimes frightening, forms.

Television has been from its introduction in the 1940s a promoter of consumption spectacle, selling cars, fashion, home appliances, and other commodities along with consumer life-styles and values. It is also the home of sports spectacle like the Super Bowl or World Series, political spectacles like elections (or more recently, scandals), entertainment spectacle like the Oscars or Grammys, and its own events like breaking news or special events. Following the logic of spectacle entertainment, contemporary television exhibits more high-tech glitter, faster and glitzier editing, computer simulations, and with cable and satellite television, a fantastic array of every conceivable type of show and genre.

TV is today a medium of spectacular programs like *The X-Files* or *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, and spectacles of everyday life such as MTV's *The Real World* and *Road Rules*, or the globally popular *Survivor* and *Big Brother* series. In 2002-3, there was a proliferation of competitive reality shows in the U.S. involving sex, dating, and marriage including *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Cupid*. In these shows, men and women humiliate themselves, facing scorn and rejection, as they compete for the favors of sexual competitors and there few moments of media glory and reward.

Real life events, however, took over TV spectacle during 2000-2001 in, first, an intense battle for the White House in a dead-heat election, that arguably constitutes the greatest political crime and scandal in U.S. history (see Kellner 2001). After months of the Bush administration pushing the most hard-right political agenda in memory and then deadlocking as the Democrats took control of the Senate in a dramatic party re-affiliation of Vermont's Jim Jeffords, the world was treated to the most horrifying spectacle of the new millennium, the September 11 terror attacks and unfolding Terror War. These events promise an unending series of deadly spectacle for the foreseeable future (see Kellner, 2001).

Theater is a fertile field of the spectacle and contemporary theater has exploited its dramaturgical and musical past to create current attractions for large audiences. Plays like *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in da Funk*, *Smokey Joe's Cafe*, *Fosse*, *Swing!*, and *Contact* draw on the history of music spectacle, bringing some of the most spectacular moments of the traditions of jazz, funk, blues, swing, country, rock, and other forms of pop entertainment to contemporary thespian audiences. Many of the most popular plays of recent years on a global scale have been spectacles including *Les Misérables*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Rent*, *Ragtime*, *The Lion King*, *Mama Mia*, and *The Producers*, a stunningly successful musical spectacle that mocks the Nazis and show business. These theatrical spectacles are often a pastiche of previous literature, opera, film, or theater and reveal the lust

for participation in cultural extravaganzas of contemporary audiences for all types of culture.

Fashion is historically a central domain of the spectacle, and today producers and models, as well as the actual products of the industry, constitute an enticing sector of media culture. Fashion designers are celebrities, such as the late Gianni Versace, whose murder by an ex-gay lover in 1997 was a major spectacle of its era. Versace brought together the worlds of fashion, design, rock, entertainment, and royalty in his fashion shows and emporia. When Yves Saint-Laurent retired in 2002, there was a veritable media frenzy to celebrate his contributions to fashion, which included bringing in the aesthetic and images of modern art and catering to demands of contemporary liberated women as he developed new forms of style and couture.

In fashion today, inherently a consumer spectacle, laser-light shows, top rock and pop music performers, superstar models, and endless hype publicize each new season's offerings, generating highly elaborate and spectacular clothing displays. The consumption spectacle is fundamentally interconnected with fashion that demonstrates what is in and out, hot and cold, in the buzz world of style and vogue. The stars of the entertainment industry become fashion icons and models for imitation and emulation. In a postmodern image culture, style and look become increasingly important modes of identity and presentation of the self in everyday life, and the spectacles of media culture show and tell people how to appear and behave.

Bringing the spectacle into the world of high art, the Guggenheim Museum's Thomas Krens organized a retrospective on Giorgio Armani, the Italian fashion designer. Earlier, Krens produced a Guggenheim show exhibiting motorcycles and plans to open a Guggenheim gallery in the Venetian Resort Hotel Casino in Las Vegas with a seven-story Guggenheim art museum next to it. Not to be outdone, in October 2000, the Los Angeles County Art Museum opened its largest show in history, a megaspectacle "Made in California: Art, Image and identity, 1900-2000," featuring multimedia exhibitions of everything from canonical California painting and photography to Jefferson Airplane album covers, surf boards, and a 1998 *Playboy* magazine with "The Babes of Baywatch" on its cover. In 2001, the Los Angeles County Art Museum announced that it would become a major spectacle itself, provisionally accepting a design by Rem Koolhaas that would create a spectacular new architectural cover for the museum complex. As described by the *Los Angeles Times* architectural critic, the "design is a temple for a mobile, post-industrial age.... Capped by an organic, tent-like roof, its monumental form will serve as both a vibrant public forum and a spectacular place to view art" (Dec. 7, 2001: F1).

Contemporary architecture too is ruled by the logic of the spectacle and critics have noticed how art museums are coming to trump the art collection by making the building and setting more spectacular than the collections. [6] The Frank Gehry Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, the Richard Meier Getty Center in Los Angeles, the retrofitted power plant that became the Tate Modern in London, Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation building in Saint Louis, and Santiago Calatrava's addition to the Milwaukee Museum of Art all provide superspectacle environments to display their art works and museum fare. Major architectural projects for corporations and cities often provide postmodern spectacle whereby the glass and steel structures of high modernism are replaced by buildings and spaces adorned with signs of the consumer society and complex structures that attest to the growing power of commerce and technocapitalism.

Popular music too is colonized by the spectacle with music-video television (MTV) becoming a major purveyor of music, bringing spectacle into the core of musical production and distribution. Madonna and Michael Jackson would have never become global superstars of popular music without the spectacular production values of their music videos and concert extravaganzas. Both also performed their lives as media spectacle, generating maximum publicity and attention (not always positive!). Michael Jackson attracted attention in 2001 in a TV spectacle where he reportedly paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to digitally redo the concert footage he appeared in. Jackson had his images retooled so that he would be free of sweat and appear darker than the "real" image, in order to better blend in with his family members performing with him and to appear a cooler black to appeal to his fans. And one cannot fully grasp the Madonna phenomenon without analyzing her marketing and publicity strategies, her exploitation of spectacle, and her ability to make herself a celebrity spectacle of the highest order (Kellner, 1995).

In a similar fashion, younger female pop music stars and groups such as Mariah Carey, Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, or Destiny's Child also deploy the tools of the glamour industry and media spectacle to make themselves spectacular icons of fashion, beauty, style, and sexuality, as well as purveyors of music. Pop male singers like Ricky Martin could double as fashion models and male groups like 'N Sync use high-tech stage shows, music videos, and PR to sell their wares. Moreover, hip-hop culture has cultivated a whole range of spectacle, ranging from musical extravaganzas, to life-style cultivation, to real life crime wars among its stars.

Musical concert extravaganzas are more and more spectacular (and expensive!) and the Internet is providing the spectacle of free music and a new realm of sound through Napster and other technologies, although the state has been battling attempts at young people utilizing P2P (peer to peer) technologies to decommodify culture. Indeed, films, DVDs, sports events, and musical spectacles

having been circulating through the Internet in a gift economy that has generated the spectacle of the state attacking those who violate copyright laws that some claim to be outdated in the culture of high-tech spectacle.

Food too is becoming a spectacle in the consumer society with presentation as important in the better restaurants as taste and substance. Best-selling books like Isabel Allende's *Aphrodite* and Jeffrey Steingarten's *The Man Who Ate Everything* celebrate the conjunction of eroticism and culinary delight. Magazines like *Bon Appetite* and *Saveur* glorify the joys of good eating, and food sections of many magazines and newspapers are among the most popular parts. Films like *Babette's Feast*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Big Night*, and *Chocolate* fetishize food and eating, presenting food with the pornographic excess usually reserved for sex.

Eroticism has frequently permeated the spectacles of Western culture, and is prominently on display in Hollywood film, as well as popular forms such as burlesque, vaudeville, and pornography. Long a major component of advertising, eroticized sexuality has been used to sell every conceivable product. The spectacle of sex is also one of the staples of media culture, permeating all cultural forms and creating its own genres in pornography, one of the highest grossing domains of media spectacle. In the culture of the spectacle, sex becomes shockingly exotic and diverse, through the media of porno videos, DVDs, and Internet sites which make available everything from teen-animal sex to orgies of the most extravagant sort. Technologies of cultural reproduction such as home video recorders (VCRs) and computers bring sex more readily into the private recesses of the home. And today the sex spectacle attains more and more exotic forms with multimedia and multisensory sex, as envisaged in Huxley's *Brave New World*, on the horizon.[7]

The spectacle of video and computer games has been a major source of youth entertainment and industry profit. In 2001, the U.S. video game industry hit a record \$9 billion in sales and expects to do even better in the next couple of years (*Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 1, 2002: C1). For decades now, video and computer games have obsessed sectors of youth and provided skills needed for the high-tech *dot.com* economy, as well as fighting postmodern war. These games are highly competitive, violent, and provide allegories for life under corporate capitalism and Terror War militarism. In the game Pacman, as in the corporate jungle, it's eat or be eaten, just as in air and ground war games, it's kill or be killed. Grand Theft Auto 3 and State of Emergency were two of the most popular games in 2002, with the former involving high speed races through urban jungles and the latter involving political riots and state repression! While some women and game producers have tried to cultivate kinder, gentler, and more intelligent gaming, the best-selling corporate games are spectacles for predatory capitalism and macho militarism and not a more peaceful, playful, and cooperative world.

The terror spectacle of Fall 2001 revealed that familiar items of everyday life like planes or mail could be transformed into instruments of spectacular terror. The al Qaeda network hijacking of airplanes turned ordinary instruments of transportation into weapons as they crashed into the World Trade Center Towers and Pentagon on September 11. Mail became the delivery of disease, terror, and death, as the anthrax scare of Fall and Winter 2001 made ordinary letters threatening items. And rumors spread that the terror network was seeking instruments of mass destruction such as chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons to create spectacles of terror on a hitherto unforeseen scope.

The examples just provided suggest media spectacle is invading every field of experience from the economy, to culture and everyday life, to politics and war. Moreover, spectacle culture is moving into new domains of cyberspace that will help to generate future multimedia spectacle and networked infotainment societies. My studies of media spectacle strive to contribute to illuminating these developments and to developing a critical theory of the contemporary moment.

Debord and the Spectacle: A Critical Engagement

In using the concept of spectacle, I am obviously indebted to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and the ideas of the Situationist international, so acknowledging the debt, I might also say that there are three major differences between my engagement of the concept of the spectacle and Debord's model. First, while Debord develops a rather totalizing and monolithic concept of the society of the spectacle, I engage specific spectacles, like McDonald's and the commodity spectacle, the Clinton sex scandals and impeachment spectacle, or the *The X-Files* television spectacle.

I should also acknowledge the obvious point that I'm reading the production, text, and effects of various media spectacles from the standpoint of U.S. society, and from the perspective of trying to understand contemporary U.S. society and culture, and more broadly, globalization and global culture, whereas Debord is analyzing a specific stage of capitalist society, that of the media and consumer society organized around spectacle. Moreover, Debord exhibits a French radical intellectual and neo-Marxian perspective while I have specific class, race, gender, regional, and so on U.S. standpoints and deploy a multiperspectivist model, using Marxism, British cultural studies, French postmodern theory, and many other perspectives.

Secondly, my approach to these specific spectacles is interpretive and interrogatory. That is, I try to interrogate what major media spectacles tell us of contemporary U.S. and global society. For example, what McDonald's tells us about consumption and the consumer society, or globalization; what Michael Jordan and the Nike spectacle tells us about the sports spectacle and the intersection of sports,

entertainment, advertising, and commodification in contemporary societies; what the OJ Simpson affair tells us about race, class, celebrity, the media, sports, gender, the police and legal system and so on in the U.S. and what the obsessive focus on this event for months on end tells us about American media and consumer society. In my studies of media spectacle, I deploy cultural studies as diagnostic critique; reading and interpreting various spectacles to see what they tell us about the present age, whereas Debord is more interested in a critique of capitalism and revolutionary alternatives.

Thirdly, I analyze the contradictions and reversals of the spectacle, whereas Debord has a fairly triumphant notion of the society of the spectacle, although he and his comrades sketched out various models of opposition and struggle and in fact inspired in part the rather spectacular May '68 events in France.

For an example of the reversal of the spectacle, or at least its contradictions and contestation, take McDonald's. When I began my studies of media spectacle, McDonald's was a figure for a triumphant global capitalism. McDonald's was constantly expanding in the U.S. and globally; its profits were high; and it was taken as a paradigm of a successful American and then global capitalism. George Ritzer's book *The McDonaldization of Society* used McDonald's as a model to analyze contemporary production and consumption, while books like *Golden Arches East* valorized McDonald's as bringing modernity itself to vast sectors of the world like Russia and China and McDonald's was praised for its efficient production methods, its cleanliness and orderliness, and its bringing food value and fast, convenient food to the masses.

Suddenly, however, McDonald's became the poster corporation for protest in the anti-corporate globalization movement. The McDonald's corporation had sued some British Greenspace protestors who produced a pamphlet attacking McDonald's unhealthy food, its labor practices, its negative environmental impact, and called for protests and boycotts. McDonald's countered with a lawsuit and an anti-McDonald's campaign emerged with a Web-site McSpotlight that became the most accessed Web-site in history; global and local protests emerged; and whenever there was an anti-corporate globalization protest somewhere a McDonald's was trashed. Suddenly, therefore, McDonald's expansion was halted, profits were down almost everywhere for the first time, and new McDonald's were blocked by local protests. Moreover, in the U.S. and elsewhere, there were lawsuits for false advertising, for promoting addictive substances and junk food, and a lot of bad publicity and falling profits that continues to haunt McDonald's through the present.

Finally, I'm aware how Debord's conception of the society of the spectacle trumps my own analysis of the contradictions of the spectacle, their reversal and overturning. A Debordian could argue that despite the vicissitudes of the

McDonald's spectacle, the Nike spectacle that involved attack of their labor practices, and other contradictions and contestations of spectacles within contemporary capitalist societies that capitalism itself still exists more powerful than ever, that the media and consumer society continues to reproduce itself through spectacle, and that a market society thrives upon the vicissitudes of spectacle, and ups and downs of various corporations, personalities, and celebrities.

While this argument is hard to answer, in the face of the continued global hegemony of capital, I think it is useful to analyze the contradictions and contestations of media spectacle within specific societies and to counter the notion that political spectacles are all-powerful and overwhelming. For instance, I have a study in *Media Spectacle* of how the U.S. Republican Party attempted to create the spectacle of the Clinton sex scandals and the spectacle of impeachment backfired and Clinton survived the attempts of the Republicans to remove him from the presidency through negative media spectacle.

There are, I believe, several reasons why Clinton survived the spectacle of the sex scandal and impeachment. British cultural studies has long affirmed an active audience that isn't totally manipulated by the media and it appears that there is residual respect for the President, or was at the time, and that people didn't like, and resisted, the attacks on President Clinton and the exposure in the national media of his personal and private life. Also, there have been culture wars in the U.S. that had been going on since the 1960s and the Republican impeachment spectacle backfired as many saw it, correctly I think, as a rightwing attack to overthrow an elected president. Hence, when Republicans attacked Clinton, liberals and others saw it as an illicit attempt to use the media to overthrow an elected president and resisted the spectacle and came to Clinton's support.

In any case, the impeachment scandal backfired, proving, I would argue, that politics of the spectacle is unpredictable and that spectacles do not always succeed and manipulate the public and may backfire. While most of the examples I've given of media spectacle are U.S.-based, I'm interrogating the examples I know best, although most of these spectacles have global impact, and I would also note that the spectacle itself is becoming more and more global. For example, in summer 2003 the Harry Potter spectacle is an amazing global literary spectacle, with the bestselling books in history, a series of films, and Pottermania this summer that just keeps expanding.

Some years ago the Princess Diana spectacle was probably the most interrogated event within global cultural studies. And in summer 2003, the David Beckham spectacle is global as Beckham moves from Manchester United to Real Madrid; this summer there was a film, popular globally, *Bending for Beckham*; and there is the Beckham and Posh spectacle which combines media culture, fashion,

sports and the global spectacle. BBC America featured the Beckham saga for some days this summer, as did some U.S. television networks, and other networks throughout the world. And, in terms of global spectacle, more distressingly, there is the Al Qaeda global terrorism spectacle that is the topic of my most recent book *From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy*. [8]

Globalization, Technological Revolution, and the Restructuring of Capitalism

Behind the genesis and ascendancy of the expansion of media spectacle, the rise of megaspectacle, of interactive spectacles, and of the new virtual spectacle of cyberspace and an emerging VR are the twin phenomena of the global restructuring of capitalism and technological revolution with the explosion of new forms of media and communication technology, computer and information technology, and, on the horizon, biotechnology.

In earlier writings, I introduced a concept of technocapitalism to describe a configuration of capitalist society in which technical and scientific knowledge, computerization and automation of labor, and intelligent technology plays a role in the process of production analogous to the function of human labor power, mechanization of the labor process, and machines in an earlier era of capitalism, while generating new modes of societal organization, forms of culture and everyday life, and types of contestation and am now developing the concept to help theorize the new global economy, polity, and culture (Kellner 1989). It is now clear that we are in a new infotainment society, a globally networked economy, and a new Internet technoculture.

We are in a parallel situation, I would suggest, to the Frankfurt school in the 1930s which was forced to theorize the emergent configurations of economy, polity, society and culture brought about by the transition from market to state monopoly capitalism. In their now classical texts, they accordingly analyzed the novel forms of social and economic organization, technology, and culture; the rise of giant corporations and cartels and the capitalist state in "organized capitalism," in both its fascist or "democratic" state capitalist forms; and the culture industries and mass culture which served as new types of social control, novel forms of ideology and domination, and a potent configuration of culture and everyday life (Kellner 1989).

In terms of political economy, the emerging postindustrial form of technocapitalism is characterized by a decline of the state and increased power of the market, accompanied by the growing strength of globalized transnational corporations and governmental bodies and decreased force of the nation-state and its institutions. To paraphrase Max Horkheimer, whoever wants to talk about capitalism, must talk about globalization, and it is impossible to theorize globalization without talking about the restructuring of capitalism.

Globalization involves the flow of goods, information, culture and entertainment, people, and capital across a new networked economy, society, and culture (see the documentation in Castells 1996, 1997, and 1998 and Held, et al 1999). Like the new technologies, it is a complex phenomenon which involves positive and negative features, costs and benefits, an up and down side. Yet, like theories of new technologies, most theories of globalization are either primarily negative, seeing it as a disaster for the human species, or as positive, bringing new products, ideas, and wealth to a global arena. As with technology, I advocate development of a critical theory of globalization that would dialectically appraise its positive and negative features, its contradictions and ambiguities, that is sharply critical of its negative effects, skeptical of legitimating ideological discourse, but that also recognizes the centrality of the phenomenon in the present and that affirms and develops its positive features (such as the Internet, which, as I'll suggest below, makes possible a reconstruction of education and democratic technopolitics).

To conclude: we are emerging into a new culture of media spectacle that constitutes a novel configuration of economy, society, politics, and everyday life. It involves new cultural forms, social relations, and modes of experience. It is producing a new spectacle culture with its proliferating media spectacle, megaspectacles, and interactive spectacles. It is evident in the U.S. in the new millennium and may well constitute new forms of global culture. Critical social theory thus faces new challenges in theoretically mapping and analyzing these new forms of culture and society and the ways that they may contain new forms of domination and oppression as well as potential for democratization and social justice.[9]

Notes

[1] Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was published in translation in a pirate edition by Black and Red (Detroit) in 1970 and reprinted many times; another edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994. Thus, in the following discussion, I cite references to the numbered paragraphs of Debord's text to make it easier for those with different editions to follow my reading. The key texts of the Situationists and many interesting commentaries are found on various Web sites, producing a curious afterlife for Situationist ideas and practices. For further discussion of the Situationists, see Best and Kellner 1997, Chapter 3; see also the discussions of spectacle culture in Best and Kellner 2001, upon which I draw in these studies.

[2] Wolf's book is a detailed and useful celebration of the "entertainment economy," although he is a shill for the firms and tycoons that he works for and celebrates them in his book. Moreover, while entertainment is certainly an important component of the infotainment economy, it is an exaggeration to say that it drives it and is actually propelling it, as Wolf repeatedly claims. Wolf also downplays the negative aspects of the entertainment economy, such as growing consumer debt and the ups and downs of the infotainment stock market and vicissitudes of the global economy.

[3] Another source notes that "the average American household spent \$1,813 in 1997 on entertainment -- books, TV, movies, theater, toys -almost as much as the \$1,841 spent on health care per family, according to a survey by the US Labor Department." Moreover, "the price we pay to amuse ourselves has, in some cases, risen at a rate triple that of inflation over the past five years" (*USA Today*, April 2, 1999: E1). The NPD Group provided a survey that indicated that the amount of time spent on entertainment outside of the home -- such as going to the movies or a sport event -- was up 8% from the early to the late 1990s and the amount of time in home entertainment, such as watching television or surfing the Internet, went up 2%. Reports indicate that in a typical American household, people with broadband Internet connections spend 22% more time on all-electronic media and entertainment than the average household without broadband. See "Study: Broadband in homes changes media habits" (*PCWORLD.COM*, October 11, 2000).

[4] Gabler's book is a synthesis of Daniel Boorstin, Dwight Macdonald, Neil Postler, Marshall McLuhan, and other trendy theorists of media culture, but without the brilliance of a Baudrillard, the incisive criticism of an Adorno, or the understanding of the deeper utopian attraction of media culture of a Bloch or Jameson. Likewise, Gabler does not, a la cultural studies, engage the politics of representation, or its economics and political economy. He thus ignores mergers in the culture industries, new technologies, the restructuring of capitalism, globalization, and shifts in the economy that are driving the impetus toward entertainment. Gabler does get discuss how new technologies are creating new spheres of entertainment and forms of experience and in general describes rather than theorizes the trends he is engaging.

[5] The project was designed and sold to the public in part through the efforts of the son of a former President, George W. Bush. Young Bush was bailed out of heavy losses in the Texas oil industry in the 1980s by his father's friends and used his capital gains, gleaned from what some say as illicit insider trading, to purchase part-ownership of a baseball team to keep the wayward son out of trouble and to give him something to do. The soon-to-be Texas governor, and future President of the United States, sold the new stadium to local taxpayers, getting them to agree to a higher sales tax to build the stadium which would then become the property of Bush and his partners. This deal allowed Bush to generate a healthy profit when he sold his interest in the Texas Rangers franchise and to buy his Texas ranch, paid for by Texas tax-payers (for sources on the scandalous life of George W. Bush and his surprising success in politics, see Kellner 2001 and the further discussion of Bush Jr. in Chapter 6).

[6] See Nicholai Ouroussoff, "Art for Architecture's Sake," *Los Angeles Times* (March 31, 2002).

[7] There is little doubt but that the emergent technologies of virtual reality, holograms, and computer implants of sensory experience (if such exotica emerge) will be heavily invested in the reproduction of sex. In a webpost by Richard Johnson, "Virtual Sex is Here," (*www.ThePostion.com*, January 4, 2001), British Professor Kevin Warwick's latest experiment is described which involves implant of a computer chip that, if successful, will make possible the communication of a wide range of sensory experience and new types of

sexual stimulation. The 1995 film *Strange Days* portrayed a futuristic culture with addictive virtual reality devices (VR), in which spectators become hooked on videos of extreme sex and violence. *The 13th Floor* (1999) portrayed a VR gadget whereby players are transported to recreations of other times, places, and identities experiencing full bodily fears and pleasures.

[7] See Douglas Kellner, *From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003.

[8] For further analysis and engagement of these issues, see Best and Kellner forthcoming.