Media Spectacle

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Chapter One

Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle

As the human adventure enters a new millennium, media culture continues to be a central organizing force in the economy, politics, culture, and everyday life. Media culture drives the economy, generating ebbing and flowing corporate profits while disseminating the advertising and images of high-consumption life-styles that help reproduce the consumer society. Media culture also provides models for everyday life that replicate consumer ideals and personalities and sell consumers on commodity pleasures and solutions to their problems, new technologies, and novel forms of identity. As technocapitalism moves into a dazzling and seductive information/entertainment society, mergers between the media giants are proliferating, competition is intensifying, and the media generate spectacles to attract audiences to the programs and advertisements that fuel the mighty money machines. Yet the Terror Spectacle of September 11 and its aftermath unleashed war and destruction, creating multiplying crises in the global economy and growing insecurity in everyday life.[1]

In the past decades, spectacle culture has significantly evolved. Every form of culture and more and more spheres of social life are permeated by the logic of the spectacle. Movies are bigger and more spectacular than ever, with high-tech special effects expanding the range of cinematic spectacle. Television channels proliferate endlessly with all-day movies, news, sports, specialty niches, re-runs of the history of television, and whatever else can gain an audience. The rock spectacle reverberates through radio, television, CDs, computers networks, and extravagant concerts. Media culture excels in creating megaspectacles of sports events, political conflicts, entertainment, "breaking news" and media events, such as the O.J. Simpson trial, the Death of Princess Diana, or the sex or murder scandal of the moment. Megaspectacle comes as well to dominate party politics, as the political battles of the day, such as the Clinton sex scandals and impeachment, the 36 Day Battle for the White House after Election 2000, and the September 11 terrorist attacks and subsequent Terror War. These drama media passion plays define the politics of the time, and attract mass audiences to their programming, hour after hour, day after day.

The Internet in turn has generated a seductive cyberspace, producing novel forms of information, entertainment, and social interaction, while promoting a dot.com frenzied boom and bust that fuelled and then deflated the "new economy," producing a turbulent new form of creative destruction in the vicissitudes of global capitalism. Ever bigger and more encompassing corporate mergers suggest emergent synergies between the Internet and media culture, and thus the information and entertainment industries. These interactions of technology and capital are producing fecund forms of technocapitalism and a technoculture which promise that the new millennium will be as full of novelties, innovation, hype, instability, and predictability as the fin-de-millennium.

September 11 and the subsequent Terror War, however, intensified uncertainty and unpredictability, disclosed a new vulnerability of the most powerful Western societies, and showed how a set of well-orchestrated events could wreak havoc with the global economy and polity. These catastrophic events and their attendant instability and capriciousness assure a profitable futures market for investments in chaos and complexity theory, as well as arms and security industries. Yet it also appears that the "information society" is being put on hold in the interests of eradicating "evil" (i.e. terrorism) from the world. The new forms of war and politics suggest that perhaps there may even be a come-back for postmodern theory, which signify breaks and ruptures in history and far-reaching novelties in the economy, politics, society, culture and everyday life. There may also be a return to dialectical theory, as the interconnections between globalization, technological revolution, media spectacle, Terror War, and the adventures of cyberspace and hyperreality become clearer and evident in every sphere of existence from the dramas and banalities of everyday life to the survival of the human species and life on earth.

In the new millennium, media culture is more important than ever in serving as a force of socialization, providing models of masculinity and femininity, socially approved and disapproved behavior, style and fashion, and appropriate role models. The celebrities of media culture are the icons of the present age, the deities of an entertainment society in which money, looks, celebrity, and success are the ideals and goals of the dreaming billions who inhabit Planet Earth. As the human species prepares to embark on adventures into outer space, to explore inner space with the miracles of nanotechnology, and to remake the human species with biotechnology, possibilities emerge that the media, consumer, medical, and other technologies of the present age will propel the human species into a posthuman adventure that may even exhibit the spectacle of the end of humanity in an age of spiritualized and uncontrollable machines (or maybe not, see the discussion in Best and Kellner 2001).

Whatever the vicissitudes and adventures of the future, today, media culture continues to arbitrate social and political issues, deciding what is real, important, and vital. Especially spectacular events, such as the Gulf war, the 2000 Battle for the White House, or the September 11 terror attacks, bring TV day to a halt, with cable news channels suspending regular programming to cover the events of the minute. Sometimes megaspectacles like September 11 and Terror War take over TV day in its entirety and dominate news, information, advertising, and entertainment. At the same time that corporate control and relentless mergers reduce the number of information sources and put them under more rigid corporate control, Internet sites multiply information and disinformation, and provide an interactive sphere where netizens can discover novel opinions and facts and themselves participate in the great dialogue of the contemporary moment (whatever it may be).

Hence, one of the trends of media culture is to multiply 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. 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. Radio,

film, TV news and entertainment, an ever-mushrooming tabloid culture, and the proliferating domain of cyberspace become spectacles of technoculture, generating expanding sites of information and entertainment, while intensifying the spectacle-form of media culture.

Of course, there have been spectacles since premodern times. Classical Greece had its Olympics, thespian and poetry festivals, it public rhetorical battles, and dramatic 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. 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 technologies of media culture such as film, radio, television, the Internet, and evolving forms of multimedia, technospectacles have emerged which have been decisively shaping the contours and trajectories of contemporary societies and cultures, at least in the advanced capitalist countries during the past decades.

Guy Debord and the Society of the Spectacle

The concept of the "society of the spectacle" developed by French Situationist Guy Debord "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (Debord 1970: #10).[2] Debord's conception, first developed in the 1960s and continuing to circulate through the Internet and other sites today, alludes to a media and consumer society, organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles. 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 conflicts and 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.

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 drama, 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 mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society" (ibid).

Experience and everyday life are thus mediated by the spectacles of media culture. 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 praxis. The 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 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).

Since Debord's theorizations 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.[3] 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).[4]

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."

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.

Sports has long been a domain of the spectacle with events like the World Series, Superbowl, 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 consumption 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, or America West Arena in Phoenix, are named after corporate sponsors. 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. 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).

The architecture of the Texas Rangers stadium is an example of the implosion of sports

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and entertainment and postmodern spectacle. The stadium is surrounded by a man-made lake, the corridor inside is modeled after Chartes 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 always been a fertile field of the spectacle, with "Hollywood" connoting a world of glamour, hype, style, and excess. Hollywood film has exhibited grand movie palaces, spectacular openings with search-lights 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 are 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 Vanilla Sky, a postmodern remake of a 1997 Spanish film, put on display the spectacle of Tom Cruise and Penelope Cruz, involved in a real-life romance, in a story propelled by the spectacle of the total reconstruction of the human being through biotechnology and technoscience.

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 middle-class values. It is also the home of sports spectacle like the Superbowl or World Series, political spectacles like elections (or more recently, scandals), entertainment spectacle like the Oscars or Grammies, and its own spectacles 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 series 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.

Real life events, however, took over TV spectacle in 2000-2001 for a spectacular battle for the White House in a dead-heat election, that arguably constitutes the great political crime and scandal in U.S. history (see Kellner 2001). After months of the Bush administration pushing the most hardright 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 which promises an unending series of deadly spectacle for the foreseeable future.

Theater has long been a 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 theatrical audiences. Many of the most popular plays of recent years on a global scale have been spectacles including Les Miserables, 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 of all types of culture.

Fashion has long been a fertile field of the spectacle, with the late Gianni Versace, whose murder by an ex-gay lover in 1997 was a major spectacle of its era, bringing together the worlds of fashion, design, rock, entertainment, and royalty in his fashion shows and emporia. In fashion, 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 intrinsically 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 famous 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).

Popular music too is colonized by the spectacle with music-video television becoming a dominant 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 so he would be free of sweat and appear darker that 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. And 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 brought

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

Sex has also long permeated the spectacles of Western culture, prominently on display in Hollywood film, as well as popular forms such as burlesque, vaudeville, and pornography. Long a major component of advertising, sex 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 and computers bring sex more readily into the private recesses of the home and the sex spectacle attains more and more extravagant forms with multimedia and multisensory sex, as envisaged in Huxley's <u>Brave New World</u>, on the horizon.[5]

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 (<u>Los Angeles Times</u>, Jan. 1, 2001: 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. As in the game Pacman or the corporate jungle, its eat or be eaten, just as in air and ground war games, its kill or be killed. 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 proliferated 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 which will help to generate future multimedia spectacle and networked infotainment societies. My studies of media spectacle will strive to contribute to illuminating these developments and to developing a critical theory of the contemporary moment. These "dialectics of the present" will disclose both novelties and discontinuities in the current epoch. The concrete studies that follow in this book attempt to articulate defining features of the contemporary moment and distinctive features of the existing and emergent society, culture, and everyday life in the new millennium. Yet my studies suggest that novel and distinctive features are grounded in the trajectory of contemporary capitalism, its creation of a global economy, and ongoing "creative destruction" that has been a defining feature of modernity from the beginning. Hence, the cultural studies in this book will be grounded in critical social theory and will themselves contribute to developing a critical theory of society by illuminating key features and dynamics of the present age. The studies will illustrate, in particular, the emergence of media spectacle and an infotainment society in the current stage of technocapitalism.[6]

The Infotainment Society and Technocapitalism

Today the society and culture of spectacle is creating a new type of information-entertainment society, or what might be called the "infotainment society." The changes in the current conjuncture are arguably as thoroughgoing and dramatic as the shift from the stage of market and competitive and laissez-faire capitalism theorized by Marx to the stage of state monopoly capitalism critically analyzed by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. I would therefore suggest that we are entering a new form of technocapitalism marked by a synthesis of capital and technology, and the information and entertainment industries, which is producing a new form of "infotainment society."[7]

In terms of political economy, the emerging postindustrial form of technocapitalism is characterized by a decline of the state and enlarged power for the market, accompanied by the growing strength of transnational corporations and governmental bodies and the decreased strength 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 addressing the restructuring of capitalism. Culture and technology are increasingly important constituent parts of global capitalism and everyday life in the postmodern world and permeate major domains of life, as well as constituting their own spheres and subcultures.

The term "infotainment" suggests the synergies of the information and entertainment sectors in the constitutions of contemporary societies, the ways that information technology are transforming entertainment, and the forms in which entertainment is shaping every domain of life from the Internet to politics. It is now well-documented that the knowledge and information

sectors are key domains of our contemporary moment, although how to theorize the dialectics of the present is highly contested. While, as many have noted, the theories of Daniel Bell and other postindustrial theorists are not as ideological and far off the mark as many of us once argued, the concept of "postindustrial" society is highly problematic. The concept is negative and empty, failing to articulate positively what distinguishes the alleged new stage; the discourse of the "post" can occlude the connections between industrial, manufacturing and emergent high-tech industries, and thus the strong continuities between the previous and present form of social organization, as well as covering over the continued importance of manufacturing and industry for much of the world.

Yet discourses of the "post" also serve positively to highlight the importance of significant novelties, of discontinuities with modern societies, and thus force us to rethink the original and defining features of our current social situation (see Best and Kellner 1997 and 2001). Notions of the "knowledge" or "information" society rightly call attention to the role of scientific and technical knowledge in the constitution of the present social order, the importance of computers and information technology, and the rise of new societal elites. It seems wrong, however, to characterize knowledge or information as <u>the</u> organizing or axial principles of a society still organized around the accumulation of capital and maximization of profit. Hence, in order to avoid the technological determinism and idealism of many forms of this theory, one should theorize the information or knowledge "revolution" as part and parcel of a new form of technocapitalism. Such a perspective focuses on the interconnections between new technologies, a networked global society, and an expansion of the culture of spectacle in an emergent mode of the "infotainment society," rather than merely obsessing about "new technologies" or "globalization," without seeing the articulations of these phenomena.

The limitations of earlier theories of the "knowledge society," or "postindustrial society," as well as current forms of the "information society," revolve around the extent to which they exaggerate the role of knowledge and information and advance an idealist vision that excessively privileges the role of knowledge and information in the economy, in politics and society, and in everyday life. Such optics downplay the role of capitalist relations of production, corporate ownership and control, and hegemonic configurations of corporate and state power with all their massive and momentous effects. As I argue below, while discourse of the "post" describe certain defining features of contemporary societies, at least in the overdeveloped world, they neither grasp the specificity of the current forms of global technocapitalism, nor do they adequately mark the continuities with previous stages of societal development.

Consequently, to adequately grasp the dynamics of our contemporary social situation, we need to perceive the continuities between previous forms of industrial society and the new modes of society and culture described by discourses of the "post," <u>and</u> also grasp the novelties and discontinuities (Best and Kellner 1997 and 2001).[8] In the studies in this book, I argue that current conceptions of the information society and emphasis on information technology as its demiurge are by now too limited; the new technologies are modes of information <u>and</u> entertainment, and it is becoming harder and harder to separate them. Indeed, "new technologies" are much more than

solely information technology. They are also technologies of diversion, communication, and play, encompassing and restructuring both labor and leisure. Previous forms of culture are rapidly being absorbed within the Internet, and the computer is coming to be a major household appliance and source of entertainment, information, play, communication, and connection with the outside world. As clues to the enormity of the transformation going on, as indicators of the syntheses of knowledge and cultural industries in the infotainment society, I would suggest reflections on the massive mergers of the major information and entertainment conglomerates which have taken place in the United States during the past decades, exhibiting the most extensive concentration and conglomeration of these industries in history.

During the 1980s, television networks merged with other major sectors of the cultural industries and corporate capital, including mergers between C.B.S. and Westinghouse, M.C.A and Seagrams; Time Warner and Turner Communications; Disney, Capital Cities, and ABC; and GE, NBC, and Microsoft. Dwarfing all previous information/entertainment corporation mergers, Time Warner and America On-Line (AOL) proposed a $163.4 billion amalgamation in January 2000, which was approved a year later. This union brings together two huge corporations involved in TV, film, magazines, newspapers, books, information databases, computers, and other media, suggesting a coming synthesis of media and computer culture, of entertainment and information in a new infotainment society. The fact that "new media" Internet service provider and portal AOL is the majority shareholder in the merger suggests the triumph of the new online Internet culture over the old media culture, while the merger itself points to escalating synergy among information and entertainment industries and old and new media in the form of the networked economy and cyberculture.

These mergers bring together corporations involved in TV, film, magazines, newspapers, books, information data bases, computers, and other media, suggesting a coming implosion of media and computer culture, of entertainment and information in a new infotainment society. There have also been massive mergers in the telecommunications industry, as well as between cable and satellite industries with major entertainment and corporate conglomerates. By 2002, ten gigantic multinational corporations, including AOL Time Warner, Disney-ABC, General Electric-NBC, Viacom-CBS, News Corporation, Viviendi, Sony, Berelsmann, AT&T, and Liberty Media controlled most of the production of information and entertainment throughout the globe.[9] The result is less competition and diversity, and more corporate control of newspapers and journalism, television, radio, film, and other media of information and entertainment.

The corporate media, communications, and information industries are frantically scrambling to provide delivery for a wealth of services. These will include increased Internet access, cellular telephones and satellite personal communication devices, which will facilitate video, film, entertainment, new and information on demand, as well as Internet shopping and more unsavory services like pornography and gambling. Consequently, the mergers of the immense infotainment conglomerates disclose a synergy between information technologies and multimedia, which combine entertainment and information, undermining distinctions between these domains.

The mushrooming and constantly evolving corporate mergers of the information and entertainment industries call for an expansion of the concept of the knowledge, or information, society, into concepts of technocapitalism. On this conception, the synthesis of global corporate capitalism and information and entertainment technologies are constructing novel forms of society and culture, controlled by capital and global in reach. In this context, the concept of the infotainment society can serve to characterize the emergent technocapitalist project in order to highlight the imbrications of information and entertainment in the multimedia and information technologies of the present. Together, these corporate mergers, and the products and services that they are producing, constitute an emergent infotainment society that it is our challenge to theorize and attempt to shape to more humane and democratic purposes than the accumulation of capital and corporate/state hegemony.

Hence, the synthesis of entertainment and information in the creation of an infotainment society is part and parcel of a global restructuring of capital. Few theories of the information revolution and the new technologies contextualize the structuring, implementation, marketing, and use of information technologies and new media in the context of the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalism and the proliferation of media spectacle and the domain of infotainment. The ideologues of the information society act as if technology were an autonomous force. They often neglect to theorize the interconnections of capital and technology, or they use the advancements of technology to legitimate market capitalism (i.e. Gates 1995 and 2000 and Gilder 2000). More conventional and older sociological theories, by contrast, fail to grasp the important role of entertainment and spectacle in contemporary society and culture, while other theories of the information society, such as those of Daniel Bell, exaggerate the role of information and knowledge.

Thus, Guy Debord concept of the "society of the spectacle" in which individuals are transfixed by the packaging, display, and consumption of commodities and the play of media events helpfully illuminates our present situation (see Best and Kellner 1997). Arguably, we are now at a stage of the spectacle where it dominates the mediascape, politics, and more and more domains of everyday life. In a culture of the technospectacle, computers bring mushrooming information and images into the home and workplace via the Internet, competing with television as the dominant medium of our time. The result is a spectacularization of politics, of culture, and consciousness, as media proliferate and new forms of culture colonize consciousness and everyday life, and promote novel forms of struggle and resistance.

The dramatic technological revolution has resulted in ground-breaking forms of technoculture like the Internet and cyberculture and vast technological sophistication and development of media forms like radio, television, film, and video. Digitization has deeply transformed culture producing new modes of multimedia spectacle and new domains of technoculture. The studies collected in this book interrogate contemporary culture in order to illuminate dominant trends, possibilities, dangers, and conflicts to better understand the present age. In the following sections, I will accordingly elucidate the methods of cultural studies and its

conjunction with critical social theory that I deploy to elucidate what I am attempting to accomplish.

From Media Culture to Media Spectacle

My earlier book Media Culture (1995) appeared following an era of Reagan/Bush/Thatcher conservativism and was shaped by its dispiriting politics and culture. Media Spectacle was informed in turn by the triumph of neo-liberalism in what now appears as an era of Reagan/Bush/Clinton/Bush2 unleashing of market forces and the curtailment of the welfare state and social services. While Clinton and Blair purportedly offered a "Third Way" between state socialism and unrestrained market capitalism, in retrospect the past decades exhibit the triumph of capitalism and the corporate spectacle. The turn-of-the-millennium period in retrospect was one of dramatic technological revolution, giving rise to globalization and both celebrations and assaults on a bludgeoning global economy. It was also a time of profound political struggle between liberals and conservatives (with radicals continuing to fight on the margins). There were also intense cultural wars, which began in the 1960s, between feminists and anti-feminists, and those who would promote racial justice and an inclusive multiculturalism opposed against those who asserted class, gender, and race privilege, fighting to preserve tradition and to oppose liberal social change.

The U.S. Election 2000 already appears as a retro back to the future with the ascension of George W. Bush, son of the conservative former President. Bush II has assembled his father's legion of doom for new domestic and global adventures and after the September 11 terror attacks is now engaging in ungoing Terror War, suggesting that the spectacles of the New Millennium will be frightening and violent. Bush blasts from the past create a brave new world of deja-vu all over again. Like Reagan and Bush I, the Bush II administration has used tax cuts for the rich and escalating military spending to destroy the deficits that had accrued in the prosperous Clinton years, thus forcing cutbacks in government spending and social welfare.

As the new millennium unfolds, the domestic U.S. and global economy appears highly unstable and Western countries are threatened by new enemies within and without. The combination of a crisis-ridden global economy with ever-proliferating media and technology, and global Terror War within a highly contested and combustible political domain, promise a proliferation of apocalyptic spectacle into the new millennium. The culture industries are also proliferating media spectacle for mass distraction, entertainment, and profitability in one of the few expanding domains of the "new economy." These developments suggest a promising futures for the study of media spectacle and need for cultural studies to help unpack their production, meanings, and effects.

This book is not per se a polemic against media spectacle, although I surely note some of its disturbing features. Critics of the dramatic expansion of media and their incursion into the new realms of cyberspace and virtual reality (VR) have worried about the obliteration of the real and the substitution of an ersatz, contrived and manufactured pseudoreality for the ordinary

experiences of everyday life. Others fret that with the glut of information and entertainment citizens will become extremely distracted from the trials and travails of ordinary life and will increasingly seek escape in the realm of high-tech entertainment. Yet other critics obsess about the vulgarization of culture, of its dumbing down and banalization in an era of special effects, spectacular media extravaganzas, tabloid journalism, and the glitter and glitz of competing high-tech media.

All of these critiques of media culture were articulated many times before. Yet the expansion, technological development, and proliferation of media spectacle provide new life to these old fears, as well as the new worries that the Internet and cyberspace may generate. While I will certainly be critical of many of the media spectacles that I interrogate, and will level criticisms at the general structure and direction of the society and culture of the spectacle, I am also interested in providing concrete readings of specific media spectacles, and in seeing what they tell us about contemporary life at the end of the second millennium and beginnings of a third.

My conception of cultural studies includes diagnostic critique based on a close reading of what various phenomena of media culture tell us about the contemporary condition, combined with critique of the politics of representation of gender, race, sexuality, and class, and ideology critique of the specific politics of a text or artifact. While engaging the politics of representation and ideology critique, I also am interested in going beyond the text to the context. My studies evoke social context and history to help read the texts of media spectacle, but also deploy cultural texts to illuminate the more general social and cultural context of the present, one that I have sketched out in this introduction and will flesh out in the studies that follow.

This dialectic of text and context was developed by Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno in their conceptions of cultural texts as hieroglyphics or prisms that provide a source of critical knowledge of the contemporary era (Kellner 1989a). Adorno and Benjamin deployed a micrological and hermeneutical method in deciphering cultural phenomena ranging from newspaper astrology columns to television programs to twelve-tone music or the poems of Holderlin. During the same epoch, Siegfried Kraucauer read the dominant modes of culture and society from phenomenona like the Tilly Girl reviews and the mass ornament -- analyses which anticipated, I might note, German fascism, just as Kracauer himself claimed that German Expressionist film anticipated the rise of Hitler and fascism. So too can one interrogate the phenomena of media spectacle today in order to appraise the current forms of contemporary society, the dominant dreams and nightmares, and the regnant values and ideologies.

I would therefore suggest that the phenomena of media spectacle provide a fertile field for cultural, political, and ideological analysis. Following these models of critical theory, I will closely examine some salient phenomena of media spectacle in order to provide insight into the vicissitudes of the contemporary moment. As I will try to demonstrate, a close reading of cultural texts and phenomena can tell us a lot about the conditions of the world of the new millennium. Reading the spectacle of some of the popular texts of media culture help provide insights into

current and emergent social realities and trends. Popular texts seize the attention and imagination of massive audiences and are thus barometers of contemporary taste, hopes, fears, and fantasies. Let me, then, briefly illustrate this argument with some examples of how critical decoding of popular media spectacles of the era can provide critical insights into the present age. I will then return to explicating the concept of diagnostic critique which guides my particular version of cultural studies.

Signs of the Times

During the summer of 2000, dinosaurs became a megaspectacle with the release and popularity of the Dreamworks film Dinosaur, accompanied by concurrent museum exhibitions of dinosaurs, always a popular exhibit, to complement the film, and with an explosion of TV-documentary specials and news reports about the extinct species. Indeed, a megaspectacle encompasses several media like film, television, the Internet, and cultural life; it is a focal point for attention and provides clues to the social psyche. W.T. Mitchell has written a book on the history of dinosaurs (1999), highlighting our cultural awareness and construction of the species, and the different meanings attached to these strange beasts. I bring up the example to suggest that hermeneutical deciphering of such figures can provide insight into contemporary social and political dynamics and concerns.

Dinosaurs can be read as a polysemic spectacle that encompass a wealth of images and meanings. The extinct beasts are a sign of radical otherness, of a species that no longer exists. Dinosaurs are dramatically different from any existing species and thus are a figure of difference and altereity. Dinos are as well figures of montrosity, of the power of nature over humans, and of the violence and menace within nature (the Disney movie, by the way, was deemed too violent for young children and there were debates whether young kids should or should not see the film). And perhaps most telling, dinosaurs are a figure of finitude, of an extinct species that was extinguished by natural catastrophe, thus pointing to the finitude of the human species itself, and constituting a figure of warning in an era of nuclear bombs, biological-chemical weapons of mass destruction, global Terror War, emergent nanotechnology, and scientific awareness of cosmic and interplantetary cataclysm (for systematic discussion of these issues, see Best and Kellner 2001).

ABC's Who Wants to be a Millionaire? emerged as the most popular new U.S. television program of 2000-2001. Itself modeled after a British TV-series, the phenomenon reveals the global obsession with instant wealth and the transformation of knowledge into information. Making a spectacle out of the gaining of easy money, the series is highly ritualistic in its posing of questions, its illuminated and blinking set and portentous music, and its hosts' repetitive intonation of the fatal question, "Is that your final answer?" The show rewards those who in particular possess a detailed knowledge of the trivia and minutiae of media culture, registering a transformation of the cultural ideal of knowledge into information. Whereas the classic quiz shows of the 1940s and 1950s rewarded contestants who had absorbed a body of knowledge and allowed them to choose areas where they had devoted the hard work of education to gain mastery of their field, Millionaire focuses on questions concerning the trivia of media culture, rewarding

those who have devoted themselves to absorbing picayune detail of the spectacle culture of which television is a crucial component.

A popular new form of "reality" television, <u>Survivor,</u> was also based on an English series which had become a global popular and model for shows around the world. The CBS <u>Survivor</u> series broadcast in summer 2000 and involved a dangerous endurance contest among 16 contestants on a deserted island off Borneo, quickly becoming a major ratings-success. On this show, contenders voted each other off each week, with the winner receiving a million dollars. The competition elicited complex sets of alliances and Machiavellian strategy in a social Darwinian passion play, in which an overweight gay middle-aged "corporate trainer," Richard Hatch, became a national celebrity. The series outdrew the Republican convention and its concluding show was deemed by <u>TV Guide</u> to be the number one event of the television season (January 8, 2001).

Another form of "reality" television spectacle, <u>Big Brother</u>, presented a positive spin on Orwell's dystopia of a society of total surveillance. Following the model of wildly successful Dutch TV series, a group of volunteers lived in a house under unrelenting surveillance of television cameras, unable even to have contact with the outside world, and viewers voted on which characters should stay or go, until only one remains and wins a cash prize. CBS bought rights to air an American version of the show and broadcast the show in summer 2000.[10] Like the Dutch show, each week viewers voted on which contestant would be eliminated and the "winner" was to take home a half-million dollar bonazana. The sight of dozens of microphones and cameras everywhere, including the CBS logo of an open eye, recalls the Orwellian nightmare, transmuted into fluff entertainment in the society of the spectacle. Quite possibly <u>Big Brother</u> helps acclimate people to surveillance, such as is exercised by the FBI "Carnivore" program that can intercept private e-mail, or to round-the-clock video surveillance at work, in public spaces, and perhaps even at home.

Upping the anti of spectacle culture, CBS played an even more dangerous <u>Survivor</u> series in the Australian outback for spring and summer of 2001, and a <u>Survivor Africa</u> series for fall-winter 2001-2. Meanwhile, the Fox television network, which seemed to have reached a new low with its embarrassment <u>How Wants to Marry a Millionaire?</u>,[11] devised a reality television series <u>Temptation Island</u> for 2001 in which four unmarried couples would be subjected to the temptations of an attractive array of dating and sexual partners to "test" the couples' relationship; it was a hit and a second season is scheduled for 2002, promising more sex and spectacle. Another 2001 reality television series concocted by ABC, <u>The Mole</u>, inserted a plant in a group, providing potential CIA agents to gain experience with infiltration and exposure, while meeting complex challenges. Fox's reality show <u>Boot Camp</u> (2001), in turn, provided training for would-be marines to head off to trouble spots around the world for adventure and endurance tests, thus providing excellent training for U.S. participation in Operation Enduring Terror War.

Demonstrating the psychopathology of the spectacle, contestants on these "reality" shows are driven by a lust for money and, perhaps more so, the 15 minutes of fame and celebrity promised to them by Andy Warhol. Buffeted about by the machines of publicity, there appear to

be no losers, as those voted off return to instant renown and receive offers to become TV guest hosts, VJs, or even to appear in Playboy (though one contestant on the Swedish Big Brother committed suicide after his exile, and it is not clear what the long-term effects of celebrity withdrawal on participants in these experiments may be).

Hence, whereas Truman Burbank, in the summer 1998 hit film The Truman Show, discovered to his horror that his life was being televised and sought to escape the video panopticon, many individuals in cyberworld choose to make televisual spectacles of their everyday life, such as the Webcam "stars" or the participants in the MTV "reality" series Real World and Road Rules. Even PBS got in the act in summer 2000 with its reality-based show The 1900 House which features another survival endurance trial, this time involving a family suffering without the amenities of the consumer society and technoculture in a Victorian-era British middle-class house. The Brits also produced a more civilized reality series, The Castaways, that forced groups of people marooned on a North Sea island to cooperate in order to survive the rigors of bad weather and isolation.

These reality TV series and their web sites seem to be highly addictive, pointing to deep-seated voyeurism and narcissism in the society of the interactive spectacle. It appears that individuals have a seemingly insatiable lust to become part of the spectacle and to involve themselves in it more intimately and to peer into the intimate lives of others. Moreover, they exemplify what Daniel Boorstin (1961) referred to as "pseudo-events," in which people pay more attention to media-produced spectacles than pressing concerns in the sociopolitical world and everyday life. As Baudrillard astutely observed (1983c), postmodern media society devolves around an "obscenity" that implodes public and private spheres and puts on display the most banal and intimate aspects of everyday life -- be it the sex games of Bill Clinton or the melodramas of ordinary "real life" drama participants.

In the Fall of 2001, reality TV lost its luster when TV news dramatically overshadowed its banal spectacle with the megaspectacle of the September 11 terror attacks and succeeding Terror War. As the U.S. began its retaliatory bombing in Afghanistan on October 7, the world was treated to a videotape of Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the terrorist network believed to be behind the attacks. Bin Laden appeared in his now familiar turban and camouflage jacket, an assault rifle by his side, in an Afghanistan landscape with a cave behind him. In ornate Arabic, translated erratically by the network translators who were trying to render his speech into English, bin Laden praised the September 11 strike on America that "destroyed its buildings" and created "fear from North to South," praising God for this attack. Calling for a Jihad to "destroy America," bin Laden attacked the "debauched," "oppressive" Americans who have "followed injustice," and exhorted every Muslim to join the Jihad. The world was now divided, bin Laden insisted, into two sides, "the side of believers and the side of infidels," and everyone who stands with America is a "coward" and an "infidel."

Remarkably, bin Laden's Manichean dualism mirrored the discourse of Israeli President Ariel Sharon, George W. Bush, and those in the West who proclaimed the war against terrorism

as a Holy War between Good and Evil, Civilization and Barbarism. Both dichotomized their Other as dominated by fear, Bush claiming that his Holy War marked freedom versus fear, citing Islamic extremists' animosity against Western values and prosperity, while bin Laden's Jihad poised fearful America against his brave warriors, characterizing as well his battle as that of justice versus injustice. Both appealed to God, revealing a similar fundamentalist absolutism and Manicheanism with both characterizing their Other as "evil." And both sides described their opponents as "terrorists," convinced that they were right and virtuous while the other side were villains.

Bin Laden was quickly elevated into an international media megaspectacle, reviled in the West and deified in parts of the Islamic and Arab world. Books, artifacts, and products bearing his name and image sold around the world. For his fans, he personified resistance to the West and fidelity to Islam, while to his enemies he was the personification of Evil, the antiChrist. Needless to say, entrepreneurs everywhere exploited his image to sell products. On the Internet, one could purchase toilet paper with bin Laden visage and choose from three slogans: "Wipe out bin Laden," "If he wants to attack he can start with my crack," or "If your butt gets to cloddin' just wipe with bin Laden." In addition, condoms, shooting targets, dartboards, golf balls, voodoo dolls, and violent video games featured bin Laden's now iconic image. Websites presented bin Laden porn, tasteless cartoons, and computer games where the player could dismember the Al Qaeda terrorist.

Documentaries and news reports circulated endlessly every extent image and footage of bin Laden, portrayed in either negative or positive contexts, depending on the media venue. Viewing the countless video and images of Osama bin Laden one is struck by his eyes. The Al Qaeda terrorist never seems to look into the eyes of others or the camera when he speaks. Bin Laden seems to be in another sphere, above and beyond mundane social interaction. His communiques are thus ethereal and bloodless in their presentation, even if their content is highly blood-thirsty, as his eyes look up and away into a transcendent horizon. The Iranian leader, the Ayatollah Khomeini, by contrast, had contempt, mixed with slight fear, in his eyes that always turned down and away from Westerners when he encountered them. The Iranian Khomeini's look away was always dour and rejective, while occasionally one sees a twinkle in bin Laden's eye, betraying a tell-tale worldliness, before it darts into a beyond that guides and bedevils him.

George W. Bush, by contrast, is known for his propensity to stare directly into other people's eyes and famously claimed he could eye the Russian president's soul by looking into his eyes. Bush is good at eye contact with the camera, providing the illusion that he is speaking directly to the people, face to face, while bin Laden is staring out in space and speaking to eternity. To be sure, sometimes the camera catches the vacant and blank Bush whose small eyes point to the littleness within, while other times Bush's infamous smirk show his snarky and beady eyes to be the signs of arrogance and contempt, although one could also see unknowledgeable insecurity in the trademark smirk.

Henceforth, the Bush administration put an embargo on Bin Laden videotapes, pleading

with the U.S. TV networks not to play the tapes which were seen as propaganda and perhaps vehicles of "secret messages" to followers. In December 2001, however, the Bush administration released a Bin Laden videotape found in Afghanistan which supposedly provided the "smoking gun" that once and for all would determine Bin Laden's guilt. The results for the West were disappointing. Although Bin Laden seemed to have foreknowledge of the September 11 attacks and gloated and laughed over the results, for the Arab world the tape was a fake. Qatar's Al Jazeera television had commentators on who immediately insisted that the "tape has been fabricated, it's not real." The father of condemned terrorist Mohammed Atta dismissed the tape as a "forgery" to an Associated Press journalist. Obviously, some Arabs were so bound to belief in Bin Laden that they could not recognize the cynicism and viciousness in his distortion of Islam, while others so distrusted and hated the U.S. that it was unlikely they would believe anything released by the Great Satan.

Although George W. Bush blustered on December 14 that it was "preposterous" that anyone could doubt the authenticity of the Bin Laden tape, in fact there were fierce debates over its production, translation, meaning, and mode of release, demonstrating acute hermeneutical capacities of audiences and critics through the world, and vindicating the position long argued by British cultural studies that different audiences produce different interpretations of the text. Special effects experts in London "say [that a] fake would be relatively easy to make" (Guardian, Dec. 15, 2001). But experts in the U.S. from Bell Labs and MIT concluded that "technology [is] not yet good enough to fake Bin Laden tape" (AP, Dec. 15, 2001).[12]

The response to the Bin Laden tape confirmed French theorist Jean Baudrillard's position that we are currently living in an era of simulation in which it is impossible to tell the difference between the real and a fake, reality and simulation. As Hollywood films use more and more computerized scenes, as rock stars like Michael Jackson digitally "cleanse" their image, wiping away sweat from a vigorous performance and making himself more black to blend in with his brothers on stage, and as politicians use political image production and spectacle to sell themselves, the difference between the authentic and the real is harder and harder to determine. Is George W. Bush a real president, or is he just acting out the sound-bites fed him by his handlers, performing a scripted daily political act that he does not fully understand? Are the frequent warnings of terrorist attacks genuine, or just a ploy to keep the public on edge to accept more reactionary rightwing law and order politics? Is the terrorist threat as dire as the National Security State claims or are they hyping threats to raise their budgets and power? In an era of simulation, it is impossible to clearly answer these questions as we do not have access to the "real," which in any case is complex, overdetermined, intricately constructed, and in some cases, as Kant discerned in his distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, ultimately impossible to specify.

As the Bin Laden/Bush Terror War unfolded, barbarism multiplied throughout the world as the human species regressed into what appeared as a New Barbarism. With Hamas and Palestinian groups following the Al Qaeda doctrine of violent Jihad, suicide bomb attacks on Israel proliferated, terrorizing civilians. Following the Bush doctrine that military retaliation in

the appropriate response to terrorism, Israel ruthlessly attacked the Palestinian terrorities, killing many. Jumping into the New Barbarism, terrorists in India attacked the Parliament in the bloodiest assault on India's democracy in its history. India and Pakistan threatened each other with nuclear war and India camofloged the Taj Mahal. China executed Muslim separatists and the U.S. sent troops into the Philippines to help exterminate oppositional Islamic groups. CIA forces entered Somalia, preparing for more U.S. military attacks, and the U.S. set up support bases in Kenya for operations in Africa. In a New Yorker article "The Iraq Hawks" (Dec. 16, 2001), Seymour Hersh documented a new war plan for Iraq being developed by the Bush administration that would follow the Afghanistan model of heavy bombardment of Iraqi targets and U.S. support of oppositional groups inside and outside Iraq; critics questioned the Iraq/Afghanistan analogy and doubted that Iraqi opposition was an extensive and well-organized as Afghan opposition which easily overthrew a poorly armed and barely functional Taliban military.

In China, a bizarre act of barbarism was reported the same day claiming that a suicide bombing had entered a McDonald's in China and blown himself up, wounding others –- or was this an act of culinary critique and anti-globalization protest? In the U.S., a fake grenade rolled down the aisle of an American Airlines flight and caused mayhem at a San Diego airport, forcing evacuations, grounding flights and closing streets. It turns out that Lolita Austria, 57, had stolen a small shopping map belonging to an airport security screener which contained a fake grenade, used to test security. Earlier, another American barbarian closed down the Atlanta airport when he jumped over a security barricade to avoid missing a connection to a football game. And on December 22, an American Airline plane was diverted when passengers and flight crew brought down a distraught passenger who was attempting to ignite a home-made bomb to blow up the plane over the ocean.

Crowd behavior in the U.S. was also becoming barbaric. On Saturday, December 15, the commencement address for mid-year graduates at California State University, Sacramento, "was halted after audience members in the packed house at Arco Arena drowned out the speech with heckling. Janis Besler Heaphy, president and publisher of The Sacramento Bee, was speaking before the largest crowd ever for a CSUS graduation ceremony about the threats to civil liberties posed by the federal government's investigation into the Sept. 11 attacks. Her comments were drowned out about five minutes into the eight-minute speech when a segment of the audience began to stomp and clap in protest to her words" (Sacramento Bee, Dec. 16, 2001).

Another ugly crowd scene took place on December 17 in the Cleveland Brown's football stadium. An unpopular referee decision in a close game in the closing minutes sent off a crowd reaction where the barbarians heeved thousands of beer bottles, garbage and miscellaneous items at the referees, hitting players of both teams and other fans. The president of the team explained that most of the beer bottles were plastic and "don't carry much of a wallop." Besides, "I like the fact that our fans cared." The owner of the team brushed it off, saying that "it wasn't World War III," thus in effect legitimating the crowds' barbaric behavior.

At the end of December 2001 in Australia, fires swept through New South Wales, ringing

Sydney and twelve young boys were arrested on suspicion of arson, while BBC reported looting and showed fire-fighters whose engines and belongings had been stolen as they fought the fire. Argentina's economy collapsed, in part due to political corruption and incompetency in the country and in part because of barbaric IMF requirements that required excessive cutbacks in the state sector and social services to pack back exorbitant interest. The destructive effects of capitalist globalization were clear and one hoped that in the future countries would be intelligent enough to resist the barbarism of predatory capitalism and construct states and a public sector able to produce more prosperity and social justice.

As the New Year's eve fireworks spectacles and celebrations took place throughout the world, one could hope for a better year and future. In Europe, there were spectacular displays to celebrate the Euro, ranging from laser-sound and light spectacle to fireworks and mass celebration. In Pasadena, California, the Annual Tournament of Roses Parade celebrated the theme of "Good Times" with the usual floats celebrating corporations, leisure, and the commodity spectacle. But under heavy security, the parade opened with the U.S. Marine Corps band and closed with the West Point Marching Band, military floats, and equestrian riders from the U.S. Marshals service, signifying military and patriotic themes and continued war spectacle as the millennium unfolded.

Cultural Studies as Diagnostic Critique

The texts of media culture thus provide material for a diagnostic critique of the contemporary era. In the following studies, I will provide some more detailed examples of cultural studies as diagnostic critique. In Chapter 2, I attempt to show how study of McDonald's fast-food chain provides insights into the dynamics of globalization, the dialectic of the global and the local, and the ways that U.S. cultural products are appropriated and used throughout the world to provide new forms of global and hybridized culture. Likewise, the study of Michael Jordan and Nike in Chapter 3 helps illuminate global media culture and NBA basketball and how U.S. sports become a global popular in the 1990s, while sport deities like Jordan become worldwide celebrities. The McDonald's study helps elucidate features of contemporary consumer culture, while the Jordan study engages the interconnection of sports, commercialization, and consumption and celebrity culture in the present era, in which sports, business, and spectacle culture implode.

Chapter 4 engages the rock spectacle with a study of the origins of rock and roll music in the 1950s and the rise of super stars like Elvis Presley. I interpret the various stages of Presley's career as exemplifing the Dionysian spectacle of mass celebration evident in later superstars such as Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Nirvana, and Pearl Jam. Presley's career also exhibits the Hollywood spectacle in the 1960s, the Vegas spectacle in the '70s, and the spectacle of the Dead Elvis in the decades to come. The rise of MTV, music videos, and concert extravaganzas are evident in the Madonna spectacle, while the rap and hip hop spectacles reveal new forms of African American culture becoming a global popular. Newer stars of recent years such as Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, and Shakira disclose an emergent multicultural pop spectacle in the global musical scene.

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The megaspectacle of the O.J. Simpson trial in the mid-1990s provides a case to study in Chapter 5 of the intersections of gender, race, and class in contemporary U.S. society and the ways that identity politics are fragmenting society into competing groups with which one gains one's primary identity. The Simpson saga, far from being merely a sordid murder trial, also shows how the logic of the spectacle is permeating the legal system and crime and colonizing everyday life by permeating television day and endless talk shows, Internet sites, and old and new media.

The popular TV-series and film-franchise <u>X-Files</u> running from 1992 into the Third Millennium provides an instructive example which I dissect in Chapter 6 of the television spectacle that combines high-tech aesthetic effects with convoluted allegories of the horrors of contemporary life. Producing a spectacle of government conspiracy, alien invasion, and biotechnological mutations of the human, <u>X-Files</u> puts on display a vast panorama of contemporary fears, fantasies, and conflicts. It allows a diagnostic critique of fears of government conspiracies, medical invasions of the mind and body, and mutations of the human in an era of technoculture and technoscience.

Politics too has become a megaspectacle over the past decade as the Persian Gulf TV War dramatized U.S. military power and weapons system, attempted to save a failing Bush presidency (the first one), and tried to insert the U.S. as the dominant police-force in the New World Order (Kellner 1992). A more television and media savvy younger Presidential candidate, Bill Clinton, used media spectacle to defeat the aging and disengaged George Bush in 1992, but then faced the wrath of a resolute Republican opposition that used all the media of contemporary culture to create a spectacle of scandal to attempt to destroy Clinton's presidency. Curiously, and unpredictably, the Republican spectacle of moralistic vengeance backfired and Clinton survived (barely) the spectacle of impeachment.

After a lackluster election in 2000 between Son of Bush and Clinton's Vice-President Al Gore, the world was treated to the megaspectacle of a Battle for the White House in which an election was stolen by the Republicans, generating fertile conditions for future political wars and spectacle (Kellner, 2001. In an era of spectacle politics, reading political spectacles like the Clinton sex scandals and impeachment trials and the Battle for the White House and Theft of an election in November-December 2000 can illustrate the broad patterns and trajectories of contemporary politics, culture, and society. Indeed, I will argue that these components of recent U.S. political spectacle are interrelated and can best be read in the context of seeing how the cultural wars and presidential politics from the 1960s to the present played out on the stage of political spectacle. In Chapter 7, I provide a study of "Presidential Politics, the Movie" to discuss vicissitudes of media and politics from the 1960s to the present.

In <u>Media Spectacle</u>, I will accordingly engage in some close and detailed readings, contextualization, and analysis of the broad effects of major cultural texts and events deploying the methods of cultural studies, as well as using critical social theory to interrogate what the texts tell us about contemporary reality. While some critics talk incessantly about cultural studies as a

historical phenomena, or endless debate the method and concepts of cultural studies, I try to do cultural studies through the multiperspectivist dissection of the production of texts, textual analysis of its meanings, and study of their effects and resonance. And while some close readings stay ensconced in the textures and surfaces of texts, I want to go beyond the texts to the contexts in which they are produced, consumed, and used, using texts to illuminate their historical and cultural situations.[13]

The conception of cultural studies as diagnostic critique thus combines using social theory to interpret and contextualize phenomena of media culture with developing close readings and contextualizations of cultural texts to elucidate contemporary culture and society. A diagnostic critique exposes hopes and fears, problems and conflicts, of the existing society, as well as the nature of the contending corporate, political, and social groups in the contested terrain of existing society and culture. Seeing culture and society as a field of contestation with forces of domination and resistance, repression and struggle, cooptation and upheaval, provides a more dynamic model than that of certain forms of Marxism or feminism that primarily see the dominant culture as one of domination and oppression. By contrast, envisioning society and culture as contested terrains articulates the openings and possibilities for social transformation, and potentials for resistance and struggle, as well as providing critique of ideology and domination.

Hence, my conception of cultural studies combines critique of domination with valorization of forces of resistance and struggle. While the politics of representation are engaged that criticize racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, there are also attempts to discern more liberating representations and social forces struggling against domination. Criticizing domination and arguing for a more egalitarian and just social order also envisages progressive social transformation. This involves, in part, educating individuals to resist cultural manipulation and to become media literate. Thus, I am also interested in the promotion of media literacy, of the pedagogy of learning how to read cultural texts critically and politically and to use culture to understand and democratically transform the world. I would thus identify my project in this regard with that of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire who wants to develop literacy to teach people to read the word and through reading the word to read and transform the world.

Thus, a diagnostic critique uses culture to analyze the conditions of contemporary culture and society and to provide instruments of social transformation. It combines theory with practice, combining doing cultural studies with reflecting on the society and culture under analysis. It seeks to transform disciplinary practice, drawing on a wealth of disciplines from textual analysis to political economy. And it seeks to transform society, providing critique of domination and subordination and valorization of forces struggling for social justice and a more democratic and egalitarian society. Seeing cultural studies as transformative practice, diagnostic critique thus seeks those phenomena that best illuminate contemporary society and that provide either obstacles or forces of social progress.

Notes

1. I suppose that this is the place to indicate the U.S.-centric nature of my subject-position and that I am interpreting the world from the lenses of decades at the University of Texas in Austin and then from the vistas of the University of California at Los Angeles. As I now write, I am looking out the window from West Hollywood into downtown L.A. and the Hollywood hills, in what is perhaps the epicenter of the contemporary media spectacle of our times and during an era of globalization more than a merely local phenomenon. Of course, things look different from variegated class, gender, race, and regional positions. And yet while the focus of my studies is on salient phenomena of U.S. culture and their planetary proliferations, in a globalized world, technologies, commodities, cultures, ideas, and experiences rapidly circulate throughout the planet, so that, for those living outside the U.S., I might recall what Marx said to all in regard to his analysis of capitalism in England: "De te fabula narratur!" ("The tale is told of you").

2. 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.

3. 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, is actually propelling it, as Wolf repeatedly claims. He 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.

4. 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).

5. 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 VR, in which spectators become hooked on videos of extreme sex and violence. The 13th Floor (1999) portrayed a VR device whereby players are transported to recreations of other times, places, and identities experiencing full bodily fears and pleasures.

6. The studies in this book are primarily cultural studies, and I explore in more detail the consequences for social theory of the phenomena explored here elsewhere. Theoretical grounding, in

turn, for the investigations undertaken here are found in past works such as Kellner and Ryan 1988; Kellner 1989a and 1989b; Best and Kellner 1990, 1997, and 2001; and Kellner 1995.

7. On the various stages of development of the Frankfurt School for an earlier introduction of the concept of technocapitalism, see Kellner 1989b. For more recent reflections on the roles of new technologies in the current stage of capitalist development, see Best and Kellner 2001 and Kellner 2001.

8. Frank Webster (1995: 5, passim) wants to draw a line between "those who endorse the idea of an information society" and "writers who place emphasis on continuities." Although he puts me in the camp of those who emphasize continuities (188), I would argue that we need to grasp both continuities and discontinuities in the current societal transformation we are undergoing, that we deploy a both/and logic in this case and not an either/or logic. In other words, we need both to theorize the novelties and differences in the current social restructuring, as well as the continuities with the previous mode of societal organization. Such a dialectical optic is, I believe, consistent with the mode of vision of Marx and neo-Marxists such as those in the Frankfurt School.

[9] See the chart in The Nation (Jan. 7, 2002) and the accompanying article by Mark Crispin Miller, "What's Wrong with This Picture?"

10. See Brian Lowry "'Big Brother's' Watchers See Everything But Privacy,'" Los Angeles Times, February 12, 2000:A1, A50 and "The Electronic Fishbowl," New York Times (May 21, 2000). The new reality shows exhibit the confluence of television and Internet entertainment; the Dutch show "Big Brother" featured a live-web site with four video streams that one could check out, gaining 52 million hits, and the CBS series deployed roughly the same setup, although it charged viewers to subscribe to its website for the 2001 season. It is interesting from the perspective of globalization that recent hit TV formulas have come from Europe to the U.S. The 1999-2001 ABC Television sensation, Do You Want to Be a Millionaire?, was closely based on a hit British TV-series, as was a 2001 follow-up, The Weakest Link. Reality-TV hits Survivor and Big Brother were also derived from European models. It appears in these cases that it is precisely the crassest and most commercial aspects of global culture that crosses borders the most easily....

11. This popular, and then reviled, program featured a supposed millionaire (who turned out to be a sleazy hustler) who choose a wife from female contestants who would share a millionaire dollar reward with their new husband. The bride turned out not to be able to stand being with the man, quickly left him, proclaimed her virtue and tried to exploit her 15 minutes of fame, eventually posing nude in a man's magazine. The tabloids uncovered unsavory pasts of both the husband and the wife and Rupert Murdoch's Fox Network suffered some slight embarrassment, although it is unlikely that the Fox people suffer much in the way of shame or humiliation.

[12] German television found that the White House translation of Bin Laden's video was not only inaccurate, but "manipulative." See http://dc.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=16389&group=webcast.

[13] For my previous work in and discussion of cultural studies, see Kellner and Ryan 1988, where the concept of diagnostic critique was first developed; see also Kellner 1995 and 2001, as well as Best and Kellner 2001, of which the studies in Media Spectacle are a follow-up and up-dating.