

## **The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike: Unholy Alliance?\***

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Michael Jordan is widely acclaimed as the greatest athlete who ever lived. The announcement of his retirement in January 1999 unleashed an unparalleled hyperbole of adjectives describing his superlative athletic accomplishments. Yet his continuing media presence and adulation after his retirement confirmed that Jordan is one of the most popular and widely known sports icons throughout the world. In China, the Beijing Morning Post ran a front paged article titled "Flying Man Jordan is Coming Back to Earth" and in Bosnia Jordan's statement declaring his retirement was the lead story on the evening television news, pushing aside the war in Kosovo.[1] An icon of the global popular, Jordan is "a kind of new world prince," in the words of Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Halberstam, who recently published a biography of the basketball legend (1999): "You hear time and again about people being in Borneo or somewhere and coming across a kid in a tattered Michael Jordan T-shirt. He's the most famous American in the world." [2]

Jordan's acclaim and popularity result in part because he is a perfect embodiment of the sports spectacle in which media culture uses high tech wizardry to magically transform sports into a media extravaganza of the highest order. Images of Jordan's windmill dunking, blazing baseline heroics, and flying through the air to net a key shot thrilled sports spectators throughout the world, as did his controlled fade-away jump shooting and uncanny ability to always bag the decisive shot in more recent years. Moreover, Jordan provided the spectacle of intense competition and the thrill of winning, perhaps the American passion play. He led the Chicago Bulls to NBA championships during six of eight seasons during which he played in the 1990s (the two seasons the Bulls failed to win were during Jordan's quixotic retirement to try to become a baseball star in 1993-1995), and became associated with the triumphs of winning as well as deification from his prowess.

In addition to being perhaps the greatest basketball player of all time, Jordan is one of the most successfully managed idols and icons of media culture. Parlaying his athletic triumphs into commercial product endorsements, Jordan became the highest paid celebrity advertising figure ever, endorsing a multitude of products for multimillion dollar fees, promoting his own line of athletic shoes and cologne, and starring with Bugs Bunny in a popular movie Space Jam (1996). Michael Jordan is thus a perfect icon for the end-of-the-millennium American and global culture, combining extraordinary athletic prowess, an unrivaled record of success and winning, high entertainment value, and an ability to exploit his image into strikingly impressive business success.

In a commercial culture that blends celebrity, product, and image, it is only natural that a sports shoe corporation like Nike -- as well as many other corporations -- would purchase Jordan's star power to promote its products. Accordingly, I wish to argue that the Michael Jordan/Nike connection calls attention to the extent to which media spectacle is transforming sports into a forum that sells the values, products, celebrities, and institutions of the media and consumer

society. The Jordan/Nike nexus calls attention to the sports entertainment colossus that has become a major feature of media culture at the end of the millennium. The Nike/Jordan alliance discloses the extent to which contemporary society is constituted by image and spectacle and mediated by the institutions of consumer culture. We are thus undergoing an increasing commercialization and spectacle-ization of the world of which Michael Jordan and Nike are a significant and highly revealing part. The following study will thus use the Nike/Jordan nexus to uncover the central dynamics of contemporary media and consumer culture and the implosion between sports, entertainment, celebrity, and commerce in the contemporary era.

### The Sports Spectacle

Professional sports is one of the major spectacles of media culture. "Spectacle" is a multifarious term developed by French Situationist Guy Debord that "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (Debord 1970: #10).[3] In one sense, it refers to a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and spectacles. Spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that 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 phenomenon that itself has been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the O.J. Simpson trials (1994-1996), the death of Princess Diana, and the Bill Clinton sex scandals and impeachment (1998-1999), and the Battle for the White House in Election 2000 in the U.S. In this study, I argue that sports is a largely untheorized and underrated aspect of the society of the spectacle that celebrates its dominant values, products, and corporations in an unholy alliance between sports celebrity, commercialism, and media spectacle.

As we enter a new millennium, the media are becoming ever more technologically dazzling and are playing an increasingly central role in everyday life. Under the influence of a postmodern 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; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society" (#18).

Experience and everyday life are thus mediated by the spectacles of media culture which dramatize social conflicts, celebrate dominant values, and project our deepest hopes and fears. 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 passively consuming spectacles, one is separated 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 passively 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 passive 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 passive consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination. The spectacular society spreads its narcotics 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 commodity 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).

In contemporary media culture, professional sports are a major field of the spectacle. Whereas the activity of participating in sports involves an active engagement in creative practice, spectator sports involve passive consumption of images of the sports spectacle. One of the distinguishing features of contemporary postindustrial societies is the extent to which sports have become commercialized and transformed into spectacle. During the industrial era, actually playing sports was an adjunct to labor that created strong and skillful bodies for industrial labor. Sports taught individuals both how to play as part of a collective, to fit into a team, and to display initiative and distinguish themselves, thus training workers for productive industrial work.

During the postindustrial era, by contrast, spectator sports are the correlative to a society that is replacing manual labor with automation and machines, and requires consumption and passive appropriation of spectacles to reproduce the consumer society. The contemporary era also sees the expansion of a service sector and highly differentiated entertainment industry, of which sports are a key component. Thus, significant resources are currently devoted to the expansion and promotion of the sports spectacle and athletes like Michael Jordan are accordingly recipients of the potential to amass high salaries from the profits being generated by the sports/entertainment colossus.

Modern sports was organized around principles of the division of labor and professionalism, celebrating modern values of competition and winning. Sports in the modern era replicated the structure of the workplace where both individual initiative and teamwork were necessary and sports celebrated at once both competing values. Sports were part of an autonomous realm with their own professional ethics, carefully regulated rules, and highly organized corporate structures. Postindustrial sports, by contrast, implode sport into media spectacle, collapse

boundaries between professional achievement and commercialization, and attest to the commodification of all aspects of life in the media and consumer society.

There are many ways in which contemporary sports are subject to the laws of the spectacle and is becoming totally commercialized, serving to help reproduce the consumer society. For starters, sports is ever more subject to market logic and commodification with professional athletes making millions of dollars. Further, televisual sports events like basketball games are hypercommodified with the "Bud player of the game," "Miller Lite genuine moments," the "Reebok halftime report," the "AT&T Time Out," and "Dutch Boy in the Paint," along with ads featuring the star players hucking merchandise. TV networks bid astronomical sums for the rights to broadcast live professional sports events and superevents such as the Superbowl and NBA championship games command some of the highest advertising rates in television.

It appears that professional sports, a paradigm of the spectacle, can no longer be played without the accompaniment of cheerleaders, giant mascots who clown with players and spectators, and raffles, promotions, and contests that hawk the products of various sponsors. Instant replays turn the action into high-tech spectacles and stadiums themselves contain electronic reproduction of the action, as well as giant advertisements for various products that rotate for maximum saturation -- previewing forthcoming environmental advertising in which entire urban sites will become scenes to promote commodity spectacles. Corporations are now franchising sports arenas to be named after their products: following Great Western Bank's payment to have the Lakers' stadium named the Great Western Forum, the franchising of United Center in Chicago by United Airlines, and the America West Arena in Phoenix by America West, Pacific Telesis paid \$50 million to name the San Francisco Giants new stadium Pacific Bell Park and Philip Morris' Miller Brewing unit has shelled-out \$40 million to have its name atop the Milwaukee Brewers' new ballpark (New York Times, August 23, 1996: C4). The Texas Rangers stadium in Arlington, Texas, supplements its sports arena with a shopping mall and commercial area, with office buildings, stores, and a restaurant in which for a hefty price one gets a view of the athletic events, as one consumes food and drink.

It probably will not be too long before the uniforms of professional sports players are as littered with advertisements as racing cars. In the globally popular sport of soccer, companies such as Canon, Sharp, and Carlsberg sponsor teams and have their names emblazoned on their shirts, making the players epiphenomena of transnational capital. In cycling events like the Tour de France, or auto races like the Le Mans 24 Hours and Indianapolis 500, entire teams are sponsored by major corporations whose logos adorn their clothes, bikes, and cars. And throughout the world, but especially in the United States, the capital of the commodity spectacle, superstars such as Michael Jordan commodify themselves from head to foot, selling their various body parts and images to the highest corporate bidders, imploding their sports images into the spectacles of advertising. In this fashion, the top athletes augment their salaries, sometimes spectacularly, by endorsing products, thus imploding sports, commerce, and advertising into dazzling spectacles that celebrate the products and values of corporate America.

Recent years have thus exhibited a dramatic implosion of the sports spectacle, commerce, and entertainment with massive salaries and marketing contracts for the superstar players/celebrities. The major media conglomerates are becoming increasingly interested in sports channels and

franchises and the most marketable athletes not only earn enormous multimillion dollar salaries, but are able to secure even more lucrative marketing deals to endorse products, star in film or TV programs, and even in the case of Michael Jordan to promote their own product lines. Although the NBA was once the neer-do-well stepchild of the more successful professional baseball and football franchises, in recent years it has become one of the most popular of the U.S. sports industries on the global scale (Andrews 1997 and LaFeber 1999). While the NBA only fed 35 weekly telecasts to foreign companies in the mid-1980s during the beginning of Jordan's basketball career, by 1996 the roster had swelled to 175 foreign broadcasts in 40 languages to 600 million households. In this process, David Halberstam describes Jordan as "the first great athlete of the wired world" (in Coplon 1996: 35).

The dramatic evolution of the sports spectacle thus has a global dimension with the major players now becoming international figures, marketed in global advertising campaigns, films, music, and other venue of media culture. As Michael Jordan's superstar agent David Falk puts it: "Michael has transcended sport. He's an international icon" (in Hirschberg 1996: 46). Indeed, in 1996-8, Falk put together deals that netted Jordan a record-breaking \$30 million contract for his next NBA season; continuing lucrative deals with Nike and other corporations to promote their products to the estimated tune of \$40 million; the inauguration of his own cologne line, Eau de Michael Jordan; and a high tech film, Space Jam, pairing Jordan with other NBA superstars, Bugs Bunny and other cartoon characters, with accompanying product line and estimates that Jordan could conceivably earn \$20 million from the latter two projects (USA Today, October 14, 1996: 6B). During the same era, Los Angeles Lakers star Shaquille O'Neal signed a 7-year, \$120 million deal, leading his agent to comment: "Shaq represents the convergence of sports and entertainment" (New York Times, August 23, 1996: C4).

Competing with baseball and football as the American sport of choice of the contemporary era, professional basketball has emerged during the Jordan era as the game that best symbolizes the contemporary sports/entertainment colossus. To some extent, the three major U.S. sports encapsulate three periods of socioeconomic development. Baseball represents the challenge of a highly individualist country to merge together individual aspirations and talents with teamwork and spirit. Emerging in the 19th century, baseball disciplined individuals to fit into teams but still rewarded individual accomplishments during a highly entrepreneurial era of capitalist development.

Football is organized on a mass production industrial model that was appropriate to the era of mass production that reached its highest stage of development in the first half of the 20th century. Football is a team sport that exemplifies arduous collective physical labor mated with individual achievement. Although the star running backs, quarterbacks, and touchdown scorers often get the credit and headlines, it is disciplined collective labor that provides the infrastructure for football accomplishments and victory. Without a strong defense and well-coordinated offense even the most spectacular players cannot adequately function and their team cannot win. Moreover, brute strength, valorized in the hard toil of the earlier factory era, was also important in football, a distinctly combat sport, in addition to skill and finesse.

NBA basketball, by contrast, has increasingly featured superstar feats of individual brilliance. Michael Jordan is thus the perfect figure for entrepreneurial capitalism, for the era of individual

achievement and excellence. Professional basketball is also the perfect high-tech television sport, fast-paced, full of action, and resplendent with spectacle. Hard-charging full-court action, balletic shots, and ubiquitous instant replays make basketball the perfect sport for the era of MTV. Perfectly embodying the fragmentary postmodern aesthetics, razzle-dazzle technical effects, and fast-pace of today's television, basketball has emerged as the sport of the spectacle, the perfect game for the sports/entertainment society. Once a primarily American game, by the 1990s it has become a global popular during the era of expanding global culture and economy.

Moreover, the sports spectacle is at the center of an almost religious fetishism in which sport becomes surrogate religion and its stars demigods. For many, sports is the object of ultimate concern (Paul Tillich's definition of religion). It provides transcendence from the banality and suffering of everyday life. Sports stars constitute its saints and deities, while sports events often have a religious aura of ritual. Sports fans are like a congregation and their cheers and boos are a form of liturgy. In sports events, fans become part of something greater than themselves, the participation provides meaning and significance and a higher communal self, fused with the multitudes of believers and the spirit of joy in triumph and suffering in tribulation. Sports are a break from average everydayness, providing participation in ritual, mystery, and spiritual aura (although, as our discussion is suggesting, sports also celebrates dominant social values such as individuality, winning, teamwork, and, increasingly, commercialism). In the pantheon of sports deity, Michael Jordan is one of the reigning gods, and in the next section I will accordingly engage his iconography and celebrity.

### The Spectacle of Michael Jordan

Among the spectacles of media culture, Michael Jordan is a preeminent figure. As a NBA superstar, Jordan was the very picture of grace, coordination, virtuosity, and all-around skill -- adeptly marketed to earn a record salary and endorsements. Jordan received \$30 million to play for the Chicago Bulls in 1997 (Time, July 29, 1996: 61) and \$33 million in 1998; he earned more than \$40 million in endorsements and promotions in 1995, making him the highest paid athlete in the world (The Guardian, June 11, 1996: 6), and reaped in excess of \$45 million in endorsements in 1996, continuing his position as the world's highest paid athlete. In June 1998, Fortune magazine estimated that Jordan had generated more than \$10 billion during his spectacular professional career in terms of an increase in tickets sold, television advertising revenue, increased profits of products Jordan endorsed, basketball merchandising exploiting Jordan's figure, and his own films, businesses, and product lines. Jordan is big business and has accelerated the trends toward the implosion of business, entertainment, and sports.

His Airness, a popular nickname for "the man that flies," thus epitomizes the postmodern sports spectacle both on the playing field and in advertisements and media spectacles. The Michael Jordan spectacle implodes athletic achievement with commercialization, merging his sports image with corporate products, and making Jordan one of the highest paid and most fecund generators of social meaning and capital in the history of media culture. He is the iconic exemplar of the media/sports spectacle, the obsession with winning and success, and the quest for unimaginable wealth that were defining cultural features of the last two decades of the twentieth century, continuing into the new millennium.

Jordan first appeared as a rookie with the Chicago Bulls in 1984 and although he was not yet a full-fledged superstar, his agent signed him to what turned out to be an incredibly influential and lucrative contract with Nike. With Jordan and a new marketing agency, Wieden and Kennedy, the Air Jordan product line and Nike's Swoosh symbol became icons of American and then global culture. At the same time, Michael Jordan became an authentic American superstar, generally acknowledged as one of the greatest basketball players of all time, one of the most popular and well-known celebrities of media culture, and since 1988, the sports celebrity most desired to market corporate products. During the era of Nike/Jordan's ascendancy, cable and satellite television and the aggressive promotion of the NBA by its commissioner David Stern increased tremendously the visibility and popularity of professional basketball. The Jordan/Nike era had arrived.

There seemed to be nothing that Jordan could not do on the basketball court. His slam dunk was legendary and he seemed to defy gravity as he flew through the air toward the holy grail of the basket. His "hang-time" was fabled and as Cheryl Cole points out (1996), designations such as "Rare Air" "render him extraordinary... and even godlike," a figure of transcendence. Nike developed a product line of "Air Jordan" sports shoes around the flying mythology and a 1990 NBA Entertainment documentary titled "Michael Jordan. Come Fly With Me" described the player as "the man who was truly destined to fly," and celebrated him as the very embodiment of professional excellence, morality, and American values. The collection of photographs of Michael Jordan as sports icon, media celebrity, and downhome good guy is titled Rare Air, and highlights the efficacy of the Michael Jordan publicity machine in fine-tuning his image as a transcendent figure, a god of media culture.

Sports writers too participate in the canonization of Michael Jordan, regularly describing him as "the best player ever," "the greatest basketball player who has ever lived," and even the "greatest athlete of all time." The phrase "there is nothing he cannot do" is frequently used to inscribe Jordan's sign-value as superstar sports deity, and in Nike ads that star Jordan the corporate logo "just do it," signifies that you too can be like Michael and do what you want to do. The Gatorade "Be Like Mike" commercial also highlights Jordan's status as a role model and embodiment of iconic values and high aspiration.

After dropping out of professional basketball to pursue a professional baseball career,[4] Jordan returned to the Chicago Bulls in 1995 and led the team to three straight NBA championships. In the process, he reinvented himself as a superstar player, moving from his patented flying air shots to become one of the great distance and jump shot scorers of all time. In the words of one analyst:

At 33, Jordan is a half-step slower than he once was. He is more beholden to gravity, less nuclear in his liftoff. He can still take wing and be Air when he needs to, still shift into turbo and batter the rim, but he chooses his spots now, waits for clear paths. He no longer hurls himself into walls of elbows and forearms, giving other side's behemoths free shots at his kidneys. He has traded risk for feel, nerve for guile, spectacle for efficiency... and because he is Jordan, even his efficiency can seem spectacular (Coplon 1996: 37).

During the 1996-1998 seasons, the Bulls emerged as a popular culture phenomenon, setting records for attendance, winning regular season games, and three straight NBA championships.

With Jordan, bad-guy extraordinaire Dennis Rodman, all-around star Scottie Pippen, and Zen-inspired coach Phil Jackson, the Bulls earned unparalleled media attention and adulation. The Jordan spectacle helped make NBA basketball globally popular and Michael Jordan a superstar of extraordinary resonance. Jordan henceforth was identified with ardent competition and winning, embodying the values of hard drive, success, and coming out on top; his shots regularly won key games and he became fabled for the magnitude of his competitiveness and drive to win.

Thus, Michael Jordan was both a great player and continues to be a highly successful marketing phenomenon, which calls attention to the construction of the media/sports spectacle by corporations, public relations, and the techniques of advertising. Just as Jordan marketed Nike, Wheaties, and other products, so did these corporations help produce the Jordan image and spectacle. Likewise, Jordan was used to market the NBA and in turn its publicity machine and success helped market Jordan (Andrews 1997). A vast marketing apparatus of television, radio, magazines, and other publications help promote and manufacture the stars of sports and entertainment, attesting to an implosion between media and sports culture, and thus sports and commerce. Indeed, Jordan became an entire sports franchise with special pitches geared toward kids (i.e., an 800 number to order Nikes that Jordan gives them "permission" to call), toward urban teens, and targeting young adults with his fragrance products. And as Cole has documented (1996), Jordan is part of a Nike P.L.A.Y. program designed to present a positive corporate image and promote its products to a youth audience.

Michael Jordan was thus a dazzling sports spectacle who promoted both commercial sports and the products of the corporations that market products to sports audiences. His distinctive image is often noted and Jordan's look and style are truly striking. His shaved head, extremely long shorts, and short socks were frequently cited defining features that were highlighted in a Spike Lee Nike ad. In a clever marketing device, the Lee figure repeatedly insists, "It's gotta be the shoes!" (i.e., which make Jordan the greatest). In addition, his wrist band, jersey number 23, and tongue wagging and hanging as he concentrated on a play were distinctive signs of the Jordan trademark image.

In fact, Jordan is so handsome that he has often been employed as a model and his good looks and superstar status have won him countless advertising endorsements for products such Nike, McDonald's, Gatorade, Coca Cola, Wheaties, Haines shorts, and numerous others. A Gatorade ad tells the audience to "be like Mike," establishing Jordan as a role model, as the very icon of excellence and aspiration. In anti-drug ads, Jordan tells the nation to just say no, to avoid drugs, to do the right thing, and to be all you can be, mobilizing the very stereotypes of conservative postindustrial America in one figure. As Andrews points out (1995), Michael Jordan is a paradigmatic figure of the "hard body" (Susan Jeffords) that was the ideal male image of the Reaganite '80s, a model of the powerful bodies needed to resurrect American power after the flabbiness of the 1960s and 1970s.

Jordan is also a fashion-spectacle, nattily dressed in expensive clothes, drenched in his own cologne line, and exhibiting the trademark shiny bald head. As such, he was the perfect sports icon to market Nike shoes, combining tremendous athletic ability with a well-honed fashion image that could be used to sell Nikes to a wide array of audience, ranging from ghetto black youth to fashion-consciousuppies and executives. In the following sections, I will accordingly

interrogate the fateful marriage of Michael Jordan and Nike to see what it reveals of the current stage of global capitalism and media spectacle.

### Jordan, Nike, and the Race Spectacle

Initially, Jordan was perceived as a distinctively black spectacle, though many claimed that eventually he transcended race and attained an almost godlike status. It is generally acknowledged that he was the first black athlete to break advertising's color barrier, paving the way for lucrative contracts for the next generation of black athletes. During his difficult transitional year of 1993, when Jordan was under intense critical scrutiny by the media and NBA because of his alleged gambling problems and the unsolved murder of his father, whose death many speculated was related to gambling debts, he became for the first and only time recipient of the sort of negative press visited upon such African American sports luminaries as Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, and his onetime Chicago Bulls teammate Dennis Rodman.

The Jordan publicity machine has regularly taken the line that Jordan "transcends race" and commentators have claimed that Jordan is "transracial."<sup>[5]</sup> Jordan himself usually plays it both ways in interviews, admitting that he recognizes he is black but calling upon people to see him as a human being (see, for example, the interview with Larry King on CNN, 1996). Yet, as a cultural signifier, as the "universal singular" who represents more general social significance (Denzin 1996, using Sartre's term), Jordan is a highly polysemic signifier who encodes conflicting meanings and values. Michael Jordan is both an example of what Berlant (1994) calls the "national symbolic" (see the discussion in Cole 1996) and the "global popular" (see the discussion in Kellner 1995 and Andrews et al 1996). Jordan embodies national values of hard work, competitiveness, ambition, and success. As a black superstar, he presents the fantasy that anyone can make it in the society of competition and status, that one can climb the class ladder and overcome the limitations of race and class. As a national and global superstar, he represents different things to different people in different countries (see the studies by Andrews et al 1996). Indeed, as Wilson and Sparks (1996) remind us, different individuals and audiences are going to receive and appropriate the text of Michael Jordan in different ways according to their own race, gender, class, region, and other subject positions.

As a polysemic signifier, Jordan thus presents a figure that mobilizes many fantasies (i.e., athletic greatness, wealth, success, and upward mobility) for the national and global imaginary, providing a spectacle who embodies many desirable national and global features and aspirations. Yet Jordan is extremely black and his race is a definite signifier of his spectacle, though his blackness too has conflicting connotations. On one hand, as noted, he is a privileged role model for black youth ("Be like Mike"), he reportedly helps mentor young athletes, and he is a symbol of the African American who has transcended race and who is integrated in American society, representing the dream of assimilation, wealth, and success. But as Andrews has demonstrated (1995), Jordan's blackness is overdetermined and has also served to signify black transgressions, as when his gambling behavior became a subject of negative media presentation and his father's murder led to speculation on connections with organized crime. In these images, Jordan is presented as the threatening black figure, as the negative fantasy figure of black deviance from white normality. Jordan's physique, power, and dominance might also feed into the fear of black bodies as Giroux suggests in his analysis of how contemporary media culture is characterized by

a simultaneous fascination with the accomplishments of the black male body while also fearing the threat it poses (1994).

Yet Jordan also has done anti-drug ads, represents constructive ideals of hard work and discipline, and is frequently presented as a positive role model. Jordan's "just say no" conflicts, however, with his "just do it," creating an ambiguous figure, who at once represents restraint and control, and transgression and excess. But on the whole, after some negative media representations during 1993 and the bad press that perhaps led Jordan to prematurely retire from basketball, his return to the NBA and succeeding superstar exploits generated unparalleled positive representations. Thus, Jordan overall became positioned in media culture as the "good black," especially against the aggressiveness and visual transgressions of teammate Dennis Rodman who with his bleached and undisciplined hair, ear-ring, fancy clothes, and regularly rebellious behavior represented the "bad" black figure – and would continue to do so during his brief 1999-2000 sojourn with the LA Lakers.

Jordan is thus the iconic figure of the corporate black, renown for his business acumen, as well as his athletic skill. He is the role model who incarnates basic American values. Successfully fashioning his image into a highly beloved celebrity, Jordan was deemed the most popular person alive between 1987-1993, tying with God in an Associated Press survey as the person black children most admired, and in a poll of Chinese students, he ran neck and neck with Zhou Enlai (Coplon 1996: 37). Thus, so far and on the whole, the Michael Jordan spectacle serves as the model of positive representations of African Americans. In consistent hagiography of his athletic skills, Jordan's concentration is often remarked and the ways that his awesome talents are mediated by intelligence are highlighted. Jordan's "airdriven bullets" seem to be guided by a highly effective mental radar system and his trademarked "aerial ballets" represent grace and spiritual transcendence as well as brute force. Todd Boyd sees Jordan's talents as exemplary of a black aesthetic and compares him to great black musical performers:

You can't watch Michael Jordan and not be moved in the way one has been moved, at an earlier time, listening to a John Coltrane solo. When I think about the way the game is played and the influence African Americans have had defining the game and the style of play -- they constitute a black aesthetic. It's a style that emanated from the playgrounds, in the hood, and you can follow the lineage from Elgin Baylor to Connie Hawkins to Julius Erving to Michael Jordan to Grant Hill to Allen Iverson. Or, Bill Russell to Wes Unseld to Moses Malone to Patrick Ewing to Dikembe Mutumbo to Alonzo Mourning. These are styles that are very much like, say, the difference between trumpet players, saxophone players and piano players (Boyd 1997b: 49; for fuller development of his concept of a black aesthetic, see Boyd 1997a).

No doubt, Jordan combined grace and cool, style and skill, drive and polish, energy and aptitude. Moreover, as remarked earlier, Jordan seemed to embody central American values and to serve as a role model for American youth and as the white fantasy of the good African American. Thus, while it seems wrong to claim, as is often done, that Michael Jordan transcends race, he seems to produce unusually positive representations of African Americans, thus undercutting racist stereotypes and denigration.

The extent to which the spectacles of sports have promoted the interests of African Americans

and people of color has not yet been adequately understood. The African American breakthrough in professional sports perhaps occurred first in boxing with boxers of color such as Jack Johnson, Henry Armstrong, and Joe Louis becoming renowned champions. But as recently as the 1940s, professional baseball was segregated and athletes of color were forced to toil in "colored" leagues, condemned in effect to the minor leagues. With the breaking of the colorline in professional baseball in the 1940s with Jackie Robinson, African American athletes could be part of "America's pastime" and icons of the sports spectacle. Indeed, during the 1950s and 1960s prominent African American baseball players such Willie Mays and Hank Aaron were acknowledged as superstars of the spectacle.

Black and brown athletes succeeded in equally spectacular ways in professional football, boxing, and basketball. Sports thus became an important route for people of color to grab their share of the American dream and cut of the great spectacle of "professional" (read commercial) sports. On the positive side, the American fascination with sports promoted racial equality, acceptance of difference, and multiculturalism. With the incorporation of black athletes into professional sports they entered mainstream media culture as icons of the spectacle, as role models for youth, and as promoters (often unaware) of racial equality and integration.

In fact, I would argue that the prowess of black sports heros and the rhythms of rock music have done much to promote racial equality and the rights of African Americans and people of color.[6] Postindustrial America became more and more of a media culture and professional sports and entertainment became key features of media culture. Once African Americans were allowed to sparkle and shine in media culture they were able to enter the mainstream -- or at least major figures of the spectacle such as O.J. Simpson, Hank Aaron, and Michael Jordan were. In Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Mookie, a pizza delivery man played by Spike Lee, confronts Pino, the racist Italian son of the owner of the pizzeria about his racist but contradictory attitudes toward African Americans.

Mookie: Pino, who's your favorite basketball player?

Pino: Magic Johnson.

Mookie: Who's your favorite movie star?

Pino: Eddie Murphy.

Mookie: Who's your favorite rock star? Prince, you're a Prince fan.

Pino: Bruce!

Mookie: Prince!

Pino: Bruce!

Mookie: Pino, all you ever talk about is 'nigger this' and "nigger that," and all your favorite people are so called "niggers."

Pino: It's different. Magic, Eddie, Prince, are not niggers. I mean they're not black. I mean. Let me explain myself. They're not really black, I mean, they're black but they're not really black, they're more than black. It's different.

Mookie: It's different?

Pino: Yeah, to me its different.

Nike too has presented African American athletes as "different" in their ads, serving as part and parcel of the American dream, thus helping promote them to superstar celebrity status. Nike also helped promote the NBA and professional basketball to global iconic status, enabling black athletes such as Michael Jordan to attain world-class superstar status and to promote the dream that success and renown are open to all in contemporary America. Yet one could argue that these appropriations of the black sports spectacle were geared above all to sell shoes and other commercial products and that the transformation offered the consumer with the Nike shoe is a false transcendence. Indeed, buying cool shoes will not produce a new superself, but simply exploit its customer's pocketbook, forcing the unwary purchaser to buy a product much more expensive than many competing products, simply because of its sign value and prestige. And while one can affirm Nike's emphasis on activity and exercise over passivity and boredom, it is not clear that the sort of activity that Nike is promoting is really going to promote the interests of minority youth. Gangs versus sports is not the only dichotomy of contemporary urban life, and one might argue that education, technical skills, and career choice and motivation are more important for contemporary youth than running and shooting hoops.

Moreover, the elevation to cultural icons of black athletes such as Michael Jordan is itself a double-edged sword. On one hand, Jordan is a spectacle of color who elevates difference to sublimity and who raises blackness to dignity and respect. An icon of the sports spectacle, Michael Jordan is the black superstar and his prominence in sports has made him a figure that corporate America can use to sell its products and its values. Yet such are the negative representations and connotations of blackness in American culture, and such is the power of the media to define and redefine images, that even the greatest black icons and spectacles can be denigrated to embody negative connotations. As Michael Jackson, O.J. Simpson, and Mike Tyson have discovered, those who live by the media can die by the media, and overnight their positive representations and signification can become negative. Media culture is only too happy to use black figures to represent transgressive behavior and to project society's sins onto black figures. Indeed, despite the endemic problem of sexual harassment, Clarence Thomas is the representative figure for this transgression; despite the troubling problem of child molestation cutting across every race and class, Michael Jackson is the media figure who represents this iniquity; despite an epidemic of violence against woman, O.J. Simpson is the ultimate wife abuser; and although date rape is a deplorable frequent and well-documented phenomena, it was Mike Tyson who became "poster boy" for this offense and then in 1997-1998 for all of the ills of professional boxing after his behavior in a title fight, his violence against seniors in a driving accident, for which he was sentenced to a year in jail, and his generally aberrant behavior (see Dyson 1994 and Hutchinson 1996 on the demonization of black figures).

Hence, such is the racism of American culture that African Americans are the figures of choice to represent social transgressions and tabooed behavior. Michael Jordan has had his bouts with negative media representations, though on the whole his representations have been largely positive and his figure has been used to represent an ideal of blackness that American society as a whole can live with -- or he presents an image of the transcendence of race that many celebrate as a positive ideal. Yet despite his adulation, it would be a mistake to make Michael Jordan the role model for African American or the youth of the world. Comparing Jordan with baseball star Jackie Robinson, who broke the major league color barrier in 1947, Jack White describes

Robinson's speaking out against racial injustice, his actions with Martin Luther King, and his constant standing by political principles:

You can hardly imagine contemporary black sports superstars taking an equally brave stand on a divisive moral issue. Most are far too concerned with raking in endorsement dollars to risk any controversy. In 1990 Michael Jordan, who occupies the psychological spot that Robinson pioneered as the dominant black athlete of his time, declined to endorse his fellow black North Carolinian Harvey Gant over troglodyte racist Jesse Helms in a close contest for the U.S. Senate on the grounds that Republicans buy shoes too. More recently, Jordan brushed off questions about whether Nike, which pays him \$20 million a year in endorsement fees, was violating standards of decency by paying Indonesian workers only 30 cents per day. His curt comment: My job with Nike is to endorse the product. Their job is to be up on that. On the baseball field or off it, when Robinson came up to the plate, he took his best shot and knocked it out of the park. The superstar athletes who have taken his place, sadly, often strike out (1997: 90).

When asked what he thought about the L.A. uprisings after the police who beat Rodney King were declared not guilty in May 1992, Jordan replied, in Todd Boyd's paraphrase: "I'm more concerned with my jump shot." Boyd comments: "Nobody's asking you to be Malcolm X, but when an opportunity arises, don't run from it" (1997b: 49). But Michael Jordan, like many athletes corrupted by the sports spectacle and commercial culture, has abrogated his basic political and social responsibilities in favor of expensive clothes, commodities, and a megastock portfolio. Nike has played a key role in promoting these values and is thus a major cultural force, a socializer and arbitrator of cultural and social values, as well as a shoe company. There, the Nike/Jordan nexus is worthy of critical reflection as the contradictions of Michael Jordan's persona come to the fore in a striking way in his intimate connection with the Nike corporation.

### Michael Jordan and the Nike Spectacle

Media culture is notorious for destroying precisely the icons it has built up, especially if they are black. Jordan has already received his share of bad as well as adulatory press and during 1996, as Nike was sharply attacked in the media for their labor policies, Jordan was put on the defensive, frequently being asked to comment on Nike's labor practices. In a carefully prepared public relations response, Jordan countered that it was up to Nike "to do what they can to make sure everything is correctly done. I don't know the complete situation. Why should I? I'm trying to do my job. Hopefully, Nike will do the right thing" (cited in Herbert 1996: 19A). Yet the media continued to pester him and he was often portrayed in images during the summer of 1996 turning away from interviewers with a curt "No comment," when asked what he thought of Nike's exploitation of Third World workers, especially women, at extremely low wages.

Nike and Michael Jordan are thus intricately connected. As noted, Nike signed the relatively untested young basketball player to a contract in 1984 and evolved one of the most successful marketing campaigns in history. There have been over 15 annual editions of Nike's Air Jordan shoes and Jordan has helped make Nike's corporate logo and Swoosh sign one of the most familiar icons of corporate culture, as well known as McDonald's Golden Arches and the Coca-Cola bottle. From the beginning, Nike deployed the spectacle of Michael Jordan and itself produced ads that celebrated its products in a commodity spectacle. With the shift back to

Weiden & Kennedy advertising agency in 1987, Nike devised some of the most spectacular advertising campaigns in history, with many featuring Michael Jordan (see the analysis by Goldman and Papson 1999).

One of the distinctive features of the Nike campaigns was the implosion between advertising and entertainment in its ads. Nike hired Spike Lee, who deployed the Mars Blackmon character, played by himself, featured in his first commercial film *She's Gotta Have It* (1986). Nike ad writer Jim Riswold and producer Bill Davenport first thought of using the Spike Lee character "when they noticed that Mars didn't take off his Jordans even to do the nasty. Light bulbs went off in their heads. Was it tough to sell Spike on doing an ad with Jordan? 'I think he would've done the commercial free, just to meet Michael,' says Riswold" (Reilly 1991: 77). Lee accordingly produced the first Michael Jordan Nike ad "Hang Time," using the black and white photography of his first commercial film to show Mars hanging on a basketball rim while Michael dunks him. Lee used the character shticks from the film, having Mars calling out to Jordan, "Money! Why you wanna leave me hangin'?" and in an ad shot in Mars's bedroom, shouting: "Shuddup down there! We're trying to make a commercial!" Thus, the ads blended humor and entertainment with the advertising pitch and helped circulate the star/celebrity image of both Lee and Jordan, just as O.J. Simpson's Hertz ads had made him a familiar icon of media culture.

In another ad drawing on *She's Gotta Have It*, Jordan is standing with his arm around the film's star Nola Darling as Mars tries to find out why she prefers Jordan to him, finally concluding "Its gotta be the shoes, the shoes!" Lee tired of the Mars persona and in an innovative series of ads in the mid-1990s, Nike disposed of the commodity altogether, drawing on familiarity with the corporate logo and swoosh sign, as well as celebrities such as Jordan, to market their product. In one set of Nike ads, urban blacks discuss the pleasure of playing basketball, while the 1994 P.L.A.Y. campaign featured urban youth in crisis, facing alternatives between bored passivity and (Nike-powered) activity, and sports and gangs (for analysis of these ads see Goldman and Papson in this volume and for analysis of P.L.A.Y., see Cole 1996).

Behind the Nike spectacle, there is, of course, the unedifying reality of underpaid workers, toiling at sub-subsistence wages and under terrible working conditions to produce highly overpriced shoes for youth, many of which cannot afford and do not need such luxury items. Nike was one of the first major corporations to shift to a mode of production labelled "post-Fordism" and "flexible accumulation" (Harvey 1989). Shifting production of its shoes from the U.S. to Asia in the early 1980s, Nike first set up factories in Taiwan and South Korea. Both countries had at the time military dictatorships, low wages, and disciplined work forces. They frequently subcontracted work to local companies which would then be responsible for such things as wages, working conditions, and safety. While there were no established unions, the largely women workers in South Korea began organizing in response to poor working conditions, humiliating treatment by bosses, and low wages. At the same time, a democracy movement began in South Korea and at the first sign of labor unrest factory managers called in government riot police to break up employees' meetings. Troops sexually assaulted women workers, stripping them, and rape them 'as a control mechanism for suppressing women's engagement in the labor movement,' reported Jeong-Lim Nam of Hyosung Women's University in Taegu. It didn't work. It didn't work because the feminist activists in groups like the Korean

Women Workers Association (KWWA) helped women understand and deal with the assaults. The KWWA held consciousness-raising sessions in which notions of feminine duty and respectability were tackled along with wages and benefits. They organized independently of the male-led labor unions to ensure that their issues would be taken seriously, in labor negotiations and in the pro-democracy movement as a whole (Enloe 1995: 12).

Conditions and wages improved for Korean women workers, but Nike was in the process of moving production to countries with lower wages and more control of labor, such as China and Indonesia. During the 1990s, Nike's shoes have thus been produced mostly in Asia where the average wage paid to their workers is often below the subsistence level. There was much publicity over Nike's Indonesian sweatshops, where women would be paid approximately \$1.20 per day to produce shoes in the early 1990s. In 1992, 6,500 workers in the Sung Hwa Dunia factory in Serang, Indonesia, went on strike and wages were raised to \$1.80 a day and eventually to \$2.20 a day (Kirshenbaum 1996: 23). Under intense pressure from the Clinton administration to improve working conditions and labor rights, in order not to lose privileged trading status, the Indonesian government raised the minimum wage to (a still pitiful) \$1.80 an hour and promised that the military would no longer harass and brutalize workers. But, as Greider reports, the concessions were largely a charade because "despite the official decrees, the military kept on intervening in labor disputes, showing up at the plant gates and arresting strike activists, herding the women back into the factories. This occurred 22 times within the first month following the supposed reform" (1994: 43).

In addition, the companies often refused to pay the workers even the legal minimum wage. The response of the Indonesian workers were a series of wildcat strikes, international campaigns to publicize their plight, and continued efforts to organize workers. Accordingly, Nike sought other sites of production, increasing production in China and then moving to Vietnam where the minimum wage is \$30 per month and they can return to the one dollar plus change a day wages of an earlier era. Basing his figures on an analysis by Thuyen Nguyen, an American businessman who studied the conditions of Nike workers in Vietnam, Bob Herbert wrote in a New York Times op ed piece on "Nike's Boot Camps," that Nike workers in Vietnam are paid \$1.60 a day while three meager meals cost \$2.10 a day, renting a room costs \$6 a month, so that Nike's workers are paid subsistant wages and work in conditions described as "military boot camps" with widespread corporal punishment, molestation of women workers, and deteriorating health of the workers (March 31, 1997: A16). There was so much negative publicity concerning working conditions in sweatshops producing Nike gear that the corporation hired Andrew Young to review its labor practices and working conditions (New York Times, March 25, 1997). When Young returned some weeks later with a report that whitewashed Nike, they took out full-page ads to trumpet the results, though generally there was skepticism concerning Young's report and his inadequate inspection of the Asian worker's plight.[7]

Consequently, Nike moves production from country to country to gain ever lower production costs. NAFTA and GATT treaties have made it even easier for Nike and other global corporations to move production across the U.S. border and Nike is thus able to move its production around at will, searching for the lowest labor costs and most easily exploitable working conditions. Meanwhile, its CEO Philip Knight earns millions per year, his stock is worth an incredible \$4.5 billion, and Jordan, Andre Agassi, and Spike Lee are paid staggering

sums for their endorsements and advertisements (see Herbert 1996). Their profit margins are enormous: Enloe (1995: 13) estimated that for a \$70 pair of Nike Pegasus shoes, \$1.66 goes for labor; \$1.19 to the subcontractor; \$9.18 goes for materials; \$2.82 for administration and overhead; and Nike thus pockets \$22.95 while their retailer takes in \$32.20.

With the Asian financial crisis, the situation of Nike workers is even more dire. The Village Voice reports that Jeff Ballinger, director of the workers' rights group Press for Change "would like to see Jordan make good on his pledge to visit factories in Southeast Asia where Michael-endorsed products are manufactured. In a cover story for ESPN. The Magazine, Jordan said, 'I want to go to Southeast Asia to see the Nike plants for myself... when basketball is done' (Jockbeat, January 20-26, 1999). Ballinger says that a Jordan visit would highlight the plight of Nike workers in countries such as Vietnam and Indonesia that have been hit by the Asian financial crisis, estimating that "Nike factory wages in Indonesia have dropped to the equivalent of about \$1 a day since the currency crash-- while the plummeting value of the rupee has translated into about \$40 million in labor-cost savings for Nike" (*ibid*).

Indeed, Nike engages in superexploitation of both its Third World workers and global consumers. Its products are not more intrinsically valuable than other shoes, but have a certain distinctive sign value that gives them prestige value,[8] that provides its wearers with a mark of social status, and so it can charge \$130-140 per pair of shoes, thus earning tremendous profit margins. Nike provides a spectacle of social differentiation that establishes its wearer as cool, as with it, as part of the Nike/superstar spectacle nexus. Nike promises transcendence, a new self, to be like Mike, to fly, to gain respect. It enables the customer to participate in the Nike/Jordan magic, to Be Like Mike, by purchasing the shoes he sells! As the Spike Lee/Michael Jordan ad insists, "it's the shoes!" and those who buy the shoes buy into a life-style, an image, a commodity-spectacle. But a New York Times writer raised the question: "Does being Mike entail any responsibilities beyond doing your best on the court?" And answered:

Let's ask Inge Hanson, who runs Harlem RBI, a youth baseball and mentoring program. She was mugged earlier this year by a 14-year-old and his 10-year-old-henchboys. After they knocked her down and took about \$60, a mugger kicked her in the face. The next day, the bruise that had welled up on her left cheek bore the imprint of a Nike swoosh. It lasted for three weeks and she felt sad thinking she was probably robbed to finance a fancier pair of Nikes.

"But I can't honestly answer your question," she said. "How could Michael Jordan possibly know that by endorsing sneakers -- sneakers! -- he was involved in a crime? And yet, one does wonder if he has any responsibility to his audience beyond just saying, 'Just Do It!'" (Cited in Lipsyte 1996).

While Michael Jordan tries to present himself as the embodiment of all good and wholesome values, he is clearly tainted by his corporate involvements with Nike in the unholy alliance of commerce, sports spectacle, and celebrity. His symbiosis with Nike is so tight, they are so intertwined with each other, that if Nike is tarnished so too is Jordan (and vice versa -- which is one of the reasons that Hertz moved so quickly to sever its ties with O.J. Simpson after the discovery of the murder of his former wife Nicole and her friend Ron Goldman). The fate of Nike and Michael Jordan is inextricably intertwined, with Nike taking on Jordan to endorse their products early in his career, helping make him a superstar known to everyone, while the Air

Jordan product-line helped reverse declining sales and make Nike an icon of corporate America with a global reach that made Nike products part of the global popular (Andrews 1995). Thus, whereas Jordan was no doubt embarrassed by all the bad publicity that Nike received in 1996, his involvement with the corporation was obviously too deep to "just say no" and sever himself from this symbol of a corporate greed and exploitation.

### Concluding Remarks

The media figure of Michael Jordan thus has contradictory effects. While he is a symbol of making it in corporate America, he also is tarnished by the scandals and negative qualities with which the corporations to whom he sells himself are tainted, as well as embodying negative aspects of excessive greed, competitiveness, and other capitalist values. Moreover, although it is positive for members of the underclass to have role models and aspirations to better themselves, it is not clear that sports can provide a means to success for any but a few. The 1995 documentary Hoop Dreams brilliantly documented the failed hopes and illusory dreams of ghetto youth making it in college basketball and the NBA. For most would-be stars, it is a false hope to dream of fame and athletic glory, thus it is not clear that Jordan's "Be like Mike" is going to be of much real use to youth. Moreover, the widespread limitation of figures of the black spectacle to sports and entertainment might also contribute to the stereotype, as Mercer suggests (1994), that blacks are all brawn and no brain, or mere spectacular bodies and not substantive persons. Yet some criticism of Jordan as a basketball player has also circulated. Amidst the accolades after his announced retirement, some criticisms emerged of his style and influence on the game. Stating baldly that "I hate Michael Jordan," Jonathan Chait wrote:

Whenever I declare this in public, I am met with stammering disbelief, as if I had expressed my desire to rape nuns. But I have my reasons. First, he has helped to change the culture of sports from one emphasizing teamwork to one emphasizing individualism. The NBA has contributed to this by promoting superstars ("Come see Charles Barkley take on Hakeem Olajuwon!"), but Jordan buys into it, too. Once he referred to his teammates as his "supporting cast," and in last year's finals he yelled at a teammate for taking a shot in the clutch moments that he, Jordan, should have taken--after his teammate made the shot. The result is a generation of basketball players who don't know or care how to play as a team. (Slate evening delivery: Tues., Jan. 19, 1999).

Chait also complained that Jordan was "the beneficiary of extremely favorable officiating," that "Jordan has been so spoiled and pampered by his special treatment that he expects a trip to the foul line every time an opponent gets near him, and he whines if he doesn't get it.... The prevailing ethic in American sports used to be teamwork, fair play, and rooting for the underdog. Michael Jordan has inverted this ethic" (*ibid*). Others noted that Jordan was so competitive and obsessed with winning that he was downright "predatory," as teammate Luc Longley put it: "Opposing player Danny Ainge described Jordan as destroying one opponent like 'an assassin who comes to kill you and then cut your heart out.' Jordan, 'skilled at verbal blood sport,' is hard on teammates and harder still, even merciless, in baiting and belittling his nemesis, [Chicago Bulls general manager] Jerry Krause" (Novak 1999: X3).

Furthermore, his obsession with wealth, highlighted in Spike Lee's nickname for Jordan -- "Money" -- circulates capitalist values and ideals, promoting the commercialization of sports and

greed, which many claim has despoiled the noble terrain of sports. Jordan is the prototypical overachiever, pushing to win at all costs with his eyes on the prize of the rewards of success and winning. Moreover, as noted, so far, Jordan has not assumed the political responsibilities taken on by other athletic idols of his race such as Jessie Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, or Muhammad Ali. As Touré put it:

Any cause he might have championed -- from something as morally simple as supporting the candidacy of fellow North Carolinian Harvey Gant, who lost two close Senate races against Satan's cousin, Jesse Helms, to any stand against any sort of American injustice--would have been taken seriously because it was endorsed by Jordan. Yet as careful as he has been at vacuuming every possible penny into his pocket... he has been equally diligent about leaving every bit of political potential on the table. Couldn't the world's greatest endorser have sold us something besides shoes? (Village Voice, January 27-February 5, 1999).

Jordan has generally symbolized the decline of politics and replacement of all social values by monetary ones that has characterized the turn-of-the-millenium global economy. Such issues are relevant in assessing the Jordan-effect because superstar celebrities such as Michael Jordan mobilize desire into specific role models, ideals of behavior, and values. They produce an active fantasy life whereby individuals dream that they can "be like Mike," to cite the mantra of the Gatorade commercial, and emulate their idol's behavior and values. Thus, part of the "Jordan-effect" is the creation of role models, cultural ideals, values, and modes of behavior, and thus scrutiny of what sort of values and behavior the Jordan spectacle promotes is relevant to assessing the cultural significance of the phenomenon.

Because the figures and spectacles of media culture play such an important role in the culture it is therefore important to develop critical insight into how media culture is constructed and functions. In this chapter, I have attempted to theorize the role of the sports spectacle and in particular the significance of the Jordan/Nike nexus in postindustrial America and to articulate the importance for media culture of sports and the representations of a black superstar. I have tried to provide critical insights into the contradictory meanings and effects of the sports spectacle, the ways that sports provides figures and ideologies to reproduce existing values, and the complex meanings and effects of a superstar such as Michael Jordan.

Insight into how media culture works and generates social meanings and ideologies requires a critical media literacy that empowers individuals and undermines the mesmerizing and manipulative aspects of the media spectacle (Kellner 1995 and 1998). Critical cultural studies is thus necessary to help demystify media culture and produce insights into contemporary society and culture. Reflection on the Nike/Jordan nexus reminds us that media culture is one of the sites of construction of the sports/entertainment colossus and of the icons of contemporary society. Media culture is also the stage in which our social conflicts are played out and our social reality is constructed, so the ways that the dynamics of gender, race, class, and dominant values are played out is crucial for the construction of individual and society in contemporary culture. Since Michael Jordan embodies crucial dynamics of media culture, it is important to understand how the Jordan image functions, its manifold and contradictory effects, and the ways that the Jordan sports/entertainment spectacle embodies social meanings. Since the Jordan adventure is not yet over, his figure remains a source of fascination that should evoke evaluative scrutiny by critical cultural studies and social theory.

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### Notes

\*My comments on the sports spectacle and use of Debord draws on work with Steve Best in our book *The Postmodern Turn* (Guilford, 1997). Thanks to David Andrews for providing material and comments which have helped with the production of this study.

[1]. On the China and Bosnia references, see Dan McGraw and Mike Tharp, "Going out on top," U.S. News and World Report, January 25, 1999: 55. Summing up Jordan's achievements, Jerry Crowe writes: "His resume includes five most-valuable-player awards, 12 All-Star appearances, two Olympic gold medals and a worldwide popularity that filled arenas and boosted the stock of the companies with which he was affiliated" (Los Angeles Times, January 13, 1999: D1). In addition, he garnered six NBA championship rings, ten NBA scoring titles (a record); a 31.5 regular-season scoring average (best of all times), a record 63 points in a playoff game, 5,987 career playoff points (best all time), and made the game-winning shot a record 26 times during his NBA career. Tributes included: Indiana coach Bob Knight who mentored the budding superstar in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics called Jordan: "the greatest basketball player ever... the best player involved in a team sport of any kind"; Coach Pat Riley of the Miami Heat called him "the greatest influence that sports has ever had."; Jerry West, former NBA superstar and executive vice president of the Los Angeles Lakers, called him "the modern day Babe Ruth"; Jason Williams of the New Jersey Nets sanctified him as "Jesus in tennis shoes" (*ibid*), adding to the Jordan religious iconography coined by Boston Celtics great Larry Bird who marveled "God disguised as Michael Jordan" after Jordan scored 63 points against the Celtics in a 1986 playoff game.

[2]. Halberstam, quoted in People, January 25, 1999: 56. In its front page story on Jordan's retirement, USA Today "employed three 'greats,' five 'greatests,' one 'greatness,' two 'marvelous,' three 'extraordinaries,' one 'unbelievable,' one 'unmatched,' two 'awe-inspirings,' two 'staggerings,' one 'superstar'" and a superhybolic "great superstar" (Sports Illustrated, January 25, 1999: 32). Television talking heads commenting on Jordan's retirement speculated if he would run for President or "compete with Bill Gates in the business arena" (*ibid*), while in a completely earnest front-page story the Chicago Tribune suggested that Jordan could be an astronaut (cited in Time, January 25, 1999": 68). But the winner in the Michael Jordan Retirement Hyperbole Contest is Bill Plaschke: "Hearing that you'll never see Michael Jordan play competitive basketball again is hearing that sunsets have been canceled. That star-filled skies have been revoked. That babies are no longer allowed to smile" (Los Angeles Times, January 12, 1999: D1).

[3]. 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.

[4]. For the complex events that led Jordan to this seemingly bizarre decision, see Smith 1995 and Halberstam 1999. During 1993, Jordan's gambling habits were criticized and increasingly the subject of scrutiny, and when his father was mysteriously murdered there were speculations that the murder was related to gambling debts, the NBA intensified its scrutiny of Jordan, and he abruptly quit basketball to pursue a quixotic and failed minor league baseball career, returning to professional basketball 18 months later to achieve his greatest athletic triumphs.

[5]. This line frequently appeared in interviews upon Jordan's retirement by Mark Vancil who edited the *Rare Air Jordan* photography books and has been regularly promoted by commentators since the mid-1990s. Frank Deford argued in the *Sports Illustrated* collector's issue published after Jordan's retirement that Jordan is not "a creature of color" and transcends the racial divisions that have so sundered U.S. society. Matthew DeBord has recently written that Jordan is "trans-racial, the first African American cultural hero to massively evade blaxploitation by rising above it, elevating to a zone of rarefied commerce where the only pigment that anyone worries about is green" (1999). At times in Jordan's reception, this transcendence of race appears to be taking place, but such claims ignore the negative press of 1993 and the fact that African Americans celebrities can easily become whipping boys as well as poster boys. For a more nuanced analysis of the stages of Jordan's racial signification, see Andrews in this volume. For a critique of the oft-cited claim that Jordan transcends race, see the article by Leon E. Wynter, "The Jordan Effect: What's race got to do with it?" *Salon* (January 29, 1999).

[6]. Of course, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and the civil rights movement did more to dramatize the plight of African Americans, but I would argue that sports and entertainment helped promote the interests of blacks and that the tremendous achievements of black athletes, music performers, and entertainers were essential in getting mainstream America to accept and respect blacks and to allow them into the mainstream -- in however limited and problematic a fashion.

[7]. For a detailed critique of Young's report, see the study by Grass 1997.

[8]. On the concept of sign value, see Baudrillard 1981; Goldman 1992; and Goldman and Papson 1996.