



## Life as Show Time: Aesthetic Images and Ideological Spectacles

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*"The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."*

- Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

On September 11, 2001, many of us experienced life as what it is not: we "lived" an extreme instance of the spectacle, of the sublime outside the realm of ethics. Starting with a few compelling questions that the media representations of the attack on the New York World Trade Center inevitably raise, this paper explores a series of similarities, continuums, and extrapolations of the aesthetic in different types of discourse from Friedrich Schiller to Guy Debord.

My assessment of the individual's "dissolution in the ritual" (former dissident and present Czech President Václav Havel's phrase) rejects the bleak Marxist theories of manipulation, without overlooking, at the same time, the potential dangers of unfreedom that the process of surrendering to the spectacle implies. Living life as show time may ultimately, and oxymoronicly, prove to be the only option toward an infinitude of choices. Otherwise, how could one explain this at first glance outrageous aesthetic response to an image of utter destruction: an airliner's crash into a building and the end in only a few seconds of thousands of lives? In what ways does a post-

industrial, consumerist society influence – or, indeed, determine – the individual’s perception of reality and, implicitly, his self-identity? What role does the aesthetic play in this coordination or, as some cultural theorists would call it, manipulation or exercise of power? Does the individual’s transformation into a mass subject enhance his identity and dignity, or does it, rather, presage the dawn of another kind of dictatorship, of a more “subtle” type of post-totalitarian society? This paper brings forward the most relevant concepts that these questions involve – aesthetics, consumerism, mass culture, artistic reproduction, images, spectacle, politics, and ideology – and puts them in as meaningful a perspective as possible by touching on a number of different theoretical angles. Besides the testimonies of the “usual suspects” and the most authoritative voices in the field – Friedrich Schiller, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Fredric Jameson, and Guy Debord – the paper also engages Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise*. Although aware that we all share the overregulated space of a mass culture that makes our perceptions part of a common denominator, the study sheds some light on this limitless world of reproductions and representations – images and spectacles – that I would call “life as show time.”

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My reaction to the images of the terrorist attack in New York (with emphasis on *images*) was in no way unique. In a letter to the editor, a reader of *Time*, for instance, was writing in the September 24 issue of the magazine: “The photos taken by James Nachtwey [*Time* photographer] capture the aftermath of that dastardly act like no others I’ve seen. Many of his pictures conjure up the surreal. It is ironic that his mastery of light and his magnificent photographic eye have actually made such devastation look artistically beautiful.” The impression of irony must have originated in that instinctual tendency of conceiving beauty outside of the realm of evil, which I have mentioned before. On second thought, however, it could be that the perception of beauty, or the aesthetic experience, takes place outside the boundaries of morality perhaps because it escapes the control of reason, and thus never becomes conceptualized. According to Herbert Marcuse,

the aesthetic perception is essentially intuition, not notion. [...] The aesthetic perception is accompanied by pleasure. This pleasure derives from the perception of the pure *form* of an object, regardless of its matter and of its (internal or external) ‘purpose.’ An object represented in its pure form is ‘beautiful.’ Such representation is the work (or rather the play) of *imagination*. [...] Although sensuous and therefore receptive, the aesthetic imagination is creative: in a free synthesis of its own, it constitutes *beauty*. (Marcuse, 1969, “The Aesthetic Dimension,” pp. 176-177)

Consequently, if the *Time* reader and I perceived the “pure form” of the event, that is, its visual representation, as beautiful “regardless of its matter” – which turned out to be violent death and destruction – are we to find solace in the fact that the aesthetic experience is not “notion,” and thus our pleasure did not border on perversity but came to us “intuitively”? Whereas the *Time* reader assigned the images a surreal, i. e., dreamlike, effect, I received them at first as the figment of a Hollywood director’s imagination. “Like imagination, which is its constitutive mental faculty, the realm of aesthetics is essentially ‘unrealistic,’” writes Marcuse, “it has retained its freedom from the reality principle at the price of being ineffective in the reality” (Marcuse, 1969, “The Aesthetic Dimension,” p. 173).

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse recognizes this “unrealistic” field of human activity by calling it the “aesthetic dimension”; it is here that the individual attempts to

reconcile “the two spheres of the human existence [the rational and the sensual] which were torn asunder by a repressive reality principle. The mediating function is performed by the aesthetic faculty, which is akin to sensuousness, pertaining to the senses” (Marcuse, 1969, “The Aesthetic Dimension,” p. 179). Marcuse’s admirable, if sometimes forced, blending of aesthetic theory with Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxist sociology echoes to a certain extent, by its Utopian tone, the concept of beauty as defined by Friedrich Schiller in late-eighteenth-century Germany (Thuringia). The intersection of the semantic field of Marcuse’s “aesthetic dimension” (the locus of our “intuitive” perception of beauty) with the German philosopher’s “aesthetic unity” is quite noticeable. “Since in the enjoyment of beauty, or aesthetic unity, an actual *union and interchange between matter and form*, passivity and activity, momentarily takes place,” Schiller explains, “the compatibility of our two natures, the practicability of the infinite being realized in the finite, hence the possibility of sublimest humanity, is thereby actually proven” (Schiller, 1982, p. 189; emphasis added).

In his definition of beauty, Schiller points to its twofold locus, one in the object itself that the subject perceives and one in the perceiving subject, that is, he distinguishes the two-way movement of the aesthetic experience: on the one hand, the object “offers” its beauty for contemplation, and on the other hand, the subject is in a “predisposition” to receive it.

Beauty is *an object* for us, because reflection is the condition of our having any sensation of it; but it is at the same time *a state of the perceiving subject*, because feeling is a condition of our having any perception of it. Thus beauty is indeed *form*, because we contemplate it; but it is at the same time *life*, because we feel it [emphases added]. In a word: it is at once a state of our being and an activity we perform. And just because it is both these things at once, beauty provides us with triumphant proof that passivity by no means excludes activity, nor matter form, nor limitation infinity – that, in consequence, *the moral freedom of man is by no means abrogated through his inevitable dependence upon physical things*. (Schiller, 1982, p. 187; emphasis added)

Schiller’s description of beauty confirms to a large extent the etymology of the word, which originates from the Greek *aisthētikos*, meaning “of sense perception,” respectively from *aisthēta*, which stands for “perceptible things,” and finally from *aisthanesthai*, “to perceive.” The “aesthetic” thus seems to cover the whole family of meanings related to the ability to perceive, to the quality of being open to perception, and to the act of perceiving.

However, as soon as Schiller brings the “moral freedom of man” into the equation, he takes his theory onto a Utopian territory that Marcuse is reluctant to tread on. Marcuse’s viewpoint is that, through his “dependence upon physical things,” the individual *is* indeed put into a false position and undergoes a process of alienation thanks to the manipulative practices of a consumerist society. “Possession and procurement of the necessities of life are the prerequisite, rather than the content, of a free society,” maintains Marcuse. “The realm of necessity, of labor, is one of unfreedom because the human existence in this realm is determined by objectives and functions that are not its own and that do not allow the free play of human faculties and desires” (Marcuse, 1969, “The Aesthetic Dimension,” p. 195). This idea from *Eros and Civilization* also occupies a central place in the chapter “The New Forms of Control” from *One-Dimensional Man*, in which Marcuse starts his argument by introducing the category of “false needs”; according to him, this includes “most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the

advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate” (Marcuse, 1964, “The New Forms of Control,” p. 5). Of course, one also needs to consider the two different historical moments in which Schiller and Marcuse are discussing the relationship between the individual and the surrounding physical objects. While Schiller, in late eighteenth century, must have had *original* objects in mind, Marcuse, as inhabitant of a modern mass culture and member of a more and more pregnantly consumerist society, the Western Europe of the late 1960s, quite likely refers to reproductions without originals. In an advanced industrial society, “the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefaction [*sic*]; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets” (Marcuse, 1964, “The New Forms of Control,” p. 7). In Marcuse’s theory, the individual is in a false position for another reason as well: while his needs might be false and artificially maintained, they are nonetheless fulfilling his existence and lending it a warped sense of happiness. “[The] satisfaction [of ‘false needs’] might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness” (Marcuse, 1964, “The New Forms of Control,” p. 5).

The “disease of the whole” to which Marcuse refers in *One-Dimensional Man* comes quite close, conceptually, to Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle” (more on that later), basically another designation for artificially – and also artistically – mediated social relationships; the most concrete form of the “disease” is nothing else than the individual’s blindness towards his constant need to consume commodities and commodified images, and ultimately also towards his manipulation into keeping the need to consume alive. It could be their fundamental Marxist streak that creates several points of articulation between Marcuse’s and Debord’s sociocultural theories, but I will refrain from speculating on causes, but point out, instead, the affinities themselves. In “The New Forms of Control,” Marcuse makes it clear that the products brought into the social limelight by the manipulative “false needs” (which I have mentioned before) inevitably lead to a false consciousness: “The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life” (Marcuse, 1964, “The New Forms of Control,” p. 12). It might sound like a paradox, but after a closer look the impression is immediately lost: the immunity against falsehood comes about, as I understand Marcuse’s argument, because of and in the absence of an objective point of reference. False consciousness feeds on its own reality, which we have just qualified as false (false needs and manipulative commodities), so ultimately it all boils down to the simple logical sentence of two negations producing an affirmation – falsehood becomes truth. In Guy Debord’s words, “Reality erupts within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and underpinning of society as it exists. In a world that really has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood” (Debord, 1999, p. 14). Debord’s pivotal concept of the “spectacle” inevitably leads me to think of Marcuse’s “mimesis.” “Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual,” emphasizes Marcuse, “and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined

to the factory. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is, not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society and, through it, with the society as a whole” (Marcuse, 1964, “The New Forms of Control,” p. 10). As I read Marcuse’s argument, the individual identifies himself with both “his society and the society as a whole” in response to the mediation of images (the “processes of introjection”). In this context, society is, after all, an abstraction.

From Marcuse’s “mimesis,” Debord’s “spectacle” is only one step away. By identifying himself with his society, the individual, who has already been put in a false position, does nothing but to perpetuate the *status quo*, which, in its turn, reinforces the individual’s false position. The deceiver deceives himself. It is a self-reflexive kind of dynamic which one could visualize by the postmodernist image of the serpent eating its own tail: simultaneous consumption and regeneration keep the cycle alive, or, as Debord would say, “The tendency toward the specialization of images-of-the-world finds its highest expression in the world of the autonomous image, where deceit deceives itself. The spectacle in its generality is a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life” (Debord, 1999, p. 12). Let us make it clear, at this point in our survey, that Debord’s “spectacle” is not merely “representation,” something related to “show,” “performance,” or just an assemblage of images, but “rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.” Therefore, in the society of the spectacle (also the title of Debord’s work), “all that once was directly lived has become mere representation” (p. 12). And as it is more often than not the case, a mediated or “represented” kind of existence can only lead to the individual’s alienation – another common territory that Debord shares with his Marxist colleague Marcuse.

Marcuse’s stance on alienation seems at times uncertain and reveals a certain degree of stoicism. Although loss of identity is deemed as regrettable, the individual’s identification with the surrounding world of commodities (the “mimesis” or Debord’s “spectacle”) brings about, paradoxically, a newfound identity – be it, as it is, the result of social control. According to the German philosopher,

this [post-industrial] civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man’s mind and body makes the very notion of alienation questionable. The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced. (Marcuse, 1964, “The New Forms of Control,” p. 9)

While alienation becomes indeed questionable in this context of man-world relationships, the newfound identities do not seem rock-solid either, if only considering that they will always have to keep up with the ever-renewing (false) needs that are supposed to maintain social control.

Quite similarly to Marcuse, Debord views alienation as a Catch-22 type of situation, in which conformity with the system leads to loss of identity, while at the same time non-conformity with it results in a newfound (but false) identity – all of which, ultimately, assures the perpetuation of the spectacle. “The spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. [...] The spectator feels at home nowhere, for the

spectacle is everywhere” (Debord, 1999, p. 23). This inescapable space that Debord points out to us is fictionalized in a masterly way in Peter Weir’s 1998 film *The Truman Show*. One of the central themes of Weir’s visual narrative is the chimera of free choice that an individual living literally “in the spectacle” comes to recognize and dramatically tries to reject. In a nutshell, it is the same Marcusean motif of alienation all over again, with emphasis on the subtlety and technical mastery of the manipulation. The mirage of freedom, supported by and within a system of predetermined choices, constitutes perhaps the most cynical, and definitely the most effective, tool of exercising power. In Marcuse’s words,

Under the rule of a repressive whole, *liberty can be made into a powerful instrument of domination*. The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but *what* can be chosen and what *is* chosen by the individual. [...] Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation. (Marcuse, 1964, pp. 7-8)

Marcuse’s gloomy rhetoric (domination, masters, slaves, toil, and fear) has lost, I believe, the socially militant power and revolutionary appeal that it used to exhibit about thirty years ago. Let us be clear about it: the issues themselves – consumerism, false needs, self-identification with commodities, etc. – remain in the forefront of human concerns and are still addressed by laymen and professionals (sociologists, politicians, cultural theorists, psychologists, and writers) alike; it is just a slight, but nevertheless visible, shift in tone and perspective that distances more recent theories from Marcuse’s viewpoint. It seems that optimism has elbowed its way into the spectacle. “Manipulative” culture is out; mediating culture, rich in signs and messages, is in. “What we must ask the sociologists of manipulation,” proposes Fredric Jameson, “is whether they really inhabit the same world we do. [...] I will say that culture, far from being an occasional matter of the reading of a monthly good book or a trip to the drive-in, seems to me the very element of consumer society itself; no society has ever been saturated with signs and messages like this one” (Jameson, 1979, p. 139). So there is nothing to be afraid of: this is the society of the “white noise.”

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The question is not anymore whether we live in a society of preimposed choices, or whether it is good or bad to identify ourselves with the commodities for which we feel the need to buy, but rather, in what way are our choices mediated (or, to use a Marcusean word, “introjected”) in order to reach our consciousness, or what is our place in a world overfilled with codes, signs, and messages. As images gain more and more terrain as methods of representation, the aesthetic dimension (Marcuse, Jameson) envelopes our consumerist society. “Everything in consumer society has taken on an aesthetic dimension,” writes Fredric Jameson. “This is [...] the triumph of instrumentalization over that ‘finality without an end’ which is art itself, the steady conquest and colonization of the ultimate realm of non-practicality, of sheer play and anti-use, by the logic of the world of means and ends” (Jameson, 1979, p. 132). Interestingly enough, it is a kind of relationship in which the conqueror (the aesthetic) is being assimilated by the conquered (the sphere of commodities). Thus, the ultimate commodity becomes the image itself (as seen in Debord’s theory of the spectacle), so it is not so much things that we consume nowadays but their representations offered to

us by the whole system, or industry, of advertisement. “The spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life,” Debord tells us. “It is not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see – commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity” (Debord, 1999, p. 29). This last sentence spells out quite explicitly the crucial shift in perspective that I have mentioned before – the system of mediation by representation (the world of the spectacle, if you wish) has come to bear more relevance than the commodities themselves. And let us emphasize again that it is not an appendix, a mere excrescence of the concrete world of commodities that we are looking at here, but a driving attitude – if not the *only* and most basic attitude – of post-industrial society. “The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a *weltanschauung* [*sic*] that has been actualized, translated into the material realm – a world view transformed into an objective force” (Debord, 1999, pp. 12-13). It is actually the *Weltanschauung* that marks Don DeLillo’s postmodernist novel *White Noise*.

Jack Gladney is chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill and, as a first-person narrator, serves as DeLillo’s candid camera. He lives with his wife Babette, their four children, Denise, Steffie, Wilder, and Heinrich in a world of objects that seem to transcend their being as physical things and become, through brand names and TV images, an integral part of the characters’ psychosomatic lives. For instance, the lead paragraph of the novel contains, as usually lead paragraphs go, all the tell-tale signs of the world into which Jack Gladney’s narrative is about to take us. The paragraph abounds with long, detailed, and very specific lists of objects that appear from a long line of station wagons that bring new and returning students to Jack’s campus. The enumeration of objects, some of them mentioned by their brand names, like Waffelos and Kabooms, Dum-Dum pops, and Mysytic mints, render the reader’s need to learn more about the students themselves superfluous. We know only that much: the world of this novel will be a world of consumers, a mass of undifferentiated voices that have been turned all into a huge mass subject. Whether it is Jack’s (the narrator’s) voice that we hear, or Heinrich’s (his son’s), or that of Murray Jay Siskind (Jack’s new colleague and the novel’s would-be *raisonneur*), there are no specific tone, diction, dialect, or age characteristics that would normally give away each individual’s personality. They all sound like DeLillo’s *porte-paroles*, simple bullhorns through which he gets across his novel’s themes and messages to us. Nevertheless, characters are defined, instead, by their individual relationships not only with each other but first and foremost with the objects that they own or those that surround them and fill their daily lives. The minutely descriptive details that the narrator allots to objects – indeed, they are more often than not introduced in paraphrases instead of only one word, like “the cartoon-character disposal baskets with swinging doors,” for instance – serve nothing else than to bring them into the foreground of the novel as markers, signifiers, codes of a world of representations.

Ownership of commodities even acquires ontological dimensions. Wondering about the nature, wealth, and social position of people wearing plaid skirts, cable-knit sweaters, or hacking jackets (all dress-code signifiers), Jack and Babette have the following exchange: “‘I have trouble imagining death at that income level,’ she [Babette] said. ‘Maybe there is no death as we know it. Just documents [i. e., representations of death] changing hands’” (DeLillo, 1999, p. 6). Furthermore, the urge to buy even imbues the ethical world of the characters. Babette seems to be

addicted to buying yogurt and wheat germ without ever getting to consume all the quantity she has bought. Denise's (another impersonal *raisonneur* of the novel) comment is, "She feels guilty if she doesn't buy it, she feels guilty if she buys it and doesn't eat it, she feels guilty when she sees it in the fridge, she feels guilty when she throws it away" (DeLillo, 1999, p. 7). However, taking possession of objects is not limited to buying only: encapsulating an object in a representation, such as a photograph, and thus appropriating it, can also become a source of gratification.

On one occasion, Jack and Murray undertake a trip to "the most photographed barn in America." Murray's reflections on the barn's being constantly photographed by tourists reveal, in a wittily constructed and very suggestive fictional image, the naked core of the spectacle. "We're not here to capture an image," Murray tells Jack, "we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. [...] An accumulation of nameless energies" (DeLillo, 1999, p. 12). What Murray means is that the barn has ceased to exist as soon as they, as well as the other tourists, have seen *the signs about the barn* – therefore, it is not the image of the barn that is being photographed but the image of that image. After a moment of silence, Murray continues: "Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. [...] We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism. They are taking pictures of taking pictures" (DeLillo, 1999, p. 12). Fredric Jameson also uses the example of taking pictures as taking possession of an image, and not of an object, in order to point out the replacement of the physical qualities of commodities by qualities more likely to provide satisfaction, such as the gratifying feeling of ownership. In his words,

the objects of the commodity world of capitalism shed their independent 'being' and intrinsic qualities and come to be so many instruments of commodity satisfaction: the familiar example is that of tourism – the American tourist no longer lets the landscape 'be in its being' as Heidegger would have said, but takes a snapshot of it, thereby graphically transforming space into its own material image. The concrete activity of looking at a landscape [...] is thus comfortably replaced by the act of taking possession of it and converting it into a form of personal property. (Jameson, 1979, p. 131)

Jameson recognizes that images have acquired, or have been invested with, the power to replace the "innocent" activity of contemplation with the seemingly more aggressive one of appropriation – a clear hallmark of a capitalist mode of life.

In the most-photographed-barn episode, Jack and Murray are absorbed by the mass of tourists: they thus constitute themselves, along with everybody else, into a mass subject. However, the aggressiveness inherent in taking possession of material images may also have an almost perverse character when it comes to images of human loss of life – accidents, plane crashes, train collision, earthquakes, etc. – the kind of perversity I have mentioned to have sensed while contemplating the image of an airplane slamming into a New York skyscraper. In a conversation with his popular culture colleague Alfonse Stompanato, Jack mentions the entertaining effect that catastrophic images on TV had on him and his family the evening before. "Why is it, Alfonse," asks Jack, "that decent, well-meaning and responsible people find themselves intrigued by catastrophe when they see it on television?" Alfonse's answer is plain and direct: "Because we're suffering from brain fade. We need an occasional catastrophe to break up the incessant bombardment of information" (DeLillo, 1999, p. 65). In "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," Michael Warner links the popularity of images of disaster to the desire of the mass subject to become a simultaneous witness body:



“[...] Whatever kind of reward makes disaster rewarding, it evidently has to do with injury to a *mass* body – an already abstracted body, assembled in simultaneity, but somewhere other than here. [...] Disaster is popular, as it were, because it is a way of making mass subjectivity available, and it tells us something about the desirability of that mass subject” (Warner, 1993, p. 248). The “somewhere other than here” specification is also echoed by DeLillo’s Alfonse when he explains to Jack that we need catastrophes as long as they happen somewhere else, like in California (DeLillo, 1999, p. 66).

Jack’s professional interest in the Fascist spectacle is not accidental either. He is fascinated with crowd scenes, scenes “that [resemble] a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire,” in which there is “no narrative voice,” but “only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks” (DeLillo, 1999, pp. 25-26). His naming one of his sons Heinrich serves – only apparently – a self-indulging purpose: “I thought it had an authority that might cling to him. I thought it was forceful and impressive... I wanted to shield him, make him unafraid. [...] There’s something about German names, the German language, German *things*. I don’t know what it is exactly. It’s just there. In the middle of it all is Hitler, of course” (DeLillo, 1999, p. 63). [The last name that first comes to mind in association with “Heinrich” would be that of Himmler, Hitler’s SS chief.] Considering the obvious *roman-à-thèse* character of DeLillo’s novel, I believe he is deliberately making use, in a fictional form, of Walter Benjamin’s theory of the aestheticization of politics by Fascism. “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life,” writes Benjamin. “The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 241). In this light, Debord’s spectacle acquires much more relevance as an aesthetic construct ruling over and determining human relationships both between individuals and between each individual and society as a whole. If DeLillo’s tone is ironic at best, the makers of the 1998 film *Wag the Dog*, writers Hillary Henkin and David Mamet, and director Barry Levinson, use comedy as their medium of choice in yet another artistic representation of the clash between aesthetics and politics.

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It is quite commonplace to say that nowadays we cannot relate to the world at large anymore in any other way than through representations – textual but mostly audio-visual – of events taking place thousands of miles afar from us. After the September 11 terrorist attack, one of my students at the University of Miami, shared the following thought with me in one of his journal entries: “I can’t wait to see what happens next. This is exactly the way the media want me to feel. CNN, as well as all other news sources, is selling the public a dramatic interpretation of the real events. Stories are introduced with patriotic theme music and subtitles that read ‘America Strikes Back’ and ‘Operation Enduring Freedom.’” Expressed in a characteristically informal fashion, it is about the same idea that Michael Warner brings forth in “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject”: “Mass media *thematize* certain materials – a jet crash, Michael Jackson’s latest surgery, a football game – in order to find a way of constructing their audiences as mass audiences. These contents then function culturally as *metalinguages*, giving meaning to the medium. In consuming the thematic materials of mass media discourse, persons construct themselves as its mass subject” (Warner, 1993, p. 254; emphases added). My sophomore student was obviously trying to resist becoming a “mass subject.”

In his discussion of Benjamin's work, Lutz Koepnick draws a tentative parallel between the Third Reich and the postmodern spectacle: "[...] Both the Third Reich and the postmodern spectacle aestheticize politics with the hope of annulling the complexity of modern society – of reconciling incompatible practices, discourses, value spheres, and social subsystems. Whether Nazi or postmodern in origin, aesthetic politics turns political values into aesthetic experiences in order to do away with [...] the hallmark of the modern condition – namely, cognitive, normative, or functional differentiation" (Koepnick, 1999, p. 2). I will end my argument on this note after going full circle and making it clear one last time that none of us can escape the world of aesthetic images and mediating spectacles (and I am deliberately avoiding the word "manipulating" here). Living life as show time does not carry, ultimately, the pejorative connotation of which some Marxist theorists of the manipulation would like to convince us.

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