1 Media culture and the triumph of the spectacle

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

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

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

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

contours and trajectories of contemporary societies and cultures, at least in the advanced capitalist countries, while media spectacle has also become a defining feature of globalization.

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

Guy Debord and the society of the spectacle

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

Building on this concept, I argue that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas, sporting 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 media sensationalism, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, and the new phenomenon of Terror War. Thus, while Debord presents a rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle, I engage specific examples of media spectacle and how they are produced, constructed, circulated, and function in the present era.

As we enter a new millennium, the media are becoming more technologically dazzling and are playing an ever-escalating role in everyday life. Under the influence of a multimedia culture, seductive spectacles fascinate the denizens of the media and consumer society and involve them in the semiotics of a new world of entertainment, information, and consumption, which deeply influences 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 (ibid.: Section 18). According to Debord, sight, "the most abstract, the most mystified sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present day society" (ibid.).

Experience and everyday life are thus shaped and mediated by the spectacles of media culture and the consumer society. For Debord, the spectacle is a tool of

pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war" (ibid.: Section 44), which stupefies social subjects and distracts them from the most urgent task of real life – recovering the full range of their human powers through creative practice. The concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation and passivity, for in submissively consuming spectacles one is estranged from actively producing one's life. Capitalist society separates workers from the products of their labor, art from life, and consumption from human needs and self-directing activity, as individuals inertly observe the spectacles of social life from within the privacy of their homes (ibid.: Sections 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 correlate of the spectacle, for Debord, is thus the spectator, the reactive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the cultivation of marketable difference. The concept of the spectacle therefore involves a distinction between passivity and activity, consumption and production, condemning lifeless consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination. The spectacular society spreads its wares mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture. This structural shift to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life. Parallel to the Frankfurt School conception of a "totally administered" or "one-dimensional" society (Marcuse 1964; Horkheimer and Adorno 1972), Debord states that: "The spectacle is the moment when the consumption has attained the *total occupation* of social life" (1967: Section 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" (ibid.: Section 42).

Since Debord's theorization of the society of the spectacle in the 1960s and 1970s, spectacle culture has expanded in every area of life. In the culture of the spectacle, commercial enterprises have to be entertaining to prosper and, as Michael J. Wolf (1999) argues, in an "entertainment economy," business and fun fuse, so that the E-factor is becoming a major aspect of business.[2] Through the "entertainmentization" of the economy, entertainment forms such as television, film, theme parks, video games, casinos, and so forth become major sectors of the national economy. In the United States, the entertainment industry is now a $480 billion industry, and consumers spend more on having fun than on clothes or health care (Wolf 1999: 4).[3]

In a competitive business world, the "fun factor" can give one business the edge over another. Hence, corporations seek to be more entertaining in their commercials, their business environment, their commercial spaces, and their websites. Budweiser ads, for instance, feature talking frogs that tell us nothing about the beer, but which catch the viewers' attention, while Taco Bell deploys a talking dog and Pepsi uses *Star Wars* characters. Buying, shopping, and dining out are coded as an "experience," as businesses adopt a theme-park style. Places such as the Hard Rock Cafe and the House

of Blues are not renowned for their food, after all; people go there for the ambience, to purchase House of Blues paraphernalia, and to view music and media memorabilia. It is no longer good enough just to have a website, it has to be an interactive spectacle, featuring not only products to buy, but music and videos to download, games to play, prizes to win, travel information, and "links to other cool sites."

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

Celebrity too is manufactured and managed in the world of media spectacle. Celebrities are the icons of media culture, the gods and goddesses of everyday life. To become a celebrity requires recognition as a star player in the field of media spectacle, be it sports, entertainment, fashion, or politics. Celebrities have their handlers and image managers, who make sure that their clients continue to be seen and positively perceived by the public. Just as with corporate brand names, celebrities become brands to sell their Madonna, Michael Jordan, Tom Cruise, or Jennifer Lopez product and image. In a media culture, however, celebrities are always prey to scandal and thus must have at their disposal an entire public relations apparatus to manage their spectacle fortunes and to make sure that they not only maintain high visibility but keep projecting a positive image. Of course, within limits, "bad" and transgressions can also sell, and so media spectacle contains celebrity dramas that attract public attention and can even define an entire period, as when the O. J. Simpson murder trials and Bill Clinton sex scandals dominated the media in the mid- and late 1990s.

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

For Neil Gabler, in an era of media spectacle, life itself is becoming like a movie and we create our own lives as a genre like film, or television, in which we become "at once performance artists in, and audiences for, a grand, ongoing show" (Gabler 1998: 4). In Gabler's view, we star in our own "lifies," making our lives into entertainment acted out for audiences of our peers, following the scripts of media culture, adopting

its role models and fashion types, its style and look. Seeing our lives in cinematic terms, entertainment becomes, for Gabler, "arguably the most pervasive, powerful and ineluctable force of our time – a force so overwhelming that it has metastasized into life" to such an extent that it is impossible to distinguish between the two (ibid.: 9). As Gabler sees it, Ralph Lauren is our fashion expert; Martha Stewart designs our sets; Jane Fonda models our shaping of our bodies; and Oprah Winfrey advises us on our personal problems.[4]

Media spectacle is indeed a culture of celebrity which provides dominant role models and icons of fashion, look, and personality. In the world of spectacle, celebrity encompasses every major social domain from entertainment to politics to sports to business. An ever-expanding public relations industry hypes certain figures, elevating them to celebrity status, and protects their positive image in the never-ending image wars. For there is always the danger that a celebrity will fall prey to the hazards of negative image and thus lose celebrity status, or become a negative figure, as will some of the players and institutions of media spectacle that I examine in these studies.

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

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

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

kettles rise three stories. There is even a climbing wall for kids and showroom space for car dealerships'" (Ritzer 1998: 229).

Film has long been a fertile field of the spectacle, with "Hollywood" connoting a world of glamour, publicity, fashion, and excess. Hollywood has exhibited grand movie palaces, spectacular openings with searchlights and camera-popping paparazzi, glamorous Oscars, and stylish, hi-tech films. Although epic spectacle became a dominant genre of Hollywood film, from early versions of *The Ten Commandments* through *Cleopatra* and *2001* in the 1960s, contemporary film has incorporated the mechanics of spectacle into its form, style, and special effects. Films are hyped into spectacle through advertising and trailers that are ever louder, more glitzy, and razzle-dazzling. Some of the most popular films of the late 1990s were spectacle films, including *Titanic*, *Star Wars – Phantom Menace*, *Three Kings*, and *Austin Powers*, a spoof of spectacle, which became one of the most successful films of summer 1999. During the fall of 1999, there was a cycle of spectacles, including *Topsy Turvy, Titus, Cradle Will Rock, Sleepy Hollow, The Insider*, and *Magnolia*, with the last featuring the biblical spectacle of the raining of frogs in the San Fernando Valley, in an allegory of the decadence of the entertainment industry and its deserved punishment for its excesses.

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

Other 2001 film spectacles included *Pearl Harbor*, which re-enacts the Japanese attack on the United States that propelled the country to enter World War II, and which provided a ready metaphor for the September 11 terrorist attacks. Major 2001 film spectacles ranged from David Lynch's postmodern surrealism in *Mulholland Drive* to Steven Spielberg's blending of his typically sentimental spectacle of the family with the vision of Stanley Kubrick in *AI*. And the popular 2001 military film *Black Hawk Down* provided a spectacle of US military heroism, which some critics believed sugar-coated the real problems with the US military intervention in Somalia. This created fears that future US adventures involving the Bush administration and the Pentagon would meet similar problems. There were reports, however, that in Somalian cinemas there were loud cheers as the Somalians in the film shot down the US helicopter, and pursued and killed US soldiers, attesting to growing anti-US sentiment in the Muslim world against the Bush administration's policies.

Television has been, from its introduction in the 1940s, a promoter of consumption spectacle, selling cars, fashion, home appliances, and other commodities along with consumer lifestyles and values. It is also the home of sports spectacles such as the Super Bowl or World Series, political spectacles such as elections, scandals, and

entertainment spectacles such as the Oscars or Grammies, and its own specialities such as breaking news or special events. Following the logic of spectacle entertainment, contemporary television exhibits more hi-tech glitter, faster and glitzier editing, computer simulations, and, with cable and satellite television, a diverse array of every conceivable type of show and genre.

Television is today a medium of spectacular programs such as *The X-Files* or *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* and spectacles of everyday life such as MTV's *The Real World* and *Road Rules*, or the globally popular *Survivor* and *Big Brother* series. Real-life events, however, took over TV spectacle in 2000–1 in, first, an intense battle for the White House in a dead-heat election that arguably constitutes the greatest political crime and scandal in US history (see Kellner 2001). After months of the Bush administration pushing the most hardright political agenda in memory and then deadlocking as the Democrats took control of the Senate in a dramatic party reaffiliation of Vermont's Jim Jeffords, the world was treated to the most horrifying spectacle of the new millennium, the September 11 terrorist attacks and unfolding Terror War. These events promise an unending series of deadly spectacles for the foreseeable future (see Kellner, forthcoming).

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

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

In fashion today, inherently a consumer spectacle, laser-light shows, top rock and pop music performers, superstar models, and endless hype publicize each new season's offerings, generating highly elaborate and spectacular clothing displays. The consumption spectacle is fundamentally interconnected with fashion, which demonstrates what is in and out, hot and cold, in the buzz world of style and vogue. The stars of the entertainment industry become fashion icons and models

for imitation and emulation. In a postmodern image culture, style and look become increasingly important modes of identity and presentation of the self in everyday life, and the spectacles of media culture show and tell people how to appear and behave.

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

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

Popular music is also colonized by the spectacle, with music-video television (MTV) becoming a major purveyor of music, bringing spectacle into the core of musical production and distribution. Madonna and Michael Jackson would never have become global superstars of popular music without the spectacular production values of their music videos and concert extravaganzas. Both also performed their lives as media spectacle, generating maximum publicity and attention (not always positive!). Michael Jackson attracted attention in 2001 in a TV spectacle in which he reportedly paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to digitally redo the concert footage he appeared in. Jackson had his images retooled so that he would be free of sweat and appear darker than the "real" image, in order to blend in better with his family members, who were performing with him, and to appear as a cooler black to appeal to his fans. In June 2002, the Michael Jackson spectacle took a bizarre

turn when the onetime superstar called the president of Sony records a "racist," in a rally with African American activist Al Sharpton, for not releasing a September 11 single that Jackson had helped to produce and for not adequately promoting his recent album. Within days, there were reports, however, that Jackson was co-producing the September 11 fund-raising song with a child pornography producer, that McDonald's had dropped its sponsorship when it learned of this, and that Sony too had issues with the project.[7] In a culture of the spectacle, public relations and image can thus make or break its celebrities. Indeed, one cannot fully grasp the Madonna phenomenon without analyzing her marketing and publicity strategies, her exploitation of spectacle, and her ability to make herself a celebrity spectacle of the highest order (Kellner 1995).

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

Musical concert extravaganzas are more and more spectacular (and expensive!) and the Internet is providing the spectacle of free music and a new realm of sound through Napster and other technologies, although the state has been battling attempts by young people to utilize P2P (peer to peer) technologies to decommodify culture. Indeed, films, DVDs, sports events, and musical spectacles have been circulating through the Internet in a gift economy that has generated the spectacle of the state attacking those who violate copyright laws that some would claim to be outdated in the culture of hi-tech spectacle.

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

Eroticism has frequently permeated the spectacles of Western culture, and is prominently on display in Hollywood film, as well as in advertisements, clubs, and pornography. Long a major component of advertising, eroticized sexuality has been used to sell every conceivable product. The spectacle of sex is also one of the staples of media culture, permeating all cultural forms and creating its own genres in pornography, one of the highest-grossing domains of media spectacle. In the culture of the spectacle, sex becomes shockingly exotic and diverse through the media of porn videos, DVDs, and Internet sites that make available everything from teen–animal sex to orgies of the most extravagant sort. Technologies of cultural reproduction, such as

home video recorders (VCRs), DVDs, and computers, bring sex more readily into the private recesses of the home. And today the sex spectacle attains more and more exotic forms with multimedia and multisensory eroticism, as envisaged in Huxley's *Brave New World,* on the horizon.[8]

The spectacle of video and computer games has been a major source of youth entertainment and industry profit. In 2001, the US video game industry hit a record $9 billion in sales and it expects to do even better in the next couple of years (*Los Angeles Times*, January 1, 2002: C1). For decades now, video and computer games have obsessed sectors of youth and provided skills needed for the hi-tech dot.com economy, as well as for fighting postmodern war. These games are highly competitive, violent, and provide allegories for life under corporate capitalism and Terror War militarism. In the game *Pacman*, as in the corporate jungle, it's eat or be eaten, just as in air and ground war games, it's kill or be killed. *Grand Theft Auto 3* and *State of Emergency* were two of the most popular games in 2002, with the former involving high-speed races through urban jungles and the latter involving political riots and state repression! While some women and game producers have tried to cultivate kinder, gentler, and more intelligent gaming, the best-selling corporate games are spectacles for predatory capitalism and macho militarism and not a more peaceful, playful, and co-operative world. Indeed, in 2002, the US military developed a highly popular and critically acclaimed computer game, freely available to anyone online for downloading and playing upon registration with the US Army (www.goarmy.com/aagame/index.htm). Promoted as "The Official Army Game," it allows the user to participate in simulated military basic training activities. The *Go Army* spectacle provides at once propaganda for the military, a recruitment tool, and participation in simulated military action. As military activity itself becomes increasingly dependent on computer simulation, the line between gaming and killing, simulation and military action, blurs, and military spectacle becomes a familiar part of everyday life.

The terrifying spectacle of fall 2001 revealed that familiar items of everyday life, such as planes or mail, could be transformed into instruments of spectacular terror. The al-Qaeda network hijacking of airplanes turned ordinary instruments of transportation into weapons as they crashed into the World Trade Center twin towers and the Pentagon on September 11. Mail delivery evoked fears of disease, terror, and death, as the anthrax scare of fall and winter 2001 made ordinary letters threatening items. And rumors spread that terrorist networks were seeking instruments of mass destruction, such as chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, to create spectacles of terror on a hitherto unforeseen scale.

The examples just provided suggest that media spectacle is invading every field of experience, from the economy to culture and everyday life to politics and war. Moreover, spectacle culture is moving into new domains of cyberspace that will help to generate future multimedia spectacle and networked infotainment societies. My studies of media spectacle will strive to contribute to illuminating these developments and to developing a critical theory of the contemporary moment. Building on Debord's analyses of the society of spectacle, I will develop the concept in terms of salient phenomena of present-day society and culture.

But while Debord's notion of spectacle tended to be somewhat abstract and theoretical, I will attempt to make the concept concrete and contemporary. Thus, whereas Debord presents few actual examples of spectacle culture, I develop detailed analyses that strive to illuminate the present age and to update and develop Debord's notion. Moreover, although Debord's concepts of "the society of the spectacle" and of "the integrated spectacle" (1990) tended to present a picture of a quasi-totalitarian nexus of domination,[9] it is preferable to perceive a plurality and heterogeneity of contending spectacles in the contemporary moment and to see spectacle itself as a contested terrain. Accordingly, I will unfold contradictions within dominant spectacles, showing how they give rise to conflicting meanings and effects, and constitute a field of domination and resistance.

These "dialectics of the present" will disclose both novelties and discontinuities in the current epoch, as well as continuities with the development of global capitalism. The in-depth studies that follow in this book attempt to articulate defining features of the existing and emergent society, culture, and everyday life in the new millennium. Yet my studies suggest that novel and distinctive features are embedded in the trajectory of contemporary capitalism, its creation of a global economy, and ongoing "creative destruction," which has been a defining feature of capitalist modernity from the beginning. Hence, the cultural studies in this book will be rooted in critical social theory and will themselves contribute to developing a critical theory of society by illuminating key features and dynamics of the present age. The studies will illustrate, in particular, the dynamics of media spectacle and an infotainment society in the current stage of technocapitalism.[10]

The infotainment society and technocapitalism

Today the society and culture of spectacle is creating a new type of information–entertainment society, or what might be called the "infotainment society." The changes in the current conjuncture are arguably as thoroughgoing and dramatic as the shift from the stage of market and the competitive and *laissez-faire* capitalism theorized by Marx to the stage of state-monopoly capitalism critically analyzed by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s. Currently, we are entering a new form of *technocapitalism* marked by a synthesis of capital and technology and the information and entertainment industries, all of which is producing an "infotainment society" and spectacle culture.[11]

In terms of political economy, the emerging postindustrial form of technocapitalism is characterized by a decline of the state and enlarged power for the market, accompanied by the growing strength of transnational corporations and governmental bodies and the decreased strength of the nation-state and its institutions. To paraphrase Max Horkheimer, whoever wants to talk about capitalism must talk about globalization, and it is impossible to theorize globalization without addressing the restructuring of capitalism. Culture and technology are increasingly important constituent parts of global capitalism and everyday life in the contemporary world and permeate major domains of life, such as the economy and polity, as well as constituting their own spheres and subcultures.

The term "infotainment" suggests the synergies of the information and entertainment sectors in the organization of contemporary societies, the ways in which information technologies and multimedia are transforming entertainment, and the forms in which entertainment is shaping every domain of life from the Internet to politics. It is now well documented that the knowledge and information sectors are key domains of our contemporary moment, although how to theorize the dialectics of the present is highly contested. While the theories of Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell (1976) and other postindustrial theorists are not as ideological and far off the mark as some of us once argued, the concept of "postindustrial" society is highly problematic. The concept is negative and empty, failing to articulate positively what distinguishes the alleged new stage. Hence, the discourse of the "post" can occlude the connections between industrial, manufacturing, and emergent hi-tech industries and the strong continuities between the previous and present forms of social organization, as well as covering over the continued importance of manufacturing and industry for much of the world.

Yet discourses of the "post" also serve positively to highlight the importance of significant novelties, of discontinuities with modern societies, and thus force us to rethink the original and defining features of our current social situation (see Best and Kellner 1997; 2001). Notions of the "knowledge" or "information" society rightly call attention to the role of scientific and technical knowledge in the formation of the present social order, the importance of computers and information technology, the materialization of biotechnology, genetic engineering, and the rise of new societal elites. It seems wrong, however, to characterize knowledge or information as *the* organizing or axial principles of a society still constructed around the accumulation of capital and maximization of profit. Hence, in order to avoid the technological determinism and idealism of many forms of postindustrial theory, one should theorize the information or knowledge "revolution" as part and parcel of a new form of technocapitalism. Such a perspective focuses on the interconnections between new technologies, a networked global society, and an expansion of the culture of spectacle in an emergent mode of the "infotainment society," rather than merely obsessing about "new technologies" or "globalization," without seeing the articulations of these phenomena.[12]

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

Consequently, to grasp the dynamics of our current social situation, we need to perceive the continuities between previous forms of industrial society and the new

modes of society and culture described by discourses of the "post," *and* also grasp the novelties and discontinuities (Best and Kellner 1997; 2001).[13] In the studies in this book, I argue that current conceptions of the information society and the emphasis on information technology as its demiurge are by now too limited. The new technologies are modes of information *and* entertainment that permeate work, education, play, social interaction, politics, and culture. In all of these domains, the form of spectacle is changing areas of life ranging from work and communication to entertainment and diversion.

Thus, "new technologies" are much more than solely information technology, and involve important components of entertainment, communication, and multimedia, as well as knowledge and information, in ways that are encompassing and restructuring both labor and leisure. Previous forms of culture are rapidly being absorbed within the Internet, and the computer is coming to be a major household appliance and source of entertainment, information, play, communication, and connection with the outside world. To help grasp the enormity of the transformation going on, and as indicators of the syntheses of knowledge and cultural industries in the infotainment society, I would suggest reflecting on the massive mergers of the major information and entertainment conglomerates that have taken place in the United States during the past decades. This process has produced the most extensive concentration and conglomeration of these industries in history, as well as an astonishing development and expansion of technologies and media products.

During the 1980s, television networks amalgamated with other major sectors of the cultural industries and corporate capital, including mergers between CBS and Westinghouse; MCA and Seagram's; Time Warner and Turner Communications; Disney, Capital Cities, and ABC; and GE, NBC, and Microsoft. Dwarfing all previous information/entertainment corporation combinations, Time Warner and America On-Line (AOL) proposed a $163.4 billion amalgamation in January 2000, which was approved a year later. The fact that "new media" Internet service provider and portal AOL was initially the majority shareholder in the deal seemed at the time to be the triumph of the new online Internet culture over the old media culture. The merger itself called attention to escalating synergy among information and entertainment industries and old and new media in the form of the networked economy and cyberculture. But the dramatic decline of its stock price after the merger and a reorganization of the corporation in June 2002 called attention to the difficulties of merging old and new media and complexities and uncertainties within the culture industries that are producing spectacle culture.

These amalgamations bring together corporations involved in TV, film, magazines, newspapers, books, information databases, computers, and other media, suggesting a conflictual and unpredictable coming together of media and computer culture, and of entertainment and information, in a new networked and multimedia infotainment society. There have also been massive mergers in the telecommunications industry, as well as between cable and satellite industries, with major entertainment and corporate conglomerates. By 2002, ten gigantic multinational corporations, including AOL–Time Warner, Disney–ABC, GE–NBC, Viacom–CBS, News Corporation, Vivendi, Sony, Bertelsmann, AT&T, and Liberty Media controlled most of the production of

information and entertainment throughout the globe.[14] The result is less competition and diversity and more corporate control of newspapers and journalism, television, radio, film, and other media of information and entertainment.

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

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

The syntheses of entertainment and information in the creation of a networked infotainment society are part and parcel of a global restructuring of capital. Few theories of the information revolution and the new technologies contextualize the structuring, implementation, distribution, and use of information technologies and new media in the context of the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalism and the explosion of media spectacle and the domain of infotainment. The ideologues of the information society act as if technology were an autonomous force. They often neglect to theorize the interconnections of capital and technology, or they use the advancements of technology to legitimate market capitalism (i.e. Gilder 1989; 2000; Gates 1995; 1999). More conventional and older sociological theories, by contrast, fail to grasp the important role of entertainment and spectacle in contemporary society and culture. Likewise, other theories of the information society, such as those of Daniel Bell (1976), exaggerate the role of information and knowledge, and neglect the importance of entertainment and spectacle.

Thus, Guy Debord's concept of the "society of the spectacle" in which individuals are transfixed by the packaging, display, and consumption of commodities and the play of media events helpfully illuminates our present situation. Arguably, we are now at a stage of the spectacle at which it dominates the mediascape, politics, and more and more domains of everyday life. In a culture of the technospectacle, computers bring escalating information and multimedia extravaganzas into the home and workplace through the Internet, competing with television as the dominant

medium of our time. The result is a spectacularization of politics, of culture, and of consciousness, as media multiply and new forms of culture colonize consciousness and everyday life, generating novel forms of struggle and resistance.

The dramatic technological revolution has resulted in groundbreaking forms of technoculture, such as the Internet and cyberculture, and vast technological sophistication and development of media forms, such as radio, television, film, and video. Digitization has deeply transformed culture, producing new modes of spectacle and new domains of technoculture. The studies collected in this book interrogate contemporary culture to illuminate major trends, possibilities, dangers, and conflicts of the present age. In the following sections, I will, accordingly, elucidate the methods of cultural studies that I am developing and their conjunction with critical social theory to signal the goals and context of this book.

From media culture to media spectacle

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

The US 2000 election already appears as a retro back to the future with the ascension of George W. Bush, son of the former CIA Director and President George H.W. Bush II has assembled his father's legion of doom for new domestic and global adventures and after the September 11 terrorist attacks is now engaging in an ongoing Terror War, suggesting that the spectacles of the new millennium will be frightening and violent. Bush's blasts from the past create a brave new world of *déjà vu* all over again. Like those of Reagan and Bush I, the Bush II administration has used tax cuts for the rich and escalating military spending to destroy the budget surpluses that had accrued in the prosperous Clinton years, thus forcing cutbacks in government spending and social welfare.

As the new millennium unfolds, the domestic US and global economy appears highly unstable and Western countries are threatened by new enemies within and without. The combination of a crisis-ridden global economy with ever-proliferating media and technology, and a global Terror War within a highly contested and combustible political domain, promises an increase in apocalyptic spectacle into

the new millennium. The culture industries are also multiplying media spectacle for mass distraction, entertainment, and profitability in one of the few expanding domains of the "new economy." These developments suggest promising futures for the study of media spectacle and a growing need for cultural studies to help unpack their production, meanings, circulation, and effects.

This book is not per se a polemic against media spectacle, although I certainly note some of its disturbing features and sharply criticize some of the effects of specific media spectacles, such as the McDonald's commodity spectacle. Critics of the dramatic expansion of the media and their incursion into the new realms of cyberspace and virtual reality have worried about the obliteration of the real and the substitution of an ersatz, contrived, and manufactured pseudo-reality for the ordinary experiences of everyday life. Others fret that with the glut of information and entertainment citizens will become extremely distracted from the trials and travails of ordinary life and will increasingly seek escape in the realm of hi-tech entertainment. Yet other critics obsess about the vulgarization of culture, of its dumbing down and banalization in an era of special effects, spectacular media extravaganzas, tabloid journalism, and the glitter and glitz of competing hi-tech media.

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

My conception of cultural studies involves critical interrogations of what key examples of media spectacle reveal about the contemporary condition, combined with critiques of the ways that certain media spectacles promote oppression of various sorts. Thus, I attempt to discern what media culture discloses about contemporary society, as well as carrying out ideological critique of the specific politics of a text or artifact. Thus, while engaging the politics of representation and ideological critique in reading cultural texts, I also go beyond the texts to interrogate the context in which they are produced and received. My studies thus evoke social context and history to help read the texts of media spectacle, and deploy cultural texts to illuminate the more general social and cultural milieu of the present, one that I have sketched out in this introduction and will flesh out in the studies that follow.

This dialectic of text and context was developed by Walter Benjamin and T. W. Adorno in their conceptions of cultural texts as hieroglyphics or prisms that provide a source of critical knowledge of the contemporary era.[15] Adorno and Benjamin deployed a micrological and hermeneutical method of deciphering cultural phenomena ranging from newspaper astrology columns to television programs to twelve-tone music or the poems of Holderlin. During the same epoch, Siegfried Kracauer (1995) read the dominant modes of culture and society from phenomena such as the Tiller Girls dance reviews and the mass ornament – analyses which anticipated, I might note, German fascism, just as Kracauer (1966) claimed that German expressionist film anticipated

the rise of Hitler. So, too, can one interrogate the phenomena of media spectacle today in order to appraise the current forms of contemporary society, the prevailing dreams and nightmares, and the regnant values and ideologies.

I would therefore suggest that media spectacle provides a fertile field for cultural, political, and ideological analysis. Following these models of critical theory, I closely examine some salient phenomena of media spectacle in order to provide insight into the vicissitudes of the contemporary moment. As I try to demonstrate, critical interrogation of cultural texts and phenomena can tell us a lot about the conditions of the world as we enter a new millennium. Reading the spectacle of some of the popular texts of media culture helps to provide insights into current and emergent social realities and trends. Popular texts seize the attention and imagination of massive audiences and are thus barometers of contemporary taste, hopes, fears, and fantasies. Let me, then, briefly illustrate this argument with some examples of how critical decoding of popular media spectacles of the era can provide critical insights into the present age. I then explicate the concept of diagnostic critique that guides my particular version of cultural studies.

Signs of the times

During the summer of 2000, dinosaurs became a megaspectacle with the release and popularity of the DreamWorks film *Dinosaur*, accompanied by concurrent museum exhibitions of dinosaurs, always a popular exhibit, to complement the film and an explosion of TV documentary specials and news reports about these extinct species. Indeed, a megaspectacle encompasses several media such as film, television, the Internet, and cultural life; it is a focal point for attention and provides clues to the social psyche. W. J. T. Mitchell has written a book on the history of dinosaurs (Mitchell 1998), highlighting our cultural awareness and construction of the species, and the different meanings attached to these strange beasts. I bring up the example to suggest that hermeneutical deciphering of such figures can provide insight into contemporary social and political dynamics and concerns.

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

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Television presents spectacles on a daily basis for mass consumption and some of the most popular programs of the past years have adopted a spectacle form. ABC's *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* emerged as the most popular new US TV program of 2000–1. Itself modeled after a UK TV series, the phenomenon reveals the global obsession with instant wealth and the transformation of knowledge into information. Making a spectacle out of the gaining of easy money, the series is highly ritualistic in its posing of questions, its illuminated and blinking set and portentous music, and its host's repetitive intonation of the fatal question, "Is that your final answer?" The show rewards those who, in particular, possess a detailed knowledge of the trivia and minutiae of media culture, registering a transformation of the cultural ideal of knowledge into information. Whereas the classic quiz shows of the 1940s and 1950s rewarded contestants who had absorbed a body of knowledge and allowed them to choose areas to which they had devoted the hard work of education to gain mastery of their field, *Millionaire* focuses on questions concerning the trivia of media culture, rewarding those who have devoted themselves to absorbing the picayune detail of the spectacle culture, of which television is a crucial component.

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

Big Brother, another form of "reality" TV spectacle, presented a positive spin on Orwell's dystopia of a society under total surveillance. Following the model of a wildly successful Dutch TV series, a group of volunteers lived in a house under the unrelenting surveillance of TV cameras. The denizens were not allowed to have contact with the outside world, and viewers voted on which characters should stay or go, until only one remained and won a cash prize. CBS bought the rights to air a US version of the series and broadcast the show in summer 2000.[16] Like the Dutch version, each week viewers voted on which contestant would be eliminated and the "winner" took home a half-million-dollar bonanza (during the second season of the US version the contestants voted each other out). The sight of dozens of microphones and cameras everywhere, including the CBS logo of an open eye, recalls the Orwellian nightmare, transmuted into fluff entertainment in the society of the spectacle. Quite possibly *Big Brother* helps to acclimatize people to surveillance, such as is exercised by the FBI "Carnivore" program, which can intercept private e-mail, or round-the-clock video surveillance at work, in public spaces, and perhaps even at home.

Upping the ante of spectacle culture, CBS played an even more dangerous *Survivor* series in the Australian outback for spring/summer 2001, a *Survivor Africa* series for fall/winter 2001–2, followed by *Survivor Thailand*. Meanwhile, the Fox TV network,

which seemed to have reached a new low with its embarrassing *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*,[17] devised a reality TV series, *Temptation Island,* for 2001 in which four unmarried couples would be subjected to the temptations of an attractive array of dating and sexual partners to "test" the couples' relationship; it was a hit and a second season played out in 2002, offering more sex and spectacle.

Following this formula, ABC series *The Bachelor* emerged as the big hit of 2002. A single and eligible male was provided with twenty-five potential mates and as the weeks went by he eliminated the competing women, until one was chosen, a ritual of humiliation which was, however, hugely popular with female and male audiences. A more militarist 2001 reality TV series concocted by ABC, *The Mole*, inserted a plant in a group, providing a chance for potential CIA agents to gain experience of infiltration and exposure, while meeting complex challenges. Fox's reality show *Boot Camp* (2001), in turn, provided training for would-be marines to head off to trouble spots around the world for adventure and endurance tests, thus providing excellent training for US participation in Operation Enduring Terror War.

Demonstrating the psychopathology of the spectacle, contestants on these "reality" shows are driven by a lust for money and, perhaps more so, the 15 minutes of fame and celebrity promised to them by Andy Warhol. Buffeted by the machines of publicity, there appears to be no losers, as those voted off return to instant renown and receive invitations to become TV guest hosts, VJs, or even to appear in *Playboy* (though one contestant on the Swedish *Big Brother* committed suicide after his exile, and it is not clear what the long-term effects of celebrity withdrawal on participants in these experiments may be).

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

The mushrooming popularity in 2002 of a MTV faux-reality series on Ozzy Osbourne's family and work life marks a new phase of "realitainment" in which celebrity lives, documentary, and staged events are collapsed into a voyeuristic exposé of the lives of the rich and famous. A long-time heavy-metal rocker fabled for his dissolute lifestyle and stunts, such as biting off the head of a bat on stage, Ozzy's rather ordinary family life became a subject of immense fascination to massive television audiences, constituting the surprise hit of the season.

These reality TV series and their websites seem to be highly addictive, pointing to deep-seated voyeurism and narcissism in the society of the interactive spectacle. It appears that individuals have a seemingly insatiable lust to become part of the spectacle and to involve themselves in it more intimately and peer into the

private lives of others. Moreover, the (pseudo)reality series exemplify what Daniel Boorstin (1961) referred to as "pseudo-events," in which people pay more attention to media-produced spectacles than to pressing concerns in the sociopolitical world and everyday life. As Baudrillard (1983a) astutely observed, postmodern media society revolves around an "obscenity" that implodes public and private spheres and puts on display the most banal and intimate aspects of everyday life – be it the sex games of Bill Clinton or the melodramas of ordinary "real-life" drama participants.

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

Remarkably, bin Laden's Manichean dualism mirrored the discourse of Israeli President Ariel Sharon, George W. Bush, and those in the West, who proclaimed the war against terrorism as a holy war between good and evil, civilization and barbarism. Each dichotomized its "other" as dominated by fear, Bush claiming that his holy war marked freedom versus fear, citing Islamic extremists' animosity to Western values and prosperity. Bin Laden's jihad, in turn, positioned the fearful United States against his brave warriors, also characterizing his battle as that of justice versus injustice. Both appealed to God, revealing a similar fundamentalist absolutism and Manicheanism, with each characterizing the other as "evil." And both sides described their opponents as "terrorists," convinced that they were right and virtuous while the other side was villainous.

Bin Laden was quickly elevated into an international media megaspectacle, reviled in the West and deified in parts of the Islamic and Arab world. Books, artifacts, and products bearing his name and image sold around the globe. For his followers, he personified resistance to the West and fidelity to Islam, whereas to his enemies he was the personification of evil, the Antichrist. Needless to say, entrepreneurs everywhere exploited his image to sell products. On the Internet, one could purchase toilet paper decorated with bin Laden's visage and choose

from three slogans: "Wipe out bin Laden," "If he wants to attack he can start with my crack," or "If your butt gets to cloddin' just wipe with bin Laden." In addition, condoms, shooting targets, dartboards, golf balls, voodoo dolls, and violent video games featured bin Laden's now iconic image. Websites presented bin Laden porn, tasteless cartoons, and computer games in which the player could dismember the al-Qaeda terrorist leader.

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

George W. Bush, by contrast, is known for his propensity to stare directly into other people's eyes and famously claimed he could look into the Russian president's soul by looking him in the eye. Bush is good at making eye contact with the camera, providing the illusion that he is speaking directly to the people, face to face, while bin Laden is staring out into space and speaking to eternity. To be sure, sometimes the camera catches a blank-looking Bush, his small eyes perhaps pointing to the littleness within. At other times, it catches his infamous smirk, which could reveal arrogance and contempt, or shows his eyes darting erratically from side to side, acknowledging insecurity and anxiety.

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

Although George W. Bush blustered on December 14 that it was "preposterous" that anyone could doubt the authenticity of the bin Laden tape, in fact there were

fierce debates over its production, translation, meaning, and mode of release. Such debates demonstrated acute differences in the hermeneutical capacities of audiences and critics throughout the world, vindicating the position long argued in British cultural studies that different audiences produce different interpretations of the text. Special effects experts in London "say [that a] fake would be relatively easy to make" (*Guardian*, December 15, 2001). But experts in the United States from Bell Laboratories and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) concluded that "technology [is] not yet good enough to fake bin Laden tape" (*Associated Press*, December 15, 2001).[18]

The response to the bin Laden tape confirmed French theorist Jean Baudrillard's position that we are currently living in an era of simulation in which it is impossible to tell the difference between the real and a fake, reality and simulation (1983b; 1993). As Hollywood films use more and more computerized scenes, as rock stars like Michael Jackson digitally "cleanse" their image, and as politicians use political image production and spectacle to sell themselves, the difference between the authentic and the real is harder and harder to determine. Is George W. Bush a real president, or is he just acting out the sound bites fed him by his handlers, performing a scripted daily political act that he does not fully understand? Are the frequent warnings of terrorist attacks genuine, or just a ploy to keep the public on edge to accept more reactionary, rightwing law-and-order politics? Is the terrorist threat as dire as the US Department of Homeland Security claims or is it hyping threats to raise its budgets and power? In an era of simulation, it is impossible to answer these questions clearly as we do not have access to the "real," which, in any case, is complex, overdetermined, intricately constructed, and in some cases, as German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1999) discerned in his distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, ultimately impossible to specify.

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So far, the year 2002 has been rich in spectacle. While the 2001–2 New Year spectacles and celebrations took place throughout the world, one could hope for a better year and future. In Europe, there were spectacular displays to inaugurate the Euro, ranging from laser-sound-and-light spectacles to fireworks and mass gala festivities. In Pasadena, California, the annual Tournament of Roses parade fêted the theme of "good times" with the usual floats trumpeting corporations, leisure, and the commodity spectacle. But, under heavy security, the parade opened with the US Marine Corps band and closed with the West Point marching band, featuring military floats, and equestrian riders from the US Marshals Service. The festival featured military and patriotic themes and projected war spectacle as the spirit of the new millennium.

As 2002 unfolded, spectacle culture developed apace. The Super Bowl spectacle is arguably one of the biggest world sports events annually – with over 800 million viewers on average from all corners of the globe. To participate in the St Louis Rams and New England Patriots Super Bowl 2002 spectacle, over 160 million US citizens tuned in to the biggest TV event of the year. Mariah Carey sang the "Star

Spangled Banner" in a diva performance, rising to a deafening crescendo at the end, as a flag was unearthed from the rubble of the World Trade Center and put on triumphant display. Whereas single players usually come out on to the field to great individual fanfare, the Patriots defense marched out ensemble, as a team, ready to roll. Sporting red, white, and blue uniforms, the Patriots were a heavy underdog against the powerhouse Rams, but pulled off an upset in the game's final seconds in what sportscasters instantly hyped as the "greatest Super Bowl in history," the biggest upset, and the most exciting finish ever.[19]

Super Bowls are sometimes connected to military events, as when the 1991 spectacle featured Gulf War floats, military marching bands, and a commemoration of George Bush I and the US military. Following this template, Super Bowl 2002 featured Bush I and former US Navy and NFL star Roger Staubach flipping the coin to decide which team would receive the first kickoff. A hi-tech spectacle featured US troops watching live in Kandahar, and military personnel punching in statistical graphics, making the screen appear like a computer in a military system. Stars of each team were periodically shown in front of a waving US flag with a graphic announcing that "they were proud to be a part of SB36, of this great nation, and that they were thankful for the troops' courage in Afghanistan."

Broadcast by the ultra-right Fox network, the computer graphics featured red, white, and blue banners and the transition graphics involved the use of an exploding fireworks scene with the triad of patriotic colors blasting across the screen. The Super Bowl logo in the center of the field was in the shape of the United States, and the Fox network used a patriotic logo with the flag's colors and images, imitating NBC, which had transformed its multicolored peacock into the flag's tricolors after the September 11 terrorist attacks. As always, half-time featured a spectacle of music and entertainment, with Bono, Irish singer and U2 band member, just back from the World Economic Forum. Bono and Bill Gates had tried to persuade the world economic leaders of the importance of addressing the gaps between the haves and the have-nots, and caring about poverty, health, and the environment. Bono screamed, "It's a beautiful day," and the crowd exploded with joy as U2 performed its hit song with the "beautiful day" signature. A more somber performance provided a tribute to the victims of the September 11 World Trade Center bombing. A large banner unfolded with the names of the victims of the attack as Bono and U2 sang their apocalyptic "Where the Streets Have no Name." At the end of the set, the banner collapsed as smoke enveloped the stage in an evocation of the World Trade Center after the attack. When Bono concluded, he opened his jacket to reveal a US flag, and the crowd went wild.

Super Bowls are also spectacles for advertising, with websites collecting the ads and museums putting on the annual display. In an $8 million extravaganza, Britney Spears belted out the Pepsi song to a background of images presenting Spears in a postmodern collage of styles from the previous decades that was a pastiche of Pepsi ads and imagery of the epoch. For the conformist 1950s, Britney appeared as a soda fountain patron in a grainy black and white montage; the 1960s Britney appeared as a white Supreme, circa 1963, and a mid-1960s beach party girl; for the 1970s, Britney appeared as a peacenik flower child; and the 1980s imagery cut to her as Robert Palmer in the 1989 "Simply Irresistible" Pepsi ad format. The flow of retro Pepsi ads

and fashion imagery culminated in a contemporary display of Britney in a belly shirt, with a highly futuristic neon-lit diner in the background, positioning the present as a conservative back-to-the-future of the 1950s!

The ad suggested that the Pepsi generation now encompasses multiple generations with icons such as Madonna and Britney representing the Pepsi community. In other ads, Budweiser featured horses bowing to the Statue of Liberty and New York and a highly acclaimed spot in which a falcon swept down from an apartment to cop a Bud for a young man and his two female friends. Altogether ten Bud ads ran, sending the message that beer promoted fun and good times and that it was cool for young people to drink. Ad prices have declined from the top price of $3 million a spot in 2000, with Fox opening bidding at $1.9 million for a 30-second spot this year. While the past couple of Super Bowls had featured a bevy of dot.com ads, this year saw limited entries, such as infect-truth.com, whose ads perhaps inadvertently sent out messages of hope that more truthful and honest corporations would not meet the fate of their predecessors, many of which, like Enron, had gone bankrupt.

A highly propagandistic set of ads, made by the US government and shown as public service announcements, made a connection between drugs and terrorism, sending out a message that if you use drugs you provide money for terrorists. "Where do terrorists get their money?" asks one of the ads, which portrays a terrorist buying explosives, weapons and fake passports while putting a stack of Russian AK-47s into a rental car! Answering its own question, the ad proclaims that half of the twenty-eight organizations identified as terrorist by the National State Security Department are funded by sales of illegal drugs. The implication is that people who use drugs help terrorists, and the ad, costing US taxpayers over half a million dollars for its production, provided the pro-Bush administration Fox network with $3 million in advertising revenues, while serving as propaganda for both the US military and the administration's drug policy.

As for the game itself, it was a cliffhanger. The underdog Patriots took a 14–3 half-time lead, the Rams fought back in the second half to a 17–17 tie, and in the final second the Patriots scored a field goal to gain an upset win, costing Las Vegas gamblers billions but creating a patriotic fervor for New England and much of the nation. The Patriots' owner declared after the game, in a cleverly conceived speech: "We did it with teamwork and spirit. Spirituality and faith in democracy are the cornerstones of our country. Today, we're all patriots and the Patriots are world champions."

And so the spectacle of the Super Bowl provided a striking panorama of US nationalism. Other media spectacles, however, were producing rising anti-US sentiment. The treatment of bound, gagged, and sedated al-Qaeda and Taliban prisoners being held in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was creating an uproar in world diplomatic circles and in the human rights community, as the United States refused to recognize its "unlawful combat" detainees as prisoners of war and thus denied them the protection of the Geneva Convention. When George W. Bush proclaimed that the United States was out to destroy an "axis of evil" in his late January 2002 State of the Union address, there was extreme anger and worry in both the Middle East and the Arab world. Moreover, the United States' European and other allies feared that it was going to take the Terror War to dangerous and unprecedented levels.

Indeed, as the Winter Olympics opened in Salt Lake City on February 8, it featured

more troops and police than were stationed in Afghanistan. Security was at an all-time high, with some 50,000 law enforcement forces deployed, domestic flights over the site of the Olympics grounded, and Black Hawk helicopters patrolling the area. After some debate, the United States was allowed to unfurl a US flag saved from the ruins of the World Trade Center in the opening ceremonies (later lost or stolen in transit). Members of the International Olympic Committee initially thought that such a patriotic symbol might conflict with the internationalist flavor of the Olympics, and others had said that the flag should go to the Smithsonian, or another suitable venue, and not be subject to the vicissitudes of weather. The ceremonies opened, however, with the usual hoopla and another major spectacle was under way as an estimated 3.5 billion people worldwide watched the festivities, which were broadcast to 160 nations.

In the opening ceremonies, as always, the identity of the final torch-bearer was a closely guarded secret, and the crowd was ecstatic to see Mike Eruzione and the 1980 US Olympic ice hockey team that had upset the favored Soviet Union during the last hot phase of the Cold War. George W. Bush emerged to deliver a political speech, breaking with a tradition that excluded nationalist proclamations, stating: "On behalf of a proud, determined, and grateful nation, I declare open the Games of Salt Lake City!" Bush then surrounded himself with the heroes of the US 1980 hockey team for a spectacular photo opportunity that combined patriotism, power, and US victory in the Cold War.

Forgotten was the corruption whereby US Olympic organizers had bribed the International Olympic Committee with over $1 million to swing their votes Salt Lake City's way. Likewise, there was little mention of the criminal investigations, fifteen counts of bribery, fraud, and conspiracy in a US Justice Department indictment still pending, and the resignation of ten members of the US Olympic committee. No one had the bad taste to mention the Olympic scandal and connect it with the Bush administration and Enron scandals, which will provide media spectacles for the coming years and forthcoming books, films, and TV movies. Instead, there was pomp and pageantry, fireworks, and an orgy of patriotism, as the Winter Olympic Games opened and the parades and competition began. Bring on the games and let media spectacle rule!

The games, as it turned out, were a spectacle of scandal, nationalism, and controversy. In what seemed to most observers to be an injustice, a Russian figure-skating pair was awarded a gold medal over the Canadian pair that most people agreed had offered a superior performance. A French judge broke down and confessed in a meeting that she had been pressured by a French Olympic group to award the medal to the Russians! Soon after, a committee decided to award a dual gold medal to stem the controversy that was flaming through the global press; some days later the French judge said that it was really the Canadians who had been pressuring her! The Russians, in turn, protested that their athletes had been "humiliated," were "greatly unappreciated," and were robbed of medals by officials' decisions, threatening to boycott the closing ceremonies and perhaps future games. But, in July 2002, it was alleged that a Russian Mafia figure had helped manipulate a victory for the Russians in one category and for French skaters in another! When a Korean speed skater lost his gold medal to an American after being accused of a foul, tens of thousands of angry Koreans bombarded the Olympic committee with e-mail. And Canada went wild in

a patriotic orgy of enthusiasm when its team upset the US ice hockey team to claim an Olympic victory, while the Germans enthusiastically celebrated winning the most gold medals. Hence, nationalism and patriotism trumped the internationalism of the games and media spectacle triumphed once again.

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For the film community and its fans, the annual Oscar awards is the major spectacle of the year, and the 2002 awards were particularly controversial and noteworthy. The 74th Oscar awards took place in Hollywood for the first time since 1960. Under the tightest security ever, entire blocks of Hollywood were closed to traffic, all shops were closed, and even the local subway station was shut down. Leading up to the awards, fierce Oscar campaigns were waged, with unprecedented attacks on *A Beautiful Mind*. This film dealt with the life of mathematician John Forbes Nash's battle with schizophrenia, and a whispering campaign demeaned the film for leaving out the rough edges of Nash's life, such as rumors of bisexuality, adultery, fathering a child out of wedlock, and anti-Semitism. Meanwhile another smear campaign unfolded against the film's star Russell Crowe, who was up for an Oscar for best actor. Crowe was systematically bad-mouthed for his womanizing and lashing out at a director at a UK awards ceremony who had cut off his poetry reading; footage was also released of a rowdy Crowe in a fight in the parking lot of a bar.

The spectacle was as outrageous as ever, with star-studded Hollywood royalty prancing along the fabled red carpet, wearing designer clothes and jewelry. Accessories included a borrowed million-dollar diamond brooch, a $3 million "pumpkin diamond" ring for Halle Berry, a $4 million 24-carat raw-diamond Bulgari necklace for Nicole Kidman, and a $27 million diamond necklace and $1 million diamond-studded shoes for Laura Harring. Cameras during the Oscar ceremonies focused on the young and the beautiful of Hollywood's aristocracy, attempting to capture, as always, intimate glimpses of the major players' responses to winning and losing. While fashion critics raved over the most spectacular clothes and accessories, fashion mavens mocked some of the stylists and couture, such as Gwyneth Paltrow's see-through dress, Cameron Diaz's messy hair, which gave the impression that she had just got out of bed, Jennifer Lopez's overlaid and trussed-up hair, or Russell Crowe's silly frock coat, which made the bad boy look like a nineteenth-century preacher.

Oscar 2002 was ultimately a spectacle of race as African Americans won both major acting awards for the first time. Halle Berry was awarded best actress and appeared to have had an anxiety attack before she overcame her sobbing and thanked every black actress who had preceded her and all those who had helped her. These included "my lawyer who cut that deal" (to pay off the victim of a hit-and-run accident, preventing a trial that might have had Halle incarcerated, rudely ending her budding career). Denzel Washington gained best actor award, just after presenting the iconic Sidney Poitier with a lifetime achievement award. The Oscar's TV hostess, Whoopie Goldberg, provided a set of race jokes, interspersed with snide comments lampooning the celebrity stars who were up for the awards.

There was also a serious side to the spectacle, as Tom Cruise opened with an evocation of the horrors of the September 11 terrorist attacks and an assurance for Hollywood that it was all the more important that it continue in its film-making efforts to provide necessary entertainment and inspiration for the public. Woody Allen made his first Academy Awards appearance to make a pitch for film making in New York. And Kevin Spacey made an emotional appeal for a moment's silence to commemorate the victims of the terrorist attacks, as the Academy remembered those members of the film industry who had passed on the previous year.

But first and foremost the Oscar awards are a spectacle of Hollywood itself and of its importance in the production and reproduction of a culture of the spectacle, one that is now global in import. Combining television performance, musical numbers, film clips, and other forms of entertainment, the evening provides an opportunity for the spectacle to celebrate itself and promote its myriad forms, values, and significance. The Academy Awards are also a celebration of victory, the primal US and global capitalist passion play. Indeed, the prize-garnering films make millions more in revenue from the prestige and position of being Oscar winners, which allows the winning studios and players to make a big score in the next deal. This is, after all, what media spectacle is all about.

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Thus, the new millennium is marked by a diversity of spectacles in the field of politics, culture, entertainment, and every realm of social life. In this context, it is important to develop a critical theory of the spectacle to provide students and citizens with the tools to unpack, interpret, and analyze what the spectacles of the contemporary era signify and tell us about the present and the future. This project requires the connection of cultural studies with diagnostic critique.

Cultural studies as diagnostic critique

Cultural studies as a diagnostic critique is concerned with in what media spectacle tells us about contemporary society and culture, in developing readings that illuminate the present age, and in decoding "signs of the times" that allow us to grasp better the defining characteristics, novelties, and conflicts of the contemporary era. Media spectacle provides a fertile ground for interpreting and understanding contemporary culture and society because the major spectacles provide articulations of salient hopes and fears, fantasies and obsessions, and experiences of the present. Media spectacles also put on display the politics of representation, encoding current problematics of gender, race, and class. A diagnostic critique thus attempts to discern how media culture articulates dominant discourses and circulates opposing political positions around class, race, gender, sexuality, politics, and other crucial concerns of the present.[20]

I am making use in my studies of concepts developed by Stuart Hall and British cultural studies of the distinction between encoding and decoding, the concept of articulation, and the importance of engaging the politics of representation of gender,

race, class, and so on. Yet, cultural studies as a diagnostic critique not only engages in ideological appraisal of the texts and spectacles of media culture, but analyzes how they put on display social content, such as hopes and fears, circulate ideological discourses and political positions, and allow a diagnosis of contemporary pathologies, anxieties, political contestation, and ambiguities. For diagnostic critique, media culture also puts on display dreams and yearnings for a better world that provide utopian content that can be used for social critique and to mobilize political opposition (see Kellner and Ryan 1988; Kellner 1995). Diagnostic critique engages social pathologies but also envisions healing and desires for a better world and social transformation.

The media spectacles of the contemporary era are especially important for diagnostic critique. They are the products of culture industries in many different media such as film, television, advertising, journalism, the Internet, and new multimedia, and they are the result of heavy investment, research, creative activity, and experimentation and development. The major media spectacles of the culture encapsulate the most significant concerns of the era, which is why they are popular and arouse the interest, and even obsession, of contemporary audiences.

Like Roland Barthes' mythologies (1983), the media spectacles that I interrogate are key cultural phenomena that naturalize and idealize the given social system. McDonald's provides a mythology for the fast-food corporation that renders McDonald's' golden arches a mythological site of fun and good food, while the Big Mac becomes a mythology of American goodness. Michael Jordan provided a mythology of the "man who flies," "Air Jordan," and the ideal basketball player and role model for youth. Barthes studied a range of phenomena from wrestling to soap ads, while dissecting their social functions and ideological meanings. The mythologies Barthes analyzed functioned to naturalize and eternalize the historically contingent forms of French bourgeois culture. In his famous reading of a picture of a Black African soldier saluting the French flag, for example, Barthes claimed that the image erased the horrors of French imperialism, presenting a sanitized portrait of a French soldier that made it appear natural that an African should salute the French flag and exhibit the proper signs of military behavior.

Barthes constructed methods of analyzing figures and rhetorical strategies of media culture, taking apart the mythologies that colonize social life and helping produce a critical consciousness on behalf of the reader. Diagnostic critique also takes apart the mythologies of celebrity, sports, media culture, and politics, showing how they are socially constructed, infused with ideological meaning, and function to cover over social struggle, negative aspects such as excessive commercialism or exploitation, or the promotion of social justice. Driven by a demythologizing ethos, critical cultural studies wants to raise critical consciousness and to promote the construction of an alternative society.

Furthermore, to paraphrase Paulo Freire (1972; 1998), I am engaged in reading the culture and the media in order to read the world. A diagnostic critique uses critical social theory and cultural studies in order to teach students and citizens how to read their culture, how to see what media culture and spectacle reveals about the world, and how culture functions to shape desire, behavior, and identity. Diagnostic critique discerns how media culture and spectacle are worldly and perform in the world,

how they relate to major social and political issues, and how they have significant effects and potentially productive uses. As I have argued before, it is important to overcome the dichotomy between seeing media culture as an all-powerful force of manipulation and as a mere popular entertainment that audiences can deploy for their own purposes (Kellner 1995). Rather, one needs to see the intersection of media texts and spectacles with the public, to mediate between the power of the media and audiences, to see how the texts and spectacles of media culture encode significant social issues and material, and to discern how the public can use and decode media in more critical and self-empowering manners.

Thus, my project combines media critique with media pedagogy, aimed at teaching how to read, analyze, and learn how the media both present a version of reality and also can be used to learn about social reality (Kellner 1995). On this view, the texts of media culture help provide material for a diagnostic critique of the contemporary era whereby critical readings of popular artifacts and spectacles are interrogated to provide knowledge of the contemporary era. In the following studies, I provide detailed examples of cultural studies as a diagnostic critique, critically interrogating media spectacles such as McDonald's, Michael Jordan and the Nike spectacle, the O. J. Simpson trial, *The X-Files*, and presidential politics in the United States in order to illuminate defining features and novelties of contemporary society, economy, politics, and everyday life.

In *Media Spectacle*, I will accordingly engage in some close and detailed readings, contextualization, and analysis of the broad effects of major cultural texts and events deploying the methods of cultural studies, as well as use critical social theory to interrogate what the texts tell us about contemporary reality. While some critics talk incessantly about cultural studies as a historical phenomenon, or endlessly debate the method and concepts of cultural studies, I do cultural studies through dissection of the production of texts, textual analysis of its meanings, and study of their effects and resonance, deploying a multiperspectivist approach.[21] And while some close readings stay ensconced in the textures and surfaces of texts, I want to go beyond the texts to the contexts in which they are produced, consumed, and used, using media spectacles to illuminate their historical and cultural situations.

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

Hence, my conception of cultural studies combines a critique of domination with valorization of the forces of resistance and struggle. While the politics of representation are engaged with criticizing racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, I also attempt to discern more liberating representations and social forces struggling against domination. Criticizing domination and arguing for a more egalitarian and just social order envisages progressive social transformation. This involves, in part, educating individuals to resist cultural manipulation and to become media literate. Thus, I am also interested in the promotion of media literacy, the pedagogy of learning how to read cultural texts critically and politically, and the use of culture to understand and democratically transform the world. I would therefore identify my project with that of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1972; 1978) who wants to develop literacy to teach people to read the word and through reading the word to read and transform the world.

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

Notes

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

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

3 Another source notes that "the average American household spent $1,813 in 1997 on entertainment – books, TV, movies, theater, toys – almost as much as the $1,841 spent on health care per family, according to a survey by the US Labor Department." Moreover, "the price we pay to amuse ourselves has, in some cases, risen at a rate triple that of inflation over the past five years" (*USA Today*, April 2, 1999: E1). The NPD Group provided a survey that indicated that the amount of time spent on entertainment outside the home – such as going to the movies or a sporting event – was up 8 percent

from the early to the late 1990s and the amount of time spent on home entertainment, such as watching television or surfing the Internet, went up 2 percent. Reports indicate that in a typical US household, people with broadband Internet connections spend 22 percent more time on all-electronic media and entertainment than the average household without broadband. See "Study: broadband in homes changes media habits" (pcworld.com, October 11, 2000).

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

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

6 See Nicholai Ouroussoff, "Art for architecture's sake," *Los Angeles Times*, March 31, 2002.

7 See Chuck Philips, "New spin on collapse of Jackson's charity project," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 2002.

8 There is little doubt but that the emergent technologies of virtual reality, holograms, and computer implants of sensory experience (if such exotica emerge) will be heavily invested in the reproduction of sex. In a webpost by Richard Johnson, "Virtual sex is here" (www.ThePosition.com, January 4, 2001), British Professor Kevin Warwick's latest experiment is described, which involves the implanting of a computer chip, which, if successful, will make possible the communication of a wide range of sensory experience and new types of sexual stimulation. The 1995 film *Strange Days* portrayed a futuristic culture, with addictive virtual reality devices, in which spectators become hooked on videos of extreme sex and violence. *The 13th Floor* (1999) portrayed a virtual reality gadget whereby players are transported to recreations of other times, places, and identities, experiencing full bodily fears and pleasures.

9 For a critique of Debord, see Best and Kellner 1997: 118ff.

10 The analyses in this book are primarily cultural studies, and I explore in more detail elsewhere the consequences for social theory of the phenomena explored here. Theoretical grounding, in turn, for the investigations is found in past works, such as Kellner and Ryan (1988), Kellner (1989a, b), Best and Kellner (1991; 1997; 2001), Kellner (1995).

11 On the various stages of development of the Frankfurt School and for an earlier introduction of the concept of technocapitalism, see Kellner (1989b). For more recent reflections on the roles of new technologies in the current stage of capitalist development, see Best and Kellner (2001) and Kellner (2000a).

12 It is striking how many theories of globalization neglect the role of information

technology, often falling prey to economic determinism, while many theories of information technology fail to theorize their embeddedness in the global economy, thus falling prey to technological determinism. See Kellner (2000b) and Best and Kellner (2001).

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

14 See the chart in *The Nation* (January 7, 2002) and the accompanying article by Mark Crispin Miller, "What's wrong with this picture?" as well as the analysis of the impact of "media unlimited" in Gitlin (2002), who discusses oversaturation, intensifying speed, and an increasingly media-mediated existence in the contemporary era.

15 See Adorno (1991; 1994) and Benjamin (1969); on the strengths and limitations of the critical theory approach to cultural studies, see Kellner (1989a); and for various readings of Adorno, see Gibson and Rubin (2002).

16 See Brian Lowry, "Big Brother's watchers see everything but privacy" (*Los Angeles Times*, February 12, 2000:A1, A50) and "The electronic fishbowl" (*New York Times*, May 21, 2000). The new reality shows exhibit the confluence of television and Internet entertainment; the Dutch show *Big Brother* featured a live website with four video streams that one could check out, gaining 52 million hits, and the CBS series deployed roughly the same setup, although it charged viewers to subscribe to its website for the 2001 and 2002 seasons. It is interesting from the perspective of globalization that recent hit TV formats have come from Europe to the United States. The 1999–2001 ABC TV sensation *Do You Want to Be a Millionaire?* was closely based on a hit UK TV series, as was a 2001 follow-up, *The Weakest Link*. Reality TV hits *Survivor* and *Big Brother* were also derived from European models. It appears in these cases that it is precisely the crassest and most commercial aspects of global culture that crosses borders the most easily. The *Big Brother* series continued to be a popular popcult phenomenon into 2002; see the collection of studies in *Television and New Media*, Vol. 3, no. 3 (August 2002).

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

18 German television found that the White House translation of bin Laden's video was not only inaccurate but also "manipulative" (see dc.indymedia.org/front.php3?article_id=16389&group=webcast). For a full study of Bush, bin Laden, and Terror War see Kellner (forthcoming).

19 I am indebted to Richard Kahn for sharing his Super Bowl notes. For a now classic analysis of the Super Bowl spectacle, see Reel (1977). Reel (1977: 93) timed the actual football action, from quarterback snap to whistle ending the play, and found that the four-hour spectacle contained a mere seven minutes of actual football action!

20 On encoding and decoding, see Stuart Hall's classic study with this title (collected in Durham and Kellner 2001); on articulation, see Hall (1986), and for specific developments and uses of these concepts, as well as the concepts of diagnostic critique, see Kellner and Ryan (1988) and Kellner (1995).

21 On the concept of a multiperspectivist cultural studies, see Kellner (1995). By this, I mean cultural studies that analyze the circuits of production, textuality, and reception, deploying a dialectic of text and context to provide critical readings of media texts and that use the texts to illuminate the contemporary era. A multiperspectivist approach also deploys a multiplicity of theories and methods of interpretation to provide more many-sided readings and critiques.