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Media Spectacle

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Preface and Acknowledgements

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

In the past decades, spectacle culture has significantly evolved. Every form of culture and more and more spheres of social life are permeated by the logic of the spectacle. Movies are bigger and more spectacular than ever, with high-tech special effects expanding the range of cinematic spectacle. Television channels proliferate endlessly with all-day movies, news, political talk, sports, specialty niches, re-runs of the history of television, and whatever else can gain an audience. The rock spectacle reverberates through radio, television, CDs and DVDs, computer networks, and extravagant concerts. Media culture provides fashion and style models for emulation and promotes a celebrity culture that provides deities and role models.

Media culture excels in creating megaspectacles of sports events, world conflicts, entertainment, "breaking news" and media events, such as the O.J. Simpson trial, the death of Princess Diana, or the sex, murder, and related scandals of the moment. Megaspectacle comes as well to dominate party politics, as their heavily dramatized presentations implode into the political battles of the day, such as the Clinton sex scandals and impeachment, the 36 Day Battle for the White House after Election 2000, and the September 11 terrorist attacks and subsequent Terror War. These dramatic media passion plays define the politics and culture of the time, and attract mass audiences to their programming, hour after hour, and day after day.¹

The Internet in turn has generated a seductive cyberspace, producing novel forms of information, entertainment, and social interaction, while promoting a dot.com frenzied boom and bust that fuelled and then deflated the "new economy," producing a turbulent new form of creative destruction in the vicissitudes of global capitalism. Ever bigger and more encompassing corporate mergers suggest emergent synergies between the Internet and media culture, and thus the information and entertainment industries. These interactions of technology and capital are producing fecund forms of technocapitalism

and a technoculture which promise that the new millennium will be full of novelties, innovation, hype, and instability.

September 11 and the subsequent Terror War, however, intensified uncertainty and unpredictability, disclosed a new vulnerability of the most powerful Western societies, and showed how a set of well-orchestrated terrorist attacks could wreak havoc with the global economy and polity. These catastrophic events and their attendant instability and capriciousness assure a profitable futures market for investments in chaos and complexity theory, as well as arms and security industries. Yet it also appears that the “information society” is being put on hold in the interests of eradicating “evil” (i.e. terrorism) from the world. The new forms of war and politics suggest that perhaps there may even be a come-back for postmodern theory,² that articulates breaks and ruptures in history and far-reaching novelties in the economy, politics, society, culture and everyday life. There may also be a return to dialectical theory, as the interconnections between globalization, technological revolution, media spectacle, Terror War, and the domains of cyberspace and the Internet become central to every sphere of existence from the dramas and banalities of everyday life to the survival of the human species and life on earth.

In the new millennium, media culture is more important than ever in serving as a force of socialization, providing models of masculinity and femininity, socially approved and disapproved behavior, style and fashion, and appropriate role models (Kellner 1995). The celebrities of media culture are the icons of the present age, the deities of an entertainment society in which money, looks, celebrity, and success are the ideals and goals of the dreaming billions who inhabit Planet Earth. As the human species prepares to embark on voyages into outer space, to explore inner space with the miracles of nanotechnology, and to remake the human species with biotechnology, possibilities emerge that the media, consumer, medical, and other technologies of the present age will propel the human species into a posthuman adventure that may even exhibit the spectacle of the end of humanity in an age of spiritualized and transformative machines.³

Whatever the vicissitudes and dynamics of the future, today, media culture continues to arbitrate social and political issues, deciding what is real, important, and vital. Especially spectacular events, such as the 1991 Gulf war, the 2000 Battle for the White House, or the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and their aftermath, bring TV day to a halt, with cable news channels suspending regular programming to cover the events of the minute. Sometimes megaspectacles like September 11 and Terror War take over TV day in its entirety and dominate news, information, advertising, and entertainment for months on end. At the same time that corporate control and relentless mergers reduce the number of news sources and put them under more rigid corporate control, Internet sites multiply information and disinformation. The ‘net also provides an interactive sphere where netizens can discover novel opinions and facts and themselves participate in the great dialogue of the contemporary moment (whatever it may be).

In this book, I undertake studies of key media spectacles of the present age in order to illuminate transformations and defining features of the contemporary economy, polity, society, and culture in the new millennium. Chapter 1 provides an overview of defining media spectacles in every domain of contemporary life and stakes out the critical social theory and cultural studies that I will use throughout the book. In Chapter 2, I show how analysis of McDonald's fast-food chain provides insights into the dynamics of globalization, the dialectic of the global and the local, and the ways that U.S. cultural

products are appropriated and used throughout the world to provide new forms of global and hybridized culture. Likewise, the study of Michael Jordan and Nike in Chapter 3 helps illuminate global media culture and NBA basketball and how U.S. sports have become a global popular in the 1990s, while sport deities like Jordan developed into worldwide celebrities. The McDonald's study helps elucidate features of contemporary consumer culture, while the Jordan and Nike reading engages the interconnection of sports, commercialization, and celebrity culture in the present era, wherein sports, business, and spectacle culture merge into one another.

The megaspectacle of the O.J. Simpson trial in the mid-1990s provides a case to study in Chapter 4 of the intersections of gender, race, and class in contemporary U.S. society and the ways that identity politics are fragmenting society into competing groups from which individual gain their primary identity. The Simpson saga, far from being merely a sordid murder trial, also shows how the logic of the spectacle is permeating the legal system and crime and colonizing everyday life by permeating television day, generating endless "breaking news," talk shows, Internet sites, and later TV documentaries and docudramas.

Chapter 5 engages the popular TV-series and film-franchise The X-Files, running on TV from 1992 into 2002, which provides an instructive example of the television spectacle that combines high-tech aesthetic effects with convoluted allegories of the horrors of contemporary life. Producing a spectacle of government conspiracy, alien invasion, and biotechnological mutations of the human, X-Files puts on display a vast panorama of contemporary fears, fantasies, and conflicts. It allows a diagnostic critique of fears of government conspiracies, aliens and terrorists, medical invasions of the mind and body, and mutations of the human in an era of technoculture and technoscience.

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

After a lackluster election in 2000 between Son of Bush and Clinton's Vice-President Al Gore, the world was treated to the megaspectacle of a Battle for the White House in which an election was stolen by the Republicans, generating fertile conditions for future political wars and spectacle (Kellner, 2001). In an era of spectacle politics, reading political spectacles like the Clinton sex scandals and impeachment trials and the Battle for the White House and Theft of an election in November-December 2000 can illustrate the broad patterns and trajectories of contemporary politics, culture, and society. Indeed, I will argue that these components of recent U.S. political spectacle are interrelated and can best be read in the context of seeing how the cultural wars and presidential politics from the 1960s to the present played out on the stage of political spectacle. In Chapter 6, I provide a study of "Presidential Politics, the Movie" to discuss vicissitudes of media and politics from the 1960s to the present.

Two major spectacles delayed the publication of this book. I was undertaking to conclude my studies for book publication in November 11 when I got caught up in the Battle for the White House in the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Election night provided one of the great media spectacles of all-time as the presidential election went from what appeared as a win for Al Gore, to an announced win for George W. Bush to an eventual deadlock and the subsequent Florida Recount Wars, itself a grand political spectacle. I initially wrote up an account of election night that I felt would provide an excellent opening for my studies of media spectacle. The study of the Battle for the White House became what I envisaged as a chapter in this book, and then eventually became a book in itself, Grand Theft 2000 (Kellner 2001), when I concluded that the media spectacle of the 2000 election and its aftermath was one of the great political battles and crimes of U.S. history.

Having concluded Grand Theft 2000 in the Fall of 2001, I returned to finish Media Spectacle, but the September 11 terrorist bombings and subsequent Terror War generated another major media spectacle which over the next months took over my research energies. Engaging the momentous spectacle as it unfolded, I produced another book length manuscript which I am now preparing for publication under the provisional title of September 11, Terror War, and the New Barbarism (Kellner, forthcoming). Hence, I now have a media spectacle trilogy that I present as my gift to understanding society, culture, and politics in the Third Millennium.

As the present text indicates, I did manage to complete my studies of Media Spectacle in a highly turbulent political and cultural situation. In some ways, postponement of publication of Media Spectacle while I worked on the major unfolding political spectacles of the era was fortuitous. As Chapter 1 reveals, the opening years of the new millennium were rich in spectacle, making clear that the construction of media spectacle in every realm of culture was one of the defining characteristics of contemporary culture and society. Likewise, the problematics of the specific studies that I was carrying out were enriched and complexified in the past couple of years. While up until 2000, McDonald's appeared as an almost uncontested example of the success of capitalist globalization, the anti-globalization movement began making McDonald's the target of major demonstrations. McDonald's profits began to fall for the first time in the opening years of the new millennium and McDonald's itself emerged as an increasingly contradictory and contested site in the present age (see Chapter 2).

The Michael Jordan sports spectacle that I have been following for some years took on added dimensions and pathos in 2001-2002 as Jordan attempted a comeback and as his failing marriage with his wife Juanita added a dimension of tabloid sex scandal to the Jordan saga. The reaggravation of Jordan's knee-injuries in March 2002 and his dropping out of play for the season just before the NBA playoffs provided a spectacle of finitude, mortality, and the limitations of the aging body, just as the younger Jordan had presented a spectacle of godlike transcendence and sport idol deity. Hence, the Michael Jordan spectacle also emerged as more complex and contradictory as the millennium unfolds (see Chapter 3).

The O.J. Simpson saga continued to play out in the New Millennium as well, internally as its celebrity scandal dimension intensified with new clashes between Simpson and the law. Another round of celebrity sex scandal in his personal life also emerged, as Simpson carried out a very public and tumultuous relation with a lookalike

of his murdered wife Nicole. It was also becoming clearer that the Simpson spectacle was a bellweather event in the transition to a time of tabloid journalism in which during an age of new media, celebrity scandals and the megaspectacle of the day dominated the news cycle (Chapter 4).

The conspiracy theories concerning the Simpson celebrity murder scandal continued to proliferate and pointed to the growing role of machination and manipulations in contemporary U.S. society and culture. Although the popular TV-series The X-Files declined in popularity in its past two seasons, culminating in an announcement in January 2002 that the series would be cancelled at the end of its ninth season, the narrative trajectories of the last two seasons make it clear that the alien and conspiracy motif intersects in a major way with fears over cloning, the genetic engineering of human beings, and the creation of a new species that could surpass and eliminate human beings, thus bringing the adventures of the human to a close. I am thus able to provide an overview of the entire TV-series and its relevance during an age of cloning and genetic engineering (Chapter 5).

Further, as I note above, adding Election 2000, the Battle for the White in the Florida Recount Wars, and the events of September 11 in my studies of contemporary politics (found in Chapter 6 of this text) provided an enrichment of our understanding of the role of media spectacle in contemporary politics. A new political sex scandal emerged in 2002 to follow the Clinton sex scandals when Chandra Levy, an intern of California Congressman Bill Condit, was found to be missing and the tabloids had a field day uncovering the kinky details of their mutual sex lives and perhaps fateful overlapping. The arrest of film and TV actor Robert Blake for the murder of his wife in April 2002 and saturation coverage of the event shows that the celebrity murder scandal evident in the O.J. Simpson megaspectacle continues to be of major import and fascination in the present age.

Thus, the theories and models of media spectacle developed in the present book should be of use for years to come. Since I make extensive use of Internet research sources I should make some comments about use and citation of this material. As is well known, Internet sources often disappear as sites shut down, take material off, or change location. Google.com, Alexa.com, and some other search engines have taken to copying and caching files in order to preserve Internet material that often disappears from its original location. Thus, while I cite the Internet url of actual material used in my text, the specific Internet source cited may disappear. Further, I would recommend that readers wishing to inspect my sources look for them in the "Wayback Machine" at www.archive.org/index.html, or type in key words from the material cited to google.com or other search engines in order to find the original sources that I cited or other related interesting material. The Internet is a cornucopia of research material, although it must of course be used with caution.

In some cases, the studies presented here appear in print for the first time and I have completely recast previously published texts to fit into the framework of this book and have updated earlier versions. At the beginning of each chapter, I cite previous publication sources and thank individuals who contributed to each study. For the entire book, I would like to thank Rhonda Hammer who read, discussed, and was often engaged in the research, as when we spent a year or more watching the O.J. Simpson spectacle go through surprising twists and turns. I would also like to give special thanks to Richard

Kahn who carefully edited every chapter and provided ideas and research material that I utilized in specific studies. I would also like to thank Richard for expertly constructing and administering my UCLA Web-site (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>), and designing and helping administer a new blogLeft project begun in April 2002 as I brought these studies to a close.

Finally, thanks to Mari Shulaw for commissioning the book, putting up with the constant delays signaled above, and giving me solid editorial advice and support throughout this process.

And, now, on with the show...

Douglas Kellner, Los Angeles, April 2002

Notes

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

² For my various takes on postmodern theory and culture, see Best and Kellner 1991, 1997, and 2001, and Kellner 1995. In the latter text, Media Culture I maintain that the contemporary era is an interim period between the modern and the postmodern era. As I try to show in this text, one of the features of postmodernity is an increasingly important role of media spectacle in the economy, polity, culture, and everyday life.

³ For debates over the vicissitudes of the human in the contemporary era and possible transition to the posthuman, see Best and Kellner 2001.



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