

Globalization and Media Spectacle: From 9/11 to the Iraq War¹

RESUMO

O artigo a seguir propõe uma visão panorâmica sobre o conceito de mídia espetacular. O que se pretende aqui é analisar a rotina de apresentação de notícias, procurando entender os mecanismos que fazem com que a informação seja sempre oferecida como uma forma de espetáculo. Eis uma análise que, em alguns momentos, tende a se aproximar das idéias de Guy Debord, contudo, em outros se vê forçada a afastar-se dela.

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mídia
espetáculo
Iraque

ABSTRACT

The following article proposes an overview about the concept of media spectacle. The point here is how the presentation of news and information often takes the form of media spectacle. This analysis of spectacle is influenced by Guy Debord, but there are some relevant conceptions which differ from these of the French thinker.

KEY WORDS

media
spectacle
Iraq

Today I want to discuss the connections between globalization and media spectacle and particularly the role of media spectacle in both national and global cultures. First, I will characterize and present an overview of my concept of media spectacle, then I'll discuss different categories and types of media spectacle, and finally I'll illustrate my analysis of global media spectacle with discussion of the complex media spectacle of the US/UK war on Iraq from 2003 to the present in order to illustrate my conception of the reversal of the spectacle and how media spectacle is a contested terrain. I will also indicate how my analysis of spectacle is influenced by the French thinker Guy Debord and how my own conception differs from Debord.

My thesis is that in media systems with highly competitive corporate media, the presentation of news and information often takes the form of media spectacle. In an arena of intense competition with 24/7 cable TV networks, talk radio, Internet sites and blogs, and ever proliferating new media competition for attention is ever more intense leading the media to go to sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle that attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible, until the next spectacle emerges.

This takes place in both national and global arenas. In the U.S. in the 1990s, major media spectacles of the day included the O.J. Simpson murder trials, the Bill Clinton sex and impeachment scandals, and the hotly contested presidential election of 2000 between Al Gore and George W. Bush. Global media spectacles of the era included the Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations, the Kosovo wars, and the marriage, divorce, life and death of Princess Diana, a spectacle continuing today. Major weather events become global media spectacles like the 2004 Asian Tsunami, or Hurricane Katrina in the United States, and major sports events like the 2006 World Cup competition in Germany, or the upcoming Beijing Olympic contests, already a spectacle on global media, were presented in the form of media spectacle.

The Time of the Spectacle

My notion of media spectacle builds on French theorist Guy Debord's conception of the society of spectacle, but differs significantly from Debord's concept.² For Debord, spectacle "unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (Debord 1967: #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

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consumption of images, commodities, and staged events.

For Debord, “spectacle” constituted the overarching concept to describe the media and consumer society, including the packaging, promotion, and display of commodities and the production and effects of all media. Using the term “media spectacle,” I am largely focusing on various forms of technologically-constructed media productions that are produced and disseminated through the so-called mass media, ranging from radio and television to the Internet and latest wireless gadgets. Every medium, from music to television, from news to advertising, has multiple forms of spectacle, involving such things in the realm of music as the classical music spectacle, the opera spectacle, the rock spectacle, and over the last decades the hip hop spectacle. The forms and circulation of the spectacle evolve over time and multiply with new technological developments.

Experience and everyday life are shaped and mediated for Debord 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” (#44) that 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. Debord’s concept of the spectacle is integrally connected to the concept of separation and passivity, for in submissively consuming spectacles, one is estranged from actively producing one’s life. Capitalist society separates workers from the products of their labor, art from life, and consumption from human needs and self-directing activity, as individuals inertly observe the spectacles of social life from within the privacy of their homes (#25 and #26). The Situationist project, by contrast, involved an overcoming of all forms of separation, in which individuals would directly produce their own life and modes of self-activity and collective practice.

The correlative to the spectacle for Debord is thus the spectator, the reactive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the willing insertion into a system of marketable difference and life-styles. The concept of the spectacle therefore involves a distinction between passivity and activity, and consumption and production, condemning the passive and scripted consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination. The spectacular society spreads its wares mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture.

This structural shift to a society of the spectacle involves a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life. Parallel to the Frankfurt School conception of a “totally administered,” or “one-dimensional,” society (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972; Marcuse 1964), Debord

states that: “The spectacle is the moment when the consumption has attained the *total occupation* of social life” (#42). Here exploitation is raised to a psychological level; basic physical privation is augmented by “enriched privation” of pseudo-needs; alienation is generalized, made comfortable, and alienated consumption becomes “a duty supplementary to alienated production” (ibid).

On my account, there are many levels and categories of spectacle (Kellner 2003a). Some media spectacles, like Dayan and Katz’s media events (1992), are recurrent phenomena of media culture that celebrate dominant values and institutions, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas like the Oscars and Emmys, or sports events like the Super Bowl or World Cup, which celebrate basic values of competition and winning. Politics is increasingly mediated by media spectacle. Political conflicts, campaigns, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call “news” have all been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the media sensationalism, infotainment, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, and the new phenomenon of Terror War.

Media spectacle thus involves those media events and rituals of consumption, entertainment, and competition like political campaigns or athletic contests that embody contemporary society’s basic values and serve to enculturate individuals into its way of life. Yet the spectacle, as my allusion to the **political spectacle** attests, may also embody key societal conflicts, and so I see the spectacle as a contested terrain. Since the 1960s culture wars have been raging between Left and Right, liberals and conservatives, and a diversity of groups over U.S. politics, race, class, gender, sexuality, war, and other key issues. Both sides exploit the spectacle as during the Vietnam War when the war itself was contested by the spectacle of the anti-war movement, or the 1990s Clinton sex and impeachment spectacle, whereby conservatives attempted to use the spectacle to destroy the Clinton presidency, while his defenders used the spectacle of the Right trying to take out an elected president to successfully defend him.

Spectacles of terror, like the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon, differ significantly from spectacles that celebrate or reproduce the existing society as in Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle,” or the “media events” analysed by Dayan and Katz (1992), which describe how political systems exploited televised live, ceremonial, and preplanned events. Spectacles of terror are highly disruptive events carried out by oppositional groups or individuals who are carrying out politics or war by other means. Like the media and consumer spectacles described by Debord, spectacles of terror reduce individuals to passive objects, manipulated by existing institutions and figures. However, the spectacles of terror produce fear which terrorists hope will demoralize the objects of their attack, but which are often

manipulated by conservative groups, like the Bush-Cheney administration, to push through rightwing agendas, cut back on civil liberties, and militarize the society.

Spectacles of terror should also be distinguished from **spectacles of horror** such as natural disasters like the Asian Tsunami or Hurricane Katrina that became major spectacles of the day in 2006. Other spectacles of horror include, fires, or dramatic failures of the system or infrastructure such as the Minnesota Bridge collapse and Utah mine tragedy, both becoming spectacles of the day in the U.S. in August 2007.

Megaspectacles constitute a situation whereby certain spectacles become defining events of their era. These include commodity spectacles such as the McDonald's or Nike spectacle, or Michael Jordan and the NBA basketball spectacle, which define an era of consumption, or entertainment spectacle like Elvis Presley, rock and roll, or hip hop, which help define cultural epochs. The Internet spectacle has been a major force since the 1990s with the emergence of the World Wide Web and more recently subcultural forms like MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube that constitute new forms of the interactive spectacle.

Megaspectacles also include socio-political dramas that characterize a certain period, involving such things as the 1991 Gulf war, the O.J. Simpson trials, the Clinton sex and impeachment scandals, or the Terror War that is defining the current era. Megaspectacles are defined both quantitatively and qualitatively. The major media spectacles of the era dominate news, journalism, and Internet buzz, and are highlighted and framed as the key events of the age, as were, for instance, the Princess Diana wedding, death, and funeral, or the September 11 terror attacks and their violent aftermath. As I write in 2007, the spectacle of Iraq, and the ongoing Terror War, dominate our era and encapsulate basic conflicts and political dynamics, although these megaspectacles can be overshadowed temporarily by the spectacle of the day, like the interlude of the "Virginia Tech Massacre" in the U.S., or globally of Tsunamis or typhoons, or other local weather disasters, or political upheavals like the current events in Myanmar.

Debord's The Society of the Spectacle and Its Limitations

In using the concept of spectacle, I am obviously indebted to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and the ideas of the Situationist International. Acknowledging the debt, I also note that there are three major differences between my engagement of the concept of the spectacle and Debord's model. First, while Debord develops a rather totalizing and monolithic concept of the society of the spectacle, I engage specific media spectacles, like the Clinton sex scandals and impeachment spectacle, the stolen election of 2000, the 9/11 terrorist attacks and Terror War spectacles, and subsequent Bush administration Iraq war and 2004 election spectacles

(Kellner 2001; 2003a, 2003b, and 2005).

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. In addition, I am reading the production, text and effects of various media spectacles from a standpoint within contemporary U.S. society in order to help illuminate and theorize its socio-political dynamics and culture, and more broadly, globalization and global culture. Debord, by contrast, was analyzing a specific stage of capitalist society, that of the media and consumer society organized around spectacle.

Moreover, Debord exhibits a French radical intellectual and neo-Marxian perspective while I engage specific class, race, gender, and regional problematics and deploy a multiperspectivist model, using Frankfurt School critical theory, British cultural studies, French postmodern theory, and many other critical perspectives (Kellner 1995, 2003a, 2003b and 2005).

Secondly, my approach to these specific spectacles is interpretive and interrogatory. That is, in a series of books over the last decade,

I try to interrogate what major media spectacles tell us concerning contemporary U.S. and global society. In *Media Spectacle* (2003), I interrogate what McDonald's tells us about consumption and the consumer society, or globalization; what Michael Jordan and the Nike spectacle reveals concerning the sports spectacle and the intersection of sports, entertainment, advertising, and commodification in contemporary societies; and what the O.J. Simpson affair tells us about race, class, celebrity, the media, sports, gender, the police and the legal system during its time in the mid-1990s. The O.J. Simpson trials raised as well the question of how to explain the obsessive focus on this event for months on end and what this megaspectacle tells us about media culture, politics, and society in the contemporary United States (see Kellner 2003a).

In my studies of media spectacle, I deploy cultural studies as *diagnostic critique*, reading and interpreting various spectacles to see what they tell us about the present age, using media spectacles to illuminate contemporary social developments, trends, and struggles. The "popular" often puts on display major emotions, ideas, experiences, and conflicts of the era, as well as indicating what corporations are marketing. A critical cultural studies can thus help decipher dominant trends, social and political conflicts, and fears and aspirations of the period and thus contribute to developing critical theories of the contemporary era.

Thirdly, I analyze the contradictions and reversals of the spectacle, whereas Debord has an overpowering and hegemonic notion of the society of the spectacle. Although he and his comrades in the Situationist International sketched out various models of opposition and struggle, and in fact inspired in part the rather

spectacular May '68 events in France, whereby students and workers rebelled almost overthrew the existing government (see Feenberg and Freedman, 2001), Debord's notion of "the society of the spectacle" is monolithic and all-embracing. By contrast, I see the spectacle as contested and have a notion of the reversal of the spectacle. For an example of contradictions and contestation of the commodity spectacle, take McDonald's.

When I began my studies of media spectacle in the 1990s, McDonald's was a figure for a triumphant global capitalism. McDonald's was constantly expanding in the U.S. and throughout the world, its profits were high, and it was taken as a paradigm of a successful American and then global capitalism. George Ritzer's book *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993, 1996) used McDonald's as a model to analyze contemporary production and consumption, while books like *Golden Arches East* (Watson, ed. 1997) valorized McDonald's as bringing modernity itself to vast sectors of the world like Russia and China and McDonald's was praised for its efficient production methods, its cleanliness and orderliness, and its bringing food value and fast, convenient food to the masses.

Suddenly, however, McDonald's became the poster corporation for protest in the anti-corporate globalization movement. The McDonald's corporation had sued some British Greenpeace activists who produced a pamphlet attacking McDonald's unhealthy food, its labor practices, its negative environmental impact, and called for protests and boycotts. McDonald's countered with a lawsuit and an anti-McDonald's campaign emerged with a Web-site McSpotlight that became one of the most accessed Web-sites in history; global and local protests emerged; and whenever there was an anti-corporate globalization demonstration somewhere, a McDonald's was trashed. Suddenly, McDonald's expansion was halted, profits were down almost everywhere for the first time, and new McDonald's were blocked by local struggles. Moreover, in the U.S. and elsewhere, there were lawsuits for false advertising, for promoting addictive substances and junk food, and a lot of bad publicity and falling profits that continue to haunt McDonald's through the present (Kellner 2003a)³.

I therefore see the spectacle as a *contested terrain* in which different forces use the spectacle to push their interests. Against Debord's more monolithic and overpowering totalizing spectacle, I see the spectacle as highly contested, subject to reversal and flip-flops, and thus extremely ambiguous and contradictory, a thesis I'll illustrate with analysis of the Iraq war media spectacle.

Iraq as Media Spectacle and the Contestation of the Spectacle

The US/UK Iraq invasion of 2003 was constructed and launched as a media spectacle, a process that I analyze in *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Kellner 2005). The spectacle of the Iraq war went through several

initial orchestrated sequences of spectacle with its opening "shock and awe" bombing campaign and invasion, its pulling down the statue of Saddam Hussein, its bogus "Saving Private Jennifer" scenario, and the now laughable "Mission Accomplished" spectacle, whereby George W. Bush piloted a naval aircraft onto the U.S.S. *Abraham Lincoln*. In this carefully orchestrated media event, Bush emerged in full *Top Gun* regalia from a jet plane with "Navy One" and "George W. Bush, Commander-in-Chief" logos. Strutting out of the aircraft helmet in hand, Bush crossed the flight deck accompanied by a cheering crowd and with full TV coverage that had been anticipating the big event for hours. Delivering a canned speech from a podium with a giant banner "Mission Accomplished" behind him, Bush declared that the "major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed." Later, of course, ongoing catastrophe in Iraq caused a reversal of the spectacle and the Mission Accomplished media event is a revealing embarrassment for the Bush-Cheney administration.

Crucially, the 2003 Iraq war was a major global media event constructed very differently by varying broadcasting networks in diverse parts of the world. Whereas the U.S. networks framed the event as "Operation Iraqi Freedom" (the Pentagon concept) or "War in Iraq," the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) used the logo "War on Iraq," and various Arab networks presented it as an "invasion" and "occupation." Whereas in Gulf War I, CNN was the only network live in Baghdad and throughout the war framed the images, discourses, and spectacle, there were more than 20 networks broadcasting in Baghdad for the 2003 Iraq war, including several Arab networks, and various national and corporate television companies presented the war quite differently.

Conservative U.S. networks like Fox and the NBC cable networks played patriotic music as the soundtrack to their news reports, and all U.S. networks engaged in extremely patriotic discourses and avoided showing casualties or the destructive elements of the Iraq incursion. But al Jazeera and other Arab networks, as well as some European networks, talked of an "invasion" and an illegal U.S. and British assault on Iraq. As Donald Rumsfeld bragged that the bombings were the most precise in history and were aimed at military and not civilian targets, Arab and various global broadcasting networks focused on civilian casualties and presented painful spectacles of Iraqis suffering. Moreover, to the surprise of many, after a triumphant march across the Kuwaiti border and rush to Baghdad, the U.S. and British forces began to take casualties, and during the weekend of March 22-23, images of their POWs and dead bodies of their soldiers were shown throughout the world. Moreover, the Iraqis began fiercely resisting, rather than cheering on British and U.S. forces.

Comparing U.S. broadcasting networks with the British and Canadian Broadcasting Corporations, among other outlets, showed vastly different wars being presented (see Kellner 2005). The U.S. networks tended to ignore Iraqi casualties, Arab outrage about the war, and global antiwar and anti-U.S. protests, but the BBC and CBC often featured these more critical themes. As noted, the war was framed very differently by various countries and networks, and analysts remarked that in most Arab media, the war was presented as an invasion of Iraq, slaughter of its peoples, and destruction of the country. On the whole, U.S. broadcasting networks tended to present a sanitized view of the war and tended toward pro--military patriotism, propaganda, and technological fetishism, celebrating the weapons of war and highlighting the achievements and heroism of the U.S. troops.

From 2004 to the present, the bloody aftermath of the Bush administration invasion and occupation of Iraq produced an increasingly violent and chaotic spectacle that alienated U.S. allies, created numerous global enemies of the US, led to defeat of the Republican party in the 2006 Congressional elections, and has undermined the Bush presidency and U.S. power. The continual presentation of nightly televised horrors of war, as during the Vietnam era, has presented a negative spectacle of a failed war and turned the majority of the people in the U.S. and globally against the war. Yet the spectacle of Iraq continues to be highly contested as the Bush administration labels critics of the war enablers of the "enemy" and underminers of the global effort in the "war on terror."

So to conclude: major events of our time are routinely presented by broadcasting media as media spectacle, but different media in different countries are going to present the spectacle differently according to their national interests or ideologies. News and information are increasingly constructed as media spectacle as media technologies develop and as competition between media sources intensifies. Media spectacles are contradictory and ambiguous and subject to contestation as the Iraq war indicates. Hence, it is likely that major events and political struggles of our time will be presented as media spectacle ■ FAMECOS

NOTES

1. This analysis builds on my books *Media Spectacle* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press, 2005), as well as my recent *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombings to the Virginia Tech Massacre*. Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press, 2007. Texto enviado para o IX Seminário Internacional da Comunicação - PUCRS/novembro de 2007.
2. Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) was published in translation in a pirate edition by Black and Red (Detroit) in 1970 and reprinted many times; another edition appeared in 1983 and a new translation in 1994. Thus, in the following discussion, I cite references to the numbered paragraphs of Debord's text to make it easier for those with different editions to follow my reading. The key texts of the Situationists and many interesting commentaries are found on various Web sites, producing a curious afterlife for Situationist ideas and practices. For further discussion of the Situationists, see Best and Kellner 1997, Chapter 3; see also the discussions of spectacle culture in Best and Kellner 2001 and Kellner 2003a.
3. I might note that Morgan Spurlock's successful documentary film *Supersize Me* (2004) created a popular anti-McDonald's counter spectacle, in which the filmmaker went on a diet of exclusively McDonald's high-calorie food for a month and seriously endangered his health, as well as his body size!