Introduction

The society whose modernization has reached the stage of integrated spectacle is characterized by the combined effect of five principal features: incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalized secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present.

—Guy Debord[1]

In my attempts to comprehend the increasing degree to which the spectacle dominates U.S. society and to imagine surpassing it, even in thought, I have returned again and again to the writings of Guy Debord. It is astounding how refreshing and relevant they still seem.[2] First published in 1967, his most well-known text, *Society of the Spectacle*, has since penetrated many aspects of critical writing about contemporary society. This quixotic manifesto was Debord's call to arms to overthrow a system of dominance that he believed turned *being* into *having* and *having* into *appearing*—thus alienating himself and his fellow citizens from the economic and cultural reality of their situation.[3] His impassioned, confident, unequivocally enraged voice articulates the dilemma of the shrinking public sphere and the failures of social criticism to permeate the phenomenon he terms *the spectacle*. Debord writes: "There is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing pressure of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it."[4] No matter how much Debord attempts a clear definition, the spectacle still eludes us because it is so all-encompassing, inclusive of everything relating to the economy as well as its "self-representation." "The spectacle," he

writes, "is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images."[5]

Debord is amazed that French society has turned against a two-hundred-year tradition of self-examination and that it now no longer encourages "criticism or transformation, reform or revolution."[6] For Debord this is the result of the spectacle that has come to dominate all aspects of reality such that nothing can exist outside it and no organized movement yet exists to effectively depose it. In such a distorted situation, the more important that social issues become, the more they are hidden. It insidiously causes citizens to feel mistrustful of political discourse, impotent to effect change, and convinced that they must separate themselves from the political in order to live meaningful, joyful, creative lives. Such reactions are death to a democracy, and yet Debord sees no way out, short of revolution—a word that has long ago passed out of contemporary rhetoric, even among the most radical social critics and activists. "The spectacle isn't the world of vision, it is the vision of the world permeated by the powers of domination."[7] Penetration into all aspects of daily life is now complete. And over time we have organically absorbed Debord's concept to mean everything woven into the invisible veil that prevents us from making a clear evaluation of our situation or organizing to change it.

The 2000 presidential election was a terrifying example of spectacle culture at its most confusing and contradictory. While many were disgusted, angry, and disenfranchised by an unjust voting process, others seemed lulled into semidelirium, casting votes against their own self-interests, for a candidate whose politics champion protecting the well-being of only a very particular group of citizens.

A Bush presidency had once seemed inconceivable. How did it become possible? Why would so many Americans choose a president who appears so provincial, inexperienced, reluctant, vacuous, arrogant and, most significant, uninterested in international affairs? There were those who didn't believe Bush was smart enough and others who weren't sure he was competent enough, yet they voted for him. On election day one voter told a National Public Radio reporter that he was voting for Bush even though Bush hadn't done a good job as governor of Texas. "But," he offered optimistically, "maybe he'll do better as president." While Bush's intelligence was rated low even among some of his supporters, Al Gore was repeatedly ostracized for being "too smart," a liability in the United States where "too smart" is equated with smart aleck—the kid in fourth grade (often a he) who always had his hand up first to answer the teacher's questions. But who could ever be too smart when the issues facing our own country and the rest of the world are so daunting? It didn't seem to matter to half the voters that George W. had traveled so little outside the United States or that he didn't appear to have any idea what the Supreme Court decision

on affirmative action actually was; rather, it mattered that they *thought* he was a nice guy, someone they might want to wake up to each morning on their television screens, someone with whom average citizens could identify as being just like them. Too many were caught in the spectacle. In Debord's terms, "When social significance is attributed only to what is immediate, and to what will be immediate immediately afterwards, always replacing another, identical immediacy, it can be seen that the uses of the media guarantee a kind of eternity of noisy insignificance."[8]

The "noisy insignificance" and false "immediacy" that catalyzed too many votes in this last presidential election had very little to do with the actual complexity of the contemporary world as it transforms around us at a rapid rate, or the day-to-day reality of representing U.S. interests within a very sophisticated and interconnected global economy. The criteria for casting votes often did not take into account the reality of a far more interwoven and fluid international situation than has ever before been witnessed. It would seem the leader of this nation, who will inevitably play a key international leadership role, would need to be truly informed about global events or at least demonstrate curiosity about the particularities of such challenges.

One of these new paradigms, the economic situation of greater global interrelatedness, has received a great deal of attention in the press. Yet few, if any, truly understand what it means to have no national boundaries in relationship to information or economics. Many find this situation disconcerting, characterized by uncertainty and a lack of coherent rules. The complexity of this new globalization leaves most people feeling less powerful than ever. And so while some are embracing this change wholeheartedly, others, out of fear, are attempting to revive nationalist fervor in many parts of the world, fighting to keep all barriers up and fortified. Even those who are sympathetic to these changes are unable to understand the breadth of this new situation or to imagine how to effect change within it. Jean-Marie Guehenno writes: "We are caught between the solitary individual and a globality that cannot be mastered but which it is no longer possible to ignore."[9] And Frederic Jameson writes: "Globalization is rather a kind of cyberspace in which money capital has reached its ultimate dematerialization, as messages which pass instantaneously from one nodal point to another across the former globe, the former material world."[10]

One aspect of the divided vote for U.S. president is represented by what Terry Eagleton calls the split between cosmopolitanism and fundamentalism—those who understand and are open to this new global, diversified, and dematerialized world versus those who want to retreat to very conservative notions of home, family, religion, and national boundaries. These opposed forces exist within each nation and across nations as well.

In one example of this divide, the United States has often split between urban and rural, with each geographic region mistrustful of the values of the other. Major cities in the United States tend to reflect a cosmopolitanism, a worldview more similar to those of other large urban centers around the world than those of small towns in America.

At the heart of this ambivalence about change is a tendency to want to simplify the complexity of U.S. society through the denial of difference. In his important book *The Uses of Disorder* (1996), Richard Sennett focuses on the desire on the part of many U.S. citizens, at times represented in the move from urban centers to the suburbs, to simplify and deny the otherness, difference, and complexity of American life by attempting to create a more homogeneous sense of community.[11] Sennett writes of the value of living in close proximity and of necessity with a wide range of people in New York neighborhoods and how significant this was to the well-being of early twentieth-century U.S. society:

> The old neighborhoods in cities were complex precisely because no one group had the economic resources to shield itself; the brownstone dwellers did not have the money to live one family to a house, and so shield the housing unit from influences outside the circle of one family.[12] . . . None of these areas of activity had enough power to control its own limits as a community. None of them was rich and centralized enough to wall itself off, and so each suffered the intrusion of others by necessity.[13]

Now, those with greater abundance construct the myth of "coherent community life" based on the illusion of sameness, rather than on the integration of difference.[14] Abundance, in other words, increases the power to create isolation in communal contacts at the same time that it opens up "an avenue by which men can easily conceive of their social relatedness in terms of their similarity rather than their need for each other."[15]

With the proliferation of gated communities, this type of isolation has reached new levels of literality. In Sennett's terms, the move to and embrace of suburbia was about escaping the urban and creating a world that could be completely controlled. The illusion of control is equated with the security of sameness. If all houses look alike, if people interact with others only like themselves, if everyone has the same clothes, cars, and aspirations, then life *should* stay ordered. But in fact this has not been the case.

The world was shocked by events at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, for example, precisely because it was a white middle-class suburban school. How could teenagers from supposedly "good homes" kill their peers? It would appear that the vacuum created by greater homogenization may have contributed to the inability of the school community to deal with complexity and difference. The result: an ostracization of those who do not conform, and a difficulty for those outside the

mainstream to fully experience and embrace their own otherness. When such a process coincides with adolescence—a time when teenagers seek peer group acceptance above all else—a fear of difference can result. Sennett understands such a society, fatally stuck in adolescence, as a "society of fear" willing to be "dull and sterile" in order that it not be "overwhelmed."[16] By contrast, when there is a fuller spectrum of acceptable difference, it allows varying points of view, as well as the creativity that can accompany such otherness, to emerge as desirable. Sennett terms this phenomenon *uses of disorder*.

It is therefore not coincidental that at this time, when U.S. society seems caught between the complexity of a global economy, rapid technological change, tendencies to fundamentalist ideology, and an inevitable internal reckoning with its own self-image, we have chosen the most blank American president to date—a person who seems the least able to articulate contradictions, the last person to gravitate to complexity in art and literature, or to be interested in the subtleties of the myriad cultures that make up our society and our own newly globalized reality: a perfect figure to embody the vacuity of the integrated spectacle. Does this choice reflect an insidious desire for the safety that comes with dullness, with the absence of curiosity and imagination? Or are people simply seeking escape from a feared, unknown future, and the desire to return to a simplicity that never did exist and certainly will not exist in the future?

At the start of the new millennium, what would constitute effective responses to the powerful, ubiquitous phenomenon of the spectacle? I would venture to say anything that punctures the veil—challenges the status quo, asks difficult questions about the actualization of democracy and the quality of human relationships under advanced capitalism, helps to create theory that ultimately brings people together under a coherent critique of the social totality, and, as Debord suggests, "goes alone to meet unified social practice."[17]

Artists flock to the ambiguities and marginalities that cause others to flee. They find inspiration in the seeming disorder of urban life. Aware of and even known to revel in their own otherness, artists desire environments where they do not need to conform to a uniform version of adult behavior, acceptable work, or relationships. They then create around themselves the possibility of living the lifestyle that feels freest and most-encouraging of creativity. These centers of artistic production are in principle the opposite of suburban malls. They are about creative pursuits and fearless originality. They are not about acceptability of taste or mere repetition and reproduction.

Because artists bring new ideas about seeing, fabricating, and responding to history into the society, their work encourages disequilibrium, creates its own type of unpredictable disorder. Although it may take decades

to reach assimilation, over time these ideas become acceptable and are absorbed within the society. When this absorption is complete and these innovations of thought, images, or techniques have lost their creative edge, then it is time to generate more new concepts.

This regeneration of the imagination has always been the labor of artists, designers, and writers. But in a society seeking sameness and assimilation, while fleeing its most painful secrets, creative people are inevitably marginalized or even punished for fulfilling this expectation. Artists often raise the questions society seeks to mask and in so doing provoke its ire. If artists are willing to engage issues of sexuality, ethnic identity, racism, gender, history—personal and collective—alienation, and despair, when others are not, then of course they will appear to oppose those for whom repression of such concerns is a way of life. The impropriety of these issues resides not in having *experienced* such conflicts but, rather, in giving them form and bringing them into public awareness.

In their desire to absorb new images, artists naturally also seek out the complexity of a global environment, finding in that complexity the richness they need to develop their work. But increasingly the art world, which likes to think of itself as cosmopolitan, has also been threatened with homogenization—a flattening out of the visual landscape. Even with the proliferation of international biennials and a supposedly global art market, the international art world apparatus has been far too willing to accept uniformity—limited versions of what is fashionable in art-making that are often determined by the New York aesthetic. It would be a shame if now, as the world of artistic creation truly has the opportunity to become bigger, it actually became smaller. But because art also exists in history, it often must fight against the same trends, banalities, conflicts, obscurities, and complexities that can stifle and paralyze other aspects of society. It too must counteract the effects of the spectacle. Debord writes: "The real life of modern poetry and art—is obviously hidden, since the spectacle, whose function is to make history forgotten within culture, applies, in the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means, the very strategy which constitutes its core."[18]

In other words, nothing is free from the distortions and abstractions caused by the spectacle. Western artists and intellectuals, well aware of this phenomenon, have responded to the dominance of signs over reality for decades—the free-floating sign that has lost its signification, the role of the media in creating this phenomenon, and the obliteration of consciousness that allows a reality riddled with contradictions to be manipulated, diminished, and made acceptable to so many. We have long understood how the media flatten rather than problematize reality. Most generators of text and image understand, "An argument that cannot be summed-up in a single sentence has no media value."[19] And we are learn-

ing to live with the intangible and often absurd situation in which information is power, even though it would appear that the "primary goal of information is to acquire more information."[20]

This tension is at the heart of the dynamic of our societies; the world is becoming a gigantic stock exchange of information that never closes. The more information there is, the more imbalances there are, as in a great meteorological system—a wind that creates a depression here causes high pressure elsewhere.

What is particularly frightening about this entire interrelated ecosystem is that few can predict where the wind will blow next, or who and what might be swept up and away. We now live daily with such precariousness and the compulsion to acquire as much information as we can to stave it off. The greatest instability of all is the degree to which Americans have accepted this unknown new world—enamored as we are with technology—without understanding to what extent technology is an ideology that conveniently distracts us from the deeper problems eroding our society. Debord writes, "The spectacle is the main production of present-day society."[21] And now it diverts us from the problems facing global society as well, which is why the Seattle demonstrations in response to the meetings of the World Trade Organization were applauded by so many North Americans and have captured their imaginations. The demonstrators, often very young and idealistic, stripped the veil away for a time, revealing policies dominated by multinational corporate greed. Their actions gave others permission to ask this question: What might be the alternatives to such rampant exploitative globalization?

The false equilibrium maintained by the spectacle and enlivened and accelerated by speed and desire *must* be ruptured by social actions, art, and critical discourse. It is only in those moments of disruption, combined with *repair*, to use Lewis Hyde's term,[22] that there is the possibility to see beyond the spectacle or to see that at each transitional moment new permutations of the spectacle may be created. It is therefore futile to try to keep up; rather, we need to step away and aside to observe, critique, and *then* act.

Within this situation rests the challenge for writers, intellectuals, and artists to find viable means to communicate their critique of established reality and to articulate deliberate projects that align with the goals of others, to affect collective consciousness. Such projects, although difficult to articulate, are more essential now than ever as we struggle against a takeover of American political and cultural life by what is known perversely as the "radical right."

For two decades my project has been to combine my roles as writer, educator, public intellectual, and dean to affect consciousness—my own and that of others. I have chosen to position myself in the world of art schools

because I have found these environments to be some of the very few sites left in the United States where a creative approach to pedagogy is possible. To apply a phrase from Terry Eagleton, art schools are "not wholly absorbed by the logic of utility."[23] Thus such environments potentially allow the values of play, "nonproductive" production, and constructive recklessness to take hold in an educational setting, as they often do in art-making. These values essential to creativity stand in opposition to, and can counteract the banalities and seductions of, spectacle culture.

Like Eagleton, I do not believe in creating isolated utopian environments that have no impact on the plight of the larger society. I do not trust that such environments will *inevitably* affect a greater whole. But I do believe that they can present the possibility of an alternative way of thinking about productivity and offer the opportunity to help develop creative, competent artists, designers, arts administrators, historians, educators, theoreticians, and writers who can enter society creatively—conversant in multiple discourses, armed with an analysis of spectacle culture, and capable of forming new concepts and alliances. These practitioners of culture can become both the producers of and audience for art and writing that challenge the grip of the spectacle. I always keep in mind Eagleton's admonition: "If culture is an oasis of value, then it offers a solution of sorts. But if learning and the arts are the sole surviving enclave of creativity, then we are most certainly in dire trouble."[24]

The goal surely is to imagine a society in which creativity is understood as essential to all aspects of daily life. But even though there is now a great wealth of creative production in art, music, dance, theater, and writing across disciplines within the society, I have never felt the established reality less open to its influence or further from its dream of creative freedom than I do at present. This situation makes the pursuit of such goals that much more urgent.

The essays that follow embody the challenge to imagine the unimaginable—a society that believes in and encourages the making of art while recognizing the multiple functions art and artists can serve in society, or a U.S. society willing to and even desirous of a process to redress past atrocities with full disclosure that is as sophisticated and transparent as that of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The essays attempt to create a useful tension around such complex concerns, to bring them into public consciousness, and to challenge established perceptions of reality. They cover a range of topics, including the role of artist as public intellectual; the situation of art-making and the education of artists in a post-postmodern climate; the myth of the global citizen and the effects of globalization on the art world; the search for truth and reconciliation in South Africa and the refusal to attempt such a process in the United States; the unreconciled pain of the Vietnam War and its relationship to public mourning; the difficulties

and possible subversions of women in leadership; the relationship between the consciousness necessary to understand the importance of art and the necessity to create ecological balance; the complexities of "modifying" nature through experiments in the posthuman; betrayal, deception, the end of innocence, and how I never got over the Dodgers leaving Brooklyn.

In each essay I have tried to exact a rent in the veil, to look closely at the social realities that have often remained so hidden or embroiled in the larger spectacle of U.S. society that one cannot see the relationships among apparently disparate topics that are in fact interrelated. Throughout, I have marveled at the power of particular visual representations to bring much-needed complexity into the lives of U.S. citizens, and yet I am continually amazed at the capacity of the prevailing spectacle culture—composed, as it is, of images—to ignore or, worse, attempt to malign or obliterate significant social statements made in art.

These essays represent the last five years of my own struggle to understand why we as a species—as nations and as individuals—allow ourselves constantly to be seduced away from our task as citizens to create a transparent democracy; why we deny the wealth of our own creativity; refuse to employ this power to envision more equitable social structures; or to mobilize our observations into actions; and how we might use our collective intelligence to transcend such ambivalence and reestablish meaning for seriously compromised words such as *humane* and *accountable* as we embark on this next millennium.

Within my ongoing dream of articulating effectively such large concerns, I have often thought of Paul Virilio—master of sprinting ahead of the spectacle to reflect on its evolution—who, while being interviewed for *Politics of the Very Worst*, said, "My work is that of a limited man who must deal with a limitless situation."[25]

NOTES

1. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcome Imrie (London: Verso, 1988), 11.

2. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1983) and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.

3. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, paragraph 17.

4. Debord, *Comments on the Society*, 19.

5. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, paragraph 4.

6. Debord, *Comments on the Society*, 21.

7. Lee Bracken, *Guy Debord: Revolutionary* (Venice: Feral House, 1997), 131.

8. Debord, *Comments on the Society*, 15.

9. Jean-Marie Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, trans. Victoria Elliott (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 96.

10. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 154.

11. Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1996).

12. Sennett, *Uses of Disorder*, 47.

13. Sennett, *Uses of Disorder*, 49.

14. Sennett, *Uses of Disorder*, 47.

15. Sennett, *Uses of Disorder*, 49.

16. Sennett, *Uses of Disorder*, 72.

17. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, paragraph 211.

18. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, paragraph 192.

19. Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, 29.

20. Guehenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, 61.

21. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, paragraph 14.

22. Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1998), 308.

23. Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 22.

24. Eagleton, *Idea of Culture*, 21.

25. Paul Virillio, *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview by Philippe Petit*, trans. Michael Cavaliere, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext[e], 1999), 51.