

## Revisiting the *Society of the Spectacle* in the post-9/11 World

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In this paper I aim to revisit and add my own contribution to the theory of the spectacle by comparing Guy Debord's model of the spectacle introduced in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* with a new type of spectacle – the spectacle of fear, here epitomized by the 9/11. By comparing Debord's model with this new type of spectacle, I proceed to identify the key differences between the two, arguing that Debord's certain fundamental theses on the spectacle need to be revised in order to understand the spectacle of fear. I propose to revise Debord's theory in three ways. Firstly, the spectacle no longer represents the betterment of reality, with trauma becoming its chief end product, replacing satisfaction as the correlate of Debord's spectacle. Secondly, as a consequence of globalization and development of technology, the state and the corporate have lost the monopoly over the spectacle and the individual is now able to produce and disseminate streams of spectacles at unprecedented speeds. Finally, I introduce the audiovisual magnitude and the intensity of the trauma inflicted to the spectator as the sole determinants of the effectiveness of the spectacle of fear, leading to the argument that the spectacle always seeks to increase its own magnitude as it immunizes the spectator against its lighter versions.

**Keywords:** spectacle, fear, audiovisual magnitude, audiovisual trauma

### 1. Introduction

In his 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord introduced the theory and concept of spectacle. Debord saw the spectacle as a pseudo world constructed from endless streams of consumer-based images that pervade every aspect of life, from entertainment to culture and politics, proclaiming domination of appearances and life itself as an appearance. The spectacle is an expression of both state and corporate power, in which the state and the mass media merged to replace commodity with images now becoming basic unit of capitalism (Giroux, 2007). The spectacle is seen as the spawning ground for production of pseudo needs that fuel mass consumption and legitimize consumer ideology

as the dominant mode of living that not only defines social relationship between people, but also constructs a controllable, apolitical subject indulged in consumption and passivity. The image as the spectacle thus performs several functions simultaneously: it constructs a submissive political subject indulged in consumption; controls the modes of societal self-representation through images by monopolizing the media space; invents pseudo-needs and desires consistent with the consumer ideology and the logic of the marketplace.

Since its inception in 1967, the theory of spectacle has been heavily debated, and there have been occasional attempts to modify it. A number of theorists increased our understanding of the spectacle by examining both the nature of

the spectacle and types of spectacle across all fields of life, including politics, culture, language, art, the media, sports, fashion, etc. Some theorists such as Baudrillard elevated the theory to an entirely new level, theorizing the concept of hyper-reality in which, as Debord would have it, appearances do not represent reality anymore, but a new stage of abstraction is reached in which the whole cycle of production, distribution, and consumption is presented in terms of abstract signs with no relation to an objective world. We thus come to consume not the essence of things but their meaning (i.e. a Bentley is bought because of the prestige it signifies) (Best and Kellner, 1999).

No matter the type of spectacle or the facet of social life it submits to its influence, the spectacle continues to execute its universal function of the creator of a society of consent, in which consumer ideology mediated by the image represents the dominant mode of living.

However, on 11 September 2001, a new type of spectacle was born, one based on fear and terror as its defining attributes (Giroux, 2007). Throughout the course of this paper I will analyze this new type of spectacle – termed the spectacle of fear, building on Kellner's terror spectacle (2003) and Giroux's (2007) spectacle of terrorism – and explore the common grounds it has with Debord's understanding of the spectacle but will also identify the key differences between the two, suggesting that Debord's model of spectacle is no longer suitable to fully explain this new type of spectacle.

## 2. Debord's Model of the Spectacle

Even though the spectacle as a social construct dates back to the 1930s when the fascist regime swayed masses by gigantic images, monumental rallies of aesthetics and sophisticated propaganda machine deployed to glorify war, physical superiority and racial purity with the aim to command obedience and create consent (Giroux, 2007), in this paper I will follow the theory of the spectacle devised by a French philosopher Guy Debord in 1967, in his book *The Society of the Spectacle* and subsequently updated in *Comments on the Society of Spectacle*.

Debord defined the spectacle as images detached from every aspect of life and merged into a common stream, that unfold as a pseudo-world apart. This pseudo-world is a substitute for reality and always manifests itself as an enormous positivity for it must compensate for the reality's inadequacies. The spectacle proclaims

the predominance of appearances turning all social life into a mere appearance, an image. At the heart of the spectacle lies image as a consumable. The spectacle as a vehicle is materialized in parallel with the invention of the pseudo-needs that have been elevated in the capitalist societies to the level of basic needs. The spectacle in everyday life has an infinite number of apparitions as all fields of societal life are dominated by images, no matter their specific manifestations (media events, propaganda, entertainment, politics, culture, etc.). This world of images, and image per se, cannot be considered only as a visual distortion of the reality or the mass media product, but to Debord the spectacle is a "social relationship between people that is mediated by images". In other words, the spectacle sets the dominant patterns of behavior in a given society. He sees the spectacle as a perfect vehicle for proliferation of a social agenda of the capitalist society, which - in the collusion with the media - uses the spectacle as a platform for setting consumption as the dominant model of living. It includes the total practice of one particular economic and social agenda, at the heart of which hides the media as the ultimate space of production of images as consumables. In fact, according to Debord, image replaced the commodity as the basic unit of measurement of power in a society since "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image" (Debord, 1995: 24).

To Debord, power in the society of the spectacle has a quintessential importance. Power is the defining attribute of the spectacle for the spectacle plays the specialized role of a spokesman, an emissary of a hierarchical society who sets the only type of what it appears to be a discourse; it is, in fact, not a discourse but an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise and the only type of communication permitted by the ruling order of a given society. The spectacle appears as "the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence" (Debord, 1995: 19). According to Debord, there is nothing coincidental in seemingly inevitable outcome of the spectacle as the natural and logical product of technological development since the society itself chooses its own technological content. If the spectacle is understood in terms of mass media as its most superficial form, and as such seems to invade society in the shape of a mere apparatus deprived of all intention as well as subjectivity, this "neutrality" answers precisely to the internal dynamics of the spectacle. The spectacle is never neutral for it meets the social requirements of an age, in which all admi-

nistration of society and contact between people depend on the intervention of instant communication. In this respect, the concentration of mass media amounts to monopolization of the means that enable the ruling order the construction of one-way communication behind which the politics of consent and submission is hidden. Debord saw the spectacle as a tool for depoliticizing the masses turning them into private actors characterized by the complete separation and alienation, transformed into the objects of submissive consumption of the spectacle. The spectacle involves a dichotomy between passivity and activity, consumption and production, and lifeless alienation from the human potential. The society of spectacle is a society barren of any critical engagement, lethargic and faceless, where individual identities converge into an atrophied mass unable to expose the spectacle as a negation of life. With the masses indulging in consumption with the pleasure as the only outcome worth pursuing, the political being of the society has vanished.

Debord distinguished between three forms of spectacle: concentrated, diffuse and integrated. The concentrated form of the spectacle is associated with bureaucratic capitalism that appropriates the scarce commodity production in the form of the total social labor, which is then reinvested back to the society in the form of "wholesale" survival. The bureaucratic class controls the total content of the consumption (music, communication, food, etc.), and any independent choice is considered as an act of mutiny, which legitimizes use of violence by the state. These societies are marked by dictatorships and the spectacle, effectuated by terror and police brutality, is deployed to reflect the image of everything that is good often in a single person.

The diffused spectacle, on the other hand, associated with most developed capitalist societies, is marked by commodity abundance in which countless commodities compete with each other to reflect the unified economic spectacle. Even though each commodity denies the other in the rat race to dominate the market, in this struggle they all acknowledge and perpetuate the higher purpose of the spectacular consumption.

The integrated spectacle is a synthesis between the concentrated and diffused spectacle, associated with liberal democracies. This spectacle is marked by incessant technological development, a state of general secrecy and existence of experts who dictate the morality, statistics, and opinions of the spectacle. To Debord, in the societies of the integrated spectacle, terrorism is

fabricated by the State to acknowledge the spectacle's superiority, which, compared to terrorism, imposes itself as the only rational choice. As we shall see, in the society of the spectacle of fear terrorism no longer serves this function.

A number of theorists furthered our understanding of the spectacle by adding their own contribution to the theory. One of the most significant was Jean Baudrillard who elevated the concept of the spectacle to an entirely new level. Baudrillard departed from Debord's spectacular commodity society rooted in production and introduced simulation, a process of replacing reality with "virtuality" or the hegemony of signs, virtual representations, images, etc, thereby displacing Debord's commodification of social reality. Simulations generate simulacra, the basic units such as images or signs without meaning, that in turn generate "hyper-reality", a reality in which everything has imploded and lost its meaning, there is no distinction between real and unreal. "Hyper" designates a model wherein the prefix hyper signifies a model according to which the reality is produced (for instance, according to Baudrillard, the model of the USA in Disneyland is more real than their instantiation in the social world, and the USA becomes more and more like the model in Disneyland). Equally descriptive of the hyper-reality could be "the ideals": the models of ideal homes in lifestyle magazines, ideal sex in relationship books, ideal families, etc. A key feature of hyper-reality is implosion that is consequential of the saturation of social field by disseminating media messages, which creates a situation in which meaning and messages neutralize each other in a flow of information, entertainment, advertising, and politics, resulting in the general state of apathy of the masses solicited to vote, buy, etc., which ultimately leads to the disappearance of the social and class, political, cultural, and other distinctions (Baudrillard, 1998); (Best and Kellner, 1999).

In his book, *Media Spectacle*, Douglas Kellner defined the spectacle as a tangible "phenomenon 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" (Kellner, 2003a: 2). Kellner distinguishes between different types of spectacle that appear in all fields of social life: media spectacles such as media extravaganzas, sporting events, political happenings, and especially news ("attention-grabbing occurrences" (Kellner, 2003a: 2)) that are particularly subjected to the logic of the spectacle; business spectacles that

incorporate entertainment as the primary source of their business; the phenomenon of celebrity spectacles who are the flag bearers of the media culture and sensationalism, and occupy dominant roles in every major social domain; sports as the domain of the spectacle in which society's deepest values are being celebrated (competition, winning, success, strength, money) and top brands which try to associate their names with those values; film industry as probably the most representative of the phenomenon of the spectacle with Hollywood and Bollywood as the incarnation of Debord's definition of the spectacle – grand movie palaces, spectacular openings, epic spectacles represented on film, special effects, etc; television as the spectacle transmitting medium and the creator of one; theater and its elements incorporated into spectacular terrorist acts that can by their very magnitude be termed spectacular performances (Kellner, 2003a); fashion as the central domain of the spectacle that imposes norms of attire to all social strata and dictates the aesthetical norms of the body; the phenomenon of celebrities as the ultimate role models and "pseudo-events" (Boorstin, 1961) or the events orchestrated by public relation experts which sole purpose is grabbing public attention in order for television, newspapers and other forms of mass media to fill their content; in a similar fashion, the domain of popular music, food, eroticism, and the video games has too been colonized by the spectacle. To Žarko Paić (2006), contemporary art in the society of spectacle faces its own tragedy in that it can never escape the spectacle of its own image since its image is message at the same time. Neil Gabler (2000) goes as far as to saying that in the era of spectacle, life itself is becoming like a movie in which we are actors and observers at the same time, creating our own lives by mirroring the behavioral patterns of role models and fashion types. Paić (2006) goes along similar lines claiming that life itself is no more the issue of free will, one's privilege from birth to death that has come to signify biopolitical merchandise that reduces a person to a "thing" of rational construction within social system of power.

For Giorgio Agamben (2000) in today's society of the spectacle, man is separated from its linguistic nature since the language itself becomes generic and accessible to everybody. The language is becoming the spectacle itself for it is only able to communicate the nothingness of things, devoid of all essence.

### 3. The Spectacle of Fear and 9/11

In what follows, I argue that Debord's model of the spectacle needs to undergo a partial revision in the light of the new type of spectacle in the contemporary age – the spectacle of fear. I argue that this new type of spectacle is fundamentally different from Debord's understanding of the spectacle and that his model is no longer appropriate to functionally explain the nature of the phenomenon as we know it today. I will proceed to analyze this new type of spectacle and identify the key properties of the contemporary spectacle that fundamentally differ from Debord's model. My aim is to arrive at a new set of theoretical tools that will help us better understand this new type of spectacle.

In the days immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall effectively designating the end of communism, the world was rejoicing in almost a universal consensus that liberal democracy is the only legitimate political system sustainable in practice. Some went as far as proclaiming the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), and although Samuel Huntington did offer a counterbalancing theory in the *Clash of Civilizations* (1997), the common conviction had it that with the fall of the USSR there was nobody else to defeat, that the world was on a well charted path toward universal achievement of the goals of the Enlightenment. The western civilization fell in an intoxicating victorious dream only to be rudely awakened on 11 September 2001, the events of which could be interpreted as the manifesto of a new terrifying enemy, one both elusive and omnipresent.

The 9/11 events not only marked the beginning of the war on terrorism, but also effectively introduced a new type of contemporary spectacle – the spectacle of fear. The spectacle of fear draws on the terror spectacle, first used by Douglas Kellner (2003b) to describe the 9/11 attacks, and the spectacle of terrorism that was developed by Henry Giroux in his article *Rethinking politics in the society of the image* (2006), as the new method of psychological warfare based on the war of images. Giroux rightly argues that beginning with the 9/11 events the image has seen a structural transformation in its pedagogical power and is now used in combination with the audio-visual media as the political vehicle to advance terror agendas around the world. "As acts of terrorism and the modalities of the spectacle converge, a new species of technological magic is produced in which shock becomes the structuring principle..." (Giroux, 2007: 17). Magnified





and instantly accessible to the viewer via the new media, images of death, violence and fear insisting on the close-ups and the visceral are no longer side effects of a violent stream of events such as wars; their cinematic representations are at the very heart of creating a global society of fear and are in themselves a strategy of a political representation. These “hyper-real visual displays” of beheadings, live suicide bombings, carnage and destruction are turning mass media into a pedagogical force able to shape the entire landscapes of economy, politics and culture, permeating every conceivable part of the societal life. However, it is not only this other dark side aiming to advance its terror agenda that is exploiting these images as a platform for spreading fundamentalist ideas and the doctrine of fear; by endlessly offering these images for consumption to their populace, the western societies have been provoked into a sort of autoimmune reaction (Derrida as quoted by Borradori, 2003) to the attack that laid foundations for creating the society which allows for the rhetorical “security over democracy”.

However, for the purposes of this paper I have decided to use the term the spectacle of fear<sup>1</sup> to refer to this contemporary form of spectacle in order to encapsulate all image-mediated events that are used to spread the doctrine of fear either as a means of economic gain or a political tool. However, it will be through the prism of the 9/11 events that I will compare the contemporary spectacle of fear with Debord’s understanding of the spectacle in order to identify the changed properties of the spectacle and to arrive at a set of theoretical tools allowing us to better understand this phenomenon. There are two reasons why the 9/11 will be used as the epitome of the spectacle of fear in this paper. Firstly, I consider it to be the birth-giver of the spectacle of fear (and terrorism), following Giroux in this respect. Secondly, one of the positions in this paper has it that the spectacle of fear immunizes the viewer against its past lighter versions, meaning that an event cannot be considered truly spectacular unless it provokes a reaction stronger than the one caused by its predecessors. Given the visual and psychological magnitude of the event, I find it to be a *sui generis* event, maybe the “most

spectacular visual event, arguably of all times” (Habermas, as quoted by Borradori, 2003), and as such the perfect epitome of the spectacle of fear.

#### 4. 9/11 as a Spectacular Event

That the 9/11 is a spectacular event is beyond doubt as it perfectly fits Debord’s key fundamental tenets of the theory of the spectacle.

#### 5. 9/11 as a Social Relationship

Debord’s famous tenet that “the spectacle is a social relationship between people mediated by images” finds its full realization in the symbolic force of the event. The importance of the event lies not solely in the physical destruction of the buildings, but it rather marks the beginning of the end of the US domination of the world. Standing as a lighthouse casting light on the pathway to a prosperous and uniform future of the world, largely defined by the US domination in many of its aspects, the image of the collapse communicated the total spectacle; the planes first effectively destroy the uniform future of the world, the very cathedral of economy (the towers), then the heart of the techno-military might of the world (the Pentagon), and finally the very act of destruction of the planes turns into one of the most spectacular visual events “arguably of all times” and perhaps unique in history (Habermas, as quoted by Borradori, 2003). These events single handedly established a new social relationship between people mediated by the image of destruction of the WTC, one characterized by the global culture of fear and paranoia, in which societal discourses are dominated by violence. Starting with the proclamation of the “war on terror” by George W. Bush (2001), the global society entered a new stage of history, one characterized by the suffocation of democratic principles across the western societies in the name of security, the persecution of Muslims and the waterboarding practices of Abu Ghraib, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as a part of the agenda on the war on terrorism; proliferation of religious conflicts and new forms of terrorism and wars of images (Giroux, 2007), etc.

#### 6. Pseudo-world and Consumption of Images

Debord defines the spectacle as “images detached from every aspect of life” merged into a common stream, whereby reality unfolds in a new generality, as a pseudo-world that appears solely as an object of contemplation.

1 The spectacle of fear, as noted, draws on Douglas Kellner’s terror spectacle and Henry Giroux’s the spectacle of terrorism. Even though the term is almost interchangeable with Giroux’s, I here aim to include all instances of image-mediated fear and terror, not only those related to terrorism but also to wars, individual violence, even natural disasters and diseases when covered in a way to spread fear and panic in order to increase viewer ratings.

By exploiting the advantages offered by the new media and technologies of mass dissemination of images, the terrorists have succeeded in turning reality on its head, exactly creating a pseudo-world apart from reality, in which we act as observers and consumers at the same time. Baudrillard wrote in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2002) about the radicalization of the relationship between image and reality. The strength of the 11 September spectacle lies in its infinite capacity to awe. The immediate broadcast of images around the world has suddenly turned into an ingenious weapon of these most radical among the anti-globalists. For the role of image is twofold. In one hand, it praises the event by multiplying it endlessly, but on the other hand, it neutralizes the event by offering it for consumption to millions of people worldwide. And this is where the true genius of the broadcasted spectacle of the 9/11 hides; even though it is almost the perfect negative image of Debord's model of the spectacle, it meets the same important purpose - it offers itself for consumption. Affected beyond recognition by everyday streams of television and images from the Internet, a viewer is faced with difficulties to accept this new reality/fiction. The magnitude of the event was such that it justifiably put in question the viewer's predilection to portray it as reality; it was of such power that it logically must belong to the realm of fiction, and yet it does not; on the contrary; the accompanying chunks of reality - live reporters, amateur cameras, unclear imagery and etc. - turn it into a hyper-reality, the regular reality magnified by special effects sponsored by the mass media, as the most unfortunate partners in the crime. Even in the *9/11 Commission Report*, in what is supposed to be a professionally and objectively written report, the authors refer to it as „the day of unprecedented shock and suffering in the history of the United States“ (preface to the 9/11 report). It was seen as the Act of God, even by the government officials and experts working on the report, the narrative of which more belonged to the domain of literature than to a professionally written report (Young, 2007). As Baudrillard (2002) puts it, the white magic of cinematography and the black magic of terrorism have come together in the mass fascination with the new phenomenon, which could best be visible from all forms of Hollywood productions to which the September 11 events serve as the perfect backdrop, with Middle East taken as a mystical category, a hole in both time and space, a ready source of threats and dangers (Boggs and Pollard, 2006).

In the following section of the paper, I will identify the key differences between Debord's concept of the spectacle as presented in *The Society of the Spectacle* and the contemporary spectacle of fear epitomized by the 9/11 events. My aim is to show that some of Debord's fundamental theses on the spectacle are no longer suitable for explaining the contemporary spectacle of fear, proposing a new set of theoretical tools as an update and addition to Debord's theory.

## 7. Comparing Debord's Spectacle and the Spectacle of Fear

### 7.1. The Betterment Denied

One of the key Debord's theses on the spectacle is theses number 12 stating that “The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity...” This idea is fundamental to understanding the entire Debord's theory of the spectacle as the only *raison d'être* of the spectacle is to compensate for the reality's inadequacies. The spectator, as the intended object of the spectacular activity, is condemned to the passive acceptance of the spectacle but only under the condition of the explicit compensation for the reality it foregoes. That compensation is found in the realm of consumption by way of the concrete manufacture of the needs and choices already chosen for the spectator, with a view of creating a subject alleviated from any social responsibility but consumption. The spectacular subject, thus, appears as a depoliticized being, alienated in its eternal pursue of consumption and separated from any social engagement; however, he stands substantially compensated by the spectacle's inherent promise of betterment.

The key difference between Debord's spectacle and the spectacle of fear is that the latter is utterly deprived of the betterment immanent to the former. The spectacle of fear offers no betterment, its promise is that of death and destruction – terror for its own sake (Derrida as quoted by Borradori, 2003). The terrifying property of the spectacle of fear consists of this: the image of death and terror accumulated into a consumable (capital) is consumed by the spectator as the consequence of the learned behavior once acquired in the society of the spectacle; confronted with the image, the spectator engages in a compulsive urge to consume it, expecting the psychological satisfaction from the act but instead finds fear and chaos. In the society of the spectacle of fear, the compulsive urge to consume is amplified by the sadomasochistic property of

the mass media apparatus to perpetuate the image, thus producing the unrelenting streams of impulses that when answered by the act of visual consumption can never be neutralized by satisfaction as its correlate. If the ending result of the spectacular consumption in the society of the spectacle is a short-lasting but attainable satisfaction that legitimizes the tautological nature of the spectacle in that it always seeks to create an additional need at the point of satisfaction, the tautological nature of the spectacle of fear is the manufacture of trauma, the wound that never stops bleeding in the future (Derrida as quoted by Borradori, 2003). The terror of the spectacle of fear hides not in the content of the spectacle but precisely in the lack of it; after the 9/11 events, a certain rationale is forcibly imposed onto it, any sort of explanation to avoid the inescapable metaphysics and symbolism of the event that posit the legitimacy of the violence as means and ends in themselves. For, not to forget, whereas the events may appear as a political statement, their primary purpose was to give birth to the society of chaos.

## 7.2. The Spectacle Kidnapped

Another key idea in *The Society of the Spectacle* is the relationship between the spectacle and power. At the time Debord was writing down his thoughts on the spectacle, a few would dare go beyond the usual conceptions of power and their inherent logic. To Debord, to reign over the spectacle, thus to reign over the conditions of existence, meant that power fuelling the spectacle is inseparable from the State and its extensions, the mass media apparatus and the market. This submission of every facet of human life materialized with the merger of the state and corporate power in which the state had interests in creating the reproduction of images that dictated the social relationships and the corporate aimed at creating and aligning the consumer needs with the marketplace values. In theses 23 and 24 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord claims that the spectacle is the spokesman of a hierarchical society that sets the only discourse allowed to be heard in a society, and more explicitly, "the spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence" (Debord, 1995). To Debord, thus, the state no longer relies solely on the classic mechanisms of oppression (prisons, police) but introduces the spectacle as a depoliticizing tool through which it administers its violence in the domain of consumable images, shaping and

funneling both collective and individual needs and behaviors according to the marketplace rules. In Debord's society of the spectacle, the state and the corporate are thus the only legitimate owners of the spectacle, choosing its content and shape.

Debord also considered terrorism in the society of the spectacle, but completely devoid of its subversive nature. As to coerce consent from the populace and to further seal the domination of the spectacle, Debord argued that the State resorts to the fabrication of terrorism as the ultimate nemesis of the spectacular society, that "evil" in the non-ending battle with the "good", the existence of which, though shrouded in the cloak of elusiveness and away from the eyes of the public, confirms the axiomatic positivity of the spectacle compared with the offer of terror. It is the very State that historically manufactured terror, controlled and dosed it as a function of the spectacle (Debord, 1988).

However, in the society of the spectacle of fear, it is terrorism and outbursts of inexplicable violence, transcended into a phenomenon of its own, that have challenged the traditional notion of the state as the only actor entitled to monopoly over the spectacle. Terrorism has become a type of spectacle, pornographic in its nature and completely out of control. 9/11 can in this sense be considered as the act of de-monopolizing the spectacle, thus displacing and deconcentrating the power from its center and shifting it elsewhere, by way of symbolic destruction of the economic cathedral of the world (the WTC) and the techno-military base (the Pentagon). The language of the spectacle of 9/11 is composed of landmarks, signs of their owners, the symbols of the dominant entity which sole aim is to send its message and in such a way accomplish the idea behind the spectacle.

However, immanent to this power shift is also a realization that the means and conditions for the production of the spectacle have suddenly become available and at disposition of this new terrifying force; even worse, they are banal and omnipresent. Not only have the everyday objects such as airplanes been used as the spectacular ingredients by the forces without serious means of their own in terms of logistics and weaponry, but the act itself exposed the inherent weaknesses of the audiovisual infrastructure that can never escape from what Derrida termed "unfortunate symbiosis" with the evil other. The unprecedented media coverage, as much as it was in the interest of the perpetrators, was also in the interest of the media. In a sort of autoimmune

response (Derrida), the media endlessly perpetuated the image, unwillingly increasing its potency and magnitude. This is yet another terrifying face of the 9/11: "...the real terror consisted of, and, in fact, began by exposing and exploiting, having exposed and exploited, the image of this terror by the target itself "(Derrida as quoted by Borradori, 2003: 108). It was at the point of this autoimmune reaction of the system that the image as a war tool was created.

However, the key aspect of de-monopolization of the spectacle came as the consequence of globalization that changed the global communication, cultural and socio-economic landscape beyond recognition. As Giroux (2007) accurately posits, the traditional monolithic system of the media control and cultural reproduction has been significantly undermined by the emergence of the new technologies such as the Internet, cell and smart phones, digital cameras and other devices that completely changed the way we produce, disseminate and consume information. The global user is now able to create, record and disseminate media events at unprecedented speeds, circumventing both traditional media outlets as the control entry point of the image content and the state control over those images. Since the 9/11 and the images of the planes crashing into the WTC, the spectacular images of beheadings, suicidal bombings and bombers portrayed as heroes, execution of individual prisoners by rocket launchers, etc., have become primary weapons used by terrorists to advance political and social agendas and establish a permanent culture of fear. The purpose of these images is to depict the pornographic nature of violence and terror predominantly executed on the carnal, to functionalize mutilation as the expression of the real and the immediate, with the 9/11 being a climatic conclusion to the 20<sup>th</sup> century's "passion of the real" (Žižek, 2001). These images also suggest that the camera by publicly exposing violence no longer actively intervenes with the aim to prevent it by mobilizing shame (Keenan, 2004) but, on the contrary, appears as an accomplice in a crime.

### 7.3. The Magnitude and the Trauma

After revising some of the fundamental Debord's tenets in the context of the spectacle of fear, in this part of the paper I add my own contribution to the overall theory of the spectacle by arguing that the spectacle of fear is defined by its two key features: the audiovisual magnitude of the event and the severity of the psychological

trauma inflicted to the spectator, as its chief end product replacing satisfaction. Both of these features ultimately define the effectiveness of the spectacular event, as they provoke fear and excitement, but at the same time build the spectator's psychological immunity, compelling the spectacle of fear always to overshadow its former versions.

From the media perspective, the 9/11 was a perfect audiovisual event of an unprecedented magnitude. As Habermas rightly notices, the presence of cameras and the media immediately transformed the local event simultaneously into a global one and the whole world population into a benumbed witness. Every part of the act was recorded and immediately broadcasted live to the greatest number of spectators in the history, creating the first historic event in the strictest sense. The passion of the real was instantaneously satisfied; beyond the falsity of Hollywood and the staged reality of reality shows, the viewer was confronted with the visceral reality of the planes hitting the buildings, the explosions, the gruesome images of people falling from buildings, and finally, the slow collapse of the symbols of the economic and military power dominating the world, causing three thousand deaths. The spectacle's ingredients were rather commonplace, yet horrifyingly effective: "An airliner traveling at hundreds of miles per hour and carrying some 10,000 gallons of jet fuel plowed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan. At 9:03, a second airliner hit the South Tower. Fire and smoke billowed upward. Steel, glass, ash, and bodies fell below. The Twin Towers, where up to 50,000 people worked each day, both collapsed less than 90 minutes later" (*The 9/11 Commission Report*). The audiovisual magnitude of the event was further intensified via endless reproduction of the images by virtually every conceivable mass media outlet, creating perhaps "the most spectacular visual event, arguably of all times" (Habermas).

9/11 is also unique from the perspective of the singularity of the trauma inflicted that defied the event from the spectator's perspective. For, in the case of 9/11, as Derrida rightly notes, a conventional trauma, the one linked to a past or present event we are able to neutralize by the process of mourning, does not apply. This trauma is to be, it is an announcement of a terrifying future to come, of a new type of Arendt's absolute evil residing in a cognitively impenetrable future, and it feeds off of our inability to appropriate the event, to deconstruct it and to dismantle it to



known particles. Worse, as Derrida notes further, the post-Cold War residue in the form of nuclear weaponry distributed without any control and the declaration of a new standoff between the West and these elusive forces, provide firm and solid ground for our fears. Further, what frightens perhaps even more is the nebulous nature of the event, deprived of any serious economy; it was executed by a "tiny group of people, not enough to man a full platoon" (*The 9/11 Commission Report*, 2004: 340), coming from one of the poorest and the most isolated places in the world. We have thus come to face a new moment: virtually anybody is able to avail themselves of the weaponry with capacity to spell the end of mankind. Nuclear, bacteriological, chemical attacks: the future horror seems virtually endless. We utterly fail confronted with the task, for the unappropriability, the unforeseeability of the event, its pure singularity remains beyond the horizons of our comprehension. The effects of the visual trauma inflicted must be temporally and chronologically revisited since the true horror of the event is yet to come, even if it may in fact never come, but the mere expectations, the open horizon of indefinable plausibility prevents us from healing.

The importance of both of these properties of the spectacle of fear is best visible in the changing nature and tendencies of virtually all types of violent acts. Reverting back to the 9/11, illustrative of this point is Bin Laden's obsession with staging a new 9/11, which he referred to right after the attacks as "the speech that overshadowed all other speeches made everywhere else in the world" (Weimann, 2008). Ten years after, in the days immediately following his death, this obsession found a new confirmation when it was revealed in his personal documents that only a massive bloodshed on the scale of the 9/11 will have the necessary shock effect to force change in the U.S. foreign policy concerning the Middle East and that "a sprinkling of smaller attacks would not have the desired effect" (Weimann, 2008). Along the same lines, the Al-Qaeda gave up on executing a terrorist attack on the military shuttle in Singapore as it was "not spectacular enough" (*The Michigan Daily*, 2003). The tendency to constantly magnify both the psychological and audiovisual components of the acts can also be recognized in the increase in the number of victims and the frequency of the acts. According to Jenkins (2006), the lethality of terrorist acts worldwide has been steadily increasing: in 1970s the fatalities were registered in tens; in 1980s in hundreds; in 1990s the frequency of the attacks has increased; and, finally, ending with the 9/11 in thousands.

This changing psychology behind terrorism as its most immediate organizing principle is in line with the so-called "arousal hypothesis", a part of a more comprehensive "contagiousness of violence" theory exploring the media disseminated violence, which posits that the exciting element in violence, rather than violence itself, provokes a reaction of the viewer (Brosius and Weimann, 2004). Even from the anatomical point of view, recent evidence indicates that the same part of the brain, medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), may be responsible for the extinction of both fear and drug-seeking behaviors (Peters et al., 2009), which may in turn suggest that both fear and addiction share a similar physiological mechanism. From this perspective, the exciting element in violence, the fear factor, must increase in intensity in order to provoke the same or stronger reaction (the intensity of trauma) by the viewer to the spectacle of fear, to bypass or undermine the psychological immunity built as the consequence of the constant exposure to the images of lesser intensity. In other words, exposed to the smaller doses of fear, the end effect of the visual consumption of such images is apathy and indifference, a complete lack of any compassion, termed by Susan D. Moeller (1999) as "compassion fatigue".

## 8. Conclusion

Since the time Debord wrote his thoughts on the spectacle, the spectacle has, if anything, reinforced its reign over conditions of human existence. It has continued to evolve in both size and scope, assuming new forms that continue to subdue all societal fields and strata under its influence. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism as the only legitimate world systems, along with the natural progression of technological development, the spectacle inundated the global society in endless forms and its accumulation accelerated beyond expectations.

However, with the 9/11 a new form of spectacle materialized – the spectacle of fear. In order to functionally explain the spectacle of fear here epitomized by the 9/11, I argue that certain fundamental Debord's theses on the spectacle are no longer sufficient. Namely, even though the spectacle of fear still retains certain key properties of Debord's spectacle in terms of defining social relationships between people and its visual manifestation as a pseudo-world apart, it also possesses new fundamentally different properties.



The first key difference is that the spectacle is no longer improvement of reality, which is the exact opposite of Debord's understanding of the spectacle who maintained that the spectacle must provide betterment to replace reality's inadequacies. The short-lasting satisfaction of consumption in Debord's society of the spectacle has been replaced by a trauma as the chief end product of the spectacle of fear.

Secondly, the spectacle has ceased to be the exclusive property of the State and the corporate, and terrorism is no longer tool for reinforcing the positivity of the spectacle. As the consequence of globalization and the new media, individual actors are now able to create and disseminate the spectacular events of fear at unprecedented speeds, undermining and displacing centers of power, with terrorism itself becoming a type of spectacle.

Finally, I argued that the audiovisual magnitude and the intensity of the trauma inflicted to the spectator are the sole determinants of the effectiveness of the spectacle of fear, leading to the argument that the spectacle always seeks to increase its own magnitude as it immunizes the spectator against its lighter versions.

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## Ponovno čitanje *Društva spektakla* nakon 11. rujna

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U ovom se članku želi vratiti i dati vlastiti doprinos teoriji spektakla kroz usporedbu modela spektakla kojeg uveo Guy Debord u svojoj knjizi *Društvo spektakla* i novog tipa spektakla – spektakla straha, ovdje predočenog kroz 11. rujna. Komparirajući Debordov model s ovim novim tipom spektakla, uočavaju se ključne razlike tih dvaju tipova te se tvrdi kako neke Debordove temeljne teze o spektaklu trebaju biti revidirane kako bi se shvatilo spektakl straha. Predlaže se revizija Debordove teorije na tri načina. Prvo, spektakl više ne predstavlja poboljšanje stvarnosti, trauma postaje glavni krajnji ishod spektakla te time zamjenjuje zadovoljenje prisutno kod Debordovog spektakla. Drugo, zbog utjecaja globalizacije i razvoja tehnologije, država i korporacije su izgubili monopol na spektakl te sada i pojedinac može proizvoditi i diseminirati niz spektakala pri neslućenim brzinama. Naposljetku, uvode se audiovizualna magnituda te intenzitet traume koju trpi promatrač kao jedine determinante učinkovitosti spektakla straha. To dovodi do teze kao spektakl uvijek pokušava povećati svoju magnitudu dok imunizira promatrača protiv svojih lakših inačica.

**Ključne riječi:** spektakl, strah, audiovizualna magnituda, audiovizualna trauma