
Beyond Image and Reality: Critique and Resistance in the Age of Spectacle

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We live in a difficult and troubled time—a time of affliction, argues RETORT (*AP*, 5). The world’s distinctive feature, the collective argues, is a “deep and perplexing doubleness,” in which atavistic forms of economic conquest and religious conflict are combined with a modern (if not hypermodern) apparatus that produces and circulates appearances. In this collision of “interests” and “imagery” we are witnessing “a bald-faced imperialism . . . crossed with a struggle for control of ‘information’” (*AP*, 14).

For RETORT, the great theoretical task for the Left is to “think this atavism and newfangledness together, as interrelated aspects of the world system now emerging.” Politics is changing and new concepts—or at least “old concepts reworked mercilessly in the light of the present”—are required. The theoretical resources RETORT turns to for comprehending “the contradictions of military neo-liberalism under conditions of spectacle” are those provided by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, particularly the idea of a “society of the spectacle” (*AP*, 15, 17).

While the double character of this era is the condition to be examined, many of the conceptual resources proceed in terms of dual perspective: interests and imagery, material and appearance, imperialism and information, capital and spectacle. RETORT is aware that being true to the nature of this political moment means that there is no easy dualism of materiality/capitalism/atavism versus imagery/spectacle/newfangledness (*AP*, 15). Nonetheless, as materialists, the dual perspective—involving “a struggle for crude, material dominance, but also (threaded ever closer into that struggle) . . . a battle for the control of appear-

ances”—governs their approach to the present condition of politics (see *AP*, 31).

Given this, I would recast the great theoretical task a little differently: how can we theorize what appears as a perplexing doubleness in terms that do not depend on the priority of one side of the dual perspective over the other? To that end, this review of RETORT’s arguments poses a series of questions relevant to their approach. In practice, how far does RETORT take Debord’s thinking, and what are the political implications of the collective’s use of Debord vis-à-vis some of the geopolitical issues it raises (specifically, with regard to United States security policy and the Balkans)? What conclusions can be reached about the nature of resistance both within and to a society of spectacle?

Before proceeding along these lines, there is an important contextual point to make. *Afflicted Powers* needs to be read in terms of the spirit in which it is offered. It is an avowedly polemical contribution, collectively authored, and intended to be read in the tradition of Left pamphleteering. Its style is robust and authoritative—with what Julian Stallabrass observes is a “rhetorical certainty that we can be sure of knowing simulation from reality”—yet its shifting between a mood of expectancy and a sense of doom represents a welcome hesitancy about our time and the best critical relation to it.¹

Forget Baudrillard

We can learn a lot about an argument’s theoretical and political commitments by seeing who is singled out as the conceptual other. To this end, it is interesting to note how much RETORT wants to inoculate the idea of the spectacle against Jean Baudrillard. The relationship between Debord and Baudrillard is a complex one, with commentators like Anselm Jappe resisting the idea that Debord was Baudrillard’s precursor. In Jappe’s reading, Baudrillard accepts the idea of the spectacle but “detaches” it from its material base, makes it self-referential, and sees signs as reality itself rather than “travesties” of reality. According to this argument, Baudrillard does not have to deal with truth, because it is now nonexistent, with resistance logically impossible because notions of content, meaning, and subject have become only signs themselves.²

RETORT shares this disdain for the spectacle’s alleged appropriation by “post-modern” media studies (*AP*, 17). Although one of the starting points for the col-

1. Julian Stallabrass, “Spectacle and Terror,” *New Left Review*, no. 37 (2006): 94.

2. Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 132–34.

lective's analysis is the way the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon constituted spectacular actions giving the United States an image defeat, RETORT maintains that anyone claiming that this event meant "the real weapons of mass destruction are the media" or that we are in a "war of simulacra not bullets"—perhaps with the slogan that "the Fall of the Twin Towers Did Not Take Place"—would be making a "tin-pot argument" (*AP*, 31). The allusion to Baudrillard is obvious. While there is much to be critical of in Baudrillard, the trace of a priori materialism (i.e., bullets versus simulacra) in RETORT's dismissal of his thought perpetuates the limited and literal readings of *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* by the likes of Christopher Norris.³ Even a quick reading of Baudrillard's contemporary journalistic interventions on the Gulf War of 1990–91 (and it is important to remember the context of their writing) demonstrates that, far from denying the reality of actions and events, Baudrillard calls attention to the way the Gulf War was a new kind of military operation in which the production and circulation of images were crucial. As such, it was a departure from more conventional senses of war, albeit one foreshadowed by the rise of deterrence as a nuclear strategy throughout the Cold War. Deterrence—involving the construction of weapons of mass destruction as a means of ensuring that they were never used—was an exercise of power in which the virtual overtook the actual with the simulacrum of war deterring the use of force. In the Gulf War, though force was not deterred, its use did not constitute a war in the traditional sense. As such, far from being detached from reality and unconcerned about its travesty, Baudrillard is concerned with the emergence of a new reality that puts an end to traditional modes of warfare (about which he is faintly nostalgic). Virtual technologies are now so central to the use of force that the dichotomy of image versus reality is no longer tenuous as the basis for political critique.

The hostility to Baudrillard—despite some affinities to RETORT's concerns—suggests that the interpretation of both his work and similar political situations (like 9/11) is driven by the need for a particular kind of political analysis. The intensity of feeling toward Baudrillard betokens a belief that no matter how difficult it is to avoid the imbrication of image/reality and truth/fiction in this age of spectacle, and no matter how close some of Baudrillard's formulations come to some of Debord's, at least a heuristic distinction between these categories must

3. See Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals, and the Gulf War* (London: Wishart, 1992). The best response to Norris is contained in the translator's introduction to Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Sydney: Power, 1995), 1–21.

be maintained to secure the possibility of resistance. One of the critical challenges, therefore, is to think how resistance would be possible and what resistance would be like if we abandoned this intensity of opposition to certain thinkers and theorizations.

Spectacle, Media, and Critique: The Left on the Balkans

The effectiveness of RETORT's critique can be explored by reference to the collective's understanding of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the wars engendered by that process. Elements of the Left, particularly in the United States, have struggled to come to terms with the dynamics of the conflict that left hundreds of thousands dead and millions homeless as the communities of the former Yugoslavia were actively divided. Perhaps because of some Cold War–inspired empathy for the alternative socialist path of the Yugoslav state, the primary object of critique with regard to “the Balkans” has been the response of the United States and the Europeans to the violent ethnonationalist wars rather than the ethnonationalist political projects that fomented those wars. Cast in terms of opposition to “imperialism,” American socialists (though not RETORT directly) have found themselves in an unholy alliance with neoconservative Republicans, in which the Left's antipathy toward U.S. military action is aligned with the Right's libertarian credo that noninterventionism abroad can be linked to noninterventionism at home.⁴

Although the wars in the former Yugoslavia ran for more than a decade until the 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, and although there are numerous dimensions for a critical perspective to uncover, the American Left's concerns worked from antipathy to Bill Clinton's Kosovo policies backward and highlighted the role of the media as pivotal. This meant the human rights abuses central to the nationalist project of Slobodan Milošević's regime during the 1990s are overlooked completely or denied outright, and NATO's 1999 bombing campaign is derided as a “hoax-begotten war” launched after the Western media “fabricated a ‘genocide’ ” and Western governments accepted and promoted the “lies” about who was responsible for the emptying of Kosovo.⁵ In making the media a central

4. Antiwar.com is a prominent site for such thinking. See “About Us,” antiwar.com/who.php (accessed October 10, 2007).

5. See Reed Irvine, “Kosovo, the Hoax-Begotten War,” *Accuracy in Media*, April 30, 2000, www.aim.org/publications/aim_report/2000/04a.html; Mary Mostert, “Why the Media WON'T Discuss the Clinton Kosovo Fraud,” *Original Sources*, August 22, 2000, www.bannerofliberty.com/OS8-00MQC/8-22-2000.1.html; and James Bissett, “The Claims and Assertions by NATO about Kosovo Were Lies,” emperors-clothes.com/articles/bissett/claims.htm (all accessed October 10, 2007).

concern—a position that runs counter to key elements of Debord’s society of the spectacle—proponents of this view sought to connect the “disinformation” surrounding Kosovo as a campaign that could be dated to the production in 1992 of an iconic image in Bosnia: that of an emaciated man behind the barbed wire of a Bosnian Serb concentration camp in the Prijedor region.⁶

There has been, of course, much to criticize with respect to the use of U.S. power globally, the international community’s wholly inconsistent concern for genocide in the post–World War II period, the international media’s often less-than-critical reading of official policy, and the tactics and strategies deployed by the United States and Europe in the Balkans. However, to take this as the overriding issue, to the exclusion of all others, with respect to crises such as Bosnia or Kosovo produces distortions that in many ways mirror the original complaint. Indeed, the “anti-imperialists” of the Left and Right consider their stance determined by prior ideological commitments rather than by the open-minded critical inquiry they claim to pursue. As Ian Williams writes in his justifiably caustic review of the American Left’s view on Kosovo, “Their politics was Procrustean, in that the line came first, and then reality had to be extended or foreshortened to fit it.”⁷ Interestingly, this account of the United States in the Balkans is similar to the “no blood for oil” argument with regard to Iraq, which RETORT rightly takes to task.

RETORT actually has little to say about the complexities of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, and that is one of the problems. Rather than render a fine-grained political critique of the dynamics of these conflicts, RETORT sweeps them up into a denunciation of U.S. policy with the declaration that “the Balkans was the other theater of major US bloodletting in the 1990s” (AP, 92). Given the vast amounts of blood let in the programs of ethnic cleansing, the failure to appreciate who were the major actors in “the Balkan theater” is quite shocking.

6. For example, Noam Chomsky’s sometime coauthor Edward S. Herman links the Western media’s performance in Kosovo to a “disinformation” campaign that began with Independent Television News’ (ITN) “fabrication of a ‘death’ or ‘concentration’ camp at the Trnopolje refugee center in 1992.” See Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, “The NATO-Media Lie Machine,” May 2000, www.zmag.org/Zmag/articles/hermanmay2000.htm (accessed October 10, 2007). These claims rely on the wholly flawed argument of Thomas Deichmann, who claimed in 1997 that this picture “fooled the world.” For a comprehensive examination of this image and the meaning of the controversy it engendered, see David Campbell, “Atrocity, Memory, Photography: Imaging the Concentration Camps of Bosnia—the Case of ITN versus *Living Marxism*,” pts. 1–2, *Journal of Human Rights* 1 (2002): 1–33, 143–72.

7. Ian Williams, “Left Behind: American Socialists, Human Rights, and Kosovo,” *Human Rights Review* 1 (2000): 144.

RETORT's brief summary of U.S. policy vis-à-vis Bosnia is also very problematic. Writing that in August 1995 the Clinton administration bombed the Bosnian Serbs after four years of no direct engagement in the "civil war" (a representation that fails to understand the international nature of the conflict), RETORT declares that this action had "no real tactical objective, since his [Clinton's] State Department was at the same moment scuttling the Dayton peace talks. But the bombing did serve the larger strategic interests of the empire" (AP, 92). Given that the Dayton peace talks were held weeks subsequent to the bombing, were organized and run by the State Department, and put into place the long-held 51:49 territorial partition of Bosnia that rewarded ethnic cleansing and was secured by bombing Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat, and Bosnian government forces, one is forced to wonder where RETORT sources its information.⁸ A look at the endnotes reveals that Diana Johnstone's *Fool's Crusade*, praised as "a clear-eyed analysis," is the only specific source on the Balkans listed (AP, 199).⁹ But Johnstone's text is a seminal example of the Procrustean Left's revisionism with regard to the Balkans—a revisionism designed to belittle Bosnia and the genocidal violence of 1992–95—and any critique that cares in the slightest for intellectual accuracy, ethical responsibility, and humane values must do better than rely on such bankrupt accounts.

RETORT could have undertaken a more adequate Debordian critique of the Balkan wars, one in which the notion of the spectacle would be appreciated for its different forms and applied to polities other than the United States. *Afflicted Powers* pays minimal direct attention to the fact that Debord described three forms

8. For a critical account of the Bosnian war, its representation, and the international response, see David Campbell, *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

9. Diana Johnstone, *Fool's Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions* (London: Pluto, 2002). Johnstone's work is posted on and approvingly cited by contributors to the key sites of the Procrustean Left: Antiwar.com and The Emperor's New Clothes (www.tenc.net). One example of Johnstone's mendacity is that five years after Deichmann's revisionist claim that the Bosnian camp photo "fooled the world," her writing made no reference to the controversy Deichmann's flawed argument had engendered, presenting his original and now-discredited claims as uncontested. See Johnstone, *Fool's Crusade*, 72–73. The desire to buttress particular positions through critique claiming that images have been "faked" continues in these circles. On the status of the Serbian military video of the Scorpion paramilitary unit executing Bosnians from Srebrenica, see Nebojsa Malic, "Death, Lies, and Videotape: Behind the 'Srebrenica' Atrocity Video," June 9, 2005, www.antiwar.com/malic/?articleid=6275; and Jared Israel, "Evidence That the Supposed Srebrenica Execution Video Is a Lie," June 24, 2005, emperors-clothes.com/sreb/vid.htm. Cf. Tim Judah and Daniel Sunter, "How Video That Put Serbia in Dock Was Brought to Light," *Observer*, June 5, 2005, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/jun/05/balkans.warcrimes (all accessed October 10, 2007).

of the spectacle, the “concentrated,” the “diffuse,” and the “integrated.”¹⁰ The concentrated spectacle was that found in bureaucratic societies, with the diffuse spectacle accompanying the abundance of commodities in the most developed capitalist formations. The former was associated with dictatorships that were either fascist or Stalinist, while the latter was aligned with “the Americanisation of the world.” With the victory of the latter over the former, Debord argues, we are now subject to an “integrated” spectacle that imposes itself globally.¹¹

The victory of the integrated spectacle for modern global society results in two things. The first involves a series of characteristics described by Debord as “incessant technological renewal; integration of state and economy; generalised secrecy; unanswerable lies; an eternal present.” The second is the cultural product of these five characteristics: the eradication of historical knowledge such that “contemporary events themselves retreat into a remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories, uncheckable statistics, unlikely explanations and untenable reasoning.”¹²

Understanding the different forms of the society of the spectacle provides the grounds for appreciating that Milošević’s Yugoslavia—from the time he deployed Serbian nationalism in the late 1980s until his demise—was a spectacular society par excellence. As a political formation that traveled the line from the concentrated to the integrated spectacle, Milošević’s Yugoslavia—given in particular the mythic narratives of a Serbian nationalism that transposed an idealized understanding of 1389 into the geopolitical upheavals of 1989—embodied the generalized secrecy and falsification of authoritarian regimes.¹³ Jappe argues that “the critique of the ‘spectacle’ should help us understand not only how television speaks of Bosnia but also the much more important question of why such a war occurs.”¹⁴ If this involves a recognition of distortion in the production of the world—a recognition of the way the Bosnia war was a product of the desire for cultural homogeneity produced by the (para)military deployment of ethnonationalism in a context of unavoidable heterogeneity—then this is certainly the case.¹⁵

10. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), par. 63.

11. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1990), 8.

12. Debord, *Comments*, 16.

13. Jappe, *Guy Debord*, 118.

14. Jappe, *Guy Debord*, 134.

15. As Robert Hayden writes, “Extreme nationalism in the former Yugoslavia had not been only a matter of imagining allegedly ‘primordial’ communities, but rather of making existing heterogeneous ones unimaginable” (“Imagined Communities and Real Victims: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in Yugoslavia,” *American Ethnologist* 23 [1996]: 783). Understanding the Bosnian war

At the very least a Debordian critique should make us uncomfortable with sitting on the International Committee to Defend Slobodan Milosevic (ICDSM).¹⁶

Resistance

The question of resistance in a Debordian account depends on how comprehensive the power of the spectacle is understood to be. If the Situationist call for a “science of situations” in which participation overcomes spectatorship is to be possible, then the spectacle has to be understood as dominant in social life while leaving some interstitial spaces from which action can be organized. If, however, the spectacle has absolute control—as Debord seems to suggest in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*—then resistance takes on an oppositional stance in which the totality is confronted.¹⁷

In its discussion of the sites for and prospects of resistance, *Afflicted Powers* embodies this tension between the interstitial and the absolutist approaches to resistance. The latter is evident in its bold declaration of an opposition to modernity (*AP*, 185).¹⁸ But the former is witnessed when RETORT sketches some thoughts on the new movements of opposition that take a nonvanguardist position by being spontaneous, pluralistic, and driven to attain something other than total salvation (*AP*, 189–92). Akin more to a Foucauldian sense of countermodernity than to antimodernity, these movements adopt their fluid forms because of the neoliberal logic they seek to resist: “Capital manifests itself on the movement of movement’s terrain as a de-centered, elusive, amoeboid set of temptations and

in these terms would also allow the experience of Bosnia in relation to Islam—in which a multicultural Bosnia was labeled “Muslim,” ethnonationalists railed against Islamic fundamentalism, and the international community’s acceptance of this political anthropology furthered the very extremism it wished to oppose—to inform RETORT’s concern with “revolutionary Islam.” For a text that should be read as part of any attempt to grasp the politico-theological challenge we face, see Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

16. The great English playwright Harold Pinter, who endorses *Afflicted Powers*, was a member of the ICDSM. See www.icdsm.com/files/members.htm (accessed October 10, 2007). His support for the ICDSM, even though he regarded Milošević as “ruthless and brutal,” was principally based on opposition to U.S. policy and the tribunal convened in The Hague. See “Free Milosevic, says Pinter,” *Guardian*, July 26, 2001, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/jul/26/warcrimes.balkans1 (accessed October 10, 2007).

17. Jonathan Crary, “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-memory,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Document*, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), 462.

18. See “An Exchange on *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*,” *October*, no. 115 (2006): 10.

coercions, and therefore has to be confronted in terms just as mobile” (*AP*, 193). Here the not unfamiliar list is populated with the nonstate and cross-national movements that William E. Connolly has argued are integral to a deep, multidimensional pluralism.¹⁹

Connolly’s argument is particularly relevant here. His trenchant critique of the “theo-econopolitical machine”—the assemblage of cowboy capitalism, evangelical Christians, electronic news media, and the Republican Party—that governs America extends both Debord’s notion of the spectacle and RETORT’s critical application of it in powerful ways. Central to Connolly’s argument is an appreciation of the multilayered, resonant condition of existence:

No political economy or religious practice is self contained. Rather, in politics diverse elements *infiltrate* into the others, metabolizing into a moving complex—Causation as resonance between elements that become fused together to a considerable degree. Here causality, as relations of dependence between separate factors, morphs into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements *fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other*, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation.²⁰

This approach takes us well beyond the constraints of dichotomy and dualism, well beyond any satisfaction with the idea that image and reality can be held apart, and thus well beyond the notion that truth can be secured by an appeal to some externally existing realm of necessity. This approach also gives us a potentially much richer account of popular culture as a site of competing tensions, but one in which resistance is nonetheless always already present. In this sense, RETORT’s surprisingly one-dimensional comment on post-9/11 popular culture—that this culture has exhibited only a deafening silence, an utter failure to address that event (*AP*, 28)—seems both empirically and conceptually out of tune. The collective’s contention that after the initial event the fall of the World Trade Center was an image that could not be shown is contestable, given the plethora of photobooks belying this claimed blindness.²¹ But even if our eyes are closed, and particular

19. See David Campbell and Morton Schoolman, eds., *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008).

20. William E. Connolly, “The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine,” *Political Theory* 33 (2005): 870.

21. The Here Is New York project—a “democracy of photographs” involving a book, international exhibitions, and an ongoing Web site—is the best example of the production and circulation of images of the event. See hereisnewyork.org/index2.asp for details.

pictures from 9/11 are absent, there is no mistaking that the image of 9/11 haunts contemporary American political culture, giving rise to George Clooney's liberal films *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *Syriana*, which offer indirect critiques of the American state, as well as jingoistic and propagandistic television dramas (like the CBS production *The Unit*) that restage terrorist attacks and the necessity of violent, extralegal responses.

How, then, given the multilayered and imbricated field of the political, might we intervene? The critical social movements of which RETORT writes are already engaged in such interventions; we in the academy should not lose sight of the critical ethos articulated by Michel Foucault:

This philosophical attitude has to be translated into the labor of diverse inquiries. These inquiries have their methodological coherence in the at once archaeological and genealogical study of practices envisaged simultaneously as a technological type of rationality and as strategic games of liberties; they have their theoretical coherence in the definition of the historically unique forms in which the generalities of our relations to things, to others, to ourselves, have been problematized. They have their practical coherence in the care brought to the process of putting historico-critical reflection to the test of concrete practices. I do not know whether it must be said today that the critical task still entails faith in Enlightenment; I continue to think that this task requires work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty.²²

Although this critical ethos is some distance from RETORT's trenchant opposition to modernity and absent from its members' reading of U.S. policy in the Balkans, it is a critical ethos that can provide the approaches and tactics to help overcome the annihilation of history and the generalization of secrecy that Debord identifies as the consequences of the integrated spectacle. For example, we should offer a counternarrative to the way Saddam Hussein's gassing of the Kurds at Hallabja became a justificatory pillar for the invasion of Iraq. This war crime deserves a thorough accounting, but that accounting must include an understanding of the way that attack occurred in the context of the Iran-Iraq war, when the United States favored Iraq, providing it with satellite intelligence and chemical weapons technology while U.S. personnel were present as battlefield observers. Such an accounting does not alter Saddam's primary role, but neither does it elide American responsibility, something obscured by the amnesiac placing of that role in the

22. Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 50.

roster justifying the U.S. invasion.²³ Equally, we should aid and support those who want an accounting of casualty figures, especially with regard to civilians, in the invasion of Iraq. From the patient research of *Iraq Body Count* to the actions of the private contractor who photographed the flag-draped coffins of U.S. soldiers flown home for burial (and thereby lost her job for breaching the Pentagon ban on images of the returning dead), making the consequences of war visible remains a vital element of resistance. How, though, can we make such diverse inquiries resonate with the visceral complexities of popular culture to enable mobilization beyond the academy and its affiliates? That remains an extraordinary challenge, and one in which RETORT's contribution, despite its evident limitations, has a considerable role to play.

23. For an account of the way the spectacle promotes amnesia for America, see Michael Rogin, "'Make My Day!' Spectacle as Amnesia in Imperial Politics," *Representations* 29 (1990): 99–123.

