

APPENDIX:

SEPTEMBER 18TH, 2005: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SPECTACLE

How do we think the relationship between the spectacle and the state of exception? As a theory of radical separation, the concept of the spectacle points to a political “experience” that seems ubiquitous in contemporary life: the separation of experience from itself. In Debord’s thought, the spectacle corresponds to a generalized experience of disassociation: one in which images of experience or, re-presentations of images of experience, are substituted for experience itself.⁹ This definition can—indeed it *must be*—further complicated by the fact that nothing in this definition, in and of itself (at least as we have the ability to think about this *today*), negates nor takes away from the radical critique of representation in the work of Deleuze and Guattari, including the theory of simulacra and simulation (via Nietzsche’s eternal return), and, more importantly, Deleuze’s theory of affect. The problem of thinking the spectacle in the context of post-structuralism is instructive. Debord’s essential theoretical insight, that modern societies are governed by the proliferation of relations of radical separation, *does not depend*, as is commonly assumed, on the putative existence of an unproblematic, pre-existent, essential (rational, knowable) “real” of “experience” as a referent, such as one finds in the Hegelian dialectic and the theory of representation from Plato to the present, but which can no longer be found in the drag queen *realness* of global capitalism. What we find in our theoretical relation to Debord and the persistent need for the *usage* of the concept of the spectacle *today*, is a unique situation. While the ideological basis of the concept of the spectacle, insofar as it remains firmly tied to the Hegelian dialectic, can no longer be maintained, its experiential basis—based on our experiences, encounters, and relations in the world—remains firmly in tact. In other words, the

conceptual basis of the spectacle lies not in its ideological foundations, but in its relation to “everyday life” in global capitalism.¹⁰ This means that the experiential basis of the concept of the spectacle—a concept formulated in order to confront the experience and “reality” of radical separation—not only *can* but *must* be separated (ironically) or, suspended, from its ideological basis if we are to face the persistence of the spectacle today. That is, in the period *after* the dialectic (*after* May ’68). What is shared between Debord’s “time” and our own is the experience of the radical separations produced in global capitalist, or “exceptional,” societies, and it is this experience, I think, that Debord’s concept was most prescient in expressing (and not his proficiency in, and knowledge of, Hegelian thought). This means that the persistence of the spectacle *in our time* needs further theoretical explication, not with respect to its ideological basis, but in relation to the experiences of our time: as Benjamin would say, in relation to the “ruins of the present.” This is the primary intervention that Giorgio Agamben’s recent work on Debord, beginning with 1991’s *The Coming Community*, has made. It exposes the spectacle as a form of governing which proceeds through radical separation and exclusion, and functions alongside, and with, the state of the exception. This form of governing is so pervasive that it can also be said to “police” the existential and epistemological basis of Deleuze’s thought (which is based on the very possibility of “having” experiences, encounters, and relations, at all—including for *a life*, as Deleuze defines it).

What one finds in discussions of Debord and post-structuralism, particularly in relation to Deleuze and Guattari, is a confusion of epistemological problems. The epistemological problem of the persistence of the spectacle is not that of “the real” and its “referent,” such as, or example, in opposition to the simulacrum and simulation, but more properly one of *affect*: how, in the face of the pervasive mediation and separation of the spectacle can we have productive access to our

experiences, encounters, and relations? According to Agamben, the pragmatic structure of the global state of exception mirrors the pragmatic structure of abuse—and the many separations produced through the physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse of children, the effects of which can last entire lifetimes.¹¹ The society of the spectacle and the global state of exception is a society of abuse: one marked by the proliferation of relations of radical disassociation. The spectacle is not about a “lost real” but about the devastating experience and legacy of radical separation on a global scale. In this context, there is no “contradiction” between the post-structural emphasis on the outside, in particular Deleuze’s theory of affect, and the concept of the spectacle. In fact, it could be argued, in order for Deleuze’s thought to make any pragmatic sense, and (hopefully) to have any effect, it seems to me that the thought of the spectacle is absolutely vital to the task of making use of Deleuze’s thought. In other words, we need Debord and Agamben in order to not treat Deleuze in a manner consistent with this global disassociation. And, I think, in order not to separate it from thought itself.

Of course, it should be obvious by now that there are both positive and negative aspects to the spectacle. Its existence as a governing principle confirms the theory of “postmodern capitalism” implicit in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (everything is produced through a process of simulacra and simulation), at the same time that it accounts, in part, for the radical proliferation of relations of belonging and connection¹²: the problem, according to the spectacle, is that we remain radically separated from ever accessing these positive aspects of the immanent potential of postmodern capitalism, because, at the same time, the spectacle proliferates relations of radical separation. This is, I think, the problem with the concept of postmodern capitalist nihilism: the idea that, following Marx, the capitalist relation needs to spread even further into “life” in order for a transformation (a superceding of the limits of capital) of the entire system to

happen.¹³ (Or, in any event, this thesis is radically called into question in the thought of the exception) Today it seems impossible to hold to this position—which even Benjamin, apparently, abandoned by 1940—because of the exception.¹⁴

After Hurricane Katrina swept through New Orleans on Monday, August 29th, 2005, and before the levees broke, a news reporter surveying the damage stated that the devastation from the hurricane “looked like a disaster movie.” Unable to refer to the devastation he was seeing and experiencing (and re-presenting to the viewers at home) at that moment in time, based on its own terms (which was clearly devastating enough), he retreated from this experience to refer to the image of a disaster manufactured on a soundstage in Hollywood. Not only is this perfectly simulacral, it is also about the “experience” of radical separation that characterizes the exception. This generalized separation from experience was just as prominent during the media coverage of the catastrophic destruction of the World Trade Centers on 9/11/2001. Witnesses to that event—live witnesses to an actual trauma, interviewed on television as it was happening—described the event as “like watching a movie.” It is through the prism of this absence, this exclusion, this radical separation from experience—named by Debord as the spectacle—that, I think, we can begin to look at the *event* of New Orleans, marked as it was by the systematic exclusion of entire populations of human beings. An exclusion, moreover, that not only was passively allowed to happen, but seems to have been actively created as a direct result of its spectacular representation.

It is September 18, 2005. Over two weeks after the hurricane first struck, the levees subsequently broke, and the excluded of a major American city were abandoned and left to die, all the while being filmed, and watched or “consumed,” live on international television. After an initial period of rage and an urge to speak, I am strangely speechless. This speechlessness is not

quite the same as the purposive speechlessness I adopted, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Then, it seemed to me that the way in which the event was being spoken about—“the world will never be the same again”—was designed to ensure that the world *never would* be the same again, and used, specifically, to bring about the very suspension of civil liberties that happened in its wake. (In other words, and interestingly enough, the language of the “end of the world” was actively bringing about a situation where “anything is possible”). Despite the fact that I was teaching courses in New York State on “The Camp and Modern Thought” and “Bearing Witness,” during and immediately after 9/11, it seemed to me that the academic discourse of the time was participating in, and thoughtlessly repeating, this same language. The only response to all of this, for better or worse, I thought, was silence (with the exception, of course, of comments to my students). And now, as I prepare to write about a traumatic event that has just happened, I find myself facing the same dilemma: torn between wanting to enter into the speechlessness of this event, and breaking silence. Today I “Googled” the words “Agamben New Orleans” and found not one or two references, but an entire page of references, primarily from “blog” entries by writers who “got” the connection. This is a substantially new phenomenon, compared with the treatment of many of Agamben’s first (graduate) students of *Homo Sacer* in the U.S. What follows has to be labeled preliminary, given the fact that this event is continuing to unfold. Moreover, I want, above all, to honor the speechlessness of this event—what cannot be said (which is the speechlessness of the experience of the trauma itself). Therefore, I will attempt to be as clear and as brief as possible in the scope of my discussion.

There were many horrible images as the refuges of New Orleans were abandoned to a life reduced to spectacular survival—corpses in the Convention Center, refugees in the Astrodome, people begging and pleading for help, pictures and commentary on “looters”—labeled for

African-Americans—and “scavengers”—labeled for Caucasians, National Guard troops playing sports within sight of the Convention Center and the Astrodome while people died,¹⁵ the “branding” of the event by CNN as a “state of emergency.” Of all of these images, one of the most horrible, to me, was that of watching a fresh faced, clean, and smiling television news anchor reporting from the scene of the Convention Center on Thursday, September 1st, 2001, live, while the events in question were unfolding, and reporting the following. (The following is an excerpt from a segment that was aired on the MSNBC political program, *Hardball*, and is an exchange between that shows host, Chris Matthews, and the reporter, Michelle Hofland).

MATTHEWS: So, it's a question of timing. We have a huge supply of aid coming to New Orleans and across the Gulf Coast, but the question is, in the next 24 hours, I suppose, of whether it can all get there in time to keep people alive.

HOFLAND: That is the question.

You can see it on the faces of the mothers with their children in their hands. *The babies are dying of dehydration or parents with the elderly people sitting there trying to get water to them, trying to desperately help them. They just look at us and say, can't you get some help? Can't you get some help? Now, we can't wait any longer.*

And it is just really, really difficult. These people are so frustrated and so desperate. And you understand. But there's nothing that we can do down here to help them, other than to ask and hope that other people will be able to get the help down here as quickly as possible. And these people also just want to get someplace, get out of here and get to someplace where they can get some food, some transportation and some help and some medicine for the people here.

MATTHEWS: Michelle, *do you feel safe down there?* Has law and order been restored?

HOFLAND: Well, right now, we do. *We have been told, don't drink outside. Don't eat outside, because they don't want other people here to realize that we do have a little bit of food and a little bit of supplies in our trucks.*¹⁶

The very next day, after the national response was finally called in, 5 days after the event, it was reported that the news reporters who had covered the refugees at the Convention Center had left the city, after filing their reports, and found emergency vehicles, such as ambulances, filled with gas and ready to go, to rescue people, but unwilling to go into the city. The news people reportedly pleaded with them to go into the city to the convention center and rescue people, but the rescue workers refused because it was “too dangerous:” because of the “anarchy” and “desperate people” who would “do anything” in a “survival mentality.” Yet there were no snipers or reported gun activity at the Convention Center while people were dying. This image of “looters,” which was clearly racialized in the media coverage, was something fomented by the spectacle itself. In other words, by the very presentation in the media of this event as both “normal,” and as something about “others” (in this case, largely African-Americans and poor people who were dying, live and on international television).

This example perfectly exposes the relation of the spectacle to the state of exception. What we witnessed, live and on television, was not merely the reduction of life to mere survival, but its spectacularization. It was not enough that these human beings were completely abandoned and reduced to non-persons, it was necessary, according to the “logic” of our present world order, to spectacularize this. Of course, the very act of consuming this event as “the news,” is also an act of participating in the spectacle itself. This is the horror of this event and why people with actual feelings for others couldn’t help but feel that they were a part of this event, that they were somehow involved, that they were connected to “those people” (because just by watching we were). This, of course, complicates Debord’s thesis that what separates us, in the spectacle, also unites us,¹⁷ and suggests that the question of affect must be posed as a political question with regard to the spectacle.

It is, of course, no surprise to discover that those housed in the older spaces of disciplinary confinement, such as prisons, hospitals and nursing homes, were simply left to die, locked in their cells and strapped to their beds. The language used in the aftermath of this “natural disaster” clearly indicates its direct connection with the camps. Almost immediately, there was talk that the *Diaspora* of New Orleans would provide an “opportunity” for the Republicans to take over the city and state political landscape because the poor and abandoned, it was assumed, had nothing left in the city to rebuild (and would not be returning). It is in this context that we can best read Barbara Bush’s comments made on a tour of the refugee camp set up in the Houston Astrodome: “What I’m hearing, which is sort of scary, is they all want to stay in Texas. Everyone is so overwhelmed by the hospitality . . . And so many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway, so this is working very well for them.”¹⁸ The shows, even more conclusively, Agamben’s thesis that the refugee is the paradigm for the political subject of our time.

⁷ Agamben calls this, following work that is attributed to Paul in Hebrews 11:1, “faith in things hoped,” *The Time That is Left*. For Agamben, this is not about blind faith or belief, but the status of faith and belief in relation to thought. The full text of Hebrews 11:1 reads, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” This is another definition of *sweetness*. For a fuller articulation of sweetness as a concept, see my “Sweetness,” forthcoming.

⁸ *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 8. From the beginning of this project, I have conceived of my work as taking place along side or, leading directly to, a re-writing of Deleuze’s *Nietzsche and Philosophy* in light of the exception.

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⁹ For Debord on the spectacle see *The Society of the Spectacle* trans. by Ken Knabb, HTML <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/debord/index.htm> (Accessed March 14, 2003), and his *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York: Verso Press, 1998). See, also, the writings collected in the *Situationist International Anthology* Ed. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) and Guy Debord, *Complete Cinematic Works*, Ed. and Trans. by Ken Knabb (San Francisco: AK Press, 2003). For Agamben on Debord and the spectacle, see *The Coming Community* and his “Marginal Notes on *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*” in *Means Without End*, 73 – 89. It should be obvious to the reader, by now, that I have not been simply following Agamben’s brief statements on cinema and gesture, nor even the spectacle, as they pertain to cinema, but developing my own thought based on my own lengthy association with cinema and cinema studies.

¹⁰ For an interesting discussion of the concept of “everyday life” in relation to globalization, which uses both Benjamin and Lefebvre, mediated through Peter Osborne, see Harry Harootunian’s *History’s Disquiet*. The Situationists were, of course, inspired in their usage of this term by Lefebvre. See also Kafka’s “Parable on Parables” in Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes* (New York: Schocken, 1975): 10 – 11.

¹¹ This is an idea that Agamben and I share. My thinking on this subject was formed long before my encounter with Agamben, through my reading of the work of Alice Miller (see, for example, her *Prisoners of Childhood, For Your Own Good, and Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*). Agamben and I talked about this idea, and Miller’s work, during the course of the seminar on *Il tempo che resta*.

¹² See Agamben, *The Coming Community*, the sections titled “Dim Stockings,” “Shekinah,” and “Tiananmen.”

¹³ See, for example, Benjamin’s “Theological-Political Fragment,” in *Selected Writings Volume 3: 1935 – 1938*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland, and Others. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 305-306. See also Jacob Taubes’ lectures on “Paul and Modernity” in his *The Political Theology of Paul*, particularly his discussion of Benjamin’s text, 70 – 76.

¹⁴ See “On the Concept of History,” particularly the distinction between the real and “virtual” exception. (As Agamben points out in *Il tempo che resta*, Benjamin’s work on the exception invalidates this earlier position).

¹⁵ This reminds us, of course, of the camps and the story Primo Levi relates of the soccer matches between the SS and the *Sodderkommando*. See *The Drowned and the Saved*, 54 – 55.

¹⁶Transcript: Hardball MSNBC, Thursday September 1, 2005) <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9173433/> (Chris Matthews and Michelle Hofland of NBC). (Accessed September 2, 2005).

¹⁷ See *Society of the Spectacle*, Chapter One, thesis 29, “The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only *in their separateness*.” See, also, Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 79 – 83.

¹⁸ Cited in “Bush, Clinton announce relief fund; Barbara Bush says relocation 'working very well' for refugees” by Pam Easton, Newday.com <http://www.newsday.com/news/local/wire/newyork/ny-bc-ny--katrina-formerpre0906sep06.0.7162001.story?coll=ny-region-apnewyork> (accessed September 6, 2005)