
Le décor et son usage. Quatre historiens et plusieurs centaines de millions, dit-on, ont été employés, cette année, pour reconstruire une partie de la ville d’Alexandrie dans une lande d’Angleterre. Mais c’était pour qu’Elizabeth Taylor y jouât Cléopâtre. L’actrice étant malade, on ne put tourner le film, ni rien faire d’autre du terrain. Finalement, Alexandrie a été livrée aux flammes.
“Rome is no longer in Rome.”
—Racine, quoted by Guy Debord

At the opening of the 2005 Venice Biennale, Francesco Vezzoli’s Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal’s “Caligula” seemed oddly site-specific. A fake trailer for a fictitious new version of a 1979 film written by Gore Vidal, who sued to have his name removed when the director decided to focus on the pornographic aspects, Vezzoli’s short film is a concentrate of Roman decadence and excesses, introduced by Gore Vidal himself and performed by many well-known actors—its climax featuring Courtney Love as a gender-bending incarnation of Caligula. Vezzoli’s work invited parallels between the excesses of the later Roman Empire and the potlatch that is the contemporary art world, in which today’s elites engage in another kind of conspicuous consumption. However, this site specificity actually signals the erosion of art’s relative autonomy in the spectacle. Vezzoli highlights the increasing integration of the “real” culture industry and its art-world double by paying campy homage to a curious entry in the list of American and European “sandal” films, thus revisiting the modern culture industry’s fascination with ancient Rome as the home of Imperial spectacles. In this respect, Vezzoli’s piece may serve as an incentive for a more thorough historicization of the notion of the spectacle, which always seems to have one sandal-clad foot in the past.

In his theory of the spectacle, Guy Debord had little patience with those who dressed themselves in antique garb, following Marx in being as skeptical of the French Revolution’s neo-Roman posturing as he was of other historical “disguises”:

The irreversible time of a bourgeoisie that had just seized power was called by its own name, and assigned an absolute origin: Year One of the Republic. But the revolutionary ideology of generalized freedom that had served to overthrow the last relics of a myth-based ordering of values, along with all traditional forms of social organization, was already unable completely to conceal the real goal that it had thus draped in Roman costume—namely, generalized freedom of trade.
Given such a dismissal of anachronistic disguises, of clothing history in Roman dress, it is somewhat ironic that Debord’s “modernization” of the notion of the spectacle is now sometimes criticized for being itself an anachronism. In reducing Debord’s enterprise to “sources” that are seen as essentialist and iconophobic and that can thus be used to discredit it, some theorists seem all too keen on burying whatever potential Debord’s thinking may still hold. But the “anachronophobia” of such authors is as problematic as Debord’s own impatience with historical recurrences.

The critique of the spectacle would be unthinkable without either Platonism and its dismissal of appearances or the monotheistic rejection of idolatry. While the emphasis is usually placed on the former genealogy, here the focus will be on the latter. Although Egypt and Babylon were the idolatrous societies par excellence of the Old Testament, for the early Christians the Roman Empire was the paradigmatic idolatrous society. Tertullian, the most puritanical of the important early Christian authors, went furthest in denouncing idolatry as an all-encompassing system. In his *De Spectaculis*, he argued that something as seemingly “secular” as the Roman games was in fact suffused with *eidolatreia*; the games were dedicated to the false gods and thus part of the heathen cults. In part because of Tertullian and his central place in the Christian tradition, the term *spectacle*—referring to all kinds of theatrical entertainments—was always ready to take on negative connotations and be used as a weapon. Protestant communities in particular inherited Tertullian’s attitude, and in the eighteenth century the Protestant criticism of spectacles was secularized by Rousseau. In his *Letter to d’Alembert* (1758), Rousseau objected to the latter’s suggestion that Calvinist Geneva might be ameliorated by building a theater and allowing actors to perform. Even while citing Calvin and referring to “notre religion,” Rousseau attempts to justify banning spectacles on secular grounds: an important argument is that the theater is antisocial and stimulates the citizen to withdraw into a world of make-believe in which family, neighbors, and duties are forgotten.

Rousseau’s complaints conjure up the famous image from English-language editions of *The Society of the Spectacle*—an audience of passive zombies donned with 3-D goggles—and Martin Jay detected in Debord’s stance “a touch of the stern Rousseauist injunction to force people to be free by compelling them to shut their eyes to illusion, whether they wanted to or not.” While such a remark neglects that in Debord’s work Enlightenment moralizing has been replaced by an analysis of the political economy, just as *les spectacles* have given way to *le spectacle*, anachronisms
are an integral part of the spectacle and of its critique. Neo-Roman posturing is met with contestations that derive some of their strength far from contemporaneous sources. “Disguises” in cultural production should be taken as seriously as survivals and returns in theory—without neglecting crucial differences and transformations. Now that both religious fundamentalists and “Enlightenment fundamentalists” proclaim a Manichaean opposition between faith and secular reason, the attempts by some to break through this deadlock by “re-sacralizing” the critique of the current imperial spectacle are of great significance.7

Imperial Now-Time

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalism often found guilty pleasure in an uneasy identification with Roman spectacles, from salon painting, popular drama, and literature to cinema and television. At the time Debord started to analyze advanced capitalism as a society of the spectacle, Hollywood was busy invoking ancient Roman spectacles through the genre of wide-screen Technicolor epics just as the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century culture industry had mined Rome for titillation. Occasionally, Situationist publications give glimpses of these and earlier returns to Rome. In the sixth issue of the journal of the German SPUR group, which was affiliated with the Situationist International, an article by Dieter Kunzelmann was illustrated with a partial and monochrome reproduction of Jean-Léon Gérôme’s painting Pollice Verso (c. 1872).8 One of the most famous compositions of this academic painter, Pollice Verso shows vestal virgins making the “thumbs down” gesture to a gladiator at the circus, signaling to him to finish off his prostrate opponent. The accompanying text by Kunzelmann mixes impressions of daily life with Jungian terminology and the author’s late-pubescent brand of machismo and hysterical actionism, and is thus indicative of the gap between SPUR and the Parisian SI headquarters; nonetheless, the use of the Gérôme painting in combination with a Jung quotation about the sense of play being the dynamic principle of the imagination is an interesting détournement of the conservative use of Roman-contemporary parallels. Robbed of its slick illusionism by being printed in red on textured paper, Pollice Verso becomes a graphic surface that disrupts the lustfully guilty identification with the scene, suggesting a transformation of Imperial games into Situationist play.
In the fourth issue of *Internationale situationniste*, an aerial view of what appears to be a Roman town was accompanied by a caption explaining that this was the set of Alexandria built for *Cleopatra*, which proved useless when Elizabeth Taylor fell ill, and ended up being burned—a summary but scathing indictment of the society of the spectacle’s oneiric identification with the Roman Empire and a gleeful prediction of its demise. In *détourning* this image, the Situationists implicitly acknowledged the power of such representations and the narratives associated with them, thus suggesting that Debord’s summary dismissal of “clothing history in Roman dress” may underestimate the force that such identifications can develop. It is significant that identification with the spectacles of Imperial Rome has been a mainstay not only of the colonial Empires of nineteenth-century capitalism, but also of Cold-War United States and of and contemporary capitalism, theorized by Negri and Hardt as the global post-national Empire. In an account that is severely critical of Negri and Hardt, Ellen Meiksins Wood has sought to develop a more nuanced account of the relations and differences between the various phases of imperialism, for instance in regard to slave labor and its abolition. However, here the focus is not on the nature of imperial-colonial exploitation, but on the identifications that run across the historical gaps. Are these merely illusory? To paraphrase the husband in Max Ophüls’s film *Madame de...*: the appearance of superficiality may itself be superficial. Did Debord himself not analyze the relapse of history into a “pseudo-cyclical” time under the conditions of advanced capitalism? The “mythical” temporality associated with agricultural cycles returns through the regular alternation of work and “free time,” thus folding history back into myth. Can historical disguises not be seen as the logical cultural manifestation of this pseudo-cyclical temporality?

Like Debord, Walter Benjamin was preoccupied by the tension between capitalist conceptions of economic and industrial progress and an apparent return to a cyclical and “mythical” temporality—associated with preindustrial, agrarian communities—under the impact of commodity production and consumption. For Benjamin, the commodity is the repressed content of nineteenth-century theories of eternal recurrence by Blanqui and Nietzsche, even though Nietzsche strongly distinguished his notion from the stylistic returns of historicist culture. The revolutionary mode of time that could shatter this temporality is now-time, which, as theorized by Benjamin, is effectively a *détournement* of cyclical-mythical time. Now-time also shatters linear history but not in order to reinstate a cycle, not to fold history back into natural history. In now-time the present is not an inevitable recurrence of the
past, not sameness but difference, an explosion of the past into the present, as exemplified by the French Revolution’s identification with Republican Rome: “History is subject to a construction, whose place is not homogenous and empty time, but time charged with now-time. In this way, for Robespierre Ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, which he blasted from the historical continuum.”

Debord’s pithy remark about the French revolutionaries dressing up the real truth of the historical process with Roman clothes suggests that the real effects of the revolution—the liberation of capitalism from feudal restrictions—had little to do with such Roman returns. But can one not also state that later developments present a betrayal of this moment of now-time and that the apparent charade represents the truth?

In Napoleon’s and in subsequent empires, a different Rome returned both as wish-image and nightmare, as the dominant states of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries recognized themselves variously in the heyday or the decadence of the Roman Empire—the former always being in danger of morphing into the latter. Detourning Benjamin’s notion, one might call this temporality that of imperial now-time. Imperial now-time also breaks up the historical continuum but not at the service of revolutionary action: imperial-now-time consists of an uneasy yet pleasurably complicit identification with Imperial Rome and its hubris. Imperial now-time is the product of the complicity between Benjamin’s two enemies: the répétition du mythe of neocyclical time on the one hand and the capitalist-bourgeois mythologization of history in the form of the ideology of progress on the other. Both conspire to create a regime of fashions and delirious innovations plotted repetitively on the axis of progress, a pseudo-cyclical economy—to use Debord’s term—in which change itself has a static quality. This is the doom-laden now-time of empire, hoping that its dynamics safeguard it against repeating Rome’s fall yet always returning to Rome—both to question and to reassure itself. Gérôme’s Pollice Verso, painted two years after Louis Napoleon’s Second Empire ended, when Victorian Britain was just gaining steam, is an important example of this morbid fascination with a visual culture that was both alien and familiar. But perhaps the nineteenth century’s ultimate scene of late-Roman decadence is Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s The Roses of Heliogabalus (1888), in which the Emperor Heliogabalus showers his favorites so abundantly with roses that many of them suffocate.

Imperial now-time was not limited to Victorian England or the France of Louis Napoleon; it returned to haunt later empires, particularly the United States. Thomas Cole’s series of paintings Course of Empire (1834–1836), which depict a quasi-Roman ancient society’s rise and fall, could be seen as a prescient warning to the
young United States, which according to some was already forgetting the values of the founding fathers. In the 1950s, the rise of television led the Hollywood studios to emphasize “spectacular” values with wide-screen color epics, including a series of sandal films that suggested a return to the heydays of imperial now-time in the Second Empire and Victorian England at a moment when the United States had fully taken on an imperial role—even if, as Negri and Hardt argued in Empire, this would in the end result in a surpanational Empire of global capitalism. In this context Hollywood once more returned to Rome with Ridley Scott’s Gladiator, now without any Christian moralizing or distancing. Gladiator shows the decadence of imperial Rome, and its addiction to cruel spectacles is depicted in lavish detail. That certain shots in the film should visually resemble nineteenth-century salon paintings is not surprising, because the producers and researchers had collected such source materials even before Ridley Scott signed on to direct. “That image spoke to me of the Roman Empire in all its glory and wickedness. I knew right then and there I was hooked,” Scott said of Gérôme’s Pollice Verso.16 The story of Gladiator follows a loyal soldier of Marcus Aurelius, Maximus, who is persecuted by his general’s perverse son and successor Commodus. Maximus becomes a gladiator, and the film contains scenes of the Colosseum, in which the gladiator ends up fighting Commodus himself. The historical Commodus did in fact repeatedly step into the ring; Gibbon, in his Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire—that inexhaustible quarry for nineteenth- and twentieth-century Roman fantasies—regarded this participation in a lowly spectacle as the most inexcusable symptom of his decadence.17

In imperial now-time, Christian motifs served either as a warning note or as reassurance. In contrast to Pollice Verso Gérôme’s other Roman spectacle, the Last Prayers of the Christian Martyrs (1883), introduces a set of figures with whom the viewer was supposed to identify, creating a distance from the heathen spectacle: the Christians about to be eaten by lions. In his 1880 novel Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ, Lew Wallace mitigated the unease of imperial now-time even more resolutely: his protagonist is a Jewish prince, persecuted by the Romans, whose life inter-
sects at various points with that of Jesus. By choosing a rebel against Rome as protagonist, and linking him to Christ, Wallace softened the potential analogies between Rome and the United States and their histories of slavery, stressing instead the differences—as a Christian society, the United States is heir to fighters against Roman slavery and tyranny. Christianity thus offered the promise of taking modern societies beyond cyclical time, safeguarding them against relapsing into cyclical patterns of rise and fall. Ben-Hur becomes a chariot driver, and the famous chariot scene, which would become the highlight of the film versions, again emphasizes modern culture’s fascination with Roman spectacles. A lavish Broadway production of _Ben-Hur_ was staged in 1899; the monumental silent film of 1925 was followed by several others, including the equally monumental 1958 color version.

While _Ben-Hur_’s incorporation of the quintessential Roman spectacle of the chariot race was legitimized by the Christian slant of the narrative, representing Christ himself in the context of a theatrical—albeit devout—spectacle was a bridge too far for Lew Wallace, who imposed a ban on directly representing Jesus in dramatic versions of his novel. In order to effect a Christian distanciation from Roman spectacles, _Ben-Hur_ paradoxically goes out of its way to avoid representing Christ, while representing the spectacles. Thus in the 1925 film version, we see a Last Supper scene directly inspired by Renaissance paintings, Leonardo’s _Last Supper_ mural in particular, except for the fact that the sight of the centrally seated Christ is blocked by a lone apostle sitting in the front, before him. All the viewer sees of Jesus is a halo and some hands. Possibly the figure in the front is Judas, who was often set apart from the others in medieval and Renaissance paintings but who was not placed in front of Christ. The absent Christ in _Ben-Hur_ is an apt testament to Christian ambivalence, in particular that of American Protestants, toward the theater and the new media of mechanical reproduction, which may pose a threat to salvation history by leading to a relapse into Roman idolatry.

Debord regarded monotheism as a compromise between myth and history, the cyclical time of tradi-
tional societies and the linear time first instigated by ruling dynasties.

The religions that evolved out of Judaism were the abstract universal recognition of an irreversible time now democratized, open to all, yet still confined to the realm of illusion. Time remained entirely oriented toward a single final event: “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” These religions had germinated and taken root in the soil of history; even here, however, they maintained a radical opposition to history. Semi-historical religion established qualitative starting points in time—the birth of Christ, the flight of Muhammad—yet its irreversible time, introducing an effective accumulation which would take the form of conquest in Islam and that of an increase in capital in the Christianity of the Reformation, was in fact inverted in religious thought, so as to become a sort of countdown: the wait, as time ran out, for the Last Judgment, for the moment of accession to the other, true world. Eternity emerged from cyclical time; it was that time’s beyond. Eternity was also what humbled time in its mere irreversible flow—suppressing history as history continued—by positioning itself beyond irreversible time, as a pure point which cyclical time would enter only to be abolished.20

Ironically, Debord’s own analysis of the spectacle, and Marxian theory in general, are often accused of being crypto-religious and of attempting to create a secular Heavenly Jerusalem on earth. However, in swapping eternity for the goal of a truly human society, Marx and the thinkers in his wake “inverted” what Debord regarded as the religious inversion of historical time, although Marxian thought still derives strength from the narratives and eschatological imagery it negates.21

From a Situationist perspective, modern and contemporary forms of religious media critique can be seen only as the farcical repetitions of the original compromise, even more radically dissimulating the true historical process: Wallace’s spectral Christ was to the Christ of the Gospels what Louis-Napoleon was to his uncle. Do not Ben-Hur and its dramatizations gloss over the historical antinomies at work in modern society by replacing issues of class struggle with a quasi-cyclical return to monotheistic time, just as today’s religious fundamentalisms distract attention from the real problems? However, one must not follow the Enlightenment fundamentalists’ portrayal of religion, and of Islam in particular, as being completely incompatible with modernity. When Islam is identified as a backward religion that is stuck in the Middle Ages, trapped in a “sealed time” without progress, then there is no need to investigate the possibilities latent in contemporary
Islamism. When Islamist ideologues say that they want to return to the beginnings of Islam because the intervening time was spurious nonhistory, a fall from the true nature of Islam, then this explains everything about the attraction that Islamism exudes. That the impression of superficiality may only be superficial goes for religious discourse as well as for the spectacle—and are the two not all but indistinguishable by now?

Media Monotheism and Bestializing Spectacles

Although there is a considerable history of Christian contestation of modern mass media is considerable, for Islamists Western media culture shows the deep complicity and compatibility of Christianity and the spectacle. If the spectacle is the result of Christianity’s Trinitarian relapse into polytheist idolatry, Christians should not be surprised at the creation of ever more idols. For Islamists the model of idolatry is not ancient Rome but the jahiliyya (“state of ignorance”) in Arabia before the advent of Islam, and the “new jahiliyya” that the modern West has brought about is its return.22 Many Salafists, in particular, idealize the early years of Islam, in a sense aiming to go beyond jahiliyya to aboriginal, pure Islam—which would mean, paradoxically, going both back and forward in time. But even the most fanatical of purists nowadays do not seem to reject media technology as such. Muslim suspicion of new media and new artistic techniques has long been strong. However, by the early twentieth century photography was having a significant impact in countries ranging from Algeria to Iran. Members of the elite went to studios to have their pictures taken, changing the (self-)image of men but particularly of women. As the camera became more prominent, the veil receded—sometimes through legal measures, as in Algeria.23

In recent years, the rich photographic culture of the twentieth-century Arab world—and its neighboring regions—has been increasingly examined, as in the publications and exhibitions realized by the Beirut-based Fondation Arabe pour l’image. The photographer Parisa Damandan has restored part of the lost photographic culture of Iran, in its peak period around the mid-twentieth century, with her archival work. One of the rescued photos shows three calligraphers sitting on and in front of Persian carpets; a sign before the men contains a sample of their skills, the calligraphied sentence “Alahoma sale ala Mohammad va aale Mohammad,” a salavaat or blessing spoken by believers when the name of the Prophet is mentioned. Thus the spoken word is integrated in the suspicious new medium. For the time being, in the space delineated by the quasi-abstract carpet patterns and the
elegant writing, the calligraphers can (re-)present themselves as faithful Muslims. However, as Damandan notes, photography’s status remained open to religious contestation. At the time of the Iranian Revolution, “Some photographers’ studios were burnt down and it was forbidden to take photographs of women who were not wearing full Islamic attire.”

In contemporary Islam, even moderate *fatawa* on mechanical/digital reproduction reflect the history of anguish over this question:

Photography as a medium of communication or for the simple, innocent retention of memories without the taint of reverence/*shirk* does not fall under the category of forbidden *Tasweer*. One finds a number of traditions from the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, condemning people who make *Tasweer*, which denotes painting or carving images or statues. It was closely associated with paganism or *shirk* . . . In other words, *Tasweer* was forbidden precisely for the reason that it was a means leading to *shirk*. The function of photography today does not fall under the above category. Even some of the scholars who had been once vehemently opposed to photography under the pretext that it was a form of forbidden *Tasweer* have later changed their position on it—as they allow even for their own pictures to be taken and published in newspapers, for videotaping lectures and for presentations; whereas in the past, they would only allow it in exceptional cases such as passports, drivers’ licenses, etc. The change in their view of photography is based on their assessment of the role of photography.

Muslim aniconism is not as monolithic as is often claimed; Shiites have a tradition of popular depictions of Muhammad in the form of prints and posters. One Iranian example shows a “young Muhammad,” and the picture used is actually an early twentieth century orientalist—and eroticizing—photograph taken by a German photographer in Tunis around 1904. However, such photographic representations have
no “official” status, and attempts to film the story of Muhammad have proven highly contentious. In 1926, a planned film version of Muhammad’s life, in which the prophet was to be played by the Egyptian actor Jusuf Wahbi, was cancelled after a massive press campaign and government actions. When director Moustapha Akkad planned his film about the origins of Islam in the 1970s, there were controversies in the Islamic world about the script, about the director (Muslim, but American citizen) and, horror of horrors, the Jewish screenwriter. The resulting 1976 film, *The Message*, scrupulously adheres to the ban on representing the prophet, choosing a rather risqué method of integrating Muhammad into the narrative: at certain moments, the “subjective camera” point of view makes the viewer see things *through Muhammad’s eyes*.

While representations of Muhammad retain an explosive potential, an out-and-out rejection of media technology is as rare among contemporary Muslims as it is among today’s Protestants. At one point it was reported that the Taliban hanged televisions, “executed” computers, and draped trees with videotape pulled from cassettes, but such symbolic acts seem irrelevant when one recalls the Taliban’s careful documentation of the destruction of the giant Bamiyan Buddha sculptures. Meanwhile the cult of terrorist leaders and “martyrs” leads to a use of images that raises eyebrows in more “moderate” circles. Hanging pictures of leaders and martyrs on walls may give rise to a feeling of reverence and to hero worship, which is precisely the main thrust of the prohibition of *Tasweer*; videos made by suicide bombers as well as by terrorist leaders also have an obvious “idolizing” tendency. Regarding the complicitness of media and terror, Boris Groys observed that “video art” has become the “medium of choice” for contemporary warriors.

An embrace of the media has also taken place in radical Protestant circles. The Catholic church has long regarded media as a potential force for the good, even going so far as to name St. Clare the official patron saint of television—a position for which she apparently qualified on the strength of a vision she saw on the wall of her cell. Protestants were much more sceptical. The erstwhile Calvinist opposition to the “dictatorship of visibility” in advanced capitalism is commemorated in a 2003 video by Arnoud Holleman, which shows girls in the Dutch Calvinist enclave of Staphorst ducking away and hiding their faces when they realize they are being filmed.

ship of visibility, is not some strange and exotic recent import from the east—as European Enlightenment fundamentalists like to claim. However, by now fundamentalist Christian opposition to mass media seems to be largely a thing of the past. Instead of boycotting mass media in principle, various organizations try to police their content in order to make sure that entertainment does not turn into idolatrous glorification of sex, violence, and profanity. Protestant groups in the United States in particular have become more vocal, effectively blackmailing large media corporations such as Disney into being “family friendly.” As if it were reverse-engineering Clare’s vision, Protestants now try to take control of the heathen media to produce technological visions that function as *vera icons* in the midst of spurious images, modern *eidolons*. While the former iconoclasts thus have stormed the studio in order to use it rather than smash it, Peter Sloterdijk has launched an attack on “visual media” as such, presenting the contemporary spectacle once more as Rome returned—the decadent Rome of gladiatorial fights, Tertullian’s old enemy.

But Sloterdijk would not wish to present himself as a latter-day Tertullian. He has since espoused Jan Assmann’s rather bleak diagnosis of monotheism, with its focus on the intolerance that can spring from worshipping “the one true God.” Instead, Sloterdijk posits antique humanism as the true counterpart of the “bestializing” spectacles of the Roman world, which created an unprecedented triumph of the “homo inhumanus.” Reducing history to an oneiric media conflict, a fight to the death between civilizing word and bestializing image, Sloterdijk presents today’s “media culture” as the recurrence of these bestializing spectacles. Whereas traditional *Bildung*, with its emphasis on text, has represented a humanizing, civilizing impulse, Sloterdijk assumes that image-saturated mass media loosen inhibitions—even if, as the aforementioned cover of *The Society of the Spectacle* suggests, the mass media may reduce spectators to passivity and to Rousseau’s abhorred state of “unsocial” absorption. Sloterdijk interprets the decline of ancient Rome—that favorite trope of cultural pessimism—in terms of a clash between the spectacular
medium of gladiatorial fights and the medium of writing. “As the book lost the fight against theatre in antiquity, so the school could now loose the fight against indirect forms of violence, in television, in the cinema and other disinhibiting media.”\cite{Note32} In Ancient Rome the theater (i.e., gladiatorial combat and similar brutal entertainments) triumphed over the culture of the classical orators, with well-known consequences. In the present, humanist Schriftkultur is once more threatened by Dionysian mass media that threaten to destroy civilization by appealing to the beast in man.\cite{Note33} Modern culture is thus seen as neo-Roman spectacle precisely insofar as it is a culture of the image, of image-media. What is absent is any consideration of historical difference. History is reduced to the eternal return of a Manichaean fight between media devoid of all sociopolitical specifics; all that matters is the fight of visual spectacle against the word, and vice versa.

Sloterdijk would seem to exhibit all the symptoms of what is often seen as a pathological distrust of the visual: iconophobia.\cite{Note34} Debord is among the authors most often accused of iconophobia, but his target is not so much the image or “media” as it is an economic regime, turning lived experience into a reified representation of human relationships. Debord had only contempt for the fashionable media studies emerging in the 1960s and 1970s. For him, all the talk about media distracted from what really matters.\cite{Note35} Debord can be accused of neglecting the interconnections of the emergence of modern media with the development of industrial capitalism, as well as their effects, their role in shaping and transforming the spectacle, and his rejection of media as serious subjects for analysis can itself be seen as having an iconophobic component. His writings are certainly marked by the struggle with phobic elements handed down by tradition, but his place in relation to Judeo-Christian religious aniconism and to Greco-Roman philosophical aniconism is highly complex—a dialectic of influence and appropriation, of continuity and détournement. Those who neglect the latter, and not only in the case of Debord, seem intent on burying whatever critical potential modern theory may still hold.

In defining the spectacle not as the result of specific media but as a consequence of the capitalist mode of production, in which capital accumulates to such a degree that it becomes an image, Debord countered essentialist and ahistorical moralizations about bestializing, disinhibiting media and focused attention on their role within a specific regime of spectacular representation. Now that religious moralizing about and attacks on images gain in strength, rejecting this out of hand as a fake politicization that fortifies the status quo is tempting. However, the political challenge is to articulate what is repressed in the image wars, which means that today’s

---

spectacular religion must be read against the grain rather than rejected outright. Religion always articulates social issues, even while displacing them, and the religious articulation—the form and its manifest content—must not be summarily dismissed. Fundamentalists’ attacks on images and their use of media are intensely political. Denouncing religion as a lie and “unveiling” the material substructure as the only truth can be as mystifying as the opposite move.

Contemporary religion seems intent on exhibiting its superficiality and media compatibility. Theological debates are smothered in conservatism and literalism, while various “affairs” that revolve around controversial images seem to propel the integration of religion and spectacle. Most recent religious controversies revolve around representation, and this is not some completely arbitrary and superficial issue that disguises the “true content.” In a way, their manifest content is their latent content. These affairs really are about representation, but in the sense that the religious (or sacrilegious) images that are the manifest content of these image wars can be read as ciphers for an absent representation, for the repression of political representation—which in turn is the flipside of the frozen representation of social relationships in and as spectacle.

**Painted Words against Representation**

In 1963 Debord painted a series of “directives”—one of them on a piece of “industrial painting” by Pinot-Gallizio. Two others, on an even white canvas, proclaim or demand the “Dépassement de l’art” and the “Réalisation de la philosophie.” In some ways the slogans prefigure the conceptual art of a few years later, but with a blunt didacticism and mocking even avant-garde painting. One could see them as an uncanny Marxist return of the purely linguistic altarpieces that were erected in some Protestant churches during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in which the place of expelled Catholic images was taken up by language. That the realization of philosophy would apparently mean the abolition of art suggests an unremitting, puritanical logocentrism. However, the abolition of art as a separate, alienated and commodified discipline would in fact also be a realization of art—after all, the Situationist utopia of a society where the human faculties can be developed fully and alienated labor is abolished can still be said to be fundamentally aesthetic. And while many 1960s détournements certainly have a strong didactic bent, in Debord’s last film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, the images manage to
develop a pull of their own.

These images relate to Debord’s own life and work, as do those of the second volume of *Panégyrique*. In the introduction to this posthumously published collection, Debord states that his intention was to use pictures as “iconographic proof” illustrating a “true discourse.” While this could be seen as betraying a secularized Christian desire to prevent images from becoming too autonomous, Debord also notes that he appreciated images that had not been “artificially separated from their meaning.”38 This, in turn, can be seen as ambiguous: is the “true meaning” to be laid down in words, in captions? Perhaps such captions—like the films’ voice-over—should be seen as a makeshift measure under the conditions of the spectacle, momentarily restoring a connection with life and meaning to images. Other and more performative modes of visuality can and have existed—Baroque festivals being one example.39 The bad “spectaclist” visuality, dominated as it is by separation, is associated with, and even identified with, representation: “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”40

In modern theory, representation came to be attacked and deconstructed with the fervor of a secularized iconoclasm. In her novel *Empire of the Senseless*, Kathy Acker made the status of representation as one of modern theory’s stand-ins for idolatry explicit when her narrator proclaims that “We should use force to fight representations which are idols, idolized images”; that is to say, “all the representations which exist for purposes other than enjoyment.”41 The notion of representation may refer both to visual and mental—as well as political—representation. Furthermore, it is sometimes attacked as a theoretical fallacy, and at other times as a social and cultural reality. Whereas Debord exemplifies the latter approach, Deleuze attacked the concept of representation itself as an imposition on Becoming, a mental straightjacket that restraints Being, resulting in a “culture of the cliché.”42 Thus representation is not merely a theoretical fallacy; it creates its own grim reality. To oppose these cliché-representations, Deleuze glorified the kind of image decried as false by Plato—the *eidolon* or, in Latin, the *simulacrum*—for having no “original” and no model, thus resisting essentialist notions of representation.43 “Reverse Platonism” is thus pitted against the idolatrous spectacle.

Sylvère Lotringer, who did much to import Deleuze and other exponents of “French Theory” into the United States, defined it as being engaged in a permanent suspension of representation: “Most often, to represent means to settle, answer, resolve, and control the represented—the experiences of the world put in the ‘right’ place. Instead, representation as conceived by French theory was turned to entirely
critical and productive purposes—to make thought experiments.” Acker’s work is situated in this rather than the Situationist lineage. Like most of her writings, Empire of the Senseless—in which the Algerian war has taken over France, colonizing the colonizer—uses quotations, cut-ups or détourments to enact a polymorphously perverse deconstruction of identity, sexual and otherwise. Acker’s works are in turn appropriated by visual artists. Natascha Sadr Haghighian quotes a passage that includes the sentence on “representations which are idols” in her piece Empire of the Senseless Part 1 (2006). The Acker text is painted on a wall in fluorescent letters: when the visitor enters the brightly lit space, the text is all but invisible, only to appear in gradually dimming, spectral letters when the light suddenly goes out. In the passage used by Sadr, a “young whore” tells the narrator to “whip my cunt.” The narrator replies that it is wrong to hurt or kill another human being, that we must not act like corporate executives in order to fight them, and that “We should use force to fight the neo-idols.” While force is needed to “annihilate erase eradicate terminate destroy slaughter slay nullify neutralize break down get rid of obliterate move out destruct end fight” idols, the whore should remember that “Julien’s sarsembls did more damage than Nero’s tortures.” As the viewer/reader makes his or her way down the lines, the letters fade until the tantalizing non sequitur that ends the quote—“‘Decomposing flesh moves me the most,’ the young whore said. ‘Give me hell’”—is hardly visible.

Although Acker’s Empire is as far removed from Debord’s analysis of the spectacle as Sadr’s Empire is from Debord’s “directives,” all drive home the point that the critique of the spectacle or of representation should not be reduced to a phobic rejection of images—which would mean that an oneiric fight against “the image” takes the place of a sustained analysis of—and actions against—a specific economy of the use, or abuse, of the visual. Rather than focusing all too exclusively on those moments in modern thought when the critique of representation seems to revert to full-on iconophobia, one should revisit those far-more-productive strands in modern theory and practice that put iconoclasm at the service of a liberation rather than a disenfranchisement of the image. At its most insightful and urgent, the modern critique of the visual in art and theory is not so much aimed against images as such but against the instrumentalization of the visual, against the frame that holds the image captive. Debord’s erstwhile comrade Asger Jorn spelled it out on one of the prints he created in 1968: “Shatter the frame which suffocates the image.”
In stark contrast to the tendency to represent modernity and religion as absolute opposites, and therefore religion as the rightful property of assorted fundamentalists, some contemporary artists link modern artistic and theoretical iconoclasm back to the monotheistic tradition—without suggesting that the two are identical, or denying those crucial little differences. In 2002, the artist Arnoud Holleman and the editors of Re-Magazine explicitly placed apparent iconophobia at the service of an intensified perception of images. Apparently giving a nod to Barnett Newman, and thus to modernist aniconism, in the red stripes running vertically across otherwise black-and-white pages, this publication largely consisted of a series of entries dating from the distant past through the 1980s and 1990s to the future, from a 2002 perspective. The issue masqueraded as the spring 2007 issue, stressing the status of the narrative as a possible history. In the notes, a “we” reflect on various public and private events, culminating in the decision to avoid images; a decision dated, tellingly, to the year 2001, the year of 9/11 and the beginning of the end of the iconophobic Taliban regime. “We couldn’t cope with the absence of pictures. It created irrational fears. We couldn’t see what was happening in Afghanistan. We needed images.”47 While this still reflects the general Western attitude, the “we” soon make an iconoclastic turn of their own: “Everything was image and nobody asked himself or herself why the ban was being violated. As an experiment, we covered or removed all images from our home. It cleared our heads. We asked friends to do the same.” The “we” come to the conclusion that “We need the absence of images to appreciate the quality of an image when we see one.” Minimizing the number of images (the issue contains only a few photo sequences among the text pages), Holleman and his collaborators question the production of images “separated from their meaning” in the form of an oneiric narrative.

In emphasizing the unreality—or the ideal nature—of the “we” and their evolution, Holleman in effect detourns Western debates on Islam, which also frequently abstract from all social and political considerations. However, here the repression of social content takes on a utopian quality—in stark contrast to the way in which such repression functions in the contemporary image wars. In these image wars, religious fanatics seem to have embraced media and images to an unprecedented degree. In Boris Groys’s words, the contemporary terrorist “wants to reinforce the belief in the image, to reinforce the iconophilic seduction, the iconophilic desire. And he takes exceptional, radical measures to end the history of iconoclasm, to end...
the critique of representation.” Rather than use contemporary “fundamentalisms” to discredit monotheism as such as being both intrinsically violent and iconophobic, one might well accuse the apparent “purists” of perverting and détourning monotheism, building new televized Romes and creating new YouTube jahiliyyas.

**Jesus and Marx against the Empire**

A distinct oddity of the contemporary political scene is self-proclaimed defender of the Enlightenment and of secularization Ayaan Hirsi Ali happily rubbing shoulders with Newt Gingrich at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute—the same Gingrich who has reassured us that Jerry Falwell’s death does not mean that “the opportunity to convert all of America has gone” and who has claimed that Franklin D. Roosevelt foresaw that the “fight against pagans” would be the big task for the future. As a Christian-fundamentalist theocratic movement gains strength in the United States without much opposition from those who claim to uphold the Enlightenment against Islamic barbarians, one cannot help but wonder if the two positions are ultimately compatible legitimizations of imperial politics at the service of the spectacle, and vice versa. Imperial policy is still largely drawn up in Washington, which Negri and Hardt acknowledge in their conceptualization of the postnational Empire, in which they also invoke the specter of early Christianity as a revolutionary force. Thus Negri and Hardt suggest that religion may be wrenched from those who claim to be its guardians, and that anachronisms can be productive forces in the dynamic archaism of today’s imperial spectacle.

An earlier anti-imperial détournement of Christianity can be found in the novel *Valis* and in other late writings by Philip K. Dick. In these works Dick developed a paranoid mythology according to which 1970s America was an illusion underneath which fictitious present the Roman Empire still existed. During a psychotic breakdown in 1974, which might also have been a divine revelation (he struggled with this question until his death), Dick saw a girl wearing a fish, an old Christian symbol now popular with Protestants, which occasioned a shattering insight: “The girl was a secret Christian and so was I. We lived in fear of detection by the Romans. We had to communicate with cryptic signs. She has just told me this, and it was all true.”

The year is not actually 1974, Dick surmised, but 70 AD. Christians are being persecuted by the empire, which has created an artificial reality to hide its continuing existence. Dick’s paranoid fiction, encapsulated by the mantra-like repetition of the phrase “the Empire never ended” may be arcane and abstruse and far removed from anything resembling real politics, yet as a fiction of political activism his revolution
of Christians against the Empire, or the “Black Iron Prison,” in *Valis* and related works constitutes a cunning reversal of imperial now-time into a Christian-revolutionary now-time. What is problematic is the gnostic character of Dick’s semifictitious cosmology: reality is a false appearance in which we are trapped; it is a “hologramatic universe” created from the interaction of two cosmic twins, or yin and yang, one of which has become sick and defective and is infiltrating the hologramatic universe with his madness.52 Christ—who is equated by Dick with other deities such as Zeus-Zagreus or Dionysus—is a “micro-form” sent by the healthy twin to heal the hologramatic universe, but he was killed off by the forces of evil. The possible birth of a new “micro-form,” a new prophet or messiah, consequently becomes an important motif in Dick’s work.53

While such alternative mythologies may seem progressive alternatives to dominant orthodox Christianity, Slavoj Žižek has a point in arguing that “against today’s onslaught of New Age neo-paganism, it . . . seems both theoretically productive and politically salient to stick to Judeo-Christian logic.”54 For Žižek, Christianity is the religion of history, a religion based in an historical event that shattered paganism and its cosmology of cosmic harmony and “mythic” cyclicity. What matters is less the specific Christ event, let alone the return to a supposedly “pure” early stage of a religion in the manner of Islamists’ thoroughly modern construction of “original Islam,” than the notion of the event as such. Žižek is following the lead of Alain Badiou, who has analyzed Saint Paul’s take on the death and resurrection of Christ, and the revolutionary universalism which Paul derived from it, as an example of how the symbolic order can be shattered by a truth-event.55 In the revolutionary now-time of Badiou and Žižek, the early Christians appear as contemporaries not because of their dogmas but because of their intransigent oppositional stance.

Meanwhile, some on the Left dream of an alliance “with Hamas and Hizbullah against the Empire” or seek alliances with Muslim groups on the basis of the supposition that the *umma*—the community of believers—is proto-socialist.56 Such delusional coalitions play into the hands of those who want to discredit any possible alternative to the current order by stressing similarities between Islamist terrorists and the Left or the avant-garde. After 9/11, Jean Clair accused the surrealists of having been consistently pro-totalitarian and proto-terrorist. Claiming to trace a “genealogy of violence,” Clair quoted Louis Aragon, in 1925, rhapsodizing about drug traffickers attacking the West and America’s “white buildings” collapsing.57 A clear announcement of 9/11, if ever there was one! The Situationists too are attacked for advocating terrorism, but Debord’s concept of the spectacle is also criticized for
being “too total” and of discouraging more limited political actions. In this way, the notion of the spectacle is said to be depoliticizing, breeding passivity rather than inciting terrorism. For Debord, it was a question of all or nothing, and therein lay his scandal, his *Unzeitgemässheit*. But as for instilling passivity: a systemic analysis would seem to be the prerequisite for any political contestation that goes beyond meek reformism without necessarily discouraging more immediate forms of political or social engagement. On the contrary, such engagement may be the only possible way to prepare the ground for more fundamental changes, as remote as this possibility seems at the moment.

Continuing the good work of casting doubt on any moment in history that might inspire a radical contestation in the present, authors such as John Gray tell us that bin Laden has a lot in common with Robespierre, and that Islamist radicalism can be seen as a continuation of “radical western ideologies.” Robespierre and other revolutionaries thus function as inner aliens, as enemies of Western democracy and liberalism, and thus as strange bedfellows of al-Qaeda. In 2007, commentators harped on the “Marxist” jargon in bin Laden’s video message released on the occasion of the 9/11 anniversary. Bin Laden (whose beard had mysteriously gone from gray to black, fueling speculation about whether this was Western-style vanity or some kind of coded message) exhorted the “[p]oor and exploited Americans” to “unite against your capitalist laws that make the rich richer and the poor poorer.”

However, comparisons of bin Laden and Marx “revealing” Islamism’s affinity with another ideological bogeyman neglect to mention that bin Laden’s jargon is at best a generic brand of romantic anticapitalism. While a hybridization of Leftist and Islamic jargon was pioneered decades ago by authors such as Ali Shariati, the resulting language sits comfortably with the right. A Web site run by German neo-Nazis offered a convert to Islam a forum to rail against American “cultural imperialism” and “stone-age capitalism,” with its mentality of egotism, addictive behavior, and “sexual obsessions.” Nonetheless, perhaps the *umma* can be a fruitful notion if its potential is set free by turning the concept against the readings and practices that frame it, thus retranslating religious time and its eschatological destiny into human history.

Contemporary capitalism seems to be the parodistic fulfillment of Trotsky’s edict of “permanent revolution”: Which social system has ever achieved a similar pace of innovation? Debord and other leftist theorists have argued that this means that the dynamics of capitalism are more show than substance and that history is in the end reduced to the sameness of repetitive innovation. Those apologists of the West who accuse Islam of existing in a “sealed time” should first clean their own cultural
backyard. The increasingly desperate gambit of the Left is to see history as, by and large, still waiting to happen. But since the 1960s the “spurious reality”—as Dick might call it—of capitalist history has marched on apace, and here one might again say that Debord was not anachronistic enough. Negri, a leading figure of Italian operaism, the Marxist movement that was perhaps most attuned to fundamental transformations in the postwar economy, such as the rise of immaterial labor and the decline of the traditional proletariat, arrived at a conception of Empire that broke the mold of older models yet still evoked the example of the early Christians as a prefiguration of the “multitude.” Now that the spectacle has moved both forward and backward from its 1960s incarnation, it is more crucial than ever to oppose its imperial now-time and its fundamentalist fantasies in the name of other pasts and different futures.
Notes


4. Tertullian also wrote a treatise *De Idolatria. De Spectaculis* focuses on the games as one instance of *idolatria*.


7. Although in use before, the term *Enlightenment fundamentalism* aimed at militant Islam-bashing secularists such as Hirsi Ali and Necla Kelek, gained a high profile when it was used in a 2007 polemic involving Timothy Garton Ash, Ian Buruma, Pascal Bruckner, and others, documented in “The Multicultural Issue,” signandsight.com, 23 March 2007, http://www.signandsight.com/features/1167.html.


12. See parts V (temps et histoire) and VI (le temps spectaculaire) of Debord, *La Société du spectacle*.


21. The historical connection preserved in this small but decisive shift was perceived by many leftists, as well as by some of their opponents, as a skeleton in the closet. Debord himself seems to be protesting a tad too much in the passage quoted above. But here, as so often, one should say *vive la petite difference*.


46. From a Situationist perspective, one might argue that Jorn’s 1968 lithographs, produced as limited-edition prints for a gallery rather than as mass-produced posters, were themselves “framed” by the spectacle, being a commodified representation of insurgence. The poster reads: “BRISÉZ LE CADRE Q[U][U] EToufllE L’IMAGE.”
49. Negri and Hardt, 21, 182.


57. Jean Clair, *Du surréalisme considéré dans ses rapports au totalitarisme et aux tables tournantes* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2003), 118. While seemingly offended by surrealism’s antidemocratic and occult leanings, Clair seems especially upset by surrealism’s success since the 1960s, accusing the “rioters” of 1968 of turning Bataille and Artaud into “idols” and of using Breton’s plea for free love to stage “Fourierist orgies” such as Woodstock and, later, raves and Love Parades (19). Clair, who is so keen to read surrealism as a symptom, must live with the suspicion that here he symptomatically betrays his true opponent: Western art and culture since the 1960s, which is the object of his conservative revulsion. The enemy is not so much terrorism; terrorism is a stick to beat all artistic tendencies that are opposed to French values, to order and clarity, and to a clear separation of the blessed *vita contemplativa* of art and the *vita activa* led by “the men of action who govern us” (65).


61. In recent years, using Walter Benjamin as one of his models, Georges Didi-Huberman has accorded a central role to the anachronism in historical writing; see in particular his *Devant le temps: Histoires de l’art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Minuit, 2000).