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## A SPECTACULAR PRESIDENT

FRENCH PHILOSOPHER GUY DEBORD'S *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) theorized a society made up of and operating amidst a constant stream of images that define people's lives, and it argued that the more people consume these images the more they live mainly as spectators, as social life consists solely of the exchange of commodified images. The society of the spectacle also fails to provide people's essential needs, like housing, health care, safety, and life satisfaction, yet it is very good at creating artificial needs and fulfilling them with an endless stream of new products and pseudo-events.<sup>1</sup>

My essay "Election Imagery," which appeared in the Autumn 2016 issue of *The Dalhousie Review*, argued that Debord's society is much like the contemporary United States, where movies, television, and especially the internet now take up most of people's lives outside of work. As a result, pseudo-events and pseudo-people are becoming more and more central to American politics, as demonstrated by Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Given the well-known facts of Trump's rise to the presidency through professional wrestling, beauty contests, reality television, and film appearances, I argued that Trump is the consummate image president—a celebrity who gets paid for playing an image of himself. Trump rightly rules the spectacle's central mirror, which is composed of celebrity (the commodified version of fame and power), and he performs the commodified self to such a degree that he represents the heart and soul of the American spectacle. In short, Trump's presidency reflects the integration of politics and economics by way of the spectacle.<sup>2</sup>

The spectacle is also self-affirming, as it "proves its arguments simply by going round in circles: . . . by repetition, by constant reaffirmation in the only space left where anything can be publicly affirmed, and believed." As the legitimate president of a republic of commodities and the leader of the free world of their consumption, Trump's indifference to what liberal politicians and commentators call "truth" is thus fitting, and the baffling nature

of “Trumpspeak” becomes more understandable if we consider that he represents those masters of corporate capitalism who control “the mechanism which operates the only form of social verification . . . universally recognized.”<sup>3</sup>

Given the continuing relevance of Debord’s theory, I continue here to try to understand contemporary events in the U.S. “The Trump Show”<sup>4</sup> interests me as a representative part of a grand, all-pervasive American production, and I believe there is an urgent need to critique this production through image analysis. Indeed, the world has no choice but to try to interpret this double-dealing American show because there’s nothing else on, and we must learn to interpret this imagery if we wish to have some standing in a reality apart from the spectacle itself. While Americans cannot see their situation as a show projected on a screen, in which politicians and commentators are privileged to play starring roles, it is possible to see the full meaning of the spectacle’s imagery from outside. If being at the centre means being more deluded, then being on the periphery means being more detached.

In its own self-regard and its peoples’ continuing belief in American exceptionalism, the U.S. is the quintessentially symbolic nation—one whose myth justly defines global reality. In a speech given on January 9, 1961, President John F. Kennedy famously described America as “the shining city upon a hill”—an image of good governance that other nations should follow (and should be made to follow). President Ronald Reagan referred to the same image in his election eve address on November 3, 1980, and in his farewell address on January 11, 1989 he said, “I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life.” Their source was a 1630 sermon delivered by John Winthrop to Puritan colonists as they were on their way to New England.<sup>5</sup> Those settlers saw their purpose as “a quest for salvation in the wilderness,” where “the Puritan mind, keen for such images,” came to see an “analogy between Indian warfare and the strife between good and evil for the soul of man,”<sup>6</sup> although historians often note that this ideology merely served to justify the extinction of indigenous peoples.<sup>7</sup>

One of the exceptional ideas brought out by the pioneer experience was the idea of “Manifest Destiny”—that is, the seemingly divine right of European settlers to own and occupy the whole of North America. European encounters with indigenous populations were of “such an intensity” as to be accurately described as “the greatest genocide in human history”<sup>8</sup>—a pro-

cess that included the forced resettlement of the pitiful remnant in smaller and smaller parcels of land by means of successively violated treaties. Another exceptional idea was “speak softly and carry a big stick”—President Theodore Roosevelt’s motto for exporting the American frontier overseas in the annexation of the Philippines, Cuba, Guam, and Puerto Rico. This idea continues to inform America’s international open carry policy, which seeks to export its own right to bear arms around the globe. The U.S. currently maintains the most formidable armed presence in the world with 800 foreign military bases (Russia, France, and the U.K. have a combined total of only 20), and it claims the right to use missiles, drones, land mines, and cluster bombs without interference from any international agreements or agencies. Americans believe this right to bear arms is essential to their own national security, as they are primarily driven by fear of the other and they never feel safe unless others are threatened. At the same time, however, they maintain a self-image of never willingly exercising power in international disputes (unlike their “new Cold War” foes).<sup>9</sup>

Trump endorses the idea of American exceptionalism, yet he is also an isolationist, as he repeatedly argues that “the shining city upon a hill” needs to be protected and insulated from those who would seek entrance. Recent examples include his attempts to foment fear of the invading “caravan” of asylum seekers from Latin America, which he used to promote the building of a wall separating the U.S. from Mexico. Liberal Democrats frequently criticize the impracticality and unprofitability of a real 3,145 km wall at a cost of billions of dollars, but Trump and his supporters seem to be aware that the wall is merely an imaginary, spectacular, and symbolic image, and Trump is digging his heels in on this issue precisely because he understands that it is an image. In the absence of real content, in other words, Americans are debating the image of a wall in order to enrich the primary image of the American-dominated spectacle.

The wall is a symbol not only of blaming and shutting out the other (psychologically, globally, politically, racially, etc.) but also of the divisions between power blocks within the country, which (according to media sources) now stand in a state of imminent civil war. A previous prediction of a second civil war featured the image of a wall formed by the tanks used to quell urban rebellion, which “embody that psychic wall of separation the cop wants to pull around him when he moves into any group of Negroes.”<sup>10</sup> This wall thus referred to the increasing divide between blacks and whites in

the U.S., yet it also applies to contemporary debates, as the image of the wall represents a commitment to a weaponized world (of civil wars) as a solution to the planet's (i.e. America's) problems. The wall thus embodies a blockage in the American consciousness, as it is a symbol of the Americans' refusal to see the other in themselves by finding all evil outside.

Immediately following the white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, the media created and continued to feature the image of a coming second civil war, as we can see from such headlines as "Is America Headed for a New Kind of Civil War?," "What a New U.S. Civil War Might Look Like," "Are We on the Verge of Civil War?," and "The American Civil War Didn't End and Trump Is a Confederate President."<sup>11</sup> The first of these articles offers the most insight into this image, as former member of U.S. special forces and current foreign service officer Keith Mines sets the chances of a new civil war at 60% over the next ten to fifteen years. In particular, Mines finds five conditions present in the contemporary U.S. that were also present in those countries where the U.S. engaged in "navigating civil wars," such as "Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Iraq, Somalia, and Sudan." He thus concludes that "the pattern of civil strife has evolved worldwide" in some mysterious, inevitable, agent-less way—a tide the U.S. helped to foment, encourage, and guide to catastrophe.<sup>12</sup>

American liberals accept no responsibility for the development of this new civil war: "One of the worst side effects of Trumpism is the way that it drives its opponents into reactive mode, amid an atmosphere of cooked-up chaos."<sup>13</sup> The drivers and cooks of the crisis are the "Trumpsters," whom the liberal media represent as scarcely human in their degree of irrationality. In an advance review of a book by William Davies on "democracy and the decline of reason," which the *New York Times* puffs as an "interdisciplinary masterpiece," Trump is described as "spawned" by "centuries of unreason," and Trump supporters are described as mentally deficient, for "right-wing populism" misleads "millions to substitute emotions for evidence." Liberals cannot accept that they, too, are acting irrationally in much the same manner as Davies' right-wing "crowds," for whom "it really doesn't matter . . . what is said, but merely how it makes them feel."<sup>14</sup> Motivated by how it makes them feel and how it makes them look, liberals have recently appeared on television weeping for immigrant women and children at the border while ignoring the women and children whose murders they are financing and directing in Yemen. "You think our country is so innocent?"

Trump asked an interviewer.<sup>15</sup> American liberals think it is.

What the liberals mostly object to about their president is his image, as seen in the recent article “Winning: The TV Producer Who Rehabilitated Trump’s Image.”<sup>16</sup> They complain that he has none of the true American style and grace in his role as global enforcer and that he is not enforcing strictly enough, comparing him unfavourably to President Barack Obama and even to President George W. Bush. Consider Thomas L. Friedman’s op-ed in the *New York Times*, which claims that Trump is an enemy of democracy and a threat to a U.S.-dominated world order and to a certain American image: “The damage an out-of-control Trump can do goes well beyond our borders. America is the keystone of global stability. . . [and] a nation that at its best has always stood up for the universal values of freedom and human rights.”<sup>17</sup> This is not a believable image of America from a Canadian perspective, and I imagine that this could not possibly be the image of America a native of Vietnam or Iraq might have, although Friedman does not seem to understand why.

The detached spectator thus observes a process of mirror imaging—a splitting of the Americans’ self-image into a Jekyll and Hyde, who never come to realize their unified identity. There is no inherent division between these would-be warring parties in the matter of exporting violence, as American liberals show no opposition to the weaponization of power relationships that the U.S. as a nation promotes. Trump’s idea of “targeted killings” was actually borrowed from Obama, who outdid his predecessor at murdering people with suspicious screen images in distant countries by remote control, with ten times as many drone strikes as Bush.<sup>18</sup> Another thing this deadlocked nation can agree on is the assumption that their continued presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Syria will somehow be of benefit, which is quite a stretch of logic. Despite their constant critiques of Trump, for example, American liberals still endorse surveillance and targeted killings in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and selected African nations. Not only can they be stampeded into disastrous war situations, but they can also be trusted to keep up those mistaken wars as if they had a real purpose and could somehow, against all recent historical evidence, end in success. This “reasoning” indicates an American blindness to the results of their actions in Vietnam (three million dead), Iraq (one million dead), and Afghanistan (over 200,000 civilians dead). That Trump defends Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in the murder of journalist Jamal

Khashoggi is perfectly consistent with U.S. policy in Yemen, if we make an analogy between individual and mass murder—an analogy American liberals for the most part refuse to see. The worship of violence as a solution is thus common to both sides in this spectacular new civil war.<sup>19</sup>

Trump and his critics are also similar in their focus on themselves. For example, liberal comedian and commentator Bill Maher diagnosed Trump as a narcissist, yet narcissism also describes the American media's constant focus on the fate of America (i.e. its own self-delusion). Debord allows that there will be conflicts within the spectacle, including those based on the resurgence of “false archaic oppositions, regionalisms, and racisms,” yet he insists that beneath these “spectacular oppositions is a unity of misery” and that beneath each mask “different forms of the same alienation confront each other.”<sup>20</sup> The new American civil war similarly reveals a mirror effect in its spectacular operation, and the resulting image is one of self-involvement to the point of narcissism and contempt for the rest of the world. Trump thus embodies the American people fairly exactly, if somewhat in caricature, especially in their self-conceit, their sense of self-importance, their faith in violence, and their belief that they are special and need agree with no one internationally.

Neither the liberal Democrats nor the Trump Republicans seem capable of seeing their mirrored identities as part of their “exceptional” nation. As outsiders, however, we are able to observe the spectacle (and its unconscious mirroring) generating itself day-by-day on television and social media. The underlying unity of this spectacle appears to be a drama about a hopelessly deadlocked nation, but there is no “America at its best” to replace the culturally-generated images that appear in mock combat before us. The U.S. is the production centre of a global spectacle that everyone is watching, but it is a show that the Americans cannot see from the outside, which prevents them from recognizing their own delusions as well as the fact that these delusions have effectively replaced their reality.

## Notes

1. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1970), 35-53.
2. Charles Campbell, “Election Imagery,” *The Dalhousie Review* 96.3 (2016): 420-425.

3. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (New York: Verso, 1988), 19.
4. Vinay Menon, "Donald Trump Is Dumping on Past Pals, so Grab Some Snacks and Let's Enjoy This," *The Toronto Star*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/opinion/2019/01/28/donald-trump-is-dumping-on-past-pals-so-grab-some-snacks-and-lets-enjoy-this.html>.
5. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society, 3rd Series* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1838), 7: 33-48. The phrase "city upon a hill" was taken from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5: 14.
6. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: Harper, 1996), 39 and 77.
7. See Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper, 2001), 13-20.
8. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Harper, 1987), 5.
9. A recent article in *The Atlantic* sought to revive this deluded self-image of American exceptionalism and "let it guide America at home and abroad." The author's list of exceptional qualities includes the idea that "America's gain also contributes to gains by others," that America never uses its size and power in international relations, and that Americans possess a "can-do spirit," derived from the frontier experience, which has helped them to resolve international problems "for the past 70 years" (thus including Vietnam, Chile, Nicaragua, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen, among others). See Jake Sullivan, "Yes, America Can Still Lead the World," *The Atlantic*, January/February 2019, 76-85.
10. Garry Wills, *The Second Civil War: Arming for Armageddon* (New York: New American Library, 1968), 18.
11. See Robin Wright, "Is America Headed for a New Kind of Civil War?" *The New Yorker*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/is-america-headed-for-a-new-kind-of-civil-war>; Thomas E. Ricks, "What a New U.S. Civil War Might Look Like," *Foreign Policy*, October 10, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/10/what-a-new-u-s-civil-war-might-look-like>; Victor David Hanson, "Are We on the Verge of Civil War?," *Washington Times*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/sep/19/are-we-on-the-verge-of-civil-war>; and Rebecca Solnit, "The American Civil War Didn't End and Trump Is a Confederate

President,” *The Guardian*, November 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/04/the-american-civil-war-didnt-end-and-trump-is-a-confederate-president>.

12. Qtd. in Wright, “Is America Headed for a New Kind of Civil War?”

13. Margaret Talbot, “The Talk of the Town,” *The New Yorker*, January 14, 2019, 13-14.

14. Mark Green, “The Short List: Politics in Our Time,” review of *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*, by William Davies, *New York Times*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/18/books/review/william-davies-nervous-states.html>.

15. *The O’Reilly Factor*, Fox News, February 5, 2017.

16. Patrick Radden Keefe, “Winning: The TV Producer Who Rehabilitated Trump’s Image,” *The New Yorker*, January 7, 2019, 30-45.

17. Thomas L. Friedman, “It’s Time to Threaten to Fire Trump,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2018, <https://www.nyt.com/2018/12/24/opinion/impeach-fire-president-trump.html>.

18. In 2016 alone Obama dropped 26,171 bombs on seven Muslim countries. See Medea Benjamin, “America Dropped 26,171 Bombs in 2016: What a Bloody End to Obama’s Reign,” *The Guardian*, January 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/09/america-dropped-26171-bombs-2016-obama-legacy>.

19. Greg Grandin supplements the frontier thesis by showing that racist violence motivated westward expansion from the start. With the Mexican War and especially the Spanish American War of 1898, this violent expansion was extended into “the overseas frontier—wars in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines, Nicaragua, and Haiti,” and the opposing sides in the actual Civil War were gloriously reconciled and reunited as repurposed Indian fighters in these foreign frontier wars where “they could fight in the name of the loftiest ideals . . . while putting down people of color.” Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 139.

20. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 62-63.