



# laetus in praesens

Alternative view of segmented documents via Kairos

30th August 2006

## Cyclopean Vision vs Poly-sensual Engagement

- / -

Requested comment on Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle* *Journal of the Interdisciplinary Crossroads* Vol. 2, No. 2 (August 2006), pp. 219-251. Published in that journal.

### Introduction

This comment on the paper by Douglas Kellner (*Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle*, 2006), reframing the earlier study of Guy Debord (*Society of the Spectacle*, 1967) derives from overlapping concerns as a futurist with the use of particular metaphors in framing the challenges of governance for the future. It arises from early work on integrative forms of presentation of information and subsequent work on its visualization in support of policy-making -- how overviews (synthesis) gets intelligently presented for action. However more recent events indicate the need to frame such topics in terms of information warfare and, more appropriately, memetic warfare (cf *Participative Democracy vs. Participative Drama: lessons on social transformation for international organizations from Gorbachev*, 1991; *Missiles, Missives, Missions and Memetic Warfare: Navigation of strategic interfaces in multidimensional knowledge space*, 2001).

My primary concern with Kellner's excellent articulation of the issue of spectacles, and their interpretation, is his minimal focus on the operational possibilities in response to the problematic situation they constitute -- despite their "contradictions and reversals" and their "volatility, unpredictability, and evanescence". As he notes, "various models of opposition and struggle" were a preoccupation of the *Situationist International* whose successors make available the Debord text on the web -- with related commentaries (cf Len Bracken, *The Spectacle Of Secrecy*) and characteristic criticism of Debord himself (cf Luther Blissett, *Guy Debord is Really Dead*, 1994). My commentary is therefore a suggestion as to how his analysis effectively creates a framework through which to explore initiatives that he does not discuss.

### Vision metaphor

A basic criticism of the framing and labelling of the phenomenon in question as a "spectacle" is that this effectively traps discussion of it in a particular metaphor, based on just one of the senses, namely vision -- irrespective of references to "multi-media". This is totally consistent with the almost universal tendency to frame the planning and policy issues of governance, at all levels of society, in terms of vision -- to the exclusion of any other metaphorical framework (cf *Developing a Metaphorical Language for the Future*, 1994).

The approach is reflected in presentations of institutional plans through promotional visualizations, whether technical or glossy. This tendency is echoed in the approach recommended to individuals in "envisaging" their own future -- and possibly adopted by them in "vision quests" and "vision workshops". Decision-making, especially in the business world, is often preceded by "putting on a show". Guy Debord does not seem to have recognized the role of spectacle as metaphor. Kellner makes no reference to the now widely recognized framing role of metaphor, notably illustrated by the concern with the spectacular of George Lakoff (*Women, Fire and Dangerous Things; what categories reveal about the human mind*, 1987).

By this metaphor the image of the future is effectively envisaged through a lens -- an optical metaphor suggesting the possibility of "focus". The term "spectacle" is itself strongly associated with the corrective lenses provided by opticians. Curiously however the metaphor is not extended, either in the governance (or personal) case, to cover the possibility that any vision may require a corrective lens to be meaningfully "seen" -- or whether any "spectacle" is effectively a lens, however inappropriate to those called upon to use it. In which case the spectacle would indeed introduce any of a range of distortions of vision -- well-known in the physical case -- whose metaphorical equivalents are never examined. Futurists in policy think tanks -- many of whom wear spectacles -- are not required to have their metaphorical "eyes" tested. Indeed there are no standard tests analogous to those used by opticians.

Should a spectacle then be understood as a lens, effectively prepared by those able to do so, which connects the factual dots such as to introduce a particular focusing curvature into perceptions of reality? This then brings some things into special focus such as to minimize others? In an alternative metaphor a spectacle might be understood as a kind of directional antenna capable of resolving distant phenomena in a particular way. However both metaphors point to the value of appropriately separated spectacles in order to obtain a sense of perspective (cf John A T Robinson, *Truth is Two-eyed*, 1979). This binocular approach has been extended to a poly-ocular

approach by Magoroh Maruyama (*Polyocular Vision or Subunderstanding? Organization Studies*, 25, 2004, pp 467-480) and notably considered as relevant to agriculture, as admirably described by Egon Noe, *et al* (*A semiotic polyocular framework for multidisciplinary research in relation to multifunctional farming and rural development*, 2005). In poly-ocular vision, the differences between several images enable detection of invisible dimensions, which cannot be obtained by adding several images (Maruyama, 1978).

This "perspective" contrasts with the cyclopean monocular vision of a single spectacle -- often designed to supercede all others and to deny any complementary insights they may offer. It goes beyond Kellner's "multiperspectivist" approach.

This argument could be considered a trivial device were it not for the obvious need for more than one sense in order to navigate the environment without disaster -- and the dangers of seeking to rely on a uni-sensual interface with the environment. In the case of uncorrected vision, the problems of [short-sightedness](#) and [long-sightedness](#) are well known -- as with blindness. The metaphorical implications of [colour-blindness](#), [night-blindness](#) and [astigmatism](#) far less so. More serious however is the constraint imposed by line of sight -- and the extreme dependence on sound, smell and touch then required to detect unseen dangers and opportunities.

In the case presented by Kellner, a spectacle does indeed impose a "totalizing vision" -- as with certain kinds of "fish-eye" distorting lens. The optical metaphor therefore opens the possibility of other forms of criticism. But more interesting is the possibility that such a dominant governance metaphor may obscure the fact that the vision presented "stinks" -- a possibility only detectable with a sense excluded metaphorically from the spectacle.

Within the context of the spectacle, what active senses enable detection of phenomena out of the line of sight? Although much is made of the multi-media dimensions of a spectacle, it is noteworthy that any such are designed primarily to reinforce the visual framing -- particularly in the case of governance programme proposals. Although the vision may be strongly reinforced by sound (cf [NSF/ICAD Sonification Report](#)), it is technically more problematic to extend that to feel, smell and taste. Little is said about the possibility that beautiful visions may suffer irredeemably from the metaphorical equivalent of bad taste -- project "body odour" and "halitosis"!

Reliance on vision reinforces unhealthy tendencies to disengagement and viewing from a distance -- echoed in "hands-off" styles of governance reliant on the visual metaphor. The point is well-made by the title of the study by Sherry Turkle (*Life on the Screen: identity in the age of the internet*, 1995). This disengagement is also echoed in tendencies to voyeurism and various forms of eroticism -- typically characteristic of spectacles as documented by Kellner -- and paralleled by the many current forms of invasive surveillance.

The suppression through spectacles of modes of knowing other than vision tends then to evoke them surreptitiously -- in ways unintegrated into the cognitive processes of governance and public debate. This is evident in the role of music. Above all it is evident in the degrees of cognitive engagement offered in compensation through alcohol and drugs -- in ways impossible for spectacles (although Kellner notes Debord's description of them as part of a "permanent opium war").

## **Substitute for failure of intellectual integration and operational coordination**

It could be argued that the totalizing function of spectacles, as noted by Kellner, is an effort to obscure various failures of conceptual integration in dealing with social reality -- especially on the part of various institutions. This effort may be partly conscious and partly inadvertent or unconscious.

Spectacles distract from integrative failures exemplified by the following:

- the inability of systems of governance to configure relevant agencies to initiate and deliver major social projects (development, "health for all", "freedom from hunger", "work for all", "literacy for all", "shelter for all", etc), but especially in response to complex crises
- the inability of academic and professional institutions to reconcile their methodological differences in order to ensure emergence of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary modes of reflection in response to complex problems
- the inability of social systems to respond coherently and creatively to the complex challenges of multiculturalism, notably as represented in the "clash of civilizations" (attaching radically different significance to the imagery of spectacles)
- the inability of religions to reconcile their differences in order to avoid the multiplicity of conflicts sustained by such differences
- the inability of leadership to engender social projects of a sufficiently inspiring nature to mobilize widespread enthusiastic support ("Make Poverty History", in contrast to travel to other planets, etc)
- the failure of attempts by authorities of any kind to disguise their failures through public relations and news management ("spin") and the consequent increase in the institutional credibility gap

Systems of governance might be said to be addicted to increasing levels of news management -- a pathological case of "mega-billboarditis" -- whose promises have proven to be increasingly unpersuasive. Those in power are no longer capable of proving the existence of challenges for which they invite support -- because of the demonstrated capacity to tamper with electronic evidence and to intimidate those who lend their credibility to its presentation. Cognitive reframing has been attempted through what have been termed "megametaphors" -- themselves a form of "cognitive spectacle" (cf Timothy W. Luke, *MegaMetaphorics: Re-Reading Globalization, Sustainability, and Virtualization as Rhetorics of World Politics*, 1999).

Spectacles are a logical extension of this progression. It can be argued that spectacular threats now offer the most effective means of controlling the priorities of governance (cf *Promoting a Singular Global Threat -- Terrorism: Strategy of choice for world governance*, 2002). A dangerous level of "groupthink" was acknowledged to have been associated with the manner in which the intelligence community encouraged policy-makers to "connect up the dots" in relation to the facts of 9/11 (cf *Report on the U.S. Intelligence Community's Pre-War Assessments on Iraq*, 9 July 2004; Lord Butler's *Review of Intelligence of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, 13 July 2004). However the question is, for some, whether this groupthink was elicited by the spectacle of 9/11 or 7/7, or whether groupthink amongst "rogue elements" of government was effectively responsible for either (cf *Cui Bono: Groupthink vs Thinking the Unthinkable?*

*Reframing the suffocating consensus in response to 7/7, 2005; also Journal of 9/11 Studies).*

## Myth and meaning

Spectacles may therefore be understood as offering access to larger meanings -- or crafted substitutes for them. The "script writers" of spectacles are offered unique media frameworks into which cultural allusions of every kind may be interwoven. These offer attractive resonances to the high values of a culture -- heroism, poignancy, devotion -- whether through blockbuster movies or "Shock and Awe" military campaigns. They effectively appropriate as instant myth-making that which is otherwise articulated as the myth of cultural traditions. As noted by [Karen Armstrong](#) (*A Short History of Myth*, 2005), who addresses the curious status of myth in industrialized societies, despite its long-demonstrated function:

Another peculiar characteristic of the human mind is its ability to have ideas and experiences that we cannot explain rationally.... imagination is the faculty that produces religion and mythology. Today mythical thinking has fallen into disrepute; we often dismiss it as irrational and self-indulgent. But the imagination is also the faculty that has enabled scientists to bring new knowledge to light and to invent technology that has made us immeasurably more effective.... Mythology and science both extend the scope of human beings. Like science and technology, mythology...is not about opting out of this world, but about enabling us to live more intensely within it..

Spectacles thus offer a sense of the sweep of history -- a sense of macro-history (cf *Engaging Macrohistory through the Present Moment*, 2004). Spectacles effectively assume mythical proportions and take on mythical functions.

The role of the spectacle may in this sense be related to that of the epic as explored in relation to the novel by [Mikhail Bakhtin](#) (*Epic and Novel In: The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981). He shows that the novel is well suited to the post-industrial civilization because it flourishes on the diversity that the epic attempts to eliminate from the world -- through its totalizing function.

As but one of the challenges to which society is called upon to respond, "peak oil" points to the complex implications for the governance of oil-dependent economies. The potential for collapse of those economies may however be associated with another form of collapse to which spectacles effectively provide a response, namely the "collapse of meaning". Such a collapse -- following the "peak meaning" of globalization -- would be associated with a radical loss of confidence in the institutionalized articulations "oiled" by global meaning. The difficulty in recognizing the potential for such collapse may be intimately related to the difficulty in acknowledging the possibility of the collapse of the monetary system that is so emblematic of one form of confidence on which society is dependent. And yet many national governments have gone bankrupt in the past, and many specialists have highlighted warning indications that the global financial system could collapse..

In relation to the the range of spectacles noted by Kellner, it is readily forgotten that faith-based "myths" are major current influences on American foreign policy, on the Christian leadership of key members of the Coalition of the Willing in its response to Islamic terrorism, and as an inspiration for that terrorism. The theological underpinnings of Israeli policy may also be defined in such terms. Interwoven in their various understandings is a variously shared belief in the myth of Armageddon (cf *Spontaneous Initiation of Armageddon -- a heartfelt response to systemic negligence*, 2004). This might well be considered to be the ultimate spectacle into which the world is now being effectively driven by faith-based governance.

## Identity and spectacle

Much is made of the current problematic challenge of identity for the individual, for groups and for nations. It could be argued that the integrative failures noted above should include the failure of social institutions, including organized religion, to enhance a sense of identity rather than erode it. A fragmented and enfeebled sense of identity increases the vulnerability of collectivities (as with pre-Nazi Germany) and exposes individuals to the increasing levels of depression (now widely acknowledged).

Spectacles, as demonstrated by the Nazi regime, offer a remedial response to challenged identity. But curiously individuals can also engage in a process of "making a spectacle of themselves" to enhance their sense of identity. It could be argued that this is the opportunity fruitfully exploited by the fashion and lifestyle industries to which Kellner refers. The role of "look" and "style", as cultivated by those industries, is a response to the fundamental social pressures that they have been able to catalyze.

More problematic is the impact of the need of individual leaders to complete their role in power by writing themselves with honour (if not glory) into the pages of history through which they will be identified for all time. Those eliciting spectacles, such as the "Shock and Awe" intervention, are effectively casting themselves into dramatic roles in those spectacles -- as with the much-cited "[Mission Accomplished](#)" photo-opportunity [[more](#)].

## Wholes vs Happenings

The totalizing role performed by spectacles for post-industrial society -- why they "work" -- may be contrasted with the rural context, from which people tend to migrate (especially the young) and to which many of wealth yearn to "return" (on retirement). It could be argued that the attractor for such a return is the sense of psychosocial *wholeness* absent from the fragmentation of urban life as experienced -- through its unassimilable *complexity*. This wholeness is not simply *spatial* in that the complete range of functions essential to community health can be comprehended through the human scale of the idyllic village -- in its *simplicity*. It is also *temporal* through engagement in the short and long-term rhythms that characterize the *cyclic* nature of village life.

The difficulty is that the larger happenings of urban life are powerful attractors in contrast with the minor happenings characteristic of the slow pace of interwoven rural patterns -- a more wholesome (healthier) life that may be difficult to furnish. Perversely however those

happenings of urban life tend to be characterized by their *short-term* nature, whereas it is the *long-term* context that characterizes those of rural life. Spectacles effectively "come to the rescue" through a totalizing function that provides urban dwellers with both a sense of wholeness and longer-term context -- a ("pre-packaged") comprehensible sense of simplified complexity. Spectacles meet a need in an unwholesome globalizing world -- as a characteristic pathology. The *urgency* of happenings in the short-term obviates any need for larger meaning.

Spectacles offer a matrix for an integrative experience sought in urban fantasies about the village idyll. Such happenings offer a surrogate sense of experience of more comprehensive patterns of life -- perhaps to be termed a "near-life experience".

## Engaging the "spectator"

In pointing to the infotainment role of spectacles, Kellner effectively highlights their role in engaging people experientially in their external environment, whether real or virtual. The world is indeed then transformed into a TV or media show where the distinction between real and virtual may be experientially irrelevant. He notes Debord's recognition of the spectator as the reactive viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission, conformity, and the cultivation of marketable difference -- 'The spectacle is the moment when the consumption has attained the *total occupation* of social life' .

It is appropriate to note that the primary preoccupation of the advertising industry is to engage individuals in order to influence -- in a manner intimately related to the function of any spectacle. Individual advertisements might be understood as micro-spectacles -- possibly linked by sponsorship to media presentations of Kellner's spectacles (as with Hurricane Katrina and the invasion of Iraq). A bright future is now seen for a high order of personalization of advertising (Spencer Kelly, *Technology lets ads get personal*, *BBC News*, 25 August 2006). The possibilities of wrapping a person in advertisements might be seen as one future of the spectacle.

It is interesting that analyses of social systems speak readily of "actors" and "players" when referring to individuals and groups, and especially to their leaders. This terminology subtly reinforces a sense of contextual spectacle...

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages.  
William Shakespeare, *As You Like It**

Rather than the "extraterrestrials" of blockbuster science fiction and conspiracy theorists, individuals are transformed into "terrestrial extras" in spectacles.

Missing from such understanding is any possibility that, rather than being simply "actors", individuals may also choose to be "directors", "producers", "scriptwriters" and "casting directors" in their own spectacles. As scriptwriters, individuals and groups can then write their own story with their own interpretations of facts -- as many of them do -- freely framing real or imaginary people as "good guys" or "bad guys", "heros" or "villains". The plots may be configured as comedy, tragedy or otherwise. Such a possibility was widely publicized by the futuristic technology of the "holographic environment simulator" (*holodeck*) in the well-known *Star Trek* series.

This missing dimension from Kellner's analysis is what may offer a means of circumventing the invasive nature of spectacles as he so successfully portrays them. This dimension is notably evident in the many alternative interpretations of the "facts" of the spectacle of terrorism. It is equally evident in the alternative interpretations of globalization as being effectively a terrible spectacle -- not the universal panacea, as scripted by the World Bank and multinational corporations, and promoted by the World Economic Forum.

In this sense the option is less one of eliminating the "undesirable" spectacles scripted by the powerful few (with their media allies), and more one of offering wider facilities for spectacle production by the many, of which computer-enhanced gaming is one example (cf *Playfully Changing the Prevailing Climate of Opinion*, 2005) . The future may be a matter of "your spectacle or mine?" or "your story or mine?" -- connecting the factual dots according to aesthetic preferences varying from realism, through impressionism to surrealism (cf *Dynamically Gated Conceptual Communities: emergent patterns of isolation within knowledge society*, 2004).

More fundamentally, hope lies in the potential of personal responsibility for the design of happenings that may be capable of addressing the dilemmas of rural wholeness vs urban happenings, short-term vs long-term, complexity vs simplicity. This is closely related to the original Situationist project, as noted by Kellner, which "involved an overcoming of all forms of separation, in which individuals would directly produce their own life and modes of self-activity and collective practice". It is also related to the enactivist approach explored by Francisco Varela (*Laying Down a Path in Walking: essays on enactive cognition*, 1997) encapsulated in the Buddhist precept of "laying down a path through walking" (cf *Walking Elven Pathways: enactivating the pattern that connects*, 2006).

The enactivist approach to "laying down a path" may be usefully contrasted with a common practice of "lying about the path" one is walking -- whether to oneself or to others -- and exemplified by the pronouncements of world leaders with respect to WMD in Iraq. With respect to spectacle-making, both may be contrasted with a distinction now made between "faith-based" and "reality-based" decision-making at the highest level, as noted in a much-cited article by Ron Suskind (*Without a Doubt*, *The New York Times*, In The Magazine, 17 October 2004) regarding an exchange with an aide in the decision-making circle of President Bush:

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act

again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

It is quite possible that this is the core issue of the sustaining psychology required for sustainable development and sustainable patterns of consumption (*Psychology of Sustainability: Embodying cyclic environmental processes*, 2002) .

---

## References

Jacques Attali. Noise: the political economy of music. University of Minnesota Press, 1977-1985 [[review](#)]

Mikhail Bakhtin. The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981 (ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist )

Len Bracken. The Spectacle Of Secrecy [[text](#)]

Guy Debord:

- Society of the Spectacle. Detroit, Black and Red, 1967 [[text](#)]
- Treatise on Secrets: Commentaires sur la societe du spectacle. Verso, 1990 [[commentary](#)]

Anthony Judge:

- Participative Democracy vs. Participative Drama: lessons on social transformation for international organizations from Gorbachev, 1991 [[text](#)]
- Missiles, Missives, Missions and Memetic Warfare: Navigation of strategic interfaces in multidimensional knowledge space, 2001 [[text](#)]
- Developing a Metaphorical Language for the Future, 1994 [[text](#)]
- Globalization within a Global Potemkin Society, 2000 [[text](#)]
- Engaging Macrohistory through the Present Moment, 2004 [[text](#)]
- Politicization of Evidence in the Plastic Turkey Era: al-Qaida, Saddam, Assassination and the Hijab, 2003 [[text](#)]
- Promoting a Singular Global Threat -- Terrorism: Strategy of choice for world governance, 2002 [[text](#)]
- Spontaneous Initiation of Armageddon -- a heartfelt response to systemic negligence, 2004 [[text](#)]
- Future Challenge of Faith-based Governance, 2003 [[text](#)]
- Humour and Play-Fullness: essential integrative processes in governance, religion and transdisciplinarity, 2005 [[text](#)]
- Psychology of Sustainability: Embodying cyclic environmental processes, 2002 [[text](#)]
- Forms of Presentation and the Future of Comprehension, 1984 [[text](#)]

George Lakoff. Women, Fire and Dangerous Things; what categories reveal about the human mind. University of Chicago Press, 1987

Timothy W. Luke. MegaMetaphorics: Re-Reading Globalization, Sustainability, and Virtualization as Rhetorics of World Politics, 1999 [[text](#)]

Magoroh Maruyama:

- Polyocular Vision or Subunderstanding? *Organization Studies*, 25, 2004, pp. 467-480
- Endogenous Research and Polyocular Anthropology. In: R. Holloman and S. Arutiunovin (Eds), Perspectives on Ethnicity, The Hague: Mouton, 1978.

Egon Noe, Hugo Fjelsted Alrøe and Anne Mette Sørensen Langvad. A semiotic polyocular framework for multidisciplinary research in relation to multifunctional farming and rural development (Paper for the XXI ESRS-Congress in Hungary, August 22-27, 2005. Working group 3: Sociological approaches to the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas) [[text](#)]

John A T Robinson. Truth is Two-eyed. Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1979

---



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#).

For further updates on this site, [subscribe here](#)