

## EUGENE ARVA

### The Show Must Go On: The Simulated Search for the Real in the Society of the Spectacle

What every society looks for in continuing to produce,  
and to overproduce, is to store the real that escapes it.  
—Jean Baudrillard

The media representations of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington elicited reactions with rather unsettling ethical reverberations in the consciousness of both primary and secondary witnesses. On September 11, 2001, the witnesses'—and my own—seemingly outrageous aesthetic perception of images of utter destruction and unprecedented brutality inevitably raised the question of the impact that visual media, as producers of image commodities (TV news, films, advertisements, etc.), can have on the viewers'—the image consumers'—sense of identity in a “society of the spectacle” (Debord's phrase). Arguing against Marcuse and Debord, who underscore the manipulative, oppressive, and life-negating qualities of images (whose social articulation is the spectacle), I concluded that “life as show time,” as a comprehensive system of signs, codes, and messages, is the next, if not the only, best thing that can possibly happen to us provided that we stay aware of the risks of unfreedom which it implies. Now, half a decade later, the controversial authenticity and meaningfulness of the world of images that we perceive as reality still invites the following









We also learn that sometimes the reenactment of a murder case on Wayne's show becomes, instead, the anticipation of one. Wayne's cynical attitude is unequivocal:

Do you think that those nitwits out there in Zombie Land remember anything? This is junk food for the brains. It's, you know, filler. Fodder. Whatever [...] And keep saying that word: 'Live Interview with Wayne Gale!' Anticipation, baby. That's what it's all about.

Wayne [hugging and patting Mickey]: “Great, man. Thanks. Every fucking moron in the world just saw that, mate.”

The scene of the prison interview suggests that Wayne, the “normal” citizen, does not care about morality or justice any more than Mickey, the sentenced “killer,” does; contrary to Mickey’s opinion, they are the same species. On television, Wayne plays Wayne the reporter, the Wayne viewers want to see and hear, the one who confirms their beliefs and makes them feel good about themselves and safe from demons like Mickey and Mallory. Indeed, Wayne will never feel more alive than during the eventual prison riot, when Mickey gives him the opportunity to shoot and kill prison guards and inmates.

However, Wayne will become aware of his ~~sub~~clusion only in the last moments of his life, before Mickey and Mallory execute him. ~~Some~~here in the woods, in front of a rolling camera, Wayne is stalling, keeps asking questions, trying to delay his apparently imminent death:

Mickey: “Killing you and what you represent is a statement. I’m not ~~thund~~ered-percent sure what it’s saying, but ~~you~~know, Frankenstein killed Dr. Frankenstein.”

Wayne: “The day you killed, you belonged to us. To the public! To the media! We are married, right? But the point is, What do we do next? Let’s do a Salman-Rushdi type of thing. Just books, talk shows, you know. We lay low, we jump up, we bob and weave. We do Letterman, we do Conan, we do Oprah, we do Donahue. Have you any idea how huge we could be?”

Wayne: “Wait, wait, wait! Don’t Mickey and Mallory always leave somebody alive to tell the tale?”

Mickey and Mallory: “We are. Your camera.”

What the fugitive serial killers bring home to Wayne, and also to us, the film audience, is nothing but the idea of the death of the referent. The ~~only~~ “real” referent—what Wayne should have known but failed to recognise—is the medium itself. Its independence and omnipotence is shocking—and all too real. However, ~~the~~ last scene of the film in no way comes across as a vindication of Mickey and Mallory’s supposed authenticity. Their search for the real is just as simulated as the television images of death and violence that have marked their lives. If Wayne

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- <sup>5</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, trans. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000),
- <sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 32.
- <sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (New York: Verso, 2002), 19.
- <sup>8</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 29.
- <sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 93.
- <sup>10</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> Benjamin, 101.
- <sup>12</sup> Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, 74.
- <sup>13</sup> Žižek, 19.
- <sup>14</sup> Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion*, 81.
- <sup>15</sup> Žižek, 89.