Ecstatic Consumption:

The Spectacle of Global Dystopia in Contemporary American Literature

Ecstatic Consumption:

The Spectacle of Global Dystopia in Contemporary American Literature

By

Pavlina Radia

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Ecstatic Consumption:
The Spectacle of Global Dystopia in Contemporary American Literature

By Pavlina Radia

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9796-5
ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9796-9

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part III: The Global Appetite for Dystopia

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ecstatic Consumption: The Spectacle of Global Dystopia in Contemporary American Literature first emerged as a fourth-year honours seminar topic. While the book is a departure from the many intriguing discussions held in the 2013 and 2015 honours seminars at Nipissing University, the drive to continue puzzling the complexities of our consumer culture and its impact on literature, specifically the ways in which the ecstasy of consumption, its dystopian impulse and emphasis on the spectacle affect contemporary society, was very much nurtured by English Studies students at Nipissing University. Special acknowledgments and thanks go to Alissa Torres who found the course description on the Nipissing University website and, excited to see her book in the honours seminar required readings, offered to Skype into the class for an interview with students. Her brilliant mind and soulful kindness are unparalleled.

Only a small segment of the book has been published elsewhere: "Doing the Lady Gaga Dance: Postmodern Transaesthetics and the Art of Spectacle in Don DeLillo's The Body Artist" appeared in the January 2014 issue of *Canadian Review of American Studies/CRAS 44*(2) (pp. 194–213). My special thanks go to Maureen Anne Mahoney, the editor of the CRAS Special Issue, "Aesthetics of Renewal; or, Everything Old Is New Again," for believing in the article and for her editorial comments. The article was seminal in the book's overall trajectory.

Special acknowledgments must be extended to the editorial board and reviewers of Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Special thanks go to Kristy Lynn Hankewitz for her keen editorial eye, insightful advice, and proofreading skills. Last but not least, special thanks go to Nipissing University and the Nipissing University Research Grant (2015–2016) that made the completion of the book possible.

INTRODUCTION

THEORIZING ECSTATIC CONSUMPTION AND THE SPECTACLE OF GLOBAL DYSTOPIA IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

> The spectacle as a tendency to *make one see* the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs.
>
> —Guy Debord (1983), *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 18

> We are no longer in the drama of alienation, we are in the ecstasy of communication.
>
> —Jean Baudrillard (2008), *Fatal Strategies*, p. 92

If the 20th century was a century of simulacra, the new millennium is the era of the spectacle, or what Guy Debord (1983) defines as "the concrete inversion of life, and as such, the autonomous movement of the non-living" (p. 2). The word "spectacle" comes from the Latin "spectaculum" (meaning a "thing seen" or a "show"), but it also refers to a "thing being capable of being seen" or a "means of seeing" ("Spectacle," n.d.). From reality television and billboard advertisements to online elections, YouTube, and selfies, contemporary culture thrives on mass spectacles—whether they be displays of power or entertainment. Historically, the spectacle has been associated with various rituals—Dionysian rites, the Olympic Games, Gladiatorial Games, medieval mystery plays, sports, and theatre. The role of such rituals was to demonstrate the prowess of the state or to assert the authority of the sovereign, as well as to serve as a distancing device during periods of crisis and from the crisis itself (Fischer-Lichte, 2005, p. 90). The spectacle mirrored reality, but it also inevitably transformed it by putting it on display. Dionysian rites celebrated the dissolution of boundaries while simultaneously commenting on social violence. Similarly, medieval mystery plays delivered morals based on historical events and social or individual crises. From its inception, the spectacle was both a ritual and a performance. In the digital

age, however, the spectacle has taken on a new dimension. What defines contemporary culture is the emphasis on mediation rather than representation. As Debord (1983) notes in his seminal study, *Society of the Spectacle*, contemporary culture relies on "a generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*, from which all actual 'having' must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function" (p. 17). As critics continue to lament, postmillennial culture is the culture of the image, fed by the capitalist imperative to consume.[1] This imperative is frequently mediated and enhanced by mass media, the ultimate purveyors of the "generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*" as Debord (1983) suggests (p. 17). In the digital age, the spectacle is a means of being.

Not surprisingly, fascination with the culture of spectacle also pervades contemporary American literature. Authors including Don DeLillo, Jane Smiley, Marge Piercy, Diana Abu-Jaber, Chang-Rae Lee, Shalom Auslander, and Alissa Torres question the ways in which literature has become complicit in the iconic drive for a bigger, better spectacle. As this book shows, this drive is frequently exemplified in the form of what Jean Baudrillard in *The Transparency of Evil* (1993) calls a "materialization of aesthetics" (p. 18), or in a lust for narratives of resistance that subvert but simultaneously reinscribe the consumerist drive for spectacle that packages anything from an intimate human experience to traumatic historical events as a commodity or a spectacle to be consumed.

As cultures and borders become increasingly globalized, the world is not only shrinking, but the human subject is also teetering on the edge between life and non-life, as technology, the Internet, and cyberspace redefine the boundaries of humanity, ethics, and being. In the world of commodity, corporate logic, and cyborgs, the very notion of identity is frequently turned into a spectacle. Yet, it is also simultaneously mobilized by the search for what Jean Baudrillard (2008) describes as the "ecstatic" form that materializes aesthetics. The ecstatic, Baudrillard argues, is a particular kind of "immoral" ethic that commodifies the aesthetic in the name of "realer than real" and "more than more" (p. 10). What does such an ethic do to the aesthetic value of art? Why is there such a desire for staging consumption incessantly, or, to put it in Baudrillard's terms, ecstatically? In what way does this drive co-opt dystopia as a new utopia? How does this co-optation inflect and deflect gender, ethnic, racial, power, and class relations? Why the preoccupation with ecstasy no matter how dystopian? Such themes and queries pervade this critical study. Through a close reading of selected works by contemporary American authors, this book examines how these authors' narratives respond to these ecstatic dystopias, but it also considers how they challenge and exceed the generic

limits of *form* by blurring the line between poetry and fiction, cinematic production and fictional representation, and graphic novel and theatre.

As the previously mentioned authors' works show, the tendency to unify the world as a global village has had both positive and negative effects. On the so-called march to the global utopia, individual and globalized subjects are not only consumed but also encouraged to consume "ecstatically" rather than conspicuously. Although Thornstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which emphasizes the importance of middle class leisure as a driving force in the politics of consumerism, was applicable to 20th century North America, the new millennium encourages us to deploy commodity culture as a means of self-validation and authentication, but also to embrace consumption in all of its excesses—ecstatically. In 2007, Paul Virilio aligned "ecstatic consumption" with the 21st century's push towards the ultimate reversal of private and public, national and global, personal and collective, "where the local is the exterior, and the global the interior of a finite world" (p. 51). As he noted, "By accelerating, globalization turns reality inside out like a glove. From now on, your nearest and dearest is a stranger and the exotic, a neighbour" (p. 51). Drawing on Paul Virilio (2007), Glenn and Kingwell (2008) point to the persistent, hysterical production of consumer appetite that promises to "take us beyond ourselves, towards the selves we wish to be" (p. 20), while noting the amplification of "ecstatic consumption" by the power of mediation performed by "the media surround" (p. 20). In their words, the new millennium is informed by the "conditions of hysterical commutation," where "there is no difference between production and consumption" (p. 21).[2] To put it differently, in the 21st century, consumption is *ecstasy*—the ultimate drug and the addiction to it.

Before pursuing this argument further, it might be useful to explore the etymology of the word "ecstasy," as its various permutations will be crucial to this study. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, ecstasy comes from the Greek *existanai*, meaning "to displace, but also to astonish, entrance"; "to be outside oneself." In Latin, *extasis* means "terror" or trance" ("Ecstasy," n.d.). In both languages, ecstasy has a double meaning—both a positive and negative, utopian and dystopian connotation—as astonishment, on the one hand, and terror, on the other. This is similar to the pursuit of the global idyll: what is idyllic to some might be nightmarish to others. The increasing erosion of cultural, national, and geographic borders has unquestionably widened economic possibilities, but it has also generated new power asymmetries (Braidotti, 2006, p. 91). These asymmetries are reinforced through state and culture politics, which are further institutionalized by the cinema and mass media

industry (Beller, 2006, p. 9). As Jonathan Beller (2006) has noted, the world of illusion has become another means of institutionalizing power disparities and class, racial, and gender hierarchies (p. 9). In his terms, "the overall effect of an ever-increasing quantity of images is the radical alienation of consciousness, its isolation and separation, its inability to convincingly 'language' reality and thus its reduction to something on the order of a free-floating hallucination" (Beller, 2006, p. 15). While modernity aspired to "fix" radical alienation through aesthetics by assigning an ethical value to narratives, contemporary literature and the arts are no longer immune to the impact of commodity culture amplified by globalization. In fact, they are equally susceptible to the consumerist imperative. In his seminal work, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson (1991) pointed out that

> [a]esthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to aeroplanes), to ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (p. 4)

The ambiguous nature of aesthetic production, particularly its complicity in commodity production, is reflected in the literary works this book examines—works that in many ways testify to the recent epistemological changes in American society while simultaneously asking questions about the increasing preoccupation with the commodity culture of which American society is clearly the ultimate embodiment.

In exploring both literary and cultural narratives that depend on but also comment on the culture of the spectacle, *Ecstatic Consumption: The Spectacle of Global Dystopia in Contemporary American Literature* draws on Jean Baudrillard's (2008) notion of ecstatic consumption as being no longer just excessive, but rather excrescent (i.e., growing out of itself) and immoral, in that it is no longer preoccupied with opposites but rather with superlatives. We want "realer than real," "more than more"; we want the best, the fastest, the latest, and so forth (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 10).[3] In Baudrillard's terms, "The ecstatic form is an immoral form, while the aesthetic form always implies the moral distinction between the beautiful and the ugly" (2008, p. 10). What such an ethic does to the aesthetic is a prominent question that underpins this study. Why the desire for staging consumption incessantly, ecstatically? In what way does this drive co-opt dystopia as a new utopia? How does this co-optation inflect and deflect

gender, ethnic, racial, power, and class relations? Why the preoccupation with ecstasy, no matter how dystopian?

Through a close reading of selected works by the above-mentioned contemporary American authors, this book examines how their narratives respond to these ecstatic dystopias, as well as how they challenge and exceed the generic limits of form by blurring the line between reality and fiction, cinematic production and fictional representation, and graphic novel and theatre. While the narratives of Don DeLillo (2001, 2010) and Marge Piercy (1991) explore characters who are part cyborgs, part human puppets, estranged by cinematic and cybernetic modes of production, Jane Smiley's *Ten Days in the Hills* (2007) takes us to Hollywood's finest parties, where bliss morphs into nightmare. How the great "Americana" is perceived and appropriated by the non-West is queried in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995). Finally, Shalom Auslander's mock-historical novel *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012) and Alissa Torres's graphic novel *American Widow* (2008) further problematize how the media drive for the ecstatic co-opts historical atrocities as a global spectacle. In the past, literature has been aligned with an ethical, as well as an aesthetic, imperative; the postmillennial emphasis on "more than more" (i.e., the ecstatic mode of existence) suggests that even the literary arts are no longer safe from the culpability of revelling in the world of images and simulacra wherein the "surplus-value of the commodity" has been transformed "into the aesthetic surplus-value of the sign" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 17). This book investigates not only how this transformation affects gender, racial, and class relations, but also how it impacts the representation of historical events.

Contemporary American Literature and the Culture of Spectacle: A Brief Historical Context

Contemporary American literature is frequently deployed as postmodern or, in other words, as a product of postmodernity's break with modernity.[4] A defining feature of postmodern narratives is the rejection of linearity and an emphasis on history and historical events as being subject to re-presentation, obfuscation, and potentially commodification. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls such narratives "ex-centric," for they thwart teleology but also force us to acknowledge history as fiction or, in other words, as a sequence of events narrated from a particular (and subjective) point of view. If modernists are preoccupied with inner reality,—that is, with the characters' interior stream of consciousness—then postmodernists emphasize the inaccessibility of reality.

Reality for postmodernists is accessible only in its mediated form as an incomplete, fragmented, and multivoiced representation.

From the 1990s on, the effects of globalization have inevitably redefined postmodern culture (particularly its counter-narrative, counter-hegemonic aspect) as equally complicit in the increasing push for commodification and ecstatic consumption**.** After the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, the preoccupation with the first and third worlds brought "global" concerns and realities onto the stage. With the persistent and increasing abrogation of national boundaries and their meaning, contemporary American authors are questioning what it means to be American in the 21st century while they investigate what remains *American* about contemporary American culture.

Pop culture media and discourses of multiculturalism, both important venues of and vehicles for globalization, have had an extensive effect on contemporary writers like Don DeLillo, Marge Piercy, and Jane Smiley, and so have the discourses of terrorism and assimilation on the works of Diana Abu-Jaber, Chang-Rae Lee, Shalom Auslander, and Alissa Torres. As the works of these authors show, the tendency to unify the world as a global village has exposed discourses of resistance to be frequently complicit in perpetuating oppressive, neo-colonial ideologies. As these writers reveal, literature no longer provides a solid cure for the somnambulist culture of instant gratification, wherein "[t]he spectacle is a permanent opium" (Debord, 1983, p. 44). It entertains an ethical imperative while simultaneously reinscribing the very values of the consumerist culture it criticizes, be it through metafictional commentaries on socio-historical events or through self-conscious intertextuality and intermedial references to cinema, TV, or the mass media industry. Narrative forms are thus not only subject to spectacle, but they also take on its very form.

On the global stage, the body similarly becomes the ultimate commodity: the fetish of ecstatic consumption. In a world of commodity, corporate logic, and make-believe cyborgs, the very notion of identity is turned into a spectacle yet simultaneously mobilized by the search for ecstatic avatar (anti)forms. Whether these forms provide an escape into a utopian space or further enhance the dystopian ecstasy is a crucial query framing this book. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard's (2008) notion of ecstatic consumption as being no longer only excessive, but rather "excrescent" (i.e., growing out of itself) and potentially unethical, this book investigates the implications of such materialized aesthetics on narrativizing human experience, specifically from a gendered and racialized perspective.

Underlying the notion of the ecstatic form is not only a collective madness—a mass consumption—but also the irrevocability of reversibility.

This reversibility blurs the line between opposites but also generates paroxysms or complexities that delineate dystopia as a necessary roadblock on the way to utopia, an idea that underpins Fredric Jameson's (2009) notion of utopia as replication. In his essay aptly titled "Utopia as Replication," Jameson (2009) draws on the genetic theory of replication as "the like reproducing as like" but also as having the potential of the like reproducing as *unlike*. His argument is that "dystopia is in reality Utopia if examined more closely," because when we "isolate specific features" as "a different system," we end up seeing the negative as positive (p. 434). Similarly, Baudrillard (2008) argues that this "passion for intensifying, for escalation, for an increase in power, for ecstasy" defines our "time," our century, while at the same time, it "ceas[es] to be relative to its opposite" and thus becomes "positively sublime, as if it had absorbed all the energy of its opposite" (p. 27).[5] Such excrescence lies at the heart of the culture of spectacle, as Guy Debord (1983) has emphasized.

But ecstatic excrescence also challenges the notion of the spectacle as defined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in their 1944 essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Adorno and Horkheimer align the culture of the spectacle with capitalism, mass media, advertising, and the increasing manipulation of the masses through formulaic narratives. Well-established formulas provide a means of escape while simultaneously strengthening mass deception. In his "Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno (1991) further elaborates on the conformist consciousness generated by the culture industry as "imped[ing] the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves" (p. 106). While Adorno and Horkheimer's model of the spectacle suggests that the spectators are passive viewers who have no agency in the process of viewing, critics such as Jacques Rancière (2009) and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2005) have pointed out the active role that the audience plays in not only the consumption of the spectacle but also in its construction and co-production. Digital media in particular have redefined the role that viewers as consumers play in the culture industry. With the rise of the Internet and the spread of self-publishing via social media and self-publishing outlets, consumers have become "prosumers" who co-produce both knowledge and its value (Tapscott & Williams, 2006, p. 4). This "prosumption" has changed how knowledge is produced and interpreted. Moreover, it has redefined the relationship between art and value, commodity and consumption, and mediation and simulation, but also between culture and performance.

Contemporary American culture is dedicated to intense dramatizations and visualizations of simulated realities, be they based on so-called "personal" experiences (as seen on reality TV shows) or imaginary representation of "events" (as expressed in cinema and literature). Jonathan Beller (2006) suggests that in the age of hypermodernity, the "cinematic mode of production" has become a cultural form codifying our perception of time and space (p. 3). Alienation and desensitization are two major effects of the visual economy driving the culture of spectacle. Both Debord (1983) and Beller (2006) note the ways in which the visual, spectaclist drive separates us from reality. The spectaclist drive not only alienates reality but also commodifies alienation and thus further fetishizes commodification. Furthermore, as Nadia Bozak (2011) notes in her recent study of contemporary culture, the 21st century is the era of the "end of editing" that advertises immateriality as its primary modus operandi (p. 141). Bozak (2011) suggests that the emphasis on providing access to the realness of reality or its excess is "an essential dimension of capitalism's operative principle of creative destruction" (p. 146). While Bozak (2011) is concerned primarily with the cinematic medium, literary texts are increasingly striving to subvert the culture of commodification while approximating digital and film media's supposed ability to capture the rawness and messiness of real life.

For centuries, literature has served as an important counterpoint to the capitalist drive for commodification. Postmodern American literature from the 1960s onward was intent on questioning the ways in which the line between high art and mass culture was becoming extremely thin. Authors including Philip Roth, Robert Stone, Norman Mailer, Don DeLillo, and Toni Morrison have aligned literary imagination with the power to resist commodification while simultaneously exposing the consumerist ideology and its impact on culture, gender, and race. Since the arrival of the Internet in the 1990s, however, American writers have been wrestling with the impact of digital media on the very meaning of the word "narrative." Literary critics Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury (1991) note the waning of postmodernism in the wake of radical capitalism. In an age of "cultural glut," they write:

> The avant-garde is no longer *avant*, but our political, technological, social and artistic philosophies remain as perplexed as ever by the ironies, paradoxes, indeterminancies. … We are abundant in commodities, clever in the creation of systems; we multiply the technologies of information, … the channels of global interaction. (p. 392)

The spread of the Internet and the impact of mass media may have ushered us into "an age of no style" (Ruland & Bradbury, 1991, p. 392), but rather than bemoaning the lack of style, perhaps it is worth considering how the increasing spread of digital media blurs the line between literature and/as performance. This book asks how literature employs performance as an essential aspect of its fabric, and how it expresses or challenges its culpability in the culture industry that it critiques and/or celebrates.

If conformity and deception are the primary goals of mass and digital media culture, what is the relationship between performance and mechanization? Is it possible to suggest that the performative function on which many contemporary literary narratives rely provides a means of not necessarily countering but certainly disclosing the ways any form of subversion or rebellion has been co-opted in the name of resistance? Indeed, as Marshall McLuhan (1987) predicted in the early 1960s, "the paradox of mechanization is that although it is itself the cause of maximal growth and change, the principle of mechanization excludes the very possibility of growth or the understanding of change" (p. 11). Scholars like Tapscott and Williams (2006) see the spread of digital social media as a positive shift towards a new way of taking part in society but also as a vehicle for creating new spaces of resistance to the commodity principle; meanwhile, the contemporary American literary writers examined in this study question whether narratives of resistance are not, in fact, co-opted by the commodity principle.

Although their narratives promise to provide a way out of the global dystopia, they are not free from the consumerist drive; in fact, they frequently reinscribe it. The work of Jacques Rancière (2009) on the spectacle, and what he calls "the emancipated spectator" (p. 6), is particularly relevant to the discussion here. In his study of the same title, Rancière questions the limits of emancipation by suggesting that the gaze, no matter how subversive, depends on the "re-appropriation of a relationship to self lost in a process of separation" (p. 6). Such re-appropriation, Rancière argues, is germane to the very nature of the spectacle, which rides on exteriority and self-dispossession, radical alienation and separation (p. 17). Rancière here returns to Debord's (1983) notion of the spectacle as a "separation perfected within the interior of man" (p. 20). However, such a separation can be productive, if not a healthy gesture that allows for new openings and interpretations. If, as Debord (1983) emphasizes, the spectacle is a "tendency to *make one see* the world by means of various mediations" (p. 18), it is not surprising that the economy of visual politics—particularly its reliance on the proliferation of images or "promiscuity of signification"—is essential to,

in Beller's (2006) words, "languag[ing] reality," (p. 15). The excrescence of the visual upon which the spectacle depends takes on an ecstatic form. The ecstatic form, in its essence, questions ethics: it is based on the logic of "going beyond," reaching a "dead point" of reversibility where narratives, systems, and contradictions enter the zone of exaltation and noncontradiction (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 33). Although violence and destruction drive the ecstatic form, they also point to the ways in which the culture industry annihilates itself through the very mass deception and conformist consciousness it generates. The ecstatic rejects normativity. In this sense, it is not an ideology but rather a frenzied iconography that never quite means what it purports to mean. As icons supplant language, they turn into a pataphysical code where absurdity and reality become one.[6] In other words, although promiscuous logic drives the ecstatic form, it also points to the zones where conformity has turned into a form of resistance and resistance into conformity.

The individual chapters of this book explore how contemporary literary narratives not only respond to but also inevitably reinscribe this promiscuity through the very politics of resistance that their aesthetics strive to undermine. The chapters reveal that while emancipatory performance or an act of resistance promises to challenge stale perspectives and positions, these figurations cannot help objectifying these positions by co-opting and thus simultaneously renewing the very spectacle that it eschews in the first place.[7]

Part I of this book, "The Spectacle of Consumption," sets up the argument of ecstatic consumption by highlighting the ways in which contemporary American literature mourns modernity's emphasis on the redemptive aspect of literary narratives. Through close readings of Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*, Jane Smiley's *Ten Days in the Hills*, and Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*, Part I examines the increasing complicity of storytelling in consumer production but also in shaping public opinion about warfare and corporate intervention. In their narratives, DeLillo, Smiley, and Piercy ponder the challenges that art and humanity face in the age of simulacra, digital networks, and military warfare. Echoing Paul Virilio's (2007) emphasis on the interconnection between the corporatization of warfare and its media simulation, these authors' novels debate the impact that the media have on shaping the body politic, but also on individuals and their sense of identity. Questioning the spectaclist drive of the 21st century, DeLillo, Smiley, and Piercy critique the encroachment of the public, ever-seeing eye into the private sphere. Their works raise concerns about the constant collusion of emotion with cinematic, audiovisual interactivity, but also expose what Virilio (2007)

refers to as the "tyranny" of information overload and its "synchronization of mindsets" through "the broadcasting of real or simulated threats" (Virilio, 2007, p. 59).[8]

Chapter One, "The Ecstatic Gaze in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega*," investigates the role that the ever-shifting, invasive gaze of the media plays in manipulating reality. The chapter explores how the media gaze encroaches on the private space and thus redefines the private as public, turning the corporeal into an ecstatic, hyperreal spectacle. Both *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010) explore the ways in which literature undermines but also inevitably participates in ecstatic consumption by reinscribing—albeit for the sake of critique—mass media discourses from the Hollywood film to performance art. Mourning the end of the private sphere and exposing the glut of economic, political, and information warfare, *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* comment on the disappearance of humanity into what Virilio (2007) calls "a groundless parallel world, where each individual gets used to inhabiting the accident of an audiovisual continuum, independent of the real space of their life" (p. 51). In both novels, the protagonists wrestle with this parallel reality as they are subsumed into the black hole of simulated realities that they strive to subvert and annihilate.

Chapter Two, "Life in the Hills: Sex, Money, and Simulacra in Jane Smiley's *Ten Days in the Hills*," ushers the reader into the world of Hollywood parties of contemporary celebrity starlets, whose lifestyles revel in consumption, but whose lives are affected by the Bush government's invasion of Iraq. While the war is looming outside, Smiley's characters remain blissfully oblivious to the atrocities—except for Elena and Max, whose frequent pondering of the geopolitics of war provides a refreshing insight into the excesses of Hollywood. Juxtaposing Smiley's characters' rampant sexuality and drive for ecstasy with the dystopian reality of the American war in Iraq, this chapter questions the ethics of media culture that thrives on the ecstatic visualization of everything, from serious historical events to intimate, personal experiences. But it also exposes the ways in which Smiley's (2007) novel indicts the drive for the ecstatic by dangerously reducing serious calamities like wars to what Jerome DeGroot (2008) refers to as "historical pornography" (p. 4).

Chapter Three, "Posthuman Identity and the Corporate Fortress in Marge Piercy's *He, She and It*," explores the increasing impact of digital media on the human subject. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) has argued, the line between humanism and posthumanism is becoming increasingly thin. Debunking what she refers to as "naturalist" and essentialist assumptions about what it means to be a human, Braidotti, building on the work of

Donna Haraway, has become an advocate of a posthumanist approach to identity. In her 1991 novel, *He, She and It*, Marge Piercy not only anticipates these arguments but also imagines what our society will be like in a future governed entirely by genetic engineering and cybertechnology. Examining the link between the rise of global capitalism, genetic engineering, and posthuman culture, Piercy's novel provides a cautionary note that problematizes the very tenets of the future of posthumanist society.

Part II, "The Ecstasy of (Multi)Culturalism," examines the global staging of American consumerism and its dependence on tokenizing difference, be it through the rhetoric of resistance or multiculturalism. Pervading Chapters Four and Five are questions concerning how this global staging of American consumerism affects cultural minorities and how their cultures are frequently commodified. Examining the challenges of multicultural politics through the novels of Diana Abu-Jaber and Chang-Rae Lee, Part II focuses on mapping what Sara Ahmed (2004) calls "affective economies [of difference]," which shape contemporary America's national and cross-cultural politics (p. 8). Building on Ahmed's (2004) argument that multicultural policies frequently revert to various forms of nationalism whereby the multicultural subject is socially and culturally marked as a potential "sign of disturbance" (p. 134), Chapters Four and Five discuss the exigencies of (multi)culturalism by highlighting the precarious and emotional terrains of Arab-American and Asian-American diasporic communities as they straddle various cultural, ethnic, racial, and gender divides.

Chapter Four, "'Dark As Chocolate': (Multi)Cultural Difference and Global Appetite in Diana Abu-Jaber's *The Crescent*," examines how media culture both represents and frequently tokenizes transnational subjects. Crucial to understanding the significance of *The Crescent* (2003) is the work of the postcolonial critic Sara Ahmed, whose acute analysis of postcoloniality and multicultural discourses as being trapped in and by the politics of colonialism is particularly useful in unpacking Abu-Jaber's poetic yet complex commentary on the Arab-American diaspora. The chapter argues that Abu-Jaber's novel interrogates the foreigner as food by countering the western appropriation of the foreigner as the Other whose difference must be policed, managed, or ultimately consumed by the global market. This chapter asks how diasporic communities participate in but also deflect western consumerism, while simultaneously exposing the ways in which the postcolonial rhetoric of multiculturalism co-opts what Ella Shohat (2006) calls "universalizing categor[ies]" of hybridity (p. 242).

Chapter Five, "Racing Alienation and the Politics of Violence in Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*," expands on the relationship between American and diasporic identity by exploring what Chang-Rae Lee (1995) refers to in his novel as "minority politics" (p. 196). Revealing the complex, intercultural, but also interracial complexities of being American, Lee exposes the ways in which the rhetoric of American multiculturalism as a melting pot of cultures merely perpetuates what Debord (1983) calls "the specialization of power" that encourages rather than dismantles class domination (p. 23). Lee's (1995) novel thus brings attention not only to the assimilationist drive that continues to underpin American politics but also to its passive-aggressive potential to generate violence.

Part III, "The Global Appetite for Dystopia," shifts attention to the ways in which historical events like the Holocaust and 9/11 are no longer safe from the culture of spectacle, whereby every personal, intimate, or deeply horrific event is reduced to an aestheticized moment to be captured, staged, and consumed by the public gaze. As Geoffrey Hartman (2002) acutely points out in *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity*, "the hyperreality of the image in contemporary modes of cultural production not only makes critical thinking more difficult but at once incites and nullifies a healthy illusion" (p. 84). How such nullification or reductionism affects our understanding of major historical events like cultural genocide lies at the heart of Shalom Auslander's (2012) *Hope: A Tragedy* and Alissa Torres's (2008) graphic novel *American Widow*.

Chapter Six, "Consuming the Holocaust: The Postmemory Re-Production of Human Trauma and the Fire of Formal Indigestion in Shalom Auslander's *Hope: A Tragedy*," exposes the ways contemporary culture reduces history to a spectacle that canonizes torment and suffering, a spectacle whereby the viewer temporarily identifies with the victim in the act of postmemorial-yet-sanitized remembrance. At the heart of *Hope: A Tragedy* (2012) is the protagonist's inability to digest food, an inability that signifies Auslander's rejection of the cultural appetite for formal canonization but also reveals what Giorgio Agamben (2002) calls a "lacuna" or an "impossibility of bearing witness" (p. 39).

Chapter Seven, "History as Spectacle: 9/11 and the Economics of Suffering in Alissa Torres's *American Widow*," on the other hand, examines the media exploitation of historical atrocities like 9/11. Focusing on the economics of the visual politics underpinning the spectacle and its emphasis on ecstatic consumption as exemplified in what Torres's graphic novel (2008) refers to as the "economic value" of individual victims, this

chapter examines the ways in which the media representation of 9/11 has been trapped in what Badiou (2006) refers to as the "spectacular staging of power" (p. 34). Through her emphasis on the commodification of loss and traumatic historical tragedies such as 9/11, Torres's (2008) graphic novel exposes the American drive for ecstatic consumption, a consumption that has lost touch with ethics and has become a testament to the violence underpinning the consumerist drive for the ecstatic.

Concluding Chapter Seven, the book comes full circle to the notion of the ecstatic gaze. It delineates the spectacle as the ultimate means of ecstatic consumption that sublimates through the process of identification and appropriation of personal experiences, public venues, historical events, or horrific traumas. While the literary texts studied in this book challenge the consumerist drive, they also emphasize that both the politics and poetics of resistance can become subject to commodification; what's more, they can be and often are complicit in co-opting the very foibles they criticize.

PART I

THE SPECTACLE OF CONSUMPTION

CHAPTER ONE

THE ECSTATIC GAZE IN DON DELILLO'S *THE BODY ARTIST* AND *POINT OMEGA*

> The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world.
>
> —Guy Debord (1983), *Society of the Spectacle*

Don DeLillo's 2010 novel *Point Omega* opens with a prologue titled "Anonymity I," in which an anonymous spectator contemplates the flood of images bombarding the 10×14 foot screen in front of him. Staring at this image-verse, he contemplates what it is he is actually seeing as he watches Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, an installation of Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* slowed to a running time of 24 hours. Leaning against the wall, the spectator contemplates "one thing's relationship to another," thinking, "the film had the same relationship to the original movie that the original movie had to real lived experience. This was the departure from the departure. The original movie was fiction, this was real" (DeLillo, 2010, p. 13). As he watches Gordon's installation at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), DeLillo's "man at the wall" ponders the unreality of the world beyond the walls of the art gallery, the frenzied pace of city life where time rushes forward and where life is "benumbed" by the endless flood of images (p. 12). This benumbed spectacle, however, is not just an endless proliferation of meaningless signs, a "collection of images," as Guy Debord (1983) says, but rather "a social relation among people mediated by images" (Debord, 1983, p. 4).

In *Point Omega,* DeLillo suggests that in contemporary society, the inversion of lived reality as unreality, facilitated by the obscene preoccupation with looking, is an "affirmation of appearance" and the "visible negation of life" (Debord, 1983, p. 5). In *Fatal Strategies* (2008), Jean Baudrillard argues that in the age of digital media, reality is hyperreal—no longer an illusion, but rather "more real than real" (p. 13). Time itself has become a commodity, frozen into the "subtle limits of reversibility … into its own exalted contemplation, into ecstasy" (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 33). As the act of looking increasingly trumps communication, or the need to verbalize

rather than visualize reality, historical events included, we no longer remain as passive participants in the spectacle we are consuming. But nor are we necessarily Jacques Rancière's (2009) "emancipated spectators" who defend against the violent economy of images and its violence (p. 17). Like the eponymous speaker of Lady Gaga's (2009) song, we are caught in a "bad romance" with our own gaze. Consumed by our own hunger for seeing, being seen, and seeing ourselves seeing, we want the "psycho" and the "vertigo shtick" (Lady Gaga, 2009)—the collusion of art and/as commodity.

In *Point Omega* (2010), Richard Elster aligns this collusion with "some mystical shift" where "the mind transcends all direction inward" towards Teilhard de Chardin's "omega point" (p. 72). The omega point, as Elster envisions it, is the inversion of the spectacle into an "exalted contemplation, into ecstasy," to put it in Baudrillard's (2008) words (p. 33). This inversion, however, generates a complete state of decorporealization and immateriality wherein the body disappears into its own contemplative state and/as art. However, such dematerialization is not entirely free of the spectaclist drive it strives to undermine; instead, it seems to be "caught in a spiral of redoubling," where "art no longer creates anything but the magic of its own disappearance" (Baudrillard, 2008, pp. 27–28). Such redoubling continues to be DeLillo's main source of contention. In *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Point Omega* (2010), DeLillo explores the art world as a universe that is progressively spinning towards its own disappearance.

While DeLillo's critics continue to emphasize the redemptive aspect of his aesthetics,[9] this chapter suggests that such an argument merely focuses on DeLillo's critique of American consumerism and ignores his exploration of the increasing complicity of not only the arts but also our own human psychology in the very politics of the spectacle and its commodification. Exploring what Beller (2006) calls the "cinematization of relations" (p. 14), DeLillo questions whether the tendency towards abstraction, traditionally associated with the arts and modernity in particular, is not in fact yet another extension of the exchange-value driving commodification through what Debord (1983) refers to as "reciprocal alienation" (p. 8). If the universe is increasingly defined by images, does the universe as its image-verse transform human life into cinematic "dreamworks," a reel of "benumbed" life, where we become, as Elster puts it, stones (DeLillo, 2010, p. 12, p. 53)? Or can the spectaclist gaze have the very opposite function—can it invert into the "barricade" where "somebody stands and tells the truth" (p. 45)? If, as Baudrillard (2008) argues, "suspension and slow motion are our current tragic forms"

(p. 39), does the proliferation of dystopian literature merely point to the increasing nostalgia for utopian transcendence before its artistic reproduction?

DeLillo's two novels *The Body Artist* and *Point Omega* engage with the spectaclist gaze that shapes contemporary American culture. *The Body Artist* questions the possibility of what Jacques Rancière (2009) describes as the "emancipated gaze," a gaze that resists the spectacle of ecstatic consumption (p. 17). Examining DeLillo's text along with mass media texts such as Lady Gaga's music video for *Bad Romance* (2009), this chapter argues that DeLillo's works expose the ways in which the aesthetic value of literature is not only increasingly undermined but also dangerously co-opted by the culture of spectacle. DeLillo explores this co-optation of the visual drive for ecstatic consumption further in *Point Omega* (2010), in which the main protagonist, Richard Elster, dreams of a more poetic world—a world where the "cinematic reproduction" of time (Beller, 2006) becomes an "enormously old … epochal time" (DeLillo, 2010, p. 46). However, the novel problematizes Elster's nostalgia for better days as an elusive, if not potentially destructive, gesture. By the end of *Point Omega*, it is not quite clear if the aestheticization of reality that Elster advocates as a means of surviving society is not what Jean Baudrillard (1993) calls a mere transformation of aesthetics into the "surplus-value of the commodity" (p. 17). This chapter addresses whether the tendency to celebrate aesthetics as a potential vehicle out of dystopia does not in fact reinscribe the consumerist drive with a vengeance, turning this aesthetic utopia into the *24 Hour Psycho* movie-installation with which DeLillo's *Point Omega* begins and ends.

From Doing the Lady Gaga Dance to the Spectacle and/as Transaesthetics in Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*

In *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, RoseLee Goldberg (2011) notes the undescribable impact of 9/11 on the world and global economics. She writes: "[after 9/11] the planet felt suddenly and profoundly changed. From then onwards, each subsequent year of the first decade of the twenty-first century showed an economy shaped by the 'war on terror' and the invasion of Iraq" (p. 226). As Goldberg (2011) emphasizes, the 21st century has been a century of profound changes whose dystopian tenor continues to affect the arts. Accordingly, postmillennial America can be described as a culture decimated by tragic historical events like 9/11 and the subsequent "war on terror." With the rise and fall of "dot com" companies, it is a culture shaped by an endless

barrage of mass-mediated images that have turned these tragic historic events into a tasteless spectacle. The line between literal and figurative warfare is increasingly disappearing as phrases like "Twitter war" and ideas such as Kim Khardashian's war on Beyoncé have become commonplace, a postmillennial vulgate of sorts.

The art world has also changed, and radically so. In contemporary culture, anyone and everyone claims to be an artist; the line between high and low art no longer exists. Such "a general aestheticization of everyday life," where art is "obliged to mime its own disappearance" through the very "*materialization* of aesthetics" suggests that an infinite inversion of meaning and meaninglessness is part of the daily menu (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 18). Performances by Lady Gaga, particularly her music video for the song *Bad Romance* (2009), highlight the way that postmillennial America's preoccupation with spectacle relies on the very materialization of aesthetics of which Baudrillard writes. In such a space where aesthetics become life, the line between the seer and the seen is abrogated as the subject's authenticity is not only questioned but also deliberately annihilated in order to pave the way for a series of image-driven simulations, whereby the physical body becomes a mask and the mask a body. Underpinning Lady Gaga's performances is an emphasis on the ways in which the gaze becomes a public-driven or self-imposed zone of terror and destruction. Inscribed in this zone are the potentialities of renewal, where the subject's sense of authenticity is paradoxically reasserted through a kind of singeing of the image, where the symbolic extinction of the subject simultaneously stages its own renewal.

Ironically, such a notion also lies at the heart of Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001), a novel that ponders the recuperative potential of spectacle; such potential delineates performance art as a means of challenging modernity's blind spots. Through the lens of the grieving body artist Lauren Hartke, DeLillo interrogates body art (i.e., embodied performance where the subject makes a spectacle of herself) as a productive, yet inevitably commodifying, means of both personal and cultural renewal, whereby corporeal suffering is staged and thus inevitably reduced to a plethora of aestheticized, albeit ecstatic, crossings. Such crossings not only constitute what Jean Baudrillard refers to as postmodern "transaesthetics"—a translation of everyday life into an aesthetic whereby "art mime[s] its own disappearance" (Baudrillard, 1993, p.18)—but also expose the complex mythographies and dystopias underpinning America's "bad romance" with its own cultural renewal.

This section investigates Don DeLillo's representation of postmillennial America's penchant for renewal by simulation and asks whether this

spectacle masks while simultaneously staging the nostalgia for a modernity whose trace it so flagrantly tries to annihilate. Particularly useful to this inquiry is Jean Baudrillard's (1988) definition of America as a "*coup de theatre*, … a utopia achieved," which casts dystopian, thus intrinsically nostalgic, glances towards the European modernity it both courts and persistently rejects (p. 76).

"Bad Romance": The Body Artist's Dance with Spectacle

Before exploring DeLillo's *The Body Artist* further, it will be useful to contextualize what (to many a literary critic) might appear as a rather unorthodox pairing. What could Lady Gaga's *Bad Romance* music video and DeLillo's *The Body Artist* possibly have in common? This section suggests: a lot. If one of the drives of the postmodern is, as Linda Hutcheon (1988) suggests in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, to "de-doxify our cultural representations" (p. 3), as well as to "expose the ways in which all cultural forms of representation—literary, visual, aural—in high art or the mass media are ideologically grounded" (p. 21), then such a pairing can provide further insight into what Baudrillard (1993) calls the "proliferative tendency" of postmodern transaesthetics and its dependence on "wild hyperbole and endless variations on all earlier forms" (i.e., a transformation of the "surplus-value of the commodity into the aesthetic surplus-value of the sign") (p. 17).

To put it in other words, the pairing exemplifies the ways in which the spectaclist gaze blurs the line between high and low culture art forms, exposing how they increasingly appropriate, rather than subvert, mass consumerism and commodification. The work of Jacques Rancière (2009) on the spectacle and what he calls "the emancipated spectator" is particularly relevant to the discussion here. In his study of the same title, Rancière (2009) questions the limits of emancipation by suggesting that the gaze, no matter how subversive, depends on "re-appropriation of a relationship to self lost in a process of separation" (p. 6). Such re-appropriation, he argues, is germane to the very nature of the spectacle, which rides on exteriority and self-dispossession (p. 17). While emancipatory performance or an act of resistance promises to challenge stale perspectives and positions, it cannot help but to objectify these positions by co-opting and thus simultaneously renewing the very spectacle that it eschews in the first place.[10]

When Lady Gaga prances on the stage in her Bunraku-inspired masks, donning machine-gun breasts and over-the-top Bauhaus fashion, bemoaning the "bad romance" she has with the paparazzi, or suggesting

that she might become Judas any minute, or simply protesting, *oh no, this is not a performance*, she was "born this way," her transformative aesthetic[11] begs the question: is it divine madness or, to paraphrase Plato, an attempt to shake away all custom and convention by reinscribing the very same customs and conventions with a vengeance?[12] Or is Gaga's performance the kind of transaesthetic that, by means of exceeding the limit of one form or the other, "spills until all sense is lost, and then shines forth in its pure and empty form" (Baudrillard, 2008, p. 10)?

This idea of "spilling" not only defines Gaga's over-the-top performances, but it is also further exemplified in her *memento mori* dance with America's desire for cultural renewal, a desire that stems from the persistent need for bigger, better, and more excessive, or what could be called ecstatic consumption. In Baudrillard's (2008) terms, ecstatic consumption employs the visual to stage its own disappearance by "pushing the pictorial act to its ecstatic form" whereby it will "creat[e] anything but the magic of its disappearance" (p. 29). While Baudrillard defines the ecstatic as "an immoral form" that is in opposition to the aesthetic or, figuratively speaking, that is "outside itself" as the meaning of the word "ecstasy" suggests (p. 26),[13] Lady Gaga's performances suggest that the kind of "transaesthetic world of simulation" of which Baudrillard writes is impossible without the enfolding of excess into an aesthetic. Accordingly, the body of an artist sets its own limits to the ways in which the very ecstasy of performance-turned-spectacle is performed and experienced.

Such enfolding pays homage to the baroque "internalization of the outside" as "a unity that envelops a multiplicity," which, as Gilles Deleuze (1993) explains in *The Baroque Fold*, is modernity's way of employing the body in the service of realizing the soul (pp. 8, 98). This deadly dance is reflected in the juxtaposition of the body weighed down by the soul and is exemplified, for example, in Tintoretto's *The Last Supper* (1594) or El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586), but also in modernist paintings by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, or Jean Dubuffet, where, abstracted from the weight of corporeality, the body is given a soulful expression (Deleuze, 1993, pp. 29, 119). In other words, the abstraction singes the physical body in order to realize the soul as an essential element of physicality. Viewed in this light, *memento mori* then represents the infinite fold of life and death, the "conception of death as a movement that is in the present" (p. 71). This fold simultaneously points to the limitations of language to mediate between the present and the past. Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1994) suggests that this "baroque signifier proliferates beyond everything signified, placing language in excess of corporeality"