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Threats to the Future of American Democracy**

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# The Post-9/11 Militarization of Higher Education and Popular Culture of Depravity: Threats to Future of American Democracy

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## **Abstract**

This article argues that the values of militarization are no longer restricted to foreign policy ventures; the ideals of war in a post-9/11 America have become normalized, serving as a powerful educational force that shapes everyday lives, memories, and daily experiences. The military has become a way of life, producing modes of education, goods, jobs, communication, and institutions that transcend traditional understandings of the role, territory, and place of the military in American society. Military values, social relations, and practices now bleed into every aspect of American life. What is distinctive about the militarization of the social order is that war becomes a source of pride rather than alarm, a powerful cultural and pedagogical force in which organized violence is elevated to a place of national honor, recycled endlessly through a screen culture that bathes in blood, death, and war porn. A primitive tribalism now grips American society as its democratic institutions and public spheres become inseparable from the military. The article analyzes how militarization has furthered in the U.S. both an aesthetics of depravity and a culture of cruelty, influencing spheres as seemingly remote from each other as higher education and the broader cultural apparatuses of popular and media culture. The article concludes by pointing to a number of struggles both inside and outside of higher education that need to address the threat of the new militarism.

**Keywords:** Violence, aesthetics, higher education, militarism, youth

Lacking the truth, [we] will however find instants of truth, and those instants are in fact all we have available to us to give some order to this chaos of horror. These instants arise spontaneously, like oases in the desert. They are anecdotes and they reveal in their brevity what it is all about.... This is what happens when men decide to turn the world upside down. - Hannah Arendt (as cited in Didi-Huberman, 2008, p. 31)

Since the tragic events of 9/11, state-sanctioned violence and the formative culture that makes it possible has increasingly made its way into higher education.. While there is a long history of higher education taking on research funds and projects that serve the military-industrial complex, such projects were often hidden from public view. When they did become public, they were often the object of student protests and opposition, especially during the 1960s. What is new today is that more research projects in higher education than ever before are being funded by various branches of the military, but either no one is paying attention or no one seems to care about such projects. Ethical and political considerations about the role of the university in a democratic society have given way to a hyper-pragmatism couched in the language of austerity and largely driven by a decrease in state funding for higher education and the dire lack of jobs for many graduates. It is also driven by a market-centered ethos that celebrates a militant form of individualism, a survivalist ethic, a crass emphasis on materialism, and an utter disregard for the responsibility of others. As research funds dry up for programs aimed at addressing crucial social problems, new opportunities open up with the glut of military funding aimed at creating more sophisticated weapons, surveillance technologies, and modes of knowledge that connect anthropological concerns with winning wars.

Higher education should be one place where young people learn to question the framing mechanisms that allow them both to be turned into producers and consumers of violence and to become increasingly indifferent to matters of social and moral responsibility. Military modes of education largely driven by the demands of war and organized violence are investing heavily in pedagogical practices that train students in various intelligence operations. Programs such as the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program and the Intelligence Community Scholarship Programs disregard the principles of academic freedom and recruit students to serve in a number of intelligence agencies, such as the CIA, which have a long history of using torture, assassinations, and illegal prisons, and on occasion committing domestic atrocities—such as spy-

-ing on Juan Cole, a prominent academic and critic of the Iraq War (Zw-erling 2011). The increasingly intensified and expansive symbiosis between the military-industrial complex and academia is also on full display the creation of the “Minerva Consortium,” ironically named after the goddess of wisdom, whose purpose is to fund various universities to “carry out social sciences research relevant to national security” (Brainard, 2008). As David Price (2010) has brilliantly documented, the CIA and other intelligence agencies “today sneak unidentified students with undisclosed links to intelligence agencies into university classrooms. A new generation of so-called flagship programs have quietly taken root on campuses, and, with each new flagship, our universities are transformed into vessels of the militarized state.” As Price (2011) points out, not only is knowledge militarized, but specific disciplines such a anthropology are now weaponized. The Pentagon’s desire to turn universities into militarized knowledge factories producing knowledge, research, and personnel in the interest of the Homeland (In)Security State should be of special concern for intellectuals, artists, academics, and others who believe that the university should oppose such interests and alignments. Connecting universities with any one of the 16 U.S. security and intelligence agencies replaces the ideal of educating students to be critical citizens with the notion of students as potential spies and citizen soldiers (Price, 2009). Pedagogy, in this instance becomes militarized.

Militarization suggests more than simply a militaristic ideal—with its celebration of war as the truest measure of the health of the nation and the soldier-warrior as the most noble expression of the merging of masculinity and unquestioning patriotism. It suggests an intensification and expansion of the underlying values, practices, ideologies, social relations, and cultural representations associated with military culture. The values of militarization are no longer restricted to foreign policy ventures; the ideals of war in a post-9/11 world have become normalized, serving as a powerful educational force that shapes our lives, memories, and daily experiences. The military has become a way of life, producing modes of education, goods, jobs, communication, and institutions that transcend traditional understandings of the role, territory, and place of the military in American society. Military values, social relations, and practices now bleed into every aspect of American life. What is distinctive about the militarization of the social order is that war becomes a source of pride rather than alarm, while organized violence is elevated

to a place of national honor, recycled endlessly through a screen culture that bathes in blood, death, and war porn. As democratic idealism is replaced by the combined forces of the military-industrial complex, civil liberties are gradually eroded along with the formative culture in which the dictates of militarization can be challenged. Wars abroad also further accentuate the failure to address serious problems at home. As Andrew Bacevich (2010) points out, "Fixing Iraq or Afghanistan ends up taking precedent over fixing Cleveland and Detroit" (pp. 17-18). Cities rot; unemployment spreads; bridges collapse; veterans are refused adequate medical care; youth lack jobs and hope—and yet the permanent warfare state squanders over a trillion dollars waging wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Kevin Baker (2003) insists, "We now substitute military solutions for almost everything, including international alliances, diplomacy, effective intelligence agencies, democratic institutions—even national security....The logic is inexorable" (p. 45). A primitive tribalism now grips American society as its democratic institutions and public spheres become inseparable from the military.

As higher education is weakened through an ongoing assault by right-wing ideologues, corporate power, and the forces of militarization, the very idea of the university as a site of critical thinking, public service, and socially responsible research is in danger of disappearing. This is especially true as the national security state, the Pentagon, and corporate power set their sites on restructuring higher education at a time when it is vulnerable because of a loss of revenue and a growing public disdain towards critical thinking, faculty autonomy, and the public mission of the university. Higher education has been targeted because when it aligns its modes of governance, knowledge production, and view of learning with the forces of neoliberal capitalism and the mechanisms of violence and disposability, it makes a belief in commodified and militarized knowledge a part of everyday life. Imposing new forms of discipline, affective investments, modes of knowledge, and values conducive to a public willing to substitute training for education, a corporatized and militarized mode of pedagogy removes ethical considerations from the social and human costs produced by the market and the permanent warfare state. More specifically, higher education in this instance makes possible a belief in militarized and instrumental knowledge as a fact of

life while legitimating those social processes “in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence” (Geyer, 1989, p. 79).

There is more at stake here than the corruption of academic fields, faculties, and the overall ideal of the university as a democratic public sphere. There is the total transformation of the state from a liberal social state into a punishing state. The machinery of death is more than a technology; it is also driven by a formative culture that creates the knowledge, values, and practices that enable human beings to work in the service of violence and death. When the military increasingly becomes a model for shaping the most basic institutions of society—institutions ranging from public schools and industry to higher education—the ideals of democracy become a faint memory and American society plunges into barbarism on all fronts. The militarization and neoliberalization of higher education is thus inextricably linked to the intensification of a general moral coma that now hangs over American society, representing one of the most disturbing legacies of the War on Terror.

Marked by a virulent notion of hardness and aggressive masculinity, a culture of depravity has become commonplace in a society in which pain, humiliation, and abuse are condensed into digestible spectacles of violence endlessly circulated through extreme sports, reality TV, video games, YouTube postings, and proliferating forms of the new and old media. But the ideology of hardness and the economy of pleasure it justifies are also present in the material relations of power that have reigned virtually unchecked since the Reagan presidency, when a shift in government policies first took place and set the stage for the emergence of torture and state violence under the Bush-Cheney regime. This shift moved the state further away from providing social protections and safeguarding civil liberties toward the establishment of legislative programs intent on promoting shared fears and increasing disciplinary modes of governance that rely on the criminalization of social problems and precarious forms of punishment (Wacquant, 2009; Simon, 2007; Davis, 2005). Today, conservative and liberal politicians alike are willing to spend millions waging wars around the globe, funding the largest military state in the world, providing huge tax benefits to the ultra-rich and major corporations, and all the while draining public coffers, increasing the scale of human poverty and misery, and eliminating all viable public spheres—whether they be the social state, public schools, public transportation, or any other aspect of a formative culture that addresses the

needs of the common good.

Meanwhile, as suggested above, exaggerated violence now rules not only screen culture but the discourse of government officials. The public pedagogy of entertainment includes extreme images of violence, human suffering, and torture splashed across giant movie screens, some in 3D, offering viewers every imaginable portrayal of violent acts, each more shocking and brutal than the last. What is appalling about this glut of screen violence and cruelty is that it becomes a resource for many politicians who mimic its values and legitimate its politics. For instance, Republican Party leadership in an effort to rally their members in the budget battle with the Obama administration played a short clip from the Ben Affleck movie “The Town” (Legum, 2011). The exchange between Affleck and one of friends played by Jeremy Renner goes as follows: Ben Affleck: “I need your help. I can’t tell you what it is. You can never ask me about it later. And we’re going to hurt some people.” Jeremy Renner: “Whose car are we going to take?” What Affleck and Renner then do is proceed to put on hockey masks, break into an apartment and bludgeon two men with sticks and shot another in the leg. Images of mind-crushing punishment and cruelty now provide the framework for establishing legislative practices among a group of right-wing extremists who are shaping policy in the United States. This is not merely barbarism parading as theater for political reform—it is also a blatant indicator of the degree to which sadism and the infatuation with violence have become normalized in a society that seems to take delight in dehumanizing itself.

As the social is devalued along with rationality, ethics, and any vestige of democracy, spectacles of violence and brutality now merge into forms of collective pleasure that constitute what I believe is an important and new symbiosis between visual pleasure, violence, and suffering. Revelling in the suffering of others should no longer be reduced to a matter of individual pathology, but now registers a larger economy of pleasure across the broader culture and social landscape. My emphasis here is on the sadistic impulse and how it merges spectacles of violence and brutality with forms of collective pleasure. This is what I call the depravity of aesthetics—the emergence of a new aesthetic of amplified voyeurism characteristic of a social order that has narrowed the range of social expression and values, turning instead to the pursuit of pleasure and the



receipt of instant gratification as its sole imperatives. Before building on the contemporary relationship between aesthetics and violence put on display in the “Kill Team” photos, I will draw upon prior discussions of the aestheticization of human suffering in order to underscore what has shifted in the broader culture since the aesthetics of depravity was conceptualized, and what educational issues are at stake in the emerging depravity of aesthetics.

### **The Aesthetics of Depravity**

Susan Sontag (1973) wrote that capitalist societies require images in order to infiltrate the culture of everyday life, legitimate official power, and anaesthetize their subjects through visual spectacles. Such images also enable the circulation of information along with militaristic modes of surveillance and control. Sontag (2003) in her later work argued that war and photography had become inseparable; as a result of that fusion, representations of violence no longer compelled occasions for self and social critique. Rather, shocking images increasingly emerged as a mode of entertainment, advancing the machinery of consumption and undermining democratic relations and social formations. She was particularly concerned about what I will call an aesthetics of depravity—that is, an aesthetics that traffics in images of human suffering that are subordinated to the formal properties of beauty, design, and taste—thus serving in the main to “bleach out a moral response to what is shown.” For Sontag and many other critical theorists, the aesthetics of depravity reveals itself when it takes as its “transcendent” object the misery of others, murderous displays of torture, mutilated bodies, and intense suffering, while simultaneously erasing the names, histories, and voices of the victims of such brutal and horrible acts. What is worth noting, especially in the current historical context, is that there seems to be a perverse pleasure to be had in the erasure of the victims’ names, voices, and histories. Paul Virilio (2004) in a meditation on the extermination of bodies and the environment from Auschwitz to Chernobyl refers to this depraved form of art as an “aesthetics of disappearance that would come to characterize the whole *fin-de-siècle*” of the twentieth century (p. 28). An example of this mode of aesthetics was on full display in the mainstream media’s coverage of the photographs depicting the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib

prison. As Mark Reinhardt (2007) points out, the dominant media had no qualms about showing the faces of the victims, thus violating their dignity, but expressed widespread indignation over reproducing the naked bodies of the victims, claiming that it would demonstrate bad taste. In this instance, concerns of beauty and etiquette displaced subject matter, while sheltering the viewer from any sense of complicity in such crimes.

Needless to say, Abu Ghraib was not an isolated event; the desire to view such voluptuous depravity has been honed for decades. Since the early 1990s, Benetton, the famous clothing manufacturer, has proven that trafficking in pain and human suffering is not only good for business but also good for providing a patina of legitimacy to the company as an artsy brand with philanthropic concerns (see Giroux, 1994). Benetton's United Colours campaign appropriated shocking and visually arresting representations of violence and pain in order to sell clothes and attract global attention to its brand. In doing so, Benetton did more than conjoin the worlds of beauty and suffering; it also pushed a mode of commercial advertising in which the subjects of often horrendous misfortunes and acts of suffering disappeared into the all-embracing world of logos and brand names. For example, Benetton used the colorized image of David Kirby, a dying AIDS patient, to sell jumpers. A more poignant example of the reconfiguring of the aesthetic in order to exploit images of suffering can be found in an unpublished interview in which Jacqueline Lichtenstein recounts her experience visiting the museum at Auschwitz. She writes:

When I visited the Museum at Auschwitz, I stood in front of the display cases. What I saw there were images from contemporary art and I found that absolutely terrifying. Looking at the exhibits of suitcases, prosthetics, children's toys, I didn't feel frightened. I didn't collapse. I wasn't completely overcome the way I had been walking around the camp. No. In the Museum, I suddenly had the impression I was in a museum of contemporary art. I took the train back, telling myself that they had won! They had won since they'd produced forms of perception that are all of a piece with a mode of destruction they made their own.(as cited in Virilio, 2004, p. 28)

As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, ethical considerations and social costs are further eclipsed by market-driven policies and values. Images of human suffering are increasingly abstracted from social and political contexts and the conditions that make such suffering possible—and thus visually alluring. Moreover, as public issues collapse into privatized considerations, matters of agency, responsibility, and ethics are now framed within the discourse of extreme-individualism. According to this neoliberal logic, individuals and the problems they confront are removed from any larger consideration of public values, social responsibility, and compassion. The collapse of the social and the formative culture that makes human bonds possible is now outmatched, though hardly defeated, by the rise of a Darwinian ethic of greed and self-interest in which violence, aggressiveness, and sadism have become the primary metric for living and dying. As the social contract is replaced by social collapse, a culture of cruelty has emerged in American society. This new mode of collective behaviour resembles Freud's theory of the death drive, though it is reconfigured less as a desire to return to nothingness, and thus quiet forever dangerous sensations, than as the apogee of an eternal present of titillation, achieved through the serial production, circulation, and consumption of images of death. Increasingly, as the spectacle of violence permeates every aspect of the machinery of cultural production and screen culture, desire seems only to come alive when people are aroused by the spectacle of high-intensity violence and images of death, mutilation, and suffering.

Death and violence have become the mediating link between America's domestic policy—the state's treatment of its own citizens—and U.S. foreign policy, between the tedium of ever expanding workdays and the thrill of sadistic release. Disposable bodies now waste away in American prisons, schools, and shelters just as they litter the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. America has become a permanent warfare state, with a deep investment in a cultural politics and the corollary cultural apparatuses to legitimate and sanctify its machinery of death. The American public's fascination with violence and death is not only obvious in the recent popular obsession with vampire and zombie films and books. We also see this in serious Hollywood films such as the 2010 academy-award winning *The Hurt Locker*, in which the American bomb disposal expert, William James (Jeremy Renner), repeatedly puts himself at risk in the

face of defusing various bomb threats—thus to highlight the filmmaker’s concern with a growing ‘addiction’ to war. As Mark Featherstone (2010) points out, there is more represented here than the reckless behavior of immature and hyper-masculine soldiers. He writes that James

takes unnecessary risks and lives for the limit experience....[H]e feels most alive when he is closest to death, a condition supported by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, who spoke about being-towards-death, and told us that we should live every moment as though it was our last, in order that we might live a full and meaningful life. When James...throws the bomb suit away and stands before the bomb with no protection, he puts himself at the mercy of the bomb, the embodiment of the death drive. Herein lies James’ ethic of deadly risk, his attempt to realize Heidegger’s idea, being-towards-death, in what for Freud would be a perverse form, being-with-bombs....In Freudian/Kleinian terms, the bomb is also a projection of the self because it consists of a hard shell containing powerful explosive material.

To be sure, Featherstone coarsens Heidegger’s concept of “being-towards-death,” but his notion of the “hard shell” echoes Theodor Adorno’s (1998) reference to an ideology of hardness that Adorno believed was one of the root causes of the Holocaust. According to Adorno, violence became entrenched in German culture as the rituals of aggression, brutality, and sadism became a bureaucratized and normalized part of everyday life. More specifically, Adorno (1998) believed the “inability to identify with others was unquestionably the most important psychological condition for the fact that something like Auschwitz could have occurred in the midst of more or less civilized and innocent people” (p. 201). One of the consequences of this psychological state was the production of a virulent masculinity that augured both a pathological relationship with the body, pain, and violence, and a disdain for compassion, human rights, and social justice. More than a trace of this mode of aggression and moral indifference now dominates contemporary American society.

The broader cultural turn toward the death drive and the strange economy of desire it produces is also evident in the emergence of a culture of cruelty in which the American public appears more and more amenable to deriving pleasure from images that portray gratuitous violence and

calamity. Such portrayals give credence to Walter Benjamin's (1969, 1986) claim that in late modernity the mesmerizing and seductive language of power underlies captivating spectacles that inextricably fuse aesthetics with a fascist politics. To his credit, Benjamin recognized the affective force of aesthetics and its at times perverse ability to "privilege cultural forms over ethical norms" while mobilizing emotions, desires, and pleasures that delight in human suffering and become parasitic upon the pain of others (Koepnick, 2002, p. 95).

Benjamin's notion of the aesthetic and its relation to fascism is important, in spite of appearing deterministic, because it highlights how fascist spectacles use the force of titillating sensations and serve to privilege the emotive and visceral at the expense of thoughtful engagement. In his analysis of Benjamin's notion of the aesthetic, Lutz Koepnick (2002) develops this point further by exploring how the fascist aesthetic "mobilizes people's feelings primarily to neutralize their senses, massaging minds and emotions so that the individual succumbs to the charisma of vitalistic power" (p. 96).

Rather than reject the aesthetics of depravity as being exclusively tied to the pleasure of consumption and the spectacle of violence, if not fascism itself, Sontag (2003) modified Benjamin's position on the aesthetic, arguing that it can have a more productive and pedagogical role. Against a conventional view of aesthetics limited to a depoliticized embrace of formal properties, she championed images that were ugly, destabilizing, and shocking. Such images, argued Sontag (2003), harbor a capacity to show great cruelties precisely in order to arouse compassion and empathy rather than mere titillation; she asserted "For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock" (p. 81). Shock and rupture become the pedagogical registers of resistance in which the image might talk back to power, unsettling commonsense perceptions while offering "an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers" (Sontag, 2003, p. 81). Sontag realized that beauty is not always on the side of oppression when presenting images of suffering. Of course, she was just as aware that in a society that makes a spectacle out of violence and human suffering, images that attempt to shock might well reinforce a media-induced comfort with horrific images.

### **The Depravity of Aesthetics**

The aesthetics of depravity addressed by Sontag, Benjamin, Virilio and others focuses on suffering through the formal qualities of beauty and design, registering the consumption of images of human pain as a matter of personal pleasure and taste rather than part of a broader engaged social-political discourse. What I call the depravity of aesthetics, by contrast, offers up representations of human suffering, humiliation, and death as part of a wider economy of pleasure that is collectively indulged. This notion of aesthetics focuses on the death drive and uses the spectacles of violence that feed it to generate a source of gratification and intense socially experienced pleasure. As images of degradation and human suffering become more palatable and pleasurable, the body no longer becomes the privileged space of agency, but “the location of violence, crime, and social pathology” (Gilroy, 1994, p. 58). As decadence and despair are normalized in the wider culture—though this is very different from accomplished in their goal to remove all dissent—people are increasingly exploited for their pleasure quotient while any viable notion of the social is subordinated to the violence of a deregulated market economy and its ongoing production of a culture of cruelty (see Giroux, 2011).

In this way, representations of human suffering cannot be abstracted from a broader neoliberal regime in which the machinery of consumption endlessly trades in the production of sensationalist images designed to excite, stimulate, and offer the lure of intense sensations. This is especially true for spectacles of violence that are now not only stylistically extraordinary and grotesque, but also grotesque depictions of the culture that produced them. No longer mere bystanders to “every act of violence and violation,” the American public eagerly substitutes a pleasure in images of human suffering for any viable sense of moral accountability (Hartman, 1994, p. 25). How else to explain the insistent demand by many conservative and liberal pundits and the American public at large that the government release the grisly images of Osama Bin Laden’s corpse, even though the fact of his assassination was never in doubt? How might we understand the growing support among the American populace for state-sanctioned torture and the rising indifference to images that reveal its horrible injustices? Just as torture is sanctioned by the state and becomes normalized for many Americans, the spectacle of violence spreads through the culture with ever greater intensity.

The culture of cruelty runs the gamut of media sources, drenching film and TV screens in lawlessness and fast-paced sledgehammer blood feasts. Violence follows a desperate search for new markets and finds its way into advertisements that sell toys to children, just as it is increasingly produces the subject positions and consumer tastes necessary to influence slightly older children. For instance, films such as *Let Me In* (2010), *Hannah* (2011), and *SuckerPunch* (2011) move from celebrating hyper-violent women to fetishizing hyper-violent young girls (see Scott & Dargis, 2011). Rather than gain stature through a coming-of-age process that unfolds amid representations of innocence and complicated negotiations with the world, young girls are now valorized for their ability to produce high body counts and their dexterity as killing machines in training. Hollywood films such as the *Saw* series, *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), *Zombieland* (2009), *The Killer Inside Me* (2010), and *Scream 4* (2011) all transcend the typical slasher fare and increasingly offer viewers endless, super-charged representations of torture, rape, animal cruelty, revenge, genital mutilation, and much more. For one example of such intensely charged images, there is the Lady Gaga (2009) *Bad Romance* video that ends with her posing with a corpse in a sexually suggestive manner. Meanwhile, such images are also increasingly saturating the mainstream news, advertising, and much of what circulates online in the United States.

Whatever bleeds—now gratuitously and luxuriously—generates profits and dominates media headlines, despite being often presented without any viable context for making sense of the imagery or any critical commentary that might undercut or rupture the pleasure viewers are invited to derive from such images. Representations of violence and human tragedy now merge seamlessly with neoliberalism's culture of cruelty in which risk and mayhem reinforce shared fears rather than shared responsibilities, and a Hobbesian war of all-against-all becomes the organizing principle for structuring a vast array of institutions and social relations.

As corporate capitalism translates into corporate fascism, prominent politicians such as Sarah Palin, radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, and media monopoly moguls such as those who deliver Fox News repeatedly deploy the vocabulary of violence to attack the social state, labor unions, immigrants, young people, teachers, and public service employees. At the same time, the depravity of aesthetics gains popular currency in organs of the dominant media that reproduce an endless stream of denigrating



images and narratives of people constrained by the forces of poverty, racism, and disability. Their pain and suffering now become a source of delight for late night comics, radio talk show hosts, and TV programs that provide ample narratives and images of poor families, individuals, and communities who become fodder for the “poverty porn” industry. Programs such as the reality TV series *Jersey Shore*, the syndicated tabloid TV talk show series *The Jerry Springer Show* (and its endless imitators), and *The Biggest Loser* all exemplify what Gerry Mooney and Lynn Hancock (2010) claim is a massive “assault on people experiencing poverty [seizing] on any example of ‘dysfunctionality’ in poor working class communities...[exhibiting] expressions of middle-class fears and distrust, [while] also [displaying] a fascination with poverty and the supposedly deviant lifestyles of those affected—where viewers of moral outrage are encouraged to find the worst and weakest moments of people’s lives also funny and entertaining.”

Spectacles of violence provide an important element in shaping a market-driven culture of cruelty that gives new meaning to the merging of an economy of pleasure and images of violence, mutilation, and human suffering. This is not to suggest that the only images available in contemporary America are those saturated with violence and pain, but to emphasize that the formative culture that produces images that are at odds with, contest, or provide alternatives to such violence seem to be disappearing. Nor am I suggesting that images of violence can only produce an affective economy of sadistic pleasure or be reduced deterministically to one reading and point of view. What I am arguing is that American society—far from a global democratic leader—has devolved under a neoliberal regime into a media-saturated culture that inordinately invests in and legitimates a grim pleasure in the pain of others, especially those considered marginal and disposable. Decentered and disconnected from any moral criteria, the pleasure-in-death principle, coupled with the search for ever more intense levels of sensation and excitation, becomes the reigning pedagogical and performative force in shaping individual and collective identities.

Every generation for the last thirty years has endorsed neoliberal policies, leaving today’s young people not only without a voice, but also saddled with a set of economic, political, and social conditions that have rendered them devalued, marginalized, and ultimately disposable. Evidence of the ongoing disinvestment in youth across the globe is all too visible and has come to the forefront of student protests in a number of



countries. For example, as the social value placed on higher education as a public good declines, students are increasingly valued, when valued at all, as wage earners. This is rather ironic since there are few jobs for them once they graduate. That the forces at work in capitalist countries—whether putatively democratic or overtly authoritarian—deny young people a future can be seen in a litany of disheartening figures. Elias Holtz (2011) sums it up well. He writes:

In capitalist countries worldwide, young people are sandwiched between the increasingly impossible expense of schooling and the dried-up job market. Youth unemployment rates are staggering. They are above 40 percent in Spain, 30 percent in Italy and an average of 20 percent for the European Union overall. In North Africa, unemployment of recent university graduates is almost 27 percent in Morocco and over 19 percent in Algeria. A third of all Arab youth are unemployed. ... Corporations and employers have also moved to a more exploitative model of temporary work contracts, unpaid internships, and part-time employment. This liquidizes the young labor force, allowing companies to hire and fire at will, without the responsibility of providing job security or benefits. Many young people are forced to live at home in rich countries—unable to afford to live independently. In poorer states, they peddle goods on the street to survive.

Under the global regime of a harsh, endlessly commodifying market-driven society that nonetheless parades under the banner of global democratization, many youth are confined to what anthropologist Joao Biehl (2005) provocatively calls “zones of social abandonment.” These expanding groups of young people, especially those marginalized by class, race, and immigrant status, are defined as a liability, no longer worthy of either social investment or the promise of a decent future. They are deprived of those autonomous social spaces in which the conditions exist for them to narrate themselves as individual and social agents. In countries like the United States, driven largely by financial speculation, market values, and the lure of short-term profits, young people are relegated to the status of commodities, a source of cheap labor, or simply human waste. According to the logic of neoliberalism and what can only be described as its perversion of the social, youth as a long-term social investment fails to register politically or ethically. Instead, young people exist—if it can be called an

existence—merely as consumers, clients, or fodder for the military and prison-industrial complex. Politics under neoliberalism has been redefined through the double registers of corruption and punishment—not behind people’s backs, as Marx once supposed it, but in full spectacular view of the world.

The youth revolts in the Middle East and Western Europe are not simply a refusal on the part of young people to be written out of the future, but also a rewriting of politics itself. Young people have taken the lead in rejecting a future which for the last thirty years or more has been shamelessly mortgaged by Western countries embracing a form of zombie politics and economic Darwinism and authoritarian societies in the Middle East that exhibit a deep hatred for democracy. What is remarkable about the mass revolts in Europe and the Middle East is their demonstration that if young people are granted the time, resources, and support to develop new models of association, then these models will have a better chance at creating the conditions for a future that makes good on the ideals and promises of democratization. For youth in the United States, whose protests appear less widespread, linked, and sustained, a critical question must be posed. What sort of conditions have young people inherited in American society that obstructs and possibly even undermines their ability to be critical agents capable of waging a massive protest movement against the growing injustices they face on a daily basis? The inability both to be critical of such injustices and to relate them to a broader understanding of politics suggests a failure to think outside of the normative sensibilities of a neoliberal ideology that isolates knowledge and normalizes its own power relations. In fact, one recent study found that even among youth who access higher education “45 percent of students show no significant improvement in the key measures of critical thinking, complex reasoning and writing by the end of their sophomore years” (Gorski, 2011; see Arum & Rosaka, 2011). It is becoming increasingly evident that the corporatization and militarization of schooling over the last few decades has produced a culture of illiteracy. The forms of instrumental training on offer undermine, for example, any critical capacity on the part of students to connect the exorbitant tuition fees they pay to the fact that the United States puts more money into the funding of war, armed forces, and military weaponry than the next 25 countries combined—money that could otherwise fund higher education (Engelhardt, 2010; see also Bacevich, 2005;

Johnson, 2006). It has become more difficult for students to recognize how their education in the broadest sense has been systematically devalued, and how this not only undercuts their ability to be engaged critics but contributes further to making American democracy dysfunctional. The value of knowledge is now linked to a crude instrumentalism, and the only mode of education that seems to matter is one that enthusiastically endorses learning marketable skills, embracing a survival-of-the-fittest ethic, and defining the good life solely through accumulation and disposing of the latest consumer goods.

On a global scale, young people, educators, and others who occupy the liminal space of political resistance are now struggling to make official power visible, especially in terms of the toll it takes on those who are viewed as excess, unworthy of government supports, and often excluded from the benefits of a good life. What is being learned from the global struggles is “the idea that people can control the functioning of society [and that] people should make decisions about all the issues that affect them” (Angus, 2001, p. 34). It is crucial for progressives and others to struggle to create those formative cultures that enable people to translate private injustices into social and systemic problems. At stake here is a notion of democracy that refuses to be reduced to the dictates of a market society. Such a view is crucial for those emergent social movements and struggles that suggest that democracy is once again being viewed as the “sharing of an existence that makes the political possible” (Brault & Naas, 2010, p. xi). Hopefully what we will see from those fighting the nightmare of neoliberalism is a narrative of both critique and possibility, one that attempts to recast the public conversation about memory as a condition for learning, higher education as a crucial public good, academics as public intellectuals, critical agency as a basis for social responsibility, and democracy as the radical frame through which meaningful political struggle becomes possible once again.

In contrast to the banally grotesque images circulated by the U.S. public pedagogy machine, we have seen Arendt’s “instants of truth” in images from Libya, Syria, and Iran in which the murder of a young students and other protesters by state militia thugs have been captured on video and circulated the world over. The video images of the killing of a young 27-year-old music student, Neda Agha Soltan, helped to inspire massive waves of protests in Iran that continue to this day. Similarly, terrifying

images of the torture and killing of 13-year-old Hamza Ali al-Khateeb have spread throughout Syria indicting the state security forces who murdered him. Such images in these countries become a pedagogical tool, a critical mode of public pedagogy capable of forms of witnessing that allow people to imagine the unimaginable. What is emancipatory about these images, as Georges Didi-Huberman (2008) points out in a different context, is that they work to refuse what he calls the “disimagination machine”; that is, these are images that are “images in spite of all”—bearing witness to a different and critical sense of remembering, agency, ethics, and collective resistance (pp. 1-2). These images have ignited massive collective protests against repressive governments. Such images did not feed the basest of collective desires and pleasurable fantasies detached from any real consequences. To the contrary, such images of abuse and suffering have inflamed a society in which a formative culture exists that enables people to connect emotional investments and desires to a politics in which unthinkable acts of violence are confronted as part of a larger “commitment to political accountability, community, and the importance of positive affect for both belonging and change” (Hemmings, 2005, pp. 557-58).

If young people in the United States do not display a strong commitment to democratic politics and collective struggle, it is because they have lived through thirty years of “a debilitating and humiliating disinvestment in their future,” especially if they are marginalized by class, ethnicity, and race (Bauman, 2008; see also Giroux, 2010). The assault on higher education in the United States, while not as severe as in Europe, still suggests ample reasons for students to be in the streets protesting such policies. Close to 43 states have pledged major cuts to higher education in order to compensate for insufficient state funding. This means an unprecedented hike in tuition rates is being implemented; enrollments are being slashed; salaries are being reduced; and need-based scholarships in some states are being eliminated. Pell Grants, which allow poor students to attend college, are being cut. Robert Reich (2010) has chronicled some of the impacts on university budgets, which include: Georgia cutting “state funding for higher education by \$151 million”; Michigan reducing “student financial aid by \$135 million”; Florida raising tuition in its eleven public universities by 15 percent; and the University of California increasing tuition by 40 percent in two years. As striking as these increases are, tuition has

steadily risen over the past several decades, becoming a disturbingly normative feature of post-secondary education. Millions of students pass through the halls of higher education in the United States. It is crucial that they be educated in ways that enable them to recognize the poisonous forces of corporatization and militarization, and their effects throughout American society. Particularly important is to understand how these effects threaten “democratic government at home just as they menace the independence and sovereignty of other countries” (Johnson, 2004, p. 291). Both students and the larger public must be alerted to the ways in which the military-industrial-academic complex has restructured higher education so as to dismantle it as a place in which to think critically, imagine otherwise, and engage in modes of knowledge production and research that address pressing social problems and encourage students to participate in public debate and civic engagement (see Nelson, 2004). This role of higher education is especially crucial at a time when, as Frank Rich (2010) has pointed out, “We live in a culture where accountability and responsibility are forgotten values.”

But there is also more at stake here than educating students to be alert to the dangers of militarization and the ways in which it is infiltrating popular culture as well as redefining the very mission of higher education. Critics such as Andrew Bacevich (2005), Sheldon Wolin (2008), David Price (2011), and the late Chalmers Johnson (2011) have convincingly argued that if the United States is to avoid degenerating into a military dictatorship, a grass roots movement will have to occupy center stage in opposing militarization, government secrecy, and imperial power, while reclaiming the basic principles of democracy. This means rejecting the established political parties; forming alternative, democratic, anti-militarization movements; and developing the groundwork for long-term organizations, new solidarities, and social movements to resist the growing ties among higher education, the armed forces, intelligence agencies, and the war industries—ties that play a crucial role in reproducing militarized knowledge.

The spectacle of terror and raw violence as entertainment along with the conditions that have produced it do not sound the death knell of democracy, but demand that we “begin to rethink democracy from within these conditions” (Jacques Derrida as cited in Peters, 2006). How might we

we construct a cultural politics based on social relations that enable individuals and social groups to rethink the crucial nature of pedagogy, agency, and social responsibility in a violence-saturated global public sphere? How can we begin to address old and new media technologies within a democratic cultural politics that challenges religious fundamentalism, neoliberal ideology, militarization, and the cult of mindless violent entertainment? Such a collective project requires a politics that is in the process of being invented, one that has to be attentive to the new realities of power, global social movements, and the promise of a planetary democracy. At stake here are both modes of critical education and public spheres that develops those modes of knowledge and skills needed to critically understand the new visual and visualizing technologies and their attendant screen culture, not simply as new modes of communication, but as structural forces and educational tools capable of expanding critical citizenship, animating public life, and extending democratic public spheres.

Roger Simon, Mario DiPaolantoni, and Mark Clamen (2004) have suggested that there is a need for various individuals and groups to develop pedagogical practices that encourage a form of attentiveness which enables audiences to engage in a dialogue with the stories told by spectacles of terror and fear, regardless of their source. Such a pedagogy would reject the anti-intellectualism, the fear of critical dialogue, and the general indifference to the stories of others that are embedded in the pedagogy of the violent spectacle. In addressing what kind of pedagogical work is performed by the spectacle of terror and the culture of depravity, audiences would analyze, first, how their own gaze might be aligned with the insidious modes and bodies of power that participate in images of destruction, humiliation, and fear; and, second, what is at stake in their attraction, expanding upon the highly individuated response solicited by the spectacle. The experience of the spectacle must be critically examined by analyzing the power relations and institutions that make up its social networks and modes of storytelling. Crucial here is how the spectacle works to eliminate memory and reduce public issues to private concerns. How does the spectacle and the formative culture that supports it, whether in the world of film, television, newspapers, the Internet, or other forms of public pedagogy, undercut those modes of power, contexts, and relations that can address a public rather than a merely private sensibility? The spectacle of terror currently resonates with the entrenched spirit of social Darwinism,

endemic to neoliberalism (see, for example, Bourdieu, 1989; Chomsky, 1999; Bauman, 2001; Leys, 2001; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001; Henwood, 2003; Phillips, 2003; Krugman, 2003; Harvey, 2003; Duggan, 2003; Giroux, 2008). The spectacle of cruelty, consumption, and terror paralyzes critical agency through the regressive retreat into privatized worries and fears, and powerfully undermines all notions of dialogue, critical engagement, and historical remembrance. Against such a spectacle, there is the need for modes of critical education and social movements that value a culture of questioning, view critical agency as a condition of public life, and reject voyeurism in favor of the search for justice. The depravity of aesthetics that now envelops our lives through a vast array of technologies ranging from smart phones to computers to televisions is inextricably linked to how we understand ourselves and our relationship to others within a democratic global public sphere. But it also contributes to policies such as the racist laws being enacted in Arizona and other states, which exemplify the power of fear and the appeal to terror to short circuit any appeal to reason, justice, and freedom. The cultural front is one of our most important pedagogical sites and it must be rethought, appropriated, and used to reject the dystopian, anti-intellectual, and often racist vision at work in the spectacle of terror and culture of fear and, in doing so, provide a language of both criticism and hope as a condition for rethinking the possibilities of the future and the promise of global democracy itself.

If higher education is to come to grips with the multilayered pathologies produced by militarization and the culture of cruelty, it will have to rethink both the space of the university as a democratic public sphere and the global spaces and public spheres in which intellectuals, educators, students, artists, labor unions, and other social actors and movements can form transnational alliances to oppose the death-dealing ideology of militarization and its effects on the world. These effects include violence, pollution, massive poverty, racism, the arms trade, growth of privatized armies, civil conflict, child slavery, and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. True to the logic of privatization, private companies now offer military services for hire, treating their products as any other commodity for sale (Singer, 2008). As the Obama regime embraces the policies of the military-industrial-academic complex with unbridled fervor, it is time for educators and students to take a stand and develop global organizations that can be mobilized in the effort to supplant a culture of war

with a culture of peace whose elemental principles must be grounded in relations of economic, political, cultural, and social justice and the desire to sustain human life.



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