THE LEGACY OF [LIBERTY]: RHETORIC, IDEOLOGY, AND AESTHETICS IN THE POSTMODERN CONDITION

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The spectacle is ideology par excellence, because it exposes and manifests in its fullness the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, servitude, and negation of real life.

- Guy Debord
Society of the Spectacle\(^1\)

The argument has recently been made that we live in an era in which signs have increasingly less to do with life. This, it is claimed, is either a consequence of our modernity, or an index of our postmodernity. In either case, the assumption is that the rationalist assault on tradition and the technological capacity to produce images favor a system of sign production in which the epistemology of representation becomes an increasingly unnecessary alibi for the value of the sign. Such is the conclusion one might draw from Jean Baudrillard’s *Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe*.\(^2\) Baudrillard’s diagnosis asserts the dark side of Walter Benjamin’s prognosis made forty years earlier in “The Work of Art In The Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” according to which the development of the reproducible and hence autonomous sign is treated, not as the dialectic of enlightenment, but as one of two historical alternatives: the emergence of a proletariat freed from the weight of dead generations through the politicization of art, or conversely, the massification of the social as spec-
tators who are participants in their own subjugation and destruction. According to Benjamin the advent of mechanical reproduction undermined the authority of tradition and the strength of historical rememberance. This loosening of signifiers from received signifieds, while potentially liberating, also led to the danger of "aestheticization," a mode of discourse in which politics collapses as the social becomes as a commodified object of contemplation, rather than a condition of praxis. A further consequence of this process is the loss of the real, for once signification becomes arbitrary, the signscape itself can become a closed, self-referential field. It is the loss of such a fixed and representable social that Baudrillard, and later Kroker and Cook, have commented upon extensively.

Our fate, at least according to these pessimists of postmodernity, is one in which the social, if it ever existed, has disappeared into its own simulation, so that aesthetic "shock effects" are all that remain to mobilize—or at least to motivate—the population. Rhetoric, in the classical sense of an active political speech, productive of knowledge and wisdom through an agonistic process, is absent. As a result, speech becomes an empty productivity within the logic of a dead power that is based in the inertia of sedimented social structures; the only political discourse that remains short-circuits reasoned judgment, and displaces it with the pleasure of the consumption of signs.

This formulation is tempting, even though we are reluctant to admit all of its premises or claims. We agree, in particular, that there appears to be a trend in the discourses of mass national politics that operates through simulation and aesthetic effect to the exclusion of reasoned discourse. We wish neither to assert, however, that substantial social relations necessarily have disappeared, nor that there is a necessary contradiction between "good reasons" (or social reason) and aesthetic effects in public discourse. The possible disappearance of social relations is not particularly germane to our analysis in so far as we are concerned with the critical assessment of public discourse, not the sociological analysis of the more private realm of everyday life. The relationship between public reason and aesthetic effect, is both central and immediate to our concerns. Nevertheless, we refuse to be scandalized by the post-structuralist discovery of the complicity between truth and power, or by the recognition that human knowledge and desire are ultimately without foundation. These are not only Nietzsche's insights, but the insights of rhetorical theory, which, since the battle between Plato and the Sophists in the fifth century B. C., has taught that historical memory and ethical value are always configured in discursive acts, and that there is no simple untangling of the cognitive and affective bases for motivation, commitment, and judgment. Political rhetoric has always simulated the social as the medium by which to call an order of power into being, and as such, the authentic, the rational, and the true have always been problematic. What marks "postmodern" mass politics as distinct and troubling is not therefore the failure of the enlight-
enment project to emancipate reason from prejudice, nor even the theoretical impossibility of a social guided by pure reason, but the very collapse of "good reasons" altogether.\textsuperscript{10} Rhetoric's reason is the practical rationality that persuades a free community by giving voice to its experience in terms that permit collective life. Rhetoric is thus a creative and emancipatory force. Postmodern mass politics, as we shall see, replaces the collective imaginary of rhetoric with simulacra that remain specular and uninhabitable, being powered neither by reason nor intuition, but by aesthetic effects.

Constructing [Liberty]

Our particular concern in this study is with [liberty].\textsuperscript{11} More specifically, we are concerned with the way in which the contemporary ideological raison d'être of the United States of America is located in [liberty] as an aesthetic object that is detached from the actual experience of public life. To that end, we will probe the 1986, nationally televised celebration of the Statue of Liberty's centennial as a means of identifying the way(s) in which aesthetic value is inserted into the terms of ideological, reason-giving discourse.\textsuperscript{12}

Our theoretical starting point is Michael Calvin McGee's analysis of [liberty] in the Whig/liberal ideology.\textsuperscript{13} According to McGee, [liberty] is not a thing, but an "ideograph," a term or sign that must be used by public officials as a warrant for the uses of state power within Whig/liberal societies.\textsuperscript{14} More to the point, McGee claims that as a necessary commitment to community, [liberty] lacks any fixed meaning. Rather, he suggests that at particular historical moments, those seeking to exercise power in the name of the state deploy the community's generalized commitment to [liberty] as an argumentative warrant for their actions, and then justify their use of the term on the basis of a proffered interpretation of the community's collective tradition. Political practice is thus based in a public, rhetorical production of history and tradition that seeks to appropriate [liberty] to one's ends. In the language of postmodern theorists of culture, simulation (a rewriting of "history," of received simulations) provides [liberty] with significance.

What makes a particular reconstruction, or simulation, of [liberty] valid is problematic. For McGee, the historical memory of some particular audience, e.g., Congress, women, blue collar workers, the American "people," would permit it to make a judgment as to the propriety of the particular usage. Such an audience would compare the proffered structuration of power warranted by [liberty] with other similar structurations in its collective experience. In the process, this audience would consider whether or not this particular usage of [liberty] afforded a feeling of comfort "in the presence" of power consistent with what it had come to expect on the basis of past experiences.\textsuperscript{15} The test of the propriety of [liberty] as a war-
rant to power would therefore not be based on a pure and abstract cognition, but on something akin to a Kantian aesthetic judgment—a judgment as to the universal validity of an experience of a feeling of appropriateness. However, this would not actually be a Kantian aesthetic judgment in that it would integrate knowledge, ethics, and art. Moreover, it would be one's encounter with the world, rather than with the formal interplay of the faculties, that would be the basis for pleasure, just as it would be historical remembrance, rather than the cultivation of sensibility, that would be the ground for a judgment. Thus, [liberty] would have no transcendental foundation, but only the grounding that is provided by the combination of collective experience and memory constructed in a community's history. Like all ideographs, [liberty] is ultimately a floating signifier, a product of rhetoric that functions in simulacra, anchored only by the experience of tension between an historically constituted historical memory and its attempted reconstruction in particular historical moments.

Benjamin linked the aestheticization of politics to the loss of aura or authenticity. Certainly, such a loss marks both an unmooring of historical memory and its susceptibility to aesthetic effects. One must exercise care, however, in condemning outright the weakening of the power of tradition, for such a movement produced Anglo-American, Whig/liberal conceptions of [liberty] in the first place; nevertheless, it is equally important to recognize that the destruction of collective historical memory radically undermines a community's capacity to judge relations of power. It is from this perspective, then, that we consider the national, mass mediated celebration of [liberty]'s most cherished monument in 1986 as more or less symptomatic of the condition of contemporary public discourse in the United States. In particular, we will focus on how television simulates through spectacle the historical memory it claims to evoke, and how it therefore risks producing a configuration of [liberty], the substance of which is but the pleasure of a collective celebration of state power.

The week leading up to the unveiling of the restored Statue of Liberty was, in itself, a sort of national celebration. Most newspapers and weekly magazines devoted front page and cover spreads to the upcoming event, featuring stories describing the meaning and significance of [liberty], the history of the Statue as a gift to the United States from the people of France, and the regional preparations being made in New York City and throughout the nation for the Fourth of July weekend. In addition, local and national television news programs marked the event with both news and feature stories. Typical of such programming were two stories shown back-to-back on the "NBC Nightly News" on July 1: Towards the end of the news program that evening, Tom Brokaw, the NBC news anchor, reported a very short news story entitled "Liberty Weekend" which was followed by a feature story narrated by correspondent Garrick Utley entitled "Patriotism." It is instructive to consider how these two stories were linked together as a frame in which the specific uses of the term [liberty] vanished in a
simulation of historical memory that reduced the ideograph to a synonym for "military vigilance," "patriotism," and indeed, "America" itself.

Brokaw begins with "Liberty Weekend," which includes two brief segments. In the first segment he describes a festival of "tall ships" in Newport, Rhode Island, and the preparations being made for their trip south to New York Harbor. The film footage that accompanies this segment is of the tall ships sailing about in a harbor, and the closing shot, filmed from above, is a full screen portrait of a Yankee Clipper, one of the most majestic and powerful of tall ships invented and used in the United States prior to the discovery of the steam engine.

In the second segment, Brokaw reports on the anchoring of the USS John Fitzgerald Kennedy, one of the U.S. Navy's largest aircraft carriers, in New York Harbor. Brokaw describes the ship as a "floating city." The film footage that accompanies this segment is also shot from above at approximately the same angle as was the Yankee Clipper, and indeed, this segment is physically connected with the previous one via an editorial "wipe" of the screen that invokes a visual continuity between the two scenes. In the first segment the camera seems to remain stationary. In the second segment the visual presentation begins by showing the USS JFK in the foreground and the outline of Manhattan in the background. As the narrative quickly unfolds, however, the camera, apparently attached to a helicopter, moves so as to bring the ship into a tight close-up, emphasizing its size and presence, and gradually locates the Statue of Liberty in the background. As the story ends the camera returns the television viewers to the studio, where they see Brokaw gazing at the monitor on his left—presumably seeing what his viewers had just seen—with a warm and friendly grin on his face. He then reflects upon the diversity of both New York City and America, noting that it is "impossible to find a place that perfectly reflects all of our ideals," as he introduces Garrick Utley's report on "Patriotism."

Let us first consider Brokaw's short nautical piece. These two brief segments demonstrate, of course, that news anchors do not always speak in the neutral "institutional voice." Indeed, the occasion of a national celebration, perhaps even more than that of a national crisis, invites the news anchor to adopt the persona of homespun philosopher, and so also to identify with the audience he claims both to speak to and for. Ironically, the news anchor becomes an anchor for the chain of significations connected by the news-text. Standing both as witness and ideal spectator, Brokaw's smile reveals the experience of an aesthetic judgment that suggests not only pleasure, but its universal validity for his American viewers. And what chain of signification does Brokaw anchor? The play of metaphor and synecdoche is hardly occulted. Tall ships find their counterpart in warships. The USS JFK (a "floating city") is America in the diversity of its crew, just as New York City is the vessel for the simultaneous privileging and transcendence of difference and variety that "make it impossible to find
a place that perfectly reflects all of our ideals." Finally, both the Statue and the USS JFK keep watch over the nation and its shores.

The sequence of stories does more than merely shift topics through formal equivalencies. It also operates to elicit a simulated historical remembrance. For the America depicted here, [liberty] is a legacy bequeathed by the revolution celebrated on the Fourth of July. The tall ships evoke a sense of remembrance: the romance of freedom on the open sea, and of men and women allied with nature in a wind-driven ship, becomes the substance of a [liberty] situated in a simulacrum of the past immediately condensed onto the present. As the the camera “wipes” the presence of the Yankee Clipper from the screen, the USS JFK is revealed as the contemporary carrier of the spirit of [liberty] in history.

The significance of “history” as the topos that organizes these two segments of the evening news becomes manifest as Brokaw’s story on “Liberty Weekend” is immediately succeeded by correspondent Garrick Utley’s story on “Patriotism,” a quality, we learn, that serves as the anchor for “all of (America’s) ideals.” Utley begins his narration as the television screen displays an American flag flapping in the wind, the bright sun shining though the flag and into the line-of-sight of the viewer. “Patriotism,” he notes, “is an elusive quality, something to be felt, to take pride in, to believe in.” As the story unfolds Utley proceeds to give sense to this sentiment, not by defining it, but by affirming its place within America’s historical memory, identifying it with the “feeling” of a lived present that the segment itself evokes.

Utley begins his story by reporting on an event in the near present, the recent Memorial Day celebration held in the small New England town of Noank, Connecticut. Utley, displaying the dual personae of journalist and populist pedagogue, reminds his listeners that Noank has had a Memorial Day parade since 1876, and then proceeds to lecture on the presence and role of patriotism in American history. He speaks, in particular, of the historical necessity of patriotism in America as the civil religion of a nation “settled by people from many countries,” a nation of immigrants who lack any other basis for social cohesion. The visuals that accompany this history lesson display the U.S. Constitution, portraits of America’s Founding Fathers, and then black and white newsreel footage of the “flood of immigrants” coming to America. In this scenario patriotism belongs to American history, even as the residents of Noank rekindle its flame in their annual ritual. Indeed, as the narrative unfolds the viewers are introduced to a wide range of Noank’s citizens, including Howard Davis, a veteran of World War II who emphasizes that patriotism is knowing that the “flag is a symbol worth fighting for”; Rick Anderson, a child of the 1960s who believes that “protesting against the American government’s policy (in Vietnam) could be as patriotic as fighting a war”; and Mary Virginia Goodman, an eighty-eight year old woman who has taken part in the parade since 1908, and who delivers a short speech to the townspeople of Noank at the closing
ceremonies of the Memorial Day celebration:

This is your country. This is your land. This was fought for you, and kept for you, and for many yet unborn, because men dared to go out and fight for it. Tell your children about them. This is America. God Bless America!

As Utley concludes the story he echoes his introduction in a reverential tone:

In the end, patriotism is in the heart of the beholder. Most people are stirred by it, some at times are skeptical about it, but no one can be indifferent to it.

And as he finishes, the viewer hears the gentle playing of “Taps,” and sees the image of the American flag placed over the graves of the brave, fighting men of this small New England town, both the headstones and the flags bathed in the warm glow of the glinting and setting sun. The sense of history, the setting sun, and the allusions to bravery and the ultimate sacrifice, all move the heart as touching reminders of those who gave their lives for their country out of a “feeling” of patriotism. But Utley’s final remarks are revealing, for if patriotism is indeed “in the heart of the beholder,” what is beheld is the television screen as it breathes life into both history and the present. The sequence affects a synecdochic operation whereby the screen’s Noank is past and present America. This narrativized and specularized Noank would exist within tradition, and thus retains its collective memory. Furthermore, as the sequence depicts these Americans and leads us to mourn the dead with them, we, as viewers, are included as residents of Noank-as-nation.

Up to now, little mention has been made of the military articulation of [liberty] made evident through its association with patriotism. We recognize (although we do not condone) the fact that most national states associate patriotism with a commitment to military readiness and strength. Furthermore, we do not wish to contest the propriety of honoring the men whose lives were taken away by a war machine they were induced or trapped into joining. But we consider particularly pernicious the historical revisionism or amnesia within the public discourse on [liberty] with regard to America as a military force precisely because [liberty] has historically provided a ground from which to critique power. Thus, for example, in the story on “Patriotism,” Vietnam War protestors are placed on equal footing with World War II veterans as representatives of patriotism. But notice the repression of memory at work: Vietnam, a recent historical event and tragedy, is reduced to and remembered as a point of patriotic dispute between generations. Whether one went to Vietnam and fought (and lived or died), or stayed behind and refused to fight, one was patriotic and enacted [liberty’s] legacy by fighting for it. What is lost to memory
is profound, including any experience of the devastation, destruction, and immorality of that war, or of the national crisis that it produced at home. The pain of Kent State and The University of Wisconsin is comfortably forgotten, and the pleasure of identification with the screen is offered to fill the resultant void. Life itself is elided.

This sequence of stories illustrates well the manner in which a mass-mediated, televisual culture risks displacing both life and the possibility of a culture of argumentation that exists when public discourse manifests a dialectic between historically material human experience and collective life. For such a culture to be possible, there must be a clear relationship between the language of public discourse and the lived experience of social relations, or what Carlos Castoriadis calls the relationship between the "imaginary," the "perceptual," and the "rational."19 The televised news sequences we have described do not evidence such a relationship, but are instead illustrative of a process by which public discourse is colonized as a series of mass-mediated, aesthetic effects. In neither "Liberty Weekend" nor "Patriotism" does the screen's proto-imaginary evidence any use of the community's perceptions or rationality; rather than to locate the experience of [liberty] in the lived social relations of the citizenry, it is placed in the condensation of grand historical narratives reproduced by the mass media in complicity with the state. In this sense, the two segments that we have just analyzed offer a constitutive rhetoric in the assertion that patriotism is a "feeling," and simultaneously deliver a narrative that elicits that very feeling.20 Put otherwise, the news textually produces "Patriotism" (and patriots) in the context of television's "Liberty Weekend." Note, however, that this rhetoric requires no other ground but itself. Whether or not those living in America "feel" free as they experience the sedimented structures of economy, bureaucracy, and their socially-determined life chances, becomes irrelevant. The experience of [liberty] of which public discourse admits resides elsewhere, such as in the televised version of Noank, Connecticut, that simulacrum of small-town harmony in nineteenth-century America. Noank thus becomes the romanticized community of which John Dewey despaired the loss.21

And there is more. For even if the spectator, interpellated by this discourse, might have an unmediated investment in [liberty] on to which this sequence of news segments could connect, the media text excludes it from public discourse. Brokaw suffices as the voice within which historical connotations and latent narratives of the romantic sea, of collectivity, and of state power are combined. Within the audio-visual grammar of television, this integration of metaphoric and synecdochic chains specularizes [liberty]. [Liberty] becomes the point of both the articulation of a feeling and of a set of condensations. As such, it becomes situated outside political argumentation. The culture of argumentation here collapses, for [liberty] is no longer an ideograph that must be deployed through a discourse of "good reasons" that admits to the possibility of a counter-argument. The
proto-judgment of the rightness of the "feeling" of [liberty] in the face of a simulated historical remembrance is extra-cognitive. Aesthetic effects have almost entirely displaced any discussion of whether, in daily life, Americans encounter the "thing itself." [Liberty] comes to belong more to the mass-mediated, televisual moment than to lived practice.

In the above analysis we might seem to be making much of a small matter. After all, the last few minutes of one network newscast are relatively insignificant to the overall field of public discourse in the United States. Nevertheless, we consider these few minutes of television to be representative of the aestheticization of America's public imaginary, and of the evacuation of politics from its political discourse. Indeed, we would claim that America's imaginary is a mass-mediated, televisual, cinemstythic culture. Consider, for example, that even the President of the United States renders [liberty] as a spectacle.

Writing in Parade on Sunday, 29 June 1986, then President Ronald Reagan previewed the national celebration of the renovated Statue of Liberty in an article entitled "Now More Than Ever... The Meaning of Liberty." He began as follows:

*The fireworks, the entertainers, the tall ships sailing through New York harbor should create fine and lasting memories for our children. Although they may not fully grasp the significance of the speeches, they will hear words like liberty and freedom and will understand that these are things that we, as Americans, hold dear and proclaim proudly. And, of course, at the center of attention will be Lady Liberty herself.*

What followed these words was the heavily anecdotal discourse that was symptomatic of the public discourse of the Reagan Presidency, in which the President remembered his own past as symbolic of America's ruggedly individualistic, privatized, frontier spirit. Frequently, it seemed, this past—and by extension America's past was intimately, and often subtly grounded in his cinematic experiences. So, for example, in this article we hear him talk of his own spiritual awakening upon seeing the Statue of Liberty at 4:00 in the morning on a return trip from Europe where he was filming *The Hasty Heart*, an experience reminiscent of that reported by hundreds-of-thousands of immigrants first seeing the shores of the United States, and of equal numbers of soldiers returning from World Wars I and II; he later discusses how his role in *Sante Fe Trail* opened "new vistas" for him, as well as "a love for the West, and its open spaces and the freedom it promised." Later still, after recalling his role as the Notre Dame running back George Gipp in *Knute Rockne: All American*, he tells of his own triumphant battle with racism while playing football at Eureka College—a triumph in which he proudly "saves" two black football players on his team from the knowledge that they have been discriminated against by a local hotel manager by concocting a story of limited space at the hotel and tak-
ing them to stay at his mother's house.

Throughout this whole rendering of the "meaning" of [liberty] is the echoing resonance of those opening lines of the article that subtly substitute the feeling in the presence of the spectacle of "the fireworks, the entertainers, the tall ships sailing through New York harbor" for the "meaning" of [liberty] itself as a term with which to discuss relations of power. What seems so problematic here is that the memory of [liberty] becomes a direct and immediate function of the reminiscence of a cinemantic past, and indeed, a past that is celebrated for the pleasure of private virtue and public displays of power, more than for (or perhaps even to the exclusion of) the public moral values embedded in the historically material commitment to [liberty] as a condition of political life. Furthermore, this essay by Reagan, like the segments on the "NBC Nightly News," set the stage for the national, televised celebration of the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty which began on July 3, and in which entertainers and politicians sang and danced their praises to [liberty] as the Statue was unveiled amid fireworks reminiscent of the "rocket's red glare" so prominent in "The Star Spangled Banner."24

Reconstructing [Liberty] in a Culture of Argumentation

At the outset we indicated our concern for the fate of [liberty]. While we acknowledge the complicity of this ideograph with the rise of bourgeois capitalism, and recognize that in certain discourses of the conservative right it pertains more to the disposition of private capital than to political expression or the experience of the social order, we would be loathe to dismiss its historical significance for the humanization of power. Indeed, this essay is, at least in part, prompted by our concern that the "sweetness" of [liberty]—the feeling of comfort "in the presence of power"—is being displaced within the contemporary public discourse that promotes a simulated America. [Liberty] hence corresponds to a self-congratulatory, romantic aesthetic. Thus, and fundamentally, this essay is about more than [liberty], it is about the death of a kind of politics and a kind of speech. It is about dead rhetoric.

We believe that we can elaborate this point more fully if we treat the case that we described above as a "representative anecdote" for the character of public discourse in the United States.25 In doing so, we will travel along a well worn path, for a number of authors have already written about the displacement of ideology or argumentation by the consciousness industry, television, or the logic of postmodernity.26 We hope, however, to offer a different inflection in our analysis, grounded not simply in the need to recover a culture of argumentation, but to promote and reconstruct such a culture so as to accommodate the public problems of twentieth-century mass society.
Judging from the effort and expense involved in the 1986 Statue of Liberty celebrations, it seems reasonable to conclude that ideology still matters in the United States. Power is still legitimated in arguments and, at least occasionally, some members of the population must be motivated sufficiently through such rhetorics to tolerate or support state power. Following McGee however, we would hasten to point out that arguments of legitimation in no way resemble those of the Aristotelian dialectician or even those of the cost-benefit analyst. These arguments are neither analytically nor technically rational. Rather, the warrants in legitimation arguments are ideographs such as [liberty] that refer to vaguely articulated principles that elicit affective responses. At best, the warranting of power through ideographs is socially rational when there is a space in public discourse for those subject to the power to judge the appropriateness of particular warrants to particular claims within particular exigencies. As we noted at the outset of this essay, this requires a form of public historical memory that would be the vehicle for a "common sense." The common sense that permits the constitution of a creative and collective power that would breathe life into the social would not be the one derided by Stuart Hall as "ideological." Rather, it would correspond to the sensus communis discussed by Hans Georg Gadamer as the contingent knowledge, akin to phronesis (practical wisdom), that is necessary to the formation and sustenance of human community.

We leave as a matter of debate whether or not the subjects of America's multiple cultural formations have unique and distinct forms of common sense, but we do maintain that the process of aestheticization that we have described banishes that common sense from the public discourse of the national political community. In its place, we argue, the discourse of the public sphere proffers a Kantian common sense of aesthetic preunderstanding as the ground for the ideographs that provide motive force to claims of power. The common sense that the Statue of Liberty celebrations appealed to (and were aimed to construct) was Kantian in that it was predicated upon an aesthetic sense that admitted of neither cognitive nor argumentative understandings. The truth of [liberty] was thus rendered as the beauty of [liberty], a phenomenon which one could not debate, and, indeed, which one was expected to experience as a condition of community. For Kant, judgments of beauty were capable of being universalized in that all those who had cultivated their aesthetic sensibilities would agree on what was beautiful. The rhetoric of [liberty] displayed in the preparations for the nation's celebration of The Statue of Liberty implies the same presumption or validity claim, the only difference being that the claim here is made with regard to patriotic sensibility rather than to aesthetic sensibility.

[Liberty] is thus subordinated in contemporary public discourse in two ways. First, it is located outside of the sphere of the sensus communis and outside of the practical knowledge that would found political judgments.
in a world of contingency. Instead, it is located precisely in the sphere of an aesthetic sensibility that is demanded of all those who would lay claim to membership in the community. The mass media's celebration of [liberty] produces a politico-aesthetic sensibility as state culture. This is the aestheticization of politics and power.

The second subordination of [liberty] in contemporary mass mediated culture is tied to the broader subordination of living rhetorics and politics. According to Kroker and Cook, aestheticized politics set the act of judgment against the life of the social, the body, the will, and the imagination. The measure of the quality of an aesthetic object, including an aestheticized social formation, is neither in terms of its ethical character nor its practical wisdom. It fails the test of the former because, as for Kant, the beautiful and the good are split, retaining at best an analogous character with one another. It fails the test of the latter because the faculty of aesthetic judgment consists of a universal, transcendental foundation, existing outside of time and space, and hence outside of the realm of lived human experiences. We thus maintain that the subordination of a vital rhetoric and politics occurs whenever human speech, with its presence, contingency, and dialogic character vanish.

We cannot demonstrate fully here that a mass mediated or televisual culture silences human speech or agency and petrifies life. Indeed, we are not even certain that such a claim is fully demonstrable, for it rests ultimately upon an interpretation of what would occur in a politics of human agency suffused with life. However, we do suspect (and hope) that at rare moments a glint of life may shine through the mass-mediated and aestheticized ideology, and through the "promotional culture" of which it is a part. Life, for us, includes the "surplus" and Brownian motion that eludes the grids of power and determination of Foucault's "formations." That surplus exists in difference, play, ambivalence, and, most importantly, human agency. It enters the public realm, the realm of politics and of collective human endeavors, through speech.

The speech we have in mind is akin to the classical conception of rhetoric in that it distinguishes itself from "just talk," from spectacle, and from the Foucauldian énoncé operating under the Will to Truth, by its affirmation of presence and its dependence on a culture of argumentation that presumes the existence of a listening other. This speech or rhetoric is a performance that creates a sense and a spirit of collective life. The speech or rhetoric that is excluded in a culture of generalized sign exchange would be animated with the spirit of the "true discourse" of sixth-century B.C. Greece. As Foucault painstakingly reminds us, this discourse was a discourse of presence and power:

(it inspired) respect and terror, to which all were obliged to submit, because it held sway over all and was pronounced by men who spoke as of right, according to ritual, meted out justice and attributed
to each his rightful share; it prophesied the future, not merely announcing what was going to occur, but contributing to its actual event, carrying men along with it and thus weaving itself onto the fabric of fate.\(^{36}\)

Of course, our life is not that of the ancients. Indeed, our [liberty] consists, in part, of being freed of the thrall of a single voice, of a solitary Logos constitutive of justice and right. Life today is animated by many Logoi; there are many voices that must speak their justice and their truth. Collective life requires that they encounter each other, not in the dead rhetorics of the mass media's hyperreality and simulation, but in a public culture of argumentation in which each utterance entails a risk.\(^{37}\) The aestheticized [liberty] of "Liberty Weekend" is a node in a public discourse of a promotional culture that moves constantly to transform politics into a commodity, to silence speech and rhetoric, and to erect its social knowledge through a range of procedures of exclusion.\(^{38}\) Excluded finally, is the possibility of ambivalence, dissent, and the risk of encountering the Other. What is excluded ultimately is the voice of life.

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Notes

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11. We employ the use of open and close bars "[ ]" to designate the specific ideographic usage of particular terms that possess both ordinary language meanings and ideological meanings as public commitments of community, as well as to accentuate the material presence of the signifier. So, for example, the word "equality" can refer to the phenomena of "sameness" or "identity" as in the sentence: "The two armies are of equal strength," or it can refer to one of the fundamental commitments of community of Whig/liberal societies, as in the American creed "All men are created equal." In the latter sense "equal" is ideographic, its use in American public discourse carries material force, and we would thus render it in single quotation marks. See Michael Calvin McGee, "The Ideograph: A Link Between Rhetoric and Ideology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 61 (1980): 235-49; John Louis Lucaites, "Flexibility and Consistency in Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Whiggism: A Case Study of the Rhetorical Dimensions of Legitimacy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1-48; and Celeste Michelle Condit, "Democracy and Civil Rights: The Universalizing Influence of Public Argumentation," *Communication Monographs*, 54 (1987): 1-18.

12. The argument has been made by some, such as Kroker and Cook, and Postman, that television constitutes the primary problem confronting a culture of reason and rationality in the postmodern condition. Our studies lead us to the conclusion that television is, at worst, symptomatic of these problems, but that it does not necessarily pose unique problems in this regard. In this particular study we focus on the ways in which television aestheticizes the universe of public social and political discourse, but the same arguments could be made about other mass media as well, including the cinema, popular music, print journalism, and so on. Kroker and Cook, *The Postmodern Scene*, 267-79; and Neal Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).


24. The opening ceremonies for "Liberty Weekend" were broadcast by ABC on the evening of July 3. In these two hours the audience was presented with a running narrative of the history and meaning of [liberty] in speeches by President Reagan, President Mitterand of France, Gregory Peck, Chief Justice Warren Berger, Lee Iaccoca, Ted Koppel, Henry Winkler, and Elizabeth Taylor, as well as through performances by Kenny Rogers, Mikhail Baryshnikov, John Williams and The Boston Pops, Neil Diamond, Jose Feliciano, Debbie Allen, and Frank Sinatra. The evening was completed with the unveiling of the restored Statue of Liberty. ABC's "Liberty Weekend" celebration had actually begun on the evening of July 2nd, when it ran a one hour prime time preview of the televised events to take place on the subsequent four days, and extended through the closing ceremonies broadcast during prime time on July 6.


27. This is a point that was accentuated by then Vice President George Bush in the 1988 presidential campaign. When Governor Michael Dukakis, Bush's opponent in the campaign, maintained that the election was about competence, not ideology, Bush responded that "competence is important, but ideology is very important!" This became a theme of the Bush campaign that was apparently authorized by the American people in the election results. Vice President George Bush, "Acceptance Speech," New Orleans, LA, 17 August 1988. A transcript of the speech can be found in the The New York Times, 18 August 1988.


THE POSTMODERN AND
THE PAEOLITHIC:
NOTES ON TECHNOLOGY AND
NATIVE COMMUNITY IN THE
FAR NORTH

Peter Kulchyski

There is an intimate relation between the way the Inuit have appropriated "advanced" southern technology and their cultural life. For example, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) have been, with remarkable swiftness, appropriated by Inuit hunters as an important method of all-season transportation; electronic amplification, synthesizers, and electrical musical instruments are all part of community cultural events. The Inuit have their own television station, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, and their own hard rock band, Northern Haze. The image of the Inuit hunter who returns home to his computer has almost become a cliché.

Feast, Pangnirtung, March 1985

This feast and talent night that I've been invited to, possibly celebrating the arrival of spring though I'm never quite sure, is held in the school gym that also acts as a community center. As I arrive I am struck by the amount of ATVs and skidoos parked outside: it looks like a snowmobile convention. The feast part of this town event is a fairly straightforward affair. Most of the community is present, including about twenty or so Qallunaat and a few hundred Inuit. The food — seal, caribou and arctic char — is placed in huge piles on the gym floor, which has been covered in plastic. We stand
around it in a circle as a prayer is said in Inuktitut. Then everyone dives in with their knives, cuts off bits of meat and wanders around eating and chatting. Most of the Qallunaat, because they have to cook their meat, are off to one side. At some point the old Inuit women, who have come prepared, stuff the remaining meat into plastic garbage bags. This is called the redistribution of material goods. It is a clear signal that the feast portion of the evening has ended.

The talent night begins fairly sporadically sometime after all of the meat has disappeared. Although there was a prepared list of performers, people are heckled onto stage at various points in the evening and the organization side of things breaks down. Among the Inuit performers are an Elvis imitator, two pairs of traditional throat chanters, a country band, an Inuk elder playing old European whaling songs on a squeeze box and a twelve year old with his synthesizer compositions.

The use of this technology in northern Native cultural and economic strategies, however, has not necessarily contributed to an erosion of the “traditional” Inuit way of life. On the contrary, advanced technology has been used by Inuits to strengthen their culture and economy. While some of the cultural products of this combination can only be described by those outside the process as bizarre, as an impossible hybrid, there remains something in the singularity—the mad eclecticism—of this culture that cannot be dismissed.

The ability of the Inuit to make use of advanced technology suggests two interesting theoretical possibilities or theses that I want to tentatively explore in this paper. The first thesis is that technology alone is not a sufficient agent of change that leads to the destruction of gatherer-hunter societies. Since Harold Innis’ *The Fur Trade in Canada*, non-Native historians have tended to represent the destruction of Native peoples as primarily the result of the inability of gatherer-hunters to absorb western technology. In his historial narrative, Innis states that “the new technology with its radical innovations brought about such a rapid shift in the prevailing Indian culture as to lead to wholesale destruction of the peoples concerned by warfare and disease.” This narrative of destruction wrought by technology remains influential as an account of Native history. The Inuit example, however, suggests the possibility that non-Native cultures and economies may be more resilient than this historical narrative suggests. The Inuit example also suggests the possibility of a subversive strategy through which advanced technology can be used to strengthen rather than undermine Inuit culture and economy.

The second thesis is that advanced technology itself contains an emancipatory possibility and lends itself to emancipatory social projects, such as that of Inuits. This thesis is obviously related to the first. There is a strong tendency in recent social thought to suggest that advanced technology is
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somehow inherently or essentially a dominating power. Jean Baudrillard is clearly situated within this tendency when he argues about television, for example, that "it is not as vehicles of content, but in their very form and very operation, that media induce a social relation; and this is not an exploitative relation: it involves the abstraction, separation and abolition of exchange itself."² The use of technology by Inuits suggests that Baudrillard's description may only be relevant to late capitalist or postmodern society. Inuit use of technology, including television, suggests that the media do not induce a social relation but that social relations condition the way in which the media will be used.

Inuit live in what are commonly characterized as "hunting societies." This does not mean that they have continued to live as paleolithic gatherer-hunters. Today, Native people hunt with the help of different technologies and sometimes for different reasons than they may have had centuries ago. Nevertheless, it may be that they share as many features with hunting societies as they do with capitalist ones. They may work for wages while still depending on fresh meat as a crucial part of their diet. I want to suggest, then, that there may be as much of the paleolithic as there is of the postmodern conditioning Inuit life today. In effect, if we are to develop any understanding of Inuits in the modern world we need to understand the risks and the possibilities raised by this particular economic and cultural cross-breeding. Although understanding and disentangling these is difficult, there are a few observations and analyses that can be made. What needs to be done first is to briefly explain our understanding of both the paleolithic and postmodern periods.

Pangnirtung, March 1985

While in Pangnirtung I am told of an old Inuit woman – in her eighties – who loves Bruce Springsteen. The reason she gives is simple: she likes his ass. At the time Springsteen's "Dancing in the Dark" video was generally popular among Inuit. I am convinced that Springsteen's popularity stemmed from the fact that in the "Dancing in the Dark" video when he walks across the stage he adopts a rolling, side to side gait that strongly resembles the way many Inuit walk. The Bruce Springsteen that many Inuit see is an Inuk.

The paleolithic period is generally understood as the period of human social development that preceded the agricultural or neolithic period. The paleolithic was a period of relatively small, nomadic, gatherer-hunter societies. In his influential analysis Stone Age Economics, anthropologist Marshall Sahlins characterizes paleolithic peoples as living in the "original affluent society", primarily because of the large amount of leisure time that is available, the minimal need for structure, and the generally egalitarian social relations.³ The term gatherer-hunter, which has also been adopted by feminist anthropologists including Eleanor Leacock, stresses the impor-
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tance of woman's role as gatherer in these societies and the roughly egalitarian gender relations that characterize them. Also of some importance to our understanding of the paleolithic is the fact that crucial distinctions central to our own time may not have any relevance: Sahlins argues that kinship relations appear as an economic force and, especially in his later work, he suggests that culture and economy, both super- and sub-structural are not clearly defined, the boundaries blurr. Stanley Diamond's definition of the primitive in In Search of the Primitive might be mentioned in this context. Although Diamond is concerned with a broader category than the paleolithic much of his argument remains trenchant, especially his sense of the loss entailed by civilization: "what primitive possess—the immediate and ramifying sense of the person, and all that I have tried to show that that entails—an existential humanity—we have largely lost."

The term postmodernism has been increasingly used to describe the culture of our time. Already there is an implicit division, since we use the term late-capitalist to describe our economy. Frederic Jameson's "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" provides a useful description and analysis of our period. Jameson argues that in the postmodern a new way of experiencing time and space has emerged and that this has lead to a culture characterized by aesthetic populism, a new depthlessness, an effacing of history, and a fragmentation of subjectivity. Although Jameson distances himself from an approach that suggests that these changes are caused by new technologies, he does relate them to the loss of effect implied by recent technology, especially computers. Ours is a society in which needs have become so unlimited, so divorced from any link with materiality, that the very concept has been questioned. The western world has produced an economy based on excessive surplus and a culture characterized as excremental. Jameson's analysis of postmodernism can be read or understood as a reflection on the implications of the further extension and expansion of the commodity form into cultural life.

Yellowknife, Summer, 1985

At the "Fold on the Rocks" music festival in the summer of 1985 the feature act is an Inuit hard rock band called Northern Haze from Igloolik. By the time they reach the stage it is midnight, the sun has just set. The lead guitarist plays a charge-ahead fuzz guitar, the music is hard rock. The lead singer occasionally mutters something like "this song is about a dream I had once about hunting, but you won't understand it because it's in Inuktitut." They hope to make it big in the south.

The paleolithic implies a society of minimal goods but also one of minimal needs; hence an affluent society. The postmodern is a society of excessive material goods but virtually unlimited needs; hence a society of scarcity. The relation between gatherer-hunters and late-capitalist societies...
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is one of domination where the latter is generally seen to be in the process of overwhelming the former. As Hugh Brody has observed, "the hunting societies of the world have been sentenced to death. They have been condemned, not in any one verdict, but by a process, an accumulation, of judgments." Captalist society can be seen as a totalizing machine that imposes the commodity form on everything that falls within its hegemony. The struggle that Inuits engage in to preserve and adapt their language and culture is a struggle against this totalizing logic. Given that postmodern culture itself involves a certain stylistic eclecticism, a seemingly random juxtaposition of radically distinct styles, it could be argued that the cultural phenomena I am pointing to is wholly contained and indeed produced by the dominant cultural logic. Modern Inuit culture resists such a neat categorization precisely because we need to know as much about the paleolithic as we do about the postmodern in order to understand it.

Most northern natives, I would argue, have adopted a strategy of mixed economic activity to support families and communities. This understanding is not new; social scientists like Hugh Brody, Peter Usher, and Michael Asch have made similar arguments. I would stress here that the mixed economy does not in my mind involve two separate, co-existing economic spheres, but rather a primary economy based on gatherer-hunter economic strategies, and a secondary economy based on wage labor that is taken advantage of by Native hunters. There are four main aspects that constitute this mixed economy: 1) the use of hunting as an important source of food; 2) the use of hunting and trapping as a source of income; 3) the use of welfare as an occasional but consistent source of income; and 4) the use of occasional wage labor to supplement income. Any one of these might take priority for an individual or a family, but most families rely on some combination of the first pair and the latter pair. In community life in the north all of these strategies are used. What is much more rare is the use of wage labor as the primary or sole basis of a domestic economy. With this in mind, a few basic questions about material life can be addressed. What is most important is the relative strength of the mixed economy, which allows Native people to take advantage of the wage work that sporadic, "bust and boom," non-renewable resource extraction projects bring without a major disruption of the basic economic strategy. It is only when attempts are made to impose wage work as a dominant economic model, and to create a dependence on it by dispossessing Native people of access to the usual means of subsistence, that the strategy is disrupted. Resistance to this form of domination can be seen as a locus of the political dynamic of the north.

Native peoples like the Inuit in Canada's north are often seen as very poor. To characterise Native people as poor is to imply that the gathering-hunting economic strategy is unsuccessful, and as a result there has recently been a tendency to refute such a characterization. As Marshall Sahlin has argued: "poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between
people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization.”

Hugh Brody and Peter Usher have been particularly concerned with stressing the importance of a hidden or Native economy — what I refer to as gatherer-hunter economic strategies — that must be taken into account in any discussion of Inuit and Indian affluence and deprivation. Yet there still remains a real poverty in the far north, a poverty intensified by the images of wealth that new communications media have exported to northern Canada. This poverty continually makes its presence known even on the silent pieces of paper that are shuffled through the offices of government bureaucrats who are rewarded with extra northern “housing allowances” and “isolation pay” to manage the problem: the morbid line of statistics — higher infant mortality, lower life expectancy, higher deaths due to violence, and so on — offers its own eloquent testimony. In an eleven month period in the mid-eighties in the largely Inuvialuit community of Tuktoyaktuk, population 750, thirty-five people attempted suicide. Seven people “succeeded.” There is something simply so wrong about this that even the need to be aware of the politics of representation and of images is overwhelmed.

Brody’s argument is persuasive, however, to the extent that he recognizes that social problems tend to be associated with capitalist economy and modernist culture. It is not as gatherer-hunters that Native people are poor, but as peoples dispossessed by the totalizing logic of capital itself. There is more than a semantic difference. What Native people call “traditional” economic activities, those we associate with gathering-hunting culture, are not responsible for native poverty and indeed offer the only viable and lasting alternative to it. But gathering-hunting does not have to be understood as a pure, unmarred, pre-contact social form. Gathering-hunting in the modern world involves adaptation, and the possibility of absorbing some elements of capitalist culture and economy into the gatherer-hunter context. It also involves the risk of being assimilated by those same elements.

The mixed economy is also a mixed culture. It involves bringing together an economy of affluence and surplus with an economy based on exploitation, class difference, and the social production of scarcity; and bringing together a culture based on minimal needs and expanded leisure time with a culture based on virtually unlimited needs and serial leisure time. This is a hybrid culture, and while it is undoubtedly true that the capitalist and postmodern elements are disruptive, are responsible for creating poverty, and which may ultimately result in the complete dispossession of northern Natives, the struggle is far from over. Inuit success will not depend on their isolating themselves from the rest of the world in some state of cultural purity. It will depend on their ability to subvert capitalist economy, technology, images, and institutions.

At the most abstract level of analysis then, the importance of advanced technology to the far north can only be understood in the context of sub
mission and resistance to totalization. On an immediate, experiential level advanced technology has come to the north because of the peculiarity, the absurdity, of an economy in which very poor people find themselves with cash surpluses. The money they get—from occasional labour or from welfare—is often used to buy consumer goods simply because the Native economy may provide the minimum subsistence requirements and because improving the material quality of life in a more sustained way, for example through better housing, is prohibitively expensive. Excess cash is rarely spent on cars because in most Inuit communities in the far north access by roads is impossible. So the money often goes towards ATVs, VCRs, television, radio, satellite dishes, cassette players, synthesizers, computers, and so on. The people from a culture of affluence meet the technology produced by a culture of excess.

Luccasi Irqumiaq, Puvirnituq

One interesting point that has come up is the number of radios in Inuit homes. Recently, I visited 40 homes and found that they contained over 100 radios of all makes and types; short wave, A.M. and F.M.\textsuperscript{13}

The problem raised by this adoption of technology on the immediate level is one of political control. Inuit recognized the dangers posed by the new communications technology: many communities voted against allowing television satellite dishes until they were assured of Inuktitut broadcasting. The problem of the resistance to assimilation was raised to new levels by the introduction of new technology, which offered powerful support to that process. The political ramifications, however, were very complex since the new technology also offered new opportunities for resistance. On the level of daily experience, the new communications technology could act like medieval village church bells, warning of an impending attack by barbarians, though here the attacker is the State.

Lasarusie Epoo, Inukjuaq

Recently, the government has been asking the people to sign some papers. We do not know the contents because it is not written in our language. The people are not forced to sign these papers but many have done so when asked without understanding the meaning of one's signature. As a result, these signatures have given the people much hardship later on. I know I experienced it myself. If we had our own radio station, we would be able to warn the people quickly.\textsuperscript{14}

On the immediate level, then, it is fairly obvious that local control of communications media offers some political advantages, especially when contrasted to allowing southerners total control over the dissemination of
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information and images. However, the intricacies of Inuit society and its own internal dynamics raise problems even on this level.

*Peter Inukpuk, Inukjuaq*

Our Inuit culture creates special problems of exchanging information. In our life it is still enormously insulting for a younger person to presume to give information to an older person. Many white people often think that as more young people like myself receive a white education, that somehow the information we receive as a result of our contact with white culture will seep into our home communities. In fact, this doesn't happen. The implications of this problem are even more serious when one realizes that change never happens in our communities unless our old people are agreed and understand the situation.15

It is hard to know how messages will be received by communities, what place the new information—even if its dissemination is controlled by Inuits—will play in community political life.

Even more serious, though, than questions of who controls the content of the new communications media, are the questions related to the form messages will take. It might be argued that in as much as the Inuit used the new communications technology surely they submitted to the logic of the dominant system, and even when they used that technology in resistance, their use of it already signaled a strategically crucial loss. That is, the technology itself may embody the totalizing logic of late capitalism, and the Inuit use of it, even for their own political ends, may be a surrender to this logic.

In his powerful critique of the communications media, Jean Baudrillard develops an argument along these lines. He argues, for example, that:

> The mass media are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication – this is what characterized them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response... Now, the totality of the existing architecture of the media founds itself on this... definition: they are what always prevents response.16

In this view the modern technology of communication is inherently univocal: it is not communication because it is one-way speech. Baudrillard is not concerned with the ideological content of the media, then – and he rejects socialists like Enzensberger who suggest a revolutionary strategy for “capturing” the media – as much as he is with the form.

There is a tendency in modern thought, of which Baudrillard is a particularly good example, that suggests that modern media, and especially television, are univocal. In this view the audience is always positioned as observer or listener and, as such, passive. Debord’s characterization of our
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society as a "society of the spectacle" (1983) and Jameson's analysis of the loss of affect, which he suggests is endemic to postmodern technology, serve as examples. Baudrillard's understanding has a specifically political implication: "power consists in the monopoly of the spoken work."17 Baudrillard, in this analysis, is unfortunately guilty of the same kind of essentialism he so often takes Marx to task for. While it is recognized that in changing the messages Inuit people will have adopted a political strategy that ultimately does nothing to vitiate the hegemonic power of modern communications technology, there is nothing inherent in the technology that suggests they cannot change the form in which their new messages will be broadcast. And this latter process seems to have been the strategy adopted by Inuit communities.

The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation was established in the early seventies in response to the demand on the part of so many communities for Inuktitut broadcasting. IBC now has three main television production centers—Iqaluit, Cambridge bay, and Baker Lake—and several small production units scattered in communities across the high Arctic. IBC produces a news show and a series of documentaries, which are broadcast by the CBC through a time-sharing arrangement. All of the IBC shows are in Inuktut. On the level of content, IBC effectively presents the Inuit view. For example, in March 1985 when I visited Iqaluit, officials from the Department of Defense were visiting communities attempting to collect contaminated materials (PCBs) that Inuit hunters may have gathered from abandoned DEW line posts. The IBC news broadcast on these visits served Inuit communities as a warning (the bell approach!) of the impending visits; it also seized the opportunity to question the existence of DEW sites in the north.

More interesting, however, are the documentaries, which themselves spill over that genre to act as visual reflections on the Inuit way of life. It is difficult to use our language to speak of the social processes at work here: the division between audience and performers that marks a society of the spectacle (Debord, 1983) does not exist. In Inuit television there are no performers, so I will use the term producers to refer to the IBC staff and assume no separation between producers and audience: both are part of Inuit community. The relatively small size of the community allows for the immediate possibility that by watching IBC people will see themselves on television. In place of the gap between audience and performer which constitutes a society of the spectacle, the Inuit have created an intimate relation between community and producers. This relation takes place on multiple levels: perhaps most importantly, that of the everyday. An Inuk producer will watch her program with other Inuit who will comment on it; the producer and her production live in the community that is the object of their reflection.

Elisapee Cain, Tasiujaq

If we had our own radio network, we would be able to hear the
recorded minutes of meetings. It would be especially pleasant to
have programmes if we knew the person who would be speaking.18

The other crucial level in which interaction between producer and com-
munity takes place is in the construction of a specifically Inuit visual lan-
guage. Those who produce the shows are still in the process of learning
to use the technology. This learning process is a public one, though. The
products of training sessions are often aired. In the past few years, then,
an intimate process of (self) educating both the community and the
producers has been taking place. The result of this process has been the
production of an Inuit visual language that radically alters both the form
and content of televised communications.

*Luccasie Irqumiaq, Puvirnituq*

I think when the radio first starts, the people will listen to anything
so long as it is in our language, but later they will become more
discriminating, and we shall have to improve the quality of our
programming. We are already making some plays that will be of in-
terest to them.19

There is, pershaps, a fine line between virtuosity and naïveté. There are
two kinds of programs that I have seen on IBC which demonstrate both
of these characteristics. What is remarkable is that they can be produced
and broadcast:

"*Skinning a Fox,*" *IBC Baker Lake*

This programme, broadcast with some frequency, consists of an
elderly Inuk sitting on the floor, his back to the wall, skinning a
fox and explaining in Inuktitut how this is done. The camera never
moves, the light glares down from above. Off camera an old wom-
an, perhaps his wife, is knitting. She occasionally leans on camera
to explain what she is up to. The programme lasts about twenty
minutes.

Since in the mid-seventies the IBC simply sent out video cameras to small
communities, with a minimum of training support, the visual results often
showed no predispositions as to what television "should" look like:

"*Hunting a Seal,*" *Sac Kunnuk, Igloolik*

An Inuk is standing over a hole in the ice. His arm is upraised, he
is holding a spear. The shot is taken from some distance away, so
the figure is very small. It is a dramatic moment, we await its out-
come. The figure continues to stand, the camera does not move.
The intensity of the moment is not produced by close ups, jump
cuts, acting or editing. We are in "real time." The intensity leaves us, we are bored. But we still wait. Occasionally it returns, we anticipate the seal, the sudden strike, the action. But it does not take place. How long have we waited, have we watched this hunter—five minutes? ten?—before we realize we are waiting for him to strike and he is waiting for the seal and so, we too are in a way waiting for the seal and perhaps our waiting and his are the same. As we continue to watch we begin to understand that hunting a seal is not the strike, the sudden moment of action, but rather the anticipation, the boredom, the intensity, the exhaustion, the waiting. After about fifteen minutes the video ends. We never see the strike.

In any southern program these images would have been edited in roughly the following way: we would have a shot at a distance, establishing context; a shot of the hunter's face, establishing intensity; a shot of the spear, of the seal hole, perhaps at an increasing pace, and to music in order to establish dramatic pacing; a shot of the spear striking the seal would follow, possibly in slow motion so we could sustain the "climax." We would have been led to believe that we understood in all its intimacy the act of hunting a seal. We would never have been bored and never forced to wait for any significant period. We would be very carefully manipulated or led by the producers; we would see all the essential aspects of hunting a seal, but experience none of them. That is, in being "led" we would have lost the opportunity to experience the activity in a way that the medium of television, as Kunnuk illustrates, allows.

IBC is an example of interactive television. It is conditioned at the levels of production, distribution, and consumption by an intimate relation with the community in which it is produced. This community is geographically widespread and culturally diverse, though admittedly relatively small. The gap between "audience" and "entertainer" does not exist in this context. In its place is the community itself as a material and cultural strategy. Within the community, different forms of production take place: these include the production of material necessities, such as food and the production of cultural reflections such as television programs. The latter allow Inuit to reflect on and re-experience the former. Both forms of production involve the characteristics we associate with the paleolithic and post-modern.

In postmodern culture the audience—and by definition this implies a separation—can have an effect on programming only in the most reified fashion. Intense surveys of the audience will determine whether more people watch "Dallas" or "Miami Vice," and the results will eventually lead to the demise of one of these programs. Both programs are produced by a specialized elite ("stars") and does not inform the everyday life of the audience. Not only do the programs not contribute to the community, but actively work against it. In the paleolithic-postmodern, on the other hand, the community speaks its own language and sees itself on television. The
producers are slowly creating a visual language that allows the community to see itself in its own terms, which is important: our own (postmodern) representation of Inuit on television involves caricature of the most vulgar sort.

Irish Spring Soap Commercial

A single television commercial for Irish Spring soap features two related visual texts. In one a miner, underground and covered in filth, is magically transported to a lush green landscape, presumably Ireland, through the use of soap. In the second an Inuk in the far north is, much to his delight, similarly transported. While the miner's filth can be equated with his work and excused, the only explanation within the visual text for the Inuk's filth is his existence in a hostile environment where no one would want to live or, more immediately, his "race" itself.

The sub-text of these caricatures is that Inuits strive to escape the north, strive to escape their own cultural identity and desperately seek to live in the same fashion as non-Native, urban southerners.

The Inuit struggle to maintain their social identity takes place on multiple fronts, one of which involves the broadcast media. This struggle is not insignificant to late capitalist societies, especially to those within them who are determined to maintain a vision of emancipation. From the Inuit we understand that the new communications technology, contra Baudrillard and many others, is not inherently dominating or a structure of hegemonic power. It has a potentiality for playing a meaningful role in emancipatory social practices. Perhaps we need to return to a marxist conceptual scheme whereby the use of forces of production—including technology—can only be understood in the context of a dialectical interaction with the social relations within which they exist. Baudrillard, Debord, and others allow us to understand the ways in which these technologies are used in late-capitalist society but say little to the more difficult question of the ultimate potentiality of these technologies.

On a broader level, the Inuit adoption and absorption of postmodern technology raises questions concerning our whole understanding of "development." The logic of development as it is imposed by so-called "advanced," late capitalist social formations on various "other" societies has no place in a meaningful understanding of either social formation. As Stanley Diamond has argued, "the basic apology for imperialism remains the idea of progress.”20 The term development implies the idea of simplicity: Inuit society, at least, does not exhibit that characteristic and probably never did. The term development further implies that Inuits should strike for what we have (this is the political significance of the Irish Spring soap commercial, and most southern television representations of the Inuit) while our understanding of their appropriation of technology leads us to con-
clude that such striving would mean important cultural losses rather than advances. We need to reject all those logical constructions that imply that "other" cultures are inferior, less developed, simpler, primitive or less advanced than our own. Furthermore, we need to reject understandings that hold to a sense of the "pure" pre-capitalist cultures as superior to our own. The latter understandings leave no room for modern adaptations and often involve an underlying sense that "other" cultures are much weaker than our own, and that they can adapt, can successfully absorb the postmodern and retain their integrity. We need, then, to understand the advantages offered by both postmodern and paleolithic cultural and economic strategies, as well as their ultimate limitations. In Diamond's words, "the problem... is to help conceptualize contemporary forms that will reunite man with his past, reconcile the primitive with the civilized..." 

Yellowknife, Summer 1985

Another act at the 1985 "Folk on the Rocks" involves an Inuk man and woman. She plays the traditional drum while he dances and sings. Both are dressed in traditional costume. At some point, when he is tired, he leaves the stage. She turns on a nearby drum machine, picks up a bass guitar and sings—in English—a few country and western songs.

In his notebooks on pre-capitalist social formations Marx wrote that "the community itself appears as the first great force of production." In the West, we have barely begun to understand the full significance of this statement and perhaps will only be able to when the process of vitiating meaningful community nears its end. For Inuits, it is the community itself that buffers the debilitating shock waves produced by the totalizing power of the late-capitalist State, economy, and culture. Where there is desperate poverty, despair, and violence, only the community can prevent total devastation. But the Inuit community has been able to engage in something more than a holding pattern. They have been able to subvert the ideology of form—to borrow Jameson's evocative phrase—and employ western technology in sustaining and entrenching the Inuit way of life. This is, admittedly, a process that has its dangers. But there is no going back and no "pure" Inuit culture that will somehow exist in isolation from the rest of the world. What may remain distinctively Inuit about the hybrid culture that is emerging is a community that is strong enough to break the logic of the spectacle and to employ "advanced" technology in a radically subversive way: as communication that defies the sender-receiver model and organizes speech with responses.

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Notes

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4. Ibid., 101.
5. cf. Ibid, 102fn.
7. Ibid., 173.
15. P. Inukpuk, Taqamriut, 111.
16. Ibid., 170.
18. E. Cain, Taqamriut, 121.
20. Ibid, 38.
21. Ibid., 175.