Boorstin and Debord: the image and the spectacle

Two important influences on Baudrillard's theory of simulation are Daniel J. Boorstin's *The Image* (first published in 1961) and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (first published in 1967). Boorstin explores the concept of 'pseudo-events', especially rife in news media and not dissimilar to Bau-drillard's media-simulated 'non-events'. Boorstin argues that the omnipre-sence of images, which are so easy to produce and distribute via multi-media channels in the late twentieth century, are indicative of a Graphic Revolution

(Boorstin 1992: 13) – a wholesale change in the way we view the reality of our world. Instead of increasing our awareness of the world, however, Boorstin suggests that news media do not usually report 'real', truthful events but instead deal in a currency of false, pseudo-events. A pseudo-event is 'not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. Typically, it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview' (Boorstin 1992: 11). Boorstin lays the blame for this state of affairs at the feet of public relations and journalistic practices. The press conference, for example, is a contrived pseudo-event carefully planned by newsworthy individuals or institutions in order to satisfy journalists' insatiable appetite for fresh 'news'. It is a self-fulfilling pseudo-event that offers little genuine news value at all. The British Prime Minister's weekly press briefing, for example, is staged and usually reported in news bulletins even if the Prime Minster has nothing really *new* to say. An up-to-date image of the Prime Minster along with his latest spin doctoring message is enough to hit the headlines. Boorstin even suggests that pseudo-events have diminished what it means to be a famous public figure. Real heroes of the past who undertook great feats have been replaced by manufactured, image-conscious celebrities who have no genuine talent. The technological progress that would lead to intellectual and political enlightenment – as promised by Benjamin and McLuhan – is not shared by the impotence of this postmodern Graphic Revolution.

Guy Debord offers a similarly cynical perspective on what he terms 'the spectacle' which 'is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production' (Debord 1994: 13). He notes: 'the world we see is the world of the commodity' (Debord 1994: 29). By extension, Debord's theory of the spectacle is not limited to mass media images, but is more centrally to do with modern capitalist economies that produce a form of spectacle which isolates and alienates those who are forced to consume it. It is only when 'the spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image' (Debord 1994: 24) that it fulfils this function of alienation, and the spectacle only becomes image when mediated through technologies such as television which 'serve as weapons for that [spectacular] system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of the "lonely crowd"' (Debord 1994: 22). The spectacle is therefore not primarily a collection of images but 'a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord 1994: 12). Nonetheless, this relationship is entirely based on appearances and images – a false reality – that conceals a real world of capitalist exploitation and class division. Echoing Baudrillard, Debord states that 'the spectacle's job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations' (Debord 1994: 17). The word *seen* is italicized by Debord because sight is the human sense most vulnerable to deception and false belief. After all, *seeing is believing* – but we do not always *see through* artifice and manipulation.

Although originally intended as Marxist rather than postmodern theory,

Debord's work has since been closely associated with the postmodernist emphasis on style over substance; image over reality. This is particularly evident in one of the two forms of the spectacle he outlines (Debord 1994: 41–3). First, we have the concentrated form of spectacle, which is associated with bureaucratic ownership and restriction of choice in the capitalist realms of production and labour. More significant, though, is a second form that Debord calls the diffuse form of spectacle, which is associated with the abundance of commodities in the capitalist mode of consumption. He identifies 'the pseudo-need imposed by the reign of modern consumerism . . . Waves of enthusiasm for particular products, fuelled by the communications media, are propagated with lightning speed' (Debord 1994: 44). The triumph of the spectacular economy, therefore, springs from its 'ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs' (Debord 1994: 33) that strike a familiar chord with Boorstin's pseudo-events. One such 'specialized mediation' of these false needs is the media celebrity. While Boorstin ridicules the emptiness of the image-conscious media celebrity, Debord conceives them as spectacular representations of ordinary people who turn their spectacle into 'images of possible roles' for us to identify with so as 'to compensate for the crumbling of directly experienced diversifications of productive activity' (Debord 1994: 38). Celebrities provide us with false representations of life, which reinforces Debord's argument that the spectacle they produce – via media – is not perceptible to direct experience and is predominantly experienced as a series of appearances. However, this spectacle *becomes* the reality of our everyday lives to the extent that social life becomes an alienating scenario grounded entirely in appearances (first impressions). On the other hand, real class inequalities, poverty and social exclusion – created by the capitalist mode of production and its uneven distribution of wealth – are concealed by the spectacle in order to protect the dominant order of power from the proletariat uprising predicted by Marx.

Jameson: pastiche and intertextuality

Although principally a postmodernist, Fredric Jameson's theories of contemporary media and culture, like Debord's theory of spectacle, owe much to Marxism. Jameson argues that we have entered a stage of late capitalism associated with post-industrial, consumer societies and globalization in the shape of multinational economics. Postmodern culture 'replicates or reproduces – reinforces – the logic of consumer capitalism' (Jameson 1998: 20) by embracing all things 'popular' and rejecting the modernist values of non-commercial, 'high art'. While modernism sought to clearly distinguish high culture from mass or popular culture, the onset of postmodernism – from the post-war boom of the 1950s onwards – has meant that 'the line between high

art and commercial forms seems increasingly difficult to draw' (Jameson 1998: 2). This cultural turn from modernism to postmodernism is centred on 'The disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasingly unavailability of the personal style' (Jameson 1991: 16). Modernist art and literature cherish the value of individuality and the 'first-person' voice in stark contrast to the hostility of an outside world marked by rampant modernity – industrialization, scientific and technological advance, rationalization, and so on (see theories of modernity in Chapter 3). James Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' technique – in which an author's thoughts and feelings are directly translated into a rambling written style – typifies the individual style of modernism. Postmodernist culture, from Jameson's point of view, dismisses the possibility that an individual style can still exist in a late capitalist era where all new styles are immediately incorporated to serve the intentions of global, consumer capitalism.

Jameson's notion of **pastiche** – and the way pastiche differs from the practice of 'parody' – is central to his postmodernist perspective on the disappearance of individuality and originality. Parody is a general technique of mimicry, not peculiar to postmodernism, which has the comic intention to 'produce an imitation which mocks the original' (Jameson 1998: 4). Impersonators deploy parody to mimic the actions and behaviour of others, especially famous people. Importantly, parody acknowledges what it imitates and does not ignore the sanctity of the original form. As such, 'there is a linguistic norm' (Jameson 1998: 4) behind parody. Parody mocks but does not threaten the existence of original meanings (language). By contrast, pastiche is a technique peculiar to postmodernism because it denies the existence of – refuses to acknowledge – the original form it *appears* to be imitating. Pastiche is less about comedy and more about plagiarism. Pastiche does not accept that 'some healthy linguistic normality still exists' (Jameson 1991: 17) because, unlike parody, it has no satirical purpose and does not distinguish its own mimic from an original form. As such, 'Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humour' (Jameson 1998: 5). Pastiche is the outcome of wider trends in postmodernity that have arisen from the compartmentalization of the professions since the earlier developments of modernity. For Jameson, the fragmentation and privatization of language into different styles associated with these professional practices – medicine, law, literature, and so on – have meant these styles are now impossible to ridicule because there is no longer a universal 'linguistic norm' through which to parody such styles. Postmodernist, pastiche styles therefore arise from both the disappearance of originality (linguistic norms) and the disappearance of parody, which relies on an original form with which to mock.

Pastiche is closely linked with Jameson's theory of **intertextuality** that he defines 'as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect, and as the operator of a new connotation of ''pastness'' and pseudo-historical depth, in

which the history of aesthetic styles displaces ''real'' history' (Jameson 1991: 20). As well as the disappearance of individuality and originality, postmodern culture has lost its sense of the past because the past has become romanticized by artistic representations of history that are clouded by nostalgia. As the author states, 'we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself remains forever out of reach' (Jameson 1998: 10). Mike Featherstone makes a similar point about the aestheticization of the present day as evidenced by 'the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society' (Featherstone 1991: 66), of which MTV and its 'three-minute concentration span' philosophy is a prime example. For Jameson, intertextuality is a practice typically found in postmodern films and other media texts that borrow features from other texts. Like pastiche, intertextuality is not about an overt acknowledgement of the original text (or texts) from which it is borrowing certain features but rather about an insistence on the disappearing sense of anything original or historical that has gone before. Intertextuality operates in a perpetual present because postmodernity has effectively obliterated any genuine sense of the past. Jameson identifies the 'nostalgia film' as an example of pastiche and intertextuality in practice. *American Graffiti* (1973), for example, aims to 'recapture all the atmosphere and stylistic peculiarities of the 1950s United States' (Jameson 1998: 7–8) by imitating – in pastiche form – both the content and the formal filmic techniques associated with earlier representations of the rock and roll generation. *Chinatown* (1974) likewise is a pastiche of 1930s America and aesthetic styles of American filmmaking familiar to this period.

Pastiche as it operates in a nostalgic mode differs from imitation as practised in the more generic category of 'historical film', however, because it colonizes 'even those movies today which have contemporary settings, as though, for some reason, we were unable today to focus our own present' (Jameson 1998: 9). Films more or less about the present day – such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) – are incapable of creating new, original representations of contemporary life, and are therefore forced to pastiche aesthetic (filmic) styles of a previous age, such as science-fiction literature and the 'disaster movie' genre, as evidenced by covert, intertextual references. Usually these references to previous films or generic conventions operate on an unconscious level and are not easily identifiable. In these cases, film directors may well refuse to acknowledge their indebtedness to a particular filmic style or scene – in keeping with the practice of pastiche – but instances of intertextuality are always able to be drawn because so-called 'new' styles have 'already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the unique ones have been thought of already' (Jameson 1998: 7). There are occasions, though, when intertextual references are self-consciously constructed for purposes of parody, in 'spoofs' like the *Naked Gun*

films (1988; 1991). In these films or other media texts, intertextuality is not a specifically postmodern facet.

Jameson's postmodernist theories of pastiche and intertextuality can certainly be applied to various media and cultural examples, and not just films. Certain forms of popular music, for example, 'sample' or draw from previous sounds and tracks (pastiche), and these forms can be distinguished from overt 'covers' that – like parody – acknowledge an original version. We should be keen to critically evaluate these theories, though. Is originality really impossible today? This partly depends on what we mean by originality. Jameson appears to define the individual style as unique and entirely new, according to high modernism, but that famous modernist T. S. Eliot understood the 'individual talent' as emerging from a concern with both tradition and novelty; with an historical sense 'not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' (Eliot 1951: 14). Eliot's definition of originality, therefore, is not about uniqueness but about adding a distinctive contribution to an existing 'ideal order' of canonical art and literature. What Jameson defines as unoriginal intertextuality, then, amounts to a more conservative interpretation of tradition-minded individual talent in Eliotian terms. Another criticism we might level at Jameson is that by referring to the disappearance of our sense of history, he also appears conveniently to neglect a long history of pastiche-like intertextuality. Shakespeare's plays, for instance *Anthony and Cleopatra*, are full of intertextual references to earlier chronicles without overtly acknowledging the historical origins of their narratives. Jameson does make it clear that aesthetic practices of pastiche have existed longer than postmodernism but that 'we have something new when they become the central features of cultural production' (Jameson 1998: 18). Is pastiche so central to contemporary media and cultural texts? Films and music – associated with genre traditions – are perhaps often pastiche-like, but what about less predictable media texts such as live (television) coverage of news or sports events? Are not live, 'real-time' media texts, by definition, original? Jameson might argue that while the content of live media may be original, the formal ways in which media represent live action always draw on pre-existing aesthetic styles.