

SUPERHIP, JOLIPUNK

From cynicism to innocence

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Coming of Age at the End of History

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—How long do we have to go on apologizing for being romantics? Why not stop right now. Here. Boom! All of a sudden. Let us make the desert green with lyrical trees and mocking jays. Let us abandon irony and the fear of naiveté. The cliché is not kitsch. It's merely pretty. So, what do you think?

—You cannot ordain the end of the times of disillusion with a wave of your hand. Cynicism is a strong castle, heavily guarded by powerful armies. You need more than a nice turn of phrase. An insurrection! A hurricane! A noise so insane that it shakes up consciousness. And even then . . . I doubt that this is enough.

“And moreover, that means that to be able to make a diagnosis of one’s times, one has to be intoxicated by one’s times.”¹

I dedicate this book to Oscar of the Aleph theater, conductor of the Cabaret de la dernière chance, Ivry-sur-Seine, to Ghérasim Luca, providential deconstructor of our dead languages, and to all the fish who have leapt out of their bowls to escape boredom.

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OUR NEW CAPTIVITY

Which way to the egress?

If there no longer seems to be any alternative to so-called reality [. . .], it's not because the real finally stands naked before our eyes. Far from it. What calls itself realism is really a kind of idealism. These days, we live as though underwater, submerged in a representation of the world and of ourselves which forecloses on every objection, every alternative. And this total intolerance is its claim to glory.²

Naturally, it's a coercive technique, but one that the prisoner has to agree to first. Consent must be given from the very beginning; the individual must allow the electronic bracelet to be placed on his wrist. And once the detainee is promised his freedom in return for wearing the bracelet consent is easily acquired.³

A man stands still. He's suffocating. Transparent walls rise up around him on all sides, clear as glass, but he doesn't know they are there. There's a ringing in his ears, a vast clamor of voices, opinions, and messages telling him relentlessly that he is free to choose, free to dream, even free to rebel if that's what he chooses to do. It's not the clamor of a department store. It's not talk radio, he's not in a movie theater. Like the six billion other people on the planet, he's locked inside the New Architecture of the United World. He's heard a thing or two about his prison: this world, the world we live in now, is all there is. There's nothing left outside it and there's no other world possible. Or: there's no such thing as distance anymore. Or again: only capitalism is truly revolutionary. And finally: the world today is complete, one and indivisible.

He can't remember where he first heard these ideas. He doesn't know who decided it should be that way. All he really knows is that sometime in the not-so-distant past, capital had licked its lips one last time and swept the last anti-establishment vestiges at the corners of its mouth into its gullet. And boom! the N.A.U.W. was here to stay. He'd gone through many changes in his search for a way out. He'd fought to improve the lot of the Third World. Later on, he'd become a Situationist. Next came Trotskyism. Some of his friends from that period are still in prison for terrorism. When punk came along, heroin in tow, he had done both. This, he had figured, might finally be what he had been waiting for. He'd OD, go out with a big fuck you. Finally, he settled for resignation. And really, resignation wasn't all that bad. After all, the New Architecture of the United World is democratic and generous. In the N.A.U.W. human beings are born

with equal rights, including the right to happiness. Through education and work every single one of them has a chance to acquire every single convenience of every modern lifestyle. And finally, doesn't the N.A.U.W. guarantee peace among all nations? Doesn't it hold out the promise of economic development to poor countries everywhere?

"Anyway," the suffocating man said to himself, "if capital co-opts everything, even its best and most driven critics, then why fight? You get fed, right? Outrage, resistance, fighting the power, subversion, revolt, revolution—it's all so last century now."

And the suffocating man was not mistaken. Capitalism's project had changed. Capitalism had become so thoroughly modern—so thoroughly postmodern as well—that frankly even those who rejected capitalism looked conservative. From within the corridors of economic and cultural power, now the same power, the malcontents now just looked like people who didn't know how to have a good time. What was their problem anyway? Thanks to the way the New Architecture of the Unified World was laid out, rejecting the establishment was now part of the establishment's very foundation. Abolishing all values had become the only value. You could listen to your poets and your rock stars, you could mix it up, shoot it up, and have your acid visions, it all still ended up being good for the bottom line. The establishment had warmed to its rebels and raging visionaries a long time ago. Now they were sought-after celebrities, picking at caviar with the elite, making copy with their bouts of air rage in first class. In fact, all the aesthetic norms of capital had morphed. The king of pop culture used to be a heavily perspiring white man. No more! Today the old empire has fractured into a thousand

provinces, exotic, hybrid, and sensual. World music is the world's music. We've come a long way, baby.

So the suffocating man jumped aboard the N.A.U.W., and surrender was not without some surprises. His name began to appear in print. Journalists and multinational corporations alike smiled on his progress, and behold, their smiles were the same smile.

He discovered that he could turn tricks with his alt-culture savvy. It could make him rich.

No sooner was he on the payroll, he found his salary growing. Rapidly. It was one thing after another. He became an art director with an ad agency, then the publisher of a hip magazine, then a booster for the new economy. Next stop was the host spot on a voyeuristic reality show that fed hungry mainstream audiences showfuls of ever more exotic deviances. And from there, it was a small step to a job with a UN agency created to bring the wonders of modern communication and information technologies to the benighted peoples of underdeveloped countries.

From these experiences our man concluded that humanity's sole destiny was to work toward reform, and reform was only possible under democratic capitalism. It was impossible to go beyond that framework and as for the counterculture, its only possible destiny was the total and specific commodification of every last one of its modes of expression. So why, you might ask, why was this man suffocating? This man, for whom rebellion had proven so lucrative? He had no idea.

He ran his hands along the invisible walls. Back when the barriers were shaggy with coils of razor wire it was all much more simple. When the other side had a name and an address. Beads of sweat oozed from his forehead. A pissed-off looking young guy suddenly rounded a cor-

ner and booked past him. They were not all that different from one another, though he figured he had about thirty years on the newcomer. He watched as the kid pulled two cans of spray paint from his pockets, red and black, and with a flurry of forearms the words Power is invisible until you provoke it appeared dripping as if suspended in air along the flank of the invisible barrier.

The suffocating man tried to keep from smiling, but it was no use—he knew that soon enough the slogan would end up adorning a pair of Nikes. The kid took a step back and watched outraged as his graffiti melted away. Then he reached out and punched the space where a moment ago he had tattooed his anger. His fist sunk deep into the wall. He hit it again, harder, and this time the momentum of his punch carried him right through the wall. On the other side, he found himself confronted by a smiling human resources director who promptly offered him a job at a design studio. “It’s 100% employee-owned,” human resources enthused, taking the kid by the hand.

As this scene unfolded, the suffocating man absently unbuttoned his shirt collar and groped for the edge of one of the soft walls of the New Architecture of the United World. Fingers grazing the wall for guidance, he took off running, slipped into a small alleyway and began weaving away from the arterials, up the shrinking feeders, farther and farther from the center. After a while he figured he must be reaching the outer edges of the fortifications. Soon, he thought, the walls would be old and crumbling, full of cracks. Instead, he rounded a corner and emerged blinking into what seemed to be some kind of bizarre theme park.

Subcommandante Marcos was digging out scoops of ice cream and whacking them into cones for the visitors,

people like, yes, there was El Ché, pumping away at the joystick of a virtual reality game. They also had this haunted mine ride where you could take an old-timery mine train with a bust of Marx bolted on the front like a figurehead and rocket down into fake caverns.

Five Pillars

My soul has asthma. I mean that the atmosphere of these times causes me severe respiratory distress. It's not the old problems, the familiar problems that we all know by heart. My suffering is less public. None of the usual symptoms here—no coughing fits, no hawking and spitting. I have observed, met, or been a part of almost everything people say exemplifies the spirit of the times, and in every case I have come away from these pathetic excuses for nourishment choking even harder. I need air. That's why I have been rooting through the debris of my 1990s for such a long time, looking for a place where I could come up for air, for one or two ideas that could give me some breathing space. I'm sure I'm not the only one. There's no way. I'm willing to bet that the suffocating I'm talking about is a suffocating *we*. The *we* of a generation whose outlook was formed between the poles of two strangely symmetrical dates: 11/9—November 9, 1989, and 9/11, that September day not so many years ago. On one of those days a wall came down, on the other two towers fell. *Boom* behind, *Badaboom* in front. Two times nine, two times eleven, double collapse. Both of those days are history now, but during the years in between “capitalism” became for me another word for maturity. I mean that I came to understand growing up as the process of resigning yourself to Reality . . . the brute reality of egoism, the idiotic reality of competition, the imbecilic reality of the incentive-driven life and the duty not only to exist, but to exist with a cozy layer of lard on your ass and a protective patty of bullshit on your eyes. Two times nine, two times eleven. Like dust clouds rising from the double collapse, a special kind of consciousness billowed up from the debris of this decade, as

yet unaware of itself, mine, ours: 119911. The palindrome-consciousness of my generation. A generation for whom all there was to see in front or behind were immense clouds of dust and debris. But it's worth trying to understand it, this palindrome-consciousness. I don't think anyone really has, not yet anyway. Its elders have gagged it. It's supposed to just shut up. Well, maybe it can make a little noise, maybe it gets to speak a few lines, but only if they're watered-down, sugar-coated, shrink-wrapped, and sanitized for consumption. The plan is to keep its voice stifled until the members of yet another generation grow old, petrified and contaminated, a thousand little renunciations stamped into their faces like crows-feet. And all this so that when the moment comes for this generation to claim its place in the history books and walk out onto life's big stages, it will be too late. By then, that beautiful spirit forged by the double collapse will have been entirely co-opted, its need for air sated by snack food and other assorted trivialities. This is why I have set out here to document the phenomenon before rot sets in, before life has eaten away what is left of my innocence. I've had it with the sage advice of the compromised and resigned. Let me say right away—I know it's true—our generation—the sons and daughters of the BOOM and the BADABOOM—our generation now has within its grasp the kind of power and the kind of honesty that can work the great changes, that can create real works of art. Every day I watch as our elders shamelessly extend their empire and spread their bullshit around and it makes me nearly blind with rage. Why don't they just finish dying for fuck's sake and take their miserable egos with them, their nostalgia, their State, their sexual liberation, their failed revolutions, their shattered illusions, their political parties, their parliaments and their

putrid corpses. We don't want any more of the history *they* are writing. Here's ours, right here!

For the children of the double collapse, the initial motivation behind the new spirit of revolt isn't economic. It's respiratory. It starts with a vague, unpleasant and overpowering feeling. A stifling feeling of being cornered, boxed in, buried alive! Does that do it justice? It's a violent claustrophobic reaction to the idea that the world is a finished piece of work. That among other things it has finally been confirmed that there is only one system of political, social, and cultural management available to humanity. You get strangely ill from having your options cut off like this; it's a disease without obvious symptoms. Its first sign is an overpowering sense of powerlessness. Then nausea sets in, it moves up through the gut, chokes the throat and then spreads throughout the entire body. This is the malaise that is driving the spoiled children of the West as they attempt to rediscover the possibility of resistance. Was it just some kind of panic attack? I don't think so. The last twelve years were clogged with despair. If we're still here, it's because we were forced to invent a reason to go on living. We had to forge an outlook that REJECTS RESIGNATION.

"What is a rebel?" Albert Camus asked in 1951. "A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion. A slave who has taken orders all his life suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command. What does he mean by saying 'no'?"⁴ The market has been systematically co-opting revolt ever since, for 50 years now. The question today isn't any longer *what* does he mean by saying "no"? What we need to ask now is why "no" doesn't mean *anything* anymore. Say no to *whom* exactly, to

what? This *impossibility*, absolute until the demonstrations in Seattle, Prague and Genoa suggested otherwise, is the keystone in our globalized prison's invisible architecture, the linchpin of what I am calling the new captivity. This is the sea into which we were cast as teenagers, where the main choices were limited to despair, suicide or irony. Despair? Despair over a destiny that is finished as soon as it has begun to unfold. Suicide? A way out. Irony? A means of survival. As the walls closed in the wake of the disappointments of earlier generations, principled revolt became increasingly difficult: its causes were discredited, its inspiration was polluted, and its value was restated in terms of the money-making potential of its different poses. This fate was not imposed from above. No one was forced into cynicism. People just heard the same message over and over: "Well, all this has been tried before, and look what good that did." We were already jaded, and anyway, Camus's "no" was beginning to bore us. No one even noticed as the different forms of revolt unraveled, and turned into what were at best quaint sound-bites and at worst marketing strategies. People would express their rage and there would be all this angry noise and every time it all just ended up seeming like a temporary pose. In spite of this, we can still feel the sincerity of that righteous indignation, late at night when we are by ourselves and undistracted by the drone of entertainment. But it has become something obscene, something we must hide from others.

This is how life is in the new captivity. My goal in setting out on this exploratory mission into its invisible architecture has been to try and understand how revolt has been neutralized and how in our resulting helplessness—since there are apparently no other options open—we seem condemned to seek shelter in irony. I want to

suggest that our bondage rests on five pillars, five conditions that are the building blocks, as it were, of the impasse our generation finds itself in today. The first pillar has come down squarely in front of History, and so History has stopped moving. The second ensures that anyone attempting to resist will be instantly condemned. The third pillar is the co-option of any and all efforts at subversion. The fourth pillar is a machine that has sucked up everything marginal and spat it out into the mainstream. And the fifth is the dispersion of economic and political power so wide that it has become impossible to confront it. This pentagon has been our school of despair. Between those five walls an entire generation was trained in the sciences of cynical laughter and in the arts of what I am going to call *mass dandyism*.

Sleep Tight

The first pillar of our world's invisible architecture is the *spirit of endings*. It was built as the 80s became the 90s, around the time that people in Moscow were celebrating this new idea—Freedom—with an intensity rarely seen since. I was thirteen years old. The pillar was made out of Berlin stone, stone from the bricks of the GREAT WALL, the same bricks that now reduced to gravel, were being made into cheap jewelry destined for the flea-markets of the West. The stones of Berlin, pocked with bullet marks and scratched by razor wire on the eastern side, colored by layers of counter-culture graffiti on the western side . . . For those who remember those days, these were artifacts of a happy time. A light, pleasant breeze blew through those months. My mother bought me a T-shirt celebrating the date: November 9,

1989. But it only took a few months and several trips through the washing machine for the letters and numbers on the shirt to fade beyond recognition.

The summer before the T-shirt, an article entitled “The End of History?” appeared in the political journal founded by Irving Kristol, *The National Interest*.⁵ Prior to that article, the name Francis Fukuyama was known only to a handful of students and academics. The question mark suggested that Fukuyama wanted to avoid jumping to any conclusions, but the damage had been done. The pundits instantly seized on what they recognized as the keystone of the *après*-Cold War’s triumphalist rhetoric. The dialectic was over; History had arrived at its final phase, its fulfillment, and would go no further. Now democracy and turbocapitalism walked hand-in-hand like the newly-hitched excreta of a Vegas wedding chapel. The rest of us had no choice but to fall in line with the macabre procession.

Veteran partiers and party-members of the 20th century, connoisseurs of the barbaric delights of that age, I ask you, use your imagination, do you think growing up is easy when your mother is a cemetery? Was Fukuyama right? That’s a question for the philosophers, not for me. But take the words “We’re at the end of History.” Try to listen to that lullaby with the ears of a child. Try to hear how it sounds as the book closes and voices are hushed, as the lights are turned out and the dim figures of the people who put us to sleep slip away with a phrase gentle and disturbing at the same time: *Sleep tight. Sleep tight* was our pillow and our cradle. And we did sleep tight. No missiles kept us awake nights. The crisis was past. We were the happy campers. There was nothing left to do but live happily ever after and sleep tight. We are the children of that funeral elegy. It was plausible

enough. It would have been easy to believe that any attempt at creating something is in vain, that writing is just a form of masturbation, that resistance is futile. The various causes that might have given us a reason to keep going were either retro or obsolete, take your pick. Independence? Retro. Alienation? Obsolete. Punk Rock? Retro. Rock and Roll? Obsolete. Unionism? Obsolete. Communism? Retro. Modernity? Outmoded.

Fukuyama caught wind of something that the rest of the world had been smelling for a while. Ever since the mid-80s, there had been something in the air, a hint of something completed, something over. Now the *spirit of endings* was a sold-out show all over the world. Pulling the wings off of the idea of *becoming*, as a child might mutilate a fly, became an international pastime. Preaching that the end times were upon us became sexy. It was sort of a weird thing to get excited about. Apparently, everything was going to vanish, or go extinct, or achieve completion, or whatever . . . But instead of hearing the happy sounds of weddings or baptisms, instead of wedding feasts and champagne, the services we saw being given everywhere were funereal, elegiac. It was the end, and the end was good. These were fat times for obituary writers. At the head of the pack were Hans Belting, a German art historian, and Arthur Danto, an American philosopher a little too obsessed with Warhol's Brillo boxes. "It was a moment—I would say it was the moment—when perfect artistic freedom had become real. [. . .] Everything was permitted, since nothing any longer was historically mandated. I call this the Post-Historical Period of Art, and there is no reason for it ever to come to an end."⁶ Snort a few lines from this period, and you get a feeling for it instantly: the name-dropping, the mania for citation, the growing

impression of a world mesmerized by its own reflection. Art had decided that its mission was to join those producing the same dittohead regurgitations of life offered in less tony media. Banality became sacred, and all of the classical aesthetic criteria were henceforth so much gunk caked on the rim of history's dustbin. In the same motion, art denied itself permission to confront society's norms. "If nothing is true," wrote Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "then everything is permitted." And if everything is permitted then transgression is obviously no longer possible. That is the contribution the *spirit of endings* has made to our captivity. To celebrate the collapse of a wall they made a urinal into an altar. In the name of liberty, Art and History were relegated to the past and vast swamps of banality were annexed to the present.

This swan song reverberated on through the beginning of the 90s. Not only did it pollute every inch of the reality around us, it stunted our ability to imagine other realities. One very prescient French essayist, Jean-Paul Curnier, put it this way: "These were the times of decomposition. The sense of completion without any hint of new beginnings that now permeates western democracies is just a figure of the general sentiment writ large. Everywhere, the only important things are endings. The end of utopias, the end of politics, the end of meaning, the end of feminism, of sexual liberation, of full employment, of the golden age, of communism, of History, and topping it all off, the end of modernity itself." The first edition of *Aggravation* was published in 1996. Curnier had started writing it in the year of Berlin Wall souvenirs and T-shirts. He was ten years older than me, so he had seen each stage of the enormous funeral under whose

shadow we were doomed to live. As for our own generation, we were widows and widowers before even getting married. Our future was like a spider web stretched between two chandeliers at a big memorial service. While on the floor below everyone appeared to be weeping, most were actually making barbed remarks under their breath, covering them with more public sniffles and sobs. Well before we had even the slightest ambition to be part of the world, the pallbearers were already carrying the casket of our future towards a common grave. We never did get a look at this future, but we did see the dirty faces of the sextons marching off with their shovels and picks. We never heard the voice of our future, but we did join in the songs of farewell. Hell, we helped to seal the vault. And now the ceremony is over. So go back home! Turn on the TV! Do something! Let old acquaintance be forgotten! What humanity really wants is a piece of tinsel and a pretty story. All you really need to worry about is getting busy with your stocks, busy with your cocks, and rocking the rocks in your stupid fucking heads.

We were still playing hopscotch when the writers, political pundits, historians, and critics took up battle stations on either side of the *spirit of endings*. Eventually, it became clear that this was a purely rhetorical war. On one side, the conservatives rejoiced that the end of the world had finally arrived. On the other, the progressives sought salvation through deconstruction. Art was over. Borders and national sovereignty no longer existed. Politics had come to an end. The timing was great, too, because weren't we approaching the millennium? Post-punks, post-rockers, postnationalists and a lot of other groups with names as silly put their faith in these trendy labels, hoping that they would carry them to a post-world, a world that would still have an after as well as a

before. But reality had lost the ability to examine itself through anything more significant than a prefix.⁷ The dominant spirit of the present has banished the image of cyclical time, of revolutionary time, and now it only dreams of a future colored in endless shades of gray. Instead of the radically new, all we've got is the cycle of fashion, seasonal novelty. A universe of tiny little variations on the same theme, just with more beats, more bass notes and more nothingness. The novelty item! That's why we keep going back to music stores, to newsstands, to supermarkets and to bookstores. Post, post, post, after, after, after, new, new, new, neo, neo, neo. The whole bundle of prefixes are is repeated with the incantatory passion of a high priestess in heat. Maybe sometimes with good intentions, but IN VAIN! Totally pointless form of behavior here. Even when the larger buildings are obscured by low clouds and fog, the whole game takes place in the framework of democratic capitalism, whatever moves are made at street level. And that's why those of us who had to grow up in the midst of this funeral are so determined to put an end to the spirit of endings.

Farewell Parties

Funerals are often times to rehash old memories, and this one was no different. *He was so this, he was so that, Yes, that night last winter, he looked so happy. Well, what can you do? He's gone now, he went so peacefully . . .* But for us, trying to sit still during the service was a chore. The entire world had chipped in for the enormous white tent raised to welcome the mourners, but we were fidgeting during the drone of the speeches, the uplifting

anecdotes, the formal, farewell-party smiles. I would have been out of there in a second had it been up to me. I was thinking of a cute girl I had seen rollerskating in the parking lot outside, brunette, a bit taller than me. But there was no escape from dad's lap, from mom, from grandpa, from the cousins—we were all stuck there, defeated and antsy as the interminable parade of speakers came and went, each one teetering off to the podium far up in front, clutching the microphone with shaky hands and delivering their eulogies.

The most heinous speeches were delivered by the very old, those who had lived through WWII and the 1940s. Sometimes they spoke in the name of their dead, other times in the name of those they had killed. Sometimes in the name of their collaboration with the enemy, sometimes in the name of their resistance—however they framed it, the main point was something about defending commerce against all comers. Gentle commerce, the peacemaker, the civilizer. Commerce, the royal road to reconciliation after the brute butchery of the war. Free enterprise: the key to brotherhood! The memorial speeches of the following generation, our parents' generation, were more sorrowful and more resigned. They had dreamt of revolution only to wake up amidst the debris of their shattered illusions. These weren't merely stories trotted out in the intimacy of family gatherings. They were depositions in sensational show trials, testimony delivered collectively, emphatically in endless public investigations launched against both eras—the war years and the 60s—almost before they had even ended. The first of these featured the sinister cortege of the guilty, the Klaus Barbies, the Maurice Papons, then came the obscene hair-splitting over the number of the exterminated, figures that had to be memorized and recited daily, as

though people believed this was the only way to stave off, for 24 more hours, the inevitable repetition of the nightmare. The format of the courtroom drama playing on the other channel was a little different. As the sexual revolution got railroaded up front, rival members of the radical left in the studio audience methodically picked each other off. This dismal fare would be interrupted from time to time by commercials brazenly peddling communist nostalgia as accessories for fashionable themes like the entrepreneurial spirit or national security. In each of these shows, humanity's role was reduced to that of a kind of coroner whose duty it was to identify and classify corpses, to figure out who got the monstrous corpses piled up by the Nazis on the one hand, and who got the decomposed corpse of Marx and the carcasses of 1917, 1936, and 1968 on the other. Our elders kept trying to pass them off on one another, batting them back and forth from side to side like millions of gruesome shuttlecocks, blocking the way forward for our generation. As long as this went on, the only choice we were offered was either guilt for the barbarity of WWII or guilt for the naïve faith in revolution.

The first narrative was fashioned after the defeat of the Nazis. Western civilization had just put the finishing touches on its second suicide, in the process inventing a form of political atrocity worthy of the age of mass culture. While some individuals, Primo Levi, for example, devoted their lives to asking how it was possible to go on living in a culture that had so eagerly welcomed the hellish enormity of the war, others just went back to work. For the beast had to be contained at any price. Never again. Never again could this thing be let out. If it were fine-tuned in just the right way, maybe the economy could banish the specter of world war for good.

Enormous expectations, immense hopes were placed in the ability of the economic system to prevent war from breaking out. It just might work—it might be possible to lock up the beast in a cage of free trade.

This was the great hope. Soon afterwards, however, people began to disagree over the nature of the beast. For the economic system designed to end war became an instrument of oppression in its turn. Does anyone still need to be reminded that more than a third of the world's population now lives on less than two dollars a day? The question today is not whether the economy should be more equitable or more just. Everyone wants “justice,” whatever they mean by that word. The real mystery is rather why today it has become so hard to criticize the status quo. Why? I'll tell you why. Because we're *still* haunted by the memory of the war. We're terrorized by it. This collective memory was constructed with a stark message: *either you choose free enterprise, or you choose war*. Just look at the 30s, protectionism, nationalism, military buildups, and then horror. It always ends in horror and atrocity. Horror, and then after the horror, the duty to relive the horror every single day in memory. And so always remember, the only way to peace is through open markets and free trade.

The idea that open markets are the only alternative to open war has worked its way into almost every cell and capillary of our daily lives. It streams invisibly through our bodies like a virus, subtly influencing everything we do. Its secret hold on our minds is such that it is hard to believe that any of our thoughts go uncolored by the memory of the war. After all, this is the pretext for the whole deal—today's economic system is literally built on the rubble of WWII. The horror of the past has been distilled into a concentrated liquor. It runs continually from

our pores like a nervous sweat, and sweating guilt for the war's unspeakable barbarities, our bodies are engulfed by its reeking vapors.

All throughout the 80s and 90s, war memories buttressed the walls of our prison. I remember the debates over the Maastricht treaty, the endless arguments leading up to the famous referendum that at one point everyone in France thought was going to be answered with a “no” vote.⁸ I remember how Mitterand sold the idea of the hyper-common market to the public: it was either this or war. Free trade or the inferno. The only way to say “no” to barbarity was to say “yes” to commerce. Fiscal discipline would keep a reunited Germany in its place and nip any rekindling of its expansionist ambitions in the bud. I remember listening to the grim numerical mantras streaming from the TV news: public deficits would be limited to 3%, national debt to 30%, inflation to 2% With the arrival of the convergence criteria for European economic union, the spirit of endings reached a new nadir of bleakness. Now you could speak truth to power as much as you wanted, you could shout it in the streets, in front of ministry balconies, go tell them that the language of fiscal discipline was the language of death—it didn't keep anyone from falling into line. The convergence criteria were our new straight and narrow, our new creed: don't stray too far from those figures. Be happy in a world without History. Don't make any sudden movements. Remember the lessons of previous generations and for everything else you'll be free to do what you like. Free to be a man or a woman, transgendered or genetic. Free to listen to traditional Neapolitan ditties or Celtic rap. Free! So long as you obey the convergence criteria. This was the message to Europeans. In

the media, one tune segued into another—we went from counting days with the French hostages in Lebanon—245, 246, 247, 248 days for Marcel Carton, Marcel Fontaine and Jean-Paul Kaufmann in the 80s, to counting off of the daily deficit figure in the 90s. You could hear sound of an era every night at 8:00. This is helplessness speaking, this is surrender telling you what you need to do, despair teaching you what you need to know. Today's deficit is 3.7%, 3.6%, 3.5%, 3.4% . . . and so on, *ad nauseum*, right up until the coming of the Euro. The memory of the war egging us on, we all raised our voices in unison: Better peace and the common market than the return of the monster.

It is important to listen to this narrative of memory, this story woven of memories and fashioned into a collective memory. It is important to pay careful attention to its comings and goings, its transformations, how it moves from language to language, from mouth to mouth. Sometimes it emerges to quash sudden eruptions of hatred, other times it is told just to trick us. For while it is put to good use when invoked against the extreme right, the same story is also twisted into an instrument used to criminalize the opposition to neoliberalism.

We had only just begun to follow the teachings of one memory when the other captured our attention. This second narrative grew into a funeral march for the 60s. After the disillusion of the 70s, the despair of the 90s was a foregone conclusion. It adopted sarcastic parodies of 60s slogans as its own watchwords and the radicals, now approaching 50, mustered all their resources in service of submission and cut deals with the establishment reality. The more the spirit of the 60s examined itself, the more disgusted it became and the more arguments for surrender it discovered. "We gave up," it said. "In the end, the

revolution just couldn't compete with the attractions of money and power. You won't last long either, you wait," it suggested. "No one resists the global economic system for long."

But there was a consolation for the hippies. Not only were they welcomed back to establishment society, they could rise in it. In Latin America, the heroes of the counterculture still have an aura of innocence, like James Dean or Jim Morrison—by dying early they achieved eternal youth. In Argentina the *hijos*, the orphans of the disappeared, carried on the struggle the Junta had tried to drown with their parents in the muddy waters of the Rio de la Plata. Youthful black and white snapshots of their parents became their icons. Same for Chile and Uruguay. So long as the revolutionaries died young, they could count on returning from the dead. They would remain eternally young. The *hijos* never saw their fathers' bellies grow soft. Their parents had escaped the fate of the aging revolution in the red robes of martyrs; their children would reconstruct their identities on a clean slate. There was no decadent remnant of the past to clear away first.

Meanwhile in Europe, the generation of Jim Morrison was pushing 50. Its members were serenely putting on weight. The hippies had had a chance to preach their sermons and only to then discover that their brand of revolutionary hedonism no longer made good television. The wayward youth of the 90s, the children who ran amok and were shipped off to boarding schools, the 14-year-old party girl who crawled home each morning with the smell of pot on her clothes and dried sperm on her face, they weren't listening. I remember the anniversary well, the thirty-year mark, 68–98. There were special maga-

zine issues, TV specials, special news reports—all featuring dinosaurs of the 60s, now become professionals specializing in their own bygone youth, recounting the heroic years of their hormones, ah yes, when one had real blood in one's veins and real acne on one's face, propelling one forward to the barricades. Acne forever! Viva hormones! Before we join that celebration, we should meditate a little on the abyss that separates us from the Ideal, meditate on all the shattered ideals piled deep in the bottom of that abyss . . . *Dany le Rouge*⁹ is there, now a bloated sermonizing bore, as repugnant as fat Elvis, desperately clinging to a chunk of green sod to keep from plummeting farther, to the bottom where the others lie in pieces. Serge,¹⁰ the former editorialist, now a denizen of talk shows, the monomaniacal pundit of a republic of couch potatoes propped up in traction, on the verge of vertebral collapse. Bernard,¹¹ the turned-on professor, a somewhat more encouraging case, suspended over the void. But what are they still doing there? Any of them? What keeps them going as they wither away into nothing? When you run out of inspiration you have to stop pretending that you still inspire other people. Or else make an exit. Go off somewhere, somewhere where there's still life, passion and blood, and find a new source of energy. In art, for example. Or shack up with a younger woman, whatever, but get it from a running spring, not from a stagnant pond! Look for it in the arena, with the lions . . . Why waste your time when you've got nothing left to say, when you no longer believe anything and are interested only in your own atonement and renunciation? And what can one say about the other kind of Red Guilt, the guilt of the Italian Red Brigades, of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, of the Japanese Red Army? They didn't come out for unwanted encore after encore,

shaking their fat asses and hogging the spotlight, but they did give the world's protest movements a taste for repentance, they provided the pretext. The bloodstains were too fresh. The violence of the extreme left groups was ineffective. We had to come up with something else. Something beyond the endings, beyond the funeral speeches, beyond what the bloated or the bloodthirsty relics of the 60s had to offer. But what could be done in the tiny space between craven compromise and outright violence?

In the spring of 2001, the journal *Lignes* devoted an entire issue to the "desire for revolution." Two years after the Seattle demonstrations, there were reasons to believe that something was changing. But no. *Niente, nada*, nothing. In his contribution, Jean Baudrillard emptied the idea of content the way one empties a garbage can. "The concepts of desire and revolution defused, neutralized and exterminated one another insofar as they were conflated under the sign of liberation." Jean-Paul Dollé sought to end the debate once and for all: "Today, the question of revolution has been answered. It is impossible, because capitalism has triumphed absolutely, leaving no part of the world untouched by its dominion." Finally, there was Edgar Morin, waxing almost lyrical: "Revolution is a word that I have abandoned. First of all, we have turned it into a myth, because we believed that it held the solution to every fundamental human problem. Afterwards, it was polluted, disfigured, betrayed, and, as Karl Korsch said as early as 1932, it has become simultaneously utopian and reactionary." The candles were extinguished. The wake was drawing to its close. Aging activists very rarely seem to have anything else to do besides indict the errors of their youth. They've spent a third of their lives readying the revolution, then devot-

ed another third to betraying it. The last third they spend explaining the betrayal. One should live in such a way that one dies with no time left to apologize. Nothing is as ugly as that about-face, that apostasy that turns on the desires of the past and confesses them like sins in the hope of being forgiven for desiring. It's not desire's fault. As long as it was only desire, the revolution killed no one. So why beat yourself up about it? There was nothing the matter with the spirit of 1968. The mistake is in apologizing for having been touched by it, as though that alone was enough to make you guilty of every crime committed in the name of revolution—in other times too, in other countries. A terrible mistake that the rest of us, we children of the double collapse, are still paying for today. Now we too must apologize for Lenin, for the massacre of the sailors of Kronstadt, for political police, for the extermination of the Kulaks, for the tartars of Crimea, for the Uighurs, for the victims of the purges, for that other monster, Stalin, for Siberia, for the murderous career of Baader-Meinhof, for the insanity of Shigenobu and the fanatics of the Japanese Red Army.

The moment the revolution itself was put on trial, from the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the opening of the Soviet Archives, from the trial of the Italian Red Brigades to indictment of the sexual revolution, the very idea of resistance became suspect. Such is the atmosphere that we have had to learn to live in.

Together with the collective memory fashioned during the *après-guerre*, the way we have been taught to remember the events of May 1968 has provided a reliable buttress to the established order. The memory of the war gave it a moral foundation by associating free markets with peace. The memory of the 1960s protects it by pro-

moting its own disenchantment with revolution. These two memories worked better than armies. They have won the battle for hearts and minds. “Never forget,” they repeated, “that even the slightest gesture of revolt potentially carries within it the seed of mass graves.” Stay put. In the name of remembrance, remain calm. Follow the path of the last men. Not the last men of Nietzsche, but the last men of Fukuyama, “men without courage, men made entirely of desire and reason . . .” Forget politics! It’s a dirty business filled with dirty people who end up, most of them anyway, covered in dirt themselves before the history books catch up with them. Instead, spend your free time contemplating the horrors engendered by the passions of your fathers, spend it contemplating their failures. If you really want to take part in the world so badly, if buying a TV set is just not going to do it for you, then at least work to defend the established order and help it protect us from the past. That’s what’s on the menu here.

In school, I learned that there were two ages of power in the modern era: the power by divine right, which was the foundation of the European monarchies, and power derived from natural law, which placed sovereignty solely in the hands of the people. The French Revolution marks the historical junction between these two regimes, with the beheading of Louis XVI symbolically marking the death of the old order. The third age of power was created out of the ashes of World War II. This time, the roots of power were neither divine nor in the people. This time, power’s legitimacy is founded wholly on memory—the total memory of total horror. Its principle goes: The world economic order is legitimate since, through free trade, it guarantees peace. Dissidence needs to be repressed since it can potentially develop into isolation-

ism, nationalism, and then barbarism. It follows that it hardly matters if the people are for or against the first principle since in any case it is the economic order that keeps the peace, not the people. Democratic legitimacy decapitated the king; now mnemonic legitimacy has decapitated the people.

We have left the democratic era behind. One day we'll have to face it. For it was only a phase, one of the better ones, to be sure, but now the time has come to turn the page. Until they can bid farewell to democracy, today's dissident forces will be unable to tear themselves from the grave of the nation-state they cling to like a forlorn Sicilian widow. Let's finish our grieving and get back on track. It's better to attack the principle of power, not its alibi: let us leave democracy right there where mnemonic legitimacy has left it—in the abyss, in pieces, along with the other corpses. "There are no duties of remembrance," says the Jean Luc-Godard film *Éloge de l'amour*, "only a right to forgetfulness." This line spoke to me when I first heard it because it offered me a way out, a path that led out of the captivity. Because the obligation to remember has transformed itself into a repressive force, revolt ought to begin with forgetting. André Gide wrote in the opening pages of *The Immoralist*: "I do not want to remember, I believe it would hamper the future and damage the past." This also spoke to me. It helped me dispense with the obligation my aging predecessors had invented to keep discontent in check. But our memory, alas, has become so consolidated, so institutionalized that it is off-limits to questions it. Take a second to think of the storm of insults and criticism that await any man or woman bold enough to stand up openly for their right to forget. They'd be humiliated, they'd be put in the stocks with the revisionist historians and similar crea-

tures and falsely accused of wanting to deny the very existence of the monster. Jean-Luc Godard dared to go there, at the risk of being understood by no one, and sure enough, no one understood him. When the collective memory is bent to serve an unjust order, then the right to forget it becomes a legitimate act of resistance.

Situationism Normal All Fucked Up

The third pillar of the new captivity came to us disguised as a means of resistance: the critique of the spectacle. I wasn't any less gullible than the rest of them. Gullible, I say because after the failure of revolutions near and far, the renunciation of the radical left and the ruse of memory, with the Situationists I thought, I hoped, I had come across the sole remaining subversive strategy. Nope. Some months had passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Market democracy had consolidated its total monopoly on destiny. With the help of travel agencies, the rest of the world had dwindled into little more than a collection of exotic tourist destinations. The spectacle went on about its business, replacing the world with itself. "You can't touch anything anymore," an enlightened homeless person would remind me each morning I passed him on the way to school. During this period I had been searching with all the fire of my adolescence for ideas that could point the way to a different world, a window carelessly left ajar, a place where I could stop and breathe some fresh air. By chance, I walked into a bookstore on rue Gît-le-Cœur in Paris. The shop had pleasantly outdated name: *Un Regard Moderne*,¹² a modern outlook. Sandwiched between kebab shops and clothes boutiques, it was barely visible. Inside, it was so

full of books that you could barely move around. On one side, American comics, manga, and photo books rose to the ceiling, on the other, shelves were crowded with seditious political tracts and anthologies of dissidence, and in the middle was a heaping pile of unidentified literary objects. There was a refreshing atmosphere of old-fashioned censorship and the consequent naughtiness in the air—to enjoy the pleasures of liberation, you have to invent imaginary taboos. Here *Un Regard Moderne* had succeeded admirably. In this shop, anarchist pornographers cohabited with opium-smoking revolutionaries and Isidor Isou¹³ ate his naked lunch while Johnny Rotten spat in André Breton's face. In a corner, Artaud trembled as incandescent lesbians licked his organs, a spectacle watched by heretical monks and filmed by a belching Pier Pasolini. Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* had not yet come out in French, but the web of references he sketched in that book was already stretched across the loaded shelves of that shop. It was dark by the time I got out of the bookstore. It was cold outside. The names I had noted down seemed to me to have an almost magical ring to them, and Guy Debord's was at the top of the list. But it wasn't long before his ideas lost their bite for me and the magic evaporated. Like the stones of the Berlin Wall, the exploits and ideas of Situationism would soon dwindle into fashion accessories.

With each new Situationist tract I digested, the movement seemed more and more tame to me. But the Situationists were suddenly in vogue again. The *habitués* of trendy art openings and street demonstrations alike came to feed at the Situationist trough. Journalists culled its texts for material to spice up their TV shows with. Artists mined their work in search of new ways to shock. American media activists used their ideas to subvert the

reigning commercial icons.¹⁴ Almost imperceptibly, advertising strategists and CEOs appropriated bits of Situationism to spice up their image. Eventually, Situationism established itself as one of the ideological references of internet culture. With a little Situationism, you could go from being a protester to being a performer, move from art to art criticism, then into advertising and television. You could begin with underground music and wind up in international marketing, go from counterculture to consultant. As this happened, its critical potential leached away and Situationism itself was transformed into intellectual capital for the production of the spectacle. It became a little toolkit for the audiovisual citizen and a practical guide to fashionable subversion. Reading the last lines of the preface added to the 1992 pocket edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, I could only smile:

This book must be read with the knowledge that it was intentionally written to harm spectacular society.

Before my eyes, I watched as Debord's combat was transformed into another amusement park for the overeducated. The democratization of Situationism had created a new situation. The critique of the spectacle had become a spectacle itself, exemplified by the reality show, and irony and subversion were norms—one of the subsidiaries of the production company Endemol, creators of the hugely popular French reality show "Loft Story" is called "*La Société du spectacle*." Subversion was no longer at the service of the forces of revolt and resistance, now it was just one more skill that interested human resources departments. Sure, artists could give it another name, they could declare it obsolete, they could choose

another, more academic term like *decontextualization*. Counterculture people seeking an alternative label for their media actions might call it *culture jamming* instead—where you monkey with an advertising message in one way or another to turn its intended meaning on its head. The creative staff at ad agencies had recourse to the concept of *disruption*,¹⁵ while journalists could busy themselves with “offbeat” content. In every case it’s just good old Situationist subversion adapted to the needs of a specific group of end-users. The arguments over the definition of a work of art, of commerce, of the production of the spectacle and of how these enterprises might or might not be hostile to one another fused into ONE final subversion of the subversion of the subversion of the subversion of the subversion of the subversion of the subversion of the subversion.

For many years, Situationist writings enjoyed an almost clandestine status. You found them in the back of the shopstore. The print runs were low, the books scarce. One never made reference to the gang of drinking buddies that made up the Situationist International without a certain paranoia. “Circumstances have lent almost everything I’ve done a certain air of intrigue,” Guy Debord wrote in the first volume of *Panegyric*. In the *Nouvel Observateur* of May 22, 1972, journalists were already writing about him as though he was part of a vast left-wing conspiracy: “The author of *The Society of the Spectacle* has always appeared as the discreet but indisputable ringleader [. . .] at the center of the shifting constellation of brilliant subversive conspirators of the Situationist International, a kind of icy chess master, rigorously carrying out moves that he has planned out in each detail.” In the United States, in England, in Italy, in Holland and even in France, the conspirators’ texts were

read only by small circles of initiates. Sure, a *mode situ* had swept through the spring of '68 in France, and media provocation enjoyed a brief fad at the port of Amsterdam . . . But there was plenty of time to forget Situationism after that. After the beginning of the 70s, Debord chose to go silent. Out of elitism, to avoid selling out—to go off and drink, more than anything else. Twenty years passed, during which time his only public appearances were accidental sightings in nondescript bars.

Only for a few years between the release of *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*, in 1988, and the late afternoon of November 30, 1994, when Debord placed a rifle barrel against his heart and pulled the trigger, did his ideas win broader recognition. In 1989, a major retrospective entitled “On the Journey of a Few People Across a Fairly Small Period of Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972” traveled from the Centre Pompidou in Paris to the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. On October 20 of the same year, the book review section of *Le Monde* ran an article entitled “Know an Individual Named Debord?” Phillipe Sollers, a critic more known for his bemused preciosity than for his militant activities, had finally discovered Debord and he proceeded to load the front page of the literary supplement with a long praise piece, as if apologizing for the fact that the author had been under his radar for so long: “I’d like to go ahead and talk about a book that no one will talk about, or hardly. A book as destructive and as invisible in broad daylight as Poe’s *Purloined Letter*. A book that tells the truth that no one wants to hear, a pin jabbed into the overinflated balloons of commerce. [. . .] The clandestine activities of Guy Debord could fill many pages, this French writer whose name a few initiates will recognize; he is by far the most

original and most radical thinker of our time.” Radical? With this blessing, whatever claim to being a radical Debord might have had went up in smoke. Subversive? Henceforth only to himself.¹⁶

The Zeitgeist needed a Debord. Since everything now was ONE, contained, englobed in the same system and facing the same future, thought needed to hold on to a semblance of dissent, for without dissent it would die. The critique of the spectacle was its life preserver. Without it, there was the risk that the world would lose itself in its own reflection. Centuries of dialogues, debates and struggles would be swept away by the force of this great sophism: only two modes of political management exist: communism and capitalism. Communism is dead. Ergo, capitalism is the only mode of political, economic and social management. The writings of Debord made a perfect shelter, a cozy room from which one could criticize the world while smoking Toscani cigars. “Today,” (Sollers again, this time in the communist daily *L’Humanité* in 1992) “with the black hole left by the collapse of the Soviet empire, I’d like to know where else besides in Debord one can find the concepts needed to understand the new unreality that’s now being held up to us as the only reality.”

So one clung to Situationism quite sincerely, for it taught the art of survival in face of the great eclipse of reason. And then very soon after, distress gave way to pleasure: one no longer challenged the real, but its image. Way more fun. One no longer railed against injustice, but against the spectacle’s exploitation of injustice. Way more sexy. One no longer resisted commerce, but battled the simulacra of commerce. Way more cool. Social criticism merged with film criticism to become a generalized critique of representation. Since reality was a given, only the

frame could vary. And the frame is chic, sophisticated. All of a sudden, the critiques founded on the real became vulgar and tiresome. The seduction of the image was too strong. With Debord, we were all potentially directors, cinematographers, semiologists, artists, dissidents, jaded and mocking documentarians of our own existences. The SI, the cinemathèque and subversion became one . . . how perfect! And intelligence decided that it was saved because it had deconstructed its own gaze. It didn't realize that in doing so it was devouring its own eyes.

The critique of the spectacle took the spirit of revolt and transformed it into a kind of mass-market dandyism. The times were ripe for an indifferent, even apathetic attitude to flourish. By shifting the issue from reality to its representations, the critique of the spectacle made it possible to adopt such an attitude. Rather than being a militant dandyism operating outside society's norms, an elite pursuit that freely traced diagonal paths through the squared-off fields of other peoples lives, the new form of revolt was a sort of shared indifference accessible to all, a *dandyism of the masses*. The hyperindividualism bred by the belief that everything was spectacular and that the spectacle was everything ended up creating a world of prefabricated non-conformity, a community of snide smugness where one made provocative remarks that sounded subversive on the surface, but were merely jaded. I belonged to that world. Oscar Wilde got sent to prison. British society isolated him and by condemning him gave meaning to his excesses. That's what I call militant dandyism. On the other hand, the dandyism of the 1990s was only tenuously connected to revolt, via the network of references that linked the critique of the spectacle, subversive practices, the search for the offbeat and the distancing of the real. I'm speaking from experi-

ence, because I myself made the journey from revolt to mass dandyism, and all I got out of it was access to an overtolerant club of people in love with their own sophistication, a bunch of jaded, vaguely suspect characters. The steps of that journey are easy to recall: in the beginning . . . the spirit of revolt such as Camus defined it so simply: a man who receives one order too many and says *no*. Then came Fukuyama and the memories constructed by the preceding generations, which taught the renunciation of idealism. From out of the past comes Guy Debord, with him you could at least negotiate your survival. This is how revolt goes into its visual, aesthetic period. As it replaces the critique of the existent with a critique of the image, a shift occurs. The real is only taken into account as art, insurrection appears only through aesthetics, revolt only as a pose and injustice only as spectacle. Those who grew up with something like passion in their blood then adopt an inconsequential dandyism where the pose is everything and revolt is no longer anything.

Debord saw that things would end up this way, probably out of lucidity, maybe out of despair. You have to read him a second time to see this in his work, you have to listen to his prose as though it were a mirror to see this vicious circle, closed in on itself definitively, where thesis after thesis just seals the closed circuit running between man and capital that much more hermetically. This is no longer theory, it's like the repetitive music of the minimalists. Thesis 42: "The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life." Should you take refuge far from the great cities, you will be quickly discouraged. Thesis 57: "The society which carries the spectacle does not dominate the underdeveloped regions by its economic hegemony alone. It

dominates them *as the society of the spectacle.*”

Situationism is not a system of critical thought, but rather a how-to for compromise. It was on page 35 of *Panegyrique* that I found the key. Debord writes: “In a fit of anger, a queen of France once reminded the most seditious of her subjects: ‘Imagining that one is capable of revolt is already revolt [. . .] The mind goes round and round in circles and returns to itself after long, eccentric orbits. Every revolution becomes part of history, yet there are no revolutions in history; the rivers issuing from revolutions return to where they began, to flow once more.’” 88, 89, 90, 91, 92, 93, 94 . . . The years of our adolescence. The time in which the unfinished sonnet of Margaret Thatcher, “there is no alternative” was completed by the angry words of a queen. In citing his queen, Debord signed a tragic armistice: even the critic of the spectacle acknowledged his defeat. Revolt had lost the battle of the real. The front that it had opened on the battlefield of the image had collapsed. A hope, a tactic and a battle objective vanished in one fell swoop.

I only recently understood how Debord dovetailed with Fukuyama, how together they laid the foundations of the new captivity. It is not at all easy to put them in the same bag: one was an alcoholic hermit, and the other helped define American foreign policy during the Reagan years. Nevertheless, different as they are the consequences of their thought are identical. Each of them described the same destiny, one in which the dialectic of History was dead, co-opted or useless, contributing at the same time to our despair and our abdication. Moreover, Debord came first: as early as 1988, or a year before the publication of Fukuyama’s article on “The End of History,” he announces the final absorption in *Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle*. He writes:

“The earlier worldwide division of spectacular labor between the rival reigns of concentrated spectacularity [democratic centralism] and diffuse spectacularity [liberal democracy] has given way to their fusion in a single form of integrated spectacularity.” The vocabulary is somewhat more tortuous than Fukuyama’s but Debord cared little about being understood. Being right was good enough.

So what about us? What will become of us? Suicide? Or will we go in search of an elsewhere you can get to without dying? Will we decide one day to unfurl our revolt and our indignation so that they can be sucked up onto the stages of the spectacle? Probably. Not a big deal. There’s some good in makeup anyway. It makes you better-looking. Whether the decision is made on purpose or through coercion, it must be made. Better to do it on purpose. That way you can grow old without growing bitter. That way you become someone that people like to hang out with. You have some fun. You PLAY THE GAME. And there are other arguments for dropping your scruples. Like the one that goes “You have to be on the plane to hijack it.” After September 11th you didn’t hear it put quite that way. Nowadays one just comes right out and admits to being a parasite. You *choose* to be one. Eating away at the system, you see? With the dialectic, there was an exterior, a beyond. The spectacle turned it into a polished, well-policed interior. See you later dialectic! *Au revoir!* There’s no option left but infiltration, becoming a parasite of the system. Such are the conditions under which revolt can occur in the age of the new captivity. We’re living in the belly of the beast now. You attach yourself to the gut or the colon and suck away until the beast gets sick. Only the beast almost never gets sick. The

beast is tough. But it's no big deal, for the more you root around inside, the higher you get promoted. On the other hand, the beast does not tolerate sleeper cells, malcontents or those who are beyond redemption. Occasionally, they manage to shake things up, even frighten it a bit, but it never goes any farther than that.

Cringe

The fourth pillar of the new captivity orchestrated the disappearance of power in its two traditional forms: political and economic. From that point forward, the representatives of political and economic power have been . . . well, they've been on a sort of business trip, a trip that's probably an alibi for some adulterous liaison, and they vanished completely from radar. They became nomadic, untouchable. We no longer knew to whom we were to address our complaints. Power drifted subtly back and forth through networks of international treaties, multinational corporations and financial markets. "I'm totally ready to throw Molotov cocktails," you said to yourself after class, "but at whom?" "Should I throw them at California retirees, or at the punk who traded in his Doc Marten's for a stockbroker's suit?" Power was no longer visible except under the guise of these ridiculous icons. Its headquarters had been transformed into a bank of facades with nothing behind them—Nike, for example, now subcontracts the lion's share of its production work so that the company proper can focus on the intangible, on its brand image. To fully appreciate this vanishing act all you needed to do was to stop for a moment and remember the way the world looked before it happened. Every once in a while

there were still taboos, still instances of censorship. It didn't really matter exactly what they were so long as there were still a few walls to tear down. In the 60s in the famous photos Gilles Caron took around the Sorbonne in May 1968, the confrontation was one of flesh and bone. The demonstrators' target was a superstructure made of ideology and concrete. These days, however, you have the G8 representatives hiding out on a boat off the coast of Genoa to avoid contact with the crowds. The WTO deported itself to out-of-the-way Qatar to keep the people at bay. The organizers have floated the idea of holding future summits in cyberspace. Thus, once mature, the new captivity became a universe of two-way mirrors in which power enjoyed the attributes of gods; it became intangible, transcendent and omnipresent.¹⁷

All throughout my adolescence, I watched the crowned heads of the world join in a collective cringe. I watched them bow down one by one in infinite reverence. It reminded me of those Russian dolls where each figurine opens to reveal another, smaller one that in turn conceals another, even smaller, and so on to infinity . . . Such was the fate of anyone who tried to trace responsibility for the damage wrought by the system. Lift up one mask and there was another, never a face. You could keep pulling off the masks until there was nothing left but a gaping hole, and from that void oozed the despair of the early 90s. Ask who was responsible and you risked falling in yourself. If a worker was laid off, if a peasant was thrown off his land, if a region was polluted, if a culture was destroyed, the anger generated was simply sucked into that abyss, along with any potential for revolt. Nothing remained but a chain of individual wills amplified by networks of machines. I saw this clearly when I interviewed the president of the world's most

powerful pension fund, CalPERS, an institution whose mission is to finance the retirement of California's civil servants by investing their savings. Bill Crist was a guy with a handsome mustache and lots of good intentions. A former economics professor, he spoke of his fund as though it were a charity organization. "I have a million small investors, civil servants like her, for example," he said, pointing to his humbly-dressed assistant, "who are counting on me for their retirement. I used to be a civil rights activist and a union organizer . . . but it became clear to me that it is useless to fight from the outside. You have to fight capitalism from the inside." From the inside! One more time, I heard those magic words of abdication, bringing the old nausea back with them. Everything was *inside*, nothing was left outside. And it wasn't me saying it, it was a former civil rights activist and union leader, a man now in charge of more than a billion dollars, who represented more than a million civil servants . . . As we were sitting there in his office, he asked me what I wanted to do. I wondered whether it was possible to visit the trading room. We walked down the long corridor and Bill Crist opened a door. There it was! Computers, price curves. A Bloomberg TV feed flickered from monitors suspended in the corners of the room. Traders vibrated with activity, buying and selling. At the time, I had been working on a fable called "A Day in the Life of a Tire," one of those exercises where you follow the life of some product from raw material to end-use and then try to derive a moral from the story. I had begun my journey in the hevea plantations of southern Thailand, where natural rubber is harvested. The small growers had come to the conclusion that the Chinese middlemen who bought their harvest were to blame for their poverty, while the buyers explained to me that their

hands were tied by the multinationals that set the rubber prices. The Thai Minister of Agriculture himself told me as much. There was nothing he could do. So I went to Akron, Ohio, to the headquarters of Goodyear to talk to *their* president, a nice Egyptian guy named Sam Gibara. During our talk, he kept on repeating how it was the “market” that was responsible. “And among the most important actors in that market,” he told me, “are pension funds.” And that’s how I wound up at CalPERS talking to Bill Crist, in that room where the money belonged to Mr. Everyman, that is to say, to no one. Power no longer appeared under the sign of the pyramid. Now it had become a chain of hourglasses open at the top and bottom to a swarm of minute actors: tiny workers of the land on one side, and small investors on the other. Only the level of unhappiness changed. For the retirees of California, it was an unhappiness with life-support, a small home in a Bay Area suburb and a choice of baseball and football on the TV. For the Thai growers, it was the rawest poverty, devoid of assistance besides the meager aid they might receive from the local cooperative, 1,000 trees to bleed each day, a few microcredits and a barking dog in the street in front of a ramshackle hovel. An unhappiness vulnerable to bad weather. Between these two extremes, there was business, cabling, the information superhighways and its nodes of control, dispersed power, a family fortune here, an inheritance there, themselves only bottlenecks where wealth builds up before flowing out elsewhere. So whose fault is it? Football’s? The barking dog’s? Is bad weather to blame? Is Thailand? Is San Francisco?¹⁸

To better understand how this vanishing was accomplished, I reopened the old and dog-eared books of that sage skinhead, the great master of rebel bodies and

deviants, of the sick, the queers and lesbians, the one to whom I owe much of my own carnal curiosity: Michel Foucault. Incidentally, I have to admit that I tried for a long time to find a pair of glasses just like his. Those glasses seemed to sum up the period perfectly—thick and black on the top of the rims, like ersatz communist intellectuals used to wear, and delicately circled on the bottom, as if to suggest a world snapped up by structure. Alas, they didn't make them anymore. Not trendy enough for opticians, not valuable enough for antique dealers, not funky enough to be included among the *situ* bling-blings and T-shirts in the artier flea markets. When I began to reread Foucault he seemed outdated as well. He had taught me about the first dematerialization of power, when power shifted to intermediary institutions to irradiate bodies and souls. He showed me that the state itself could no longer be the target of revolt; only the current flowing from power was accessible to criticism. He wrote of the myriad conditions imposed on the flesh, of the secondary sites onto which discipline applied its power. The battlefield had been extended to the peripheries of the state apparatus, and so education, psychiatry and the military came under the scrutiny of the critic. Yet in terms of liberation, there was only feeble progress. From now on, criticism was to turn its gaze elsewhere, above our heads, towards the shifting non-space where power now drafted its orders in utter secrecy.

In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault suggested that an examination of the development of carceral techniques would reveal the way modern power operated. He sifted through the past, studying implements of torture, the remarks of executioners, the sentences of kings and the darker passages of judiciary gazettes. From these jour-

neys through the Archive he returned with a masterful, brilliant, remarkable symbol that would become *the* metaphor for power for years to come: the Panopticon. “A circular building wrapped around a central tower with large windows looking out on the interior façade of the circle. The peripheral building is divided into cells running its entire width. They have two windows, the first facing the outside and allowing light to flood the entirety of the cell. It then suffices to station a single watchman in the central tower and fill each cell with a mental or medical patient, a criminal, a worker or a student.”¹⁹ I was a quick study and, emulating my master, set out somewhat more modestly to sift through the present. I checked out the French National Assembly’s 1997 report on prisons, and in this book I found a rather pathetic and burlesque counterpart to the form Foucault had chosen to embody modern power: the electronic bracelet, a new type of control that was being proposed as an alternative to incarceration. Even the name was ridiculous. I mean, *electronic bracelet*? The way it tied fashion to surveillance, jewelry to control . . . it reminded you of a marketing gimmick from a tacky online store. I even fantasized about buying one to show off at the beach. The Assembly heard the presentation of one Eric Lallement, “Undersecretary of Organization and Operations, Field Staff, Department of Corrections.” He took care to explain that the technique was already in use in Holland, Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. This is how he described the system:

“It is a plastic bracelet with a fiber optic cord running through it. Cutting the bracelet automatically triggers an alarm. The bracelet contains a device that emits a continuous signal, and is approximately three times thicker than a watch. [. . .] It is not particularly pretty. [. . .]

The second technical element is a device that is installed at the residence of the person or the place where the person is to be surveiled. [. . .]

This device is connected to a telephone link and generates an alarm if the person moves out of a radius of 50 meters from the device. It emits a signal regularly, about once every minute approximately, to which the bracelet responds. When there is no response because the person has moved out of a 50 meter radius, an alarm is generated and then we go to the next technical element, which is the place where alarm will be received. [. . .] Finally, the last technical element is the surveillance center where all the information is compiled [. . .] This place can be inside a penal establishment, inside a halfway house, at a probation site or in any other place deemed appropriate.”²⁰

Two of the principles Foucault saw embodied by the Panopticon also apply to the electronic monitoring bracelet. First, the asymmetrical relationship that allows the watcher see the watched without being seen. Second, the internalization of the mechanism of control by the prisoner, making him “the principle of his own subjection.” “The individual subjected to a field of visibility, and who is aware of it, himself becomes the agent of the constraints placed upon him by power—he spontaneously applies them to his own person.” On the other hand, the monitoring bracelet explodes the site of the power relation: no more prison cell, no more circular building, no more center, no more periphery—just a broadcast antenna, a receiving antenna and nomadic poles of surveillance. All that is needed is to enlarge the free-roam zone. Within these limits, we can come and go as we please, desire, amuse ourselves, rebel. We have the right

to create, to imagine, to dream freely. We are not under any constraint at all, since as we move, the signal of the bracelet moves with us, seeming to expand the range of our liberty. In the same way, power's new intangibility creates a form of incarceration without walls. All you have to do is look at the financial press. "In response to poor management in Argentina, sanctions have been applied . . ." As soon as a country steps out of the magic circle, alarms begin to go off in the remote centers of power. "After years of ignoring its ballooning debt, foreign investors are sending a signal to Mexico to get back on track." Financial markets send signals. They beep. They launch volleys that sometimes are harmless and other times mortal. They supervise. Day after day, market indicators are so obsessively scrutinized—national debt, deficits, gross national product and other, even grosser things—that in a fate similar to that of the prisoners of the bracelet, the liberty of entire peoples is magnificently annihilated in favor of an *appearance* of liberty, an *authorized range*.

A Dried Locust

The fifth pillar of the new captivity is almost too familiar to my generation to even mention here. I'm talking about *co-option*. The very word speaks volumes to those who like me, ran to the counterculture for shelter. For this reason, I won't go into its history. I'll leave it to each reader to stew in his or her own memories: rock & roll, Malcolm McClaren, rap, the hollow cheeks of junkies popping up in the spreads of glossy fashion magazines . . . whatever it is. By absorbing the margins, capitalism has managed to get the avant-garde, the under-

ground and marketing seminars singing the same tune. It took decades for white rock to finish looting the heritage of American blacks but things move much faster now. Today, culture is created, understood and accepted as a commercial product from the very start. As anarchist Hakim Bey points out in *Immediatism*, “It has been noticed that all the more advanced and intense art-experiences have become recuperable almost instantly by the media, and are thus rendered into trash like all other trash in the ghostly world of commodities. [. . .] Everything delicate and beautiful, from Surrealism to Breakdancing, ends up as fodder for McDeath’s ads; 15 minutes later, all the magic has been sucked out, and the art itself dead as a dried locust. The media-wizards, who are nothing if not postmodernists, have even begun to feed on the vitality of ‘Trash,’ like vultures regurgitating and re-consuming the same carrion, in an obscene ecstasy of self-referentiality. Which way to the Egress?”²¹

During the 90s, this festival of vultures was completed by two big events which allowed capitalism to fully co-opt the spirit of revolt and integrate it into the heart of consumer society. By superimposing the rhetoric of the “new economy” over the communist utopia of a classless society and by touting diversity as an aesthetic norm, it was able to impose what some friends of mine and I have called the “Economics of Permanent Revolution,” what with a bit more marketing savvy, you might refer to as “Rebellionomics,” the economics of the rebel age. You could even stretch it into a business book: *Protest for Profit*. But it was getting late, and anyway, we weren’t marketing consultants, so we left it there, sticking with those three words that seemed to explain our predicament. “The Economics of Permanent Revolution” describes a system of capital accumulation based on

rebellion and protest. From this modest insight, we drew an even more shocking conclusion: capitalism is now and for all time the only authentically revolutionary system. Anyone who denies it is a reactionary.

It was in the U.S., around 1992 or 1993, that capitalism's aesthetic norm shifted. I learned this from Naomi Klein's book *No Logo*. During her college years, Klein was immersed in identity politics. She was furious that so few women, African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Asians, gays, and lesbians were present in the canon. "A great number of our battles dealt with questions of 'representation', a rather vague rubric of grievances directed primarily at the media, university curricula and the English language."²² I could imagine this blessed moment in the history of the American conscience, where revolt was limited to defending quotas, I could see young Naomi and a few earnest teenagers wringing their hands together on green campus quads. It was a perfectly defined struggle, with no gray areas. More African-Americans, more women, more Puerto Ricans . . . this ethnic opportunism directed its criticism less at power itself than at the conditions of holding power. Identity politics served the same purpose for American anger that the critique of the spectacle had for European internationalism: it was a refuge for dissidence. At least until something better came along . . .

As she moved through college, Naomi watched as the good cause fell apart. Before she had even begun her long inquiry into the strategies corporations used to seduce young people, she witnessed her own co-option, women, African-Americans, Puerto Ricans, queers, dwarves, whatever, all of her precious minorities were transformed before her eyes into fodder for advertising messages. A junkie with a needle in one arm and a bottle of Pepsi in

the other was the pinnacle of hip. “The brands seemed to say to us, you wanted diversity, here you go.”²³ One after another, the identity groups’ demands for representation were met by commerce, and doubts began to creep into her well-intentioned heart. “The crowning of sexual and racial diversity as pop culture and advertising’s new superstar clearly created a kind of identity crisis.”²⁴ Elbowing art aside, capitalism took over the business of critiquing its own aesthetic. Diversity replaced white conformity, and business widened the spectrum of its own discourse to englobe everything that the counterculture had formerly represented: the bizarre, the eccentric, the mixture of belief systems. All these became the latest thing in makeup for capital. And as it was brushed onto the pages of glossy magazines, the fellow-travelers of dissidence were left to leaf through their memories. The avant-garde was no longer avant anything. Everything that had once been relegated to the margins of culture now awoke to find itself at the epicenter.

While on the surface, some observers were right to worry that: “[. . .] In the nice neighborhoods of the world’s largest cities, the spice of diversity is giving way before an explosive offensive of standardization, homogenization and uniformization,”²⁵ the blossoming reality was completely different. To uniformity, brands preferred the image of an adorable exoticism. It became less interesting to sell a monoculture than to “supply each individual, across the entire world, with a kind of spice mix. At the end of the 20th century, the marketing spiel was coming from the mouth of Ricky Martin, not the Marlboro Man: a bilingual mixture of North and South, of Latino and rhythm & blues, all of it wrapped up in the sing along lyrics of an international party.”²⁶ This was sadly confirmed for me when I met with the communications

director of McDonald's France. "Our clocks are set to local time," he explained. Touting the company's global reach was too ostentatious, too egocentric. He corrected himself: "*Chez McDo*"—he started every sentence this way—"we've set out to adapt our production to the diversity of cultures, to the environment." And while he droned on about the virtues of the latest French-style McDonald's combo, I recalled an article by Jean-Marie Messier, the now-fallen super-CEO of Vivendi. A few weeks earlier, he had published a kind of hymn to diversity in the pages of *Le Monde*. He had his top advisers write so much of the article that it gave the impression of having been written by a *Wallpaper* columnist. At that moment, I felt as though the captivity had reached its culmination in the achievement of a uniform diversity. "Senegal," wrote Jean-Marie Messier, in rock critic mode, "after having imported rap music, completely *Senegalized* it and transformed it into one of the most active and outspoken forms of local political expression [. . .] As for the electronic music that had its origin in Detroit, thanks to French DJs, it engendered the 'French Touch' that we dance to today . . . in Detroit." What can you do? Which way to the Egress? Is there a window left anywhere, in a corner even, to jump or vomit from?

Be subversive, dangerous, visionary, hostile, anarchist, punk, strung-out, whatever. "Destruction is cool," taught management guru Tom Peters in his book *The Circle of Innovation*. Such was the rhetoric of the economics of permanent revolution. You didn't even need to read books like Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.²⁷ You just had to open your eyes: United States, 1996. London, 1997. Paris, spring, 2000. The new economy is off and running. Welcome to cyber-

space. Death to hierarchy. It was as though the spring of 1968 was being remarketed “New and Improved,” and like that other spring, slogans didn’t need billboards, but were written right on the walls. The slogans urged us to change the world, to recreate it according to our desires, to play as much as we wanted. Those who had read the American magazines from the west coast knew that one day or another, the springtime of the wired would soon reach the freeways of France. But who could have predicted its scope? The boosters were all ready. It was a perfect story, for didn’t the new economic have its roots in the California counterculture? Didn’t it all begin with hippies who listened to John Lennon, smoked joints, wore platform shoes and long hair, and dropped acid according to the teachings of Timothy Leary? That’s where it all started, in the middle of the psychedelic era, a few miles from campuses overrun by student activists. That’s where the founding fathers of e-commerce had begun their work. The media quickly drew their conclusions: the new economy reconciled insurrection and the spirit of free enterprise. “In the new universe, everything is possible because creativity, reactivity and flexibility are the new buzzwords.”²⁸ Judging by the enthusiasm of the columnists in French newspapers, we were entering a utopia worthy of Fourier. *Openspace*, an architectural concept born in the squats that sheltered English punks in the 80s, now reappeared in more businesslike clothes as the idea behind internet incubators for young entrepreneurs. Quite naturally, the internet ate away at the last vestiges of authority. Management manuals reoriented themselves toward permanent revolution. There would no longer be any bosses, supervisors, inspectors or bureaucracies. What May 1968 failed to accomplish in the street, the web would deliver, and in the halls and

boardrooms of commerce itself. We stepped boldly into the era of fulfilled anarchism, of a capitalism that knew neither God nor master—an economy without oppression. The business models of the new economy welcomed even the heresy of gratuity: a free connection to a world of services that cost nothing more than the willingness to put up with a bit of advertising on one’s screen. In a few months, the New Spirit of capitalism forged in the Ivy League business schools of the West busted out onto the scene. While companies like Apple dug deep in their pockets to license the great icons of the counterculture—*El Ché*, Gandhi, Bob Dylan—for their ad spots, the figure of the ideal entrepreneur began to take shape: he had to be a rebel, a maverick, a superman. “For this, he must have intuition and talent, in the same sense we mean when we speak of artistic talent. His gaze sweeps across the world around him in search of new signs and he is always predicting, anticipating and sniffing out the links worth pursuing.”²⁹

Laughter from the Mud

Faced with the new captivity, there were at first only two options open to us: despair or laugh. I should add that in the beginning despair was the only option; laughter came later. You see, a man or a woman who grew up in the era of endings, who saw Situationism give itself up before the onrush of commodities, who saw their revolt put on sale in department stores—anyone who grows up in such circumstances and desires freedom can only begin their existence in despair. This is the state from which the children of the collapse are struggling to extricate themselves. For Naomi Klein, it’s what made it necessary for

her to write her book: “I spent a good part of my last year in college discussing, with my best friend Lan Ying, the absurdity of living in a world where everything had already been done [. . .]. We could leave the straight and narrow path of career materialism, but it was only to enter another narrow path—the road of the people who did not follow the road [. . .]. Do you want to travel? Become a modern Jack Kerouac? Here’s the *Let’s Go Europe* path. You want to be a rebel? Avant garde artist? Go to the used bookstore and pick up your ‘alternative’ path, dusty, worm-eaten and worn down to the bone. Every place we could imagine changed before our eyes into a bundle of clichés—like in a Jeep ad or a standup comedy routine.”³⁰

Some will see in this despair the recurrent capriciousness of the spoiled children of the West, which History has so often condemned to boredom. “That nameless evil” that Serenus, the friend of Seneca was unable to describe in the philosopher’s *On Tranquility of Mind*. After all, a few weeks after the events of May 1968, didn’t Pierre Vianson-Ponté write a piece in *Le Monde* entitled “France is Bored”? There was some truth to it. Boredom is a powerful catalyst of revolt. It has been ever since the French Revolution imposed the bourgeois ideal as the norm. And it will continue to be so for years to come: the delights and pleasures of capitalism are only capable of satisfying half our needs. It is only natural that the other half should occasionally awaken to remind us that in addition to our longing to possess lies a longing to be. But we were not there yet. Absent suicide, despair was for the time being the only viable option for us.³¹

Out of this despair came a burst of laughter. Initially, it became a weapon against guilt. It said: “Since there is nothing we can do about it, we might as well have a good

time.” And gradually, almost in spite of ourselves, the laughter replaced the despair. During this period—the beginning of the 90s—we chose laughter over freedom. It was the laughter of the vanquished, which unbeknownst to us was quietly filling our world with cynicism. “From radio to the press, from advertising to television channels, from boardrooms to coffeehouses, the same type of laughter has appeared almost everywhere—as a symbol, a guarantor and an expression of democracy,”³² wrote Jean-Paul Curnier. Make no mistake, we’re not talking about a spontaneous explosion of joy. No, this laughter was born on the day after our funeral vigil, out of the ashes of ends. It was born as a defense against the two-headed memory of disillusion and horror, after the great abdication of power, and the dematerialization of the world . . . Yes, in that laughter pickled in the aesthetic of resignation, we heard the booming eulogy of human will and the thunderous applause that greeted the appearance of abdication on the stage. It was the laughter of the editors-in-chief who force feed us with outrageous facts and garnish them with snide little turns of phrase to emphasize that writing against one’s times is completely pointless.

When I go back and try to pinpoint the first appearance of that laughter, a certain image always haunts me. Was it in Guatemala, in the Honduras? An amazing spectacle. A sacred spectacle, par excellence. I was barely ten years old. It was on television. It was a little girl, right in front of the camera. Actually, it wasn’t a little girl, it was a little girl’s head, sticking up out of a mudpond, the rest of her body already submerged. The body already gone and the head too, vanishing. There, just a few yards from me, from us, from everyone. Thousands of miles away

from everyone too. And the rescuers! Where were the rescuers? There were none. The only thing you could do was watch the little head of the little girl in the mudpond. If I had to locate the source of that laughter, I'd look around that mudpond, even in the mud, in the spectacle of that mud. Because there too, suddenly, the image neutralized our outrage and laughter allowed us to bear our helplessness without dying of shame. Yes, we didn't kill ourselves on that day. Maybe we should have . . . out of dignity.

The laughter has changed since then. It's no longer a means of surviving despair. Now it is an instrument of submission. It is used incessantly to ridicule our dreams. I still remember those images from 1996, the ones that showed the "Intergalactic Conference" organized by Subcomandante Marcos. The TV news sought to prove its own relevance by showing the "behind the scenes" of the event, that was their "angle" on the story. Watching the media watching the media watching the media . . . The images showed a wall of cameras facing the head of the Zapatista Army, French intellectuals lost in the jungles of Lacandone, folklore and T-shirts bearing the image of the "Sub." The whole little demi-monde of global resistance wallowed in the mud. For there was mud there too. Mud around the huts, mud on the paths. There was unending heavy rain. The leaky roof let the rain in and mud filled the interior of the dormitories. Why was an area that furnished 40% of Mexico's hydroelectric power awash in mud within minutes of the first drops of rain? We might have asked ourselves that. Why in spite of huge oil and gas reserves did the building lack running water? Finally, why did that mud resemble the treatment reserved for the 10 million indians living in Mexico? Yes! We MIGHT HAVE . . . but no, we preferred another response, more modern, more Situationist,

and admittedly, more conformist. What we saw was the farce of these intellectuals wallowing in the mud while the Zapatista uprising was *saved by 4x4s*. We got the message all right: misery is a spectacle. Oppression is an image. The little girl is in the mud. No one can help. It's the camera that's the problem. It's better to criticize the frame than what's inside it; at least the frame can be changed. You can't change the world. And anyway, like the angry queen said, "desiring revolt is already revolt." So that would be the angle: Marcos Superstar, and the Intergalactic Conference rained out. Just like Wimbledon. Very funny. That would make a nice punch line. We laugh in the editing room: pretty funny, those "I Love Marcos" T-shirts in the central market of San Cristóbal. "Did you see the American with the Ché Guevara pin? *Elle* called him a 'Fashion guerilla.'"

Seen through the humor of mass dandyism, the Zapatista uprising looks like a fall runway show. "It would seem as though Helmut Lang is trying to invent ski-mask style . . ." The whole world knows it. Nothing means anything. The entire world is in the mud, in the laughter of mud. "Chiapas is being bled through a thousand different channels: oil pipelines, gas pipelines, power lines, freight cars, through bank accounts, through trucks and pickups, boats and planes, secret trails, dirt roads, tracks and pathways; these lands continue to pay their tribute to various empires: Oil, electric energy, cattle, money, coffee, bananas, honey, corn, cocoa, tobacco, sugar, soy, melons, sorghum, melons, mamey sapote, mangos, tamarind, avocados—and Chiapan blood flows out through 1,001 fangs sunk into the neck of southeastern Mexico. Billions of tons of natural resources go through Mexican ports, railway stations, airports, and road systems to various destinations: the United States,

Canada, Holland, Germany, Italy, Japan—but all with the same destiny: to feed the empire. The dues that capitalism imposes on the southeast corner of the country ooze out, as they have since the beginning, in mud and blood.”³³ What should we have heard in Marcos’ words here? The story of capitalism’s penetration of a remote backwater? A collection of cold statistics or rather the insurgent lyricism of a people cheated out of their life’s blood, the funeral music of a wilderness converted into a system of commodity flows, of a primordial abundance pillaged by the logic of scarcity? The spectacle dismantled the world’s reality, and with it went our capacity for outrage. We became little better than a studio audience for an unending performance. We were invited to submit our judgments, but as though we were film critics at a premiere. All the classic causes of revolt have now become raw materials themselves, commodities circulating through the same system, following the same routes as sorghum, tamarind and mangoes. They have Controlled Origin Labels and an exotic aftertaste.

If you want to understand *mass dandyism* in the era of the new captivity, start by imagining a man seated atop a pile of garbage, laughing. He knows each piece of trash in the pile by name; in fact, that’s exactly set him off laughing. He can still be affected by *particular* things, but the sum of his experience with the world’s objects has killed his desire to see things *in particular*. Not because he is blind—it’s that he can’t rid himself of the vision of the trash heap, which has made looking at things *in particular* seem pointless. He’s no brute. On the contrary, he’s a sensitive soul, feminine, incapable of violence. It’s just that he’s given up. If he’s laughing, it’s because he has *chosen* to live on the trash heap, and not against it. He’s

made it his home, his closet, his smoking room and his study. Laughter is his aesthetic . . . an aesthetic of resignation. Generally speaking, *mass dandyism* is not into evil. The idea of doing evil is repugnant to it, but at the same time it finds morality profoundly boring. It laughs out of principle, as a defense against the seriousness of those who want to teach it what it knows already. But from the top of its trash pile, it is often struck by a deep fatigue. Drunk with laughter, it stumbles on the idea that to sit *on top* of the garbage is also to be *part of* the garbage, and that by laughing so much it has actually *become* garbage. By becoming so familiar with mediocrity, *mass dandyism* has actually become mediocre *itself*. At first it only brushes against mediocrity, skirts it, avoids it, grazes it ever so slightly. Then it caresses it. Then . . . just a taste. Then it dives right in. Gets used to it. And so begins the period of getting rich . . . just to get rich. WITHOUT A MISSION. The memory of despair recedes and cynicism takes over completely. Brute calculation takes over from subtlety. Its denial continues a while longer, sometimes for an entire lifetime. Nevertheless, the last sparks of revolt sink below the waters and the cynical laughter flies ever higher, irresistible and resigned.