

Seminar Two:

THE PARKING LOT OF BABEL

We've been looking at consumer culture through a peculiar lens.

Yesterday, I told you about a dream. It happened when I was 12 or 13 years old. In the dream, I saw a parade marching down the street. I also saw Things with a capital "T" looming over the parade. They were translucent as a soap bubble and tall as an ten story building -- think Godzilla-sized paramecium. These creatures, I realized, were aliens. Extraterrestrials. An invasion had taken place, but in a subtle, even subliminal manner that nobody noticed. The parade was under the control of forces which the marching band, the clowns, and the people on the floats did not recognize. As I watched, people began stepping off the sidewalks, joining the parade.

Then I woke up.

As a fan of science fiction, I was intrigued by the idea of an alien invasion that nobody noticed and was pleased when John Carpenter's film, "They Live," toyed with a similar premise. But "They Live" turned out to be more "Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots" than "Metropolis".

So far, I have encountered only one thing which captures the strange subtlety and pathos and complexity of that dream. It's called commodification. I first learned of it in a book by Vincent Miller titled, "Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture."

As you may have guessed, it is a work of non-fiction. Which is a little scary.

Commodification trains us to shop for happiness. Yesterday, we discussed how this training takes place below cognitive radar, beneath thought, prior to choice -- so that without realizing it we end up marching to the beat of a different drummer.

We also looked at how this strange, subliminal invasion quietly changes us -- something like the pod

people in the original Invasion of the Body Snatchers. They were sleeping. In the parade, I suppose, we are sleepwalking.

Today, we are looking at how such a cultural invasion could have happened in the first place. Invisible. Subliminal. Under our very noses. Were there no Martian war machines sighted at the edge of London as in "War of the Worlds"? Was there no amoral scientific genius who collaborated with the would-be invaders as in Roger Corman's oddly memorable cheapie, "It Conquered the World" or Howard Hawk's "The Thing from Another World"? Or was the invisible invader something from inner space, a Monster from the Id as in the uberclassic, "Forbidden Planet"?

This may seem like a cute contrivance, looking at some overarching cultural change in terms of alien invasions and evil geniuses. Actually, I find that I can see political and philosophical concepts with greater clarity through the lens of fantasy, horror and science fiction. In particular, there is something uniquely philosophical about stories of invasion and apocalyptic upheavals -- with their visions of modern civilization overthrown and shell-shocked individuals forced to look at their own humanity and decide what is worth fighting for.

Take "Dawn of the Dead" for example. I remember seeing George Romero's original version when I was just a preteen. Due to its outrageous gore, Romero had released it minus any film rating in order to avoid a "rated X." This meant that when my brother and I showed the newspaper ad to my Mom she saw no particular warning about this odd little horror movie. So my Mom, my little brother and I all trotted down to the Westgate Theater to see "Dawn of the Dead." Within the first five minutes of the film a zombie calmly bites a chunk out of a woman's shoulder and an innocent bystander gets his head blown off. I was riveted -- an immediate candidate for what my friend, Rod Bennett, calls

“the widening wet spot.” Nothing, I repeat, Nothing had ever frightened me so deeply or grabbed my imagination so completely. Later, when I was back home in my bed (yes, my Mom allowed all three of us to sit through the whole film!), I lay there in the dark, staring up at the ceiling. Was I fending off a series of disturbing, gory images? No. I was carefully working out what would happen if there really was some kind of zombie apocalypse. What would happen to society? To school? To people in cities? To people like me in rural Georgia? Was there any way to save the human race? Were zombies still human in any way?

I recall deciding it was best to use the railroads to get around -- walking the tracks or perhaps commandeering one of those seesaw driven rolling platforms. After all, zombies were drawn by instinct to places that were important to them in life -- like, in Romero’s wry observation, the mall. Few zombies would find themselves drawn to the local railroad tracks. And, if any happened to show up, there was a wide grassy space between the tracks and the treeline. Plenty of time to grab your pump-action pellet rifle (which could conceivably punch a hole in a rotting zombie’s forehead and wouldn’t draw attention like a rifle).

In the same spirit of speculation and imagination, let’s take a look at the apocalypse known as commodification -- not to be cute, but because it really is an invasion, an upheaval, and we are the rag tag team of survivors who have to deal with it.

First, enter the collaborator. The mad scientist. The evil genius. The fellow who, in his insane zeal for knowledge, opens the door to forces beyond his reckoning.

Enter Frederick Taylor, mechanical engineer and management consultant circa 1911.

All Taylor wanted to do was apply clear-headed science to the way people work.

This required a revolutionary change in the way

work was done. At that time, craftsmen, from their vantage point as skilled experts, set the standards for how much work might reasonably be accomplished in a given work day. Craftsmen were also the sources of traditional knowledge about HOW the work should be done in their particular trade. This practical knowledge, of course, was passed on from master craftsman to apprentice.

The craft system was an obstacle to Taylor. He proposed, instead, that “all of the traditional knowledge which in the past has been possessed by the workmen” should belong to management. Workers were self-indulgent. Management was concerned with efficiency and higher productivity; therefore, planning and know-how belonged to management. Simple execution belonged to the worker. It was necessary to “remove all possible brainwork from the shop,” said Taylor, and to raise efficiency to such a finely tuned level that the worker became “an interchangeable part of an interchangeable machine making interchangeable parts.”

Taylor’s method, in a nutshell, was this: take skilled jobs and divide them into simple tasks which require less thought and little training. These “discreet measurable elements,” as Miller puts it, then “could be experimentally modified to maximize output.”

An example:

At the Bethlehem Iron Company, workers were hand-loading 11.5 tons of “pig” iron per day. Taylor claimed he could quadruple the quota to 47 tons per day. This would require a single worker to carry in a single day 1,156 pigs of iron, each of which weighed 92 pounds.

Nevertheless, Taylor had worked out in scientific detail how this could be accomplished. For his guinea pig, Taylor chose a fellow he called “Schmidt.” This man, Taylor explained, had “been observed to trot back home for a mile or so after his work in the evening, about as fresh as he was when he came trotting down to work in the morning.”

In Taylor’s view, this betrayed energy resources better spent at work. In fact, Schmidt had been observed “...putting up the walls of a little house for himself in the morning before starting to work and at night after leaving.”

A manager told Schmidt exactly when to move the 92 pound pigs of iron. Then, exactly when to sit down and rest. Then, exactly when to get up again. Schmidt made Taylor's quota and received a 60-percent pay increase.

One can be sure, however, that Schmidt no longer felt like building a house that afternoon (or much in favor of "trotting down to work in the morning"). This side-effect was actually rather central. In Schmidt's day, the home was, by definition, a nucleus of productivity and self-sufficiency. As Miller puts it, "[Schmidt's] home was a center of production as much as consumption. His wife worked as hard as he did: growing a garden, buying only basic foodstuffs, doing most of the preparing and preserving of the food they ate." When Taylor's scientific management caught on, workers were too exhausted to build, and craft, and preserve, and till, and harvest. In time, instead of gardening, they bought canned food. Instead of making their own quilts and furniture and various practical necessities, they bought it all at Wal-Mart.

The modern consumer was born.

Thus, the mad scientist, bursting with enthusiasm for his discovery, flipped the switch and brought this vast machine to life -- with little regard for its affect on humanity and no clue about the forces he had unleashed.

While Taylor's ultra-efficient workers repeated and repeated and repeated their drone-like tasks, something was happening inside them. Taylor thought he had "taken all the brainwork out of the shop," but he should have known better than that.

"In the past," Taylor wrote, "Man has been first. In the future the system must be first." Henry Ford took Taylor's management paradigm and combined it with the automated production line. Within four years, Ford's production facility in Highland Park, Michigan increased its output by an astounding 1,200 percent. Ford went even further in this mechanical methodology, creating a cor-

porate "Sociology Department." Machinery must be maintained, routinely calibrated. Similarly, the Sociology Department visited Ford employees at home to monitor their way of life. Habits of hygiene, leisure time, alcohol use and even sexual activity were duly recorded for future reference and possible modification incentives.

Of course, the Sociology Department had no clue about what was really going on.

Anonymous drones performing mechanical piece work have little satisfaction in the end product. It bears no trace of their humanity. Gone is the element of creative self-discovery or even the satisfaction of mere competence. As Marx put it, Ford's assembly line drones were stuck in "external work" which had no connection to their "essential being." As a result, the worker "only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself."

This was alienation. People were separated from natural, beneficial aspects of being human. Using one's mind, body and heart to develop one's skills, one's craft, is part of being human -- whether you are a child working with construction paper and crayons or a web designer using Photoshop and Dreamweaver on a G5. We are, after all, made in the image of a creative God.

There was also alienation from the community. Taking delight in what one has created and sharing that delight with the community are also part of being human. With the advent of scientific management, instead of providing goods for one's neighbors, contributing to the general wellbeing of the community, and enjoying the relationships that developed, workers simply "showed up for work." The community that existed among craftsmen and customers largely disappeared.

Alienation, in this context, is separation from what is Good -- with a capital "G" -- about being human. Thus, work that intentionally excludes head and heart is called "machinelike," "dehumanizing," or "soul deadening."

The psychic space these capital "G" Goods once occupied in workers' lives stood empty. It was as though these Capital "G" Goods occupied a neighborhood in the human soul -- with creativity and

community and so on each set up in their own Victorian style home. Taylor creates a forced evacuation. Everybody is crammed into these windowless concrete dormitories beside the factories. That old neighborhood is still there, vacant -- but it could not remain vacant for long. Something was bound to step in.

And so we come to the alien invasion. A different world makes contact with our own.

According to economic theorists like Guy DeBord, what stepped in was an abstraction.

Capital "G" Goods once looked to as markers of identity and belonging were gone. A different sort of value took their place -- an abstract way of calculating what one was worth.

When people "showed up for work," they sold portions of their life -- their time and energy -- at a previously negotiated exchange rate. Their exchange value was, let's say, 3 dollars an hour. This abstract notion of exchange value stepped into the place once occupied by capital "G" Goods.

This brought about, according to Guy DeBord, a fundamental shift in self-definition and self-perception -- a descent from "being" to "having."

"Being" refers to the inherent dignity of being human. You exist. You are human. Your life has value, dignity, apart from anything you may do. We can affirm this as Christians; how Marx or DeBord affirmed this nobility from their anti-Christian outlook is unclear to me. But we don't have to agree with everything Marx or DeBord said to find them truthful in some areas.

"Having," on the other hand, means basing one's value on what one possesses. Another word for "having" is "consuming." Thus, exchange value becomes a way of seeing oneself and -- because you are using exchange value wages to purchase commodities, as in, "Given my own exchange value, what is the relative exchange value of this oatmeal?"

-- it becomes a way of seeing in general. Everything is ascribed an exchange value. All exchange values are an abstraction. Therefore, we see everything in terms of an abstraction.

"Exchange value" replaced the more noble "use value." Here, an example may help. When I was a kid, my grandfather would load me up in his nicotine mobile and drive to the local Nu-Way hotdog franchise. This restaurant was within walking distance of Chi-Chester's Pharmacy. While my grandfather chatted with the staff of Nu-Way, I would visit the ample comic book and magazine racks of Chi-Chesters, returning with a stack of comics carefully narrowed down from a much larger but entirely unaffordable stack. When the staff of Nu-Way poked fun at these comics, my grandfather would defend me by saying, "Those comic books might be worth something one day." This was true. The exchange value of these comics would almost certainly increase in the next decade or so. But as I sat there, eating french fries, my total absorption in Batman's current adventures -- related to me by the awesome graphics of Neal Adams and Dick Giordano -- told me the joy these comics inspired would always trump any cash value.

My grandfather's "exchange value" justification for those comics, God love him, was abstracted from their real meaning or "use value" to me. His perceived value was not based on an esteem for the human creativity and craft of the comic as art, but was based on artificial signifiers like financial status, branding, collectibility. In other words, I saw the thing itself, while my grandfather -- like a lot of folks who could care less about comics -- was able to relate to the comic only in a form "once removed" from the thing itself.

That is where the doppelganger comes in. We see not the thing itself, but its exchange value doppelganger. To repeat, everything is ascribed an exchange value. All exchange values are an abstraction. Therefore, we see everything in terms of an abstraction. Into that psychic space once occupied by capital "G" Goods steps an abstraction which sets the stage for further abstraction. This makes it possible for one of Taylor's exhausted new consumers to buy manufactured goods which replace homemade, and, moreover, to buy commodities

which in their abstract, doppelganger form pretend to restore those missing capital "G" Goods.

Strangely, the vitality we lost through alienation seemed to reappear in the commodities we desired. When the exhausted worker went to buy something instead of make something, the vitality that once came from making -- the creative vitality, the self satisfaction -- became an abstract quality attached to the things he bought. Over the space of a few decades and with the growth of various electronic media, a whole world of abstracted commodities took shape. My generation -- I was born in 1964 -- and those that have come after learned from childhood how to traipse through this media driven alternate reality like Gene Kelly singing in the rain. Thus, we found the best parking spot and powerwalked our way into what Guy DeBord has called "the spectacle."

In the world of the spectacle, the sign, the image, the doppelganger takes over -- it co-opts reality. As I mentioned yesterday, the iPod is a great example of this. I suppose it seems so to me because I am an Apple nut and a fan of the iPod. What I see when I look at an iPod is not simply an mp3 player in a cardboard box. What I see is an amalgamation of what the iPod is in modern media culture -- what it appears to be in TV ads, in magazine articles, in photos with celebrities, on the internet. Apple's marketing department started the ball rolling and the marketplace took over, producing an iPod mystique that is strong, and endearing, and exciting. I don't so much see the physical, nitty gritty, pragmatic fact of the iPod when browsing in Best Buys. I see what is superimposed over this: the iPod mystique, the media-driven version of the iPod, the iPod's abstract doppelganger. I feel as though there is some big party out there and once I purchase an iPod I will be, at that moment, in the party.

In Miller's words, "Value becomes a function of being signified." Or to quote Henri Lefebvre, "There is nothing, whether object, individual, or social group -- that is valued apart from its double, the

image that advertises and sanctifies it. This image duplicates not only an object's material, perceptible existence but desire and pleasure that it makes into fictions situating them in the land of make believe, promising 'happiness' -- the happiness of being a consumer."

Guy DeBord goes so far as to say, "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation. The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a separate pseudoworld that can only be looked at."

"Having" or "consuming" operates primarily through the sense of sight. What we see, however, is colored by the presuppositions we bring to the act of seeing. That area of presupposition is now occupied territory. That psychic space is the nerve center of the alien invasion.

Those human Goods which once formed us, which served as benchmarks for identity, are gone. In their place -- coincidentally or not -- appears a different way of viewing ourselves, a way of seeing ourselves which is abstracted from reality, a way of measuring identity and worth through abstract notions of exchange. This abstract way of viewing ourselves sets the stage for further abstraction when we, sorely missing those human Goods, reach out to commodities as the answer. We see these commodities in abstract terms -- that is, not as they are in nuts and bolts reality, but as they are in hyper-realized media-driven pseudoreality. This pseudoreality presents commodities to us as the incarnation of our missing Goods. The commodities possess the integration, the confidence, the vitality, the wholeness we lack.

Now here is the real kicker. This commodification is so tied into basic human longings that all relationships are affected; commodification washes over into other areas of life. Thus, the complexity of the pseudoreality grows by leaps and bounds as the media which -- coincidentally or not -- facilitate this pseudoreality reach saturation levels. The

interface -- not the media, but the area of presupposition in ourselves -- abstracts reality so thoroughly that it becomes another world, a different reality, a doppelganger constantly renewed by a marketplace of abstractions which has taken on a life of its own.

This is what DeBord calls "the spectacle." It is not merely some kind of new consciousness generated by human contact with the internet or television -- such as what is explored in the anime, "Serial Experiments: Lain" or David Cronenberg's film, "Videodrome." As Tom Wolfe has explained in his book, "Hooking Up," that's baloney. The spectacle is a very different thing. As DeBord puts it, "The spectacle cannot be understood as a mere visual deception produced by mass-media technologies. It is a worldview that has actually been materialized, a view of a world that has become objective."

Please recall, for a moment, the nature of the alien invasion in my dream. It appeared in the form of a parade.

The parade was secretly under the domination of an alien intellect. The people in the parade may have felt as though they were moving under their own volition, but they were mistaken. The invasion was subliminal, had taken place beneath thought, prior to choice. In many ways, this matches the spectacle DeBord describes.

Imagine my surprise when I read this: "...The more [the spectator] identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him." That's just plain freaky.

And then this, "The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere." In my dream, people pour off the sidewalks and into the parade. By definition, in joining the parade --

which has no end in sight -- they embrace a kind of homelessness. Again, freaky.

Other convergences:

Joining the parade makes us feel special simply because we are being seen. "Value becomes a function of being signified."

The parade, by definition, only exists so long as it is in motion. Likewise, commodification is not about arrival, closure, completion, but about perpetual desire.

Strangely, too, a person can be in a parade, in the midst of all that frantic activity, and yet feel quite isolated. A parade isn't about contact with one another. Like a Best Buy, it's far too loud for conversation. Similarly, commodification stems from alienation and perpetuates alienation as it encourages a rather solitary pursuit of happiness -- that is, shopping -- which takes place while one is surrounded by hundreds of other shoppers.

This, also, is just plain freaky.

So I have my alien invasion that nobody noticed -- its internal logic explored, its ramifications worked out to the nth degree. Unfortunately, it has not been elaborated upon in a work of fiction, but in works of non-fiction, like Vincent Miller's "Consuming Religion" and Guy DeBord's "The Society of the Spectacle." This whole non-fiction thing gives me the creeps and prompts me to wonder, "How much of this has actually happened?"

We reviewed actual historical data about Taylor. Ditto Ford and his Sociology Department. At that point, however, we shifted from historical data to states of mind on a cultural scale. When DeBord describes the "coup d'etat" of these states of mind, he speaks in conceptual generalizations -- as when he writes, "In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation." But he means this as historical fact. Theoretical fact, but fact. We have no way of verifying this except by examining the ebb and flow of historical events to see if there is a pattern there. If you are like me, your knowledge of history is patchy at best. The

best I can do, in my current state of education, is to look at myself and see if patterns have appeared in my own behavior -- patterns, that is, which match or even echo what DeBord describes.

Here are three patterns I found which resonated with me. See if they conjure up a similar response in you.

George is shopping in The Nature Store. He encounters a large Celtic cross. Apparently, one may stand it up in a flowerbed as an interesting accent. Something in George reacts positively to the Celtic cross. It awakens a feeling of tradition and a charming old-world seriousness about religious commitment. George knows nothing about the Celts, except that he feels a vague kinship with their culture. George knows something of Christian theology and what the cross means. He wishes he knew more. He wishes his own faith was deeply rooted in some beautiful, multi-faceted culture of faith. He buys the Celtic cross garden decoration. He hopes this will help him to put out roots and tap into deep waters of beauty and faith. But after he buys it, the Celtic Cross ends up in a utility room behind the bird seeds. He never puts it in his garden and, two or three years later, he knows more about the latest contestants on American Idol than he does about Celtic spirituality. He has touched the divine through consumption -- to be specific, through the moment of desire and self re-imagining which precedes purchase -- not through the lived reality of faith, not by dealing with doctrine, or belief, or the blood of martyrs. He gets to feel spiritual through buying something, not through the hard work of seeking truth. He gets a cross, a decoration, minus the reality of the crucifixion.

Why does George operate this way? Truly, the same question can be asked of any of us who have grown up in a consumer society. We find it easier to make contact with a commodified form of the sublime. As Miller puts it, "[Religious] traditions are pillaged for their symbolic content...which is then repackaged and recontextualized in a way

that jettisons their communal, ethical, and political consequences." And elsewhere, "Traditions are valued as sources of 'poetic and imaginative imagery' while their logics, systems of doctrine, and rules of practice are dismissed for their rigidity and exclusivity. But it is precisely these connections that enable religion to inform the practice of life."

In a sincere desire for spiritual renewal and depth, we automatically turn to acts of consumption and take home commodified "trinkets" of spirituality which, by their nature, cannot actually inform or change our life. In this way, writes Miller "...elements of religious traditions -- beliefs, symbols, and practices -- are fragmented in consumer culture; ...are lifted from their traditional contexts and thrown into a cultural marketplace where they can be embraced enthusiastically, but not put into practice."

This is also why the commodity seems self-contained. IT DOES NOT LEAD TO SOMETHING ELSE -- that is, to the content of what it symbolizes. Rather, it is a kind of decoration for our lives. One might even conjecture that it operates as an alternate sacramental system. This commodification of religion is Miller's main concern, but I think it is fair to say it is part of DeBord's spectacle as well. Is the spectacle real in this regard? Has this happened to you?

Notice also that everything George just did he did alone. There is something about commodification -- about dealing in layer upon layer of abstractions -- that erodes community. It's not simply a case of consumer self-absorption, says Miller. "It is not simply that [consumer spirituality] reinforces our self-centeredness and immaturity, encouraging us to cloak our selfishness in the aura of spiritual wisdom. Rather, it offers us the transformative wisdom of many religious traditions stripped from their supporting communal infrastructures... The spiritual consumer is constructed as an individual, in the single-family home, attempting to make sense of and to transform his or her life without the momentum provided by communal affiliation and support." And elsewhere, "When we do manage to commit ourselves to the rigors of long-term disciplines, we do so increasingly as isolated indi-

viduals who encounter traditions in the abstract, not as part of a particular community.”

Sound familiar yet?

Or perhaps this pattern resonates with you.

When I was in college, my girlfriend broke up with me. My idea of fixing this problem was to get up very early in the morning, drive over to the place she was renting, and climb this huge oak tree in her front yard. I would esconce myself there -- so the idea went -- with a casual, nonchalant air. And then my former girlfriend would get up, go to the kitchen, start a pot of coffee and, through the window over the kitchen sink, glimpse something out of the corner of her eye. It's Lint. In the tree. At eight o'clock in the morning. (Did I have a flower? I think I may have had a flower.) Charmed by my romanticism, my ability to make a passionate statement while at the same time keeping it lite with my quirky flair, she would smile despite herself.

How did I know events would play out this way? Because in the movies of my youth, the likeable, wacky Bill Murray type gets the girl in the end. It seemed very plain to me that if you take chances and pursue quirky improbable ideas like he did, you will get the girl, too. I call this “movie logic.” In the same way that commodities are “disciplined for market, “ reality is commodified for film -- we are shown what the test groups gave the thumbs up and spared what they gave the thumbs down. And some of us, looking to art for guidance and insight, adjust our expectations about life accordingly.

And so my former girlfriend would step out onto her front porch. She would pause a moment, hands on her hips, then remark, “They say it's gonna rain later today.”

“Oh, yeah?” I would reply, standing on the limb, absent-mindedly inspecting a leaf.

“Yeah,” she would say with a knod and then a laugh -- an okay-you-win-but-I'm-kinda-glad-you-did laugh. “You want some coffee? I've got a pot brewing...”

“Yeah, that would be great,” I would say and drop to the ground with proper aplomb. And that would be it. Relationship restored.

In the real world, I made it into the tree that morning. And I stayed there, in that tree, for quite a while. Everything around me seemed very stark and impersonal -- the trees, the cars, the leaves on the ground, the clouds in the sky. It often feels that way when you are exercising movie logic, I have found. There is no feeling of sympathy. No picturesque old lady walks by and lends her own crotchety yet soft-hearted perspective.

Eventually, my former girlfriend came out the front door. She looked like Witcheepoo from “H.R. Puffinstuff” --- an especially ornery and exasperated Witcheepoo. Her hair was sticking out in all directions. She looked pale and stiff. And painfully lucid -- like a traffic cop. She stood there in a house coat, arms folded over her chest and stared at me.

If memory serves, I broke the silence with a high-altitude, “Hi!”

If memory serves, she said, “What are you doing?”

Which was really the cruellest thing she could say. There was supposed to be an unspoken communication here --- an unspoken “See how crazy I am about you?” and an unspoken “You nut, you.” Instead, she said out loud, “What Are You Doing?” I knew she was smart. I knew she had seen plenty of movies. She knew exactly what I was doing. But it didn't matter. She wanted an explanation.

My movie logic was unreeling.

Climb down the tree. Walk over to the porch. Talk to the traffic cop. Get pretty much nowhere. Try to give the traffic cop a goodbye hug. Traffic cop insists it can only be a one-armed hug. Walk home -- movie logic in disarray, entirely unaware of the commodified unctuousness of the whole scenario -- surrounded by the stark, unsympathetic logic of reality.

Does this match-up with a pattern in your life? Does it resonate? Is movie logic a symptom of the spectacle?

As I said previously, we tend to receive lived reality as it is mediated to us through consumer culture. That which appears on the mass media map has life and respectability.

As DeBord put it, “[The spectacle’s] sole message is, ‘What appears is good; what is good appears.’” Our longings have been told, “Look to the spectacle. There we find the goods we long for embodied in the form of commodities. There reside the goods that are missing from our lives.” A compelling logic insists, “Whatever is good appears in the spectacle. Therefore, if a thing is good, it WILL APPEAR in the spectacle which IS REALITY. If a thing is not good, it WILL NOT APPEAR -- and, therefore, it IS NOT REAL.”

This is a chilling logic. The Marquis de Sade once said, “Whatever is, is good.” A philosopher may say this in the sense that existence or being is good. That’s not what de Sade meant. The Marquis meant whatever urges exist within you -- even if violent or perverse -- are part of reality and reality is not a thing of laws and restrictions. One does not constrain what one is. The urge is there. It is real. It is yours. Do what thou wilt. Similarly, in the spectacle, whatever appears is good; whatever is good will appear. Sex outside of marital promises is good, because “Sex in the City” portrays it as good and “Sex and the City” has more life and, therefore, self-justification in it than what we can still manage to perceive of actual reality. Do you see? A thing will seem “authentic,” will feel “authentic” according to the part it plays in the spectacle -- which is a fake!

As DeBord writes, “The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having -- human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing --- all “having” must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from

appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real.”

If commodities basically cater to our desires, and if commodities are the basic building blocks of the spectacle, then what will appear in the spectacle will be our desires “writ large.” What we think of as objective reality will actually be a commodified panoply of our desires. Thus, our desires will become their own justification; if we try to determine whether a desire is appropriate, permissible or realistic, we will measure it against a reality which is composed of images of the same freaking desires.

I’m thinking the answer will be “Yes. Go for it!” Don’t you think?

In a reality like that, ANYTHING GOES -- which is exactly what the Marquis intended to say.

Finally, check this pattern out. See if it resonates.

I have noticed that I have little connection to the past -- and what I do know of history is a coloring book version of the real thing. This goes for world history, American history, even the history of my own family.

Even the details of my own life.

The manner in which we encounter objects, reminders of the past, in the natural course of our daily lives is also affected by commodification. Remember, as Miller put it, “As commodification expands thru culture, it focuses on those elements of culture that can most readily be made into discreet elements of exchange.” This is true of elements of history which appear in the marketplace. These, too, are “disciplined for market” and the result is sometimes so far removed from the original -- the signifier from the signified, the mystique from the material -- that we lose touch with our own past.

What comes to my mind is when a new restaurant declares it is a “classic diner” and proceeds to prove this by taking a black and white poster of James Dean and framing it with pink neon. The effect has nothing to do with James Dean the member of the Actors Studio, James Dean who died tragically young. This is a symbol, a simulacrum of James Dean, summoned from the world of commodification to evoke only the vaguest empty-headed sense of a past era. It is as though Monopoly money had replaced genuine currency, as though there were suddenly no real doctors -- only actors who smile and say, “Hello. I’m not a doctor. But I play one on TV.” Frankly, in Christian terms, commodified history is painfully present in the average Christian bookstore when the chilling apocalyptic events of Noah and the Ark are transfunkified into fuzzy animals and whimsical boatniks. Each Noah’s Ark playset should be required to include several thousand “drowned sinners” who can beat on the door of the Ark and beg for rescue.

Disconnected from authentic personal and cultural history, a sense of personal identity is feebly gathered to oneself moment by moment. One feels thin, almost ghostlike. “The subject,” Miller writes, “floats adrift, a passive consumer of intensities...”

Once again, do you recognize yourself in these words? Does this suggest that the spectacle really exists?

Frankly, I have to finish reading DeBord’s treatise, “The Society of the Spectacle” before I can decide whether it is an historical fact or not.

Tomorrow, we will do still more of what John Carpenter’s “They Live” failed to accomplish. We will examine what a rag-tag team of underground rebels can do to rebuff the alien invasion, to take back the parts of our lives which are laden with abstraction, to unplug the Las Vegas strip that has established itself in our imagination.