

## Introduction to *The Spectacle of Accumulation*

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Given the current state of American politics in which the very nature of democracy appears at risk, if not under siege, it has never been more important for intellectuals to take a concerted public role in addressing the major issues of our time. Of course, I am not talking about the public relations intellectuals who appear regularly on Fox, CNN, and other dominant media that increasingly and willingly serve as adjuncts of the American Heritage Foundation or the American Chamber of Commerce. On the contrary, I am referring to public intellectuals who are concerned with finding ways to develop a more democratic and humane future, intellectuals who refuse to consolidate authority by questioning it and holding it accountable for its consequences, intellectuals whose projects are rooted in the need to alleviate human suffering and create public spaces that promote critical discourses, collective action and the return of resources back to communities.

When I think of all of the many notable public intellectuals in this country, Sut Jhally stands out as one who engages in diverse forms of publicness while taking seriously the obligation to provide what Pierre Bourdieu has called a permanent critique of the abuses of authority, especially by those who are in positions of power. He not only teaches, gives public talks, and publishes scholarly books and articles, but he also runs a progressive foundation—the Media Education Foundation. In addition, he directs, writes and produces films, and orchestrates a web site that is a theoretical and strategic gold mine for accessing alternative, critical views on a variety of subjects including American foreign policy, globalization, and a host of other issues. Sut Jhally in many ways provides a model for what it means to connect learning to politics, pedagogy to a wide variety of forms and public sites, and cultural politics to social change. His diverse body of work addresses the important insight that the power of the dominant order is not just economic but also intellectual—residing in the realm of ideas, knowledge, values, and beliefs. For Jhally, a politics for the twenty-first century has to not only engage matters of political economy but also the educational force of culture as it makes its way across the globe shaping all aspects of life and everyday experience. His ongoing concern with social justice attempts to break down the illusion of unanimity that seems so prevalent in the dominant media, all levels of government, and the commanding heights of corporate power. Equally important are his sustained attempts to foster modes of critical public pedagogy whose purpose is to reach a diverse number of publics and audiences—all of which have the potential to come to grips with their own power as individual and social agents. And that is precisely why he supports both a cultural politics based on the presupposition that the worldly space of criticism is the democratic underpinning of social agency, and a cultural politics that combines a public pedagogy with a politics aimed at restoring a sense of utopian possibility, collective resistance, and social transformation. For Sut Jhally, making the pedagogical more political suggests creating robust theoretical discourses and practices that offer people a critical vocabulary, a space for dissenting, and a set of experiences for considering the possibility of connecting

critique to political action. As one of the most important theoreticians of cultural studies, public pedagogy, and visual culture in North America, Sut Jhally's work has always embodied the assumption that the greatest danger facing the 21st century is not the risk of illusory hopes but those undemocratic forces that deny social, economic and political justice.

Just before his death, Edward Said, the great social and cultural critic, suggested that intellectuals have a greater responsibility than ever before in the United States and throughout the world, because democracy unlike no other time in our history is being threatened. In many ways, *The Spectacle of Accumulation* embodies, deepens, and extends Said's sense of what it means to be an engaged intellectual. This is a book that is concerned with the ongoing threat to democratic culture, the corporate control of mass media, the intersection of race, class, power, the war on youth, and the power and reach of the spectacle of accumulation and commodification. Rather than separate knowledge from commitment, political economy from cultural politics, and theory from practice, this book connects all of these issues within a broad political and cultural landscape that makes visible how the spectacle of appearance, commodification, and accumulation functions to reproduce ongoing attacks on minorities of class and color, the highjacking of the political state by the corporate state, the commercialization of public space, and the increasing reduction of young people to consumers. As this book indicates in brilliant fashion, Sut Jhally offers a much needed critique of those intellectuals who had either become largely silent in the face of a growing authoritarianism or were simply reduced to clerks of empire, appearing daily on Fox News or speaking ever so softly on National Public Radio. An underlying concern of the book is a critique of those cultural workers and intellectuals who have turned away from the idea of engaged criticism, which increasingly collapses into a form of banal and accommodating politics. Intellectuals in this sense do more than keep a particular discourse going or simply map out and adjudicate positions, they take a stand and do so with the greatest possible sense of justice. Critique in this instance becomes a form of public pedagogy, an oppositional discourse that reminds us that there is no genuine democracy without genuine opposing critical power. But there is more than an implicit critique here of disinterested and accommodating intellectuals, there is a demonstration of what it means to be publicly engaged intellectual who takes seriously the educational force of the larger culture and the politics it reproduces. Underlying Sut Jhally's political project is both a language of critique and possibility. Critique in this case works to show not only how culture deploys power in the service of domination, but also how many intellectuals have simply turned their backs on the great narratives in search of freedom and emancipation. In the place of such silence, *The Spectacle of Accumulation* is grounded in a project which frames its essays in a call for intellectuals and cultural workers in a variety of sites to exhibit a critical and engaged interaction with the world, an engagement mediated by a responsibility for challenging structures of domination and for alleviating human suffering. *The Spectacle of Accumulation* is more than a series of brilliant essays on media and culture, it is the embodiment of an ethical and political stance that embraces a political worldliness and sensibility that is afraid of neither controversy, making visible connections within the culture that are otherwise hidden, deflating the claims of imperial jingoism within the spectacles produced by the dominant media, nor bridging intellectual work and the operation of politics. Refusing the now popular sport of academic bashing

or embracing a crude call for action at the expense of rigorous intellectual and theoretical work, *The Spectacle of Accumulation* combines rigor and clarity, on the one hand, and civic courage and political commitment, on the other, all as part of a larger attempt to both understand the cultural politics of power and transform it in the interest of developing a more just and democratic society. Sut Jhally demonstrates in this book what it means to live in a world that demands a certain kind of worldliness, a wakefulness if you will, a recognition of interdependence, and a willingness to speak not simply as an engaged intellectual, but as an intellectual for the public, an intellectual who represents a varied range of important issues and understands that an inclusive democracy matters, that it must be struggled over first and foremost within the realm of culture, and that such a struggle needs to be done with a fierce sense of commitment, solidarity, and hope. As a public intellectual, Sut Jhally embodies in both his work and action the ideal and the practice of what it means to give meaning to the notion of a militant and educated hope, one that registers politics as a matter of desire, intervention, and struggle.

As Fred Jameson has pointed out, we live at a time when it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of a market economy creating vast inequalities throughout the globe. Corporate ideology increasingly drives the meaning of citizenship and social life. One consequence is that the principles of self-preservation and self-interest increasingly appear to undermine, if not, sabotage political agency, if not public life itself. Moreover, as democracy succumbs to the instrumental politics of the market economy and the relentless hype of the commercially driven spectacle, it becomes increasingly difficult to preserve those public forums where private troubles can be translated into public concerns, or to maintain under the onslaught of privatization those public spheres that do the crucial pedagogical work of democracy by offering resources and possibilities for resisting the dissolution of sociality, reciprocity, and social citizenship itself. *The Spectacle of Accumulation* is a crucial book that takes seriously the task of addressing the intersection of culture and politics, texts and power. Its original contribution lies not only in its ability to combine the study of symbolic forms and meaning as a form of public pedagogy with concrete social formations and relations of power, but also in its provocative ability to unmask the workings of the spectacle in media culture, make power visible, foster public debate, lift the discourse of private problems to the level of public considerations, and make cultural politics central to the struggle for an inclusive democracy at home and in the larger global public sphere.

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