

# Disneyization, Debord, and the Integrated NBA Spectacle

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Within his recent (and no doubt career-compromising) sojourn into considered sporting analysis, Michael Mandelbaum, the noted US foreign policy expert, pointed to basketball as the quintessential team sport of the post-industrial age, that “world of satellite televisions, computers, and the Internet” in which humanity, to varying degrees and with varying outcomes, is presently ensconced (Mandelbaum 2004, 200). According to Mandelbaum, basketball—unlike its rigid and hierarchical industrial counterparts, baseball and football—expresses the dynamism and flexibility of post-industrial [economic] existence. In basketball, as in other facets of post-industrial society, the fluid and innovative application of individual knowledge (or, in the case of basketball, individual skill), in addressing ever shifting problems and issues, is managed through the establishment of dynamic networks of horizontally linked operatives. For this reason, we are encouraged to believe that the gargantuan US Baby Boom generation has largely embraced basketball, since their entire lives are invested in the “post-industrial world that the game reflects” (Mandelbaum 2004, 200).

While unquestionably engaging, and to a certain degree illuminating, Mandelbaum’s sporting schema ultimately appears a little forced, and certainly fails to provide anything approaching a compelling explanation as to how, and indeed why, specific sport forms become the active embodiments of particular American social and historical formations. I would concur in one respect, however: basketball—most vividly in the highly corporatized, commercialized, and mass-mediated form delivered by the National Basketball Association (NBA) (the focus of this discussion)—can only be understood in terms of its complex relationship with the social, political, economic, and technological forces and relations of the contemporary condition (herein referred to as the late capitalist moment). Moreover, the organization, delivery, and experience of cultural practices, such as sport, are in a dialectic sense actively engaged in the ongoing constitution of the conditions out of which they emerge; they are “always constituted with and constitutive of a larger context of relationships” (Grossberg 1997, 257). Thus, this analysis, however preliminary, of the structural and symbolic underpinnings of the cultural economy that is the NBA (and thereby its emergence as a culturally and commercially vigorous sporting entity), provides a vehicle through which it is possible to elucidate the broader turn to culture, and

cultural manufacture, associated with the moment, or condition, of “late capitalism” (Jameson 1991). In doing so, it illustrates the manner whereby sport has become commandeered by a phalanx of commercially-impelled cultural organizations and workers (i.e. sport management, marketing, advertising, public relations, and mass media broadcast companies and professionals), whose common aim targets the advancement of sport culture (in all its myriad manifestations) as a vehicle of multi-revenue stream capital accumulation. For the cultural laborers responsible for global popularization of the NBA are less the athletes through which this sport organization is embodied, and more the management, marketing, and mass-media-oriented cultural intermediaries (Nixon and Gay 2002) responsible for the spectacularization, televisualization, and globalization (Miller et al. 2001) of the league, its teams, and players. While each of these interrelated process is doubtless significant, this discussion focuses primarily upon the manner through which—and in a complementary fashion to the Disney Corporation—the NBA has been transformed into an “integrated spectacle” (Debord 1990 [1988]), through the strategic and commercially overdetermined mobilization of various forms and strategic initiatives of cultural labor.

### Sport and Late Capitalism

The work of Marxist economist Ernest Mandel represents an important precursor to, and influence upon, Frederic Jameson’s (1991) influential characterization of the late capitalist condition. Mandel prophesied the penetration of capital investment into, and hence the commodification of, ever more intimate realms of social existence. As he identified, late capitalism was organized around the “industrialization of superstructural activities” (be they leisure, sport, education, art, or health related) that are produced “for the market and aim at maximization of profit” (Mandel 1999). In this way, Mandel (1999) pointed to the centrality of culture—both as process (through the symbolic manipulation of commercial consumption) and product (through the commodification of superstructural elements)—to the instantiation and experience of late capitalism. Moreover, and propelled by late capitalism’s symptomatically flexible regime of capital accumulation, highly educated and well-compensated ranks of commercial cultural workers (Bourdieu 1998) have come to mobilize and manipulate the cultural realm as a pivotal *source* of commercial products. Whether in the guise of films, television, music, literary, or informational products, mass-mediated “cultural forms” have thus become a “central focus and expression of economic activity” (Connor 1989), and a definitive feature of the late capitalist condition. Within today’s mass-media-driven economy, professional sport organizations are “brazenly commercial enterprises, that make no pretense as to the cardinal importance of delivering *entertaining* products designed to maximize profit margins” (Andrews 2001, 154; emphasis added). Contemporary sport culture routinely exudes the “profit making” focus and “rationalized organizational

procedures” exhibited by the more readily accepted forms of industrialized mass culture (Negus 1997). If popularity is any indication, then certainly sport can be considered a legitimate culture industry, in that it represents a lucrative site for the accumulation of capital via the manufacture of popular practices and pleasures for mass audiences. As Kellner noted:

spectator sports have emerged as the correlative to a society that is replacing manual labor with automation and machines, and requires consumption and appropriation of spectacles to reproduce consumer society. The present-day era also sees the expansion of a service sector and highly differentiated entertainment industry, of which sports are a key part. (2002, 66)

Since late capitalism’s culturally inflected regime of accumulation is pre-figured on the operationalizing of the mass media (simultaneously as both core product and process), sport’s evolution has become inextricably tied to the rhythms and regimes of an expanding media-industrial complex, which corroborates Real’s (1998, 15) identification of the “institutional alignment of sports and media in the context of late capitalism.”

The “seductively consumerist union of commerce, sport and television” (Rowe 1996, 566) that has come to dominate, and indeed define, late capitalist sport culture, is arguably best exemplified in initiatives that led to the contextually symptomatic transformation of the NBA into a vibrant “mass-mediated . . . brand . . . produced, distributed, and consumed across the globe” (Hughes 2004, 180). The NBA’s commercial and cultural metamorphosis has to be understood in regard to the concerted “dedifferentiation of fields” associated with the economy’s *turn* to culture, and the attendant collapsing of sport into commercial television (and vice versa) that exemplifies the “new kind of dynamic” generating superstructures within this “third stage of capitalism” (Jameson 1991, xxi). As such, David Stern’s leadership of the NBA perhaps best illustrates the strategic initiatives responsible for the coming to fruition of distinctly late capitalist sport forms.

Stern assumed the role of NBA Commissioner in February 1984 and, through a combination of pioneering organizational, media, and marketing directives, oversaw the cultural and commercial reformation of what had been a moribund sport league:

Although one man can’t possibly be credited for every bit of growth over the past two decades, David Stern has single-handedly done more as commissioner of the NBA over a 20-year tenure than any other top executive in sports history. Franchise values have soared from \$15 million to \$300 million. Total gross revenues from licensed products have risen from \$10 million to more than \$3 billion. *Overall league revenues have jumped from \$118 million to more than \$3 billion, and U.S. television rights now average \$765 million annually, which is up 13,000 percent since Stern first took office on Feb. 1, 1984.* That doesn’t include even international broadcast rights, as games are now aired in 212 countries in 42 different languages. (Rovell 2004; emphasis added)

Indeed, the transformation of the NBA has been such that the league has arguably come to represent the quintessential exemplar of “the high-flying entertainment-media-sports industry” (Marantz 1997). At this juncture, Bryman’s (1999) concept of Disneyization would appear an appropriate starting point for examining the NBA’s fusion of sport and the logics, practices, and products of the media entertainment domain—indeed, the authors has carried out such an analysis (Andrews 2003), but, as is often the case, has subsequently questioned the wisdom of what was an uncritical appropriation of Bryman’s conceptualizing. On reflection, the discrete focus (the phenomenon of the Disney theme park) of Bryman’s framework necessitates using it, for present purposes, as an instructive point of departure, as opposed to a preordained interpretive destination.

According to Bryman, Disneyization incorporates a multifaceted process (somewhat complimentary to Ritzer’s neo-Weberian concept of McDonaldization; Ritzer 1993, 1998), wherein the “process by which *the principles* of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Bryman 1999, 26). Far from being frivolous, as some may accuse, Bryman’s conceptualizing uses the Disney theme park as an environment illustrative of the “large social changes... in economy and culture... which are discernible in and have implications for (late) modernity” (Bryman 1999, 29). Thus, Bryman’s variously described Disneyizing principles, dimensions, or trends (these include spatial theming, the dedifferentiation of consumption, varied forms of merchandising, and the operationalizing of emotional labor) evoke, in dialectic fashion, the “cultural turn” that frames the condition of late capitalism (Jameson 1991, 1998). The pronounced spatiality of Bryman’s understanding prompted its considered application within themed restaurant (Beardsworth 1999), zoo (Beardsworth 2001), and, McDonald’s restaurant (Bryman 2003) settings. It is equally clear to see how the principles of Disneyization provide a useful conceptual basis for interpreting the stadia and event complexes (i.e. Baltimore Orioles’ Camden Yards facility), themed bars and restaurants (i.e. ESPN Sportszone), museums and Halls of Fame (i.e. the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown), and branded retail stores (i.e. Nike Town), which combine to form the built landscape of late capitalist sport.

While indicative of, and indeed contributing toward, broad changes in “economy and culture,” Bryman’s (1999, 29) spatial preoccupation with theme parks disregards that which occupies Disney’s cultural and economic core. In short, he overlooks the role and function of the mass media products that constitute the integrative heart of Disney’s media entertainment complex. It is media content (the branded spectacles delivered via film, video, television, magazine, and web platforms), and not theme parks, that comprise the generative core of Disney’s global media entertainment empire. Within the contemporary televisually propelled culture, Disney inspired consumer imaginations and expectations are largely stimulated through the accumulated consumption of multiple mass media offerings. An intertextual economy of media productions thus represents Disney’s frontline in a commercial media[ted]

offensive, through which the corporation attempts to penetrate the consciousness of, and seeks to extrude capital from, the global consuming masses. However, as well as being important cultural and economic entities in their own right, Disney's media spectacles simultaneously act as pivotal points of cross-promotion (Wernick 1991) through which the corporation markets its subsidiary—or perhaps more accurately, derivative—array of consumer products and experiences. In addition to the filmic and televisual outpourings one would expect from a contemporary media entertainment behemoth, Disney's extended and “staggeringly powerful panoply of pop-cultural offerings” includes “theme parks, hotels, sport teams . . . retail outlets . . . Broadway shows, music publishing, a planned community . . . a cruise ship, and copious lines of merchandise produced under various licensing agreements” (Holbrook 2001, 142). The theme park is thus a derivative—albeit an important one—of a “Disney Universe” (Wasko 1996) driven and defined primarily by spectacular mass media content, and through which the desire for the sensual materiality and emotive possibilities of the Disney theme park experience (as offered in the form of character sightings and interactions, exhilarating rides, licensed merchandise offerings, etc.) is generated.

### The Debordian Dualism

The demands of understanding the Disney spectacle leads, almost inevitably, to a detour through Debord's theorizing on the society of the spectacle (Debord 1990, 1994 [1967]). However, as Tomlinson (2002) warned, all too frequently Debord's provocative treatise on the transformations in relations between capitalism, technology, and everyday life are the subject of little more than superficial invocation. This is routinely done through reference to the proliferation of mass-mediated spectacular events (i.e. Olympic Games, World Cup, Super Bowls, royal weddings, state funerals, presidential inaugurations, etc.), as if they, in and of themselves, encapsulate the complexities of spectacular society. In Tomlinson's terms, this trite appropriation belies an “interpretive shorthand” used by academics, whose passing references to Debord signify an acknowledgement of the mediated spectacle “without any fully developed sense of the conceptualisation of the spectacle” (2002, 45). The tendency toward reifying the spectacle is soon eviscerated through actual recourse to Debord's theses, which, somewhat repetitively, exhume the layered complexity and multidimensionality of the spectacle, and its position and function within spectacular society: “The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification” (Debord 1994 [1967]), 12). According to Debord, the upper-case Spectacle (mediated mega-event) and the lower-case spectacle (relentless outpourings of the corroborating and/or parasitic culture industries) provide both the monumental and vernacular architecture of a spectacular society, in which the spectacle—as capitalist product and process—realizes a situation in

which the "commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Debord 1994a [1967]), 29).

Two decades after the publication of the original work, within *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1990 [1988]), Debord assessed the continued veracity of his earlier prognostications. In this later project, he confirmed his original observations with one caveat: he identified a new, heightened stage in the evolution of the society of the spectacle, announced by the emergence of the "integrated spectacle" (Debord 1990 [1988]). This concept represented the synthesized extension of Debord's earlier notion of the "diffuse" (characterized by neo-liberal freedom) and "concentrated" (marked by command economy alienation) spectacles, and is manifest in the seeming contradiction of increased governance of the marketplace (in terms of the commercial direction of social practices and subjectivities). Through the integrated spectacle, the "autocratic reign of the market economy" reached a new level of rational efficiency, such that the "spectacle has never before put its mark to such a degree on almost the full range of socially produced behavior and objects" (Debord 1990 [1988], 2, 9).

Hopefully, it is evident how a Debordian inflected understanding of spectacular society can inform the understanding of the Disney Corporation, and lead to a more holistic understanding of the process of Disneyization. The spectacular structure and significance of this media entertainment behemoth evidences how, "Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production" (Debord 1994a [1967]), 13). As a constituent and constitutor of spectacular society, any understanding of the process of Disneyization needs to address more closely Disney's primary organizational objective: the "art of providing fantasy-enriched, sentimentally-compelling, fun-packed entertainment for their children-of-all-ages mass audiences" (Holbrook 2001, 142). Disney's major film and video releases, and indeed sometimes re-releases, could be considered the corporation's equivalent of media mega-events (the upper-case Spectacles) unceremoniously thrust—via hugely expensive, and disconcertingly intrusive, marketing and advertising strategies—into the popular consciousness of the global masses. These Disney Spectacles, and indeed the spectacular demeanor of the Disney brand as a whole, are simultaneously substantiated through a relentless tide and diversity of Disney products and services (the lower-case spectacles), which, through the various forms they take, result in Disney's colonization of many aspects of social life. Disney can also be considered an integrated spectacle, for, across the breadth of its expansive media entertainment landscape, it seeks to control and direct consumers' emotions and desires in the manner of a tautological system designed to enhance the aura of the Disney spectacle.

Such is the emotive autocracy of Disney's cultural economy. The promotional labor (Wernick 1991) responsible for the hegemony of the *Wonderful World of Disney* ethos allows the corporation to bask in the perpetual glory of its self-proclaimed *wonderfulness*. It also directs (not always successfully) the consuming public toward the uncritical celebration (not unsurprisingly, perhaps, the

name of the planned community in Florida), and thereby perpetuation, of what is a preordained state of brand *wonderment*.

The understanding of Disneyization developed herein is prefigured on the centrality of the spectacle (in all its various forms and guises) as the domineering vehicle and manifestation of cultural and economic existence. So, rather than the derivative theme park that provides Bryman's focus, the process of Disneyization is herein understood to incorporate the *spectacular principles and practices of Disney's broader media entertainment operations that are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world*. That is not to say Bryman's notion of Disneyization is superfluous to the project of critically examining the enmeshed cultural and commercial logics of contemporary spectator sport in general, and the NBA in particular. Rather, Bryman's four principles of Disneyization (theming, the dedifferentiation of consumption, merchandising, and emotional labor) represent important subprocesses contributing to the broader process pertaining to the media[ted] entertainment-based *spectacularization* of contemporary sport. Of course, any US spectator sports display many elements of this complex understanding of Disneyization. This is not least because sport has evolved into a multifaceted, and intensively marketed, vehicle for the production and delivery of mass-mediated entertainment. As Kellner identified, "Postindustrial sports . . . merge sports into media spectacle . . . and attest to the commodification of all aspects of life in the media and consumer society" (2002, 66). Spectator sport, like the Disney Corporation itself, evokes Debord's conceptualizing in both the monumental (the proliferation of sport media mega-events) and vernacular (the social relations and experiences mediated by ancillary commercial texts, products, and services) understandings of the integrated spectacle. Yet, as Kellner continued, "professional basketball has emerged . . . as the game that best symbolizes the contemporary sports/ entertainment colossus" (2002, 66). As such, it could be argued that the NBA is the most Disneyized of contemporary US sports.

### The NBA's Integrated Spectacularization

In seeking to reverse the NBA's potentially terminal cultural and economic decline experienced during the early 1980s, when the league was widely perceived to be too regional (it lacked significant national television exposure), too black (the preponderance of African American players was felt to alienate the game from the United States' white consumer majority), and too drug-infested (a litany of drug scandals resulted in the league being the forum for the most regressive form of racial pathologizing) (Cole and Andrews 1996), David Stern initiated the aggressive restructuring of what was a failing professional sport industry into a multifaceted marketing and entertainment conglomerate incorporating over 20 divisions, including NBA Properties, NBA Entertainment, NBA International, and NBA Ventures. This restructuring represented the newly

instantiated corporate architecture through which cultural labor and processes—used to advance the NBA as a manufacturer of multi-platform, multi-manifest, mass(-mediated) entertainment products and experiences—have been organized and operationalized. As the league’s primary “captain of consciousness” (Ewen 1976), Stern’s brief has been to mould the NBA brand into an exhilarating, exciting, and entertaining game played by talented, committed, interesting, and/or charismatic individuals and teams. Moreover, through the implementation of various disciplinary strategies (including accusatory anti-drug policies, various iterations of collective bargaining agreements between owners and players, and the subsequent enforcement of a salary cap; Staudohar 1989), Stern has made highly visible the league’s attempts to (at the very least symbolically) police the various excesses that plagued the popular perception and reception of the NBA and other professional sport leagues. He has become the figurehead leading the reconstitution of the NBA as a semiotically consistent and culturally acceptable compendium of branded entertainment-oriented personas, products, and services. Interestingly, and perhaps because it is easier to digest the authority and influence of a morally upright and seemingly benevolent guiding hand, rather than the collective structures and sensibilities actually responsible for what is primarily a commercial operation, routinely leads to the reification of professional sport administrators such as David Stern. Thus, the complex social relations of production responsible for both the material and cultural manufacture of mass entertainment products, such as the NBA, is effectively obscured. Stern, akin to Walt Disney, thus becomes the representative embodied architect of an entire organization (the NBA’s *magic kingdom*), thereby adding to the personified aura of the spectacle.

The NBA’s radical, and indeed rapid, transformation into a global media entertainment concern has allowed David Stern to freely acknowledge, and indeed celebrate, the similarities between the NBA and the Disney Corporation:

They have theme parks . . . and we have theme parks. Only we call them arenas. They have characters: Mickey Mouse, Goofy. Our characters are named Magic and Michael [Jordan]. Disney sells apparel; we sell apparel. They make home videos; we make home videos. (David Stern, quoted in Swift 1991, 84)

However, mere acknowledgement of these parallels is insufficient. It is important to examine the precise nature of the NBA’s Disneyization, focusing primarily on the league’s integrated spectacularization. Differently put, the only instructive way that it becomes possible to consider the NBA as a Disneyized entity is by acknowledging the central importance of the league’s television output to what is unabashedly perceived to be a “major entertainment and consumer goods company” (David Stern, quoted in Lombardo 2004, 1). It is the NBA’s mediated mega-events (such as national network game coverage and, particularly, play-off and finals broadcasts) that propel popular consciousness of, and interest in, the league, its teams, players, and, equally importantly, its array of ancillary products. Hence, as within the “Disney Universe” (Wasko 1996), the

NBA's mass-mediated spectacles act as the integrative fulcrum of this multi-faceted consumer entertainment complex. As such, the cultural work required for the entertainment-based reformation of the NBA needs to be considered.

The past two decades have witnessed the transformation of the NBA through concerted and aggressive processes of media[ted] entertainment-based *spectacularization*, involving the mobilization of both the monumental and vernacular levels of the spectacle. In terms of the former, as with any commercial cultural entity looking to occupy a place within the consciousness of potential viewers [consumers], the NBA needed to occupy a regular and reliable place on national network television. In the late 1970s, the NBA's national network presence was virtually negligible, with even the NBA Finals being shown on tape-delay. Thus, in order to facilitate the national popularizing of the league—and before worrying about the nature of the programming being delivered to the American public—David Stern recognized the need to harness television's spectacularizing potential. Thus, during the 1980s, the league furthered its public persona through a more intensified relationship with the incumbent broadcaster, CBS, and by forging a presence on the fledgling cable system (on channels such as USA, ESPN, TBS, and TNT). Fortunato (2001) has described the relationship between the NBA and various television interests as the “ultimate assist.” However, the intensified televisualization (Miller et al. 2001) of the league was mutually beneficial, in that both the NBA and its broadcasters enhanced their symbolic and economic capital as a result of the increased audience interest generated in the revamped media spectacle of seductively telegenic rivalries (Magic Johnson versus Larry Bird; the Los Angeles Lakers versus the Boston Celtics), and exciting new players (particularly Michael Jordan and Dominique Wilkins). As an indication of the NBA's rapid transformation from moribund anonymity to popular cultural centrality, during the 1979–80 season, CBS paid \$18.5 million for the network television broadcast rights to the league, an annual figure that leaped to \$150 million by the time NBC wrestled the rights away from CBS in 1990–91.

The only recently interrupted relationship with the National Broadcasting Corporation (which broadcast the game on network television between 1990–91 and 2001–02 for a combined \$3.1 billion) was most responsible for the advancement of the NBA as a popular media spectacle. Under the guidance of Dick Ebersol, chairman of NBC Universal Sports & Olympics and an acolyte of ABC's influential Roone Arledge, NBC sports programming advanced a production strategy that recognized that sport broadcasts needed to compete with other forms of mass entertainment. Thus, NBC produced network sport spectacles that went far beyond the mere game/event coverage, incorporating and accentuating particularly emotive storylines, rivalries, and personas, such that the viewer would become invested in the spectacle at a number of different levels. In other words, NBC sought to make its sport programming more entertaining for the masses of casual viewers looking for televisual stimulus, as opposed to the relatively fewer sporting obsessives driven by their inveterate and often irrational personal passions. Through its advancement of what has been dubbed “the soap opera games” (Carlson 1996), NBC's manipulating—or, perhaps more

accurately, contrived constitution—of sporting spectacles for the purposes of accentuating viewer entertainment is most readily evident in the network's Olympic Games coverage (Andrews 1998). The emotively imbued production values developed within the NBC Olympic crucible have become the hegemonic form of national network sport coverage, and can be evidenced in the broadcasting of events ranging from ice skating, to the X-Games, and even the sacrosanctity of ABC's Monday Night Football. Predictably, therefore, NBC's coverage of the NBA, albeit less intensively than their Olympic narrativizing, adopted similar production strategies: NBC personalized, as it spectacularized, the NBA, its teams, and its players, to the American viewing public.

In 2002–03, the NBA broadcast rights were commandeered by—in an ironic twist for this discussion—Disney's ABC networks, which paid \$2.4 billion for a six-year contract to show a significantly reduced number of games on the ABC national network. By introducing a self-imposed scarcity with regard to national network game coverage, ABC's aim was perhaps to accentuate the *monumental* stature of the NBA spectacle (Debord 1994 [1967]), while simultaneously accommodating the *vernacular*, through expanded coverage on cable platforms (the ABC contract included provision for game coverage on Disney/ABC sport television's ESPN cable outlet; additionally, NBA also signed a separate six-year \$2.2 billion contract with TNT).

### The Primacy of Emotional Labor

The narrativized sport spectacle is, to large extent, only as compelling to a viewing audience as the emotive resonance of the objects that provide the focus of highly personalized storylines. For this reason, Bryman's (1999) concept of emotional labor is perhaps the most salient constituent element of Disneyization to the evolution of the spectacularization of the NBA. Emotional labor refers to highly contrived and rehearsed practices whereby service workers express what are perceived to be socially desired expressions and behaviors, during the course of interactions with the consuming public (Bryman 1999). Within the theme park context, manifestations of emotional labor are readily apparent in the willing smiles and demeanors of service workers. Although somewhat less obvious, high-profile sport leagues similarly seek to ensure that the embodied representations of their organization (in this case, playing personnel) exhibit what are perceived to be engaging (commercially desirable) public personas. Unlike in the Disney scenario, the NBA's leading personalities do not have to be uniformly wholesome; they simply need to project an identifiable character that would most successfully interpellate the subjectivities of sufficient swathes of the consuming populace. Hence, through its own promotional invectives, those of network, cable television, and radio broadcasters, and even the ancillary influence of corporate advertisers using (and thereby contributing to the advancement of) players' celebrity, the NBA's rampantly intertextual marketing machine has conjured forth a phantasmagorical world of embodied identities and narratives

incorporating tropes routinely associated with the experiential sweep of human existence (triumph and tragedy, falling and redemption, success and failure, heroism and villainy). Thus, the NBA is both humanized and personalized to an audience eager any kind of emotive gratification (either resonant or dissonant).

The very essence of basketball lent itself to the reengineering of the NBA into a manufacturer of personality dramas and cults: it is an extremely telegenic sport, in as much as the “The athlete’s face—and emotions—aren’t shielded by a helmet as it is in football” (longtime Deputy Commissioner of the NBA, Russ Granik, quoted in Moore 1994, 1B). As a consequence, during the early to mid 1980s, Larry Bird’s whiteness and Magic Johnson’s disarming black smile and style were intensively mined as part of the remodeling of the NBA into a racially ambiguous—and thereby accessible to mainstream American sensibilities—popular cultural space (Cole and Andrews 1996). Bird and Magic came to represent, however spuriously and unrepresentatively, the public *face* of this cosmetically managed NBA. However, it was Michael Jordan’s imaged identity that was to play an even more instrumental role in what could be described as the racial disassemblage of the NBA into a viable commercial product (Andrews 2001). In short, Jordan’s imaged identity harnessed and nurtured the racially acceptable semiotic space initiated by the Bird–Johnson dyad, and ushered in an even more lucrative era of popular acceptance for the NBA. While the search for the next Jordan (an imperious African American player whose countenance massages rather than challenges America’s racial anxieties) continues, ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, within the late capitalist context, numerous commercial interests have also sought to engage, and thereby capitalize upon, what is considered to be the resistant and oppositional tendencies exhibited among America’s youth cultures (Smith and Clurman 1997). Specifically, the NBA’s seemingly endless supply of African American “anti-Jordans” are cast by the promotional messages emanating from shoe, fast food, and mobile phone companies alike as seductive frames from which to engage the sensibilities of predominantly white American youth. As Goldman and Papson (1996, 1998) identified, these embodied signs speak to the manner in which the perceived culture of urban (read African American) America has been commercially colonized as a mechanism for addressing middle class concerns, and indeed pretensions, about authenticity. They are compelling examples of what Dyer-Witheford (1999) described as “market-racism.” Therefore the semiotic system of the NBA reinforces the historically grounded discourses of acceptable and unacceptable blackness (Carrington 2000, 2001) in a manner that draws further parallels to the more reactionary outpourings of the Disney Corporation (Giroux 1994).

In terms of the production of the vernacularity of the NBA spectacle, it is also important to consider Bryman’s (1999) interrelated concepts of theming, merchandising, and the dedifferentiation of consumption, all of which point to the spectacle’s colonization of evermore aspects of everyday existence (Debord 1994 [1967]). In terms of its expansive semiotic economy, the NBA has been transformed into a complex network of branded commodity signs (those pertaining to the league itself, its franchises, and, perhaps most importantly, its cultural economy of superstar players) from which the consumer is

encouraged to derive a positive and consistent sensory experience (Goldman and Papsen 1996; Klein 1999). In this vein, the NBA's aggressive merchandising practices now mean the league, its teams, and players can be experienced in multifarious commodified forms, the most obvious being through engagement with NBA televised game coverage, in-house promotional programming and commercials, a 24-hour cable channel (NBA TV), pre-recorded videocassettes, books, magazines, computer games, and an extensive array of related sports apparel and merchandise. The theming of NBA-related personas, commodities, services, and experiences reached its most explicit expression within a joint venture between the NBA and Hard Rock Café that resulted in the opening of the NBA Café: a restaurant at the Universal Studios theme park in Orlando, Florida, and the seemingly unavoidable corollary of a collision between ever-converging entertainment universes. In this way, as late capitalism's propensity for advancing the "dedifferentiation of fields" (Jameson 1998, 73) continues unabated, the spectacular principles and practices advanced by the NBA as a media entertainment complex suggest a moment in which "the spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality" (Debord 1990 [1988]), 9).

In conclusion, the *monumental* NBA spectacle (network television coverage) acts as a generative and unifying locus for the diverse ancillary products and services (the "panoply of pop-cultural offerings"; Holbrook 2001, 142) through which the NBA brand enters into everyday consciousness and experience. Thus, in Debord's oft-cited but in this case most appropriate words, the various ways though which the NBA can be experienced (in other words, consumed) thus exemplifies the "historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life . . . commodities are now all there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity" (Debord 1994 [1967], 29). The integrated spectacle of the NBA also contributes to the increased governance of the consumer marketplace through the commodification of particular objects and associated modes of behavior. As with the Disney Corporation, through the entirety of its media entertainment offerings (from the spectacular network game coverage, through the serial "I love this game!" promotions and their recent iterations, to the deifying replica shirt, and the lionizing tendencies of NBA.com), the NBA represents a tautologous semiotic system designed to control and direct consumer emotions toward the goal of enhancing the aura of the NBA spectacle. As Debord noted, "The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are identical. It is the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity" (1994 [1967], 15). The NBA can thus be considered an emotive autocracy because, while not always successful (as witnessed by periodic semiotic aberrations and inconsistencies), its various cultural offerings seek to direct the consuming public toward an uncritical engagement with, and thereby perpetuation of, its own virtuosity. This even becomes apparent in the manner in which the league's global (in terms of its global diffusion as a mediated and merchandised spectacle) and international (regarding the increased numbers of non-US-born players on NBA teams) growth is celebrated (cf. Andrews 1997).

Herein, the NBA spectacle, like other tautologous semiotic systems before it (of which Disney and the British colonialism are the most obvious like-minded imperial projects), revels in its own *manifest* destiny. In Debord's terms, the NBA "covers the entire globe, basking in the perpetual warmth of its own glory" (1994 [1967], 15), in a way not dissimilar to the discursive constructions of other, less benign, American-led overseas incursions.

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