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Spectacular Annihilation: On Contemporary Apocalyptic Aesthetics

Abstract: This article argues that Debord's concept of the *spectacle* is fundamentally a theory of *time*. The spectacle isn't merely an accumulation of images but a *social relation* that reorganizes lived temporality, undermining historicity—the capacity to grasp the present as historically produced and, therefore, transformable. Under spectacular conditions, time is experienced as an oscillation between compulsive acceleration and the desire for closure, a temporal blockage that tends to generate apocalyptic imaginaries in which political change appears only as terminal rupture.

Drawing on Ilyenkov and Kosík, the article reconstructs how capitalist *abstractions* are lived as a *pseudoconcrete* world of self-evident *appearances*. Debord's spectacle names the social organization of this pseudoconcreteness as the “paralysis of history and memory,” where incessant renewal coincides with an eternal present. Debord's distinction between *diffuse* and *concentrated* spectacle clarifies how liberal *fragmentation* and fascist *pseudo-unification* emerge as responses to the same production of lived abstraction. Benjamin shows how fascism radicalizes this logic through the *aestheticization of politics* and war as apocalyptic closure, while Jesi explains its mythic technology as a “vacation from history.” Against this, Benjamin's revolutionary interruption names an alternative arrest of time that reopens historicity.

Debord's first thesis names the transformation of lived time: in “societies in which modern conditions of production reign [...] everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”¹ The *spectacle* is no mere layer of images added to an otherwise intact reality; it's “a social relation” in which images and commodity-forms become the dominant medium of coordination, recognition, and authority.² I claim that spectacular thinking—the practical habit of treating images and commodity-forms as the locus of reality—precludes historicity (the capacity to grasp the present as historically made and therefore historically transformable) and tends to generate apocalyptic and eschatological imaginaries (i.e., visions of an imminent end to history).

This blockage is epistemic (false beliefs) by virtue of being temporal. Spectacularity helps to shape what Benjamin calls the “mode of perception.”³ The spectacle supplies an experience of time that oscillates between compulsive acceleration and the desire for closure—for instance, climate crisis discourse often oscillates between technocratic progress narratives and doomsday pessimism. On one side, capitalist modernization presents itself as irreversible *progress*.⁴ On the other, the same modernization repeatedly produces crisis, fear, and a longing for arrest: to stop the storm, halt the clock, freeze the social world before it collapses. This desire is politically ambivalent. It can take the form of emancipatory finality (a revolutionary interruption of domination) or it can be captured and inverted into fascist temporality: an authoritarian promise to “end” conflict by suspending history in mythic unity and apocalyptic war.

¹ Debord, Guy. 1970. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1.

² Ibid., 4.

³ Benjamin, Walter. 2006. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Second Version).” In *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 104.

⁴ Benjamin, Walter. 2006. “On the Concept of History.” In *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 389–400.

Capitalist acceleration produces a social need to stop time because acceleration is lived as compulsion rather than as collective self-determination. I show this in five steps. First, capitalist production generates *real abstractions* that dominate producers (Ilyenkov). These abstractions are lived as a *pseudoconcrete* world of firm and self-evident appearances (Kosík). Second, Debord's concept of the *spectacle* is the social organization of this pseudoconcreteness through images, commodities, and staged events, whose temporal form is what he calls "the paralysis of history and memory."⁵ Through spectacular *temporality*, "incessant technological renewal" marches alongside "an eternal present," so the spectacle mediates between capitalist production, lived experience, perception, and politics by reorganizing how people apprehend time.⁶ Third, *diffuse* and *concentrated* spectacle are capitalism's two aesthetic-temporal strategies for managing this contradiction. Diffuse spectacle disperses antagonism into consumable instants; concentrated spectacle answers the resulting anxiety with magical identification and mythic permanence. In this way, Debord's distinction between *diffuse* and *concentrated* spectacle clarifies how the same aesthetic logic of abstraction yields both liberal *fragmentation* and fascist *pseudo-unification*.⁷ Fourth, Benjamin shows how fascism radicalizes the concentrated spectacle's pseudo-unification: it "[grants] expression" without "granting them rights," and culminates in war as apocalyptic closure.⁸ This "aestheticization of politics" engenders an apocalyptic fascist imaginary.⁹ Fifth, Jesi analyzes the temporal technology at work. Capitalism employs what Jesi calls the "technicized myth" by which fascists become invested in this apocalyptic closure—this "festival," this fascist "vacation from [...] history" that denies the conditional truth of historical time.¹⁰ Against this, Benjamin's revolutionary arrest names a different interruption: not mythic closure, but a break in "homogeneous, empty time" that reopens historicity.¹¹ The political problem, then, isn't whether time will be arrested—capitalist crisis already creates a shared desperate longing for change, for the end of the world's prevailing state—but whether arrest takes the form of emancipatory interruption or fascist apocalypse.

Abstraction and the Pseudoconcrete

Ilyenkov's reconstruction of Marx blocks a persistent mistake: *abstraction* isn't only in the head. Partly quoting Marx, Ilyenkov writes that "abstract labour" names an "objective characteristic" of labor under commodity production; "the reduction of different kinds of labour to uniform simple labour" is "an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production."¹² Capitalism differs from non-capitalist societies in that certain moments of thought—abstractions such as *value*, *equivalence*, and *calculation*—are structurally stabilized and generalized. Capitalism thus intensifies the moment of thought's autonomy—autonomy relative to the other moments of whatever material process. Thought's newly-intensified autonomy gives it a more significant role in the organization of social practice than in other social formations. This gained significance is partly enabled by a siloing of thought's role that renders its operations opaque, obstructing understanding of its significance to collective practice. Because capitalist abstractions are enacted materially (in practices of exchange, accounting, and production), they dominate materially: rather than in collective practice, social power appears to reside in impersonal forms (*value*, *price*, "the economy"). Thus, Marx separates the ontological (the material) from the phenomenological (what we experience), allowing him to make a bold claim on materialist

⁵ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 158.

⁶ Debord, Guy. 1988. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Malcolm Imrie. New York: Verso, 11–2.

⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁸ Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 121.

⁹ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰ Jesi, Furio. 1979. *Materiali mitologici: Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea*. Turin: Einaudi, 49.

¹¹ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 396.

¹² Ilyenkov, Evald. 2008. *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*. Trans. Sergei Syrovatkin. Delhi: Aakar Books, 34.

grounds. In most societies, material conditions have transparently determined ideas; in capitalist experience, socially-stabilized abstractions organize the course of practice through which the world is reproduced.

Kosík describes how we experience this domination by forms that we produce and externalize. Everyday practice produces “routine thinking,” a familiarity with things and “their superficial appearance” that reproduces phenomenal forms as reality.¹³ Hence, Kosík’s decisive formulation: “the world that exposes itself to man in his fetishised praxis [...] is not a real world [...]; rather, it is a ‘world of appearances.’”¹⁴ The *pseudoconcrete* isn’t illusion in the sense of sheer falsity; it’s appearance that presents itself as solid self-evidence. When underlying relations are predominantly mediated by abstractions, one navigates pseudoconcreteness through practices that grant supposed “firmness” and “effectiveness” to abstractions.

Dialectical critique begins with avoiding the temptation of that immediacy. Programmatically, Kosík insists that thinking must “*abolish* the apparent autonomy of the world of immediate everyday contacts,” must “[abolish] the pseudoconcrete in order to reach the concrete.”¹⁵ The “concrete,” then, isn’t the sensory *given*; it’s the historically-mediated *totality* of relations and practices that pseudoconcreteness conceals. Whether it’s our thoughts, considered in a one-sided way, or our practices, determined one-sidedly (as in labor’s sole goal of producing value), it remains abstract vis-à-vis fully-fleshed out concepts and practices that transparently take into account a variety of considerations.

The pseudoconcrete, then, forms the experiential pole of a dialectic with the spectacle. At its heart, the *spectacle* is capitalism’s socially-determined form of abstract perception. Insofar as capitalist social relations take the form of *real abstractions*—or what Marx calls “inverted forms”—the spectacle names the perceptual, or aesthetic, regime through which those relations are apprehended, coordinated, and reproduced in everyday life. Thus, the spectacle is the aesthetic field’s social counterpart to the phenomenological pseudoconcrete: not merely a way of seeing, but the historically-specific organization of appearances through which pseudoconcrete experience becomes a generalized social context. It’s a regime in which images and commodities no longer merely represent relations, but function as the primary “facts” through which social life is lived. Through the everyday repetition of these facts and the rhythms that we form around them, the present is experienced not as a historical conjuncture but as a self-evident environment.

Spectacular Time

Debord’s analysis of time shows why spectacle is intrinsically anti-historical. He writes, “The time of production, commodity-time, is an infinite accumulation of equivalent intervals” wherein “segments of the chronometer must only prove their quantitative equality.”¹⁶ Debord quotes Marx—“time is everything, man is nothing”—naming a world in which time confronts people as an external measure imposed by production.¹⁷ By this temporal logic, lived development is devalued. The future becomes the continuation of quantitative measure, foreclosing the possible opening of any new collective project according to shared criteria or deliberation.

The spectacle, then, entails a flattened temporality: “Pseudo-cyclical time is a time *transformed by industry*”; it “is in fact no more than the *consumable disguise* of the commodity-time

¹³ Kosík, Karel. 1976. *Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World*. Hingham, MA: D. Reidel, 2, 5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147; The shift to modern temporality is a much-studied topic. See, for instance: Benjamin, “On the Concept of History”; Thompson, E. P. 1967. “Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism.” *Past & Present* 38: 56-97; Tomba, Massimiliano. 2013. *Marx’s Temporalities*. Trans. Peter D. Thomas and Sara R. Farris. Boston: Brill.

of production.”¹⁸ That is, spectacular society “impersonally” imposes on us the pseudo-cyclical repetition that conditions our orientation toward the world. Leisure, novelty, and “free time” are packaged and sold. The future is preformatted as the next consumable moment: new products, new scandals, new crises, new spectacles. Each is interchangeable with the other, regulated only by the normative iteration of one partially-differentiated thing after another. Debord insists that, under this regime, “pseudo-events” are “lost in the inflation of their sudden replacement,” while lived experience is deprived of critical access to its own past.¹⁹ What can’t be retained and collectively narrated can’t become *historical consciousness*.

The spectacle’s reconfiguration is thoroughly structural: “The spectacle, as the present social organization of the paralysis of history and memory [...], is the *false consciousness of time*.”²⁰ In this way, the spectacle pits two kinds of abstract expression against each other: the abstraction of the ever-new, ephemeral, and separated against the organized, necessary, repeating, and unchanging. The same set of channels, then, produce and distribute, on the one hand, the ephemeral and separated and, on the other hand, the lasting and binding—using abstraction to make each appear self-sufficient.²¹ The spectacle thus institutionalizes a social arrangement that systematically interrupts memory and narration. Because this organization is necessary to capital’s reproduction, it can’t rely on mediation alone. When spectacular abstraction fails to secure its own conditions, its reproduction is guaranteed by extra-economic force. As Marx famously remarks, “Force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one.”²²

In this way, the spectacle must deny historicity as such. If historicity means the capacity to relate the present to a past that remains appropriable and to a future that remains open, then the spectacle is anti-historical, converting past and future into derivative functions of present consumption.

The implications can be stark. The spectacle’s late capitalist, or neoliberal, form is characterized by “incessant technological renewal” and “an eternal present,” alongside “secrecy” and “unanswerable lies.”²³ This is the spectacle at its most extreme. This even more impenetrable spectacle engenders apocalyptic imaginaries by proliferating and deepening capitalism’s temporal contradiction within itself. You want to point out that society appears as all rapidly-changing differences? It’s obvious. You want to point out that things seem to be completely unchanging? Also obvious, and time marches on, so you might as well smile or give up entirely. Which you

¹⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 149, 150.

¹⁹ Ibid., 157.

²⁰ Ibid., 158.

²¹ These institutional channels are the reproductive prostheses of capitalism and its state form that we sometimes call the “Ideological State Apparatuses.” Althusser, Louis. 2014. “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation.” *On the Reproduction of Capital*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Verso, 232–72.

²² Marx, Karl. 1982. *Capital, Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 916. One of the more well-studied examples of capitalist force being used to institutionalize a shared social fantasy—an inverted form—lies in the example of “race.” On race as a *real abstraction*, or inverted form, see: Sorrentino, Sara-Maria. 2019. “The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx’s Method.” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 96: 17–37. On the forced institutionalization of “race,” see: Buck, Pem Davidson. 2001. *Worked to the Bone: A History of Race, Class, Power, and Privilege in Kentucky*. New York: Monthly Review Press; Morgan, Edmund. 2003. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company; Allen, Theodore. 2012. *The Invention of the White Race, Volume II: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*. New York: Verso; Ignatiev, Noel. 1996. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge.

²³ Debord, Guy. 1988. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Malcolm Imrie. New York: Verso, 11–2. Debord calls this form the “integrated spectacle.” For Debord, it integrates the diffuse and concentrated spectacles (which we’ll discuss below). I’ll argue that, while capitalist societies can sometimes balance the two in a way that makes the spectacle appear impermeable to revolutionary intervention, the two always remain in tension, and this helps to explain why capitalist societies can cycle through fascist periods.

choose makes no difference. It's no wonder that the youth so often lapse into what's called "doomerism." As Milani incisively observes, the algorithmic "feedback loops" of the digital age have made the online sphere "a fertile ground for the aestheticisation of politics in a late-fascist key," further intensifying this spectacle-induced paralysis of historical time.²⁴ Technological renewal increasingly accelerates, and the ideology of progress becomes harder to resist. Yet, the "eternal present" names the political function of that renewal: preserve the continuity of domination and render high-order alternatives unthinkable.

This catastrophism has its witness, and it indexes the possibility of alternatives. As Benjamin writes, the angel of history "sees one single catastrophe [...] piling wreckage," while a storm drives him "into the future"; "What we call progress is *this* storm."²⁵ Thus, we experience progress as a compelling—indeed, overwhelming—force. Under these circumstances, the "state of emergency" is "not the exception but the rule."²⁶ As change appears impossible and as the state of emergency appears permanent, the anxious need to stop time is easy enough to explain. It's the wish to interrupt the storm—not necessarily to return to the past, but to escape the forced futurity of catastrophe. The spectacle thus doesn't merely obscure history; it produces an apocalyptic imaginary in which history appears either as endless repetition of the terrible or as something that desperately must be brought to a decisive end. This temporal oscillation appears in contemporary climate crisis discourse, which repeatedly vacillates between technocratic narratives of managed progress and apocalyptic imaginaries of irreversible catastrophe. Each is rooted in the insecurity of atomized and fragmented life.

Diffuse and Concentrated Spectacle: Fragmentation and Pseudo-Unification

Debord's distinction between *diffuse* and *concentrated spectacle* clarifies how capitalism produces both liberal *fragmentation* and fascist *pseudo-unification* as spectacular responses to the same temporal problem. "The diffuse spectacle accompanies the abundance of commodities, the unperturbed development of modern capitalism."²⁷ The spectacle's diffuse expression reflects the proliferation of plural images, plural commodities, plural roles. The subject is interpellated as a chooser, but the field of choice is internally homogeneous: it's the multiplication of equivalents in the self-same abstract form. Again, time here is pseudo-cyclical: novelty as repetition, replacement as stability.

This fragmentation isn't politically neutral. Diffuse spectacle disperses antagonism into ever-expanding lifestyle differentiation and media cacophony. It converts history into a reservoir of styles and identities and converts the future into a schedule of increasing consumption. Insofar as it organizes experience as a series of isolated instants, it reproduces the "paralysis of history and memory" at the level of everyday consciousness. The affective residue is anxiety, exhaustion, and hopelessness: one must maintain incessant renewal while sensing that nothing fundamental can change.

The concentrated spectacle answers this desire with immediacy enforced through "permanent violence."²⁸ In the spectacle's concentrated expression, "[t]he image of the good [...] is usually concentrated in one man, who is the guarantee of totalitarian cohesion. Everyone must magically identify with this absolute celebrity, or disappear."²⁹ This "magical" identification, then, isn't de-

²⁴ Milani, Benedetta. 2025. "Politics of *aisthesis* and the aestheticisation of politics in the digital world: On technology, aesthetic and the faschosphere." *Studi di estetica* 53(1): 73–86.

²⁵ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 392.

²⁶ Ibid., 392.

²⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 65.

²⁸ Ibid., 64.

²⁹ Ibid., 64.

terminated by agreement on shared interests; rather, it's staged fusion.³⁰ Spectacular concentration suspends mediation—plural representation, conflict, deliberation—by staging an immediate unity of leader and people. The temporal promise is equally immediate: the end of complexity, the end of uncertainty, the end of conflict—history as open struggle replaced by the warm blanket of a fixed mythic order.

In truth, there's no tension between the diffuse and concentrated expressions of the spectacle. In either case (or in the case of their combination), "it is the system alone which must continue."³¹ Across changing conditions, the spectacle ensures the reproduction of capitalist social hierarchy and the authoritarian functions that underwrite it. It achieves this by dispersing antagonism into consumable fragments and by channeling antagonism into mythic unity. The spectacle reaches its effective apex in the integrated spectacle, in which it mobilizes both diffusion (abundant commodified choices) and concentration (occult control, state-economic integration), but, as has been discussed, even the diffuse form needs its infrastructures of regularity, and even the concentrated form accommodates certain surface changes. The balance between these two expressions of the spectacle is regulated by capitalism's reproduction demands in whatever historical political moment.

At this point, the relation between liberalism and fascism can be precisely stated, then. In one sense, fascism is the latent tendency in liberal capitalism: when diffuse fragmentation fails to stabilize crisis, the desire for unity crystallizes in concentrated spectacle. In a complementary sense, the logic of capital demands the production of both tendencies simultaneously. Diffuse spectacle is the normal form of commodity abundance and managed separation; concentrated spectacle is the emergency form that captures the desire to stop time and redirects it toward authoritarian closure. The spectacle manages this tension—between acceleration and arrest, fragmentation and hope for social bonds and cohesion—at the level of appearances. Fascism radicalizes that management to a murderous extreme.³²

Fascism: Aestheticizing Apocalypse

Benjamin provides the decisive bridge from concentrated spectacle to fascism's eschatology. Fascism "sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights."³³ Here, "expression" is a name for *aestheticization*: politics as empty, abstract representation. The masses are to be allowed to appear to themselves as a unified collective, but the private property regime will remain intact. As Benjamin notes, this logic of empty appearance lies at fascism's heart: "*The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life.*"³⁴

As with Nazi apocalypticism so, too, with the contemporary far right. As Milani argues, contemporary far-right politics reproduce the same aestheticization of annihilation under digital conditions: in the online "faschosphere," collapse, civilizational death, and terminal conflict are

³⁰ On this Freudian theme in Frankfurt School analyses of fascism, Adorno writes, "The mechanism which transforms libido into the bond between leader and followers, and between the followers themselves, is that of *identification*." While *identification* is the means for creating fascist social bonds, it is, in a sense, inauthentic (perhaps, "magical," then): "They do not really identify themselves with him but act this identification, perform their own enthusiasm, and thus participate in their leader's performance." Adorno, Theodor. 1982. "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." In *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt. New York: Continuum, 124–5, 136–7.

³¹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 70.

³² On capitalism's evisceration of social bonds, and the fascist danger in this evisceration, see: Tomba, Massimiliano. 2021. "Neo-Authoritarianism without Authority." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 23(1); Tomšič, Samo. 2022. "No Such Thing as Society? On Competition, Solidarity, and Social Bond." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 33(2–3): 51–71; Mazzarella, William. 2017. *The Mana of Mass Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

³³ Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 121.

³⁴ Ibid., 121.

staged as inevitable and even desirable horizons, offering destruction itself as a form of resolution.³⁵ What twentieth-century fascism pursued through mythic war and *Götterdämmerung* imagery is today dispersed across platforms and networks. Today, as in the interwar period, aestheticized immediacy substitutes for historical mediation and, in the place of a concrete political program, apocalypse is lived as a permanent, pleasurable present.

Hence, aestheticization culminates in eschatological spectacle: “*All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war.*”³⁶ War supplies what concentrated spectacle promises: total mobilization, total unity, and a terminal horizon. Thus, “[Humankind’s] self-alienation has reached the point where it can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure.”³⁷ This is spectacular time pushed to a limit: the world’s destruction enjoyed as a beautiful and marvelous culminating image because historical agency has been replaced by its aestheticization.

Capitalism’s political theology thus underwrites the end of its time. As Benjamin remarks, capitalism is “a purely cultic religion,” whose cult is incessant: “each day commands the utter fealty of each worshiper.”³⁸ It produces universal “guilt”—a sense of “debt”—rather than redemption, and demands “endurance right to the end.”³⁹ This is eschatology without salvation—an endlessly intensifying obligation whose horizon is catastrophe.⁴⁰ Fascism can then be read as capitalism’s spectacular attempt to give this horizon an enjoyable, communally universal, and absolutely decisive form—not the slow crisis of endless renewal, but the climactic crisis of war and sacrificial unity.

The Mythological Machine and the Vacation from History

Where Debord and Benjamin diagnose the spectacle’s temporal form, Jesi analyzes its mythic technology. Jesi proposes the “mythological machine” as a model: “a device that produces epiphanies of myths.”⁴¹ Crucially, the machine may even be “empty.”⁴² The machine’s efficacy lies in producing the appearance of myth as immediate truth—not in the truth of any mythic substance.⁴³ In fact, capitalism’s mythological machine produces what Jesi calls “technicized myth.” That is, non-capitalist societies have had *genuine myths*, but, often, capitalism can only produce the hollow husk of the myths that we crave—the highest possible forms of shared significance and the grounds for our social bonds. It should be no wonder that fascist political theology can operate even when its “content” is incoherent—functionally “empty.” Because the mythological machine normalizes and saturates our sphere of meaning with incoherence, fascism needs only to employ the spectacular production of technicized myth.⁴⁴ As Mazzarella notes of contemporary

³⁵ Milani, “Politics of aisthesis and the aestheticisation of politics in the digital world.”

³⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 121.

³⁷ Ibid., 122.

³⁸ Benjamin, Walter. 2001. “Capitalism as Religion.” In *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 288.

³⁹ Ibid., 289.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 289.

⁴¹ “[P]er definire la forma di un congegno che produce epifanie di miti e che nel suo interno, di là dalle sue pareti non penetrabili, potrebbe contenere i miti stessi—il mito—, ma potrebbe anche essere vuoto, possiamo utilizzare l’immagine della *macchina mitologica*.” Jesi, Furio. 1999. *Mito*. Segrate, IT: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 105.

⁴² Ibid., 105.

⁴³ Ibid., 93.

⁴⁴ Saturation is, of course, a common metaphor that comes from chemistry. If chemical saturation is when it becomes impossible to add a substance to a solution because the ability of the solution to absorb that substance has hit its limit, then, in this communicational case, the proliferation of incommensurable and even unrelatable messages makes it impossible for the addition of true messages to influence public opinion. Debord writes, “The simple fact of being unanswerable has given what is false an entirely new quality. [...] It is truth which has almost everywhere ceased to exist or, at best, has been reduced to the status of pure hypothesis. Unanswerable lies have succeeded in eliminating public opinion.” Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, 12–3.

populism, a “cult of immediacy” is possible only because it is “so thoroughly mediated.”⁴⁵ Through the use of technicized myth, then, capital can short-circuit the work of collective deliberation and meaning-making, gaining coherence’s complement in the form of manufactured epiphany—the depth of meaning that people most need and desire when they feel lost and desperate.

This transcendent break in people’s experience stops time. Jesi describes this possibility as “an arbitrary vacation from history, a ‘festival.’”⁴⁶ The festival is an “expansion of consciousness” that “denies the conditional truth of history.”⁴⁷ Whereas history is contingent, mediated, revisable, the mythic festival denies contingency by replacing historical mediation with ritual immediacy. Fascist pseudo-unity is, by this mechanism, not only based on ideological content but, also, on temporal experience—the sense that one has stepped outside ordinary time into a sacred “now” in which destiny resolves all conflict.

We can now explain the social need to stop time. Benjamin quotes an anonymous poem inspired by the July Revolution:

Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower,
Were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still.⁴⁸

The desire to interrupt the continuum can be emancipatory. Benjamin insists that thinking involves “not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well”: an interruption that breaks the additive flow of “homogeneous, empty time” and opens a revolutionary chance.⁴⁹ Fascism captures the same desire for arrest and inverts it—aestheticizing politics where people should be “politicizing art.”⁵⁰ Fascism offers not interruption as opening, but interruption as closure: the end of mediation in leader-mass identification, the end of politics in empty technicized myth, the end of time in dazzling self-annihilation.

Conclusion: Total Annihilation or Justice

Under the spectacle, time, itself, is betrayed. Everything accelerates—new products, new crises—but all this frantic motion freezes in a perpetual present. Spectacular thinking turns lived reality into a stream of images so ubiquitous and self-contained that it paralyzes history. The past fades into irretrievable memory; the future shrinks to a fated repetition or looming catastrophe. In this world of appearances that feels solid but is hollow, the only imaginable horizon is apocalypse—an end of time that might quell unceasing anxiety, nervousness, and paranoia.

Managing this crisis of time and meaning, the spectacle is a double-game. On one side, it shatters experience into an ether of countless consumable moments, distracting and diffusing any urge for change. On the other, it conjures mythic unity—a charismatic narrative that promises to freeze all turmoil all at once, in a flash. Fascism is this aesthetic logic’s extreme conclusion. It offers mesmerizing closure: a people unified in appearance but stripped of agency, their history halted in a final spectacle of war and sacrifice. Technicized myth is a temporal sleight-of-hand—a false festival outside time that denies history’s open-ended truth.

⁴⁵ Mazarella, William. 2020. “Populism as Political Theology.” manuscript available at *Academia.edu*, https://www.academia.edu/42286798/Populism_as_Political_Theology, accessed 9 Jan 2026, 8.

⁴⁶ “L’esperienza dell’Antiquario, dell’archeologo settecentesco, era dunque al tempo stesso una arbitraria vacanza dalla storia, una «festa», ed un ampliamento di coscienza come quello di Don Chisciotte, che nega la veridicità condizionata della storia per offrire l’accesso ad una verità storica non condizionata, e perciò autenticamente vera.” Jesi, Furio. 1979. *Materiali mitologici: Mito e antropologia nella cultura mitteleuropea*. Turin: Einaudi, 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁴⁸ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 395.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 396.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 122.

But, covered in the lichen clinging beneath this wreckage, seeds of hope quietly grow. In place of the fatal myth that seals fate, the possibility of a revolutionary halt—the smashing of progress’s flat clockface, allowing us to rediscover and relearn together the complex temporalities tucked in our marrow. How do we collectively seize this moment of suspension? By succumbing to beautiful annihilation, or by carving a path back into history and its unfinished future?

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