

**Two
Local
Chapters
in the
Spectacle
of Decomposition**

**Chris Shutes
p.o. box 4502
Berkeley, California 94704**

**May, 1979
No copyright**

Chris Shutes

Two Local Chapters
in the Spectacle of Decomposition

Chapter II: Popular Temple

***“Everything is said
about the spectacle
except what it always
& fundamentally is:
the colonization of
the point of view
of the individual
by the point of view
of the collectivity.”***
—Daniel Denevert

Two Local Chapters in the Spectacle of Decomposition

Chapter 1: Peoples Temple

1

"The spectacle is a drug for slaves. It is not supposed to be taken literally, but followed at just a few steps distance; if it were not for this albeit tiny distance, the mystification would become apparent."

—*Internationale Situationniste*

The essential error made everywhere concerning the phenomenon of the modern cult is to pretend as though it were a complete aberration, something out of this world and fundamentally in contradiction with the existing forms of society. Always implicitly, and usually explicitly, the "normal" activities of society are evoked as "healthy," a positive contrast. On the contrary, the "fanaticism" or "insanity" of the modern cult stems from a *single* basic divergence from the dominant social norms: the cult places itself as organization *above* the decor and etiquette created by and for the circulation of commodities. It doses out its alienation straight. It does away with the "distance" demanded by the commodity spectacle and proposes that its victims take the underlying message literally, on face value: the cult demands that its slaves *act like slaves*.

The cult abandons all pretense that the individual dominates his own conditions and actions in modern society; it *correctly* recognizes that the essential need created by the spectacle is the need of the individual for submission. This need is exactly what Jim Jones and his counterparts at the head of other cults unabashedly exploit—to the extreme embarrassment of those respectable civic and economic leaders who must preserve the sanctity of the *appearance* of the individual's freedom in order to effect more subtle ways of crushing him (wage-labor, commodity consumption, culture, the family, "free speech," "democracy," etc.). The astonishing proliferation of cults in the last ten years can only be explained by the fact that modern society has already created millions of people ripe for the picking. On the level of the individual, the cult is not the product of the failure of modern society, but rather is the excessive product of its *success*.

While modern capitalism manufactures *en masse* the need for consoling illusion—above all the need for the illusion of community—it finds today that many of the structures and institutions which served it so well in the past are no longer able to function with their previous efficiency. In this regard, the nuclear family ranks high on the list of casualties. In the wake of Jonestown, various commentators proposed the family as the answer to the cult. They put the horse behind the cart. All Jones' manipulations notwithstanding (they simply accelerate the process for a handful of people), the modern cult is much less a cause than a *result* of the nuclear family's decomposition. The fate of the nuclear family at the hands of Peoples Temple is a Punch and Judy version of a process at work throughout Western society, a process that generally presents itself in a much more tedious, drawn out fashion. The cult replaces the normal wear and tear, whose secret in the commodity form constantly remains hidden, with a foe in which the process of decay is concentrated and personified.

Thus the cult achieves entertainment value: it becomes consumable as a separate world apart. The general conditions of society provide the material basis for the spectator's fascination with the cult—in that the spectator is essentially no different from the cult member in his need for resignation—at the same time that the consciousness of one's own relation to the general is deluged by the organized fetishism of the particular. The terror of one's own existence—torn between the need for hierarchical security (of the family, for instance) and the quasi-generalized modern etiquette which forbids all individual appearance of this need (to the point where the most gauche thing one can be in this day and age is a patriarch or a passive woman)—thankfully pales before the spectacle of nine hundred corpses.* "Tragic" catharsis has abandoned all its cosmic pretensions: the spectator gains an added sense of security simply because he is able to *survive*.

As long as the cult confines its imaginary secession from society to abstention from the mores of mass distribution, it remains relatively safe. But the success of the Leader in seducing adherents leads the Leader, by a sort of automatism, to believe in his own lie. The followers who, powerless in themselves, delegate their existence to the Leader

*In the same way, the plight of the individual pales before other vicariously contemplated disasters: earthquakes, airplane hijackings, terrorists, nuclear catastrophe, and so on.

demand *real compensation*: they demand *power*. Because of the *necessity* of putting into practice the image of himself which his slaves project onto him (without the slave, the Leader is nothing), the Leader becomes the victim of his own propaganda, a mere actor playing a part.* The moment of truth comes when the Leader, if only by a lapse in calculation, extends his pretension of superiority over the spectacle to a pretension of superiority over the spectacle's enforcer: the State. The initial skirmish with the State portends the cult's downfall. Jones was smart enough to realize this. He realized that in stepping outside the law he had gone too far. He knew that he was incapable of confrontation with, or subversion of, the State. His choice was to face the mercy of the courts—an impossible alternative—or to beat a tactical withdrawal. So he fucked off to Guyana, in a *tour de force* of subjectivism: a ritual effort to recreate the pre-capitalist objective conditions corresponding to the pre-capitalist form of the cult's social organization—the feudal, or even tribal, village. All the blather about a utopia has absolutely nothing to do with this decision. The explanation of a utopia-gone-sour is the product of deliberately deluded persons who share the very humanist illusions that Jones so ruthlessly exploited. The bottom line of the cretinism that humanism has now *visibly* become is to see all the respectable humanists, from Jesse Jackson to the San Francisco District Attorney, reminding everyone of all the "good" accomplished by Peoples Temple.

"The cause for which they died remains unspoken. Thus they died in vain, and that is the ultimate tragedy," says Herb Caen. Here the shameless house cynic of San Francisco reveals his own ties with the faded image of liberal/humanist "opposition," the chronicling of whose spiraling decline constitutes a big hunk of his own chatty career. The "tragedy" for Caen has to do with Guyana only insofar as what Guyana *represents*: causes are kaput. The reason that the "cause" of Peoples Temple was "unspoken" was because *it didn't exist*. In Peoples Temple, the cause becomes pure spectacle: the spectacle of nothing. The guilt which Caen so loyally takes upon himself—on the grounds that Jones took him in—is a write-off of the point of view for which he speaks. According to this point of view, one is supposed to accept even still the notion that the problem consists in finding an *ideal cause*—one which makes dying worth the trouble—not that the form of activity which sacrifice to a cause implies is not only unattractive, but also totally bankrupt.

*The search for a clue to Jones' megalomania in his personal life, a pursuit with which the psychologists and the reporters had a field day, is just so much horseshit; it assumes an individuality which is not there. As always, psychological phenomenology abstracts from real social relations.

Caen is capable of more sophisticated mystifications as well. He's clever enough to know that the market for tear-jerking fluctuates unpredictably:

"The vocabulary of horror stretches only so far. In the case of the Reverend Jim Jones and Peoples Temple the words—those 'buzz' words so dear to the heart of every newspaper headline writer—soon ran out of steam and meaning. *Bizarre* and *grotesque* were followed by *nightmare* and *shock*. The unbelievable became all too real, and the unspeakable was at last given tongue and voice. Then came stunned silence, the only possible response to the still unanswered question: Why?"

The tendency to reduce all description to cliché is a banality to every reporter (or newscaster) who values his job. The role of the modern reporter is increasingly becoming to aesthetically eliminate all *symptoms* of this tendency—not out of some loyalty to the truth (as journalistic ideology would have it), but because of the imperatives of entertainment (read: sales). One of the most frequently employed means of confronting journalistic petrification has become to acknowledge it openly and make it a big issue: thus, for instance, the problem of "media events" becomes a topic of debate within the media. By anticipating the criticism of the spectator—thus postulating as fact the agreement it intends to create—the media maps out the terrain of improvement: whether the problem is located in incompetent or lazy writers, in editorial bureaucratism, or in verbal repetition, the solution always remains within the specialized world of the media—whose premises, for good reason, remain unspoken.

When, in the case of Peoples Temple, Caen cops the plea that the "events" themselves are such that no words can possibly do them justice, he simply extends this process. "Then came stunned silence, the only possible response to the still unanswered question." That essential premise of the media, the passivity of the spectator, itself becomes cliché ("stunned silence"), one more banal element among all the others. Caen's trick is to present as particular and incidental what is in fact general and fundamental. For the metaphysical power of cliché to describe life derives from the fact that life has been reduced to cliché. "Shock," "horror," "surprise,"—the whole vocabulary represents what people *no longer live*. These sensations have been expropriated. Subsequently, they are redistributed as the habitual, anaesthetic response to images. The media need no longer tell the good spectator what or how he ought to think; as the saying goes, it goes without saying. Particular clichés become a liability; like the workers in enterprises that can no

longer operate at a profit, their position has become, as the British so aptly put it, redundant. *The mere hint* of the clichés to come dictates to the well-drilled mind of the consumer of information how he is already going to respond; he is "free" to labor under whichever master he chooses.

Calculated inaction in the face of crisis has become the approved form of response for those at the top of other social hierarchies as well. In the political sphere, this is the well-publicized watchword of the Carter administration. A supposed position of weakness has in fact become one of the American State's greatest strengths: it eliminates premature compromise and clumsy manipulation, concealing domination by acting only when conflict has played itself out, avoiding useless and tedious skirmishes, retractions, and explications concerning superficial details. Jimmy Carter's well debated personality has little to do with it: Carter simply does an excellent job of filling the bill *necessitated* by the historical epoch in which the State is faced, less with the need to instigate change, than with the need to adapt itself gracefully to change brought about by forces admittedly outside its control.

The apparent absence of the State is in fact the affirmation of its permanent presence. It is not simply a matter for Carter or for any other State functionary of leaving no trail by never standing up; in the illusory spatial void, anyone who so desires can (and does) walk around like Winnie the Pooh and Piglet in search of the State Woozle—whose tracks turn out to be their own. The State's self-repudiated consciousness is perpetuated, often against the State's immediate interests, in the consciousness of its victims. Although the American State acts infinitely less by its direct control than by mediations which blanket this society, intimidation is so overdeveloped that millions of people—probably the majority—believe in the power of authority far more than those who actually run the system.

The ideology of conspiracy reflects in the crudest form the powerless effort to exorcise in one blind swoop the mediations by which Power actually functions. It takes the image of the State at its word—or rather, at its word of decades ago (and which was largely bluster even then). In practice, the CIA has mucked up almost every major effort at manipulation it has tried in the last fifteen years.* But the CIA's brutalizing power—thanks mostly to the press and the tattered remains of the

*The much vaunted exception, Chile, is used by leftists to conceal the major issue: that Allende assured the success of the coup that overthrew him by disarming the workers, and that the workers' downfall was their willingness to tolerate a so-called socialist State whose sanctity assured that events transpired at a level out of their control.

Left—has never been greater. Each new mistake the CIA makes, each new scandal concerning it, each new exposure about it reaffirms with every word the stupefaction of the individual in the face of the power of specialists, the specialists of power. The unspoken, but all the more totalitarian message is this: history exists, but goes on over your heads and always will—and that's that.

Like the cult which consolidates—in the cult itself and in its Leader as locus of the cult's alien coherence—all the mediations between the individual and society, conspiracy ideology becomes a strategy which mediates all of reality. For the believer, the clouds rain conspiracy, the sunshine nourishes it. Its favorite climate is fog, the element of confusion, where secrets are wrapped in a nebulous environment that animates mundanity. Facts are relevant only as details in the landscape which jive or don't jive with what the believer wants to see. The same people who bitch about the CIA/FBI/State Department *not* intervening in Guyana (even in the face of the accurate government response that intervention would have been illegal) would have been the first to bitch if the CIA/FBI/State Department *had* intervened. Conspiracy ideology does not set out to demonstrate the real motive forces behind human practice (including the actual role, if any, of conspiracies within the development of events), but rather takes the conspiracy as beginning and end. The notion itself of conspiracy constitutes the totality of its substance.

Conspiracy ideology is a quintessential reflection in ideas of commodity production: each new detail at once creates the need for more details and confirms the value of all previous investigation (consumption). Each detail is a commodity in and of itself. The goal—discovery—is always a letdown, a pageant of bureaucratic tedium. The process is everything.

Conspiracy ideology is modernist to the extent that it makes interpretation participatory. The specialist is not the person best able to interpret the evidence, but the person who uncovers it. The interpretation is left to mutilated subjectivity. Everyone is invited to inject his own banal experience and paranoid reaction to it. Why did the cop stop *my car*? Why have *I* never won on a lottery ticket? Why did *my* dishwasher break down? In the past, the *materia prima* of what is now the raw material of conspiracy ideology was known as *gossip*. Today, in large point due to the proliferation of the alienated "feminine point of view," gossip is socialized. The abstraction from utterly petty activity, from which traditional gossip draws its inspiration, is scarcely noticed: the most out-of-the-way old maid has seen her existence invaded by the spectacle to the point where the image of the State appears no less mundane than the story of the neighbors' latest fight or the frequency with which the people upstairs fuck.

Perhaps the most significant repercussion of the demise of Peoples Temple was its effect on certain black ideologues who, sensing that the brutal truth of Peoples Temple revealed something about themselves, emerged from the woodwork in a public infestation of apologetics. "'No one can make me buy that lie,' said Ruth Singleton, a local (East Palo Alto) NAACP official. 'We are a people who escaped slavery through the underground railway, not a people who kill ourselves and our babies.' . . . She blames 'racism.'" (San Francisco *Chronicle*, December 14, 1978). Black ideologues have for a long time expressed their contempt for the black individual by positing a collective personality which is supposed to reflect a black person's true humanity simply on the grounds of skin color, and which justifies whatever a black person does, no matter how stupid. Black "pride" tops the list of the qualities that this collective personality must embody. Politically, this pride is supposed to create a superior moral being, one whose radiant inner strength will cause his oppressors to melt like cheese in a broiler when he "stands up for his rights"—and marches around in circles to the tune of black bureaucrats. In practice, the ideology of black pride almost never has anything to do with politics; its material basis has much less to do with rights than self-righteousness: the arrogant dismissal of petrification in daily life. Recently, a few black women intellectuals have begun to point out the disastrous reality of the relations of the sexes in the black milieu, and the support given it by the blustering image of the rebellious black developed in the Sixties. Unfortunately, these women seem content to trade in the old specializations on a new feminist model. One of the major nexes on which class struggle in the United States is going to revolve in the next ten years will be the ability of blacks to outflank the specialized versions of change brought forth as a superficial corrective to ideological decay: to aggressively liquidate the remains of twenty years of ideological fetters and at the same time to seize and maintain the initiative against new reformisms *as these reformisms develop*.

A second notion that ran up against the stone wall of Jonestown is *the illusion of a collective black history* which supposedly puts the historical present within the immediate grasp of all blacks. It would be bad enough if Singleton maintained that living persons who had once participated in class struggle were *ipso facto* capable of renewing past achievements at will—an illusion which any distanciated examination of past revolutionaries can see through in two seconds. But Singleton has to run the notion into the ground: because one's *great-grandparents* participated in a struggle (whose broadness of commitment and whose

content she greatly exaggerates), one evidently inherits, by *genetic transference*, the ability to rebel. William Shockley would be proud. This ideology finds its practice in the posters adorning the Oakland offices of the Internal Revenue Service celebrating "Black History Month;" and in the proposed enshrinement of Martin Luther King's Birthday on an equal footing with the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln (the State generally recognizes better than King's erstwhile constituents the counter-revolutionary value of the preacher's contributions). Those who use history to explain the present in terms of the past simply reveal their inability to understand the present. The radical point of view—the critique *ad hominem*—starts rather with a disabused analysis of the present and works backwards. It turns pitilessly on the compatibility of the results of past struggle with the present brutality of human reification, and the inordinate support that insufficient rebellion in the past gives to the glorification of the *status quo*.

The determinist malarkey that places all responsibility for the situation of blacks on "racism" reaches the pinnacle of ridiculousness when applied in the context of Jonestown. The absolute contempt for observing *how people live* expressed by this perspective surpasses even that of the liberal politicians who, prior to the exodus to Guyana, gleefully accepted Jones' offers of organized sheep at demonstrations and rallies. For it is undeniable that those who followed Jones willingly *chose* to abdicate all semblance of individuality.

The fetishism of exactly how people died at Jonestown conceals this individual choice, a choice which had been made long ago. This fetishism of death is in no way peculiar to the fate of Peoples Temple; it is a concrete case of the essence of modern society, this society which brings its whole weight to bear against life in order to impose everywhere the conditions of *mere survival*. The question of whether the residents of Jonestown were shot, injected with cyanide, drank cyanide of their own accord, or were tricked into drinking it is a problem for necrophiliacs, the *predictable* product of this morbid society that, from television to insurance companies to subliminal images of skulls in whiskey glasses to punk rock, uses death to sell commodities (the commodity sold by the deaths at Jonestown being the entire commodity system). Taboos *must* accompany death in this society, must make it into a source of awkwardness and embarrassment, because taken at face value death reveals too crudely the reduction of human activity to animality. When survival is the name of the game, the step to dying is simply icing on the cake: a melodramatic *ritual* in which one, in the best sportsmanlike conduct, acknowledges the power of the unknown adversary, basking in the consolation of bringing to a close a game well played. Jones merely turned the emphasis upside down, minimizing the value placed on survival in order to make a well-staged ritual of dying the explicit goal of existence.

Chapter 2: The Death of Harvey Milk

1

One week after Jonestown, some 25,000 people, mostly homosexuals, held a candlelight vigil in downtown San Francisco, in honor of the slain politician Harvey Milk, one of the greatest spontaneous shows of ritualized passivity seen in the Bay Area in years. The epitome of self-effacement is revealed when Milk speaks literally from the grave, cautioning in a pre-recorded message against violent excess. All the moralist baloney about human rights—appropriately concretized as respect *for the dead*—gains a new lease on life as various insufferable humanists like Joan Baez return from their own style of graves—the hip suburbs—to repeat the same empty phrases, sing the same schmaltzy songs and play the same vapid roles that everyone got bored with ten years ago.

2

Harvey Milk stated several months prior to his death that he knew he would be assassinated sooner or later. In retrospect, this makes him appear lucid. But in fact, it is a banal case of the increasing self-consciousness of the modern actor, the role-player, who knows enough to realize that his role is self-defeating but who doesn't know enough to do something different. As roles become more and more clearly defined as such, as roles, a certain lucidity is required simply in order to play them credibly. Like the advertisements which recognize that people have been subjected to previous advertisements and have been disappointed—and which even go so far as to refer mockingly to previous advertisements in order to go them one better (all the while concealing for good reason all the social presuppositions of advertising and the misery of life that constitutes its foundation)—the modern actor self-righteously admits his impending fate in order to exit with a flourish. (This is the social basis for the pre-occupation with *Rocky*, the hopeless but tireless underdog.) *Failure* to transform oneself and to transform society is jabbered away in the public expression of a powerless consciousness. This is everywhere acclaimed, acknowledged as the mark of *sophistication* (whether that of consumption or that of street-life experience, preferably a combination of the two); in the meantime, it gets you into the best parties and the more intriguing social circles, the very environment which ultimately destroys you. Beyond the aestheticized folderol, the choice is simple: you either submit to your "fate" or undercut *in practice* the objective bases of *your own participation* in what makes you a perennial loser.

"Come out!" exhorted Harvey Milk in his posthumous address, as the center of his social-political crusade. The ideology of coming out stakes the entire value of the individual on the moment when he acts publicly, following the basic forms of this society in which *appearance* denotes the essential moment of individual transformation. Once beyond the old moral-social stigma (which hundreds of thousands of people in the Bay Area and numerous other urban centers already are), coming out is the single most *immediately* accessible total package on the market of non-conformist choices, both because it provides the spectacle of complete social and personal change *on the terrain that is farthest from the center of Power*, and because it need not be mediated by any particular authority. Coming out plays the function formerly limited to seduction but goes further, in that it is a general social statement as well as a particular social act. At the same time, each subsequent homosexual seduction is automatically imbued with an aura of generality to a far greater degree than heterosexual seduction; one seduces a person not only by being sexually attractive, but by offering an instantly identifiable reciprocal valorization for a whole way of life.

Whenever the miserable history of the individual is not confronted concretely—when it is quite precisely *repressed in action*—it returns in the form of awkwardness, grotesqueness and contrived behavior, the visible symptom not of the presumptuousness of radically subverting old roles (as the pseudo-critique of experimentation in daily life pompously articulated by timid souls would have it), but of entering into new ones. The smug attitude of superiority (over "straights") common in gay milieus relies on the collective etiquette which places on the top rung the role of playing with roles. What is most collective within it thus appears to be the most individual.

The incredible proliferation of homosexuality in the last decade is an indisputable sign of the fact that the most natural relations—sexual relations—have become completely socialized. The possible import and effect of this practice is mitigated, however, by the ideology rife in gay milieus of "realizing one's natural essence" by affirming one's gayness. In the most absurd spectacle, historical precedents of homosexuality (because people have always done it, it's natural) are dredged up as external justification for *subjective choice*. History becomes an opiate of the masses whenever it is required as a supplementary explanation for conscious action.

Come out! *In order to do what?* Evidently, following the leadership of Harvey Milk, to become a specialist of cultural consumption and to become part of a political constituency. The supposed fluidity of the gay world—the lack of doctrine and the emphasis on the most direct form of human activity constitute two of homosexuality's principal enticements—reveals its underlying dogmatism when placed in the service of a politician. The death of the politician—willingly groomed in advance for the role of martyr—reintroduces ritual: 25,000 gays, 25,000 candles and 1001 reaffirmations of doing what one has already done and which challenges zero in the present.

Among the "progressive"-thinking persons of the Bay Area (they used to be called "liberals"), any systematic critique of the gay spectacle has become completely taboo. This taboo is most notable in the concerted silence regarding the prevalent attitudes of male homosexuals towards *women*, an area in which the lineup of gay male stupidities is well prepared for an ideological Olympics. For starters, the supposed affinity of gay males for the plight of women pales quickly when one considers the infatuation of the male homosexual for *fashion*—one of the dominant forms of the exploitation of the female consumer. Often the gay male's contempt for women is more direct. This is most evident in the separatism fanatically practiced in keeping women out of public places dominated by gay males, not only in bars but in the glares women receive as standard procedure on the sidewalks of Polk and Castro Streets. (Thus, the perfect reproduction of the old roles, where men were allowed consort with women *in private* but *went out* with "the boys.") On the other hand, numerous woman movie stars are positively drooled over, especially those with slightly masculine qualities. Here is the most spectacular attitude towards women for you; women are prized as *images*, but an influence by women on public gay male *practice* is to be denied, avoided, and, at the extreme, violently rejected.

What is everywhere repressed in this society is *history*: one's own, with others, that of the whole, and above all, the *mediations* among the three. The feminine affectation of many male homosexuals has a social basis that goes beyond personality and individual role playing (the mechanical mimicking of this affectation, the most frequent response to it, only betrays the narrowness of the mimic and his miserable prejudice for his own brand of sexual role-playing). It is simply one form among thousands of expressing practically the notion that by

changing oneself one changes the world, resolves its contradictions. If one believes that one is non-conformist because of one's private life (in this case, sexual orientation), one must find a means of expressing this to all comers. The *compulsion* to inform others that one is gay—with about as much particular reason as one has to confess to another person what one's hobby is—is another symptom of the same impoverishment; as is the ubiquitous “gay look.” Whatever the style of the sleeve on which one wears one's gayness may be, it simply serves, in this age of economized time and energy, to save a lot of bother. The stupidity and rigidity of society in responding to the display reinforces the illusion of one's personal and personalized subversiveness. Regardless of the professed affinity of most gay males for feminism, this *parody* of the “hidden richness” of the traditional feminine role remains an established form of behavior.

9

If men did to women what gay men do to other men on the streets in terms of sexual advances, violent reaction would be frequent. The most commodified form of sexual advance, the pickup which is about as selective, well-considered and grounded in creative desire as the purchase of laundry detergent, is semi-officially legitimized by the quasi-mystical aura of the gay terrain. The compatibility of the gay pickup scene with the dominant society is eminently revealed by the hordes of tourists who now split their time between Fisherman's Wharf and Castro Street: the role of playing with sexual roles is so pedestrian that it is highly consumable even for the most hungup midwest tourists. While the participants in the annual gay parade may harbor illusions as to the social-political import of their regalia, the tourists go to the heart of the matter: they come quite correctly to see America's biggest yearly fashion show.

10

According to the spectacle, the atmosphere of daily life is so erotically charged that total strangers can get it on without any introduction, hesitation, embarrassment or guilt. This ideology reaches its zenith in the gay areas of San Francisco, where all of social space appears organized to the contours of facilitating individual desire.

The ease with which so many find in these areas an acceptable terrain for the pursuit of their sexual interests is, as noted previously, a sad commentary on their initiative, creativity and individuality. But the social function of the ideology of the erotically charged spectacle does not stop at a hierarchically organized subjectivity. The commodity which

presents itself as eroticism's greatest agent in fact puts eroticism to its own good use, using it extensively and thoroughly to rearrange its decomposing urban landscape from top to bottom. Behind the aura which broadcasts the possibility of an orgy in the streets at any time—but which never happens and is never intended to happen—lies an orgy of real estate speculation. Ethnic and low income neighborhoods (and hangouts), whose basis in poverty was in large part responsible for their being left partially outside the uniformity and monotony of city planning, are now threatened with extinction less at the hands of bureaucratic redevelopment than at the hands of the gay dollar playing the market. The emphasis placed on *style* within the gay milieu provides a welcome addition to the general trend of superficially correcting the excesses of the aesthetically bankrupt architects bankrolled by the state in the previous two decades: the wave sweeping San Francisco today is much less concrete and stucco monstrosities than well-designed and conceived renovations—*tasteful monotony*, the monotony of “taste.”

In the meantime, while thousands of persons in the older “neighborhoods” rightfully protest their impending dispossession in the face of opportunist speculators, they have up till now almost invariably done so in the name of archaic repressive institutions—notably the family and religion. On the one hand, these institutions produce their own form of hierarchical separation, despite the superficially more believable sense of community they sometimes inspire; and on the other hand, they staunchly support the very same commodity system which leads, among other things, to real estate speculation. What emerges thus appears to be only a battle of hierarchies: the objectively grounded resentment of gays as *agents of the commodity* is displaced into resentment of gays over the stupidest prejudices: non-conformism, sexual experimentation, the whole list of “sinful” no-nos which constitute the terrorizing substance of political reaction.

In the middle of the controversy stand a large number of homosexuals who maintain their innocence on the basis that they are not involved in real estate. While true enough in itself, this argument ignores the fact that gay capitalism is not a minor excrescence, but the *essential product and support of the entire gay scene*. Participation in this scene, if only as consumer, is inseparably culpable participation in the social fabric which places gays in a hierarchical position above those being dispossessed, indirect as particular gays' relation with the dispossessed may be, and even though they too may well become victims of the same process.

In the appropriate context of a drug—alcohol—which supplies an illusion of unity, the gay bar is the nexus of the illusion of the gay “community.” Certain “radical” gays criticize the “exploitation” of gays that occurs in the bars, but generally along the most simplistic “anti-capitalist” lines (e.g. exorbitant prices). They blame the bars’ monopoly on gay meeting places on intolerance, evoking the ability of heterosexual lovers to parade about together as they please, as if this were something to emulate. Sometimes, the exponents of this criticism go so far as to create “alternative” institutions to compete with the bars. This “radical” gay criticism of bars is contradictory, because it ignores the *need*, created by the *very logic itself* of gay ideology, that the bars fulfill: the need for a spatial link between public and private life which allows enough latitude for living out the ideology, but which is sufficiently self-contained that it does not openly challenge the privation to which eroticism in this society is necessarily subjected. Without the bars, there *would be* no gay “community” as such; and this indispensable element in turn reveals very precisely this “community’s” limits in revealing its foundation. It is a “community” of *consumption*, of, by and for consumption. Of individuals (sexual), of roles, of stars. It is modernist in the sense that monetary exchange comes in, as it were, through the back door; the commodity, the show’s hidden director, appears as mere backdrop to the spotlight upon which the deceived gaze remains transfixed.

The gays first appeared as a social grouping dissatisfied with the dominant cultural trends, which had previously excluded them. On the other hand, in creating an illusory free space for themselves, the gay milieus initially did not contest the essential presuppositions of culture, then offered themselves as open to cultural input, and finally ended up demanding culture as aesthetic complement to the new turf. This combination of elements made gay milieus an excellent source of inspiration and testing ground for new cultural trends. Culture appeared in advance of most other aspects of the commodity economy in seeking to exploit, openly and directly, the gays as new market for consumption (catering not simply to consumers who happened to be gay, but to *gay consumers*). The principal cultural form adopted was music, the form most suited to bars and clubs. Numerous experiments were tried, met with varying success, and went the way of passing fads, either too ordinary to stand out, or too gimmicky, particularized or esoteric to appeal to the mass market which the culture industry requires in order to sustain its astronomically high rates of investment and return.

With *disco*, the gay scene finally paid off.

Unlike the cultural reflections (jazz, blues, even soul) of earlier black milieus—culture that was at least in part grounded in an indigenous sub-society whose semi-autonomous existence outside the social mainstream left broad room for individual creativity and originality—the evolution of disco was unambiguously grounded in culture-as-commodity from the word go. The unusual social context provided by the gay scene served not as a source for a wealth of material or as impetus to formal innovation, but rather as an external *excuse* by which the most hackneyed, repetitious, totally technologized aesthetic mediocrity, inherited from decomposed popular music, gained a new lease on life.

Disco answered the illusion of unity long since lost to rock ‘n’ roll by following the general trend of the redefinition of luxury in this society: the switch of emphasis from *what* one consumes to *how* one consumes. Change in style is less and less invested in the article for sale: style is, rather, *brought to the commodity* by the consumer on whom the preponderance of attention is focused. Disco swept the performer off the stage; and thankfully, since the antics of the pop music star have become so predictable that his displacement by a machine is a welcome relief to embarrassing pretension. The totalitarian imposition of the sexy, vibrant singer, standing before a humiliated audience pacified by drugs in an uncomfortable and claustrophobic immobility, is replaced by a democratized, participatory situation in which the crowd humiliates itself. Everyone is a potential specialist, a potential star, a potential critic. Whether the now *active* consumer is isolated as “individual”—as spotlighted dancer who expresses himself by displaying how well he has absorbed and perfected a dancing technique whose criteria are recognizable and open to the well considered judgment of everyone—or whether the individual dancer is lost in a sea of flashing lights to the point where even his body adds to the decor only as image, total immersion of self in a planned, organized environment remains the rule.

Whereas rock ‘n’ roll referred to sexuality in the context of the official denial (and struggle against it) to which its audience was subjected—sex appeared as the principal means of escape from a hostile, miserable world—disco caters to people who have achieved the image of sexual happiness that rock promised and who have found it somewhat less idyllic than it seemed from a distance. The focus of disco is to provide escape, not from the frustrations of imposed abstinence, but from the frustrations of the isolation and constriction of the couple (the social unit in terms of which disco functions). In explaining the immense popularity of disco, numerous persons, particularly promoters, point out that cultural consumers now demand more than “just sex.” Of

course, just as it is possible to overindulge sexually only if one has too much mediocre sex, so the flight from "just sex" is the flight from sex reduced to a commodity, sex that is de-inhibited at the cost of being de-sexualized, happy in images only. Having achieved a state of affairs where its image of sexual happiness has been so successful that people now pursue it spontaneously, the cultural spectacle implicitly offers an apologetic corrective to its past excess: it leaves the bedroom out of the picture as the quasi-sacred domain of individuals (this plays the secondary function of not offending, and thus including, those persons still encumbered by moral constraint). Disco thrives behind this veil of false modesty, knowing that if people achieve sexual "success" within the forms and structures that its cultural predecessors have outlined, they will, *whatever* their particular style of sexual expression may be, "naturally" return to the longing embrace of the cultural commodity.

The infantile simplicity of disco serves to reveal the underlying basis of modern culture as a whole. Culture has always been hierarchical, founded on hierarchy and promoter of hierarchy. In the past, according to a diversity of hierarchies: high-brow and low-brow, particularities to one ethnic, religious, tribal, age-group, regional base. Disco eliminates all the criteria of distinction save one: money. The goal of the commodity to abolish all distinctions except its own is broadcast, in disco, no longer as wished-for dictate but as accomplishment (numerous other hierarchies remain, to be sure, but their existence is dwarfed beyond recognition). Hicks and hoi-polloi alike, from the Transamerica Building to Jackson, California, to Johannesburg, South Africa, can become equally involved in terms of subjective engagement. But following the patterns of the ideology of equality in this society, the "equality" remains *separate*.

When certain gays protest the commercialization of "their" culture, they protest in the name of nostalgia for a uniqueness which never existed. The *total* culture that disco has inspired—film, dance, clothing, as well as music—is the legitimate objectification of the subjective illusions of the social milieus which gave birth to it, and especially of these milieus' dominant characteristic: *total* immersion in role. The purist expressions of self-hurt and wounded pride in the face of the "rip-off" of disco accurately measure the *despicable reality* of those who whine them.

Just as gay culture emerged as parody of black culture (all the ideological justifications minus all the objective bases) at the very moment when black culture was being fully integrated into the cultural mainstream (and thus stripped of its particular qualities to the profit of mass garbage), gay politics emerged as parody of the Civil Rights Movement at the moment when that movement's illusions had not only exploded, but had become integrated into national politics as official ideology of the American State. Through the most traditional political means (organizing of an electoral constituency), for the most traditional political goals (representation in the State apparatus), Harvey Milk succeeded in entering the hallowed chambers of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. Here and there, an eyebrow was raised. It took Anita Bryant and John Briggs to mould a *bona fide* gay politics.

The rabid hysteria of these two victorian shitheads and their happily married, constipated followers was surpassed only by the pavlovian reaction of those who opposed them. Everything outside of the terrain defined by the "New Right" foe was forgotten. One became a social rebel by exercising that great, long-standing tactic of non-conformism: voting. The liberalism that gay ideology had supposedly left behind (in the form of ditching the liberal ethic of the '50s/early '60s, which held that it was all right to be homosexual if you kept it to yourself) reappeared in full flower, showing that it had not been finished off but had only lain dormant in the hearts of many: everywhere the clamor was raised for *tolerance*. The issue at stake? The right to work, the right to buy or rent homes solely according to the laws of the market, and the guarantee of enforcement by those fearless defenders of freedom, the local police. Not to be forgotten is the right to *be* a policeman, not only in uniform but as educator, according to the rationalization that gay teachers can assist in integrating children into society, can teach children the ability to think in inverse proportion to their ability to think critically, and can as teachers respect that bastion of sexual repression, the family, just as well as heterosexual teachers can (throughout the campaign against Proposition 6 in California, the similarities of gay couples to heterosexual couples were repeatedly pointed out, following exactly the same lines of argument traditionally used to expound the merits of the family; unfortunately, the practice of most gay couples seems to be accurately reflected in this sort of paean).

The new gay politics serves to reveal that *morality* is not simply the product of a repressive tradition ("conditioning"), but is the appropriate form of self-expression for *any* grouping that defends the virtues of

its particular position in society *today*. Behind the appeal for "human rights" lies a desire to be left in "peace" not only by an irrational, authoritarian State, but also by radical critique. An ideology of individual rights in fact replaces and suppresses the individual; all the contradictions, humiliations and ignominies suffered at the hands of the very people who have a million good reasons to be furious with this society—and the absurd contortions which this society either forces people to live or seduces them into living of their own accord—are either forgotten or excused as an "understandable" response to "alienation."

The new gay politics can easily point out the contradiction between the official policy of tolerance and the real social prejudice to which homosexuals are subjected: and can do so *endlessly*, because the legal authorities are in no position to abolish this socially ingrained prejudice even if they want to. (City officials can't even eliminate harassment of gays by their own watchdogs, the police.) The gays may elect a respectable supervisor, but the gays as a whole *must represent immorality* in this society founded on commodities. The hierarchy of morality (like all other hierarchies) being based on private property, those who most visibly step outside the social locus of the *private property of sexuality*—the family—find themselves at the bottom. If homosexuals reproduce the essential features of the family in their own lives, or put forth an apologetic, normal image, their position in this hierarchy nonetheless remains fixed; which only makes their secularized morality more ridiculous. Flaunting their immorality resolves nothing; it leaves untouched the root of the matter, much the same as the atheists who create their own treadmill in their simplistic opposition to religion.

"The right of an individual to live as he or she chooses can become offensive. The gay community is going to have to realize this. It's fine for us to live here respecting each other's lifestyles, but that doesn't mean imposing them on others" (SF Mayor Dianne Feinstein in the March, 1979 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*). Here, Feinstein is in a sense more candid than Harvey Milk or George Moscone ever were: she acknowledges openly that liberal tolerance has its limits. Leaving aside the political trappings in which her attitude is couched, she personifies the attitude of the entire society towards the gays: *it must repulse them at the same time it attempts to integrate them*. Her lie consists in confining the social contradiction posed by homosexuals to the level of "individuals" and "lifestyles," as if people lived in a cultural vacuum where a hierarchy of morality were not already set up, with the whole oppressive weight of society seated squarely behind it.

The gays are involved in a social war, whether they like it or not; a war that up till now has been characterized by "progressive" retreats in the face of the enemy's advance. Precisely to the degree that they are

now, in the words of Harvey Milk's successor, "united as never before" (as electoral constituency), they are disarmed. They can only arm themselves with the consciousness of what they are *already* up against; a process which, as is always the case in proletarian struggle, necessarily passes through a ruthless confrontation with the compensations so generously offered them by the system that simultaneously isolates and humiliates them without end.

The traditional palliatives and incentives once used to buy off the proletariat have little application for the gays: they have tasted the rewards of affluence (political and cultural as well as economic) and *they are still alienated*. This is the core of the universal contradiction that the gays today pose concretely: their position is strategic, not, obviously, because they are "more alienated" than others or because their alienation is special, but because they are more *aware* of their alienation and thus face *practical alternatives* more clearly. More and more, these alternatives are being radically simplified, as the carrot of neo-reformism shows its attendant stick: the gays can either become the rallying point for a new revolutionary wave, or they will be manipulated as an even more decomposed model of sophisticated submission. Against the apologetics of all the Harvey Milks of this world, it is *only* in carrying their struggle through to its complete consequences that they will transcend the superficial (and always retractable) solidarity of others based on sexual orientation, and discover the basis for a profound and durable support: the rejection of commodities and of the State. The tactical objective coincides with its theoretical demand: either the gays want *the total subversion of this society*, or they want *nothing*.

May 15, 1979

Postscript, May 24, 1979

The night of May 21 saw in San Francisco the most exciting event in this country in the last ten years. Departing immediately from the lenient verdict in the Moscone-Milk murder trial, a crowd of thousands trashed City Hall to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Fifteen police cars were burned. Several businesses were looted. Fires raged. Fifty-nine cops were injured. Supervisor Carol Silver was rewarded with a rock for trying to play two sides.

All the predictable "explanations" were hurriedly issued. The cops and the *Examiner* blamed permissiveness. Certain politicians blamed the absence of a public address system (in Watts the authorities were more modern; they blamed the absence of air conditioners). All kinds of imbeciles debated the outcome of Dan White's trial, in terms of the legal system that was undeniably *rejected*. Everyone looked helter-skelter for the agitators, provocateurs, radicals and what-not. All this *noise* is inevitable; the script could have been written ten years ago, leaving blank spaces for the particulars.

More serious in terms of their mystifying and pacifying effect were the actions and statements of certain "gay leaders."

The dumbest of the bunch showed their colors outright—they deplored the violence of May 21 according to the traditional rhetoric. These were typified by those who, on Tuesday the 22nd, undertook an intensive course in crowd control from the San Francisco police, in anticipation of possible violence later that evening at the "celebration" of the birthday of the deceased Harvey Milk.

Others were more sophisticated in their postures.

Sally Gearhart, whose pleas for moderation were ignored on the 21st, changed her tune. This opportunist turd announced that she would not "apologize" for the violence that had occurred Monday night—she had enough sense to realize that she would have lost all credibility by doing so. She proclaimed, in a most self-ingratiating manner, that the events of Monday had "radicalized" the gays—hoping thereby to promote her own image of the tame "radicalism" that is practiced as a *professor, talking about* things subversive but shitting in one's pants when the logical consequences of this talk are lived out. Her contribution to the passivity of Castro Street on May 22nd was a mystical speech directed to another corpse: Harvey Milk.

Harry Britt—Milk's surrogate—put forth the cleverest statements of the lot. He described the violence as a "catharsis"—revealing once and for all the repressive function of *all* psycho-therapeutic perspectives. For Britt, violence becomes a moment of reformism. Behind his occasional tough verbiage—issued only after his failure to quiet things down, and discontinued when the riots ended—lies the old moralism of

Civil Rights. "Now the society is going to have to deal with us not as nice little fairies who have hairdressing salons, but as people capable of violence." The key word is "capable." Power is reduced to a *pose*: the ability to *appear* so militant that one's adversaries will back down in the face of any demands (which will, as long as this set-up is accepted, always be demands for a rearranged form of the individual's powerlessness).

Virtually every commentator agreed on two things.

First, that the definition of a leader is someone who can keep people under control (and thus keep *things* in control). Harvey Milk was lauded for precisely this reason (the huge effigy of Milk draped on the Castro Theater on May 22nd reminded one ever so much of the portrait of Stalin that dominates Peking's Tien An Men Square); Britt was condemned for his inability to play the part.

Second, that Harvey Milk would not have been involved in the violence of May 21st and would not have supported it. This is *absolutely true: everything Milk stood for went up in flames*. When one graffiti writer on Castro sprayed "Gay riots now" and "Harvey Milk lives" on adjoining walls, he expressed the first contradiction that now faces the gays. This contradiction was concretized in two radically opposed forms of practice: the spontaneous attack on the system (May 21) and the bored passivity of the lonely crowd opiated by cultural consumption (May 22). Dianne Feinstein showed herself, on the 22nd, to be a bureaucrat of the first order: even in the heat of battle, she realized that the most effective policemen don't wear uniforms. The best cops are the colonized minds of the oppressed themselves: beginning with their *habitual respect for private property*, especially when that property stands in their own ghetto. (The retreat to the illusory security of Castro Street by the rioters late Monday was already their first defeat.) The unspoken question that was posed on Castro Street May 22nd, on which everything hinged, was simply this: are the gays prepared to cut off the branch they're sitting on—to include in their practical critique of private property the practical critique of *gay* private property? They were not, and Feinstein won her double or nothing bet.

On the brink of the rioting, Harry Britt exhorted: "Listen to our own people, don't act like a bunch of heterosexuals." In adopting subversive means, the rioters discovered the path of the abolition of the stupid divisions between stereotypes. (On the most immediate basis, numerous heterosexuals were involved in the melee.) This was not Britt's "gay community" that was in revolt—that pseudo-community founded on the roles allotted to homosexuals *in this society*. If only for one night, the question of community was posed concretely, on the level of the *individual*, seeking its truth not in which form of isolated compensation one seeks within capitalism, but in capitalism's destruction.