

## “LIKE TRUTH IS BEAUTY, BEAUTY TRUTH”: BIOPOLITICS, THE SOCIETIES OF THE SPECTACLE AND *THE STONE GODS*

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### Abstract

Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, intertwined with Guy Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle, serves as a critical lens for analyzing the post-apocalyptic world depicted in Jeanette Winterson's novel *The Stone Gods*. This article explores how this community's extreme fixation on aesthetics, DNA modification and genetic enhancement aligns with Debord's notion of society as the spectacle functions as a tool for the operation and the application of biopolitics as Michel Foucault conceptualizes it. Guy Debord, presents a scathing critique of modern society's transformation into a spectacle, where images and representations dominate social interactions. This article highlights the parallelisms between Debord's observations, and the fictional community composed by Winterson, where individuals are consumed by their obsessions on their appearances, fostering a culture of a fake self-worth and an obsession with plastic surgeries. Foucault's biopolitics, on the other hand, examines the relationship between power, politics and life and this interrelationship exposes how control mechanisms that originate from these infiltrate even the most intimate and/or personal aspects of human existence. Winterson's portrayal of genetic fixing, extreme plastic surgeries and the extreme desires to conform to beauty standards epitomize the societal power dynamics rooted in biopolitics. Winterson's novel, in this respect, serves as a compelling literary work that sheds light on the complicated interplay between biopolitics, the society of the spectacle and the human body as a space for the operation of power. It demonstrates how these concepts converge to create a disturbing vision of a future/present society marked by extreme obsession with appearances, genetic manipulation and an entailing erosion of individuality.

**Keywords:** Biopolitics, The Society of the Spectacle, *The Stone Gods*

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### Özet

Michel Foucault'nun biyopolitika kavramı, Guy Debord'un gösteri toplumu kavramıyla bir arada düşünüldüğünde, Jeanette Winterson'un post-apokaliptik bir dünya kurguladığı romanı *The Stone Gods* için çok uygun bir eleştirel lens sunar. Bu bağlamda bu çalışma romanda resmedilen toplumun estetik, DNA modifikasyon işlemleri ve genetik iyileştirme uygulamaları konusundaki aşırıya kaçan bağımlılığının Debord'un gösteri toplumu kavramıyla uyum içinde olduğunu ve bu gösteri toplumunun, Michel Foucault'un biyopolitika olarak tanımladığı güç ilişkileri ağının işlerliğinin ve sürekliliğinin sağlanması amacıyla taşıyan bir araç olarak kullanıldığını göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Guy Debord, modern toplumun, sosyal etkileşimlerin imgeler ve temsiller tarafından belirlendiği bir gösteri nesnesine dönüşmesine karşı sert bir eleştirel tutum sergiler. Bu çalışma da Debord'un bu gözlemleri ve Winterson tarafından kurgulanan toplum arasındaki paralellikleri görünür kılmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu kurgusal dünyada bireyler, sahte bir öz-değer kültüründen beslenen bir imaj saplantısının pençesinde tükenmektedirler. Bu saplantının Foucault'un biyopolitika kavramı üzerinden açıklanabileceği düşünülmektedir. Bu bağlamda biyopolitika gücü politika ve yaşam kavramları arasındaki ilişkiyi, ve bu karşılıklı ilişki üzerinden kontrol mekanizmalarının insan deneyiminin en özel ve/ya da kişisel alanlarına bile nasıl sızdığını irdeler. Winterson'un romanında temsil edilen genetik sabitleme ve benzeri aşırıya kaçan estetik cerrahi işlemleri kökenini biyopolitikadan alan toplumsal güç dinamiklerinin işleyişini gözler önüne serer. Bu bağlamda Winterson'un romanının biyopolitika, gösteri toplumu ve bir hakimiyet alanı olarak insan bedeni arasındaki karmaşık etkileşime ışık tutan çarpıcı bir metin olduğu söylenebilir. Roman tüm bu kavramların nasıl bireysel imgeler konusunda aşırı bir saplantı, genetik müdahaleler ve bunların bir sonucu olarak bireyselliğin erozyonu ile tanımlanmış son derece rahatsız edici bir gelecek/güncel toplum vizyonu yarattığını gözler önüne serer.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Biyopolitika, Gösteri Toplumu, *The Stone Gods*

## Introduction

One of the most widely-discussed and elusive concepts of Michel Foucault, biopolitics has been the focus of a wide variety of scientific disciplines from anthropology to political sciences. Biopolitics can simply be defined as the ways in which the political structures work in elusive ways to organize and control life through forms of power that Foucault labels as biopower. Even the relatively personal aspects of life are kept under control by these forms of biopower from health and birth rates to population diversity as discussed by various studies that are conducted in the field of biopolitics. One of the most influential fields of operation for biopolitics, on the other hand, is the individuals' relationship with their own bodies. Supported by Guy Debord's concept of 'the societies of the spectacle', this article aims to discuss the post-apocalyptic community represented in Winterson's *The Stone Gods*. It is believed that this community is marked by an extreme obsession with the looks and perplexing applications of DNA modification and genetic fixing which can be interpreted in the light of Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle as a tool for power and control founded on Foucault's concept of biopolitics.

Guy Debord is a French Marxist theorist and philosopher who is considered to be one of the most influential figures of the Situationist International Movement. His work basically seeks to critique and transform the modern social structure and the modern human condition. His 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle* also aims to make a critical analysis of the modern society and the individual's transformation and reduction into an object of sight, a spectacle, in his own terms. He points out that in this age of advanced capitalism, the core of social relationships and experiences has been tainted by images and mere representations turning the modern world into a huge web of interconnected spectacles. What he refers to as the spectacle is a collection of images that mediates social relations, operating pervasively to alienate individuals to their real selves and to distort the way they perceive themselves and the reality through the power of media, advertising and consumer culture. In his own words "the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images" (Debord, 1983, 17). To explain this phenomenon, Debord employs Marx's concept of commodity fetishism or meta fetishism and argues that individuals are not only reduced to commodities in the modern experience but also to spectacles. Although Debord is trapped within the limiting boundaries of orthodox marxism and economic determinism, his arguments about the disruption of reality and humans perception of themselves as spectacles and their reduction to objects of sight is applicable to the modern experience especially with regard to individuals' obsession with their body images and the irrational demand for plastic surgeries.

As Guy Debord argues more than half-a-century ago, this is obviously the recent consequence of the systematic alienation of the individuals within the modern social structure and their reduction to objects of sight to fit the needs of the consumer culture. In this world the image replaces the original as the sacred, as Debord quotes from Feuerbach at the very beginning of his book:

But for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, appearance to essence ... truth is considered profane, and only illusion is sacred. Sacredness is in fact held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to 'be the highest degree of sacredness. (1983, 6).

Debord argues that this is a pseudo-world of spectacles "where even the deceivers are deceived" (1983, 7). He goes on to argue that in this world of deception, the moments of commodity fetishism are represented as the real life whereas all that is actually happening is

the production and reproduction of the spectacle at intense levels. “What is presented as true life turns out to be merely a more truly spectacular life” (1083, 87). The creation of this pseudo-reality is characterized as a form of schizophrasia by Debord (1983, 217) and the realm of operation of this pseudo-reality is basically the human body which brings another important concept into the argument of this article, biopolitics.

Biopolitics is a complicated concept for the fact that Michel Foucault uses the concept in several different contexts and to refer to several different issues also using it interchangeably with the concept of biopower (Lemke, 2011, 11). It is a concept that deals with the intertwining relationship between power, politics and mere life including the most intimate and personal aspects of one’s being. Lemke simply defines it as politics that is concerned with life (2011, 16). Foucault introduced the term in his *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality* where he examines the ways in which power infiltrates in the phenomena that are specific to human existence and operates on the regulation of life and social relationships through mechanisms of control (1995; 1978). Foucault further argues that the processes concerning even the simplest aspects of human existence are regulated by practices including punishment, exclusion, normalization, discipline, healing, through biopolitics. In *History of Sexuality Vol I: The Will to Knowledge* Foucault defines biopolitics as forms that disciplines the body and controls the population (1978, 139) whereas in *Discipline and Punish* he defines it as some kind of an art form that is concerned with the human body (1995, 137-138). These forms which were basically concerned with the population rates before the 18th century, simply turned their focus gradually on the human body. In this respect, Lemke, complementing by Foucault, argues that biopolitics then becomes a precondition for directing and administering life (2011, 21). Foucault explains this transformation from the 18th century onwards arguing that, there has been a shift from sovereign power to disciplinary power through the establishment and institutionalization of prisons, schools, hospitals, mental institutions and factories. He argues further that this control mechanism is endorsed by scientific knowledge, statistics and technology in the name of increasing the health and productivity of the society while in fact solidifying power. Foucault also refers to a panoptic mechanism of surveillance, classification, normalization and self-discipline as one of the pillars of this control society which he refers to as governmentality. In his own words biopolitics is a systematic subjection of life to “precise controls and comprehensive regulations” (1978, 138).

The Foucauldian concept of biopolitics, today, can be discussed in a lot of different contexts. However, the specific focus of this article would be the influence of biopolitics on the human body, especially within the context of the imposed standards concerning the aesthetics of the body and the entailing boost in the demand for plastic surgeries. This issue is actually also one of the most widely discussed topics in the world of literature including the work of Jeanette Winterson, who created an extreme vision of the future world in which people are overwhelmed with this obsession with their looks to the point that they lose touch with the natural human form in *The Stone Gods* (2008). Although the main storyline of the novel does not directly align with the conceptual focus of this article, namely Foucauldian biopolitics and Debord’s concept of the society of the spectacle, Winterson launches a discussion questioning if “truth is beauty, beauty truth?” (2008, 33) ironically referring to John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” meticulously commenting on the objectification of the human body and its reduction to a spectacle on the one hand and shedding light on the operation of biopolitics towards the creation of a society of the spectacle on the other.

### **A World of Spectacle as a Tool of Biopolitics**

Winterson sets *The Stone Gods* in various timeframes and worlds to explore various themes such as environmental issues, the repetitive nature of history and the human condition,

the archetypal quest for a paradise regained, etc. through interconnected narratives. The narrative is divided into four parts, each taking place in a different era and setting. The opening of the novel is set on the fictional planet of Orbus, which is facing an ecological crisis and fastly approaching its end, labelled as ecocide by Emily Arvay (2020, 278). Billie Crusoe is assigned to cover a mission to travel to the Blue Planet as an alternative settlement, a paradise regained, for the elite of Orbus which is the most outstanding epitome of how biopolitics operates within this social structure rendering the rest of the community as deviant, in Foucauldian terms, and leaving them to die in Orbus. On the other hand, Winterson also puts other disfunctional aspects of this social structure in Orbus highlighting how people employ medical procedures such as genetic fixing and extreme plastic surgeries to interrupt aging and to temper with their looks, which is referred to as “the political technology of the body” by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1995, 26), turning themselves into objects of spectacle. Winterson contends that science or Bio-tech in particular, as a part of the biopolitics, has been creating these problems as it has been trying to solve others.

Winterson hints at the fact that this is the consequence of the subtle form of systemic violence that the community is subjected to which operates through the subconscious conditioning of the members of the community into acting within specific, selfdestructive patterns of behaviour that is legitimized and internalized by the imposition of a certain discourse, a promotion of the consumer culture and a culture of hedonism that entails it. Men in this community are represented as hedonistic paedophiles with strange sexual tendencies whereas women, in turn, are subconsciously forced to look like children to be able to serve this crooked male sexual fantasy. “Now that everyone is young and beautiful, a lot of men are chasing girls who are just kids. They want something different when everything has become the same” (Winterson, 2008, 21). Little Senorita is the most outstanding epitome of this crooked sexual tendency. She is a twelve-year old pop star who has fixed at this age rather than get older and lose her charms and fame. She is basically famous for being frozen in time and has become a sex icon.

As Foucault discusses in *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, sexuality in this crooked fictional projection of reality, has turned into something that has to be “managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum” (1978, 25). He contributes to the same argument concerning the body becoming a utility of the power relations in *Discipline and Punish*, highlighting how biopower puts hold upon the body, “invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (Foucault, 1995, 26). Foucault goes on to argue that from the 18th century onwards “there emerged a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex” (1995, 26) because then field of desire is also the field of power according to him. That is why Foucault highlights the scientification and utilization of sexuality and desire arguing that “where there is desire, the power relation is already present” (1995, 82). Therefore, the body and sexuality become a realm for biopolitics, a field for administration and control. According to Lemke the body turns out to be a molecular software that can be read and rewritten rather than an organic essence (2011).

The epitome of this interrelatedness between desire and power in the fictional world created by Winterson is that the social structure represented in the narrative is one in which “routine cosmetic surgery and genetic Fixing are considered normal” (Winterson, 2008, 70). Winterson’s critical emphasis on cosmetic surgeries and genetic fixing procedures, echo the Foucauldian critique of the Hôpital Général in *Madness and Civilization* (1988). Foucault argues that the Hôpital Général “is not a medical establishment” anymore, but it is “a sort of semi-judicial structure, an administrative entity which, along with the already constituted powers, and outside of the courts, decides, judges, and executes” (1988, 40). It is an institution

of biopolitics that is utilized as a tool for the regulation of the community and the imposition of the standards of normality at the cost of individual uniqueness and liberty. The doctors in this context are the “priests of the body” (Foucault, 2006, 33) operating within the axis of normality/abnormality.

In the fictional universe of Winterson’s novel, the medical institution is a tool of biopower, that imposes a specific axis of normality, which is represented by a corporation named MORE. MORE is a private institution which regulates the operation of the society in the novel and it utilizes the society of the spectacle to be able to passify the individuals, keep them engrossed by their appearances so that they do not get in the way of the operation of the system as Debord envisioned almost half a century ago. People are so busy worrying about their appearances that “No one wanted to talk about the issues” (Winterson, 2008, 71). MORE has created a so-called “democracy that is in default of its responsibilities. MORE is taking over the Central Power. MORE owns most of it, funds most of it, and has shares in the rest. There was never any debate about the ethics of Genetic Reversal — it just started to happen because MORE figured out how to do it” (Winterson, 2008, 72). As Winterson proposes MORE in this respect is operating like a private state imposing biopower on its subjects.

Genetic fixing, a fictional medical interruption on one’s maturation process, is a central concept of this discussion. Patricia Podgajna argues that, genetic fixing is basically “oscillating between a technological dream and nightmare” (2018, 89). It serves as a fulfillment of the archetypal dream of remaining young forever, on the one hand, and works as a part of the self-inflicted violence the individuals are lured into subjecting themselves, on the other. This process becomes such a ‘natural’ part of their being that the characters in the novel no longer celebrate their birthdays but their g days, the day in which they are genetically fixed, “a great day to celebrate” (Winterson, 2008, 18). Therefore real human beings willingly become objects of meta fetishism. As Guy Debord argues, these

reified people proudly display the proofs of their intimacy with the commodity. Like the old religious fetishism, with its convulsionary raptures and miraculous cures, the fetishism of commodities generates its own moments of fervent exaltation. All this is useful for only one purpose: producing habitual submission. (1983, 37)

Obviously, genetic fixing functions as one of the tools for the operation of biopolitics which can be referred to as the new monster. In the novel, the society of the spectacle works through the imposition of certain beauty standards and paralyzes the individuals by manipulating them into obsessing with their appearances. The emphasis on the objectification of the human being as an object of sight, a mere spectacle is even more intensified through the representation of the celebrities who are under further pressure. In a world where everybody is young and beautiful now due to the macro-surgery procedures, celebrities are pushed to go one step further, to the degree of grotesque, with their bio-enhanced bodies and colour-changing hair.

Their boobs swell like beach balls, and their clicks go up and down like beach umbrellas. They are surgically stretched to be taller, and steroids give them musclegrowth that turns them into star-gods. Their body parts are bio-enhanced, and their hair can do clever things like change colour to match their outfits. They are everything that science and money can buy. (Winterson, 2008, 19).

The transformation of the human body is taken to such a level on the case of the celebrities that their bodies are neither social nor productive but are just pure objects of spectacle and carriers of power. Foucault refers to such bodies which are utilized as “multipliers of power” and as

“zones in which power is most concrete and intense” in *The Punitive Society*, as “dynastic bodies” (2015, 206-7). Perhaps it is a lucky coincidence that Winterson refers to this community of genetically enhanced individuals 'The DNA Dynasty', or perhaps not. Whichever is the case, these dynastic bodies linger on the verge of the grotesque with their translucent bodies, men looking like golden retrievers, women looking like gienesses with impressive breasts with two extra mouths where one would normally expect to see nipples. Such na objectification of the individual as a mere spectacle, yet, is justified through discourse, specifically through a crooked reappropriation of the concepts of democracy and basic human rights which functions as a Swiftian irony.

Another extreme point in which the genetic fixing takes the self-inflicted violence, in this society of the spectacle, is that the dissident voices or lifestyles, or the deviances in Foucauldian terms, are marginalized, judged and punished. Foucault argues that in the disciplinary system of biopolitics every single individual is located on one polar of the binary pairings such as normal vs. abnormal/deviant, the adult vs. the child, the healthy vs the sick, the sane vs. the mad, the nondelinquent vs. the delinquent through which the individuals are reduced to being objects of a biopolitical selection. Lemke argues that these binary parings have two basic functions. The first one is that they enable the possibility to envision that there are homogenous blocks within a community that can be differentiated from each other and this, in turn, creates a distinctive line between who is to live and who is to die (Lemke, 2011, 62-3). This way biopolitics makes it easier to regulate the dinamic relationship between one’s right to live and the other’s death. Identifying the other, excluding the other, fighting the other and even killing the other becomes ideologically justified for the sake of refining the conditions of life. Lemke asserts that the other’s death, in this respect, is not only simply one’s ceasing to exist, it is the dismissal of the other for the sake of security and order of the one (2011, 63-4). In Winterson’s novel, these functions can be observed in three different cases. The first case is that only the rich are allowed to leave Orbus to begin a new life on Planet Blue, as discussed earlier. Planet Blue, as a paradise regained is only reserved for the elite of Orbus which are rendered as worthy of living by biopolitics operating within the system and this unconditional selection is justified as normal and what’s more natural: “The rich are leaving. The rest of the human race will have to cope with what's left of Orbus, a planet becoming hostile to human life after centuries of human life becoming hostile to the planet. It was inevitable — Nature seeks balance” (Winterson, 2008, 73).

The second epitome is the distinction between the ones who conform and the ones who do not. As represented in Winterson’s narrative the individuals who refuse to genetically fix or biologically enhance themselves, are rendered as occupying the lesser end of the binary pairings. Billie is constantly judged and even harassed for being eccentric, writing in a notebook using a pencil rather than using a SpeechPad, living in a farm which is referred to a “bio-bubble thing” by Manfred, and consuming natural food which is ironically seen as “dirty and diseased” (Winterson, 2008, 9). She is labelled as a deviant agent and is constantly being investigated by the Enchantment services and harassed by the police force. As ironically portrayed by Winterson these “monsters” are “humanely destroyed” for being deviances (2008, 6). Although she does not refer to the conceptual framework of this article, Michaela Weiss interprets the same point through a reference to Horkheimer and Adorno:

The ruling elite thus imposes the image of the bright future on the masses. By making the new world publicly attractive, the government creates a utopian vision for the masses ... The image of future paradise has to be perfect so that no opposition towards the mission could arise. As the Central Power regulates and controls the seemingly democratic and ecological distribution of resources, its chief interest is to keep the majority satisfied and reassured of the common

good it would produce, preventing any suggestions concerning the saving of the current planet. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, such government prevents independent thinking. (2013, 180)

This not-so-fictional world it is a projection of a hi-tech panopticon in a Foucauldian sense. This society of the spectacle, which is defined in the novel as “repressive, corrosive and anti-democratic” (Winterson, 2008, 54) manipulates its subjects into submission by working on them as such. Obviously, the system corners people in different ways to make them conform and does not allow dissident voices and alternative lifestyles.

Biopolitics, as represented in the novel, obviously works through the axis on normality and abnormality as highlighted by Foucault. If an individual refuses to conform to the operations of this society of the spectacle, s/he is literally pushed out of the system, being labelled as an “Unknown”. This system of deviation gives one no chance of existence outside the system. When one becomes an Unknown, their papers are destroyed, assets and accounts are frozen, they cannot travel or even buy anything. Such deviation repeats itself over and over again in different forms and normal people are made to function as agents of the system constantly watching, correcting and punishing each other. As Manfred lays bare “we’re going back to a fairy tale ... defeat the dragon and be offered the kingdom” (Winterson, 2008, 57). Passify the deviance and the order is restored. So being na Unknown is as if one has never existed. “You see them sometimes, cleaning the streets, their taggers flashing at fifteen-minute intervals, checked and recorded by the satellite system that watches us more closely than God ever did” (Winterson, 2008, 31). It is impossible to avoid such a panoptic mechanism, because every single detail about an individual is stored in a chip that is implanted in the wrist of each person so that all the information concerning that person or the necessary information concerning his/her present location can be accessed at any time if the authorities feel necessary to.

And the final example of the biopolitical deviation is seen in the post-war era through the representation of the toxic people who are pushed away to live in the forest. The setting here is especially meaningful because of the Latin etymology of the word forest which means ‘outside’. So as highlighted by Lemke earlier, these characters represent the deviant outcasts of the community who are excluded and punished in accordance with the operations of the biopolitics. The folk represented here are toxic radioactive mutants, the incurables and freaks who are fed by helicopters to stop them from proceeding towards the cities which can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of modern day refugees. These are the people who are rendered as disposable for the sake of the safe-keeping of the rest of the community which is the reason why the forest harboring them is referred to as the Dead Forest. They are the deviants of the rotten forest,

coming in ragged, torn, ripped, open-wounded, ulcerated, bleeding, toothless, blind, speechless, stunted, mutant, alive [...] They were the bombdamage, the enemy collateral, the ground-kill, bloodpoisoned, lung-punctured, lymph-swollen, skin like dirty tissue paper, yellow eyes, weal-bodied, frog-mottled, pustules oozing thick stuff, mucus faces, bald, scarred, scared, alive, human (Winterson, 2008, 232).

They are the victims of a “regrettable, unavoidable, a war to end all wars, a war for democracy, a war for freedom, peaceful war” that distinguishes who gets to live and who is to die (Winterson, 2008, 234).

## Conclusion

In each one of the cases discussed above, biopolitics elusively operating through even the most intimate fields of one's life "surrounds, penetrates, and works on bodies" as Foucault indicates in *Psychiatric Power* and the human body is reduced to be a spectacle, a "surface to be penetrated and volume to be worked on" (2006, 2). Such manipulation of human bodies is represented within a gift interplay with biopolitics and the concept of the Society of the Spectacle in Winterson's thought-provoking novel. Winterson portrays a world where individuals are paralyzed through their obsessions with their appearances and the imposed standards of beauty as outcomes of the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics. In this context, the body becomes an object of control, regulation and manipulation, as individuals are compelled to conform to a narrow set of standards. This society of the spectacle, as conceptualized by Guy Debord, is vividly illustrated in Winterson's novel, where individuals are bombarded with images and representations that distort their perceptions of reality. The obsession with the appearance and the commodification of the human body as imposed as a consequence of biopolitics are integral to maintaining the spectacle, ensuring that individuals remain passive consumers rather than active participants in shaping their lives. The novel also highlights the consequences of non-conformity and deviation from imposed societal norms which range from exclusion to several different forms of punishment. Winterson's exploration of these themes, among others, underscores the pervasive influence of biopolitics and the society of the spectacle in contemporary society which is manifest in various different fields of life from the refugee crisis to COVID-19 restrictions. The novel, in this respect, serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to turn a critical eye towards the workings of biopolitics. In an era marked by the manipulation of bodies, obsession with appearances and the commodification of identity, *The Stone Gods* serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving individual agency and authenticity in the face of biopolitical control and the seductive allure of the spectacle.

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