You ought to know that this letter isn't really addressed to you. I want to make an argument about the role of spectacle in the politics of global poverty, and I imagine that you are the person least likely to be convinced by what I have to say. So this letter is addressed not to you, not to a person, but to him, the persona, the media image known as Bono. That grandiose and ubiquitous image has become the public face of global poverty, and that is precisely the problem.

This letter takes its cue from a 1972 film by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin titled Letter to Jane. Their film is a cinematic letter, composed in images and sounds, addressed to Jane Fonda. Shortly after making a movie with them titled Tout va bien, Fonda had gone to North Vietnam, where she conducted a highly publicized tour of bombed villages. Godard and Gorin sent their cinematic letter as a response to the press coverage of Fonda's trip to Vietnam. For most of the film we see just one image, a magazine photograph of Fonda in Vietnam. We hear Godard and Gorin talking about the image at great length, examining its details and questioning its possible uses. They want to investigate the way Fonda put her celebrity to use on behalf of the North Vietnamese, who were under ferocious assault by the US military. Although Godard and Gorin admire her impulse to help the Vietnamese people, they say that her gesture of solidarity is insufficient and contradictory. After thoroughly criticizing her stance and her actions, they invite her to reply. As far as I know, she never answered their letter, either in words or in images. In recent
years she has, however, apologized profusely for being “thoughtless” about the publicity generated by her trip. As someone who knows the power of images, Fonda has said, she should have known better.

Even when set against such a doubtful precedent, celebrity politics has clearly regressed. In 1972, Jane Fonda went to see for herself what happens when B-52s drop their bombs on villages and towns. In 1985, a crowd of rock stars (organized by Bob Geldof and including Bono) staged two huge concerts called Live Aid to raise money for starving people in Ethiopia. The money helped to buy supplies in an emergency, although press reports have shown that the effort was deflected by local conflicts and even by superpower maneuvering around the Horn of Africa. In 2005, another crowd of rock stars (led by Geldof and Bono) performed at a series of concerts called Live 8. Here the goal was meant to be unambiguous: the event would support and publicize the development agenda proposed at the summit of G8 leaders in Gleneagles, Scotland. At each turn of this history, the call for political commitment becomes less and less critical, less and less tangible, less and less committed. The logic of this evolution—during which every trace of opposition, intransigence, and negativity disappears—leads to a well-behaved “activism” that becomes little more than the pop-cultural expression of official policy.

Bono surely knows that the economic and ideological machinery that creates global rock superstars is inseparable from the vast machinery that creates and maintains global poverty. He says that he wants to be seen as a tough businessman playing by pragmatic rules rather than a do-gooder invoking his exalted ideals. He refuses no accolade, no medal, no knighthood; it does not appear to have occurred to him that the praise and honors heaped on him by pundits and politicians might belong to the repertoire of empty gestures whereby the custodians of the system grandly congratulate themselves for having some kind of a conscience. Within that system Bono has been quite successful: he has gained extraordinary access to presidents, ministers, and corporate leaders; he attends summit meetings and private audiences; and he has assembled a network of supporters to provide expertise and publicity. He believes that his superstar presence can move world leaders to address global poverty, and he casts his campaign as a rebellion and a crusade. But the more often he succeeds within this system, the more clear it becomes that his political agenda is really theirs, and that his way of doing politics does an injustice to everybody he claims to represent. By joining in the merry-go-round of promises, deferrals, disappointments, and compromises—that whole sorry spectacle—Bono is doing his part, more than his part, to prevent real change to the global system that causes poverty.

Instead of arguing about policy, strategy, and morality—we can leave that to the policy makers, strategists, and moralists—let’s examine precisely what Bono does. First of all, in order to operate in the arena of politics, he has had to leverage his show biz fame into the currency of official connections and news media attention. “Bono,” the rock star persona, has become a kind of living brand name capable of functioning in a wide variety of settings. Strictly speaking, the power of this public image doesn’t belong to one person, and it has little to do with personal qualities like charm or talent. The image of “Bono” is actually a very big production, carefully constructed by many people over a long time, crafted to fulfill a range of practical purposes, from selling CDs and iPods to fundraising, sponsoring, and lobbying. Meanwhile the flesh-and-blood Bono has to be an expert at multiplying, amplifying, inflecting, and enacting images of himself; that is the special skill and expertise he has to offer, the unique source of his authority. Not everyone could pull it off. He has to strike a tricky balance between making himself visible and making himself scarce, massively larger than life and intimately down-to-earth. His role is to inhabit that image in just the right way, stoking its aura of popularity—its market value—in order to attach it to actual products, tasks, and agendas.
Take a look at the photograph of Bono and George W. Bush. It was taken by the AP photographer Ron Edmonds on March 14, 2002, and quickly disseminated around the world, via newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. According to the caption, Bono and President George W. Bush are walking across the White House lawn after a meeting at the Inter-American Development Bank. What does this image tell us?

First of all, there are two gestures and two looks. Bono is holding up his right hand, giving a V-sign. It is not immediately obvious what that gesture means here, especially because he is not at all the only person to have shown it on the White House lawn. Does it mean victory over the Vietnamese, like Nixon? Victory over the Soviets, like Reagan? Or is it supposed to be a peace sign? If so, peace for whom, exactly? Is he perhaps signaling a victory for peace, or peace with victory, or something else entirely? Meanwhile, Bush is holding up his right hand with the palm up. It could be a friendly wave but it could also be an imperious salute. This ambivalent gesture is also common on the White House lawn, where greeting friends and giving orders usually amounts to the same thing. Bono is looking directly at the camera. His mouth is closed and his whole face is composed and ready for display. Bush, on the other hand, is slightly turned away, glancing somewhere else, and his mouth is open as if he were trying to smile. Bono seems to have decided that he cannot afford to smile. His expression is tight and serious; Bush's is perfunctory and distracted. Their clothes tell the opposite story: Bush's suit is buttoned up and he's wearing a tie; Bono's jacket is open, showing an open shirt, untucked. Bono looks slouchy and rumpled, pausing for the camera, while Bush keeps walking ahead, scarcely lingering or turning. Bono looks determined, even heroic, in a well-practiced way, while Bush looks stiff, distant, and unconcerned.

The photograph is a calculated risk for both of them. An image like this is a deliberate act, a public statement, perhaps even a kind of promise. Insofar as the two of them have different agendas at stake—a supposition we will examine in a minute—it should be obvious that the existence and dissemination of this photograph will serve those agendas differently and unequally. What serves one of them in the short term may serve the other in the long run, and it is hard to say which of them is playing the longer game. So although both of them are equally visible in the photograph, they are not really there in the same way.

To a well-trained, cynical viewer, this photo does not need to be decoded at all, because the cynicism is built right into it. The image does not simply advertise that some kind of deal is being struck: the image is the substance of the deal itself. The only question is whether or not it is a good deal, and for whom.

It is easy to imagine what people will say: Bono and Bush are simply using each other. Bono uses his celebrity to pressure Bush on debt relief and AIDS funding for Africa. Bush uses Bono to show that he is somehow in touch with popular tastes, and somehow sympathetic to the causes Bono espouses. Nobody will be surprised to see the pomp of state power mingling so freely with the glitz of pop stardom. Nobody needs to believe that these two men are actually having a serious conversation about the issues of global poverty. Instead everybody will assume that each of them has a good, if vague, reason to be seen in public with the other. For Bono, this photo might provide a kind of blackmail, to be used at some later date to  

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1 In a cover story on Bono for the New York Times Sunday Magazine, James Traub reports that this initial photo opportunity was brokered by Condoleezza Rice. In exchange for his presence beside Bush, Bono originally demanded that Bush would announce a new AIDS funding initiative. On the day before the event, he learned that there would be no such announcement, but Bono went along anyway, hoping to convince Bush later. As we will see, it is a pattern that would be repeated throughout the following years. (James Traub, "The Statesman," New York Times Sunday Magazine, September 18, 2005, pp. 87-9.) Contrast this glowing press coverage with attacks from the left (George Monbiot, "Bards of the Powerful," Guardian, June 21, 2005; available online: monbiot.com) and the free-trade faithful (Jagdish Bhagwati, "A noble effort to end poverty, Bono, but it is misdirected," Financial Times, February 28, 2006, p. 13).
remind the president to keep his promises. For Bush, it might be an alibi, offered up whenever someone complains about his insensitivity to poverty. Bono supporters can see it as a breakthrough in the campaign to wangle a commitment from the administration, while Bush supporters can see it as proof that the president’s conservatism really is compassionate after all. Yet the reverse reading seems equally plausible: Bono is not there to push his own agenda, but to support Bush’s, and in exchange Bush will help Bono gain access to his constituency, legislators, policy makers, “world leaders,” lobbyists, and various rich people.

Bono might think that he got the better end of the bargain. All he had to do was to let himself be paraded before the cameras; Bush was the one who was supposed to commit political capital and real money. The only thing Bono had to give up was imaginary capital, a momentary scrap of his public persona, and he has plenty of that to offer. But the deal cuts both ways. Just as Bono surrenders the rebellious image of a rock-and-roll singer, Bush demonstrates how even the most unanswerable and withdrawn forms of state power rely on the ceaseless conjuring of spectacle.

Let’s look more closely at this event from 2002. What role is Bono playing in this negotiation? When campaigning for debt relief, whose side is he on? Does he take the side of the creditors, eager to get their money back? Does he take the side of the highly indebted governments, anxious to improve their position in the world market? Or does he somehow speak on behalf of indebted people in general, who are desperate to get out from under an economic structure that crushes the life out of them?

Let’s not forget that the “debt relief” bill passed by Congress in 2000, which marked Bono’s first foray into US political lobbying, did not directly appropriate new money to aid the poor. Instead, the $435 million appropriation was a kind of internal bookkeeping measure to erase existing bilateral debt owed to the US government. (This was simply the stub end of the original debts, which had been discounted over the years already.) The debt relief measure, passed in a year when the US was running a large budget surplus, seemed neither courageous nor particularly generous. Remember that “debt relief” amounts to paying off creditors holding onerous, possibly unpayable, debts. As long as they get a good share of what they’re owed, the creditors love it. Bankers and bondholders see a payday they thought might never come. Governments who write off debt can use the occasion to place new conditions on future lending and aid. As for the ostensibly humanitarian benefits of debt relief, everything depends on the political situation of the indebted countries. Although the financial balance sheets of poor nations certainly improve when debt service obligations are reduced, there may be little real impact on the quality of life for poor people.

That is why the issue of debt relief necessarily raises historical and political questions about the way such debts have been contracted, enforced, and unequally imposed across whole societies and the whole world. There is, to say the least, always a disparity between the official parties who contract debts and the multitude of people who try to live under the burdens of sovereign indebtedness. In the contemporary global economy, indebtedness should not be viewed as the accidental product of bad luck or poor planning: as we have seen, it functions everywhere as a regime of top-down control and network discipline, designed to replace older forms of social negotiation and political autonomy. As this regime becomes entrenched, every dimension of social life will be restructured according to the wishes of the creditors and their local enforcers, rationing access to everything from work and education to clean water and air, subjecting every component of the local economy to increasingly direct pressures from the global markets. Throughout the global south, this process has been going on for decades; indeed, depending on the way we connect the dots between enslavement, colonization, and indebtedness, it has
been going on for centuries. And that is why the full cancella-
tion of debts should, in principle, empower a genuine liberation
of indebted people, not only from financial obligations imposed
upon them by foreign and domestic creditors, but from political
domination by their own ruling elites. And yet it never seems to
work out that way—why?

We should return to Bush's speech at the Inter-American Bank,
which marked a renewed effort to link US aid to neoliberal policy
prescriptions for the developing world. In the March 2002 speech
Bush announced the Millennium Challenge Account, his adminis-
tration's response to the United Nations' Millennium Development
Goals, the UN's signature initiative to address the life-and-death
crisis in the developing world. Bush insisted that aid must involve
"accountability" for both rich and poor governments, signaling that
the existing "conditionality" clauses were still too weak and that
future aid would be more closely supervised and more narrowly
targeted than before. And to prove that this program served the
highest of purposes, he linked the effort to help developing nations
to the global war on terror. When it came to specifics, he offered a
$5 billion annual increase, built up over the next three years. This
budget figure must have caught Bono's attention right away. The
UN Millennium Goals, crafted in 2000 under the supervision of his
mentor, Jeffrey Sachs, called for substantial increases in foreign aid
and major improvements in the human welfare of poor nations. So
it would have been immediately obvious that the Bush Millennium
Challenge fell far short of the commitments the United States had
already made. As Sachs himself has pointed out, Bush's pledge of $5
billion, even if fulfilled, would have been less than 0.05 percent of a
single year's GNP, whereas the UN goals (agreed upon by the UN
members themselves) called for rich countries to give 0.7 percent
a year by 2015. Indeed, Sachs excoriated Bush's 2002 speech for the
"disconnect" between its analysis of the problems facing poor coun-
tries (with which he was nevertheless in fundamental agreement)
and the paltry sums it offered as a solution. We can assume that
Bono realized that Bush was massively undercutting the Millennium
Goals, but he showed no sign of it, sitting there on stage or, later,
walking across the White House lawn for the photographers.

Today it is clear that the Millennium Challenge initiative has
accomplished very little beyond diminishing expectations about the
commitment of the US government to helping the world's poor. Let's
follow the timeline laid out by Bush in 2002, projecting four years
into the future. First, it took more than two years to set up the initia-
tive's new bureaucracy, the Millennium Challenge Corporation. The
MCC has never been anywhere close to fully funded; instead of $10
billion over three years, Congress appropriated only $4.25 billion.
Out of that, the MCC actually approved only $1.6 billion worth of
projects, and of that sum, it managed to disburse only about $19.5
million. Look at those numbers again: out of the already inadequate
sums promised on that day in March 2002, after four years less than
one-fifth had even been earmarked for particular countries, and of
that, just a tiny fraction (less than 2 percent of the total) had actually
been sent anywhere. But the chronic underfunding and inefficiency
of the MCC goes hand in hand with its repudiation of state-led
development and its starve-the-beast attitude toward official aid. Its
programs have little to do with the commonsense life-saving items
Bono likes to emphasize in his sales pitch (malaria bed nets and
village wells): the money is largely aimed at infrastructure (ports and
roads) and at developing private sector businesses in agriculture,
tourism, and finance. Indeed, the MCC ranks prospective recipients

2 Jeffrey Sachs, The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time (New York:
3 Michael A. Fletcher and Paul Blustein, "With New Leader, Foreign Aid Program
Is Taking Off," Washington Post, January 31, 2006, p. A15. Also see Celia W. Dugger,
p. 1. Dugger reports that the disbursements by the end of 2007 had only reached $155
million, out of $4.8 billion approved. Current data on disbursements and contracts is
available online at mcc.gov.
using an array of indicators produced by the Heritage Foundation, Freedom House, the World Bank, and others. That's the deal that Bono has been promoting ever since: an urgent call to save lives turns out to be a protracted campaign to spread free enterprise.

By way of contrast, consider the money spent on the Iraq war and reconstruction over the same period, through January 2006: $251 billion. During the same period that the administration had such a hard time scraping together just over $4 billion for the Millennium Challenge, it spent more than sixty times that much on Iraq. As Financial Times columnist Martin Wolf noted, “the minimum budgetary cost [of the war] is 10 times the world’s net annual official development assistance to all developing countries.” (Congressional appropriations for the Iraq War would reach $748 billion by the spring of 2010, plus another $53 billion for reconstruction.) Moreover, there are costs not counted by the budget, including health care for veterans and the cost in American lives. In 2008, Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes estimated that the total economic costs of the war (not counting the cost in Iraqi lives) would likely rise to as much as $3 trillion. If the US government can spend so much money when it wants badly to do something and does not care how much it costs, we can begin to calculate how little it cares about Africa. (Of course the same lesson can be drawn from the financial crisis: billions for bailing out banks, insurance companies, and hedge funds, while scarcely a trickle of money goes to support those most at risk from a global downturn.)

Bait-and-switch maneuvers also prevailed in Bush’s AIDS policy in Africa. The dollars and percentages announced with great fanfare did not materialize, and even the substantial funds that were spent have been channeled into a strikingly contentious agenda. The administration’s strategy was marked on one side by its legal and financial support of big pharmaceutical corporations hoping to squelch poor countries’ manufacture of generic drugs, and on the other side by its heavy emphasis on abstinence and monogamy as the keys to prevention. More people did indeed receive anti-retroviral drugs than before, because the US government brokered a patent-protection deal with the Big Pharma companies. Surely this strategy has its costs. Should we count the number of people “saved” by the pro-patent approach against the number of people who might have been saved if the patents had simply been broken by the endangered counties? And who can quantify the damage done by narrowly moralizing public health campaigns? As long as the standard of performance begins with “better than nothing,” there will always be a semblance of progress even if nothing really changes. But it is difficult to celebrate the number of people “alive today” because of President Bush’s policies—which is Bono’s constant refrain—without asking whether more people might be alive if different priorities had prevailed. Or to put it another way: whenever a superpower trumpets the lives it has saved in one place, it is absolutely necessary to ask about the lives it has taken elsewhere.

Even when the carrots don’t materialize, the stick always does. Bush’s hard-nosed rhetoric of “accountability” has become a keynote in discussions about foreign aid. What that means in practice can be judged by the way successive administrations claimed to be spreading “freedom” around the world under the banner of the Washington Consensus: those countries rendered pliable and docile will be hailed as truly democratic, while those that balk at following orders from Washington will be treated as outcasts. It is not a question of whether aid should require “enforced liberalization”: that issue has already been settled, by force. Where the rigors of liberalization and the surrender of sovereign priorities have already taken place, aid and investment will flow more freely, and where it has not, aid will

be parceled out for smaller and narrower purposes. Any challenges to this regimen—as when the democratically elected government of Bolivia considers nationalizing the gas industry—are met with stern warnings and open threats. “Accountability” is the next turn of the screw beyond “conditionality”: it means more strict scrutiny by the donors and more inbred obedience for the recipients. This approach reaps the rewards of IMF austerity plans, even as it acknowledges their failures. We can expect that debt relief will be granted only in those places where decades of debt peonage have already had their usual effects: a thoroughly stripped and restructured economy, a weakened state, and an eviscerated civil society. On such blighted earth, new kinds of dependency, rebranded as “freedoms,” will surely grow.

Back in 2002, Bush reiterated his plans for “developing nations” at the Monterrey Conference and, more significantly, in his National Security Strategy document, released in September 2002. That document, as we have seen, calls for US economic and military domination of the world, enshrines free trade as a “moral principle,” and justifies the use of preemptive force against any threat. Over the years Bono has had plenty of time to think about how all of this fits together. Has there been any reason to assume, then or now, that he has ever really disagreed with any part of the administration’s global strategy? From one photo opportunity to the next, the images of Bono and Bush kept telling the same stories—the major new policy announcements, the public haggling over percentages, the congratulations on unprecedented achievements, the request for more money next time. Just as the dire evocations of an “emergency” never let up, neither does the humble and optimistic plea to try harder. In order to embrace these contradictions, we are supposed to get used to the disjunction between visionary plans, disappointing follow-through, and ongoing catastrophe. We are asked to brace ourselves for the long haul, always keeping up the pressure, subscribing to the every-little-bit-helps approach to big problems. In this way, we grow accustomed to the impression that there is only one way to address global poverty (let’s call it messianic neoliberalism), that its basic principles are indisputable and widely shared, and that the only real discussion is taking place between Bono and various heads of state. We are meant to accept that such conversations (always commemorated with another photo op) exhaust the spectrum of possibilities for the world’s poor. And yet, looking at political developments across the global south, it is easy to see that Bono’s unending charm offensive is not the only hope; in fact, it is not the best hope—it is not much of a hope at all.

Over the course of 2005, Bono’s image took on a new ubiquity, especially during the media blitz surrounding Live8 and the Gleneagles G8 meeting. As Jamie Drummond wrote, “Live8 and the G8 Summit garnered this year more than 2.7 billion media impressions in America alone according to our best estimates.” It is striking that Drummond speaks as if Live8 and the G8 meeting were the same event. It is hard to know what a “media impression” is—let alone what kind of significance 2.7 billion of them might have—but let us take note of one televisual event: Bono’s appearance on Meet the Press on June 26. Bono’s face and voice were being transmitted from Dublin to the studio in Washington, so that Tim Russert could interview him “live.” Just moments before, Russert had interviewed Donald Rumsfeld about the war in Iraq.

Even though Bono wasn’t in the same studio as Rumsfeld, he shared the same program, separated only by a few commercials for financial services companies, Boeing Aerospace, and the agricultural conglomerate Archer Daniels Midland. It’s easy to see that all of these images fit together nicely. From moment to moment, television has an ineluctable way of making connections, sometimes surprising and sometimes not surprising at all.

Russert asked Bono a number of good questions. Concerning Live8, he asked if it was true that Bono and Geldof had agreed to steer clear of any critique of Bush and Blair over the Iraq war. Bono replied, "Absolutely. This is the other war. This is a war that can be won so much more easily than the war against terror, and we wish the president and others luck in winning the war against terror." Concerning the "accountability" of aid for Africa, he told Russert:

This is the number-one problem facing Africa: corruption. Not natural calamity, not the AIDS virus. This is the number-one issue and there's no way around it. That's what was so clever about President Bush's Millennium Challenge. It was start-up money for new democracies. It was giving increases of aid flows only to countries that are tackling corruption. That's what's so clever. It's the implementation of the Millennium Challenge has not happened. It is in trouble. They recognize that. President Bush is embarrassed about that. They're trying to put it right. But the idea, the concept, was a great one.4

We've already seen just how narrowly focused and badly funded the Millennium Challenge Corporation was. Nevertheless Bono offered his full support once again, performing damage control for the Bush Administration at a crucial moment. No wonder the State Department posted a proud news release the day after this broadcast, headlined "US Aid to Africa Hits Record Levels; Geldof, Bono praise Bush before Group of Eight Summit in Scotland."9

Just a few minutes earlier on the broadcast, Russert had asked Donald Rumsfeld about the progress of the war on terror and the prospects for democracy in Iraq. Rumsfeld replied:

[The] Iraqi people have a choice. They're either going to go down a dark path where the beheadings are, and a small group of people who run that whole country, as they have before, or they're going to have a representative system, where women participate and where people have to have protections against each other because of the constitution. And I think they're going to choose a path of lightness. There's—the sweep of human history is for freedom. Look at what's happened in Lebanon and Kurdistan and the Ukraine and these countries. I think there's—we can be optimistic about the future, but we have to recognize that it's a tough, tough, tough world, and there are going to be a lot of bumps in the road between now and then.10

Is the Defense Secretary's visionary optimism, tempered with hard-headed realism, really all that different from Bono's? One is fighting poverty and corruption in Africa; the other is fighting an insurgency in Iraq. We keep hearing that it is the same war, without metaphor, as far as the eye can see.

While interviewing Bono, Russert replayed a portion of the ONE campaign ad, which includes this statement by Nelson Mandela: "We now need leadership, precision, and political courage." Russert remarked, "Political courage! Those words seem to be a direct challenge to President Bush and the other leaders." To which Bono responded: "Yeah. Yeah, it is a challenge." He praised European countries for boosting their development aid (as a percentage of GDP), while "the United States is down to about .17 [percent]. .2 is within sight. But really to get serious about this, the United States has to get up to .3–.4–.5. That's our wish here. And we know it will take time to

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9 State Department, "Rock Star Bono Applauds Bush Efforts to Aid Africa, Cites AIDS Funding, Anti-corruption Element of Millennium Challenge Account," news release created June 27, revised June 28, 2005. Available online: america.gov. It is worth noting that the State Department webmasters used the Associated Press photo of Bush and Bono from March 2002 to illustrate their story.
10 Meet the Press transcript, p. 4.
get there. We know that you've got a deficit problem. We understand there's a war being fought."

Underline these numbers. Bono casually suggests that the US might raise the level of aid to 0.3, 0.4, or 0.5 percent of GDP. He must know that such an increase would require multiplying that Millennium Challenge promise three, five, or seven times. And given the difference between promises, specific agreements, and actual disbursements, it is clear that the whole aid system would have to grow more efficient and effective by several orders of magnitude in order to deliver the money. Given everything—that president, that Congress, that deficit, that war—this was simply not a serious wish. Russert did not raise a challenge, and viewers could hardly decide if Bono was admirably stubborn about his demands or simply disingenuous. To speak of such goals without speaking of the need to make fundamental changes in the political situation is not dreamy idealism, it's disinformation.

In the mass media division of labor, politicians lie about facts and celebrities lie about hopes. We can also set aside the question of whether or not this increase in aid would really do so much good, whether it would solve the problems of developing countries or "make poverty history." We need not enter into the arguments about how aid might be spent, although that is clearly a crucial issue. (The economist Robert Pollin has made a reasonable argument that Bono's proposal for aid in alliance with a neoliberal trade regime will be strikingly worse than an effort to build an alternative to neoliberalism.) For our purposes here, on the level of images, it is enough to show just how much euphemism and misdirection have to be employed in order to make Bono's campaign look disinterested and philanthropic, even as it allies itself with the most aggressive imperial powers.

Earlier in the broadcast, Russert quoted a statement by Rumsfeld's former deputy, Paul Wolfowitz, who testified to Congress in March 2003, "We're dealing with a country [Iraq] that can really finance its reconstruction relatively soon...[The] oil revenues of that country could bring in between $50 and $100 billion over the course of the next two or three years." Russert then asked Rumsfeld, "Did you make a misjudgment about the cost of the war?" And Rumsfeld dismissed the question with a shrug: "I never estimated the cost of the war. And how can one estimate the cost in lives or the cost in money? I've avoided it consistently." In his years directing the war, Rumsfeld had his own way with numbers, which was also his way with human lives: he didn't consider them at all.

When Wolfowitz was catastrophically wrong about the costs of the Iraq war, he was rewarded for his expertise with the presidency of the World Bank, a tenure that proved to be short-lived. He made a show of wanting to talk with Bono soon after his installation there, and Bono promptly took his calls. Later Wolfowitz met with Bono backstage at Live 8, as the World Bank proudly advertised on its web pages. Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Robert Gates, and the rest of the administration remained openly dismissive of any attempt to count human costs along the "path of lightness." How could Bono put himself in such company and still invoke the moral authority of Nelson Mandela? Remember Mandela's criticisms of the rush to war: "[The] attitude of the United States of America is a threat to world peace...[There] is no doubt that the United States now feels that they are the only superpower in the world and they can do what they like." Throughout the Bush administration, no matter what

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11 Ibid., p. 21.
12 Robert Pollin, Contours of Descent: US Economic Fractures and the Landscape of Global Austerity (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 163-8. Meanwhile, questions about the effectiveness of aid in the execution of contemporary imperial rule have been raised by the former World Bank economist William Easterly, in The White Man's Burden (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), and the former Goldman Sachs economist Dambisa Moyo, in Dead Aid (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009). Moyo enjoyed a brief season of positive press coverage as the "anti-Bono" for her calls to end all development aid and to impose shock therapy prescriptions on African governments. When Sachs protested against such a plan, she gleefully pointed out that she had learned the recipe from him when she was a student at Harvard.
13 Meet the Press transcript, p. 13.
happened, Bono continued to do business with the president as well as with those around him. The images remained the same, even as the agendas changed: a smile and a handshake, again and again.

By the end of 2005, mainstream media commentary was cautiously optimistic about the debt relief, aid, and trade agreements hammered out in the wake of the G8 meeting. There was widespread recognition that these deals were not all that they had first appeared to be, let alone all that was needed. Once again, well-trained cynics denounced the extravagant hype surrounding the whole event, and keen-eyed critics noticed that the deals were whittled down in the process of implementation. As before, the distinction between the erasure of old debts and the provision of new aid was absolutely crucial, yet was left notably blurry in the official pronouncements. Nevertheless, it might seem especially churlish to deny that something good happened, and that the Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign played a significant role in shaping that outcome.

In order to accept that version of the story, however, we would have to believe that Bono, Geldof, and the MPH campaign effectively marshaled "public opinion" into a collective body capable of pressuring the G8 governments and the multilateral financial institutions. We would have to believe that all of those so-called "media impressions," along with a year-long blitz of white wristbands, public rallies, mass concerts, TV commercials, Internet petitions, newspaper editorials, and NGO press releases finally coalesced to generate a sufficient shift in the political winds to steer the bureaucrats and politicians toward doing the right thing. It would be nice to believe that things work that way, but there are reasons to doubt it.

We can compare Live8 to F15, that day in 2003 when millions of people around the world—at least 14 million, possibly as many as 20 million—took to the streets to protest against the prospect of war in Iraq. The war proceeded anyway, leaving those millions and many more to experience the exhilaration and dismay of genuine dissent against their governments. It became clear then as never before that the ruling powers can treat massive popular protest as a police matter rather than as a crisis of their own legitimacy. The democratic contraptions that are supposed to transform popular discontent into a common project appear to be perpetually out of order.

F15 attempted to stop a war before it started; Live8 aimed to endorse an economic plan that had already been decided by ministers and bureaucrats weeks before. Its value as a political action consisted in the way it elicited pleasure by stating the obvious and enfolding audiences in its apparently painless, frictionless unanimity. The mass mobilization of crowds through media spectacle is fundamentally conservative: it serves purposes defined from the top down, rather than serving as a means of expression from the bottom up. So instead of conceiving of Live8 as a successful effort to flex the political muscles of a nascent televisual constituency, it seems much more plausible to think of the concerts as a "public diplomacy" campaign on behalf of governments—especially the US and the UK, but even including Russia—desperate to appear responsive and humane. Live8 explicitly proposed to its audiences that they were exercising political agency solely by virtue of their inert spectatorship—a role with less expressive force than the audience of American Idol. In modern media democracies, a fleeting kind of popular legitimacy can be bought just that cheaply. That is why such events serve as a perfect supplement to the customary exercise of power in advanced consumer societies: by encouraging people to demand what has already been decided for them, governments can issue orders as if there were no alternatives while manufacturing a good public conscience and sense of accomplishment on a mass scale.

Although Live8 took its bearings from Live Aid, played twenty years before, its place in history is much more directly grounded in the events of the past few years. It was staged at the conjunction of two kinds of crisis, and its success consists in the way it seemed to reconcile them. On one hand, there has been a crisis in the global
anticapitalist movement, which has been struggling to regain the momentum it built up after Seattle and Genoa. No doubt much of the popular support for Make Poverty History is drawn from veterans of that movement who saw the campaigns of 2005 as a small step toward more comprehensive changes. (For those interested in the internal politics of NGOs, it would be instructive to trace Bono's own relationship to the Jubilee movement, and explore the reasons why he decided to keep his distance from them, and they from him.) At the same time, on a much different scale, there has been a crisis in the ruling economic orthodoxy, which has seen its own internal doctrinal cohesion falter and its own prescriptions fail. The so-called Washington Consensus, confidently enforced by the IMF, World Bank, and other economic institutions since the 1970s, has been comprehensively challenged from within the ranks of its own practitioners. Now it appears that even die-hard believers in Adam Smith are scrambling to rebuild some semblance of government infrastructure in weakened states throughout the poor world. And thus the time is ripe for a new synthesis. The mission itself—making the world safe for the wealthiest individuals, enterprises, and nations—has not changed, but it has adopted the very same tone of righteousness that its critics once invoked against it.

Jeffrey Sachs wrote The End of Poverty in order to rewrite the prescriptions of neoliberal economics in the face of a zealously neoconservative political climate. It represented a rebranding of his shock therapy prescriptions for a new range of patients in the global south. The book's release was timed to coincide with the Gleneagles summit, and it was kitted out with a publicity campaign to maximize its mainstream appeal. The book jacket announces: "Foreword by Bono." Indeed, the foreword effectively rehearses the key themes of the book. First of all, Bono is full of praise for Sachs's expertise and wisdom. Second, he tries to coin catchy slogans that will not only "sell" the argument (like a good pop song) but also make it seem irresistible and inevitable. Let's look at just one key sentence:

Bono says that Sachs proposes an "equation that crosses human with financial capital, the strategic goals of the rich world with a new kind of planning in the poor world." If we accept that slogans matter, it is hard not to be struck by the awkwardness of his phrasing. Even if we accept that all of the world's problems and possibilities should be described in terms of "capital," why would we want to draw an equation between "human" capital and "financial" capital? Instead of balancing the terms, this equation inexorably twists in one direction, recasting fundamental human concerns in the idiom of finance, as if a more rigorously economic approach to global problems would deliver us from the vagaries of politics. Wasn't that the problem with the debt crisis in the first place? And what happens when "the strategic goals of the rich world" are combined with "planning in the poor world"? That is the most damning "equation" of all, wherein the rich world assures its strategic superiority by imposing its own preferred kind of planning. In one respect, Bono's phrasing is exact: the planning will take place "in" the poor world—not by the poor world, nor for it.

It is hard to avoid the impression that the "new paradigm" is essentially the same as the old one, now pursuing global free market restructuring in the name of morality rather than economic efficiency. (If people want to believe that "the right thing to do" will be more efficient and profitable, so much the better.) Weak states might be built up far enough to deliver limited health services and primary education, but not far enough to reclaim sovereign control over their own economic priorities. The same messianic faith in global markets that drove Sachs to prescribe shock therapy for Bolivia, Poland, and Russia is here applied to sectoral aid, trade reform, and an economic triage of the developing world. The prescriptions must be written in such a way that there cannot be, as Sachs would put it, any triumph of politics over economics. (The popular rejection

of neoliberalism in Bolivia and the oligarchic restoration in Russia strike Sachs as temporary aberrations from the permanent verities of economic science.) Above all Sachs wants to argue that the end of poverty can be accomplished without diminishing, let alone threatening, the accumulation regime organized by the rich world. Thus the accent of guilt has been switched from the past to the future: the rich should no longer feel guilty about the historical processes that brought about impoverishment and suffering, because that had nothing to do with the accumulation of their wealth, but they should henceforth feel responsible for ameliorating the suffering of others, because their security demands it and, in a pinch, their surplus can afford it.

Three and a half months after the Gleneagles G8 summit, where the multilateral debt relief and aid package had been announced, Bono visited the White House again for another photo opportunity. What was the deal this time? On whose behalf does he strike his deals? Who or what does he represent? Does he represent others like himself, well-meaning citizens of the West who feel indignant and guilty over the suffering of the poor and the sick? Or does he represent the poor and the sick themselves, as their self-appointed spokesman and champion? Bono made his position perfectly clear in a *Rolling Stone* interview published just before this meeting with Bush: “I’m representing the poorest and most vulnerable people. On a spiritual level, I have that with me. I’m throwing a punch, and the fist belongs to people who can’t be in the room, whose rage, whose anger, whose hurt I represent. The moral force is way beyond mine, it’s an argument that has much more weight than I have.”

Is that so? By what right does he claim to represent the poorest and most vulnerable people? Does he represent all of them, everywhere around the world? It is hard to know what he could mean by such a statement. Political representation, at least in a democratic key, is supposed to involve some kind of deliberative process, whereby a group of people choose a representative as their surrogate, advocate, or intercessor. Moreover, this decision to name a representative has to be grounded in the principles of freedom and procedures of sovereignty that govern such acts, so that all parties—including representatives of other people—can accept the legitimacy of the representative. Only through such a process can a representative be considered responsible for and answerable to those people he or she represents. But enough of these technicalities. It is obvious that Bono cannot be the “literal” or “legal” representative of the poorest and most vulnerable people. If he were, he wouldn’t be standing in the Oval Office.

Instead, he presents himself as the figurative and spiritual representative of a vast array of people, billions of them. He does not claim to represent their interests, their perspectives, or even their hopes, but rather their “rage, anger, and hurt.” That is to say, he does not represent human beings, he represents affects, detached from real lives and filtered through his celebrity image. In his sleepy-eyed seriousness and sympatico slouch—which is the current signifier for “compassion”—he absorbs and deflects everything that those billions of people might actually say on their own behalf. It is not as if “the poorest and most vulnerable people” do not express themselves, in countless ways, all the time. They are articulate, deliberative, and far too various to be summed up just by their pain or their poverty. They have many representatives, too, in and out of governments. All of them are aching to be heard. None of that seems to matter when Bono goes to the White House. Indeed, we should make no mistake about it: he can stand there precisely because those people are so absent; he can speak for them exactly insofar as they are silenced; he can “throw a punch” at Bush, Blair, Obama, or any of the others only because he disguises the immense material force of their lives with the soft “moral force” of his rhetoric. The short circuit between imperial power and media spectacle makes every image of Bono—whether at the White House, Davos, Cannes, Ghana, or
anywhere else—an apt visualization of the prevailing global order, shuttling between remote-control imperial projection and helping-hand philanthropy. What is missing, invisible, off the agenda, is any belief that economic development can be a mode of collective self-determination, opening up a realm of freedom for the poor beyond that envisioned for them by billionaires.

The trajectory of Bono’s campaigns over the past decade tells us a great deal about the limits of philanthropy, reform, and popular politics in a world where any feeling of global collectivity seems increasingly remote. In its earliest phases the debt relief effort drew upon established movements that were challenging longstanding historical injustices; Bono left those behind in order to strike deals with Bush and Blair (among others). As he encountered obstacles, he drove the agenda in wider circles, sweeping up disparate causes into an omnibus program that migrated toward the media mainstream, preferring conservative pieties to progressive abrasion. The Project Red campaign—a series of branding agreements that leverage symbolic synergies across sneakers, sunglasses, computers, and other aspirational goods—set out to prove that consumerism could trump both old-fashioned charity and official aid. After years of consolidation, the ONE organization (named after a U2 song) now functions as a kind of all-purpose NGO, a shadow UN fuelled by celebrity endorsements and colored wristbands. For a time it seemed as if Bono had succeeded in cornering the market in moral outrage, which he repackaged in a form that could turn a profit and soothe the uneasy heads of state. Yet in spite of his high-flown rhetoric, he does not want to forge a bond of solidarity and obligation between the mass audience he addresses in the West and the subjects in the South whom he claims to represent: such a bond might all too easily turn against the system he serves. Try as he might, he can hardly disguise the fact that the end of poverty will require a radical change in the current order of things. It will require new languages and new images—nothing like anything Bono has to offer.

5 Spaces of Indebtedness

What does indebtedness look like? If being in debt involves something more than a mental state or a legal status, and it necessarily encompasses a range of social relations and productive forces, we should be able to find its traces everywhere, built into our landscape and flashing across our screens. Yet indebtedness does not exactly present itself as such: there is something not quite visible about it, as if the phenomenal world and the people in it could always be measured against their debts and found somehow lacking. It is hard to see indebtedness at work in the world—although it exists nowhere else—precisely because it shows us a world where nothing ever really belongs to itself.

In order to start thinking about the relationship between indebtedness, visibility, and space, we can turn to an essay by Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on Control Societies” (1990). In this text, one of his last, Deleuze outlines a general historical shift away from the “disciplinary societies,” so thoroughly analyzed by Foucault, toward what he wants to call the “control societies” of the present day. Disciplinary societies were defined by “sites of confinement”—prisons, hospitals, factories, schools, the family household—that shaped individuals into mass components of social force: the docile bodies of labor, the patient bodies of the health system, the oedipalized bodies of the family, and so on. Foucault wanted to grasp the whole program of modernity through these isomorphisms, which had themselves replaced and rationalized the