Spectacle

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Word Count: 4202

The term 'spectacle' could encompass many different Romantic phenomena. In the theater, 'spectacle' usually refers to the spectacular sets, costumes and special effects that attracted playgoers to major and minor theaters alike. But the theater was only one place that spectators could find events that were memorable because of their appearance. The British enjoyed a wealth of street shows, museum exhibits, scientific demonstrations, illustrations and engravings, performances at inns and fairs, panoramas, dioramas and replicas, 'virtual reality' experiences staged at private estates. Even war camps and political events took on the appearance of public shows (Bolton 2001, Russell 1995).

In their introduction to a *Romanticism on the Net* special issue on *Romantic Spectacle*, Ian Haywood and John Haliwell describe the term 'spectacle' as 'intentionally tendentious': 'unlike a more neutral word such as 'image', the idea of 'spectacle' implies the emergence of conspicuous new types of visual effects in British culture of the late eighteenth century'(Haywood and Haliwell, 2007). And while there is nothing new about spectacle – monarchs had demonstrated their power through lavish display for centuries, and many of the fairs and exhibits that came to be an issue in the Romantic period dated from medieval times – there is a sense that there is something 'new' about visual culture in the Romantic period, something all-encompassing and perhaps even dangerous.

One factor in this change was the simple 'encreasing accumulation of men in cities,' where, as William Wordsworth noted, 'the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies'(Wordsworth 1967, p. 160). 'Socioscopic' recreations, such as urban pleasure gardens, the masquerade, landscaped country estates, and public art galleries, provided an easy form of entertainment for a mass culture (DeBolla 2003). By the mid-eighteenth century, according to Richard Altick, 'about one in six of all English men and women were either living in London [which held ten percent of the total population of England and Wales] or had once lived there and had thus been directly exposed to the social, political, and cultural influence of the capital'(Altick, 1978, p. 2). What had been a scattered, incidental and rural culture became a centralized national culture.

Spectacle was also informed by the enlightenment interest in science. Even the showiest spectacles could be justified by a scientific, educational or historical purpose. Aristocratic and learned collectors showed their collections either for free or for charge; scientists like Robert Boyle staged formalized demonstrations for students. Museums, waxworks, clockwork, scientific and anatomical exhibits, freaks – all were exhibited for the edification of eighteenth-century and Romantic audiences. Even spectacles based on illusion often had a documentary purpose behind them. Panoramas, dioramas, history paintings and occasionally even plays purported to bring their viewers into the center of historical events like the siege of Gibraltar or Napoleon's preparation for battle. One of the period's spectacular innovations, the aquatic drama, often staged scenes of the period's great naval battles. Realistic spectacles often became, in Gillen D'Arcy Wood's words, 'an actual subsitute for tourism'(Wood, 2001, p. 103). The panorama's vistas promised '[a]ll that the traveller sees when he is there'(Wordsworth, 1979, l. 280).

Indeed, the nature and function of vision – both illusionary and non-illusionary – was at issue in the Romantic period. Jonathan Crary's far-reaching study *Techniques of* *the Observer* (1990) has shown how the various illusionary technologies of the eighteenth century and Romantic period helped to construct a new, more autonomous 'seeing subject' and a new type of subjective vision that reached well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Vision also had a moral dimension. David Marshall (1986) and Ian Haywood (2006) have both shown how heavily Romantic culture and politics relied on theories of sensibility, where the viewer's morality was tested by seeing another's pain. David Hume, Adam Smith, Samuel Johnson and the Earl of Shaftesbury, among many others, theorized what it might mean to observe spectacles of suffering.

Political power was also at issue by way of the sublime. Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine both identified violent spectacles as a cultural tool of dictatorships (Haywood and Halliwell, 2007), and debated how audiences might deal with the 'awe' that accompanied the spectacle of grand power. For Paine, spectacle not only led to governments founded upon fear, but also destroyed the tenderness needed for proper sympathy in their subjects. But the political view of spectacle was not always negative. More democratic thinkers like Leigh Hunt, William Hazlitt and Thomas DeQuincey explored ways in which public spectacles could bind audiences together as a nation, allow them to assert their individual creative powers, and put them into contact with the material facts of their existence (Nuss, 2010).

Romanticism has a reputation for being against spectacle. Wordsworth and Coleridge distrusted the 'eye,' which Wordsworth called the 'most despotic of the senses'(Wordsworth, 1979); 'Simulations of nature,' according to Coleridge, are 'loathsome' and 'disgusting'(Wood 2001, p. 3). Gillen D'Arcy Wood even sees Romantic attitudes towards spectacle as the origin of a modern 'shock effect' at the impact of popular and visual media. But increasingly, critics are discovering a lively culture of debate around the visual spectacles that populated Romantic culture. Frederick Burwick (1991) has uncovered a history of Romantic-era debates over the nature and function of illusion in the theater; Michael Gamer and Jeffrey N. Cox (2003) have shown that the reaction to Romantic-era drama was far from uniformly negative. And parts of the debates on sympathy and the sublime show that there could be a positive social function for spectacle.

Still, a divide between higher-culture spoken and written media and lower-culture visual spectacle did develop during the Romantic period. Jane Moody (2000) and Michael Gamer (2006) have shown the burgeoning of an ‘illegitimate’ theatrical culture that threatened established hierarchies and institutions. Spectacle was one of the cultural markers that separated the ‘legitimate’ from the ‘illegitimate,’ a marker that quickly started losing its value as even the most legitimate cultural institutions started adopting the techniques of visual spectacle.

It would be impossible to fully describe all of the spectacles and spectacular effects that caught the eye of Englishmen during the Romantic period. If spectacle is defined broadly, as the American Heritage Dictionary defines it – ‘something that can be seen or viewed, especially something of a remarkable or impressive nature’ – it could include prints and engravings, boxing and other rural sports, the ‘star system,’ celebrity culture, and even visual or theatrical scenes in print media like poems or novels. What follows, then, is only a brief catalogue of more public spectacles, spectacles that fit the American Heritage’s second definition – ‘a public performance of display, especially one on a lavish scale.’

The smallest but perhaps the most ubiquitous types of spectacle were small street shows that did not even merit the minimal dignity of a handbill. In 1697, animal shows were so common that an edict forbade the display of 'lions, lionesses, leopards, or any other beasts which are ferae natura' on the grounds that these shows violated the monopoly granted to the keeper of His Majesty's lions at the Tower of London (Altick, 1978, p. 35). But the edict did little good. Even three years later Ned Ward observed that tigers were 'grown now so common they are scarce worth mentioning'(Altick, 1978, p. 35). The practice continued through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, so that in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth would describe witnessing 'singers, rope-dancers, giants and dwarfs, / Clowns, conjurors, posture-masters, harlequins / Amid the uproar of the rabblement / Perform their feats'(Wordsworth 1979). In 1773 a catalogue of London sights asserted that there were 'Lions, Tygers, Elephants, &c. in every Street in Town'(Altick, 1978, p. 35).

Human freaks, tame animals and other oddities were regularly exhibited in the streets, courtyards, inns, taverns and fairs of London in the eighteenth century. Our best description, oddly enough, might come from *Gulliver's Travels*, where in Brobdignag the tiny Gulliver is paraded from inn to inn, performing ten to twelve shows a day for a small room of spectators, and performing 'an hundred diverting tricks' that were similar to tricks actually done by lower primates on exhibit in London (Altick, 1978, p. 35).

There were plenty of formal and informal venues for such shows. By the Romantic period, Bartholomew Fair had grown into one of the most spectacular national and international events of the year, featuring sideshows, prize-fighters, musicians, wire-walkers, acrobats, puppets, freaks, wild animals and even wife-selling. Wordsworth would famously describe it in *The Prelude* as a 'Parliament of Monsters,' where 'half the city shall break out / Full of one passion, vengeance, rage, or fear' (Wordsworth 1979). Pleasure gardens like Vauxhall and Ranelagh provided shows, concerts and fireworks, as well as permanent displays of scenic ruins, arches and statues. Terry Castle (1986) and Peter DeBolla (2003) have analyzed the public culture of display and masquerade that ran through the eighteenth century and romantic period.

Next were exhibitions more permanently indoors: museums, collections, curiosities, waxworks and demonstrations of scientific skill. Private collectors amassed and catalogued private miscellanies of natural and scientific objects and occasionally presented them for exhibition (Pascoe, 2006). In 1753, Parliament purchased the collections of physician Sir Hans Sloane to create the British Museum, the first museum in Europe to be explicitly open to the public. Horace Walpole recalled 'hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese!'; visitors would recall an entrance stuffed with 'oriental idols, marble busts, elephants and sponges; polar bears, portraits, fossils and meteorites. . . and several stuffed giraffes'(Altick 1978 pp. 25-26). In 1783, two eminent surgeons, William and John Hunter, began exhibiting their renowned collections at 28 Leiscester Square; Sir Ashton Lever exhibited his collections across the street at the Holophusikon. Spectacles and shows played an important part in the advancement of science. As early as the seventeenth century, Robert Boyle staged anatomical demonstrations; Thomas Beddoes and Humphry Davy staged experiments in pneumatic medicine in theaters built for scientific studies at the Pneumatic Medical Institution at Bristol. Waxworks and exhibitions of mechanical figures showcased both human knowledge and technological skill; Madame Tussaud began her British career in

1802 at the Lyceum, and, after touring England and Ireland, opened her permanent rooms in London in 1835. (Altick, 1978). And mechanical figures also entertained English audiences. In 1742 Jacques de Vaucanson exhibited mechanical figures which could play the flute, pipe and drum, and a mechanical duck which was advertised as being able to swim, quack and digest its food. (The digestion was a trick; pellets representing excrement were stored inside the duck.) Later in the century Englishmen thrilled to automaton writers, draftsmen, harpsichord players, and soldiers. A few even pretended to rational skills, such as the automaton which could give 'a rational Answer (by Motion) to any Question proposed, [and] calculate Sums in Arithmetic, etc. etc.'or the celebrated automaton chess player exhibited in Burlington Gardens in 1783-84 (Altick, 1978, pp. 67-68). Even freak shows and exhibitions of trained animals also often claimed the banner of scientific interest. Caroline Crachami, the Sicilian Dwarf, was exhibited at Dr. Gilligan's lodgings in Bond Street until her death in 1824, and exhibited as a skeleton thereafter; Charles Byrne, the Irish Giant met a similar fate (Youngquist 2003). As Paul Youngquist (2003) has pointed out, spectacles of this type played an important role in establishing scientific discourses of 'normalcy.'

Art exhibits also caught the eye of the public, both in the form of displays of collections and exhibitions by dealers. And the line between learned collection and showmanship could be blurry. In 1821 Giovanni Belzoni, a Bartholomew Fair performer turned adventurer, created a giant replica of an Egyptian tomb in Piccadilly, with two colossal Egyptian figures in its façade, housing archeological artifacts that he had recovered from Egypt. Historical objects often became spectacles in and of themselves – William Bullock made the carriage that Napoleon fled from at the Battle of Waterloo part of a touring exhibition, and Lord Byron paraded a replica of the vehicle on his tour of Europe (Pascoe 2006, p. 87). Even ordinary artwork tended to spectacular size. Art historian T.S.R. Bose has spoken of a ‘cult of immensity’ that reigned from approximately 1786 to 1830: ‘Sheer magnitude, combined with the powerful feeling inherent in the subject and amplified by the artist, was intended to overwhelm the spectator’(Altick, 1978, pp. 186-187).

Political events also took on aspects of spectacle. Since John Wilkes’s ‘Wilkes, Liberty and Number 45’ in the 1760’s, public events often took on a theatrical cast. Public figures like Mary Robinson, Emma Hamilton, the Duchess of Devonshire and Princess Caroline were either made spectacles of or made spectacles out of themselves (Bolton, 2001). More importantly, popular spectacles of political, religious and military power played a crucial role in shaping British national identity in the late eighteenth century (Colley 1992). Paula Backsheider (1993) has argued that popular spectacles created powerful communal fictions in times of crisis. Gillian Russell (1995) has analyzed spectacle’s role in the conduct of war; Mona Ozouf (1988) has shown the pivotal role that spectacles and festivals played in the French Revolution.

Aside from these spectacles of more-or-less real events, the Romantic period did not stint on illusion. Panoramas, dioramas and magic lanterns showed a culture fascinated with creating virtual experiences. The smallest of these were the ‘raree-shows,’ framed and artificially lighted boxes with modeled groups of figures placed against a painted background. The groups were not seen directly, but as reflected in a slanted mirror on the principle of the camera obscura, creating the illusion of perspective for the viewer (Altick 1978, p. 56). Although these boxes provided a striking example of the way that new discoveries in optics could create fresh effects, they were the most common of shows. Simple versions of these show boxes were made for home use or carried by wandering showman; in fact, the shows became so common that 'raree-show' became a catch-all term for any novelty that was not to be taken seriously.

Robert Barker's panoramas, which opened in the late 1780's in Leicester square, attracted more attention. Barker patented the idea of exhibiting a 360º oil painting, lighted from the top, with an enclosure which prevented the observer from coming too close to the painting and a shade that concealed the light source; the result was an all-embracing view that placed the spectator in the middle of the scene. The innovation quickly spawned imitators in London and spread across the continent; Paris, Berlin and St. Petersburg all opened similar exhibitions. Panoramas became the common-man's substitute for the Grand Tour -- London, Edinburgh, Athens, Naples, Milan, Rome, Florence, Genoa, Sydney, Constantinople, and Rio de Janeiro were all the subjects of panoramas. They also revolutionized history painting. Battles both ancient and modern were also popular subjects. Tourists could be present at the taking of Seringapatam (1799), the siege of Acre (1800), the battles of Agincourt and Alexandria (1801), the battle of Lodi (1803), General Suvorov's defeat of the French at Novi and the crossing of the Alps by way of Mount St. Gothard (1804), and even Napoleon's staging facilities for the invasion of England at Boulogne (1805).

The most spectacular of all, however, were shows that played with moving pictures and virtual reality. 'Magic Lantern' entertainments had been a feature of London shows for quite some time; Pepys recorded seeing an early magic lantern, with scenes painted on glass slides, as early as 1666, and magic lantern shows seemed to come into vogue in the 1770's, with an exhibition of caricatures at the Great Room being called the 'Magick Lantern'(Altick 1978, p. 115). Projected transparencies were used during public celebrations, at pleasure gardens, and in the pantomime. 'Chinese shadows,' where a light source projected figures painted on a revolving oiled-paper drum, were also popular entertainments. David Garrick introduced moving shadows at the end of his pantomime *Harlequin's Invasion* (1759), and Philip Astley installed them at his Ampitheater in 1779. But the capstone of illusion was Philipe Jacques de Loutherbourg's 'Eidophusikon, or Representation of Nature,' presented to its first audience in 1781 at DeLoutherbourg's house in Leicester Square. There, on a darkened stage, de Loutherbourg used perspective cutouts, moving scenery, three-dimensional models and natural materials to create realistic-looking moving pictures. Concentrated light sources colored by stained glass yielded the lighting effects appropriate to the scene; sounds were carefully orchestrated to correspond to the visual action. The Eidophusikon was advertised as 'various imitations of Natural Phenomena, represented by moving pictures'; as a theater without actors, using complex scenic and lighting effects, the Eidophusikon gave England its first proto-cinematic entertainment (Wood, 2001, p. 42).

Private spectacles carried the illusion even further. In 1781 William Beckford commissioned deLoutherbourg to create a private, three-day event at his Wiltshire mansion that would immerse its participants completely in an erotic utopian Oriental spectacle – a forerunner of modern-day 'virtual reality'(McCalman 2007). For Beckford, even the Eidophusikon was inadequate because it appealed mostly to the eye; he looked for a spectacle that would ravish its participants with touch, taste and music. At Beckford's mansion, his guests entered a hermetically sealed world of Egyptian and

Turkish fantasies, lit only by ‘expiring lamps,’ where they could find replicas of ancient artifacts, back-lit transparencies and painted glass magic-lantern slides, all accompanied by music, chanting, and fragrance.

The theaters, both major and minor, carried flavors from all of these exhibitions. The minor, or ‘illegitimate’ theaters were best known for spectacles, since they were prohibited by law from five-act, spoken comedies and tragedies (Moody, 2000). But the tricks that they played to get around their restrictions – puppet shows, banners, spectacular sets, animal acts, physical comedy – were all, to one degree or another, appropriated by the ‘majors’ as the century went on. Alterations to the major theaters beginning in the 1740’s and continuing for a century afterwards enlarged the area for the stage and scene and permitted more and more spectacular effects. Garrick removed the audience from the stage once and for all. Larger stages and larger houses required larger scenery; theater designs from the 1790’s show space for bridges, traps, and wings, and an elaborate system of blocks, wheels and ropes to manipulate the scenery. Scene painters such as Nicholas Thomas Dall, Inigo Richards, William Capon, and Philipe Jacques de Loutherbourg created larger and more elaborate sets. The stage directions for *Zoroaster,* for example, which appeared at Drury Lane in 1824, included ‘The Great Desert by Twilight; A Caravan of Merchants; The Pyramids; The Great Temple of Apolloniopolis Magna; the Colossus of Rhodes; Mount Vesuvius by Moonlight; The Grand Falls of Tivoli; the City of Babylon; [and] the Destruction of Babylon’(Nicoll, 4:27). Historical accuracy was also at a premium. In 1779, Philip James deLoutherbourg, the premiere set painter of the day, based the sets for *The Wonders of Derbyshire* on sketches he had made on a tour through England, and spectacular panoramas, dioramas and dramas were created to show the great battles of the Napoleonic War. (Russell 1995). By the 1770's, the names of set and costume designers were beginning to appear in advertisements and printed texts (Nicoll 4:27). And theaters were themselves magnificent. Decorated in gold, velvet and mirrors, they were a spectacle in themselves.

Lighting effects, too, developed in the Romantic period. Garrick introduced footlights, lights concealed behind the stage, and additional chandeliers to better light the theater. But by the early nineteenth century, shows used dioramas, projections and magic lantern effects. Oberon, in 1826, featured a transparency showing flying demons (Mayer, 1969, 111). By 1823, the critic for *The Times* could write that 'the great theatres monopolize all the written applause which can be bestowed upon "gorgeous pagentry" and "superb decorations" – rose pink, sap green, blue gauze to array the moon-light – illuminated pillars and fairy palaces'(Mayer 1969, p. 11).

Indeed, the major criticism of the theater in this period is that shows were arranged simply to show off these special effects. Shakespeare was often staged with songs, dances and grand processions. Rope dancers performed even at the major theaters. Occasionally, the special effects were so elaborate that they were advertised in the program, and could fill theaters of their own accord. The gothic was an especially fertile ground for spectacle. It was, as Thomas Dibdin wrote in his prologue to *Of Age To-Morrow* (D.L. 1800) a 'hobgoblin'd and be-spectre'd age' (Nicoll 4:25). Chemical reactions produced green lightning; sheets of copper shaken on chains produced thunder. In 1794's *Fountainville Forest*, James Boaden draped a male ghost in a dark blue, armor-shaped costume and made him appear through a blueish-gray gauze to remove the corporeality of the scene. 'Vamp traps' – spring-controlled doors cut into the scenery –

allowed vampires and other spirits to dissolve into the walls. Theater designers used projections and magic lantern effects to simulate the presence of spirits. Mark Londale produced a 'Spectrographia' at the Lyceum in 1802, and in 1804, a series of 'Optical eidothaumata' featuring 'Capnophric phantoms' (Purinton 2001, p. 142).

The pantomime also lived and died on spectacular scenes. Frame stories often featured spectacular or exotic locations – *Harlequin in Asia* (1807), *Whang-Fong; or, the Clown of China* (1812), *Harlequin Harper, or, A Jump from Japan* (1813), *The Valley of Diamonds; or, Harlequin Sinbad* (1814) – or grotesque creatures – *Harlequin and Mother Goose* (1806), *Harlequin and the Water Kelpe* (1806), *Jack the Giant Killer* (1809), *Harlequin and the Red Dwarf* (1812) – which set designers were charged with making real. Paper mâche 'big heads' concealed the characters in their frame-story personas until the time came for the harlequinade. Benevolent agents rose from the floor, dropped from the sky, or arrived by water chariots and other spectacular conveyances. Processions were routine, especially at Drury Lane. *Harlequin Harper, or, a Jump from Japan,* staged in 1813, contained no fewer than five grand processions in its opening: the arrival of emissaries at the 'Grand Entrance to the Water Palace of Bud-so, Governor of Xo-ko-ko,' the arrival of Fi-co, a foppish suitor to the Governor's daughter San-zu-ma, the entry of San-zu-ma, the procession of the dignitaries offstage, and the procession for San-zu-ma's forced marriage to Fi-co in a 'Splendid Japanese Banquet Gallery' (Mayer, 1969, pp. 32-33). The pantomime entertained its audience with dioramas: *Harlequin and Friar Bacon; or, The Brazen Head* (1820) featured a mechanical contrivance which put the back scene in motion, so that Harlequin and Columbine seemed to sail through a succession of sea views (Mayer, 1969, 70). Even domestic scenes – breakwaters, harbors, the river Thames – were staged with elaborate recreations.

But the form of spectacle that audiences looked for in the harlequinade section was trickwork. Scenes were painted on both sides, so they could be quickly flipped or dropped to signal a magical transformation (Mayer, 1969, p. 112). 'Slow traps' could raise figures from under the stage. Traps were also placed in flats so that Harlequin could evade his adversaries by leaping through mirrors, windows and other unconventional exits (Mayer, 1969, 116-117).

Animal acts, too, were popular. In Frederick Reynolds' 1803 *Caravan, or the Driver and His Dog,* 'Carlo the Wonder Dog' performed a daring rescue of the heroine. The act was repeated by the 'famous dog Bruin' in *Philip and his Dog* (1806), where the dog pursued the villain of the piece, grabbed him by the throat, and drowned him. Equestrian performances, while a fixture at the minor houses for decades, created a stir in 1811-1812, when Covent Garden staged *Blue Beard* and *Timour the Tartar* with battle scenes that featured horse charges. A host of satires and imitators of the hippodrama occupied the stage for the next season (Gamer, 2006). In 1811, *Harlequin and Padmanaba* attempted the still more spectacular feat of bringing a live elephant onstage; startled by the noise of the crowd, the elephant quickly exited the stage (Mayer, 1969, 101-02). Animals were so plentiful that the *Gray's Inn Journal* could satirize the theater by announcing a pantomime in which 'the principal parts . . . will be performed by a wonderful *Armadillo* from *Brasil,* a *Serpent* from the river *Oronoque*, the famous *Lanthorn-Fly* from *Peru*, a *Mermaid* from the *Ladrones Islands*, a surprising *Camel*, a

Rhinoceras, and many horrible animals, *being their first appearance on the English stage*' (Nicoll 3:24).

But perhaps the most extreme example of the theater changing itself to accommodate new and spectacular effects was the aquatic drama. While the immediate impulse to install tanks of water in the theaters seems to have come from Drury Lane's need for fire control, theater designers soon realized their potential for creating novel landscapes and special effects. Soon both major theaters and many minors were staging lakes, rivers, oceans and waterfalls. Benevolent agents in the pantomime arrived accompanied by water jets and fountains; Neptune or Britannia appeared in properly-outfitted water chariots. Theater manages staged naval battles with model ships; villains jumped into the sea to elude pursuit. Sadler's Wells took advantage of its location near the New River to become the 'aquatic theatre'; at the height of the rage for water spectacles, it could produce up to three aquatic spectacles per season.

In its visual entertainments, then, Romantic culture was in love with all things new, exotic, outlandish and oversized. In the process, it not only invented new technologies and new entertainments, but created new ways of looking and ultimately a new mass culture.

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