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Spectacles of Light, Fire, and Fog: *Artichoke* and the Art of the Ephemeral

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What does Christ's crucifixion have in common with George Floyd's video-recorded murder, Donald Trump's reality TV-like Presidency, popular festivals like Mardi Gras, and the advertising and news media images that flood our daily existence? The answer is that all of the above have been considered "spectacles" by critics in various fields; and, in fact, they share key features when regarded as a "spectacle." Furthermore, all have had — or can have — a significant impact at the individual, local, national, and/or global levels.¹

Historically, spectacle emerges as an inevitable phenomenon in any society, and is crucial to promote a sense of identity and community. It also provides education and entertainment, and is used to enforce the law and maintain the social order. Leading up to the present day, spectacle becomes even more central to culture due to the increasing importance of the mass media. Yet, spectacle rejects any *a priori* ethical alignment; namely, it can possess a bright or a dark character. Because spectacle is a source of values, myths, and symbols that directly impact our psychological, emotional, and material lives as individuals and as members of communities, it is crucial to encourage life-enhancing spectacles while being mindful of their negative potential.

On the dark side, spectacle — live and virtual— shows its power by posing a clear and present threat to democracy, as the Presidency of Donald J. Trump illustrates. Spectacle can also promote isolation and loneliness, fueling rising rates of anxiety, depression, and even suicide, as illustrated by some reality TV shows.² On the bright side, spectacle can strengthen the very foundations of community and democracy. This function is apparent with the Marches on Washington, especially the one in 1963, where Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream Speech." This is also the purpose, at the local and national levels, of the spectacles produced by the British non-profit organization *Artichoke* when addressing social crises — such

as the sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland, unemployment, violence, and gender inequality— through stunning spectacles that place art at their core. Later in this essay, I will examine some of these events.

The field of "Festival studies" has frequently analyzed how spectacle has the power to engage citizens in their communities while countering social isolation.³ In the belief that it would enhance citizens' appreciation of the world surrounding them, in Book VIII of *Laws*, Plato recommended that the Republic have festival every day of the year.⁴ At this point in history, when divisive politics, COVID-19, and an unprecedented environmental crisis provoked by humans are striking the planet, intelligence about the power of affirmative spectacle is of vital importance. Live and virtual spectacle can educate, bridge differences, generate social capital, and empower people as community members to act towards the multiple crises that we are facing. The future depends significantly on our ability to reflect upon and mediate the unconscious influence of spectacle. In what follows, I will first examine the various ways in which the word "spectacle" has been used, including my own characterization of this concept in order to reach a deeper understanding of *Artichoke's* work. Then, I will analyze some of *Artichoke's* extraordinary spectacles and the enduring, life-affirming impact of its art-based, large-scale public events on individuals and communities across the United Kingdom.

I. What is “Spectacle”?

In English dictionaries, the word “spectacle” does not conjure up the full range of meanings that the term has in culture. However, the dictionary definition is a good starting point to initiate our journey into the complex and impactful world spectacle. According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “spectacle” means: “something exhibited to view as unusual, notable, or entertaining. *Especially*: an eye-catching or dramatic public display.” Both *Merriam-Webster* and *The Oxford English Dictionary* share a similar definition of the term: an agent exhibiting something uncommon and entertaining to many people’s sight. The features defining “spectacle” in the dictionary fit some uses of the term, although they can be related to most of its uses in an approximate or metaphorical sense. Theater, opera, NASCAR races, and many festivals would easily fall under the dictionary definition. A less immediate sense of spectacle would be the protest kneeling of football quarterback Colin Kaepernick during the American anthem’s playing during a sporting event, something traditionally considered a side event in a game. Kaepernick’s kneeling made something that was not considered a spectacle a real spectacle. Festivals like India’s *Kumbh Mela* engage all senses — not just sight as the dictionary definition states or implies — and the 2017 worldwide *Women’s March*, would only partially fit the dictionary’s definition because it is not so much about seeing the event for entertainment as it is about participation and democratic assertion of human rights. Guy Debord’s sense of “the spectacle,” which I will describe later, and Reality TV shows also transcend the dictionary’s scope because, among other things, they exclusively refer to virtual spectacles.

The richness of the term “spectacle” is apparent when we think of their uses in culture. For example, spectacle may refer to:

- (1) The theater, concerts, opera, the circus, and sports events characterized by the strict differentiation of performers and audience.⁵
- (2) Festivals. David Rockwell includes in his book *Spectacle* many events that, in most cases, would fall under the purview of “Festival studies,” an established domain of academic inquiry informed by fields such as Sociology, Anthropology, religious studies, Psychology, and Economics. From the Olympics as a global spectacle to local spectacles such as *La Patum* in Berga, Spain, the festival’s live communal experience covers an enormous range of spectacles.⁶ The spectacles organized by organizations such as *Artichoke* fall within the festival category of spectacle.
- (3) Political rallies. They can be either liberating and advancing human rights and freedom such as the marches on Washington or protests against dictatorships; or aimed to reinforce authoritarian control of the population such as the Nazi “Nüremberg rallies” (1923-38), or the Stalinist parades in the Soviet Union.⁷
- (4) The spectacle of death. Showing death and suffering has often been associated with spectacle. Some notable spectacles of this kind are: (A) Crucifixions among the Romans. By far, Jesus Christ’s crucifixion is the most relevant case of its kind given the enormous consequences for the world. (B) Executions from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution. The counterpoint of public execution is the covert gassing of Jews in concentration camps by the Nazis during the Second World War, which were kept secret. (C) The video of the killing of George Floyd, an event inscribed in the practice of racism in the United States whose most significant precedent is the spectacle of lynching. The video of Floyd’s agony caused the “Black Lives Matter Movement” marches and, as the title of an article by Nicole Chavez says, 2020 was “The Year America Confronted Racism.”⁸
- (5) Virtual spectacle. These spectacles range from the broadcasting of the terrorist actions of 9/11 to Reality TV shows. Geoff King’s *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'reality' TV and Beyond* illustrates this sense of the term spectacle. Regarding Reality TV shows, some can be arguably considered life-affirming such as *Frontier House* or *Alaska: The Last Frontier*, and some are leading people to their death, as mentioned previously. Donald J. Trump has been referred to as a Reality TV President and a “spectacle” himself, as Trump’s larger-than-life persona has incorporated many of the board-room strategies and modus operandi of *The Apprentice* in his still unfolding political career. Critics speak of TV series like *The Crown* as “the great spectacle of history.”⁹

Among the critical concepts of spectacle, the most relevant is that of Guy Debord's book *The Society of the Spectacle*. In it, the author discusses "the spectacle" of modern life in negative terms. According to Debord, the constant barrage of images coming from the media creates a system of social relations between people that interferes with a direct experience of reality and grounds consumer capitalism. According to Debord, our understanding of the world and values are shaped by advertising images — Nike, Gucci, Budweiser, Sandals, BMW — and the news industry — CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NewsMax. They shape our behavior and existential experience depriving us of an authentic sense of the real. In this respect, live, popular festivals would be the opposite experience of Debord's "the spectacle."

Other negative uses of "spectacle" include that of the historian and specialist in authoritarianism Timothy Snyder, who opposes "truth" and "spectacle," saying that "if nothing is true, then all is spectacle" (65). This use of the term connects spectacle with the notion of Post-Truth exemplified by the "alternative facts" approach to reality promoted by the proponent of Brexit and the populist discourse of the Trump presidency.¹⁰ Finally, writer and Nobel prize winner in literature Mario Vargas-Llosa is critical of the change in cultural paradigm regarding the contemporary understanding of "culture." In *Civilization of the Spectacle*, Vargas-Llosa says that real "culture" is the opposite of the spectacle. He states: "What does it mean civilization of the spectacle? It describes a world where the highest value is entertainment, and where to have fun and escape boredom is the universal passion" (34). Vargas-Llosa's point is that when entertainment is the supreme value, cultural production becomes inconsequential, and the crucial role of the media to inform citizens of a democracy becomes a frivolous exercise of "irresponsible journalism" focused on "gossiping, and scandal" (34).

Previous work on the notion of "spectacle" has focused mainly on one or two of the above uses. I propose a more comprehensive, multidisciplinary perspective that includes all of them. In this regard, I understand "spectacle" as "a short-term, live or virtual event harnessing a sentiment, contextualized by a story, and potentially engaging all of the senses. It is different from but interdependent with everyday life, performed in diverse spatial venues, and ethically neutral." In the following sections, and with this definition in mind, I will examine some of *Artichoke*'s most creative spectacles. First of all, however, it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with *Artichoke* as an organization, its goals, and its productions, which exemplify what I mean when I talk about exercising intelligence regarding a creative, positive approach to spectacle to bring people together and constructively confront conflict.

II. Introducing *Artichoke*

Artichoke was founded by Helen Marriage and Nicky Webb in 2005. The group specializes in large-scale public art. Since then, they have organized twenty-three art-centered spectacles in different parts of the UK. These spectacles come under four categories according to the main type of art at their core: mechanical art; performance; fire; and light, fog, and sound installations. The mechanical art spectacles are: *The Sultan's Elephant* (2006), *The Telesroscope* (2008), *La Machine* (2008), and *The Magical Menagerie* (2010). Of these, *The Sultan's Elephant* is the most notable not only because it was the first spectacle that *Artichoke* produced, but because it implemented the group's conviction that public space should not be reserved for everyday activities, state functions, and parades honoring sport triumphs alone, but also for the arts. *The Sultan's Elephant*, which took place at the very heart of London, was so successful that it inspired some of the London 2012 Summer Olympics activities.

Artichoke's spectacles based on performance are: *One & Other* (2008), *Dining with Alice* (2011), and *Processions* (2018). *One & Other* lasted three months. It is noteworthy because it put 2,400 people from all corners of the UK on the bare Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square in London. The “Plinthers” symbolized humanity, and once on the Plinth and in front of thousands of observers, they performed, dressed, and undressed; they gave speeches on different subjects, told their stories, or sat and did nothing. This live artwork event was also live-streamed on Sky Arts and, as *Artichoke's* web page says, it was “the longest broadcast of its kind. Television and radio anchor Clive Anderson presented 16 weekly TV updates on site.”¹¹ As for *Processions*, it commemorated the one-hundredth anniversary of British women’s right to vote and to hold public office. The women marching wore the suffragettes (in favor of direct action) and suffragists’ (in favor of negotiation) colors: green, white, and violet. They marched in this “mass participation artwork” on the streets of Belfast, Cardiff, London, and Edinburgh in a televised “joyful inclusive occupation of our streets.”¹²

The spectacles of fire are: *Temple* (2015) and *London's Burning* (2016). Finally, the spectacles of light, fog, and sound, consisting mainly of light installations and projections on surfaces, are the biannual *Lumiere Durham* (2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019), *Peace Camp* (2012), *Lumiere Derry-Londonderry* (2013), *Lumiere London* (2016 and 2018), *Processions in the City* (2018), *Apollo 50* (2019), *Imminence* (2020), and *Galway 2020-European Capital of Culture*.

The goal of all of these events is to have an impact on the individuals and communities where they take place. By changing people’s perception of reality and the environment through art, they seek to transform people’s lives. Their ultimate ethical objective — to change and improve lives — is intimately connected with the spectacle’s story and with the use of the different senses of the participants. As the renowned artist of mas’, the masquerade tradition of Trinidad’s carnival Peter Minshall says, story works better if it is “powerful in visual terms” (Rockwell 158).¹³

In what follows, I introduce some of *Artichoke's* spectacles before I examine them from the framework established in my definition of spectacle. These spectacles are: *Temple* (2015), *London's Burning* (2016), and three installations based on light, fog, and sound: *Crown of Light*, by Ross Ashton, Robert Ziegler and John Del'Nero, from *Lumiere Durham*, 2013 (light and sound installation); *Fogscape #03238*, by Fujiko Nakaya and Simon Corder, from *Lumiere Durham*, 2015 (fog installation); and *Waterlicht*, by Daan Roosegaarde, from *Lumiere London*, 2018 (light installation).

III. *Artichoke's* Spectacles

Temple [Image 1] is one of the most meaningful projects produced by *Artichoke*.¹⁴ It addresses reconciliation after the *Troubles* in Northern Ireland (1969-1998), a period of sectarian violence between the two communities of Derry-Londonderry: the Protestant Loyalist majority and the Republican Catholic minority. The conflict caused the loss of 3,500 lives. *Artichoke's* spectacle sought to address this horrifying and still-unhealed past. Traditionally, the two communities built about 3,000 bonfires in the summer. In them, they burned symbols of the other community such as flags and effigies. The bonfire was considered a celebration of identity by both communities. Helen Marriage, *Artichoke's* Director, sought to subvert this tradition, finding “a better way of doing this [the bonfires] than this recycling of hatred and enmity.”¹⁵ As a result, *Artichoke* asked artist David Best, who builds temples for the *Burning Man* spectacle in Nevada, to design a non-denominational third cathedral in Derry-Londonderry. This non-sectarian building would redefine the meaning of a cathedral by bringing people of all faiths and beliefs in the community together as volunteers to build the temple. In a closing ritual, the cathedral would be torched to the ground. Children contributed to the design of panels, unemployed young people were trained in digital design and carpentry, and community members constructed the building.



Figure 1a: Temple

The temple's location was essential to the project as *Artichoke's* philosophy of spectacle includes making public space available to the whole community. Consequently, the temple was built at Kelly's Field, at a spot called the Top of the Hill, an area considered Republican, and it overlooked the protestant and Catholic cathedrals. Most people in Derry-Londonderry had never set foot at Kelly's Field. A local participant in the project said that the last time journalists showed up there was after the "Annie's Bar Massacre," when Loyalist paramilitaries killed five civilians who were watching a soccer game in 1972. Helen Marriage was advised not to build the temple at the Top of the Hill, but as she says, "spaces that are never considered to be shared never become shared."¹⁶ Attendance at this spectacle was massive. In fact, the temple had to be kept open longer than expected because the community's traumatized members had so much to say, expressing their emotions in writing on the panels of the temple. They also left objects evoking memories that they needed to leave behind at the temple. Writing and objects full of meaning burned with the building on the last day so participants could move on with their lives. In the words of its designer David Best, the temple "has to be so beautiful that you give up the thing that has been troubling you your whole life." The objective was to "leave the past behind, celebrate your passions and look to the future."¹⁷



Image 2:

Temple (burning), David Best, 2015. Produced by Artichoke in Derry~Londonderry. Photo by Matthew Andrews.

After two years between conception and delivery, the temple's burning ritual took fifteen minutes [Image 2]. Sixty-five thousand people showed up for the ritual in a city of 55,000. They

embraced each other at the ceremony, feeling a sense of *communitas*, recognizing their shared experience and common humanity.

London's Burning [Images 3 and 4] was a week-long festival of art and ideas for Londoners, British, and international audiences.¹⁸ It memorializes the 350th anniversary of the 1666 Great Fire that left 80,000 people homeless in four days. For the festival's final event, David Best built a 120m-long replica of the 17th-century London skyline on a barge that sailed down the Thames and was burned in front of 50,000 attendants while 6,700,00 more people viewed the ritual online.



Image 3: *London 1666*, David Best, *London's Burning*, a festival of arts and ideas for Great Fire 350. Produced by Artichoke. Photo by Matthew Andrews.



Image 4: *London 1666*, David Best, *London's Burning*, a festival of arts and ideas for Great Fire 350. Produced by Artichoke. Photo by Matthew Andrews.

When they memorialized the historical event, *Artichoke's* interest was to engage audiences in a reflection on the threats to a modern city in the 21st century, such as climate change, rising sea levels, and violence. It was also an opportunity for many audiences and participants to re-imagine the city. Part of the festival was interactive art and performances, culminating in the medieval London's replica's torching. Children were asked about "my hope for London." Young people were recruited in impoverished areas of the city, trained in carpentry, design, technology, punctuality, and other skills to function in the community. Their experience working on this project opened up new possibilities that these young people had never considered. This engagement in the construction of the art that is later burned is one of the most important ways in which *Artichoke's* project helps change the lives of people. This youth loved meeting other people, communicating with them, working together, and being part of something larger than themselves. The experience empowered them, and comments like the following were typical: "I can do anything, to be honest." Some even got traineeships after the spectacle that prior to their training and participation in *London's Burning* would have been unimaginable.¹⁹

Three installations connect with *London's Burning* through either a focus on history — *Crown of Light* (*Lumiere Durham*, 2013) — or their concern with the environment — *Fogscape #03238* (*Lumiere Durham*, 2015), and *Waterlicht* (*Lumiere London*, 2018). *Artichoke's Lumiere* spectacles seek a physical transformation of the urban space. By transforming, through art, the way people see their cities, they seek a change on how the members of a community feel about themselves. *Artichoke* has been producing a biannual *Lumiere* festival in Durham since 2009. Durham is a town of about 40,000 people in northeast England that was negatively impacted by the end of the coal industry in 1994. Unemployment, obesity, and under-achievement are common in the city and the county. *Artichoke's* light installations make the urban landscape a playground where people wander around, experiencing their town in new and magical ways. As a participant in *Lumiere London*, 2016, says: "It forces you to see the space in a completely different way."²⁰

Durham Cathedral is one of the best examples in England of Norman architecture. It is almost 1000 years old, and it holds the remains of the most important medieval saint in northeast England, St. Cuthbert. The spectacle projected on the cathedral facade [Image 5] shows images 100 meters wide of both the inside the cathedral and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.²¹ This book is the first illuminated manuscript of the gospels in England. It took a monk called Eadfrith forty years to make it, and it has been dated around 715. The extraordinary *Lindisfarne Gospels* are in the British Library, and the hope of its return to Durham is naught. With *Crown of Light*, *Artichoke* sought to recover this jewel for the city in a light and sound spectacle. It was part of *Lumiere Durham* for three consecutive spectacles: 2009, 2011, and 2013.



Image 5: *Crown of Light*, Ross Ashton, Robert Ziegler and John Del'Nero, *Lumiere Durham* 2013. Produced by *Artichoke*. Photo by Matthew Andrews.

Fogscape #03238 [image 6],²² by Fujiko Nakaya and Simon Corder, was part of “Lumiere” Durham in 2015 and 2019. It is a moving, poetic fog sculpture. Its evanescent, fleeting quality connects with a local myth, according to which, during the German bombing of England known as the *Baedeker Blitz*, the Germans intended to bomb the Durham cathedral to demoralize the population. Fortunately, and as the story goes, St. Cuthbert saved the day by invoking the fog so the Germans could not find the cathedral. Nakaya’s ephemeral fog sculpture addresses the issue of human-made climate change. It promotes the notion that nature as we know it, like mist, is fated to disappear — unless we protect it. The immersive installation invites people to walk in the disorienting fog and to wonder about in a space different from that of their daily experience. Walking in the fog forces the participants to use senses other than sight, making what is usually invisible visible and vice versa.



Image 6: *Fogscape* #03238, Fujiko Nakaya and Simon Corder. Lumiere Durham 2015. Produced by Artichoke. Photo by Matthew Andrews.

Daan Roosegaarde’s *Waterlicht* [image 7] was part of *Lumiere London*, 2018. The installation was placed at Granary Square, and was made using a steam machine, reflective lenses, light, and software programs. It addresses the current environmental crisis, and it is part of Roosegaarde’s interest in sustainability issues. *Waterlicht* invites the public to imagine how it would be like to be underwater due to rising sea levels. The effect of undulant waves is spellbinding and, for some, even scary, according to Roosegaarde. As the artists said, with this project, you educate a “mesmerized” public who can “experience it together [because] it is real.”²³



Image 7: Waterlicht, Daan Roosegaarde. Granary Square, Kings Cross. Lumiere London 2018, 18 - 21 January. Produced by Artichoke and commissioned by the Mayor of London. Photo by Matthew Andrews.

IV. Elements of Spectacle

(A) Time

Spectacles are brief, and *Artichoke*'s spectacles do not last long.²⁴ When a spectacle is based on performance — for example, a theatrical experience — its duration lasts the same time as the experience of the viewer or participant. This is illustrated in *Artichoke*'s *One & Other*, *Dining with Alice*, and *Processions*. The spectacles treated in this essay are hybrid in nature. They have two components: they are art, and they are also immersive experiences. Art — a painting or a sculpture in a museum, for instance — is not a spectacle in and of itself because it is an expression of creativity produced in the past and is not immersive; on the other hand, spectacle is experienced in real time unless it is virtual in which case it can be experienced either at the time the spectacle is happening or after it happens. This is the case when we watch a film or a pre-recorded event. The art that *Artichoke* places at the center of their spectacles is pre-conceived, but, unlike a painting on a wall, the creation of the art itself is an organic part of the full spectacle, and is an immersive experience. In the case of *Fogscape* #03238 and *Waterlicht*, the work of art acquires a life of its own, as the artists cannot fully control the contours of their creations — due to the mist used in both pieces.

As immersive experience, *Temple* invites participants to express their negative memories through writing on the cathedral's panels and to leave the objects that stir up painful memories. Then, as previously mentioned, all the participants experience the burning of the temple. The torching of the building, according to David Best, does not signify its destruction, but its protection. Keeping what is built to be burned would be to condemn it to become one more forgotten monument among so many others, like a piece of furniture in a house. The key consideration in these spectacles is the experience.²⁵ *London's Burning* reproduces *Temple*'s concept regarding the use of fire, but instead of inviting participants to conjure painful memories of the past in order to move ahead with their lives, it requires a focus on the present and the exercise of people's imagination towards the future of their city. The rapid burning of both the temple and London's replica become an affirmation of the brevity of spectacle and a symbol of both the transience of all things human and the possibility of renewal.

The projection of the *Lindesfarne Gospels* on Durham's cathedral denotes the continuity between the past and the present of a community; it upholds the relevance of past creations as sources of identity of a community in crisis. *Fogscape* #03238 represent the ephemeral quality of the world we call our home, inviting us to protect and preserve the planet we have inherited. *Waterlicht* does the same as *Fogscape* #03238 through light and mist, as it makes us confront, in a purposeful manner, the real and present danger of environmental catastrophe.

(B) Live and Virtual Spectacle, Emotions, and the Senses

A spectacle can be experienced live or virtually. *Artichoke*'s spectacles are all live, but some of them were available virtually. While live spectacle appeals very directly to the senses and promotes community with a power that virtual spectacle does not, virtual spectacle reaches many more people even if the community it creates is less organic, as the viewers access it individually, on TV or online. As a result, the emotions evoked are more all-embracing and complete in live spectacles. *London's Burning* was watched live by 50,000 people, but 6,700,00 viewers watched online. The scope of this viewership and the quality of the production, made Helen Marriage declare: "Of everyone here, I am the least interested in digital, I am focused very much on the live event. But this certainly changed my mind—digital can give a deep and profound experience to audiences. I still want people to come to the live event but realize that if they can't or want more, online has something to offer."²⁶ *Artichoke*'s other spectacles that could be watched virtually are *One & Other*, *Peace Camp*, *Processions*, and *Galway 2020-European Capital of Culture*.

Sometimes, and given its purpose, the spectacle's real power can only be effective when experienced live. This is the case with *Temple*, which provided the most powerful form of catharsis for the traumatized Derry-Londonderry communities. Another example of powerful emotions is in *Waterlicht*, where, as we have seen, participants are enthralled by the spectacle and, at the same time, they experience fear of what can occur as a result of human-provoked climate change.

Regarding the senses, while virtual spectacle appeals only to sight and hearing, live spectacle offers a spectrum of sensorial possibilities beyond the reach of virtual spectacle. Critics like Requena discard smell, taste, and touch as irrelevant to a true spectacle. The use of those senses eliminates what the critic considers a necessary "distance" between "the body of the perceiving subject and the object that is perceived" (35). In this sense, the concept of spectacle proposed in this essay expands on Requena's conception, including spectacles where all senses can potentially be used. In 2001, 70 million people attended India's *Kumbh Mela*, the largest spectacle in the world; it congregated twenty-five million people bathing in the River Ganges in one day (Rockwell 21), and it requires the use of all the senses.

Among the spectacles treated in this essay, *Crown of Light* fits Requena's model of spectacle as the participating subject uses only sight and hearing. The rest require the exercise of other senses as well, or even purposefully deny participants the use of sight as in the case of *Fogscape* #03238, which forces them to find their way in the mist. *Waterlicht*, as Roosegaarde says, is experienced as "real" because "you can touch it [the mist]."²⁷ *Artichoke*'s *Temple* and *London's Burning* require of those who participated in the live event to smell smoke from the fire, and, in the case of the former, those who wrote on the panels of the cathedral to touch it.

(C) The Everyday and the Unexpected

While everyday life is predictable, spectacle is the opposite. A key element of spectacle is the experience of the unexpected. In live spectacle something can go wrong, an issue that Helen Marriage discussed with the London authorities regarding, for instance, *One & Other*, as the authorities were afraid that one of the "plinthers" could be shot or had an accident while on the plinth.²⁸ Additionally, it shakes up our routine and takes us into a unique place unthinkable in the experience of our everyday life. This exceptional experience opens up new venues in the understanding of what is possible. The range of these experiences is large: from an exclusive and expensive concert at New York's Lincoln Center to the massive and free popular festivals such as a carnival.

In *Artichoke*'s case those possibilities are presented to us through the powerful vehicle of art. The possibilities opened up by the artistic imagination and its disruption of everyday life have an effect on the creation of memories that we take back with us into our daily life, potentially having an effect on it. Following the Russian Formalists' concept of *ostranenie* (de-mechanization, or disruption, of the habitual and predictable), spectacle de-mechanizes the everyday, it awakens our dulled senses and perception of reality, allowing the participant to take with her/him an experience of the unique. The effect of this experience is, as Rockwell says, to "turbocharge the everyday" (20).

Temple was done in the belief that it is ethically objectionable to accept the sectarian fights that shaped the daily life and identity of people in Derry-Londonderry. It symbolized the view that there was a better way to celebrated identity and community than making bonfires to vilify the other. *London's Burning* was produced from the belief that the modern city is a dynamic experience, and that part of that dynamism is the possibility to re-imagine it. The projection of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and parts of the inside of the cathedral on the West façade made it possible to make available to the city what otherwise remains inaccessible. *Fogscape #03238* and *Waterlicht* challenge the complacency of those who, busy in their everyday lives, see climate change as something remote or unrelated to their daily lives. Through their uniqueness, these spectacles tell us stories that have an impact on the lives of communities; they widen the participants' horizons and, by experiencing the unexpected, they are invited to become part of a continual, utopian project to better the everyday.²⁹

(D) Performance

Spectacle belongs to the world of culture, human expression, creation, and performance. Natural wonders can be spectacular, but they are not spectacle. Performance is "twice-behaved behavior, that is, "restored behavior" (Schechner 46-47). A performance is not always a spectacle, although spectacle is based on performance. Sakina Khan, Deputy Director of the Washington, DC, Office of Planning, says: "All infrastructure is a stage and all residents are performers."³⁰ *Artichoke*'s bold spectacles bring art to cities and the countryside, engaging participants as an intrinsic part of the event. Our daily performances do not reveal all of our possibilities; in fact, "there are multiple 'me's' in every person" (Schechner 28), and *Artichoke*'s spectacles address part of humans' multifaceted identity, opening up new existential possibilities. This is what we see in *Temple*. By taking the members of the community out of their ordinary selves and lives deeply anchored in the sectarian conflict and its traumatizing effects, the spectacle invites the participants to tap into a different version of themselves, another "me" that rarely or never has a chance of emerging within its specific community, be it Protestant or Catholic. By transcending sectarianism and joining a wider community, spectacle makes us reconnect "with our humanity" (Rockwell 21).

Artichoke's spectacles respond to humans' "play instinct," that is, to have experiences that are not for real, as cultural historian Johan Huizinga says (47). *Artichoke*'s spectacles meet the different functions of play: "to entertain, to make something that is beautiful, to mark or change identity, to make or foster community, to heal, to teach, persuade, or convince" (Schechner 38). Art itself is a playful expression of human creativity. During spectacles like *The Sultan's Elephant*, *La Machine*, or *The Magical Menagerie*, the city itself becomes a gigantic and joyful playground for all participants. Besides its playful aspect as art, some of *Artichoke*'s productions emphasize the ritual dimension of spectacle.

Ritual is a powerful source of community (Schechner 74), and *Temple* is the best example among the spectacles treated in this essay of a ritualistic process, especially at the burning ceremony, where the spontaneous feeling of what Victor Turner calls *communitas* was clearly present. In *Communitas*, "people [...] obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive," and he adds that "spontaneous *communitas* abolishes status. People encounter each other directly, 'nakedly,' in the face-to-face intimate encounter" (44-48), it is a state where the participants can feel that "there's a little bit of you in each of me" (Schechner 63). This is what the feelings were

among the participants in the burning of the temple in Derry-Londonderry. They all recognized their common human experience, they also understood the similarity of their painful experiences, and that they were on the same boat together as a community. Participants in *Waterlicht* felt something similar: by seeing themselves in a metaphorical sunken ship, they realized that they were all inhabitants of a threatened planet. Thus, they transcended their individuality and merged with the community through an intensified state of common purpose in light of the climate crisis.

(E) Space

Spectacle can take place not only in real or virtual space, but also in private or public space. As opposed to the circus model, and the Italian model —the most common stage in theaters today— *Artichoke*'s spectacles are closer to the open scene of the carnivalesque model, although they also happen on the “ghost scene,” or electronic medium (Requena 40-43). *Artichoke*'s spectacles are designed to unite people in public space, the domain of everyday life, the country, and coastal landscapes, injecting magic and poetry that the participants can take with them to their daily lives.

From the outset, *Artichoke*'s discourse and practice of space was based on the notion that public space also belongs to the arts. Their first spectacles, *The Sultan's Elephant* and *London's Burning* took years of negotiation with the authorities of the City of London who were initially reluctant to use public space for the arts. *Artichoke*'s “invasion of public space” requires that the entire city becomes a dynamic, free of charge scene where the participants move around without concern for traffic. The participants in the spectacle can move “inside” and “around” the spectacle in an egalitarian, free, and democratic experience of the gaze, body, and word where there is no privileged perspective.

V. Conclusion

As Cormac McCarthy says, what humans need the most to survive is “food and human community” (cited by Gotschall xvi). *Artichoke* addresses this need for community and identity as a core principle of their life-enhancing spectacles. This necessary sense of community is expansive and it functions at different levels: from smaller towns like Durham or Derry-Londonderry, to bigger cities like Liverpool or London, and to the post-Brexit United Kingdom.

Anthony Gormley, the Director of *One & Other*, stresses both the competence and “creative energy” of *Artichoke*'s spectacles, but also their inspirational power.³¹ I myself felt inspired by *Artichoke*'s work. In 2019, I wrote to Helen Marriage suggesting that *Artichoke* help launch a spectacle in the United States related to President Donald Trump's proposed border wall with Mexico, a controversial symbol of the profound economic, social, racial, and political divides in the United States. Additionally, the wall endangers different animal species, which connects with the larger environmental crisis unfolding around us. I suggested that *Artichoke* help produce a spectacle along the U.S./Mexico border (or elsewhere in the country) that would elevate our collective consciousness in the United States, particularly among young people, by building, not a wall, but a bridge between the two sides of the border with Mexico. At the end, it would be burned. This project would include American and Mexican activists and artists from both sides of the border. Understandably, Marriage answered that their own field of operations is the UK, and the obvious fact that they are disconnected from the U.S., suggesting to work with someone nearer. On this particular occasion, I passed on the opportunity to do it, but *Artichoke*'s inspiration remains, and I look forward to being involved in spectacles that contribute to changing lives.

Artichoke's immersive, transformational and bold projects are a model for life-affirming spectacles everywhere. We are going to need them in the critical times ahead.³²

Notes

- ¹ For Crucifixion as spectacle see John Granger Cook, “Crucifixion as Spectacle in Roman Campania”; for the video of George Floyd’s death see article by Melanye Price. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/03/opinion/george-floyd-video-social-media.html>; for festivals as spectacle see Ping-Ann Ado, “Anthropologie, Festival, and Spectacle”; for Donald Trump’s presidency as spectacle see S.L. Brandt, “Donald Trump, the Reality Show: Populism as Performance and Spectacle”; for advertising and news media as spectacle see Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*.
- ² This is the case, for instance, with the UK’s *Love Island*, or Japan’s *Terrace House*. See Yomi Adegoke, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/may/27/why-suicide-is-still-the-shadow-that-hangs-over-reality-tv-hana-kimura-terrace-house>
- ³ See Jan Packer and Julie Ballantyne, “The Impact of Music Festival Attendance on Young People’s Psychological and Social Well-being; and, Charles Arcodia and Michelle Whitford, “Festival Attendance and the Development of Social Capital.”
- ⁴ See Plato, *Laws*, Book VIII, 8, 828b: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laws.8.viii.html>; Also, Sylvia Benso, *The Face of Things* (187-96).
- ⁵ This is the notion proposed by Jesús González Requena, “Introducción a una teoría del espectáculo,” and Adrián Pradier Sebastián, “¿Qué es un espectáculo?”
- ⁶ See Donald Getz, “The nature and scope of festival studies,” and David Rockwell, *Spectacle*; on the Olympics, see John J. McAloon, *This Great Symbol*. Interestingly, Plato and Jean-Jacques Rousseau opposed theater but approved of popular festivals: see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 5-37, 256-94.
- ⁷ On the Stalinist parades see Kristin Romberg, “Festival,” 250-57.
- ⁸ For Jesus’ crucifixion see Frederick T. Zugibe, *The Crucifixion of Jesus*, 51-56; and Mitchell Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel*, 41-68. Merback also analyzes the spectacle of death in the Middle Ages, 126-48; and also Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Daniel Gordon treats the spectacle of death during the French Revolution in “The Theater of Terror”; for the spectacle of lynching see Amy Louise Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle*; also see Nicole Chavez, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/12/us/america-racism-2020/>
- ⁹ Former President Barack Obama calls Donald Trump himself “a spectacle” in his 2020 book, *A Promised Land*, 672. For *The Crown* as a spectacle see: <https://elpais.com/television/2020-11-13/vuelve-the-crown-el-gran-espectaculo-de-la-historia.html>
- ¹⁰ Regarding the post-truth phenomenon see James Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*, and Matthew D’Ancona, *Post Truth*.
- ¹¹ See *Artichoke*’s web page: <https://www.artichoke.uk.com/>
- ¹² Helen Marriage in <https://www.artichoke.uk.com/>
- ¹³ A simple perusal of *Artichoke*’s web page shows that the section corresponding to each spectacle includes its “story,” which contains the specific issue they are addressing and its impact on communities. Unlike other perspectives on spectacle, my understanding does not separate spectacle and story. In this regard see Simon Lewis, “*What is spectacle?*” 214-21, and Neerani [check]
- ¹⁴ Credit for *Temple*: David Best, 2015. Produced by Artichoke in Derry~Londonderry. Photo by Matthew Andrews.
- ¹⁵ See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfqdLyI3Mgo>
- ¹⁶ Cited in Phineas Harper: <https://www.architectural-review.com/TODAY/LET-IT-BURN-TEMPLE-IN-DERRY-NORTHERN-IRELAND-BY-DAVID-BEST-ARTICHOKE>
- ¹⁷ <https://www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/visual-arts/how-we-built-temple>
- ¹⁸ Credit: David Best, *London’s Burning*, a festival of arts and ideas for Great Fire 350. Produced by Artichoke. Photo by Matthew Andrews.
- ¹⁹ See <https://www.thespace.org/resource/artichokes-london-1666-story-artwork-went-viral>
- ²⁰ See: <https://www.artichoke.uk.com/project/lumiere-london-2016/>
- ²¹ Credit: *Crown of Light*, Ross Ashton, Robert Ziegler and John Del’Nero, *Lumiere* Durham 2013. Produced by Artichoke. Photo by Matthew Andrews.
- ²² Credit: *Fogscape* #03238, Fujiko Nakaya, Simon Corder, *Lumiere* Durham 2015. Produced by Artichoke. Photo by Matthew Andrews.
- ²³ See: CNN’s “Haunting virtual floods submerge cities around the world”: <https://vimeo.com/291731776>. Credit: *Waterlicht*, Daan Roosegaarde, Granary Square, Kings Cross. *Lumiere* London 2018, 18 - 21 January, produced by Artichoke and commissioned by London’s mayor. Photo by Matthew Andrews
- ²⁴ Derry-Londonderry’s *Temple* (14-21 March, 2015), *Lumiere* Durham (12-15 November, 2015), *London’s Burning* (30 August-4 September, 2016), *Lumiere* London (18-21 January, 2018).

- ²⁵ See Phineas Harper: <https://www.architectural-review.com/TODAY/LET-IT-BURN-TEMPLE-IN-DERRY-NORTHERN-IRELAND-BY-DAVID-BEST-ARTICHOKE>
- ²⁶ See “Artichoke’s London 1666 — the Story of an Artwork that Went Viral.” <https://www.thespace.org/resource/artichokes-london-1666-story-artwork-went-viral>
- ²⁷ See: CNN’s “Haunting virtual floods submerge cities around the world”: <https://vimeo.com/291731776>.
- ²⁸ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Hq7zSj7Rqs>
- ²⁹ Spectacle challenges what is predictable in our lives and offers an extraordinary event. Yet, in order to display its true power, the viewers and/or participants need to have an “expectation” (Pradier 7), they need to feel a sense of excitement before and during the experience. Furthermore, it needs to be “ostensible” (Pradier 9), that is, it needs to be designed as a spectacle.
- ³⁰ See: <https://www.ncpc.gov/videos/546/>
- ³¹ See: <https://www.artichoke.uk.com/project/one-other/>
- ³² I would like to thanks Sheila Kinkade and Erin Lang for their commentaries and edits. My thanks to *Artichoke* for its kind help acquiring the images that are part of this essay. Khadija Niang, *Artichoke*’s Communications Assistant, has been extremely helpful in the process of acquiring those images.

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