

Teaching Spectacle: The Cultural Relevance of a Global Phenomenon

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After 30 years of deadly sectarian violence in Northern Ireland known as “the Troubles” (1969-1998), the British nonprofit Artichoke decided to build a church-like, non-denominational structure aimed at healing the pain that Protestants and Catholics had inflicted up on each other. The “Temple” was built at Kelly’s Field, a former scene of violence, located between the Catholic and the Protestant cathedrals in Derry. Architect David Best designed the structure, the construction of which was carried out by local Catholics and Protestants working collaboratively. This work of art, “built to burn; designed to heal” (Artichoke, “Temple”), was visited by over 60,000 members of the two traumatized communities. At the “Temple,” visitors left messages in honor of loved ones lost during the Troubles. They also touched the structure, wrote on the walls, remembered the past, cried, and expressed their deepest emotions. On Saturday, March 21st, 2015, the “Temple” was set afire in a powerful ceremony before 15,000 onlookers (LaRubia-Prado 148-50).

Artichoke’s “Temple” illustrates the most positive aspects of what in this essay is called “spectacle”—community integration, healing, equal access to public space, and artistic expression. Indeed, there are many kinds of spectacles, from the example set by the “Temple” to promote tolerance and recognition of a community’s shared humanity beyond ideologies, to the Nazi Olympic Games of 1936, whose purpose was to mask Germany’s growing militarism and antisemitism (Byrne 107-22). Without a doubt, the cultural impact of spectacle in human life is massive.

Spectacle was feared by the puritans and used to indoctrinate by Catholics during the Counter-Reformation. It can serve as a recreational relief valve, a spiritual celebration, a channel for artistic expression, and a political mobilization tool. In fact, spectacle has influenced people’s daily lives from the beginning of time even more than the other way around. For all these reasons, teaching spectacle as an academic subject is vital to building a critical understanding among students of the ways in which spectacle—consciously and unconsciously—shapes our world.

The scope and impact of what has been referred to as “spectacle” in cultural criticism—from Jesus Christ’s Crucifixion to popular festivals to reality T.V. shows—can unquestionably be considered global and universal. Most communities have had festivals that provided a break from everyday life. Many of those celebrations (e.g., Mardi Gras, Kumbh Mela, the running of the bulls, Formula One races, or a myriad of T.V. shows) were and are cosmopolitan because people from different communities have celebrated them.

The importance of spectacle in the form of festivals was apparent to Plato, who, in the belief that it would enhance citizens’ appreciation of the world surrounding them, recommended, in “Book VIII” of *Laws*, that the Republic have a festival every day of the year, even if restricted to a sacred ceremony. Plato clearly understood the power of affirmative spectacle. Today, in a world where calamities such as COVID, climate emergencies, and the war in Ukraine are happening simultaneously, the need for positive spectacles that bring joy and a sense of purpose to communities, and that celebrate inclusiveness, tolerance, and the gifts of nature and of existence itself, are more urgent than ever. In this regard, learning to mediate the unconscious power of spectacle becomes a powerful tool for humanity to transcend the self-destructive impulses that the creator of sociobiology, E.O. Wilson, thought were intrinsic to the human condition.