Teaching Spectacle: The Cultural Relevance of a Global Phenomenon

Francisco LaRubia-Prado
Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA

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.

Based on the multiple meanings given to the notion of spectacle, I recently proposed an inclusive definition: "[Spectacle is a] 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" (LaRubia-Prado 146-47). When a spectacle is live, it is short-term; when it is circulated through the media, spectacle refers to the consumption of visual images, sound, and story. If the media spectacle refers to Guy Debords's notion of spectacle, the sustained production and consumption of images generates specific social relations that feed a capitalist, consumer-oriented culture.

In what follows and based on a seminar taught in the Fall of 2021 at Georgetown University, I shall cover some of the possible modules constituting a course on "Culture and Spectacle" where each section could have universal and global relevance, although my emphasis is often on American culture given that the course was offered in an American University.

Module 1. The "Society of the Spectacle"

In *The Society of the Spectacle* (*La société du spectacle*, 1967), Marxist philosopher Guy Debord elaborates a critique of "the spectacle" of modern life.[1] In it, Debord critiques contemporary consumer culture and commodity fetishism. In addition, the book deals with class alienation, cultural homogenization, and mass media. According to Debord, the constant stream of images produced by the media and advertising makes a direct experience of reality impossible and creates a new system of social relations between people. For Debord, "the spectacle" unifies society under the banner of the commodity, and human existence becomes dominated by appearances that colonize free time, perpetuating capitalism and making it virtually impossible to escape from the consumption trap. Debord's critique is global, a web of images woven by the economic system —Nike, Gucci, Budweiser, Sandals, BMW— and the news industry — CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NewsMax— shaping our values and priorities, our behavior, choices, and experiences. This trap steers us away from our real needs for experiencing a meaningful individual and communal life. Instead, the spectacle sells us stuff that we often do not need (e.g., vehicles, appliances, fashion) by using images of desirable situations that we long for and need (e.g., love, connection, communication). As a result of this cultural dependency on the spectacle, Tauel Harper has characterized the archetypal human being of our time as *homo spectaculum* (65-67).

For Debord, the spectacle only affirms human life as an "appearance" based on images while negating more "real" life based on actual experience, the senses, and social connection. For him, "The reality of time has been replaced by the advertisement of time," inciting "a surplus of economic expenditure" leading "only to deception." Regrettably, Debord says, we may be flooded with images of unreality, but this is "an epoch without festivals," that is, without real-life spectacles (fragment 154). For Debord, festivals are essential if we are to reverse the current situation and bring reality back to life. As he considers real-life spectacles, Debord historizes them, looking back to "the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the art of the festival, [where] life is experienced as enjoyment of the passage of time" (fragment 139). He affirms the life implicit in the "theater and the festival, the theatrical festival" that flourished in the Baroque period (fragment 189). In fact, popular theater and festivals are key antidotes to the world of alienating media images.

Unfortunately, global phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic have meant an interruption in popular festivals and most community activities. Because of the pandemic, people are consuming media images as the only entertainment possible in generalized lockdowns, increasing the grip of Debord's spectacle over culture. Hopefully, as we break free from the clutch of the pandemic, local spectacles will return everywhere and people will feel again the sense of bonding with their communities that spectacles have made possible everywhere throughout history.

Module 2. Neuroscience and Spectacle

In its encouragement of a never-ending consumption of commodities, Debord's society of the spectacle is inherently isolating. Neuropsychologists John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick elaborate

on what is necessary for humans as "inherently social beings": social connection in a social world (5). Humans need love, intimacy, community, compassion, and a deeply-felt sense of gratitude for existence itself. Yet, more than 36% of all Americans feel "serious loneliness," a situation that undermines their physical and mental health (*Making Care*). Recognizing the social and physical pain caused by loneliness, the U.K. government appointed a "Minister for loneliness" in 2019. According to then Prime Minister, Theresa May, "For far too many people, loneliness is the sad reality of modern life." Mark Robinson, an officer of Age U.K., a British charity, says that "the problem [of loneliness] could kill"; it is "worse for health than smoking 15 cigarettes a day." Dr. Vivek Murthy, Surgeon General of the U.S., says that: "loneliness generates much risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, depression, and anxiety" (*NYT*, 1/17/2018). Yet, the sense of loneliness, as Cacioppo and Patrick say, "developed as a stimulus, and to reach out toward others, to renew frayed or broken bonds" (7). They suggest the value of rituals—an essential aspect of spectacles—as one of the solutions to this serious problem so "social connections" can be created (10, 16).

A sense of connection and being in sync with other people and the world relieves social pain. Connection is particularly intense when we experience what Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi has called "flow" (Schechner 88-89), a feeling of bonding and togetherness frequently experienced in large communal festivals such as La Patum (Berga, Spain), Bonfire Night (Lewes, UK), or in a political demonstration (Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream Speech" on August 28, 1963), or the Women's March on Washington in 2017. Indeed, a powerful way to channel our genetic need for gregariousness is experienced through popular festivals and collective activities that generate a sense of community.[2]

Cacioppo and Patrick converge with Debord's assessment that the media is mainly responsible for why social connection is not promoted more forcefully in Western societies (251). As a result, people's isolation grows, and a specific model of social relations that promotes a progressively more intractable web of homogeneous ideology—Debord's spectacle on steroids—keeps growing.

From a neuropsychological perspective, religion promotes closer social ties and community. In America, such religious manifestations often occur in megachurches. However, religion is not a general solution to the social problem of isolation because holding a concrete faith excludes those who do not believe in the same ideology. However, a more comprehensive solution based on our belonging to a shared "humanity" would be desirable (Cacciopo 252-54) In Putnam's terms, religion would promote "bonding," that is, reinforcing narrower identities and homogeneity among members of a specific group, not wider identities or "bridging" (Putnam 22-24). On the other hand, community spectacles are usually open to all and tend to promote both "bridging" and "bonding."

Module 3. Megaspectacles: Death as Spectacle

The "society of the spectacle" is at the heart of the modern capitalist mode of production, unifying and explaining, according to Debord, "a great diversity of apparent phenomena" (fragment 10). This power is even more apparent in today's world than it was when Debord wrote *La société du spectacle*. Contemporary media literacy and media culture theorist Douglas Kernell stresses how the social spectacle has grown exponentially with the internet vis-à-vis Debord's vision. Due to its level of high-tech sophistication, the contemporary spectacle in the form of "infotainment" has become a central, organizing principle of culture, that is, of society, the economy, and everyday life ("Media" 23). In fact, through information technologies, techno-spectacles are shaping worldviews, behaviors, and life at a global level more than any other form of spectacle historically.

Kellner's main interest is in "megaspectacles," that is, spectacles that define an era, such as the O.J. Simpson trial, the War on Terrorism, or the Clinton impeachment scandal. Today, Donald Trump's impeachment trials; the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the U.S.; the Tokyo Olympics during the pandemic; the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2020; or the easily available images and information from Ukraine's war horrors would exemplify Kellner's notion of megaspectacle.

As relevant and era-defining as the above-cited megaspectacles are, the phenomenon of racism in the United States —"America's original sin," as Historian Annette Gordon-Reed put it—has been the source of multiple era-defining megaspectacles. Episodes such as the lynching of Emmett Till, the teenage boy whose mother chose to make his death a spectacle through an open-casket funeral disseminated by major magazines in 1955, the Tulsa massacre of 1921, or the video-taped agony and killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis, are megaspectacles of death.

Teaching spectacle in the US begs for a reflection on the meaning of George Floyd's video-recorded death and of the cultural background that explains it. Floyd's death is the most impactful visual document available to begin understanding the depth and extent of racism in the US. Even if, at this point (2 years after the fact), it is not "breaking news" and the culture industry does not remind Americans of the episode and its root causes any longer, bringing this megaspectacle of death to the classroom is both painful and a way to keep fighting the reality of racism and its causes.

In the US, as Bryan Stevenson says (*True Justice*), blacks were historically excluded from the principle of national sovereignty. As a result, the dehumanizing practice of lynching became, as Amy Louise Wood shows in *The Spectacle of Lynching*, became a touristic phenomenon, the ultimate spectacle. The video of George Floyd's death saves his lynching from being forgotten, showing him as both the image of the abject victim and a man who, despite his tormentor's dehumanizing efforts, displays his humanity through his suffering. It is spectacle that gives the spectator an actual sense of the reality of racism in America, a spectacle portraited in the early days of film by D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), where the director's supremacist views denounced blacks as the true seed of discord in America.[3] In this regard, teaching the universal impact of spectacle must include the work of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a non-profit organization located in Montgomery, Alabama, which exposes the legacy of racism and discrimination in the US. The documentary *True Justice* (2019) and the film *Just Mercy* (2019) reflect the work of the founder of the EJI, Bryan Stevenson. Yet, it is not easy to understand why an excellent and generous documentary such as *True Justice* is not taught in every school in America. Instead, and with considerable historical shortsightedness, the movement against teaching "critical race theory" has as a goal to hide real history. The truth is unless the US comes to terms with its real past, the country will never be able to move forward. As philosopher George Santayana famously said in *The Life of Reason: The Phases of Human Progress* (1905), "those who don't know history are destined to repeat it."

In her essay, "George Floyd's death as Spectacle," Emily Tamfo has suggested that perhaps people were more upset at watching the spectacle of Floyd's death on video than at the meaning of his death itself. Whether this is the case or not, even Tamfo recognizes the importance of the video's virality in making Americans aware of this endemic problem. Nicole Chavez suggests that the video of Floyd's death made 2020 "the year that America confronted racism." In view of Charles Blow's essay in the *New York Times,* "The Great Erasure" (5/24/2022) we may deem Chavez's view an optimistic appraisal. However, we must recognize the importance of death as megaspectacle in shaping the ethos of a nation: confronting racism in America has taken a 9:58 viral video showing a case of what has been happening for 400 years.

Module 4. From Religion to Las Vegas

Historically, Catholicism and Protestantism had very different perspectives on spectacle. On one hand, Catholics' approach to festivals was a matter of symbolism and form. Catholicism incorporated festivities in honor of re-branded profane old gods and goddesses. The Virgin of Guadalupe or St. Brigid of Ireland would exemplify this pragmatic approach. On the other hand, for Protestants, festivals were not a matter of form but substance (Bauman 93-4). Their goal was to experience life seriously and eliminate the celebration of festivities altogether. Quakers especially believed that fertility rituals, singing, May Queens and maypoles, athletic contests, gaming, extraordinary consumption of food, or drinking wine were expressions of human pride, demonic excesses of the flesh, and a sinful waste of resources. Instead, they emphasized the "silence of the flesh," God speaking from within and quietly to each believer, the rationalization of work, and capital

accumulation as an expression of divine blessing and the way to merge God's spirit and that of the believer (Bauman 94-95).

Clearly, Protestantism's opposition to festivals and spectacles, including the theater, as Thomas Barish shows in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, was motivated by converging religious and economic trends. In order to live a life in fear of God, the faithful could not take time off from life's daily activities. In this regard, festivities—extraordinary time—were sinful "all the time" especially at "holidays" (Bauman 97). Rejecting festival time as unholy leads to adopting homogeneous time, that is, a time steadily devoted to work as the only acceptable time to God. Such stable, productive time together with discipline, the identification of wealth with God's blessings, the accumulation of capital, and the investment of that capital in productive activities led to capitalism, as Max Weber showed in *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* (1904-1905). It is highly ironic that the Protestant tradition with its rejection of spectacle and Debord's society of the spectacle lead to the same economic system: capitalism. This essential convergence, however, does not hold true regarding their positions on consumerism.

The fear of festivals that characterizes the Protestant spiritual tradition shows the power of spectacle. The recognition of this power is precisely what led Catholicism to embrace spectacle and the spiritual value of the senses, especially during the Counter-Reformation period. Herbert Muschamp refers to the Catholic Counter-Reformation as a sense-based spiritual movement and to Baroque aesthetics as the spectacular defense of absolute values vis-à-vis modernity, capitalism, and Protestantism, a position also apparent in Marcia Hall and Tracy Cooper's (eds.), *The Sensous in the Counter-Reformation Church*. One can consider Baroque aesthetics as the foundation of the contemporary "notion of spectacle" (Muschamp 217), which makes sense in Debordian terms given that in a more ideologically, less myth-based and plural world, Christian and secular authority were questioned in the 16th and 17th-centuries, and a new, more dynamic art came to existence. This art includes "Theater and the festival, the theatrical festival, […] [as] the outstanding achievements of the baroque" (Debord, fragment 189). Finally, Architect Robert Venturi states that the contemporary spectacle "inevitably engages baroque characteristics" (Rockwell 64).

In contrast to values prized by modern capitalism and Protestant ethics (e.g., seriousness, action, production, work, and time without festivities) stands the spectacle of Las Vegas in the US, the "most believable unreality show" (Rockwell 61). Debord's society of the spectacle is a system based on deception: "vulgarized pseudo-festivals, parodies of the dialogue and the gift, incite a surplus of economic expenditure, they lead only to deception always compensated by the promise of a new deception […]. The reality of time has been replaced by the advertisement of time" (fragment 154). In Las Vegas, however, there is no deception because everyone knows that all "deception" is open there, honest, relaxed, and fun. The opposite of puritan seriousness, Las Vegas is all about humor. Validating Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer's incongruity theory of laughter, the mismatch between what one sees (the Pacific, the Eiffel Tower, Venice's Grand Canal, the Colosseum, the statue of Michelangelo's David, the Statue of Liberty, and other landmarks) and its location: the Nevada desert, could not be more incongruous (Morreall 51-56). In addition, Las Vegas, according to Freud's theory of humor, is humorous because it is about the release of energy through entertainment (Morreall 111-16). Cultural critic David Hickey has observed that everything in Las Vegas "is ridiculous, it's a joke" made for consumption, adding that "the discourse of spectacle is a counter-discourse to the dominant Protestant culture. It exists because there is no joy in this culture." Thus, Las Vegas embodies a spirit of resistance to American "ugliness" (gated communities, malls, corporate parks) (66). He also famously said that Las Vegas is "the most democratic city in America" as everything it offers exists for people's enjoyment, while the government has little to say regarding precedent, regulations, and tradition (63). As a city founded on the idea of enjoyment, Las Vegas is also an answer to the US culture of "repression." Implicitly re-introducing the religious background of contemporary spectacle, Hickey says that there is less difference between Las Vegas and Rome (the center of Catholicism) than between Las Vegas and Minneapolis (archetypal US city of Lutheran background), the last two cities, that is, Las Vegas and Minneapolis being separated by a "vast genetic abyss" (66).[4]

Module 5. Carnival(ization)

Whether it is one's favorite vacation destination or not, Las Vegas was conceived as an open market for fun and a relief valve to the culture of seriousness and puritan work ethics. Its liberating quality of sensuality and excess unmasks the city's carnivalesque nature. Carnival, a festivity rooted in primitive and Pagan festivals (such as the Saturnalia) but experienced in cultures with a Catholic background, gives free rein to satisfying sensory and bodily needs before Lent. Carnival begins with Epiphany (January 6) and ends at the beginning of Lent (from Ash Wednesday, March 6 until April 18).

As Mikhail Bakhtin says in *Rabelais and His World*, Carnival was held in direct opposition to religious and secular authority in the Middle Ages. It was part of folk culture, which included ritual spectacles, verbal compositions, and obscene language (…). As a statement of life and market culture, Carnival embraced everyone and was characterized by laughter, the display of sensuality and excess (sex, food, drinking), play, and freedom versus secular or religious hierarchies, privileges, prohibitions, and rules. During Carnival, actors and spectators become the same on the street, while other spectacles require more spatially restricted "scenarios" such as the Italian stage, or screens, differentiating between performers and the public (Requena 38-41). Carnival is associated with the natural cycle of "death-renewal-change," and opposes the idea of "completeness" and the absence of change and, even if briefly, it offers a second life beyond everyday life based on the notion of the "world inside out" (15-20).

During Carnival, the spiritual ideal is cancelled in favor of materiality, lower bodily parts, the obscene, and the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quijote de la Mancha* illustrates the carnivalesque in literary terms because it degrades chivalry and idealism, while Sancho fits in through his constant preoccupation with food and the body. In the arts, grotesque, pregnant witches embody the carnivalesque spirit as metaphors for the unstable and cosmic renewal. Francisco de Goya painted many witches, and the most perceptive depiction of Carnival, *El entierro de la sardina* [*The Burial of the Sardine*] circa 1814-1816.

For Cultural Anthropologist Victor Turner, Carnival is a rite of reversal of everyday life practices (88). He conceives of Carnival as "society in the subjunctive" (76) as it expresses desire, will, and fantasy, always in a playful fashion. Carnival rejects everyday reality —the "indicative" mode of existence— and reminds us of the subversive power of humor.

Writer and political theorist Madame de Stäel (1766-1817) experienced Carnival's subversiveness and display of humor in Rome, where she witnessed the mix of social classes, habits, and the appearance that there was no social order. De Stäel cites how Carnival represents the rebirth of time, a liberation of energy, and the inversion of hierarchies, stressing how freedom was not "given" but taken by the people during Carnival. Challenging the notion of homogeneous time, Carnival entails the temporary transformation of identities; joy results from all kinds of metamorphosis, masks, and cross-dressing (Stoichita 11-12). The world "turned upside down" includes humans as animals, men as women, women as men, oppressed as oppressors, and vice versa, as shown in Goya's *The Burial of the Sardine* (Stoichita 26). The whole cosmic order is turned around, upside down, inside out.

However, to meet its renewal function, Carnival's symbolic violence, such as effigy executions and the proclamation of a madman as king among other reversals, needs to be temporary (cited by Stoichita 22). The intermittent human need for a relief valve finds a clear expression during Carnival, and it is crucial to stress both that Carnival time is different from the experience of everyday life, and that all that Carnival means and represents has a symbolic value. Like de Stäel did, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) also witnessed the Roman Carnival—for him, a "symbolic revolution" (Stoichita 15-17).

A connection between revolution and Carnival based on the topos of "the world upside down" permeated the transition between Monarchy and Republic during the French Revolution of 1789. French revolutionaries, however, took the similarities between Carnival and Revolution too literally as they assimilated the symbolic nature of Carnival with the literal violence of the French Revolution,

and the temporary essence of Carnival with the sustained effect that a regime change must have in the everyday of the population. They abolished Carnival itself because they considered it a dark legacy of the past and attempted to make the revolution a perpetual Carnival, but they failed. In fact, the only revolutionary holiday that succeded was an intermittent festivity, Bastille Day.

Recognizing the power of Carnival, the revolutionaries prohibited masks during the Terror, but created a revolutionary outfit in exchange for it. Yet, an "official" dress is in itself the very denial of Carnival, which exists in symbolic opposition to official authority. Thus, during the revolutionary period, the spirit of Carnival was expressed through other means, namely, through the mocking of the revolution in the press and pamphlets. In fact, "The Revolution was the 'making' of the Carnival just as, in its turn, the Carnival was the 'unmaking' of the Revolution" (Stoichita 28-30).

Module 6. The Post-truth Phenomenon: Donald Trump and the World of Reality-TV

Given his background as a reality T.V. star, Donald Trump made his presidency and even himself, a spectacle, as Barack Obama points out in his memoir *A Promised Land* (D'Zurilla). Insulting opponents, misrepresenting reality, and using reality T.V. techniques were and are part of his political performance. Trump's success had a deceptive carnivalesque quality as he became the voice of those who wanted the world upside down while he, an elitist, disguises himself as an anti-elitist. He did so in part by embracing the post-truth phenomenon. However, through his transformation of reality into a permanent reality show, he exhausted the public and eventually lost the 2020 Presidential election after four seasons.

Post-truth emphasizes the importance of personal feeling over factual foundations. A radically subjective approach to the world, post-truth is perversely characterized as "democratic" because individual feeling is considered of equal value to informed opinion, even if the way one feels does not match factual reality. Hence the danger that the post-truth phenomenon poses to the stability of a culture based on the authority of knowledge, expertise, and liberal democracy. With its disdain for rational arguments, post-truth appears as the foundation of modern populist politics and of what James Madison feared most: "the turbulency and weakness of unruly passions" (see "Founders Online"). As C.G. Prado puts it, "post-truth pronouncements priorize personal belief and feeling, spurn consistency, disregard objective facts, and disdain factual rebuttals and demands for substantiation" They cannot be separated from a desire to obtain and maintain power. A common practice in pursuing this goal is to reinforce prejudices and suspicion against the media and the educated "elite" (7).

The current version of Debord's "society of the spectacle"—led by social media and the culture industry—is a significant promoter of the post-truth phenomenon. The role of Facebook and Twitter in the 2020 electoral victory of Donald Trump is well known. A top executive at Facebook, Andrew Bosworth, explained that the platform got Trump elected in 2016, adding that he saw no reason to stop Trump's reelection in 2020 (see Lecher Collin; Jonathan Haidt; Gabriele Cosentino). The coming together of a population increasingly accepting of the post-truth phenomenon promoted by the use of a minimally controlled social media, and the excesses of today's version of the Debordian spectacle help explain the current divided state of public opinion and politics in the US as well as in other countries.

Philosophers such as Harry Frankfurt (*On Bullshit*), and journalists like James Ball (*Post-truth. How Bullshit Conquered the World*) have treated the post-truth phenomenon and its practical consequences, discussing how telling lies requires the awareness that there is something such as "truth" and "falsehood" and a recognition of a difference between both notions. Yet, the bullshitter disregards the notions of truth and lies altogether, caring only about the "narrative" (Ball 5). Bullshitters use truth if it works, or they can make up something if that is what they need. Thus, "bullshit is a greater enemy of truth than the lies" (Ball 5). Traditional media is not able to deal with this kind of approach for two reasons: bullshitters sell "news," and the ultimate goal of a news corporation is to make money. Of course, when the practice of ensuring equal time to the parties

engaged in a public debate was established, the existence of the post-truth phenomenon was not widespread the way it is today (Ball 226).

The coming to power of Donald J. Trump and the victory of "Leave" in the 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom stand out as resounding and dangerous triumphs of the post-truth phenomenon, and they meant a new impulse to Debord's "society of the spectacle" at a scale and level of sophistication that Debord himself may have found shocking. To begin to gauge the spectacular dimension of Brexit for those who did not experience the actual events, the film *Brexit. The Uncivil War* (Toby Haynes, 2019) illustrates the emotional manipulation of the British public through all kinds of technological, financial, and rhetorical means leading to the withdrawal of the U.K. from the European Union on January 31, 2020, after 47 years of membership. As for the Trump presidency, it contributed to changing American society and the international political landscape. Domestically, it divided the country and lent legitimacy to intolerance and violence as a political tool. Today, one out of three Americans believe the use violence is justified to accomplish political objectives (see Larry Diamond**)** a belief put into practice during the spectacle of the January 6, 2020 insurrection. In the international realm, Trump encouraged the methods of authoritarian, nationalistic leaders across the world. Both cases, Brexit and the Trump presidency, illustrate the dangerous alliance of post-truth and spectacle (Ball 15-67; D'Ancona 7-34).

Beyond the strict realm of politics, reality T.V. is a frontier genre defined by its lack of clear-cut definition. It is neither fiction, like a film, nor news or a depiction of real life. Instead, it uses reality for entertainment, bringing together spectacle and experience in a context of "construed unmediation," use of technology, and post-production intervention in a way that the final product appears unmediated (Kavka 94). Reality T.V. is a major source of enculturation in today's society. Its possibilities in terms of themes and techniques are virtually endless as media, culture, and communication specialists Leigh Edwards (*The triumph of reality T.V.*), and Susan Murray (*Reality T.V)* have shown. Their range is virtually inexhaustible: from food shows (*Top Chef*) to courting (*The Bachelor*), police work (*The First 48*), psychological issues (*Hoarders*), or extraordinary and life-changing experiences in nature (*Frontier House*).

According to Khadija Coxon, certain aspects of popular reality T.V. shows are positive. For her, the legitimization of raw emotion that makes possible the free expression of affect is one of them. However, even if such expression is perceived as authentic by the public, it appears to be a demotic—not democratic—phenomenon that confuses sincerity with authenticity. There is no question about the financial value of expressing raw emotions in today's media world. In fact, the media has created a new kind of T.V. star in the 2000s. The new T.V. celebrities usually lack special talents; instead, they are everyday men and women expressing their feelings in front of the cameras. This exposure is profitable for the media industry and feeds the narcissistic tendencies of a post-truth era. Thus, shows like the multiple *Real Housewives* franchises channel emotions to what Coxon calls "epistemic currency" (111), which duly strategized and "intensified" have an apparent "branded affect" (112).

Finally, many reality T.V. shows and social media have become the way to define people's selves and our perception of others, societal rules, and expectations in contemporary culture. The result is what Megan Collins calls the "new Narcissus" (12) that complicates the formation of a healthy identity. Excessive immersion in social media can doom any effort to embark on a process of authentic self-discovery and lead to an unbridgeable separation between the subject and reality. This disconnection generates a "false self" (12) whose centerpiece is the search for a "fake uniqueness" that supposedly leads to success (9).

Even if some reality T.V. confuses the individuals' feelings with the reality outside themselves generating Collins "new Narcissus," other reality shows such as "Alaska: The Last Frontier" have the opposite effect as the viewer is taken out of himself and exposed to the human-nature interaction that stresses both the power of nature and humans' ability to live in harmony with the natural order.

Conclusion

This essay covers critical components of a course taught at Georgetown University on the impact of spectacle on culture/s in the Fall of 2021. "The working hypothesis is that a complex and global phenomenon such as spectacle and its power of enculturation tells us, at least, as much about who we are as human beings as the way we experience everyday life." (76)

The essay includes the following sections: (1) Guy Debord's critique of a system of social relations based on images leading to commodity fetishism. (2) How, according to Neuropsychology, communal spectacles and activities can be a solution to loneliness, a symptom experienced by people in societies where there is a mismatch between our social nature and the individualistic way of life implicitly or explicitly encouraged by the media. (3) How death has become a megaspectacle in the US due to a culture which refuses to address (or addresses poorly) 400 years of racism. (4) The connection between religion and spectacle. Las Vegas, a humorous performative statement in itself, has been associated with a "counter-discourse" (Hickey) to a culture of seriousness, homogeneous time, and disembodied spirituality. (5) The Carnival tradition, guided by the notion of the world upside down, has always been a counter-discourse and a counter-practice to official culture, secular or religious. Carnival's symbolic and periodic nature opposes any attempt to assimilate it into everyday life or make it an official festivity. (6) The connection between the post-truth phenomenon and the mass media and some of its political implications.

The relationship between people and cultures and spectacle has been universal throughout history. Today, however, spectacle has become the organizing principle of society and everyday life because of the mass media. As a result, the future depends on how we mediate the unconscious influence of spectacle. The awareness of the crucial role of spectacle in the future is a compelling reason to make it part of the intellectual offering in an academic curriculum. Beyond academics, life itself is already taking care of its need for spectacle. As we resume a post-pandemic life, live spectacles continue their course as a universal phenomenon that have always characterized human life. In 2022, Mardi Gras was, once again, a great success, and the summer of 2022 promises to be a new beginning for spectacle as one of the best antidotes to loneliness and the lack of community that characterizes modern life.

Notes

[1] Later, Debord continued his critique in *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (*Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*, 1988). When I cite Debords text in this essay I am doing so from the 1967 text.

[2] In our connection with other community members through civil and/or festive engagement, we develop our roots in society. As Robert Putnam analyzed in *Bowling Alone*, the loss of social engagement entails the loss of "social capital" (Putnam 15-28). Putnam considers "social capital" as social good because networks have value. They affect individuals (increases goodwill, fellowship, solidarity, exchanges between individuals and family, networks, jobs, and company). Great spectacles such as Il Palio (Siena, Italy), Bonfire Night (Lewes, UK), La Patum (Berga, Spain), Fallas (Valencia, Spain), Carnival groups, and many others work year-round to connect members of the community, promote all kinds of activities and social connection, raise funds. They are a valuable source of social capital. Unfortunately, this kind of historical spectacle is rare in the United States. New Orleans' Carnival and its krews is one of the exceptions.

[3] For the history of racism in America see Deneen L. Brown, "It Was a Modern-day Lynching'," where Brown says that, between 1877 and 1950, more than 4,400 black men, women, and children were lynched [and frequently tortured] by white mobs.
Regarding president Joe Biden's signing a bill that makes lynching a federal crime in America on March 29, 2022, see Jamelle Bouie's "This Is Why It Took More Than 100 Years to Get an Anti-Lynching Bill." *NYT*. April 1, 2022.

[4] If Las Vegas is today's America's sin city, New Orleans played the same role in the past. See https://www.wwltv.com/article/news/local/new-orleans-ranked-as-one-of-the-most-sinful-cities-in-the-united-states/289-617969926

References

Artichoke, "Temple." https://www.artichoke.uk.com/project/temple/

Bakhtin, Mikhail. (1984). *Rabelais and his world.* Bloomington: Indiana UP.

Ball, J. (2017). *Post-truth: how bullshit conquered the world*. London: Biteback Books.

Barish, Jonash. (1981). *The antitheatrical prejudice.* Berkeley: U California P, 1981.

Bauman, Richard. (1987). "The Place of festival in the worldview of the seventeenth-century quakers." *Time Out of Time.* Ed. Alessandro Falassi. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, P.93-98.

Brown, Deneen L. (2020). "It was a modern-day lynching': Violent deaths reflect a brutal american legacy." *National Geographic,* June 3, 2020,

Byrne, Moyra. (1987). "Nazi Festival: The 1936 Berlin Olympics." *Time out of time.* Ed. Alessandro Falassi. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico.

Cacioppo, John T. & William Patrick. (2008). *Loneliness.* New York: Norton.

Chavez, Nicole. (2020). "2020: The year America confronted racism." *CNN.* From: https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2020/12/us/america-racism-2020/

Cosentino, Gabriele. (2020) *Social media and the post-truth world order: The global dynamics of disinformation*. Palgrave MacMillan. Chapters 1 and 2.

Collins, Megan. (2018). *The new narcissus in the age of reality television.* New York: Routledge.

Coxon, Khadija. (2018). "Reality for the People." In C.G. Prado, ed. *America's post-truth phenomenon*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

Debord, Guy. (1983). *The society of the spectacle.* Detroit: Black & Red.

Diamond, Larry and others. (2020). "Americans increasingly believe violence is justified if the other side wins." *Politico.* 10/09/2020. From: https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/10/01/political-violence-424157

D'Ancona, Matthew. (2017). *Post Truth.* London: Ebury.

D'Zurilla, Christie. (2020) "In his new memoir, Barack Obama relishes taunting Trump: He was a spectacle." November 20, 2020. *Los Angeles Times*.

Edsall, Thomas B. (2021) "America Has Split, and It's Now in 'Very Dangerous Territory'." *NYT*. 1/26/2021. From: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/opinion/covid-biden-trump-polarization.html

Edwards, Leigh. (2013). *The triumph of reality T.V.: The revolution in American television.* Santa Barbara, California: Praeger.

Founders Online. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-10-02-0044. And: http://newconsensus.org/wp/2011/07/13/protecting-the-republic-from-democracy-a-lesson-from-1787/

Frankfurt, Harry G. (2005). *On Bullshit.* Princeton: Princeton UP.

Gordon-Reed, Annette. (2020). "America's original sin." *Foreign affair.* January-February 2020. From: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-12-12/americas-original-sin

Goya y Lucientes, Francisco. *El entierro de la sardina.* (1810s). From: https://fundaciongoyaenaragon.es/eng/obra/el-entierro-de-la-sardina/467

Gordon-Reed, Annette. (2018). "America's original sin." *Foreign affairs*, January/February 2018. From: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-12-12/americas-original-sin

Griffith, D.W. *The birth of a nation,* 1915.

Haidt, Jonathan. (2022). "Why the past 10 years of American life have been uniquely stupid," *The Atlantic*. 4/22/22.

Hall, Marcia, and Tracy Cooper's (eds.). (2013). *The sensous in the counter-reformation church.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Harper, Tauel. (2010). *Democracy in the age of the new media: The politics of the spectacle.* New York: Peter Lang.

Hickey, David. (2006). "Real Fakery." Ed. David Rockwell. London: Phaidon, 2006. 66-67.

Haynes, Toby. *Brexit. The uncivil war*. 2019.

Kavka, Misha. (2005), "Love 'n the real; or, How I learned to love reality TV." *the spectacle of the real.* Ed. Geoff King. Bristol: Intellect. 93-104.

Kellner, Douglas. (2018). "Donald Trump and the politics of the spectacle." *Media, ideology, and hegemony*. Savaş Çoban, ed. Brill. Chapter 10: 183-197.

Kellner, Douglas. (2005). "Media culture and the triumph of the spectacle." *The spectacle of the real.* Ed. Geoff King. Bristol: Intellect. 23-36.

LaRubia-Prado, Francisco. (2020) "Spectacles of light, fire, and fog: Artichoke and the art of the ephemeral." *International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity*. Volume 8, Number 1-2. 145-59.

Lecher, Colin. (2020). "Facebook executive: We got Trump elected, and we shouldn't stop him in 2020." *The Verge*. January 7. From: https://www.theverge.com/2020/1/7/21055348/facebook-trump-election-2020-leaked-memo-bosworth

Making Care Common Project at Harvard University. "Loneliness in America: How the pandemic has deepened an epidemic of loneliness and what we can do about it." Harvard University. Report. From: https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america
Morreall, John, ed. (1972). *The Philosophy of laughter and humor.* New York: Academic Press.
Murray, Susan. (2009). *Reality T.V.: remaking television culture*. New York: New York UP.
Muschamp, Herbert. (2006). "Here is the church." *Spectacle.* Ed. David Rockwell. London: Phaidon. 216-21.
Nesbit, Jeff. (2016). "Donald Trump is the first true reality T.V. president." *Time*. December 9. From: https://time.com/4596770/donald-trump-reality-tv/
Plato, *Laws*. Book VIII, 8, 828b. http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/laws.8.viii.html
Prado, C.G., ed. (2018). *America's post-truth phenomenon*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
Putnam, Robert D. (2000). *Bowling alone.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
Requena, Jesús González. (1985). "Introducción a una teoría del espectáculo." *Telos.* 4: 35-44.
Rockwell, David, ed. (2006). *Spectacle.* London: Phaidon.
Schechner, Richard. (2002). *Performance studies.* New York: Routledge.
Stevenson, Bryan. (2019). *Just mercy.* Dir. Destil Daniel Cretton.
Stevenson, Bryan. (2019). *True justice: Bryan Stevenson's fight for equality.* Dirs. George Kunhardt, Teddy Kunhardt, Peter Kunhardt.
Stoichita, Victor I., and Anna Maria Coderch. (1999). *Goya. The last carnival.* London: Reaktion Books.
Tamfo, Emily. (2020). "I fear we have turned George Floyd's death into a spectacle." *Toronto Star.* June 8. From: https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/06/08/i-fear-we-have-turned-george-floyds-death-into-a-spectacle.html
Turner, Victor. (1987). "Carnival, ritual, and play in Rio de Janeiro." *Time Out of Time.* Ed. Alessandro Falassi. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico.
Ventury, Robert, and Denise Scott Brown. (2006). "Constructing decoration." Ed. David Rockwell. London: Phaidon. 64-65.
Weber, Max. (2002). *The Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism.* Trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. New York: Penguin.
Wilson, E.O. *Of Ants and Men*, 2015. From: https://video.vermontpbs.org/video/eo-wilson-ants-and-men-full-episode/
Wood, Amy Louise. 92009). *Lynching and spectacle.* Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina.
Yeginsu, Ceylan. (2018). "U.K. Appoints a minister for loneliness." *NYT.* January 17.

About the Author

Dr. Francisco LaRubia-Prado earned his Ph.D. from Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. He is a professor with the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. He also taught at Princeton University. He has published books on Miguel de Unamuno, José Ortega y Gasset, and the Romantic period. His latest book is *The Horse in Literature and Film*. He has edited several volumes on various topics, including the Enlightenment, Cervantes, Literary Theory, Intellectual History, and Transatlantic Studies. His latest edited book is *Imperialism and the Wider Atlantic* (with Tania Gentic). Dr. LaRubia-Prado has published many essays on Spanish and Comparative literature, and culture. He is currently working on a book about the cultural impact of spectacle.