
A funhouse journey through the strange, enticing visual cultures of fin-de-siècle Paris, Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris promises to engage a host of intellectual curiosities surrounding that ephemeral yet essential quality known simply as “Parisianness.” The book is an endless showcase of the unusual (dismembered cadavers, wax pantheons, hot-air balloon panoramas) which situates its ideas within a hotbed of complex debates, multiple disciplines, and key thinkers (the usual celebrities—Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Anne Friedberg—appear alongside the seminal works of Tony Bennett and T. J. Clark) while remaining highly accessible.

Spectacular Realities is both succinct and ambitious, encompassing the historical phenomenon of spectatorship, the birth of a new urban and decidedly non-revolutionary crowd in fin-de-siècle Paris (denoted here as Paris after the Commune, focusing on the years 1880-90), a revised and decidedly democratic concept of the flâneur, and the origins of cinema. Schwartz traces the emergence of mass culture to the spectacularization of city life in late nineteenth-century Paris, investigating an eclectic array of practices and institutions which, she argues, each had a unique function to re-present everyday life as fin-de-siècle spectacle.

The book’s captivating curatorial tour begins with that most famous and enduring of Parisian haunts: the boulevard. Schwartz’s analysis of the urban delights offered Parisians by the boulevard (understood as an effect of urban design which resulted from the mid-century re-structuring of Paris known as Haussmanization) insists on the links between cultural forms. She successfully argues that the popular activity of seeing and being seen on the boulevard worked simultaneously with the sensational narrativizing of its visual pleasures in the burgeoning newspapers, constituting a bona fide crowd of spectating Parisians. And thus proceeds Schwartz’s thesis: the shared consumption of many such “spectacular realities” provided visual evidence of a common existence among Parisians, thereby creating a new urban identity.

Onwards from the boulevard, Schwartz weaves her analysis through a motley crew of Parisian sites: public displays at the Paris morgue, conceptualized as a “theatre of the masses” in which an ostensible invitation to identify unknown corpses gives way to macabre mise-en-scène; the Musée Grévin’s elaborate waxwork tableaux, in which unique and multiple sightlines fuel appetites for spectacularly real images; the revitalized popularity of dioramas and panoramas, which underscores technologies of increased realism, as well as a shift in representational subject matter toward real-life people and places; and, in the final chapter, an examination of early cinema at the Musée Grévin locates film’s innovative technology alongside the practices of urban spectatorship set in motion by the entire constellation of viewing exhibitions offered to fin-de-siècle Parisians.

Far from being a register of separate media histories of the “strange but true” entertainment variety, the book’s multi-form approach maps how the practices and modes of spectatorship of urban cultures grew out of a shared visual climate; Schwartz’s methodology also creatively blends a history of social groups and mass consumption with a history of media forms and their representations. Still, when assessing the strength of her claims, one finds that it is in the close, detailed semiotic analyses of fin-de-siècle texts that Schwartz convinces. Deftly capturing the intricate habits, styles, and, of course, thrills of “looking” encoded in period illustrations of wax exhibits and dioramas, morgue displays, serial-novel advertisements, and exposition posters of panoramas, Schwartz’s technique reveals at once the fantastic appeal of these forms and the complexity of spectatorship they often demanded. She further impresses with the use of semiotic tools to understand how the
architectural design and urban placement of the city morgue (opened in 1864) functioned to proclaim itself as an exhibitory stage within a culture of leisure.

Appropriately, given the extent to which visual culture defined fin-de-siècle Paris, this book boasts a large and eye-catching collection of illustrations. Undeniably, Schwartz has researched this material with great panache and enthusiastic fervour. Mining the rich archival sources of the time, Schwartz draws historical evidence from her Paris sources (police records, museum documents, and national library collections), complemented by an eclectic selection of primary sources (French guide books, exhibition catalogues, poetry, and newspaper reviews).

Crisp, understated writing sustains the serious intentions of the author’s scholarship and nicely balances out the melodramatic subject matter. Her selection of often gory, frequently horrific, case histories (the 1895 “mystère de Suresnes”—dead baby sisters clothed in gowns and posed in miniature chairs—surely takes the cake!) across the myriad forms does, however, betray a certain impulse to sensationalize the period. Thankfully for this reader, it also happens to turn her book into something of a “whodunit” mystery, a page-turning quest to find out how and where the tale of viewing pleasures, urban identity, and spectacular consumption ends.

Although Spectacular Realities seems to offer a near perfect blend of intelligent amusement and taut scholarship, its cracks stand out twofold. In one of her most engaging lines of analysis, Schwartz advances a reconceptualized theory of the flâneur; an historical French figure widely understood to represent the specifically masculine, bourgeois freedoms of modern Parisian urban spectatorship, mobility, and consumption. In the context of urban spectacular culture in fin-de-siècle France, Schwartz suggests that we consider the idea of flânerie to represent not an historical Parisian subject but, rather, an open “positionality of power.” Delineating this position as “one through which the spectator assumes the position of being able to be part of the spectacle and yet command it at the same time” (p. 10), Schwartz concludes that fin-de-siècle flânerie was as democratic as it was strange; all Parisians, she suggests, regardless of class position or gender identity, participated in commercial-spectating practices which fed a seemingly insatiable public appetite for odd representational blurrings of reality. Solid support for this claim is found in mid-century press accounts, public records, guide books, and popular narratives which at times celebrated, and in instances cautioned of, the great numbers of women and working-class Parisians who flocked to the boulevards and the morgue. Schwartz also presents an imaginative and compelling study of the fluidity and privilege of viewing positions offered to wax-museum visitors. Her effective discussion of dioramas, which encouraged spectators to walk through and among wax-celebrity figures of Parisian high society, persuades the reader to see how such positionality might offer otherwise socially disempowered Parisians at least a virtual experience of equality.

Schwartz fails, however, to adequately develop the constituency of crowds participating in the Parisian panoramania. She relies instead on a generalized assumption: in addition to the relatively low cost of the exhibitions and the overall increase in workers’ wages, individuals from all walks were encouraged to partake in these sites by the very principles and imperatives of mass consumerism. A more in-depth study of the systemic, as well as economic, forces determining the relative heterogeneity or homogeneity of urban crowds in this context would have been beneficial.

The subjects of modernity and urban crowds also prove thorny terrain. Schwartz challenges the pessimistic Foucauldian model by turning the reader’s focus away from state control, and toward the “equally potent phenomenon of crowd pleasing” (p. 5). She replaces Foucault’s Panoptican with the model of “urban spectacle,” advancing the position that the crowd did not disappear under changed conditions—rather, the experience of a shared collectivity was reinvented through the consumption of urban spectacles.
Although refreshingly optimistic, Schwartz's reading of the Paris morgue as "crowd pleasing" assumes an entirely benign, if not benevolent, model of the state apparatus. In fact, her very thorough history of the state-orchestrated public displays of unidentified dead (1864 to 1892) undercuts her own line of thinking by encouraging the reader to scrutinize the myriad links between the public display of anonymous corpses and disciplinary functions of the state (e.g., "confrontation" cases in which the police would escort suspected criminals to the morgue to face their dead victims). Understood as a site of social power and not mere public spectacle, one can easily align the morgue as a mechanism through which the state might shape and define its citizens' prevailing values and freedoms. Despite self-contradiction and underdevelopment, Schwartz does succeed in opening up new avenues for the conceptualization of modern crowds, the politics of mass spectatorship, and the operations of power associated with the practices of looking. Future scholarship in this area might pursue the related histories and practices of public executions and public displays at the city morgue, a hot topic here relegated to footnotes.

All told, Spectacular Realities is an original and significant contribution to media studies. Schwartz's historical model of spectatorship offsets the purchase-dominant ahistorical models' hold over the field. Indeed, it is her historical knowledge of the specific contexts, modes, and communities of urban spectatorship in fin-de-siècle Paris that leads to the book's dramatic and eye-opening conclusion: wrestling cinema's origins away from the stronghold of technologically driven, media-specific theories, Schwartz convincingly locates the origins of film in the context of distinct visual cultures and audiences present in fin-de-siècle Paris. That fact that the Musée Grévin was the first entertainment establishment in the world in which spectators paid for the public consumption of moving images is in itself great food for thought. If cinema technology had been invented outside the broader culture of "spectacular realities" in fin-de-siècle Paris, would it have still gone on to become the prize medium of the twentieth century? asks Schwartz. To respond in full to this question, interested readers are urged to pursue her related scholarship in Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (Charney & Schwartz, 1995).

If the "spectacular realities" of fin-de-siècle Paris seem oddly familiar to contemporary readers, they should. Schwartz's archeology of media approach urges us to reconsider the deceptive novelty of twenty-first century popular culture phenomenon such as virtual reality and "reality TV." An historical understanding of our culture's endless appetite for representations blending the real with spectacular re-presentation might shed new light on the meanings and practices of mass consumption—not to mention the popularity of television shows such as Survivor. Strange flânerie indeed.

Reference

Deidre Martin
Concordia University