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Cinematic Sensation: The Sublime and the Spectacle

John Martin was a nineteenth-century sensation. Arguably more people saw his pictures than those of any other artist, not only because his development of mezzotint and lithographic reproduction techniques disseminated smaller, often altered, versions of his huge canvases, but because this in turn contributed to his becoming a global phenomenon, supposedly even as far afield as China. At the end of his life, his great triptych of the *Last Judgement* (1849–53) toured the country, being exhibited at every urban centre of any size, and seen by several million people. Always more popular with the public than with the arts establishment, his reputation was in decline by the 1870s, and only recently has there been any real revival of interest within the art world itself.¹

One of his early works, *Sadak in Search of the Waters of Oblivion* (1812), depicts a tiny figure in a mountainous landscape, dwarfed by towering crags, rugged high peaks and plunging waterfalls, very much in the tradition of the eighteenth-century sublime, albeit already on a grander scale. This engagement with the sublime remains central, but many of his later works convey a novel twist. Nature and culture blend: the works of human labour – great cities, vast buildings – become awe-inspiring and terrible, inhabited yet alien. We confront forces we have released but cannot control; our mastery of the world cannot avert the catastrophe we may even have helped bring about, the apocalyptic devastation that reduces us to abject helplessness, constituting the drama at the core of his work.² In *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852), a fiery vortex both manifests and highlights the force of destructive power, with buildings, whole cities, collapsing into the abyss. And if, as Simon Morley suggests, the contemporary sublime is mostly about ‘immanent transcendence ... a transformative experience understood as occurring within the here and now’,³ then Martin’s work prefigures this: the ‘beyond’ is all-too-present, the

John Martin, *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah* (1852) Newcastle, Laing Art Gallery

sensation of cataclysmic ruination conveys its own sufficient sense of the sublime brought *closer* in its distance from us.⁴

Martin's canvases were widely drawn on as a visual language for the articulation of feeling, and he himself described the receding colonnades and vertiginous viewpoint of *Belshazzar's Feast* (1820) as 'a perspective of feeling';⁵ a disturbance in sensory awareness is indeed central to what his art conveys, a sense of the imagery of experience at its limit. This is a clue to the controversies around his reputation. The bracing quality of the sublime, implying a degree of distance and detachment whereby the awesome and the terrifying can be properly interior responses, qualities of self rather than primarily of the senses, is here threatened by 'excessive' sensory involvement and an engagement of the self in the theatricality of the spectacle. As Julie Milne puts it, his work 'unsettles our sense of cultural value, blurring distinctions between the trite and the esteemed, the authentic and the artificial',⁶ in effect questioning the notion of 'good taste' as already established in official aesthetics, and refusing any clear distinction between 'fine art' and popular culture. He implicitly suggested the impossibility of separating art from that wider nineteenth-century world of popular spectacle and entertainment, the panoramas, dioramas and other innovations of the visual technology of the time.⁷

However, the contemporary revival of interest reminds us that, in a sense, he never really went away, for his work has been a significant influence on that most original and potent of twentieth-century cultural forms: film. Right from the start, film directors, set designers and 'special effects' innovators were drawn to him. D. W. Griffith acknowledged the importance of *Belshazzar's Feast* as the model for the set for Babylon in his film of a century later, *Intolerance* (1916), and so on up to Ray Harryhausen, George Lucas and Peter Jackson; recent films like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009) feature panoramic landscapes undergoing cataclysmic destruction in a way that rivals – but hardly exceeds – the Martin originals. Yet of course it remains true that Martin's works are *paintings*, hanging on a wall, in frames. The differences, as well as the similarities, are significant. So now it is appropriate to pursue the sublime further, into the experience of film itself.

The cinematic sublime

From Benjamin's parallel between surgery and the cutting involved in making film, to the 'director's cut', we have found that 'cutting' appears to have both practical significance and a symbolic dimension, and we can now take this further. Cutting is the incision in the real that separates the image *from* the real, liberates it into meaning, while ensuring, through that very act, that it necessarily remains imbricated with the real. Kracauer's essay 'The Mass Ornament', on dance troupes like the Tiller Girls, argues that it is not really bodies that are the component parts of the display, but 'arms, thighs, and other segments', and there is an implicit violence in the language here, a visceral language of cutting, in the 'ripping open' and 'dissecting' of organic unities.⁸ While not explicitly referring to the filmic practice of montage, it is difficult not to be reminded of the way sections of film are cut up, spliced together, and reassembled to form the 'composition'. Here, 'cutting' in film takes its place in a culture in which such violence – both symbolic and practical – can have other dimensions.⁹

For an intriguing further twist in the argument, we can turn to Derrida. Beginning a discussion of the notion of the sublime in Kant, he points out that *taille*, usually translated into English as 'size', has a near-obsolete second meaning in French: '*taille* marked the line of a cut ... all the incisions which ... delimit a contour, a form or a quantity ...'¹⁰ To mark this, the translators of Derrida use the obsolete 'cise' instead of 'size', with its suggestion of cutting (incision).¹¹ The implication is that whereas cutting can involve shaping, the

imposition of form, the sublime must lie beyond this: it 'exceeds cise and good measure, it is no longer proportioned according to man and his determinations', as Derrida puts it. Following Kant quite closely, he suggests that the idea of the sublime can only be aroused by 'the spectacle of a nature ... which no limit can border, finish, or define in its cise',¹² implying a sense in which the sublime depends on the notion of the cut for its very possibility.¹³

If we draw the two dimensions of 'cise' together, we can say that the cut has the effect of making something manageable, 'to scale'. And the sublime has a necessary reference to scale. In this sense, the 'cinematic experience', positioning the spectator in relation to a large screen, already suggests that cinema may be potentially sublime in a way not possible for other media: a film reproduced on television, as a small object in a domestic space, loses much of any sublime effect it may have had. In the light of this, the relation between 'cinema', as experience, and 'film', as the screen and its content, needs further consideration.

It is within the relationship between the camera, the eye and the I – between technology and the embodied subject – that the sense of cinematic space is constructed, in turn enabling the flow of the film, the sense of movement in time, to unfold. Cinematic space extends behind the screen, as if the latter is a window or opening, just as it extends in front, towards and through the audience, thereby giving the breadth and depth fundamental to our experience of the film. For this to be possible, there has to be a fluctuating relationship, a tension, between the two-dimensional image and the three-dimensional depth and breadth that position us in a distance *from* the screen but also *in* the world of experience that the very gap opens up, a space of fissure. Thus Richard Maltby suggests that the 'curious status' of cinematic space, torn between these two dimensions, neither one nor the other, ensures that our attention to the screen is 'a play of looks *at*, *into*, and *through* the screen space; it fluctuates in its intensity, direction, and point of resolution.'¹⁴ Cinematic space thereby becomes a place both familiar and strange, somewhere we inhabit, belong in, somewhere continuous with, but not reducible to, the space of everyday life. It is a zone where everyday life – including daydream and fantasy – can be experienced through the embodied imagination in the mode of distraction, in a relatively relaxed and experimental way. This incorporates distraction (involving attention, perception) and dispersion (identities as 'mass', as other), the latter hinted at in Claire Colebrook's formulation, following Deleuze, that 'What makes cinema *cinematic* is this liberation of the sequencing of images from any single observer',¹⁵ implying a 'pluralism' of the 'cinematic subject', shifting within various viewpoints. And of course camera technique – close-ups,

long shots, the use of telephoto and wide-angle lenses – affects this, giving a fluctuating awareness of proximity and distance, possible spatial disorientation, and ‘atmosphere’. This experience, then, is as much one of simulation as representation, the experience of a mediated world.

In this context, we can return to cutting and framing, the shots and their conjunction as montage. With the photo, the traditional frame of a painting becomes ‘edge’, signifying an inherently arbitrary intervention into the ‘real’ that reminds us, in the violence of its gesture, in its cutting into and out of the world, of the insistent presence of that world, of the fact that what lies to the side of the photo, around it, remains ‘there’ even in its crudely enforced absence. So this ‘framing’ of the photo is always potentially dynamic, as if the ‘motion picture’ is already implicit (implicated) in the photo (just as it can always return to it: the film still as still photo). Film enforces this movement of the frame itself, using tracking shots, cuts and fades to incorporate an ever-active relation to the absence beyond, an ‘absence beyond’ that becomes the dynamic source of the cinematic experience, a constant or potential source of the shock that both Benjamin and Deleuze, in their different ways, see as inherent in film technique and its effect. If the photo appears to ‘fix’ the real, partly by being fixed to, or in, the real, film relativizes or reinvents the real. Implicit in this, as cinematic experience, is the way the ‘time of watching’ is incorporated into the image, expressing duration, and incorporating moving fields of perception. This ‘time effect’ is disjunctive – the spectator’s sense of passing time, of duration, is not identical with time as it develops in the film, as diegesis, and hence contributes to the shock/distraction dynamic. As an approximation, then, we can say that the ‘beyond’ of cutting, framing, the cise – what it makes possible but does not in itself constitute – is this sense of the cinematic experience as it incorporates a transformed sense of space, time, and – perhaps the most fundamental innovation – movement itself. And this is an essential clue to the cinematic sublime.

Here we can begin to draw on the work of Deleuze. His suggestion that ‘montage itself constantly adapts the transformations of movements in the material universe to the interval of movement in the eye of the camera’¹⁶ both reveals the ambitious scope of his philosophy of film and – whatever these wider possibilities – certainly seems appropriate for thinking the relation between the mobile camera and the technology-inflected aspect of movement that has become so central to the modern experience of movement as such, both in its repetitive patterns and its unpredictable outcomes. Nor is the audience’s own involvement with movement ever purely visual: it is always embodied,

responsive. Movement is not just about film or the world being filmed; it also resonates in the subject, in mind and feeling. For Deleuze, it is this apparently independent power of movement communicated in film that is central to its role in the circuit of sensation: 'It is only when movement becomes automatic that the artistic essence of the image is realised: producing a shock to thought, communicating vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly.'¹⁷ Whether this indeed realizes the 'essence' of the image may need further consideration; for now it can at least be observed that this formulation – intriguingly reminiscent of earlier, nineteenth-century ones – seems to have some resonance in Kant's own thought. Claiming that the sublime involves 'a *movement* of the mind' rather than '*calm* contemplation',¹⁸ Kant elaborates this by suggesting that there must initially be 'a vibration ... a rapidly alternating repulsion from and attraction to one and the same object'.¹⁹ Clearly this movement, this 'vibration', is physical as much as mental, 'vibration' being a characteristic figure for sensation and its effects, from as long ago as Hume.²⁰

It is significant that while, for Kant, there is supposed to be a process here, from displeasure to pleasure – as the imagination's sense of its own inadequacy gives way to the realization that reason can transcend these limits – the specific use of 'vibration' here seems to imply an oscillation in which *both* are present, an oscillation that is perhaps irresolvable. In swinging between attraction and repulsion, feelings negative and positive, we seem to encounter the pattern, the dynamic, of excitement itself, and sensation as the embodiment of this. In this sense, the sublime *in* sensation is what forces us *beyond* sensation, without specifying anything about the 'beyond'; but that very fact might suggest to us that imaginative 'reflection' is inherent to it, reflection as the attempt to think and hence 'image' the reflexive gap itself, as it opens up in and beyond the subject, in the very attempt to grasp it. The very act of reflecting on itself has to be from a 'beyond' that it cannot simultaneously occupy, and that enforces *figuration*, an inevitable projection into – or incorporation of – 'nature': generally, nature as external, but in principle nature 'within' as well, hence figuring 'mental' processes as vibrations, nerves, shocks, using them as raw material for imaginative transformation. Deleuze, too, seems aware of the gap that opens up here, just as he is also aware of the possibility of figuration, suggesting that 'the shock is the very form of communication of movement in images'.²¹ It is feeling or emotion that appears in this interstice or gap, *as* the experience of the gap, which is then filled by an image.²² Indeed, 'the whole becomes the power of the outside which passes into the interstice'.²³ The 'cinematic subject' can thus be seen as positioned both *within* cinematic space yet *outside* the film, so that the

outside is immanent in the very relation between the two, in the gaps or interstices of the subject and/or as the cuts or interstices of the film, the 'beyond' that is also 'inside'. And this 'beyond' suggests a sense in which the cinematic sublime is a central feature of the cinema experience, not just a facet of film and a reaction to its content.

If this involvement with movement is one defining attribute of the cinematic experience, then this in turn is refracted in cinematic space through a double tension. Movement can engage directly with the sense of depth, draw us in, and impact on us, in what can certainly include a physical reaction. But movement can also be transverse, across the screen, as if to emphasize the tension between two- and three-dimensional: movement as panoramic, like the view from a train window. And of course the camera can move between the two, slowly or rapidly, within the same shot, techniques which engage the audience at various levels of involvement and detachment, shock and defence. No more than in everyday life can 'movement' be seen as an integrated, linear process of uniform development, even though *ideologically* this emphasis on subsuming movement into a coherent narrative flow, an unfolding, organic 'whole' – subordinating movement *in* the film to movement *of* the film – serves as a powerful constituent of the more conservative film production strategies. But the second tension can be mapped on to this. If the depth perspective opens us more to the shocks of the cinematic experience, the breadth perspective encourages a more reflective, detached view, more sensitive to compositional features and the framework of interpretation. This is, after all, encapsulated in the film 'still': even if it portrays a moment of depth, it is portrayed as stasis, as breadth, encouraging this more reflective, analytical mode. In using the method of montage to suggest the idea of flow, of movement in time, then, the camera operates as a transformer in yet another sense. It is sensation, force, impact, shock; but it is also image, composition, meaning. And just as there is no way one dimension can be reduced to the other, so any approach to the cinematic sublime must encompass both.²⁴

The filmic sublime

Here, as we turn towards a more explicit focus on the sublime in relation to film *content*, we can turn draw more directly on Kant, invoking a celebrated passage from the conclusion to the second *Critique*: 'Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.*' I

connect them immediately, Kant adds, with the ‘consciousness of my existence,’ the first referring to ‘the external world of sense’ I occupy in a relation of ‘unbounded magnitude with worlds upon worlds ...’, and the second beginning from ‘my invisible self,’ presenting me with a world of ‘true infinity,’ one not merely contingent but ‘universal and necessary.’²⁵ He even uses the phrase ‘sublimity of the object,’ apparently referring to both dimensions.²⁶ One can say that, for Kant, the unified subject cannot but complement the world as totality, both being revelations of the law of reason in its legislative self-sufficiency. If the more sustained discussion of the third *Critique* crucially couples this with a thesis about the limitations of the imagination in grasping the sublime, this coexists with an awareness of the oddly empowering form this limitation nonetheless takes, as has been suggested above. Deleuze offers a succinct summary: the imagination ‘goes beyond its own limit itself,’ albeit negatively, ‘by representing to itself the inaccessibility of the rational Idea, and by making this very inaccessibility something which is present in sensible nature.’²⁷ And if there are problems here – if there is a reflexive gap, a disjunction or discontinuity – then what we cannot attain is also within: problems with infinity and totality, mapped into the immensity, the limitlessness, of nature, will parallel those with person and self, mapped into the immensity, the depth, of mind. There can be no real closure here; the gaps, the interstices, of film do indeed map the gaps, the interstices in the Kantian system of the sublime – which are inseparably linked to its insights.

The sublime, then, surges up through the gaps, around the edges, as the disturbing presence of the beyond within the content, the images, of the film as it is in turn mapped into the cinematic experience of the spectator. Here, Kant’s distinction between the mathematical sublime and the dynamical sublime, drawn on by Deleuze, can come into play. It is captured succinctly by Deleuze: ‘The feeling of the sublime is experienced when faced with the formless or the deformed (immensity or power).’²⁸ The mathematical sublime is the ‘absolutely great,’ incorporating the idea of boundless extension in space and time, endless horizons, the infinite in extent, seriality and repetition; ultimately, the threat it poses is that of dissolution into the infinite. The dynamical sublime is an ‘object of fear,’ but considered from a position of safety, and it allows us to ‘discover within ourselves a capacity for resistance’;²⁹ hence it incorporates ideas of force, impact, power and the ultimate threat is that of annihilation by superior force.

One arena of comparison, to bring out this contrast, would be technology. In the dynamical sublime, automata seem potentially animate, a threat to the power of the human, hence disturbing for that reason; in the mathematical

sublime, it is rather that the human, as animate, is threatened by the possibility of reduction to the status of automata, losing individuality and independence. The contrast is between the machine as organic, and the organic as machine. In the mathematical sublime, interaction between human and machine becomes repetitive, mechanical, geometrical. Deleuze draws examples of this from the classic French school (Abel Gance, Jean Epstein, Jean Renoir),³⁰ but we are also reminded of the dance troupes already alluded to. Thus Kracauer alludes to the dancers as 'no longer individual girls, but indissoluble girl clusters whose movements are demonstrations of mathematics,' hence functional, interchangeable.³¹ But one might instance, in particular, the scene from *Gold Diggers of 1933*, choreographed by Busby Berkeley, when the girls dance in the dark, photographed from above, so they themselves become invisible, and what we see are the vivid, changing patterns of the lights they carry. The lines and circles of these patterns could, in principle, be endlessly extended. This is also, of course, the realm that can produce the large-scale military and gymnastic displays put on by regimes like those in China and North Korea. All of these can figure the spectacle in its spatial extension and unboundedness, its suggestion of a combination of drama and immensity as carrier of the sublime in the age of the mass and media technology.

This can, in turn, remind us of the dual perception of the mass, positioning it relative to the two sublimities: as homogeneous, whether atomized, diffused or patterned repetitively to infinity; and as surging, unruly, unbounded, defying its own limits – in short, as 'monstrous'. Now, it is intriguing that Kant himself, in a brief reference to the monstrous, positions it in the *mathematical* sublime. He writes: 'An object is *monstrous* if by its magnitude it annihilates the end which its concept constitutes.'³² In context, Kant has just observed that known objects, in their normal state, whether animals or artefacts, cannot be sublime; so the claim seems to be that the 'excess' of the monstrous, while it might be *suggested* by something huge in size, is fundamentally a matter of excess in relation to our *categories*. So if the monstrous object defies classification, defies 'cise', it must do so in a way that nevertheless involves the latter: it must be in some respect *deformed*. And here we can enter a caveat about the characterization of this (in Kant and Deleuze) in terms of 'formlessness'. Strictly speaking, form calls into play notions of size and shape, of foreground and background, and, in particular, of figure against background. To be totally 'without form' would be to disappear into background, into infinite undifferentiation. So the monstrous is indeed *de-formed*: it makes sense only as transgression of form, not lack of it, although that transgression can include *relative* lack, and a *process* of emergence

of the de-formed out of the background, as the object with obscure boundaries. The monstrous can be sharply outlined, but also relatively shapeless, the clarity of the line always semi-dissolved, whether expanding or contracting, as endless movement, invading space. All this is the stuff of the monstrous, in Hollywood and popular culture generally: the Thing, the Blob, the creature from the infinite depths, or the pit, the beast from hell ... And 'lurking' here, in the depths of the Western cultural tradition, is the body itself, as threat, as the danger of the undisciplined: the body as always excessive to itself, fat, grotesque, yet potentially *tempting*, as a route to self-expression, defying the slim body, the body beautiful.³³ How appropriate, then, that the monstrous should trouble the boundaries of Kant's own classification ...

Could the Kantian sublime also be troubled by another category, that of the abject? While displeasure or pain is supposed to lead to pleasure, we have noted the uncertainty in Kant's formulation, the positive and negative appearing to 'vibrate' together, suggesting the possibility of irresolution. Trapped here, the subject could find the experience of the sublime inseparable from that of the abject. A stage in the emergence of the sublime is the abjection of the human subject before the grandeur or power of nature; but since the 'reason' that is thus projected into nature is itself in some sense either beyond the embodied self or mapped into it (as 'superego' perhaps), the potential for abjection remains present. If the subject can reach for the sublime, it can also be barred from it, abject in its inadequacy, the 'other' now embodying this alienated power. If in turn it becomes flooded by this other, its boundaries overwhelmed, it becomes truly abject. And where there is apparently irresolvable suffering, there is always the potential for the sentimental. Where the sublime purports to transcend time, the sentimental is embedded in it (nostalgia); and where the sublime attempts to maintain the integrity of the self by subjecting the body to the demands of reason, the sentimental subverts this distancing, this control, in the name of the body itself, wallowing in abject embodiment. The abject, hinted at in the sentimental, is perhaps the bathetic 'other face' of the sublime, subverting, even ridiculing, its pretensions.³⁴ For a dramatic example of the convergences that are possible here, we can instance the famous scene in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Eliza flees to freedom carrying her infant across the jagged ice of the frozen river. Noting that the scene has frequently been depicted in film and popular representation generally, Lauren Berlant suggests it makes the spectator 'merge awe at the woman's power in the face of the danger she endures for freedom, love, and family with the techno-aesthetic of an entertainment medium to reframe the real, to generate

surplus pleasure and surplus pain at the spectacle of the sublime object of sentimentality'.³⁵

When we incorporate this whole dimension of technology and mediated mass culture into the analysis, we can say that the sublime is the world experienced as 'special effects', combining the attributes of magnitude, immensity and power as a particularly dramatic and focused instance of spectacle, one that draws attention to the way technology itself – nature beyond nature, as prosthesis, instrumentality for its own self-transformation – can itself produce effects that are out of all proportion to itself, just as nature sublime is nature beyond all proportion. Special effects, suggests Sean Cubitt, enable us to 'marvel at the capabilities of the medium itself, throwing before the audience the specificity of the medium as well as a terminal form of illusion that succeeds by exceeding the apparent limits of the medium'. Such effects must be 'cutting edge' if they are to be sensational and spectacular. In this way, appearing to transcend its own status as media technology in the intensity that results, the special effect nonetheless 'circumscribes its own sublimity, identifying the boundary of communication with the technical limits of mediation'.³⁶

All this invites us to ask more precisely about the relation of the sensational to this spectacle of the sublime. We might say that the mathematical sublime is crucial for the spectacularization of sensation, and the dynamical sublime for the sensationalizing of spectacle. This suggests the fundamental convergence here, albeit a convergence in difference, in different registers or aspects of the real. As infinite dispersion or distraction, spectacle tends towards the sublime in its mathematical mode; as concentration, or enforcing concentration, the sublime tends towards the dynamical mode, a sensationalism that intensifies the power of spectacle.

In one way, as spectacle, special effects can be said to freeze time, not because the time of duration cannot be incorporated into spectacle, but because *grasping* spectacle as object, as a whole, takes it out of time, just as it is actually *experienced* by the subject in time. Expressing the tension of this sense of totality as incorporating the subject that reflects on it, the sublime presents challenges of belonging, of identification and of power, in the context of the reflexive gap that constitutes its very possibility. If, in general, the sublime is a refracted and rarefied projection of our sense of everyday experience as it presents itself to us as encompassing us, stretching beyond us in space and time, and at times impacting on us, as shock, in ways that can seem threatening, we can now see how cinema can be its appropriate vehicle. Cinema positions us in a space that incorporates a relation between us and a screen such that this congruent world,

involving depth, sensory immersion and visual spectacle, acts as a perspective on the everyday world, a place from which this world appears as other in itself, as 'real' yet only as one world among possible others. Like fiction, cinema is a parallel mode of experiencing and appropriating life *as real*, constituting it as such, and in cinema this is made vivid and distinctive through the disjunctions and juxtapositions on a screen whose 'edge' functions as *absence* of frame, identifying the sense of depth and spectacle. This sharp edge, parallel to the very different 'edge' around our visual gaze, with its qualities as penumbra, similarly enforces the presence of the *outside*, the beyond, letting the outside in, permitting focus, while hinting at the way in which everyday experience itself tests the frame, beyond 'cise'.

Sensation and spectacle

Sensation has always been difficult to 'place'. The scientific language of sensation, a language of forces, causes and effects, of organism or electricity, suggests a firm location in nature; the language of nerves and 'nervousness', frequently overlapping with the former, suggests a psychology of mind; and the media sense of sensation, albeit still suggesting impacts and effects on mind and body, seems to locate it in culture. Part of the place occupied by sensation, though, is its claim to *reality*, however paradoxical this may now seem, with sensation, as part of media culture, frequently denounced for exaggeration and fakery. It exists in its effects: if it is seen or experienced as sensational, it *is* sensational. A sensation is what passes as a sensation, no more and no less. Although it is true that the *embodied* aspect of sensation can in principle be faked, the general point remains: if I feel a sensation, then that is conclusive, whether or not there is something 'there' a scientist would recognize. One could perhaps say, then, that we have reached a point where Baudrillard's language of simulation becomes appropriate.³⁷ Sensation addresses the aspect of sensory experience in the age of spectacle, experience as self-constituting, self-sufficient in its impact, whatever its source. Sensation in this sense is not sensation as culture *rather than* nature or mind; it is what *interrogates* these pigeonholes, questions the very classifications through which it has been appropriated. And spectacle corresponds to the mediated, representational aspects of experience, positioning subject and object, reproducing the gap, the distance, within which sensation can occur as the force or charge that flashes in the gap, both bridging it while yet maintaining it, *in* its distance. A suggestion by the painter Fernand Léger,

writing in 1924, seems appropriate here: he presents 'the shock of the surprise effect' as 'the origin of the modern spectacle'.³⁸

In this world, visual technology and its consequences, mass reproduction, and 'the masses,' never encounter each other as abstractions because they are all alike constructed as and through material practices, continuities and disjunctions, shocks and flows. This is the world as plethora, with spectacle as its visual mode, the mode of its appearance. Spectacle is 'that which distracts,' the totality of distractions, the totality *as* distraction, corresponding to infinite dispersion. In this sense, there is no grand 'spectacle of spectacles,' only the endless disjunction of spectacles, calling for our attention, whether or to whatever extent they actually get it. 'To say that the world is conceived as a series of spectacles is to say that it is treated as something to be attended to,' as Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst put it.³⁹ When sensationalized, this does indeed become the spectacle to which we *have* to pay attention, spectacle concentrated. And if film draws all this together in a particularly vivid fashion, it is not of course unique.

Douglas Kellner suggests that 'the society and culture of spectacle is creating a new kind of information-entertainment society'.⁴⁰ This is by no means totally new: the eighteenth-century spectacle of sympathy,⁴¹ revealing a vicarious interest in the plight of the other, coupled with the aspiration to relieve it, was balanced on an unstable terrain between a detached, scientific interest in learning about the nature of suffering, on the one hand, and the risk that a voyeuristic *pleasure* could be derived from the spectacle of the other's pain, on the other. And just as the nineteenth century saw the impact of the news media, the innovations of photography, and the diffusion of 'special effects' in the theatre, so the conjunction of these in the modern media spectacle reveals continuing overlap and convergence with the cultural experience of sensation, from its eighteenth century origins up to the later cult – and culture – of the 'sensational,' to the point where they become difficult to disentangle. Nevertheless, the 'spectacular' in the sensational does add a distinctive emphasis, and this is worth exploring.

A spectacle could be defined as something that appears as display before a subject. 'Display' seems to come from the Anglo-French *despleier*, with an associated medical meaning of 'disperse'. To 'display' could then be taken to mean 'unfold-as-dispersal': a display is an unfolding that is not determined in its origin. That such display incorporates a visual dimension is brought out in Steve Neale's characterization of spectacle as exhibiting a concern 'to *display* the visibility of the visual'.⁴² But it is not reducible to this. Describing panoramas and dioramas in late nineteenth-century Paris, Vanessa Schwartz suggests that what

we find here is that 'to capture "life", a display had to reproduce it, not simply represent it. The display had to fit motion and the entire bodily experience of its viewers into the spectacle.' Spectacle should be sufficiently distracting to catch the attention, as a fully embodied power of focusing, and sufficiently startling, detailed or diverse to hold it – at least for a while. What was 'modern', then, was the idea that 'the everyday could be transformed into the spectacular and the sensational'.⁴³ Discussing the popular wax museum, which claimed to be a *journal plastique*, a 'living newspaper', she points to the 'intertextuality' here, the assumption of a public already familiar with newspaper stories. Rather than simply representing reality, the *Musée Grévin* was 'a representation of a representation of reality: it had the reality of a newspaper, which most people enjoyed as reality', showing that 'reproduction was inscribed in layers of representation'.⁴⁴ In turn, Tom Brown argues that in the film *Gone With the Wind*, the relationship of Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) to the spectacle that surrounds her 'vivifies or "naturalizes" her relationship to her world'.⁴⁵ This confirms that display is not 'mere' display, as it were: it emphasizes figuration as 'realization', as a making-real that simultaneously constitutes it in a possible relationship with a viewer.

The element of theatricality that is apparent here can be further brought out by this definition of spectacle given by Thomas Richards, working within a broadly Marxist framework: 'a state of signification in which much of society becomes a theatre for the fictions it has created for its commodities'.⁴⁶ Objects 'come to life' as commodities through the spectacle, a vivid emplacement of our experience of the world as a world of commodities that is explored in Benjamin's own texts, and which is, in turn, vividly exhibited in the profuse illustrations in Susan Buck-Morss's book on Benjamin, including a concluding section, 'Afterimages'⁴⁷ – the whole point being that these are also *not* 'illustrations'; rather, they embody, 'realise', Benjamin's own descriptions, peopling the world of spectacle with the commodities that variously entice, seduce or repel us, in all their multiplicity. We might also note that its claim to be *noticed*, in its autonomy, emerging against its context, claiming our attention, reveals *excess* to be a central feature of spectacle. This excess can include various dimensions: there is excess of detail (the miniaturization of space), excess as expanse (space as horizon), and excess of movement (action as speed), just as these can be combined in excess as distortion, exaggeration.⁴⁸ Spectacle 'invested the quotidian with the panache of the extraordinary', as Richards puts it.⁴⁹

Schwartz suggests that, increasingly, 'the cultural context for using the term reality was one in which life itself was framed – in which events were experienced as what could be represented'.⁵⁰ This brings to a head an intriguing

tension running through all this: 'framing' is an active process, an intervention, involving 'cutting', as we have seen; yet, as spectacle, the world 'presents itself' to us, before us. 'We' seem to slide from active to passive here. This is not just the different positions of director, producer and artist, on the one hand, and audience, as spectator, on the other. How is it that the world can present itself both as *ready* for framing, but also as *already* framed? As has been hinted at, in Schwartz's account, we live in a culture in which we are used to the world being ever-available for photographic and filmic appropriation and reproduction, one that already *has been* represented and experienced in these terms, that addresses us in these terms. We can do this because, as display, this world of (and as) representation differs from itself, unfolds itself, by virtue of the irreducibly arbitrary aspect of the cutting that separates it in the very act of representing it, the interventionist approach of the camera that necessarily fragments and recombines even as it records and thereby reproduces the real in its difference, concentrated into spectacle, only ever precariously integrated. The spectacle is thus the world as it presents itself as, inseparably, artefact and artifice.

Thus positioned as 'artwork', spectacle implies a distinctive angle on the familiar problem of whether 'meaning' is a function of the artist's intention or the audience's interpretation, a dilemma rejected in Jacques Rancière's formulation: 'There is the distance between artist and spectator, but there is also the distance inherent in the performance itself, insofar as it subsists, as a spectacle, an autonomous thing, between the idea of the artist and the sensation or comprehension of the spectator.'⁵¹ This seems appropriate, with a reservation over the term 'autonomy' here. The spectacle incorporates dispersal through the cutting that is central to its mode of presenting space and time, through movement and action, just as its own ever-threatened dispersal back into the nothingness of its own background is precariously kept at bay through the mechanisms of concentration spectacle itself pioneered – its 'technology' in the broadest sense, the means whereby it displays itself and thereby distracts its audience.

Let us push this further. Suppose that in some sense the whole world had become a spectacle. This is the thesis that is developed in its most cogent and influential form in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). 'Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation', and since '... reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real' we can no longer appeal to a reality outside or beyond it. Since our experience can only be expressed through the spectacle, it becomes alien to us: '... the spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.'⁵² What we contemplate

in spectacle is life detached from truth, and what we experience is the suffering that is precisely this. Here is the concentrated core of an argument that is already highly concentrated:

The origin of the spectacle is the loss of the unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss: the abstraction of all specific labor and the general abstraction of the entirety of production are perfectly translated in the spectacle, whose *mode of being concrete* is precisely abstraction. In the spectacle, one part of the world *represents itself* before the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is nothing more than the common language of this separation ... The spectacle reunites the separate, but reunites it *as separate*.⁵³

In its way, this is a vivid summation of a whole tradition of Western thought: the original fall from Eden, whether seen in Christian or Hegelian–Marxist terms; and Plato’s picture of the resulting entrapment in a cave of shadows playing on the wall, a mystified reality. What is missing here is the usual hope of redemption or resolution, a vision of utopia as return to a transfigured origin. This is implicit in Debord, but notoriously what appears as the all-encompassing determinism of his analysis makes it difficult to leave any opening for it.⁵⁴ But let us dig deeper.

The mode of realization of spectacle, we are told, is through abstraction. The notion of ‘abstraction’ here is derived from the labour theory of value, whereby the individual forms of concrete labour lose their individual content or meaning through the transformation imposed by the logic of the market. Yet, we learn at the very beginning that modern life ‘announces itself as an enormous accumulation of *spectacles*’,⁵⁵ and the analysis frequently emphasizes the diversity and plurality here. How is the uniformity of ‘abstraction’ to be mapped onto this? The abstraction of the spectacle, *as concrete*, is manifested in its rendering of particulars as purely arbitrary, contingent, and interchangeable. The spectacle ‘represents itself’ as the endlessly empty sign, empty in the infinite possibility of its meaning, its content, available to be anything for anyone, and therefore nothing. Objects become random signifiers, unrelated to any real or particular need or purpose, and linked to consumers via the equally random working of fashions and trends, which in turn trigger *desire*; and since such desire is as transient as anything else, it moves quickly to new objects. Every product promises ‘a dazzling shortcut to the promised land’, but once brought home ‘it reveals its essential poverty’. The object has lost the aura of the real, now existing only as a projection of the self, image of a desire that can never find satisfaction

in it. Desire reads reality as appearance, seeking to possess it as image, and this dynamic of possessing and appearing reproduces the desiring subject as subject to fashion and to transient reputation, reproducing itself narcissistically through an ever-slipping, ever-inadequate self-image. Indeed, what Debord writes of commodities would seem to apply also to those who consume them: 'Every given commodity fights for itself, cannot acknowledge the others, and attempts to impose itself everywhere ...' Thus consumerism 'liberates unlimited artificiality, in the face of which living desire is disarmed'.⁵⁶ Looked at in this light, Debord's critique may remind us, however distantly, of an earlier critic of market society: Rousseau.⁵⁷

The relation between abstract and concrete thus seems to imply a dispersion of 'Spectacle' into spectacles, in some tension with Debord's own drive to a concentrated, totalizing analysis; yet this tension is also present in the *content* of his argument, for he suggests that spectacle exists in two forms: concentrated and diffused. The former involves centralization and bureaucracy, and is ultimately liable to culminate in the figure of the dictator, intriguingly characterized as the 'absolute celebrity', whereas the latter involves the free play of the market, in which the consumer can nonetheless 'directly touch only a succession of fragments of this commodity happiness'.⁵⁸ Glossing the latter, Abercrombie and Longhurst suggest that spectacle is 'all around and fragmented, diffused throughout and infused into everyday life – just like the diffused audience',⁵⁹ and Kellner's case studies emphasize the 'plurality and heterogeneity of contending spectacles'.⁶⁰ Conversely, the concentration pole indicates the potential for the projection of 'mass identity' on to the 'mass celebrity', as a function of mass mobilization and its manipulation. Debord's later views, suggesting a certain convergence between these two forms,⁶¹ could be developed to suggest that the 'absolute' celebrity may merely become the omnipresent mass-produced one, providing the potential for moments of fashion-driven identification that coexist readily enough, as moments of concentration, with their dissolution into new ones, all in an overall context of diffusion and distraction, sensation and spectacle, just as the power of the dictator is transformed into a competing field of tension between the concentrating impetus of bureaucratic surveillance and its own antithesis in rival institutions and individual strategies of counter-surveillance.

We can move towards a conclusion by recalling that the notion of spectacle in relation to dispersion or unfolding implies *process*. To consider the implications of this, let us take two examples, both continuing the political emphasis. From within the 2003 Gulf War, the reporter Sarah Boxer wrote that 'with the

war rolling ahead on television, you the viewer are made a part of the invading army', and 'Meanwhile, just as the audience feels part of the army, the army becomes part of the audience. American troops on an aircraft carrier watch CNN to see how the war is playing and progressing. Soldiers are watching other soldiers on television.' Hence, she adds, there is 'general confusion as to who is acting and who is watching'. She asks: 'Are the television cameras witness to war, or are they part of the weaponry?'⁶² Before commenting, let us take the second example, from the fall of Communism in the Eastern Bloc in 1989. Jean Seaton refers to the television images of cars streaming out of East Germany, with the authorities no longer making any effort to stop them: 'The sudden, shared vision of possibility altered people's lives, brought down a regime, and changed the world. It was composed out of a classic media process: a loop showing the audience its own behaviour.' She adds that such images foster 'allegiance through sentiment and identification'.⁶³

One could say that the moment of spectacle itself, the moment of its appropriation *as* spectacle, undoubtedly does pose a clear distinction between the performance, or what is happening on the screen, and the audience, but when one sees this as a moment in a *process*, a rather different picture emerges. Then, the distinction between passive viewing and action becomes blurred: viewing has consequences. This can get lost if the term 'spectacle' is restricted to a narrow sense, as the moment of passive appropriation, one that positions subject and object in a relation to each other of timeless abstraction. If 'spectacle' is taken to include the moment of subject-object distance, but also to characterize the process as such, the unfolding that necessarily incorporates the moment of reflexive difference, we can make sense of these examples. If spectacle incorporates this irreducible reflexive element, we can see that, *pace* Boxer, it is not *necessarily* the case that the viewer is made 'part of the invading army': the war produced plenty of opposition, demonstrations and controversy; many recoiled from and felt alienated by the unfolding spectacle of events, and were not necessarily 'immobilised'. Then again, Seaton's 'sentiment and identification' can play strange games, inhabiting the reflexive gap in ways that are necessarily unpredictable. Indeed, rather than 'identification', it may be a sense of 'belonging with', of shared *participation*, that is crucial here – Kant's 'enthusiasm' again. A structural approach, incorporating feeling, reflexive awareness, and the possibility of judgement, can incorporate the possibility of critique as immanent rather than closing it off altogether or making it impossible to account for its occurrence. But in an age when the spectacle has become ever more sensational, problems still loom ...