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Different Faces of the Spectacle

I. Framework of the Spectacle

Analyzing how the media, advertisements, and popular shows represent the real, an American writer and columnist Raymond Federman was clearly irritated. We are faced with a parade of parties which try to draw our attention, but they do not say a word about the surrounding world. Lengthy TV series, which dominate TV and show business, deserve to be called rubbish, and TV docudramas are worth not much more. They more cover up than discover reality.

Consequently, in this chaotic gallop and motley mixture of images and stories, “the real subsides without a trace”, and the audience is totally confused. As a result:

“the derealizing flux of media images runs away with our powers of discernment, our conscience, our lives, and of course our writing. It forces us to surrender to what can only be called, in a strict sense, the fabulous and seductive grasp of spectacle. It bars us from a simplified representation of the real. It educates us in the dazed distrust of what is there in front of our eyes – those eyes that have been overfed with icons. But despite our embittered submission to the charm of these icons, despite our willing servitude to the spectacle, we know very well that it is all false, that it is nothing but a theater of shadows that exhausts our sense of the real in its emptiness, and teaches us nothing, nothing but a mythology custom-made for a new breed of savages” (Federman).

Publishing the manifesto “The Real Begins Where the Spectacle Ends” in the last decade of the twentieth century, in the tone of critical lament, Federman continued the analysis and diagnosis of such prophets of postmodernity as Marshall McLuhan or Jean Baudrillard. This group should be expanded by the French writer, film maker and philosopher, Guy Debord, who in the 1960s introduced the suggestive idea of “the society of the spectacle”. It is worth analyzing this formula at least to see if it is no longer up to date or, perhaps, if it is even stronger nowadays.

The key point is to understand the idea of the spectacle. “All that once was directly lived has become mere representation”. The spectacle has become “a concrete inversion of life” and “autonomous movement of non-life” (Debord 12). The essence of the modern and postmodern spectacle was characteristic of the flux of images, their automation, simulation and covering the real, combined with social affirmation, and their wide acknowledgement as a contemporary lifestyle.

This was the reflection of the disputable or completely negative influence of the spectacle. Mistrustful critics demonstrated that an epoch which concentrates solely on showing and exposing kills authentic minds. It delights in repetitive clichés and imitations, which maintain its self-satisfaction, but also tear it away from problems that contradict tasteful and idealized images and need urgent intervention.

Despite the naïve and utopian assumption that direct experience of the real is a desirable and effective alternative for the flux of images and theatricalization of human relationships and social practices, Debord's critique is also to the point. It indicated the roles of the spectacle in contemporary conditions, multiplied, intensified, and altered in terms of quality and functions. Being at once a liberating and ludic alternative for the economy of labour and exploitation, utilitarianism, rational calculation, self-interest, and the struggle for survival, with time the spectacle blended in these practices and submitted to their rules. Retaining an evocative style, variability of forms, the power of attraction, and apparent independence, it has become an effective device in the media and advertisements, one which is used to regulate hegemonic and commercial social relations.

It turned out, then, that the energy of the spectacle is not exhausted, as superficial observations suggested, in the blinding invasion of ever-changing images and the exciting drama of shows. It does not burn in an intensive absorption of perception and arousal of short-term desires. Quantity radically becomes quantity. Further analyses demonstrated that modern and postmodern spectacular nature reflects, expresses, and promotes a totally separate type of civilisation and culture, which gradually become more and more global. For some – for Debord or Federman – such changes meant degeneration and the fall of authentic democracy and the humanities; for others – for example, fervent postmodernists – they were equal with a necessary and irreversible process resulting from the unlimited power of money and the open or secret commercialization of all relations and spheres of life.

It is worth mentioning some qualities of a spectacular nature. It reaches its climax striving to be an up-to-date, attractive, and dramatized presentation: to be studied “being”, being noticed, famous, admired, and fêted. By means of the media, both spectacular works and the things they present multiply their reflections and transfer them into interpersonal relationships. They create conditions favourable to fame and glory, and then to further advantages. Modern technology transforms such a presentation into a product and industrial feast, which are thoroughly commercialized by the market. But this is one side of the coin. Media and promotional presentations draw mass perception to figures, events, things, products, works, and places. They use them to create

a sovereign and complete quasi-reality, which, in turn, naturalizes, elevates, and confirms other, fragmentary presentations. Because of their interlocking, penetration, common character, and repetitions, they finally become the only, definite, and intransgressible reality. They draw a vast audience. Spectacles for the audience create and mould the audience for spectacles. In this sense the postmodern spectacular character has anthropological, social, and cultural consequences.

It leads to changes in and influences the nature of postmodern subjectivity. It causes its doubling (or even chaotic multiplication), decomposition, variance, and blur. It is divided into the spectacular, the public, the authoritative I of role and position – composed from cultural and social matter – and into the individual I for myself, woven with genes, corporeality and psyche.

The first, the public ego, is formed by suggestive, repetitive patterns of career and success. It is both devoted to the environment and subject to interiorization (openly or in secret). In a confrontation with a network of media and commercial norms and relations (whatever is written and said on this subject), the other ego becomes fragmentary, fruitless, unnecessary, irrelevant and accidental. In the society of the spectacle it is subject to constant marginalization: it becomes important only when it transforms into the up-to-date, public “I” for others and, consequently, when it accepts the conditions and demands of public presentation; in other words, it appears in a proper form and frame.

In a spectacle, as Debord pointed out, “the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him” (23). In a spectacle, by their sheer appearance and the connotation of “excellence”, idols, stars, celebrities visualize commonly affirmed values, the most important being becoming recognizable and famous. They personalize the success in a signal and spectacular way. Demonstrating (or rather feigning) their “subjectivity” on stage, they encourage the audience to identification with it. The above-mentioned signs of success mean *pars pro toto* and accumulate mass desire in an abstract form: position, power, wealth, life satisfaction, luxurious consumption, everlasting holiday.

Enticed with such images – models of being – the audience is gradually but inevitably subject to self-commodification. They relocate their ego to the stage and the stage to the inner life and fill the psyche with it. Being “only a viewer”, under the pressure of the spectacle and because of its charm, he/she assimilates the need for characterization and being seen and admired. He/she learns how to meet the demands of the stage and role and the expectations of the audience. It assimilates the consumerist ethos of the spectacle society and tries to submit to it.

The spectacle unifies perception, traps the psyche, controls it and manages it directly and indirectly. Intensified evocative spectacular character imperceptibly penetrates the psyche and is able to influence opinions, decisions, attitudes and behaviour of the audience from the inside. The engrossing logic of the spectacle makes the viewer or the spectacle's object its participant and subject in the sphere of his emotions and fantasies. In such a transformation, the pervasive power of spectacular nature, its possessiveness and elements of manipulation and compulsion, so difficult to trace, are revealed.

These features established the usefulness of the spectacle. They formed the crucial and effective part of superstructure in reference to the political and manufacturing basis of society. They created an independent field of production and consumption, offering service and being complementary towards other areas of the economy and collective life. They have become specialized in producing, promoting, propagating, and consolidating fantasies, opinions, values, languages, and models of communication desired by the users. They have become necessary and indispensable in forming positive approval of market consciousness, in arousing consumerist aspirations, and in developing commerce-favourable emotions, habits, needs, and types of sensitivity. Being a part of the market and giving the spectacle the status of a commodity, postmodern spectacles naturally reconstruct and affirm in aesthetics, semiotics ideology, and communication the rules of their own existence and conditions of circulation and prosperity. They enliven, renovate, and preserve the system they belong to.

Setting up countless forms of commercial spectacles, coalescing them, intensifying their presence, strengthening their influence and obtrusiveness, the economy of spectacular character formed the nature of the postmodern spectacle *per se*. It penetrated its interior and defined its poetics, aesthetics, and pragmatics. It transplanted its ethos into other nominally independent artistic and literary forms. It blurred boundaries between art and business. To put it bluntly: it transforms literature and art into an instrument of business. As a result, it displaces and blurs aesthetic criteria, replacing them with business criteria. It transforms the declared by artists, critics and academic theory principle of artistic autonomy into some kind of alibi and ornament. It embellishes the practice contrary to the idea of autonomy. It rids it of sanction and makes it an illusory and sentimental value.

Also the social conditions and effects of the spectacle became evident. Its essence lies not in the spectacle itself, but, according to Debord, in "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). Sociological analyses have shown that there are various forms and styles of a spectacular character, depending on the type of society. In accordance with this suggestion, we can talk about centralist, programmed, and bureaucratically controlled machine forms and integral models,

the last of which use both methods and techniques. Nevertheless, in all those cases functions of the spectacle were coincident: they affirmed, consolidated, and idealized the dominant model and mode of social life. They made it natural, obvious, and intransgressible. They defended its unequal distribution of wealth, positions, power, connections, and privileges, but also naturalized and consolidated the division into the disposers of spectacles and the satiated and stunned audience.

The significance and power of the spectacular character were expressed in the enticing ambiguous pressure to be shown, looked at, to draw attention, influence the environment, form its opinions, needs, demands, and decisions. Paradoxically, the effects of this tendency were also visible in making various spectacles independent, dramatized, alienated from the content of the real presented. This led to the primacy of "what is to be communicated" and "what is in the communicator's interest" over what is or what really happened. Dissemination, industrialization, marketing, and commodification of the spectacle were favourable to that tendency.

We could say that the moment and feature of presentation outgrew the thing presented and they, in their own way, have become separated and independent from it. They started determining its public presence and values, and this led to numerous effects. The original being has been absorbed and processed by the secondary represented being, which has become independent and replaced the former. In Europe, this coincided with the depreciation of values such as authenticity, precedence, truthfulness, verifiability, coherence, and consistency. The metaphysics of mediation, to use Leśmian's expression, was transformed into the "first" and "real" reality, whereas the other started to hold the disgraceful status of a metaphysical "thing itself", actually indecipherable and inaccessible apart from the current presentation. Inversion of this kind enabled common expansion and the global success of the spectacular.

The ubiquity of the spectacular made those changes evident. It embraced – apart from the media, art, and entertainment – other more solemn forms of life. It penetrated the economy; engulfed or is still engulfing education, science, philosophy, religion, privacy, intimacy, inner life. They zealously care about the image, prestige, the number of the audience and the effect of the spectacular. They often shock the viewer to publicize the message.

Thereby, the image, spectacle and message, which originally inform about or reflect a reality different from them *per se*, interfere in it in different ways. They shape it according to the intentions of the author of the spectacle and the conditions of transmission. They select, frame and characterize scenes, events, and actors. Under some circumstances, they provoke and arrange events; in other words, they compose objects of the spectacle and adjust the reality to the need of the message.

Images, spectacles and messages do not limit themselves to the mere presentation of independent events. As artefacts and signifiers, they express the authorial intentions of those who produced, communicated and popularized them. They determine the significance of the spectacle, sometimes also its reception. In this sense, with their symbolic significance, publicized media events often outgrow the influence of the real.

They can form and magnify, but also ignore, omit, belittle, and marginalize real events. Pervasive intentions are usually enriched with an evocative epiphanic setting, which accentuates surprise, dramatic tension, peculiarity, or the shocking character of the message (this media epiphany is indicated by headlines such as *breaking news*). Postmodern spectacularity owes to them its vigour and vitality. They have become an indispensable element of economic, political, and religious business.

A poetics of the spectacular is commonly used in marketing and production undertakings, state ceremonies, civil initiatives, rallies, political marches, election campaigns, educational rituals, sport events, military parades, and Church celebrations. It embraces almost all forms of consumption: lavish flats, fashionable clothes, prestigious parties and connections. It embraces and penetrates private life; appropriates nakedness, copulation, fertilization, and confinement (it visualizes, exploits and commercializes this broad sphere of sexuality to an extent similar to pornography); it transforms engagements, weddings, affairs, arguments, infidelity, divorces into public events; it broadcasts deaths, funerals and mourning. Injuries or even death are on the podium in a street performance – here we have the symbol and condensation of the postmodern internalized power of spectacularity.

All things considered, spectacularity has become universal mediation. It determines being and the value of particular phenomena in public reception – of characters, deeds events or products, but it also defines its significance to those who make, arrange, or participate in it. Inner or utilitarian values lose their significance; what becomes important is what this phenomenon means to other people. “What is appropriate” and “what appears to be” is more important than what is in real. The hallmarks of originality are given not to the works which are truly original, but to those which are effectively promoted and widely accepted.

The paradox of spectacularity has also influenced ethics. It repressed and displaced the personal, inner ethics of intention and replaced it with public-oriented self-presentation and self-affirmation constructed to win acclaim for oneself and one’s opinions and behaviour. Ethical declarations and confessions acquired the virtues and values of the spectacle. Care about an ethical public image and the necessity to form it repressed the inner conscience and arguments of the categorical imperative, while dignity

and obligations have become a rhetorical *decorum*. In the postmodern epoch, one's inner ethics has become as blurred and unclear as the reality antecedent to the act of presentation.

Images and roles have totally engulfed the ethics, especially its personal dimension and prescriptive functions. They have become demanding *qui pro quo* of individuals and masses, coming from the outside, but also a substitute of their identity and the content of libido. In this reversal, personal stories or experiences have lost their significance and have been replaced with intersubjective image and drama of the spectacle.

Prophets and observers of postmodernity announced the epoch of common mediocracy and semiocracy, or the total power of the media and signs, which often refers to and is enlivened and dynamized by the spectacular. They claimed that this power degraded authentic forms of existence, schematized and reified interpersonal bonds, put an end to the dramatic history which ruined old systems and introduced new order. They announced, as Jean Baudrillard did, the disappearance of references to reality, the end of the criterion of the truth and the advent of the era of hyper-reality¹. It legitimized the staggering career of the spectacle and the spectacular.

In this era, the role of economy of political production and consumption are taken by the political economy of signs, messages, images, and spectacles. Also explosive social issues are turning into hyper-reality, similarly ideology, culture and religion. According to discoverers of hyper-reality and apologists for consumerist society, the masses do not thirst for ideas, faith or meanings. They are not interested in the difference between the true and the false. They truly thrive for spectacles. That is the reason why the main forms of the superstructure – ideology, culture, and religion – adopt the faces and functions of the spectacle in the hyper-real world. Consequently, spectacularity means more than just a mass medium. It penetrates the process of conveying messages and controls them. Itself, it becomes the main message.

The effect of this shift, this devaluation, and these changes is the society of the spectacle. By acquiring the ability to influence things globally, gathering a massive audience, synchronizing reception, making perception and interpretation uniform, the spectacle has become an influential device in forming personal and collective worldviews. It has become able widely and effectively to influence production and consumption, social and political relations, personal relationships, customs and culture. It has engulfed

¹ The concept of typer-reality connects reality with its own simulation, which makes it impossible to differentiate between the two. Baudrillard develops the idea in his *Simulacres et simulation* (1981). Towards the end of his life he wrote: "On a alors à faire à une réalité où tout est opérationnalité, ou plus rien ne reste hors champ. Si tout se réalise ou s'accomplit, c'est d'abord sur la base de la disparition de l'«essence», de la «transcendance» ou du «principe» de la réalité. Cette base spectrale nous mène, d'une certaine façon, au virtuel, et à tous ces mondes où règne la virtualité" (Bessism 9).

the human psyche and imagination; it has influenced human sensitivity, patterns of perception and reactions. One might say it is a marginal phenomena if we compare it with nature, existence, production, and society' and that it should be neglected and treated as delusion, duplicate, entertainment, and trifle, but it has turned out to be a dynamic component of postmodern civilisation.

According to Baudrillard, postmodern society transforms all the elements and values of its environment – interpersonal relations, the natural habitat, production, traditions, ideas, beliefs – into semiotic objects and concentrates on their exposition and circulation. They symbolize connotative and representational values. Added to practical functions and exchangeable values, these objects communicate the meanings of style, prestige, position, possessions, leisure time, luxury, power. They form the image of the individual. The more prestigious objects the individual has, the more it rockets in the identity discourse. The social system is becoming similar to linguistic system. An individual's position in society – accentuating levels in the hierarchy, connections, showing up, and being shown – resembles the unit of a discourse.

However, the effects of spectacularity aroused controversies. Some disapproved of the society of the spectacle, as they noticed anaesthetics, mystification, and wrong preferences in this media-commercial spectacularity. Others received this notion enthusiastically. They noticed the end of the old world, social and political conflicts, the advent of "the eternal present time" and a never-ending, stunning, colourful, and ever-changing spectacle. This feast of extravaganza prevented any thought of differences, disproportions, and social frictions, the struggle for survival and boredom of everyday life. It provided a sense of being and balance.

Opponents claimed that such a society is only a cover for the despotic, economic, and political power of money and a device for dispersing and isolating egoistic self-satisfaction, hidden manipulation and pressure, and unequal distribution of privileges and benefits. False pluralism and competition did not influence this systemic dominance of money resulting from exploitation of workers, passive and stunned by the avalanche of spectacles. Their colourful and noisy background – spontaneous and cheerful at the first glance – hid a number of sponsors and directors, who acted behind the scene, composing details of the spectacle and making sure of the final effect. Thus critics discovered the educational and ideological aspect of the spectacular machine and its dependence upon the political system. They exposed their negative effects: blending, equalization, immobilization, and passivity of the audience.

They also proved that, contrary to self-commercials, the society of the spectacle is not a state of consumerist happiness. Managing collective perception, public

space and discourses determined its essence. As a result, this society required unmasking and correction. It required an alternative idea which would oppose the ubiquity and omnipotence of money and the rule of manipulation, and the narcotic bewilderment of the masses.

In a commercial society, the spectacle has lost the marks of authentic entertainment: directness, disinterestedness, carelessness, and cheerfulness. In comparison with previous forms and functions, it significantly changed. It has lost the hallmarks of a ritual culminating in a collective *catharsis* and unhindered and spontaneous features of the carnivalesque.

It has been transformed into a media-cultural device dependent on industrial rationality and the logic of resourcefulness and business. It has become a factory of perception, emotions, experience, memories, connotations, thoughts, reactions, behaviour, and attitudes. Mechanisms and methods of reproduction have killed and displaced spontaneity and authenticity. They have transformed it into the product of knowledge, technique, cooperation, and engineering streamlining; they were subject to the rules of production, reproduction, turnover, supply, demand and consumption. Consequently, the spectacle acquired some features of a commodity.

The relations between representation and reality are, in turn, represented. Formerly the spectacle was often an authorial “test of character” and “an interest on life”; it immersed itself in life and expressed, recorded, represented, criticized, and corrected it. In postmodern reality, in turn, it was transformed into the mental equivalent of chewing gum or coca-cola. It took the role of an alibi for the disoriented existence, which is powerless and helpless in view of the flux of information, messages and images. The tyranny of the spectacle incapacitated the individual. According to its anthropological definition, it made “a man of the spectacle” a spectacular failure.

He has concentrated his interests on the surface of things and has come to terms with the common state of simulation. What is more, he has acknowledged it as the essence of nature, necessity and definite reality. The empty but stunning metaphysics of the spectacle has beguiled him. He succumbed to its esthetics and mirage. He surrendered to the pleasant, erotic transfer of impressions, relieving him from tensions and the commonplace. He believed that ever-changing spectacles refer to nature, fantasy, and freedom. But he failed to see that they eventually relax his vigilance and dull his sensitivity. In the meantime, simple observations suggested that the effect of the spectacle (even if it was not the goal) is riveting, immobilizing, and trapping the audience. The spectator became a prisoner: the device and material of the spectacle.

The interest in space also had other consequences. It led to the disappearance of the sense of transcendence in a religious and social-historical dimension. The chaos of commodities and impressions made the individual unable to transgress the present comfortable lifestyle. This is reflected in the aversion to the beyond, utopia, or metaphysics. Meanwhile the practice and cult of the spectacle themselves have created a form of metaphysics. It suppressed the awareness of the dramatic changeability of time, immersed an individual in a monotonous present time, removed the thought of limited existence, blurred the difference between “before” and “after”, and delighted in being.

The psychological effects of invasive spectacularity were also important. The multiplicity of stimuli led to tiredness and softening of the spectator; it disoriented him and made it possible to manipulate him. Desire, needs, and the ways to satisfy them started to come not out of the individual, but out of other people’s suggestions which simulated the inner voice. The recipient really believed in the ego, subjectivity, ethics, conscience, and decisions from such a prompt box. This way, he gave up his own identity and personality. Satisfied with such a pretence, he has assumed the role of a golem.

It is not surprising that opponents of the society of the spectacle sometimes threw the baby out with the bathwater. They ignored sense, enlightenment, knowledge, organization, production, decorousness, order – values connected with a sensible, pragmatic, utilitarian and functional social model – they glorified anarchy, chaos, coincidence, luxury, extravagance, excesses, poses and gestures. In the twentieth century such ideals were promoted by George Bataille. In such attitudes, critics wanted to discover the real human nature, make dreams about freedom, spontaneity, and control over necessities and the matter come true. However, it seems that this alternative to the society of the spectacle is not convincing and does not appear to be good cure for its dysfunctions.

II. Literature and the Spectacle

A question arises: what is the relationship between literature and art and the society of the spectacle like? The truth is that they selectively both use the devices of the spectacle in the work’s construction and mimetically represent the spectacles that deliberately occur “beyond the text”, in the presented world. Dramas and novels describe with pleasure and fictionalize spectacular duels, competitions, weddings, feasts, balls, carnivals, festivities, customs, fights, executions, funerals, marches, crowds, state and religious ceremonies, street images, city squares and market squares. They use the conventions, techniques, forms, and devices of the spectacle as someone who presents and refers to the spectacles as “the object of the performance” connected with the literary relation

and action. Scenes from *Dziady* by Mickiewicz, *Kordian* by Słowacki, or *Wesele* by Wyspiański provide clear examples. In the meantime, films strengthen a structural, typical regard for the spectacular character of narration. They double the inner spectacularity of the film's message.

It is worth stressing the fact that the speciality of literature and art is also a parody of devices, episodes and scenes which have been subject to conventionalization or schematization. Literary or artistic spectacularity locates itself on the "meta" level and adopts meta-spectacular functions. They enable problematizing, critical-satirical perspectives and going beyond the frames of the spectacle, approaching it from an angle different than its own. They separate what is utilitarian, manipulated, conventional and secondary from what is original, authentic, and spontaneous. Undoubtedly, whether such perspectives are successful depends on the quality of particular works.

Anyway, a meta-spectacular potential allows literature and art to locate itself both inside or even at the core of the spectacle, use it and participate in it, and to go and be beyond it. This potential initiates a reflexive, evaluative, and expressive attitude towards the spectacle, which ceases to be the machine, the means to the target, standard, exploitation, and commodity, and becomes a self-contained notion and determined aesthetic and humanist value. It is subject to artistic and worldview valorization, updates, experimental and innovative modifications and selection. What has been previously described is blurred, suppressed and killed by the spectacle; literature and art bring it back to life, or at least they have such an ability. Whether, and if so, to what extent they use it, belongs to a different discussion.

Often, as in dramas, films and theatre, particular works form and condense the features of spectacles functioning in the society. They refer to realities ontologically and qualitatively different from themselves (with the exception of self-referential works). The works transfer reality into a linguistic-semiotic sphere of arbitrariness, condensation, intensification, expression, and ambiguity. Such a metamorphosis is conducive to an artistic vivisection of the spectacles that are accepted by the societies they function in. The problem is currently much more evident, because the simulated, derivative reality (the postmodern hyper-reality) insists on becoming exclusive and ultimate. A conflict occurs between the automatic reproduction, standards of content, multiplication of ready patterns, conformist reception, and obligations within society, on the one hand, and, on the other, artistic creation which wants to remain free, inventive, deautomatized, and ambiguous.

Genuine artistic spectacles (unlike their fake versions) are connected with transformation, metaphor, and polysemy. They make use of arbitrariness, deformation,

exaggeration, fiction, and poetic licence. They choose independent resistance and individual expression rather than conformist reception. They reject fixed codes and systems in favor of modification, recreation, and new codes (complementary, alternative, or polemical in relation to the existing ones). The degree of innovation determines the difference between an artistic spectacle and a mass, commercial, profit-oriented product.

Ambitious spectacles present their content in an intersubjective social discourse. They differ from public, utilitarian ceremonies and rituals by their highlighting of the aesthetic function (which provokes innovation, experiment, and originality). Thus works of art employ unconventional means of expression and composition despite frequent misunderstanding by the reader. They prefer the presentation itself and the effect it creates to other functions; they promote the joy of art and highlight the autonomy of each individual work and of art in general.

Literature and art, however, are also subject to a pressure of spectacle which forces them to adapt themselves to opinions, criteria and expectations of the audience and to surrender to a tempting manipulative economy. Federman claims that literature which subjects itself to norms and rituals of the society of the spectacle “and ceases to understand the world and accepts the crisis of representation in which it functions ... becomes mere entertainment, it becomes part of the Spectacle” (Federman online). This acceptance of the commercial spectacle is typical for popular, mass literature, while another, more critical view is evident in authors who aim to offer a corrective view of society.

Yet another problem is the internal, artistic spectacular character of literature, which is especially apparent in literature’s attempts at redoubling meanings and translating intellectual elements into sensual, visual ones that can normally be perceived, watched, seen. A different view is offered by works of literature that oppose elements of spectacle, starting from the embodiment of these, and then reworking them in humorous, parodic, satirical, or grotesque forms. These attempts offer what we could call an anti-spectacle.

A general practical and theoretical problem arises from the fact that words – the fabric, the means and the object of artistic literary communication – are visualised mainly as writing. Their graphic form depends on the system of writing rather than on what they signify. The level of graphic imagery is very high in ideograms, and quite extreme in textual compositions called *carmina figurata*. It is not present, however, in conventional writing, which defines the signified-signifier relation on the basis of a collective, arbitrary agreement rather than similarity or the cause-effect rule.

This relation is deliberately and precisely hidden in cryptographic communications, which code signs and texts and purposefully make signifier-signified associations more difficult to notice. In articulate speech the word loses its spatial character typical for visual

graphic forms. If a spoken word is not recorded in graphic or phonic form, it physically disappears; it becomes nothing but an element of memory.

A literary text, then, presents the signified element through sensory, iconic similarity only in the most unusual situations. “The house was impressively high” and “There were red roses blooming in the garden” – such utterances will take a different form in different languages, because they do not have features that could seem clearly in common with the communicated content (the independent denoting elements). Visual contact with a high house or with red roses in a garden does not offer any information on what to call these phenomena in a given language. Visual qualities somehow indirectly originate in the meanings of words in a given language, as well as in cultural associations and imagination. They are created in purposefully stylised and composed artistic texts and remain connected with tropes, word play, narrations, passages of dialog, plots. Hypotyposis is the rhetorical figure most commonly associated with these.

It is true that in numerous situations authors try to provide their works with spectacular qualities; that is, they make the works available not only for understanding but also for sensory reception and joy. We should not forget, however, that such spectacles do not only consist in the presentation of static shapes, images, paintings, and engraving. Literature orders sequences of words (one after another) in time and requires similar kinds of reading. A painter places new shapes and colours spatially (one next to another); the eye is able to perceive them. When confronting these practices, the spectacle combines elements of both – it exploits the temporal character of literature and the spatial nature of painting. In itself, the spectacle takes place in space and time, and presents a kind of “happening”. An event as such, the spectacle represents a signified, devised reality that is different than, for example, a different happening. The spectacle evokes the reality, performs it, presents, enlivens, and makes it evident. This expressive character of the spectacle can be seen in historical drama. An independent work of art, available here and now, such a work creates an intentional world – based on signs and meanings – which is different temporally and spatially from the one of the spectator.

Literature, therefore, manifests a large spectacular potential. Similarly, spectacles make use of literature by adapting it to different heterogeneous non-literary contexts (film, opera, theatre, painting, music, sculpture, or ballet). This, of course, is a subject in itself, and I will not discuss it here in detail. It is important to say that the spectacular character of literature can be observed also in the theatrical and film adaptations of literary works. If not for the spectacular features, such intersemiotic translations would be impossible.

On yet another level, the spectacular quality can be discussed in connection to dramatic instructions and scenic narration. Similarly, critical and theoretical concepts are also useful. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's theses contained in *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766) did not reject the painterliness of literature (as some simplistic interpretations put it), but pointed to the limitations of the issue. Lessing's claim is that painting presents mainly spatial objects, while literature (poetry, *Dichtung*) follows the temporal nature of text – is devoted to sequences, actions, events. Although Lessing stressed that paintings also presented activities, he added that they did so by means of spatial corporeality, while literature imitated and showed corporeality by means of dynamic action based on succession of elements.

After Lessing literature changed substantially. Contemporary scenic presentation (scenic or visual narrative) prefers the fragmentary, independent moment or episode to the very activity of narrating. In the past, according to the norms of epic, it focused on the flow of events in the plot. These days the spatial quality of literature (so much questioned by Lessing) is re-established in a number of ways, both on the level of signifying (narration, text) and the level of the signified.

In the abovementioned scenic presentation, the narrator reports the speech of protagonists and offers necessary detail on the situation. Narration of this kind does not stress the omniscient or subjective character of the narrator and neglects the specificity of language, the style and manner of speech, the distance and point of view involved in the relationship among narrator, reader, characters, and plot. This narration refrains from using panoramic descriptions or erudite, informative comments. It gravitates towards a bare presentation of situational, individual episodes.

As a result, it violates the continuity, progression, and the cause-effect relations within the plot. It slows down time and isolates individual episodes; it develops at the time of reading, here and now. If it appears, frequently enough, as direct dramatic *oratio recta*, it stands in overt or covert opposition to summarising, panoramic, and commenting narration.

This does not mean, however, that it lacks interpretive and assessing commentary. The commentary appears, but in disguise. A spectacular presentation of a scene is a commentary in itself since it implies a choice of frame, communication method, composition, and content. All these carry meanings, valuations, and emotions. A scenic narration is motivated by and based on the intersubjective (public, available to readers) character and sense (or lack of sense) of the characters, events, situations that are presented.

The apparently bare, neutral presentation of something accumulates an implicit symbolic, semantic, expressive capital. Scenic narration shows episodes, characters,

situations, events and objects to somebody and for a particular reason. It assumes them to be interesting and worthy of interest, that is, capable of generating reflection, admiration, outrage, condemnation, scandal, etc. The act of selection and communication of what is being presented to move the addressee is a commentary itself. Thus the literary spectacle activates in the addressee specific identification processes or, differently, offers him/her the Brechtian role of distanced observer, witness, or judge.

This very spectacular quality of literature can be proven by the double character of the speaking subject. The figure who assumes this fictional role in a literary text – who authorises the very utterance as narrator, dramatic persona or the speaking “I” – is at the same time being “uttered” by the author of the fictional work. Also, the speaking subject becomes an object in order for the work to be received, read, audible and conceivable.

Bakhtin very clearly exposed this objective, spectacular aspect of utterances. He believed it was an inborn feature of human beings to express themselves in continued production of texts based on words and signs (also behavioural ones) that would be available to other people. He also claimed that this expressive process takes place in an intersubjective space between two consciousnesses, two subjects (Bakhtin 285). The expression itself is a game and a spectacle, even if the actor and the spectator are the same person. In such a case each reply is objectified – otherwise it could not possibly be perceived and understood (interpreted): “Human action is a potential text and it can be understood (as human action rather than physical activity) only in the context of dialogue of its time (as a reply, a semantic position, a system of motifs)” (Bakhtin 286); “To express oneself means to make oneself an object for somebody else and for oneself at the same time (‘reality of consciousness’). This is the first step of objectification” (289).

The next step of objectification is exteriorisation and awareness. This provokes “a second voice” to appear. The voice reacts to the material dimension of the utterance and manifests an active, interpreting relation to it. Thus, according to the theory, “a writer is a person who is able to handle language when being outside it; somebody with a skill to speak not directly” (Bakhtin 289). Each meaningful reference to or a repetition of an existing utterance engages it in a spectacle, in which the utterance plays the role of the object for the addressee (spectator) and the audience. This is so because of the second voice and for its sake. It is an utterance outside utterance. It embodies the text, which breaks away from the authority of the author and becomes objectified, seen from outside as somebody else’s.

Spectacle, therefore, works in literature in a number of variants. It is important, however, to notice its abovementioned double and divided nature. On the one hand, literature assimilates means, poetics, and aesthetics of spectacle by adapting and internalising it as its own mother tongue. On the other hand, however, literature objectifies and alienates the spectacular quality, changes it into an object of literary observation and decomposition; it despises its repertoire, its techniques, ethics, and social applicability. In other words, literature treats the spectacular as alien and subjects it to satirical, grotesque, and parodist reworking.

Thus some kinds of writing present interpersonal and social spectacles and reveal their derivative, conventional, manipulated form. Writing is in numerous cases based on anti-spectacle. By redoubling and splintering practices and relations that directors, authors, and sponsors want to see as authentic, it exposes their conventionality and fake values such as truth, goodness, beauty, faith, altruism, or patriotism (which mask the play of arbitrary convention and the artificiality of message, as well as coding it and presenting it as the very essence of things).

It is impossible not to notice that both the scenic narration and the anti-spectacular approaches are becoming more and more popular. They can be found in different literatures of all times. The beginnings of critical reflection on the character of the spectacle in different spheres of social life and art appeared in the works of Plato. The basis of reflection is the differentiation of the essence and of appearance.

At the same time, we should stress the fact that twentieth-century civilisational, cultural, and social changes created very conducive circumstances for the analysis of spectacle. New forms and qualities appeared. The postmodernist negation of essence was symptomatic, with its insistence on simulacra, simulation, and hyper-reality. The propagation of the tendency was facilitated by the technical and cultural expansion of electronic media and the formation of what is now known as the society of spectacle.

This tendency ceased to be only a theoretical initiative; it became a practical issue of great popularity and support. Hyper-reality – fiction mixed with facts – turned into a solid technological, technocratic, and social reality. Concepts such as truth or the essence of the thing were relegated to a less important position. What used to be a philosophical centre moved to the periphery, while the formerly scandalizing margins conquered the very centre.

The success of spectacle influenced the idea of anti-spectacle. A typical example can be easily found in the polemical, subversive attitude of Witold Gombrowicz's work towards the "interpersonal spectacles" of twentieth-century Polish literature. Spectacular episodes seemed in it to degrade and parody social spectacles of family life,

neighbourhood relations, friendship, school, church and state institutions, which were performed on different levels depending on generation, gender, or social class.

Yet another point of reference for Gombrowicz's anti-spectacles were images, episodes and scenes presented in literature and high discourses of culture, which were treated as "national heritage", "high art", "the essence of life" or simply "reality", and celebrated in an almost ritualistic way. Anti-spectacles aimed to devastate this sophisticated aura and highlighted its trivialities, because they followed a mechanism of "universal disillusioning of reality" described by Bruno Schulz (445).

By using in his work some spectacular scenes, Gombrowicz exposed and parodied characters and situations that presented themselves with a different face from the one that was natural for them. Thus he unmasked their unfinished form, shapelessness, artificiality, ambiguity, and comic character. He renounced all claims for these characters and situations to be treated seriously, that is, according to how they wanted to be perceived.

This disassembling took place on the basis of spectacular-artistic, social (interpersonal), anthropological levels. A basis and at the same time a motivation for it was the assumption that the game of identifying with form, a tendency for hiding behind a mask and justifying one's behaviour with a spectacular alibi – is an innate part of each human being and works as a passionate force that alienates, stiffens, automatizes and – if attempts are made to take a critical distance – frees a spectator. Fully aware of this, Gombrowicz showed the fake and perverted character of human relations. His work is a perfect example of grotesque spectacle that denigrates the serious artificiality of school in *Ferdydurke*, of death in *Pornography*, and of diplomacy in *Trans-Atlantyk*.

Gombrowicz had his own theory for motivating the use of such a strategy. He assumed that the spectacular is inherent in what is human and interpersonal and remains part of the individual and social life of a person. An awareness of representation and form requires, then, a kind of acting, stylisation, and play. The human psyche and personality, together with the social need to show oneself to people in a better light – these are all impossible to harness. The acting imperative results in a complex and ambiguous dialectics that aims to control others' perception of a person and to appropriate the way others see and understand the image. This dialectics controls human autoidentification, presentation, and appearance and defines human interpersonal perception; also, it stimulates a rebellion against form, which generally limits, simplifies, and wastes the spontaneous, unharnessed, creative energy of individuals.

In Gombrowicz's work spectacle is a form of ambivalent artistic game, which uses literary devices to recreate, renew, mock and denigrate the existential motivation and the stake of the game. The whole interplay works on the levels of narration

and plot. Unlike in Guy Debord – who rejected the social, institutional, commercial, modern and postmodern ideology and practice of spectacle - Gombrowicz ridicules the same elements in a more intuitive, colourful, free, and universal way, by referring to readers' sense of humour, imagination, non-conformism, and engagement.

It is true that both polar approaches – despite their different points of reference, methods and discourses², as well as opposite views on numerous subjects – appeared to be largely parallel, convergent, and mutually translatable. Both authors showed the appropriating character of modern and postmodern spectacle. They pointed to its alienating effects and tendency for spreading. Debord underlined the economic, class, civilisational, and political functions of spectacle, and opposed them to the projects of the state, free of the tyranny of spectacle. He tried to wake the reader to the dazing effects of production-consumption cycle. Gombrowicz, in turn, focused on the anthropological, interpersonal, behavioural, and ludic aspects of spectacle. He explored them in an artistic way, denigrated comically, and freed the readers of all of them. Although the world views and aesthetics of both writers are different, their diagnoses of the problem seem largely similar and, as we may now say, truly insightful.

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² We need to add here that Guy Debord (1931–1994) was not only a philosopher, man of letters, and an activist of the Situationist International, but also a talented artist, poet, writer, and film-maker. This perhaps explains some affinities he manifests with Gombrowicz in his "spectacular" perception of modernity.