


## After “The Spectacle of Performance”

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### Abstract

The publication of “The Spectacle of Performance” three decades after it was written offers the opportunity to reflect upon the intellectual circumstances of its production; on what was and was not distinctive about it then; on where sociological and interdisciplinary studies of performance have come to in the years since; and about what the framing of Spectacle might still contribute so long after it was written. I suggest that performance, when understood not only in interactional terms but more broadly, in relation to temporally structured social formations, offers a basis for reorienting sociohistorical inquiry in a synthetic way.

**Keywords:** Dramaturgy; Medieval society; performance; postmodernism; social temporality; theater; theory.

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## 1 Introduction

It has been more than three decades since "The Spectacle of Performance, The Postmodern Hyperreal and Medieval European Play" was presented, on one occasion only, live at the 1992 Social Science History Association meetings in Chicago, Illinois. Now it has been revived for an open-ended second run on the internet — something not even possible when it first hit the boards (Hall, 2022). In the years since, theatrical metaphors of dramaturgy and performance have played ever more prominent roles in sociological analysis (Alexander, 2004), while understandings of medieval performance have broadened (Symes, 2009). Given the very limited first run of "The Spectacle of performance," it can hardly be seen as influential in these developments, but it does seem to have anticipated them.

The launching of the second run offers an opportunity to reflect on, first, my intellectual circumstances when I wrote "Spectacle of performance" (hereafter, *Spectacle*); second, what was and was not distinctive about it then; third, where sociological and interdisciplinary studies of performance have come to in the decades since; and finally, what the framing of *Spectacle* might yet contribute three decades after it was first performed. My discussion inevitably will be schematic. My take-home message is simple. Performance, when understood not only in interactional terms but more broadly, in relation to temporally structured social formations, offers a theoretical basis for reorienting sociohistorical inquiry in a synthetic way.

## 2 Spectacle in its Historical and Intellectual Context

When I wrote *Spectacle*, I was influenced by three mingling intellectual currents — social constructionism; the broadening of a subdisciplinary "sociology of culture" into "cultural sociology"; and the various "turns" in the humanities and social sciences, toward narrative, deconstruction, and a postmodern *Zeitgeist*. These currents no doubt exerted deep influences on me, so deep that I was not always directly aware of them and they did not always receive explicit acknowledgment in the essay. Social constructionist themes could be extracted even from the work of nineteenth and early-twentieth century social theorists, but those themes became explicit with W. I. Thomas, Herbert Blumer, Howard S. Becker, other symbolic interactionists, and fellow travelers. Key developments included Erving Goffman's development of a dramaturgical sociology in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956) and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's foundational phenomenological treatise, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). Along with Goffman, Ned Polsky (1969) took a special interest in hustlers and con artists — imposters who depended upon subterfuge in the presentation of self. In a different key, Harold Garfinkel (1967) demonstrated the precarity of the taken-for-granted that depends on broadly scripted enactments of the social. By the early 1980s, social constructionism, dramaturgy, and phenomenological sociology offered strong counterpoint to then hegemonic positivism and social systems theory as bases for sociology as a science. Insistence on hermeneutic analysis of emergent, lifeworldly meanings in social interaction came to challenge any easy route to a "science of society."

In a different vein, Emile Durkheim established the significance of ritual for the communal affirmation of collective identity. Later, anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 1982) opened conduits for understanding connections between ritual, performance, and social life. Among sociologists interested in ritual, Goffman (1967, 1971) underscored its centrality in everyday interaction. Overall, formulations about the enactment of social life through the interplay of drama and ritual were well established by the 1980s.

In parallel, sociological interest in culture that had grown out of an earlier 1960s focus on popular culture and subsequent work on the production of culture (e.g., Peterson, 1976) became consolidated during the 1980s in a general "sociology of culture" (Hall & Neitz, 1993). In that milieu, reading two books on theater crystallized my own interest in performance. One was Wendy Griswold's (1986) wonderful *Renaissance Revivals*, which played to my long-standing appreciation of theater by demonstrating how particular historical moments shape audiences' receptions of canonical plays such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The other book was Steven Mul-laney's (1988) provocative *The Place of the Stage*, which historicized performances and audiences in relation to their wider social circumstances.

The third current, the postmodern, aided and abetted social constructionism and the cultural turn in sociology. But postmodern theories also provided the specific thesis that became the protagonist for *Spectacle*. Various interconnected "turns" away from reigning approaches in the humanities and social sciences came to a head in the 1980s — the cultural turn, Foucault's genealogy, the narrative turn, the new historicism, and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. Among these, theories of the postmodern were distinctive for their arguments about the unfolding of a new basis of the social — one in which the reality principle central to modern society had been undermined and ultimately displaced by a blurring of boundaries between genres, categories, aesthetics, and most importantly, reality versus representations of reality. In *Spectacle*, the thesis of a distinctive historical shift in the relationship between reality and representation became the foil for an historical and comparative survey of medieval performance unbounded by any conventions of "theater".

### 3 Spectacle, Itself

Given its production at a particular historical and intellectual moment, *Spectacle* was not written on a blank slate. It used consideration of a postmodern shift in the character of reality as a springboard to explore varieties of performance in medieval Europe. That analysis cast into doubt ironically broad and binary postmodernist claims about the collapse of strongly enforced modern distinctions between reality and imaginaries.

In writing the essay, I came to understand that the well-established dramaturgical approach in sociology could be enriched in its concerns with scripts, enactments, and audiences by drawing on the history of theater as a discipline. Delving into the rich range of semi-theatrical performances in medieval Europe suggested the possibility of broadening the scope of dramaturgical analysis that Goffman and others had initiated.

In *Spectacle*, I sought to explore the dramaturgical character of diverse social domains. *Spectacle* began to consider the institutional bases of the dramaturgical, not only in religious performance and political theater, but also elsewhere. It was (or in reflection, seems to have been) an effort at identifying "social formations" of performance, partly by bringing them to light through historical comparison.

In the opposite direction from bringing history to sociology, *Spectacle* demonstrates the leverage that sociological analysis can bring to history — not just the "big" history of politics, states, and revolutions — what Fernand Braudel characterized as the history of events — but also social history in Braudel's *moyenne durée* and even "ecological" history of "repetition" in *la longue durée* (Hall, 1980). Historians, concerned with distinct and unique events, too often avoid comparison, much less the use of analytic concepts. But I hope *Spectacle* shows — in a preliminary way for the history of theater and more generally as an exemplar — that sociological analysis can contribute much to the understanding of history, precisely by cutting

across all the diversity and distinctiveness of particular events and bringing them into sharper theoretical focus (Hall, 1999). For medieval Europe, Spectacle opened up the possibility of freeing performance from its containment in histories of theater and religious ritual through sociological analysis.

Spectacle employed a double movement, one of reversed borrowings — on the one hand, from cultural sociology to historical inquiry and, on the other hand, from the comparative analysis of history to cultural sociology and the problem of the postmodern.

#### 4 The (Postmodern?) Spectacle and Performance Understood Today

Three decades out, we have the opportunity to consider whether Spectacle had it right about the postmodern and the sociological study of performance more generally.

As I noted in Spectacle, the idea that the postmodern represented any fundamental break from the modern already had been placed in doubt by Jean-François Lyotard (1984). In his analysis, the two "master narratives" of the modern — expansion of democratic citizenship and science as the route to knowledge — ironically created space for counternarratives that might reject, displace, or transform modernity. The postmodern already was but a "moment" of the modern before the word.

On a different front, Spectacle suggested parallels between the rich varieties of medieval performance and postmodern blurrings of boundaries between reality and performance. This comparative analysis offered a case in point of what Bruno Latour argued — that "we have never been modern". In Latour's (1993) view, we inhabit a "middle kingdom" in which temporal distinctions between epochs are arbitrary acts of "purification" (p. 48). Any claim about the transition to modernity falls into doubt once social continuities across historical time are acknowledged. Both narratives of history as progress and historians' blood sport of periodization give excessive emphasis to new developments and underplay the social forms that persist across supposed historical "turning points".

In the different but hardly incompatible accounts of Lyotard and Latour, claims of radical discontinuities between the modern, its antecedents, and anything postmodern are overdrawn. By now, the debate over the postmodern has long faded. It is no longer a hot topic. But perversely, it has become an absent present: the issues raised by Lyotard and Latour remain with us, especially for any general understanding of contemporary society.

(Postmodern) performance as a feature of blurred genres is the backdrop of much intellectual discourse about current political and social developments — notably, the significance of the internet and social media for constructions of social and political reality, the polarization of politics around the world, proliferation of alternative realities (in a central instance, in constructions of the Covid-19 pandemic), the retreat from neoliberalism and the rise of neo-nationalism, denialist versus activist responses to climate crisis, and the seeming collapse of any full-throated embrace of modernity's ideology of progress.

Yes, ideology has fallen on hard times, but not because we have reached "the end of history" in the absence of alternatives to the ideal of democratic capitalism, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) argued. Rather, that ideal itself has come under pressure as a coherent and viable basis of global social organization. In its place, the drift seems to have been toward fragmented assertions of finite political goals, transitory *ad hoc* coalitions formed on the basis of seemingly contradictory amalgamations of political positions, and the raw pursuit of power on "tribal" bases. These conditions have revived readings of W.B. Yeats's (1920) poem, "The Second Coming". "Things fall apart," he wrote, "the centre cannot hold". He continued, "The best lack all conviction,

while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity. / Surely some revelation is at hand". The poem concludes, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?" This question is not a postmodern one, it is apocalyptic. Historical time, as Walter Benjamin wrote, is shot through with "chips of messianic time" (Hall, 2009, p. 3). Under the sign of the apocalyptic, the established order falls apart.

What needs reckoning today? That the fact that lies are untrue doesn't matter to the throngs of people who embrace them? Such would be the understanding about alternative constructions of reality — apocalyptic or otherwise — in the view of those who rally around modernity. Has the postmodern finally come fully into its own at the very juncture when trendy intellectuals have ceased to speak of it, other than to lament its features without naming it? No. To take such a view requires ignoring both Lyotard and Latour. The conditions of the spectacle and its distribution no doubt have changed, but modernity has always had its share. Look at religions that expect believers to affirm the truth of highly improbable "miracles". Affirmation makes you a true believer, impervious to "reason". You have entered a world of myth, unreal but gaining in the sheen of truth by the faithful's massive ritualistic embrace of falsehood. A large-scale alternative reality — religious or otherwise — is something of a collective fugue, obvious to those not caught up in it, but a matter of indifference to the collective who affirm each other's authenticity in their shared reality.

In recent decades, as postmodernists have thrown modern conventions of reality into doubt, public and scholarly attention to performance has mushroomed in a seemingly ever-expanding circle of reflexivity. Performances and discussions about performances feed upon one other. Beyond interaction in everyday life, questions about performance have become central to the study of politics, conflict, ritualized communion, and the construction of personal identity.

Already in 1984, Jeffrey Alexander was using a Parsonian lens in a neo-Durkheimian way to analyze the public hearings about Watergate as a cleansing ritual that led to US President Richard Nixon's resignation. Later, Lyn Spillman (1997) considered commemorations of nationhood in Australia and the United States as extended public rituals. And performance is not just to be found in public rituals. Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2000) examined dramatic and contingent "standoffs" — for example, between the radical communal group MOVE and Philadelphia authorities, and between David Koresh's Branch Davidians and federal authorities outside Waco, Texas. In an entirely different domain, drawing on a phenomenology of the body, Judith Butler (1988, 1990) argued not only that gender identities are socially constructed, but that enactments of such social constructions ultimately involve "performativity", that is, creating reality that would not exist without its repetition.

Alexander, Spillman, Wagner-Pacifici, and Butler were all concerned in different ways with power. Alexander explored the quest for public closure in the wake of a breaching event. Spillman pursued the question of whether and how national identity could be reinforced through public ritual. Wagner-Pacifici investigated the power dynamics in dramatic unfolding events. And Butler excavated the politics of gender in everyday life in ways that both demonstrated how the personal is political and in turn helped mobilize pursuits of gender politics.

Drawing on these and other studies, Alexander (2004) proposed a "cultural pragmatics" that would bridge the long-standing divide between structuralist semiotics on the one hand and hermeneutic, interpretive, and interactionist approaches to contingent meaning construction on the other. His analysis catalogued and advanced the "performative turn" by theorizing an historical transition away from ritual in early, less complex social groups under conditions of increasing social complexity. Social change, Alexander argued, "de-fused" the previously "fused"

conditions of ritual in less complex societies, where performance was relatively unproblematic because its authenticity was typically taken for granted.

Alexander (2004) noted the continuing importance of enchantment and ritual, particularly in relatively coherent social groups — families, gangs, and ethnic groups — where the fusion among cultural materials, performers, and audience is relatively unproblematic in its authenticity. Religion remains central to religion and community. However, the wider problem for modern "plausible performance" (2004, p. 529), Alexander argued, is that success depends upon "re-fusing" relationships between background cultural representations, scripts, and enactment in conventionalized venues for an audience. "Cultural pragmatics" (2004, p. 566) referenced various modern cultural genres — sitcoms, cartoons, documentaries, and Rap music. But theater as a specific genre represented the archetypal reestablishment of compelling performance that would bring people together to experience and cathect upon shared issues of cultural meaning. Alexander found the analog of theater as especially relevant to political performance, to the "public stage" as a venue for political discourse and action, for example, in social movements, revolutions, and wars (2004, pp. 544, 550). In his view, social drama thus conceived constitutes an alternative venue to the rationally based "public sphere" that Jürgen Habermas identified as so critical to modern democracy.

Examining politics as social drama has continued to prove fruitful. Recent research suggests the diversity of sociological approaches. Studying youth activists in Brazil, Ann Mische (2007) showed how their lives intersected and formed networks and social movements that cut across conventional institutional boundaries. Geneviève Zybrzycki (2016) analyzed the "Quiet Revolution" toward secular nationalism in Québec through the lens of a disrupted parade, *La Fête de Jean-Baptiste*. Isaac Reed (2020) explored the exercise of political power by deploying an agent-centered model concerning the delegation of tasks in the enactment of political projects. And Paul Joosse (2017) and Joosse & Zelinsky (2022) examined moral panic and *ressentiment* as processes of charismatic mobilization, taking as a case the performances of Donald Trump. These and other recent studies cannot be reduced to a single model of politics as theater but they broadly emphasize the centrality of performance in the exercise of power, and they do so by variously invoking cultural contexts, scripts, enactments, and audiences.

The subsumption of contemporary social life within the reflexively performative is hardly limited to politics as drama. The example of tourism identified by Baudrillard (1988) is iconic. But not only can reality be subsumed by simulacra, myriad operations of performance organized under other than everyday auspices wind their way into everyday life. As is emphasized by contributors to the "broad program" of cultural sociology (Grindstaff et al., 2019), status display, carnival, cheerleading, drag, work, professions, science — all involve cultural performance. Other improvisations in the blurring of boundaries between reality and imaginaries continue apace. Reality TV, in which performers live their lives in unfolding dramas with other real people; social media that envelope individuals documenting the unfolding plays of their lives; the app BeReal, which prompts people to photograph themselves and their surroundings at a random time each day — these developments erode any quest for authenticity by affirming, once again, everyday performance as a conventional frame of reality, thereby rendering the previously inauthentic as the new authentic, continuing the redefining of authentically real life through the exercise of irony.



## 5 The Future Limits and Possibilities of Understanding Performance

Cultural analysts now widely understand that performance is a central theoretical metaphor linking elements of symbolic culture in materially based social enactment, not only in everyday life but in politics and, more generally, across all domains of social life. Yet identifying the significance of performance across so many venues and in so many distinctive ways paradoxically raises new challenges for dramaturgical analysis of the social.

A first challenge concerns resisting reductive or totalizing impulses concerning dramaturgy. Yes, we may say that performance infuses all social action. The very etymology of the word "perform" traces a bringing into being, a production of "form" through action. Yet this conceptualization entails a range of possibilities broader than the dramaturgical, strictly construed. If all life is performative, it is necessary to consider whether and how performance ranges beyond any ideal type of drama or theater. This question is not to be resolved here, but a first pass at the issue would explore *differences* between drama and actual social life, however performative the latter may be.

One difference seems paramount. Reviewers of movies sometimes give a "spoiler alert" in order not to "ruin the ending" for their readers. But spoiler alerts are only relevant when the future is already fixed. To a greater or lesser degree, in some situations more than others, social action deviates from the conventional script, or actors contend with one another about which play they are in or the direction of the plot, or performers from another play take the stage and disrupt the drama. The dénouement of a theater production is scripted, but what in social life are the certainties, other than death and taxes? The point emphasized by symbolic interactionists, social phenomenologists, and historians who use counterfactual methodologies is straightforward: No matter how dramatic, social life is open-ended. As Pierre Bourdieu (1972) insisted, the meanings associated with what he called practice are emergent rather than purely scripted deployments of culturally available symbols.

A related challenge concerns identifying the myriad kinds of performances, the auspices of their production, and their play with audiences. As much as theoretical models of ritual and theater provide analytic leverage, the sheer variety of performances exceeds either of these two typifications. Independently of Spectacle and with far greater expertise, Carol Symes has emphasized that for medieval Europe, conventional histories of theater had occluded recognition of the performative richness of popular culture across diverse venues of social life (2009; see also Dox, 2004, pp. 1–2). For Symes, understanding the varieties of medieval performance offers a basis for deepening our understanding of the medieval world more generally.

How, then, to address the twin challenges — of locating performances within a broader sociology of enactment and theorizing the variety of performances? Giovanni Zampieri's (2022) discussion of my writings on social temporality and history in his introduction to this publication of Spectacle anticipates one approach. To take on the emergent, complex, and overlapping interplays of social life requires an alternative to the grid of objective, historical time. In phenomenological terms, all social actions are temporally constructed. Meaningful actions take different forms depending on their orientations toward past, future, and the immediacy of the unfolding moment — all in relation to alternative frames of the social construction of reality. There are distinctive social temporalities in working, going to a party, playing sports, addressing the requirements of a bureaucracy, taking part in a legal trial, participating in rituals of a religion or community, acting apocalyptically in relation to "the end of the world as we now know it," or seeking transcendence in an eternal "now" (Hall, 2009, pp. 12, 207–226). Even in relation to the same overarching problematic, for example, climate change, differently located

people act in radically different temporal frames (Hall & Baker, 2021).

In a social phenomenology of enactment, it is possible to locate alternative kinds of performances as they are produced and structured in the multiple temporalities of social life, both in the objective scales of historical time that Braudel identified, as well as in the "times of history" (Hall, 1980). It is important to locate performances not just in one or another genre, not simply as one or another unfolding drama, not only in their dazzling and always emergent complexity and variety, but also in their production within relatively institutionalized or otherwise conventionalized structurations of the social.

People enact meanings, or perform, within one or another domain or arena — a formal organization, the street, the home, a community gathering. In its most strongly centered version, a domain tends to be ordered by a particular type of social temporality that patterns a broader constellation of actions. To take one example, bureaucratic organizations certainly have multiple and complexly intertwined temporal "moments," but they are composed and undergirded by temporalities of linear or diachronic time, notably in the construction, scheduling, and replication of actions in relation to clock and calendar. Establishing the character of performances as they unfold in domains and arenas within an overall social formation offers the opportunity to consider lifeworldly social constructions of reality as institutionally and culturally shaped formations. To explore "the times of history" is to locate performances within their broader conventionalized and institutionalized horizons.

"All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances," Shakespeare had Jacques tell the audience in *As You Like It*. He then listed — for men — acts in seven ages of life from infancy onwards. Moving from Jacques's male age-graded roles to other social distinctions, domains, and institutions, we can explore roles in complexes of performances that comprise the general structuration of social organization. We may ask, what are the temporal structures of political actions, not just in public rituals, but in relation to strategic action and in organizational routines? How do religious groups use rituals to orchestrate, channel, and limit experiences of the transcendental? How do the carefully curated scripts of consumption diffused by business enterprises colonize performances in everyday life? Pursuing these kinds of questions can reveal, in Michel Foucault's almost anti-historical sense, multiple genealogies of performance and the auspices under which they are produced.

Efforts to formulate general sociological theory reached their peak under high modernism around the end of the third quarter of the twentieth century. Holistic and totalizing sociological theories — social systems theory, marxism, and others — lost their capacities to provide analytic imaginaries relevant to understanding and critically reimagining social formations. This retreat from the project of general sociological theory was driven by the turns toward narrative and cultural analysis. These developments, however appropriate, left sociology bereft of any capacity to organize and integrate its enterprise. In turn, a disintegrated sociology has suffered in intellectual authority in public discourse. Thinking through the Spectacle in a fulsome way would build from analysis of the "social construction of reality" to examining the "constructions of social reality" in historical and contemporary social formations. Linking action, culture, institutions, and the historicity of multiple temporalities, thereby excavating the performance of social organization, offers a basis on which to resurrect the discourse of general social theory in relation to sociohistorical inquiry.



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