"Spectacle of Performance" as a Spectacle of Interdisciplinarity. Comments on John Hall

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Abstract

Comment on John R. Hall's *The Spectacle of Performance. The Postmodern Hyperreal and Medieval European Play (1992–2022)*.

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1 Introduction

When I happened to read John Hall's "The Spectacle of Performance" (2022) for the first time, I was reminded of how and under what circumstances, just three of four years after the drafting of that paper, I was standing at a crossroads (no drama involved: it had mainly to do with what to do with my life as an undergraduate) and did what, romantically, people usually do in those circumstances: either they take a turn (left or right, most of the times the wrong turn), or they sell their souls to the devil. As I took the second option and never looked back with a single glance of regret, it can be said that the devil, disguised as cultural sociology and offering an interdisciplinary promise in which "culture" has always carried a more seductive offer than "sociology", has walked with me for a long time. It comes as evidence that I must not have been that wrong in choosing the path when one realizes that I have walked — for the most part — in good company.

Many of those familiar faces (mediated by equally familiar work) make their appearance in Hall's text, an unpublished draft that is well placed in that fateful decade for cultural sociology, and to which the author himself contributed ideally with two works that open and close that decade of intellectual excitement and inquiry: the ongoing discussion on the epistemology of socio-historical analysis (Hall, 1990, 1992), and the more mature effort to distinguish between cultural meanings and structures in order to infuse the problem of explanation with an attention to the semiotics of culture (Hall, 2000). Meanwhile, around the time Hall was drafting "Spectacle", and unfortunately closing it into a drawer, exciting things were happening in the emerging area of cultural sociology: William Sewell's powerful critique of Giddens' duality and the proposal of a new dual model that involved semiotic schemata (Sewell, 1992); Jeffrey Alexander's more and more explicit theorization of cultural autonomy, which inaugurated a move from cultural codes as essential for the definition of the analytic autonomy of culture (Kane, 1991; Alexander & Smith, 1993) to social performances (Alexander, 2004), and from syntax to semantics and ultimately "cultural pragmatics" (Alexander et al., 2006); Robin Wagner-Pacifici's (1992) analysis of violence, soon to be transformed into one of the most compelling sociological analyses of contingency (Wagner-Pacifici, 2000); equally, the objects of study demanded attention as much as the perspectives, and one can reconstruct an intellectual environment in which fascinating objects as fascist selves, nations and commemorations, *terrae cognitae*, Wittgenstein's kitchens, all contributed to the excitement that something new was happening.

While not everyone shared this attraction for cultural sociology, it had a certain appeal for those outside the discipline. Genres had become blurred, we were told; a new type of interdisciplinarity had set in, and the learning curve for those who happened to be on the side of the humanities made it relatively easy to get in. On its part, cultural sociology was a welcoming environment. When, for example, Hall (2022) wrote of the alignment of literary criticism with his own version of sociohistorical inquiry as building on "long established concerns in social theory with meaningful action, ritual, symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, and dramaturgy" (p. 111), it became suddenly much easier for the practitioners of humanist inquiry to recognize a common ground for intellectual work, and to slip — sometimes inadvertently — from the humanities to sociology as "quasi-humanities" (Zald, 1991).

The opening pages of "Spectacle" look almost like an exemplar and familiar text in this regard, and it will be on those that I will focus my attention. No matter how hard I try to read them with my current sociological eye, and to place them retrospectively in the context of work that was being produced in that vein in those years, my older self keeps distracting

me. It points to the concepts, the questions, and the references that made that interdisciplinary connection possible. In this regard, my remarks, particularly the conclusive remarks, also stand as a sort of reflection on what practicing interdisciplinarity at the intersection of sociology and the humanities largely involved in the development of cultural sociology.

2 "Spectacle" as a Spectacle of Interdisciplinarity

Cultural sociology has often — more or less explicitly — fashioned itself as the legitimate, rightful heir of the cultural turn in the social sciences and the humanities, and of the large-scale effect of a slightly antecedent "linguistic turn" (Rorty, 1967) that brought semiotics and hermeneutics at the center of cultural theorizing.

It is more fruitful and engaging, therefore, to comment on "Spectacle" as an instance and as a consequence of the cultural turn and its interdisciplinary sensitivity, not only because its leading idea (the investigation on the relationship between reality and representation) follows in the steps of the powerful critique against the "mirror of nature" (Rorty, 1979), but also because its subject matter and its method of appreciation — medieval performances, interpreted as occurrences in which the drift from reality to representation was problematic — speak of the interests, the approach, and the eccentricity of cultural sociologist's choices, far away from their original presentism as well as from comparative historical quantification. In this regard, "Spectacle" is at the same time an attempt to theorize from within the field of "culture", and to reconstruct a history of early reception into a unified "cultural history of representation" (Hall, 2022, p. 110).

Recent studies of interdisciplinarity often highlight infrastructures of collaboration, interpersonal networks of work, boundaries, and boundary-work, but "Spectacle" is rather an instance of "intrapersonal" interdisciplinarity (see Graff, 2015; Bortolini & Cossu, 2020) that operates through the incorporation, within a scholar's self-concept and practical knowledge (the way, to put it bluntly, he or she does things with concepts and data), of problems, techniques, and orientations that come from other disciplines and are integrated into one's sociological practice.

Indeed, even a cursory look at the references that Hall mobilizes, and the debates they suggest, spanning a period from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, function as signals of a certain de-territorialized take (that is, not affected by disciplinary exclusivism) on the problem of representation. The problem, in fact, is so general that it has been approached from many different angles, some of them mentioned by Hall: Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, the deconstructionist's insistence of the autonomy of the text and the drift of signifiers, and other semioticians' insistence on the self-description of sectors of the semiosphere (Lotman, 2001) or the general encyclopedia (Eco, 1984), while at the same time there emerged — pretty much in the years Hall was writing, a debate on the what anchored interpretation or allowed over interpretation (1992), with Umberto Eco taking the first route first with *The Limits of Interpretation* (1990) and then with his late-career new-realism.

Hall (2022), in fact, starts with an argument that requires interdisciplinary reflection. Even if "postmodernists abandon any claim to know about the world in favor of a less ambitious — but no less fundamental — project of understanding how the world is represented" (p. 110), the approaches under consideration:

> all share a fundamentally sociological insight, namely that drama cannot be understood purely on an internal basis; instead, critical analysis must contend with the

> question of how drama establishes a relationship between performance and what such performance might mean or signify. (p. 110)

Performance, in other words, cannot be understood semiotically (a common concern among many starting to develop their arguments at the time, not last for two major figures in cultural sociology like Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Jeffrey Alexander) if we leave out what constitutes a major part of semiotics — namely pragmatics.

This rift between semantics and pragmatics seems ultimately the one that Hall wishes programmatically to reduce, even when he does not adopt the lexicon of cultural semiotics (in this regard, his other work shows a more explicit sensibility that has made him one of the few scholars really able to grasp the implications of what we do when we try to mix cultural sociology with "applied" semiotics: see especially Hall, 2000). Much of the discussion is centered on the issue of the textuality of social life, something which had clear antecedents both in interpretive social science (Geertz, 1973) and continental hermeneutics (Ricoeur, 1973). Indeed, as Hall (2022) argues, "the textual turn is not new" (p. 113), and it has produced a blurring of fiction and reality that could expand in two directions, either "showing how texts create a sense of reality, even in the absence of the capacity of any text to represent or correspond to reality" (p. 114), or surrendering to the very postmodernist idea that representation has taken the place of an absent reality (a suggestion that Hall takes from Baudrillard), thus becoming the new, available, and intelligible "world".

Such a drift, ultimately, poses a great weight on language and other symbolic systems, and ultimately on the signifiers that constitute the surface of the text. In this regard, Hall's insistence on anchoring the problem of representation to its meaning and its reception (that is, the concrete process of meaning making in specific sociohistorical circumstances) needs not only to be praised, but also to be pushed further.

It is somehow unfortunate, then, that the argument about the existence of a medieval world in which life was certainly "brutish, short, and hard", but also infused "with qualities of ritualization and enchantment" (p. 128), was not explored through a comprehensive, comparative and historical analysis. For it is there that many of Hall's reflections — and those of many others who contributed to the performative turn — converge toward an implicit argument about performance, which nonetheless is of central sociological importance. Many have explored different strands of "cultural pragmatics" (a term used in very different ways both by Jeff Alexander and Orlando Patterson), and despite the differences they all seem to align to the idea that the attention to performance does not simply bring situations and individuals back in, but also connects to real — as opposed to virtual or textualized — cultural structures. There is, in other words, an attention to multidimensionality which links culture and action (in Alexander's terms, the representations and the mise-en-scene which involve an actor-audience linkage), but also individuals and their intersubjective backgrounds. Yet multidimensionality, at its worst, lacks temporality and historicity, i.e., it lacks attention to flow and social process.

Hall's proposal for an analysis and a direction for cultural sociology, back then, did not simply hint at the historicity of the effort to produce cultural analysis (as thick description or endogenous explanation: Kaufman, 2004), but at the processual nature of the change in the balance between reality and representation.

This seems to be the point, at least from my perspective, that should be taken home from the hints (even those which, with today's eyes, seem like relics from the past) that Hall has seeded in "Spectacle": that cultural sociology and cultural history can walk hand in hand, and that the cultural history of representations is a form of cultural sociology. It looks common currency today, but it was less than taken for granted back then.

3 Conclusive Remarks

Buried somewhere in that masterpiece of conceptual history that is *Futures Past* (Koselleck, 2004), Reinhart Koselleck (1982) elaborates on Epictetus' maxim that "it is not deeds which shock humanity, but rather the words describing them" (p. 409). Brute reality, contrary to widespread opinion, is something that can be faced quite unproblematically. But when language (or any system analytically modeled after language) sets in, trouble starts, and the dichotomies — "of word and thing, of the spiritual and the lived, of consciousness and being, of language and the world" — loom large on our attempts to reduce the gaps. After all, as Koselleck (1982) reminds, the epigram "draws our attention to the autonomous power of words without whose use our human actions and passions could hardly be experienced, and certainly not made intelligible to others" (p. 409).

Change "words" with "Culture" (usually, with a capital "C"), and here is the program, the promise, and the damnation of cultural sociology. If we follow Epictetus' epigram, culture *is shocking*, and we certainly know that by the faces of the non-culturalist friends with whom we share department space. Well-versed in the Structure vs. Culture distinction, and on its interpretation as a means to reproduce within the discipline the cleavage between realism and idealism, they argue against Culture (Gans, 2012) as a way to exorcise the shock, which comes with the threat that there may be some explanatory power in "deep culture" (thus reclaiming that decisive structures can also be *cultural structures*), and that the surface of action is the key to understanding the meaningfulness of social life.

That is probably why performative genres (ritual, play, drama, festivals and spectacles) have long fascinated cultural sociologists. They are less instances of the "all the world's a stage" argument, than they are types of action designed to bring together the textual and the practical, what is deep and what lies in the surface. They are almost designed to build a culturalist frame around the obnoxious sociological problem of structure and action, as Jeff Alexander (2004) has aptly reminded us in his characterization of the distinction between background collective representations, foreground scripts, and mise-en-scene (pp. 529–533). What lies in the background is a configuration of "codes" (Norton, 2014), "deep culture" that activates rhetoric devices (Reed, 2015), semantic networks that include their own scripts rather than describing the antinomies generating them (Cossu, 2022), or a set of semiotic devices that organizes both the syntactic features (Madigan, 2023) and the semantic-pragmatic ones (Cossu, 2023).

In this regard, this "even stronger program" in cultural sociology is characterized by the same interdisciplinarity of the past, grabbing concepts and methods from semiotics, performance and ritual studies, cultural history, and the wide range of disciplines and subfields that were simultaneously transformed by the cultural turn around the time of Hall's earlier writings. What Hall anticipated, however, is the attention to the historicity of meaning structures, which brought forward the idea — developed in the decades that have passed since the early 1990s — that "history matters" not only as a *past context* in which horizons of understanding were radically different (Michael Baxandall's "period eye", Robert Darnton's restless reconstruction of the carnivalesque motives of cruelty against cats: Baxandall, 1972; Darnton, 1984), but also as an unavoidable inscription of meaningful action into temporality.

The latter had been sidelined — at the dawn of the cultural turn — by the emphasis of the synchronic over the diachronic, and by a parallel insistence of system over process. The latter distinction, however, still bore the marks of virtuality, of considering process as immanent to structure, and as a generated consequence of its operations. Once made virtual in such a fashion, communication could disregard crucial elements of action (say, the individuals actually

acting, and the concrete communications they produced). This posed a problem, in particular, for an understanding of the autonomy of culture as *concrete* autonomy, because at some point in the logic of cultural explanation structural arguments steered away from methodological structuralism and became, decidedly, ontological ones (Eco, 1968; Lizardo, 2010). The point is not just philosophical, as it tackles issues, still unsolved within the boundaries of cultural sociology, of how we can produce explanation that involves cultural structures without idealizing structures or, worse, falling prey to misplaced concreteness.

I am not sure that cultural sociology has solved the riddle — after all, it has been *the* riddle of functionalism, interpretive social science, Neo-functionalism, and other weaker or stronger approaches in that lineage — but at least, in trying to link the idea of performance with the idea of the temporality of meaning in action, and its unfolding in time, through time, and in a way that is contingent upon the passing of time, it has pointed out that if there's a solution to the riddle it lies at the conjunction of text and act.

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