

## Introduction to the Flashback: Setting the Scene for John Hall’s “The Spectacle of Performance”

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### Abstract

Introduction to John R. Hall’s “The Spectacle of Performance. The Postmodern Hyperreal and Medieval European Play (1992–2022)”.

**Keywords:** Historical sociology; social performance; cultural sociology; temporalities; interdisciplinarity.

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John R. Hall is a distinctive figure within the subfields of historical and cultural sociology: during the last 45 years, he has managed to combine a compelling interest in theoretical questions with methodologically sound empirical research enriched by thoughtful epistemological concerns. These remarkable features already appear when considering his first two books, *The Ways Out* (Hall, 2020) and *Gone from The Promised Land* (Hall, 2004). In the former, Hall blends a Weberian style of interpretive sociology with a Schutzian phenomenology to show how the differences between secular and religious communal groups can be fundamentally ascribed to their alternative orientations toward time — and the meanings associated with them. The latter book presents a cultural history of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown, advancing an interpretation of a violent episode by reading it against a filigree that interweaves broader social and cultural processes.

The fascination for the generative interplay of temporality and meaning has informed Hall's work throughout his career. In *Apocalypse* (Hall, 2009), he traced the 'end of the world' through history — from classical origins to 9/11 — exploring connections between forms of social organization and the temporal modalities these implied. More recently, Hall (2016) employed a "structural phenomenology" to show how different domains of collective action (e.g., science, environmental activism) correspond to distinct temporal orientations that frame climate-crisis actors' capacities to understand and communicate their stances toward the future. Hall's interest in the conceptual couple of temporality/meaning has been complemented by a reflexive evaluation of the disciplinary border between history and the social sciences — a divide that Hall sought to overcome through a *transdisciplinary* program that incorporates history and the social sciences within the single banner of a "sociohistorical inquiry" (see Hall 1992, 1999).

Temporality and meaning; sociology and history. These are the four coordinates within which much of Hall's intellectual path can be charted. These coordinates can set a scene for reading 'The Spectacle of Performance: The Postmodern Hyperreal and Medieval European Play' (Hall, 2022; hereafter: 'The Spectacle'). Originally presented at the 1992 annual meeting of the Social Science History Association, the essay focuses on the (now emblematic) postmodernist claim that the postmodern era can be characterized by an unparalleled shift between 'reality' and its 'representation.' This argument, which in Hall's paper is primarily engaged through the ideas of Jean Baudrillard, hypothesized that in postmodernity, 'reality' has become subsumed by its representations, which become more real than reality itself. This postmodern reasoning advances a new periodization, suggesting the existence of a pre-postmodern era (i.e., where representations are less real than reality) and a postmodern era (i.e., where representations are more real than reality itself). Taking Medieval drama as a case study, 'The Spectacle' shows the postmodernist argument to be misplaced: the problematic association between social performance and the realities they represent also characterized the Middle Ages, and is not, therefore, distinctive of the postmodernist turn. What is more, Hall shows how, during the Middle Ages, the lines of demarcation between what was deemed to be 'real,' and its 'representations,' were, at best, vague — where not entirely blurred. It would seem that the very categories of 'reality' and 'representations' become scarcely helpful when considering different historical epochs: this is the reason why 'The Spectacle' highlights the need for a cultural history of performance.

The paper outlines a research program aimed at uncovering the processes of cultural construction of social reality and their variation through historical time. In it, we see the concepts of temporality and meaning working undertrack at the service of some of the intuitions that anticipated the performative turn in sociology and history — as Hall recounts in his postscript

to the essay, “After ‘The Spectacle of Performance.’” Moreover, Hall’s approach lead to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries to produce a text that Andrea Cossu (2023), in his comment, aptly calls a “Spectacle of Interdisciplinarity.” Reading it some thirty years later, ‘The Spectacle’ gives us a flashback to the intellectual debates and questions that spurred theorizing and research within the American social scientific field of its day. Its publication today, however, pushes us to pursue a historically-minded cultural sociology that recognizes the significance of social performances for the meanings that actors enact in the running off of time, and for the temporalities of meanings themselves — that is, their local production, diffusion, and endurance over historical time. In ‘The Spectacle,’ we find a time capsule that allows us to look backward and a prism whose refracted light lets us take a glimpse forward — to uncharted paths in cultural and historical sociology that might be worth exploring in the future.

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