

# The Realist Novel as Meta-Spectacle

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It is often difficult to know precisely what one is discussing when the topic turns to realism. Some regard realism primarily from a technical perspective as a style of literary or visual representation. Others understand it in a scholarly context as a moment in the history of literature and art during the nineteenth century. Still others identify realism as an evolving critical discourse that has influenced—and continues to influence—cultural sensibilities toward the act of representation. To complicate matters further, there are critics within this latter group who credit realism with the ability to liberate the historical consciousness of its audience, while others disparage realism for naturalizing the present political order as a spectacle that strips the audience of its sense of agency.

The coexistence of these contradictory claims regarding literary realism begs critical attention, not necessarily as a conflict to be resolved, but as an opportunity to broaden our understanding of the purpose and possibilities for mediating the real in fiction. The question takes on particular relevance at a time when technologies of visual representation seem bent on achieving greater and greater levels of literality. One must first distinguish between realism as a form of avant-garde consciousness versus mass-market “reality fiction” that, much like “reality television,” participates in and reinforces the dynamics of consumption. To this end, I will clarify the realist project as making visible the dynamics of industrial society by bringing it into dialogue with the Situationist concept of “specta-

cle.” One must then distinguish between realism as a theoretical stance towards the world versus the various realizations of that stance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature. The failure to maintain this distinction allows more superficial categories of genre and period to fragment an otherwise coherent and evolving impulse towards literary realism in the novel. In this respect, I will consider realist consciousness in three novels by Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf and Salman Rushdie, placing into dialogue texts that are typically isolated within the discrete critical discourses of realism, modernism, and post-modernism. Woolf singles out Hardy’s realism as worthy of praise in contrast to the naturalism practiced by his contemporaries, while defining her own work not as a modernist rejection of realism, but as a more authentic method for achieving it. Rushdie, who has been controversially received as an imperialist sympathizer and whose fiction has often been misleadingly exoticized as “magical” realism, is indeed a self-described realist whose essays suggest that his novels can be read in a broader context than the merely postcolonial. An uncritical use of the term “realism” has thus not only led to a misreading of specific texts and authors, but also perpetuated a muddled sense of literature’s relationship to society, one that effectively dates to Plato’s banishment of the poets from his Republic for trafficking in representations of representations: reality twice removed.

Certain critics have looked to the realist novel as a means of exposing the false consciousness of ideology, laying bare opportunistic constructions of history and stripping them of their compelling internal coherence. Written in the late 1930s, Georg Lukàcs’ study of the historical novel praises Walter Scott for providing an alternative to the epic model of heroism, which tended to mystify social forces as the workings of the individual will in a manner that lent itself to various fascist cultural projects of the period (270). According to Lukàcs, the heroes of Scott’s novels function in precisely the opposite manner by serving as a “neutral ground” on which social forces in conflict “can be brought into a human relationship with one another” with the “concrete historicism of all the details” (36, 151). Lukàcs regards the “full political effect” of realism as the “literary unmasking of the pseudo-hero of Fascism,” which the novel achieves through its “social-historical and not merely individual-biographical standpoint” (341). Enlarging upon this idea of realist literature’s ability to “unmask” ideology, Pierre Macherey later argues in *A Theory of Literary*

*Production* that although the substance of the realist novel is rooted in historical reality, the text is mediated by a literariness that disrupts one's ability to mistake the novel as attempting to achieve an objective reflection of the real (118). As a fictional environment comprised of "partial reflections" due to the very "improbability of reflecting," the novel makes possible, according to Macherey, an "escape from the domain of spontaneous ideology" and the "false consciousness of self, of history, and of time" (132). Macherey claims that it is this dynamic of literary realism which enables the "spontaneous ideology in which men live" to be brought into a "state of consciousness" (133). The novel thus "establishes myth and illusion as visible objects" from which the reader can achieve a critical distance (133).<sup>1</sup>

Can literary realism, however, be said to produce these historicist sensibilities spontaneously in the consciousness of its audience? Macherey himself suggests that criticism may be necessary to foreground the disparity between a text's rhetorical claims and the access to the real that it can actually provide (128). For the most part, however, one could derive the impression from reading Lukàcs and Macherey that realist fiction is an inherently anti-ideological lens through which any and all subjects are automatically historicized before the reader's eyes. Fredric Jameson also acknowledges the success of the realist novel in "estranging commonplaces again some expected 'real'" and "foregrounding convention itself" as the basis of our understanding of "events, psychology, experience, space and time" (*Unconscious* 151). However, Jameson sees the novel's "secular 'decoding' of those preexisting inherited traditional or sacred narrative paradigms" as merely displacing one set of cultural givens with another set that are made to appear equally as natural and unchanging, namely "life and work in the new world of market capitalism" (152). Thus, as Jameson suggests, the impulse towards realism is revolutionary in character, but ultimately leads the author to represent the world as an "organic, natural, Burkean permanence" (193). This involves the enactment of numerous "containment strategies," as Jameson calls them, that portray "impulses of desire and other transformation praxes . . . as naturally occurring feelings, psychological attributes, representable forms of being instead of agents warping totality itself" (193). This ease with which realism's supposed avant-garde stance can shift to one of repressing consciousness of historical change leads Jameson to criticize Lukàcs for failing to see his

own imprisonment within the “ideological expression of capitalism” constituted by realism’s “reification of daily life” (229, 236). Jameson calls instead for a “progressive or critical realism” that does not merely “reflect or express the phenomenology of life under capitalism” (134).

How can realism have been construed so divergently as both an avant-garde gesture and an agent that reinforces dominant cultural discourses such as consumerism and industrialization? A useful approach to this question emerges from Guy Debord’s insights in *Society of the Spectacle* concerning the failure of various political revolutions and artistic movements to avoid the influence of the very cultural logic that they critique. For Debord, the spectacle is not a specific image or object, but a relationship or discourse that exists between the individual and society. Debord attributes the spectacle to the proliferation in modern industrial culture of images and representations, which act as dehumanizing commodities that reduce the individual to a mere spectator of thoughts and desires that are represented to him as his own. Because these images and representations typically outlive (or are perpetuated beyond) the socio-historical context in which they originated, the individual’s encounter with the historical past in such a culture is ultimately constituted by the consumption of kitsch. Debord emphasizes, however, that the spectacle does not merely consist of this layer of mediation that has inserted itself between the individual and historical consciousness, but also comprises the broader social condition in which such acts of mediation (and their ideological filters) become naturalized, transparent, and forgotten. If, as Lukàcs and Macherey suggest, critical consciousness of the acts of representation and perception are a hallmark of the realist perspective, the novel’s engagement with visual culture must come to be understood as fully as its discursive relationship to historiography. Otherwise, realist fiction stands to mystify the very culture of industrialism and consumption that it attempts to reveal.

As demonstrated by the existence of such varied theorizations of literary realism, the novel’s relationship to spectacle is difficult to discern. The realist novel is both a depiction of the relationships and forces that emerge in industrial society, as well as a commodity produced by that society. In an essay titled “Raffles and Mrs. Blandish,” George Orwell examines how popular fiction of his time effectively reduces the consciousness produced by realism (the “political effect” of which Lukàcs writes) to generic images of modern culture for mass consumption. According to Orwell, the

realist elements of these texts are stripped of any ethical consideration of the situations presented. Instead of confronting the reader with consciousness of a world shaped by ideology, pulp realism epitomized for Orwell by a contemporary crime novel titled *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, simply naturalizes a dysfunctional society for its mass audience:

Several people, after reading *No Orchids*, have remarked to me, "It's pure Fascism." This is a correct description, although the book has not the smallest connection with politics and very little with social or economic problems. It has merely the same relation to Fascism as, say, Trollope's novels have to nineteenth-century capitalism. It is a day-dream appropriate to a totalitarian age. (146)

Such novels not only fail to circumscribe ideology within language and subjectivity, but present instead an image of reality that is circumscribed within ideology. What bothers Orwell is not the representation of fascist violence such as mass bombings, torture-obtained confessions, executions without trial, or the falsification of data, but the fact that such acts are presented aesthetically as "normal and morally neutral, even admirable when they are done in a large and bold way" (146).<sup>2</sup> In its superficial references to psychology and political theory, *No Orchids* also participates in the repackaging of consciousness as a spectacle of superficial intellectualism. Regarding the mass distribution of novels like *No Orchids*, Orwell concludes ironically that "emancipation is complete" once "Freud and Machiavelli have reached the outer suburbs" (147).

This tension between realism as a source of consciousness and the continuous recuperation of realism as kitsch is informed by similar ambiguities in the reception and cultural afterlife of avant-garde art. The greater the presence of conventionality in any artistic representation, the more easily it is consumed on the mass level and the less capable it is of producing heightened critical consciousness. The pulp realism of *No Orchids* is generated solely for consumption, whereas avant-garde realism seeks to disrupt the process of consumption and draw attention to the culture that enables it. However, even the most revolutionary works of art and literature seem doomed, if only by the passing of the years, to be regarded eventually with antiquarian devotion as specimens of a genre or an

author's oeuvre, the consciousness they once produced having ultimately been exchanged for iconicity. Debord locates one aspect of the spectacle in the process whereby representations of lived experience become detached from their origins in myth or history and are then reconstituted as commodities in the form of a class-defining cultural literacy.<sup>3</sup> Specifically citing Dada as susceptible to this process, Debord anticipated quite presciently the Dada "exhibit" at Paris' Center Pompidou in late 2005, in which the "anti-art movement" was itself anthologized for consumption within the walls of the Pompidou and circulated as cultural capital to New York's Museum of Modern Art and the National Gallery in Washington. While touting Dada's "raging contempt for existing values," which led its practitioners to engage in a "voracious interrogation of modernity itself," this exhibit sets out to put the "entire Dada period on parade" by tracing chronologically and geographically the work of numerous "icons of modernism" ("Dada Press Release").<sup>4</sup> Such an exhibit not only transforms Dada into a cultural commodity, but inscribes it within the very historical and aesthetic meta-narratives that Dadaists sought to negate.

As the harbinger of alienated consciousness in modern industrial society, realist fiction is vulnerable to similar distortion when the novel comes to be fetishized for its level of material detail as a cultural artifact or museum-piece from which one can extract authentic access to an historical moment. Like Dada mummified within the museum, the novel thus construed resembles the fragment masquerading as a world-view that Debord decries as spectacle. Yet Debord's focus on the relationship between historical consciousness and visual culture provides a new emphasis with which to read literary realism that avoids its potentially reifying function and recovers its full engagement with the historical field. If one conceives of the historical field in Foucauldian terms as an archaeology of what is able to be expressed discursively and what is able to be represented visually at a given moment in time,<sup>5</sup> then the realist novel accesses the historical field by engaging with the field's verbal and visual discourses. While scholarship abounds concerning verbal discourses within the novel (including the novel's relationship to quasi- or non-fictional genres such as memoir, biography, journalism and historiography), the novel's engagement with visual discourses risks being oversimplified as an ekphrastic presentation of observable details that approximates a spatial reality. Such an attempt to immerse the reader in the material trappings of the historical

moment creates a relationship of spectacle between the novel and the reader, who is thus placed in the role of consuming images either for their own sake or to indulge the illusion of participating in a past reality.

Authentic literary realism provides the reader with a discursive understanding of the socially conditioned acts of seeing—the possibilities for vision—undertaken by the characters depicted. This affords the reader a heightened consciousness of historical process and the act of representation. As a literary stance, realism can thus be read as meta-spectacle: a making-visible of the process whereby consciousness becomes distorted or concealed by the proliferation of discourses and images that objectify reality. Recognizing meta-spectacle as a fundamental motivation of realism enables one to distinguish between an ethos of realism and the specific avant-garde literary gestures through which that ethos has been expressed. For example, a play is Brechtian because it challenges the audience to adopt an ethical stance towards the acts depicted on stage and not because of various stylistic gimmicks that Bertolt Brecht himself regarded as a provisional and temporary means of producing consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, a novel is realist because the author seeks to render social experience visible by accounting for what was possible to express and to observe within a particular social reality, not simply because it contains a certain density of material detail or looks beyond the aristocracy for its subject matter.

This distinction informs Woolf's critique of Arnold Bennett's materialism in "Modern Fiction." She argues that realist fiction must represent the complexity of individual experience in its interaction with an external world by "trac[ing] the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness" (150). Woolf suggests that there is no single method for achieving this realist vision, as long as it enables the author to "come closer to life" and the reader to come "closer to the novelist's intention" (150, 152). Bennett's flaw, according to Woolf, was to construct social spaces with great naturalistic precision, only to fail to develop the psychological and spiritual dimensions of his characters that would allow reality—recognizable life—to inhabit these spaces within the novel (147). James Joyce errs in the opposite direction, according to Woolf, when his solipsism begins to falsify any appearance in his novels of a reality outside the mind (151).

Woolf thus locates herself between Bennett and Joyce in pursuing a more refined and penetrating realism than the naturalists, but not a discrete

modernist vision either.<sup>7</sup> The modernist elements of *Between the Acts*, for example, do not ultimately alter its realist vision. Woolf's inclusion of moments of psychological interiority, pastiches of "overheard" conversational fragments, and entire scenes from a fictional pageant do not cross the threshold into non-realist hypertextuality and reflexivity. The appearance of the pageant within the novel does not serve any significant meta-fictional purposes, but instead draws attention to the spectacle of patriotism proliferated by historical pageants enacted throughout England and America during the early twentieth century. The realistic world of the novel—in which various avant-garde theatrical gestures and moments of consciousness (or lack of consciousness) occur—never disappears from view and remains intact through the end. Woolf thus utilizes the realist perspective to make visible the individual's encounter with reality, including the ideological representations of life that circulate within that reality and falsely define it.

Hardy and Rushdie have advanced similar accounts of the dynamics of realism in response to public criticism incited by their novels. The publication of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 sparked an outcry against Hardy for attacking the institution of marriage and the British academy. Hardy resented this reduction of his fiction to a manifesto, noting that the novel advanced no ideological agenda for social reform. Using language similar to Woolf's, Hardy describes his fiction in realist terms as an attempt to "give shape and coherence to a series of seemings, or personal impressions," leaving aside "the question of their consistency or their discordance, of their permanence or their transitoriness" (3). He anticipates the idea of meta-spectacle in describing his novels as attempts to portray the alienation wrought by the persistence of archaic social forms and ideologies that no longer correspond to the reality of human experience (3–5). Critics of *Midnight's Children* have similarly misunderstood Rushdie's realism, accusing him of reinforcing orientalist characterizations of Indian consciousness as exotic fantasy. They point to Rushdie's European education and success within the Western publishing industry as the basis for his imperialist sympathies and question whether his novel is capable of prompting an ethical response from its readers or has simply been recuperated within the spectacle of empire.<sup>8</sup> Rushdie contends, however, that *Midnight's Children* is a Dickensian satire in which "details of place and social mores are skewered by a pitiless realism . . . against a scrupulously

observed social and historical background—against, that is, the canvas of a ‘real’ India” (*Step* 64). Noting the presence of certain “highly fabulated” scenes in the text, he explains that what some have regarded as “‘magical’ moments” are instead rooted in the psychological distortions of an alienated child brainwashed by nationalist rhetoric (72, 64). The narrator of *Midnight’s Children* suggests that the blend of history, fantasy and irony in his autobiographical account in no way undermines its realism, contending that “reality can have metaphorical content [and] that does not make it less real” (240). Rushdie thus echoes Woolf’s understanding that realism is not a specific method of representation, but an ethic that compels an artist to “attempt to respond as fully as possible to the circumstances of the world in which the artist works” (*Homelands* 210).

Each writing four decades apart, Hardy, Woolf, and Rushdie demonstrate a consistent attempt to portray realistically an individual consciousness in negotiation with the world. As Debord illustrates in *Society of the Spectacle*, this negotiation, from which one’s sense of identity derives, is rendered uniquely problematic—and thus uniquely visible in the realist novel—by the emergence of mass culture in modern industrial society. The characters in such novels are alienated by the various representations that mediate their relationship to society, such as the Gothic revival in *Jude the Obscure*, historical pageantry in *Between the Acts*, and Bollywood cinema in *Midnight’s Children*. In reflecting, replaying, and mimicking visual discourses, these novels reveal the extent to which individuals are often forced to salvage identities out of the competing and contradictory representations of life that circulate within the spectacle. At the same time, fiction that involves mimicry risks literal association with the discourses that it replays, in which case any critical distance from the spectacle that the novel achieves would collapse and the text would simply reinforce those discourses to the reader. A dialogue between the concepts of realism and spectacle prevents this collapse of meaning by emphasizing the novel’s depiction of social relationships mediated by visual culture as opposed to its mere rendering of visual objects as part of a naturalistic setting. The novel brings into relief the visual discourses in which its characters are situated; from which they derive, often dysfunctionally, their sense of self; and on which they depend, in a manner Debord would consider symptomatic of spectacle, for their sense of reality and presence.

Taking Hardy as an example, the fundamental gesture of *Jude the Ob-*

*scure* is not to attack marriage or the academy, but to expose the manner in which the romanticized revival of medieval visual discourses stunted the ability of Victorian England to respond to the social transformations wrought by industrialization. Jude Fawley grows increasingly alienated from his rural village as its visual connection to history is systematically erased. With the demolition of thatched-roof cottages, the renovation of the church in a fashionable neo-Gothic style, and the razing of hillsides once home to a vibrant peasant life, Jude's sense of a unique connection to the countryside evaporates. Eager to overcome this sense of displacement from his feudal roots, he becomes captivated by the medieval Gothic skyline of Christminster looming on the horizon and resolves to pursue theological scholarship at the university.

Jude's desires and attitudes are largely defined by his fetishized relationship with architecture, one that Hardy models after John Ruskin's influential account of the "Nature of Gothic" in *Stones of Venice*. In this text, Ruskin criticizes neo-Gothic architecture as being untrue to the medieval ethos in which it originated, pointing to the fact that it is produced with a machine-like precision symptomatic of industrial culture's excessive pride in technology and dehumanizing capitalist labor practices. He calls for a revival of authentic medieval architecture as a means of reasserting authentic medieval sensibilities within the increasingly secular and utilitarian industrial culture of England. Jude, who has been relegated because of his social class to repairing the walls of the university as a stoneworker attempts to participate vicariously in the community of scholars within by equating the work of restoration with that of scholarship. Jude compares the act of recreating with "keen edges and smooth curves" to the scholarly activity of restating in "modern prose" ideas that had, like a picturesque ruin, assumed a poetic obscurity with the passage of time (68). However, Jude's Ruskinian sensibilities suggest to him that restoration fundamentally changes the architectural statement instead of merely re-presenting the Gothic form to the contemporary viewer. The original stonework, even when new, would have exhibited the "jagged curves, disdain of precision, irregularity and disarray" of the Gothic "savageness" that Ruskin identifies with the medieval laborer's humility and creative liberties (Hardy 68; Ruskin 171). Jude comes to regard the restored pieces instead as mere simulacra marked by the "precision, mathematical straightness, smoothness, exactitude" that embody, for Ruskin, the reduction of the

modern laborer to a non-thinking machine enslaved to the pursuit of technical perfection (Hardy 68; Ruskin 165).

Although this realization further alienates Jude from his vocation as a stoneworker, he fails to extend this logic to his original comparison between restoration and scholarship. Still determined to gain admission to the university, the extent to which the academy, like the stoneyard, had taken on the aspect of a factory was concealed from Jude by its Gothic facades. Although Jude ultimately concludes that the work of the Christminster stoneyard is nothing but “copying, patching and imitating,” he is blind to these same dynamics at play in the work of Christminster’s scholars. Like Ruskin’s belief that the moral code of the pre-industrial age could be shored up with flying buttresses and ribbed vaults against the evolving ethics of consumer culture, Jude’s faith in the continued relevance of medieval visual discourse remains unshaken. He fails to realize, as the narrator explains, that “medievalism was as dead as a fern-leaf in a lump of coal” (69). Hardy alludes here to Ruskin’s analysis of the moral implications of sculpted fern leaves on the facades of Gothic versus Renaissance cathedrals.<sup>9</sup> A medieval visual discourse had thus become fossilized within an industrial icon. Through this engagement with visual culture, Hardy enables his readers to encounter the deep contradictions in which Jude is mired: the modern world in which “Gothic architecture and its associations had no place” and there was a “deadly animosity of contemporary logic and vision towards so much of what [Jude] held in reverence” (68–69). Blinded by a Ruskinian idealization of Gothic art and his nationalistic vision of the feudal society that it embodies, Jude ignores the feudal hierarchy which lingers intact behind the university’s Gothic walls and refuses entry to self-educated peasants like himself, nor does he anticipate the extent to which those same walls had allowed the logic of the industrial economy to permeate the profession of divinity housed within.<sup>10</sup>

It is through Jude’s subjection to Ruskin’s spectacle of medievalism that the readers of Hardy’s novel become aware of the influence of visual discourses on individual consciousness. In spite of his cousin Sue’s chidings that the future of architecture lay in the neo-classical imperialist style and that the railway station had replaced the cathedral as the center of city life, Jude continues to indulge his medieval fantasies to the point of financial ruin (107, 242).<sup>11</sup> Jude is rejected from the rural community because of his intellectualism and untraditional domestic arrangement with Sue,

literally living and laboring in the shadow of the Gothic fortress of knowledge that forever recedes before him like a mirage. Jude is ultimately reduced to exploiting the public taste for Gothic kitsch by selling “Christminster cakes” modeled after the traceried windows and towers of the university’s facades. Hardy thus embeds within the novel itself an image of the production and consumption of images that constitute the spectacle.

The figure of Jude as an unemployed philosopher hawking Gothic souvenir pastries is emblematic of the tenuous position of realism within the economy of consumption and its ambiguous relationship to spectacle. This same dynamic surfaces more recently in the founding of the Unemployed Philosophers Guild by two brothers who had earned their doctorates but could not obtain academic appointments. Driven like Jude to market their knowledge of culture as kitsch for mass consumption, they ultimately determined that “making smart, funny things”—such as Nietzschean “Will to Power” bars, silk ties emblazoned with selections from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, and Munch-inspired throw pillows that scream when leaned upon—“proved to be almost as satisfying as probing eternal questions.”<sup>12</sup> It is indeed surprising that the Guild has yet to tap the market for Situationist merchandise, such as designer knock-off “Debordian spectacles” or perhaps a deliberately mislabeled “*dérive* compass” bearing Debord’s likeness. It appears that Orwell’s comments were somewhat premature: emancipation will be complete once *Debord* has reached the outer suburbs.

Historical pageantry functions similarly in Woolf’s novel to the role of Gothic architecture in *Jude the Obscure*. Both place the characters in a spectatorial relationship to reality by reviving visual discourses from past ages. Ruskin foists the Gothic form onto Victorian society as if that were its own cultural expression. He plants a “modern flower in a medieval flowerpot”<sup>13</sup> in the hope of reconnecting industrial society to romanticized notions of piety and social morality that Ruskin projects onto its feudal roots. The historical pageant similarly invokes past golden ages to produce a unifying sense of nostalgia and patriotism among the members of the audience. What begins as a typical pageant in *Between the Acts*, however, concludes with various Brechtian subversions of the genre orchestrated by the pageant-master, Miss LaTrobe. Instead of merely conjuring historical kitsch through naturalistic period costumes and archaic diction, LaTrobe ultimately attempts to communicate an avant-garde consciousness to her

audience. She spurs the audience to shrug off the complacency of spectatorship and take an active role in visualizing its own identity and pursuing its own historical legacy.

While certain characters in Woolf's novel resent being placed in the role of spectator, a significant portion of the audience is reluctant to move beyond it. The first half of LaTrobe's pageant is conventional enough not to challenge them to do so. The elderly Lucy Swithin, for example, relishes the role of spectator as a means of participating vicariously in a grand narrative of British history. During an intermission after the scene depicting the Age of Reason, Swithin praises LaTrobe for helping her feel like she "could have played Cleopatra" in spite of her otherwise insignificant existence. Preferring not to hear that she has enabled such a cathartic illusion, LaTrobe willfully misinterprets Swithin's comments as indicating the sort of ethical consciousness that Brecht sought to engender in his "non-Aristotelian" epic theater: "'I might have been—Cleopatra,' Miss LaTrobe repeated. 'You've stirred in me my unacted part,' she meant" (153). Up to this point in the pageant, LaTrobe's attempt to replay the verbal and visual discourses of the Elizabethan and Augustan ages before the critical eye of her audience had failed to move the spectators beyond the simple act of consumption to which they were accustomed. The scenes of Elizabethan and Augustan life never transcended the mere reproduction of visual detail through period costume and iconography that LaTrobe pairs with excerpts from plays showcasing the idealized poetic diction of the age. She shows what was expressed and seen, but not the relationship between individuals and society that reveals what could and could not be expressed and seen. Consequently, regardless of her intentions, these opening scenes of LaTrobe's pageant reinforce the dynamics of the spectacle in a way that mirrors the pulp realism described by Orwell.

The pageant crosses the threshold into the avant-garde, however, when it moves past the Age of Reason to portray the Victorian era and the present day. LaTrobe flouts the conventions of the genre, which dictated that historical pageants were to remain apolitical by focusing only on the events of the "remoter past" (Withington 221–22). She embodies the ethos of Victorian society in the controversial figure of a panoptical constable who soliloquizes on the need for empires to monitor closely both their domestic and colonial populations. Although some members of the audience evaluate the constable's performance aesthetically as a perfect replica

from the period, others become unsettled and confused by the implications of the discourse of surveillance that LaTrobe invokes. Swithin herself even criticizes the very notion of assigning a collective identity to the Victorians, in spite of her earlier rapture at being allowed to stand alongside “the Elizabethans” and “the Augustans.” Having begun to arouse the critical capacities of the pageant-goers, LaTrobe attempts to portray a ten-minute interval of “present-time reality” simply by letting the stage stand empty before the final scene titled “Ourselves.” The audience grows impatient and restless with this lapse in action, however, and the gesture is lost upon them as an accidental delay. The pageant concludes with the tableau of a man, a woman, and several Middle Eastern and African figures rebuilding a wall, a tableau which is suddenly disrupted when the entire cast emerges holding up fragmented mirrors to the audience. LaTrobe jars the audience from its seats at the very climax of its complacency, puncturing the satisfaction of this seemingly optimistic dénouement with self-consciousness and indignation. While the dose of pure naturalism does nothing to shift the paradigm of spectatorship, the conscious act of reflection renders the spectacle momentarily inoperative.

But what does the audience make of this brief window of critical consciousness? Woolf provides two examples of how rapidly such moments of insight are recuperated as spectacle through “official” interpretations that attempt to define their meaning for the audience. As soon as the final tableau takes the stage, a reporter captions it in his notes as a tribute to the work of the League of Nations in rebuilding civilization after the Great War. No sooner are the mirrors put down than the Reverend Streatfield takes the stage to deliver a fundraising speech in which he reads the image of wall-building through the tropes of Christian unity and a humble acceptance of one’s allotted role in life. Yet in light of the mirroring gesture that interrupts it, the wall-building tableau could just as well suggest to the spectators their responsibility to construct authentic relationships with reality as individuals instead of permitting pageant-masters to flatter them with artificially revived nationalistic and collective identities. Ironically, however, the audience calmly, with folded hands, resumes its seats as Streatfield begins to speak, making it clear that the only wall that it is interested in rebuilding is the aesthetic “fourth wall” that had been broken by the mirrors.

As the audience departs, Woolf replays for the reader a pastiche of in-

dividual lines from various conversations that epitomize the constituent tension between avant-garde consciousness and spectacle in realist fiction. These conversations indicate that after an initial struggle to comprehend the meaning of the pageant, many members of the audience revert to making dismissive aesthetic judgments based on familiar (yet arbitrary) generic expectations of theatrical performance. They thus avoid addressing the most provocative implications of LaTrobe's pageant by explaining them away as the idiosyncrasies of outdoor venues, constrained budgets, and amateur actors. Shuffling *en masse* towards the parking lot, the audience is essentially divided between those who believe that the "play" is a failure if there are unanswered questions versus those who conjecture that the pageant's lack of a ready-to-digest meaning (notwithstanding the attempts by the journalist and the preacher to ascribe one) is itself an achievement (200). Once they have reached their cars, however, even the seemingly cognizant audience members become submerged in the practical concerns of the moment and abandon their trains of thought. Yet in this realistic portrayal of both the production and consumption of cultural representations and the recuperation of a moment of critical consciousness within the spectacle, Woolf holds up a broken mirror to her readers and challenges us not to allow the insights of her novel to share the same fate.

As *Jude the Obscure* and *Between the Acts* demonstrate, realist fiction is uniquely suited to visualize the dynamics of spectacle because it is capable of tracing the most subtle alterations of consciousness wrought by the visual discourses in which it is immersed. Debord is adamant that the spectacle is not itself a visual object or a monolithic conspiracy perpetrated against society, but a tissue of social interactions—active, passive, manipulative and spontaneous—that alienate the modern individual. This alienation stems from the nostalgia conjured by vestigial visual discourses, such as Ruskin's account of Gothic "savageness" or the pageant's depiction of "Merrie Olde" Elizabethan England, that cast the subsequent shift toward industrial society as a poignant cultural loss. In some cases, these visual discourses are deliberately revived and forced upon resistant spectators. Other times individuals cling to the role of spectator, perhaps because they have come to rely upon the spectacle for their sense of identity. In any case, an index of valid realism is its ability to portray how, in reality, both deliberate ideological mystifications and spontaneous virtual worlds spawned by desire shape individual consciousness.

Rushdie's depiction in *Midnight's Children* of the competing spectacles of imperialist power and the nationalist "optimism disease" in colonial India achieves precisely this effect. Like Jude Fawley and the audience of LaTrobe's pageant, Rushdie's narrator, Saleem, struggles to discern an authentic identity among the cultural and political representations that are continuously projected onto him. Saleem is transformed into an image within the spectacle at the very moment of his birth on the midnight of the transfer of power from the Raj. Swaddled in the colors of the Indian flag and photographed by journalists, he receives a letter from Nehru declaring that the nation will watch over his life as a "mirror of our own" (143). Countless visual cues of the empire's presence also linger, however. A print of the Millais painting titled *Boyhood of Raleigh* (itself a conflicted visual representation of imperialist fantasy and postcolonial sensibility) hangs above Saleem's crib. The family lives in a cluster of neo-classical mansions named after European palaces, purchasing one cheaply from a departing colonial industrialist on the condition that the Victorian furnishings of the house remain intact. Rushdie does not include such details in the interests of picturesque naturalism or local color, but to indicate the troubled relationship between an individual and the conflicting visual discourses of national and cultural identity into which he is born.

Rushdie achieves his realism by embodying the dynamics of spectacle in the neurotic insecurities of a child whose auspicious birth date has thrust him into a battle for hegemony between a collapsing colonial historical narrative and the equally surreal nationalist fiction that supplanted it. Depicting the manner in which imperial architecture and Haussmann-inspired urban design, neo-Classical portraiture, Eurocentric maps, Western photographic and cinematic practices, and corporate advertising all mediate the narrator's understanding of the real, Rushdie's novel satirizes the fascist spectacle of Western cultural superiority that repressed indigenous historical memory and visual culture during the British occupation. The novel's full consciousness of spectacle, however, lies in Rushdie's depiction of how these same dynamics were then adopted and perpetuated by India's own nationalist movement, thus replicating the very logic of colonization in order to advance the fiction of a politically unified sub-continent.

As Saleem's disproportioned facial features combine with various scars and injuries inflicted upon him during childhood, he evolves into a living map of the partitioned and strife-ridden independent India. He ex-

emphasizes Lukàcs' realist hero as the site upon which social forces are made visible and brought into conflict on a human scale. At the same time, Saleem embodies what Jameson describes as the basis of realism, namely "a society torn between past and future in such a way that the alternatives are grasped as hostile but somehow unrelated worlds" ("Narrative" 158). In creating this character, Rushdie taps into an essence of realism that reveals an unlikely connection between Lukàcs and Jameson in their linking of realism with the function of meta-spectacle.

Of all the visual discourses that mediate reality in Rushdie's novel, cinema is the most ambiguous in its relationship to spectacle. Film technique is closely associated in the novel with the consciousness produced by mimicry and replay in realist fiction. Declaring that "nobody from Bombay should be without a basic film vocabulary," Saleem explicitly utilizes director's commands (e.g. cutaways, fade-outs, zooms, long-shots and close-ups) throughout his autobiographical narrative as a means of re-asserting his sense of agency in a situation that he is otherwise powerless to control (31). One such moment occurs at a restaurant where Saleem discovers that his mother is having an affair. He observes her during a clandestine meeting with her lover, Nadir, through the "cinema-screen window" of the Pioneer Café, narrating an "extreme close-up" on the minute details of a pack of cigarettes on the table in order to avoid having to look at her face (260). Saleem describes leaving "the movie" before the end, having witnessed his mother and Nadir engage in techniques of sublimated eroticism commonly found in censored Bombay films. As with Woolf's incorporation of actual pageantry within *Between the Acts*, these references to film technique are not so much hypertextual in purpose or effect, but participate in a realistic symptomology of the alienated spectator.

Although Rushdie replays cinematic techniques in the novel to produce consciousness of spectacle for the reader, the film industry itself—as experienced spontaneously by the characters—is central to the proliferation of the spectacle. Members of the working class routinely flock to the Pioneer Café to be cast as extras in the latest major studio effort, exhibiting the excessive need that Debord identifies among the alienated to be made visible and present within the discourses of the spectacle. It is no accident that they return to this same café in the afternoon to attend underground meetings of the Communist Party, pursuing what Saleem characterizes simply as "a different set of dreams" (258). Debord locates the

failure of the various socialist movements of the twentieth century in their attempt to resist capitalism while replicating its rationalist logic. Instead of combating the spectacle, such movements contribute to it by imposing onto reality a utopian conception of life in which consciousness has lost contact with “the historical struggle” (Debord 59). It is in this sense that Rushdie associates the Communists with the fame-seeking would-be movie extras as various types of dreamers who no longer maintain a productive relationship to the real.

Rushdie establishes a similar connection between the film industry and the spectacle of socialism in the character of Saleem’s uncle, Hanif Aziz. A successful screenwriter of exotic romances, Hanif experiences a Brechtian conversion late in his career through which he forsakes Bollywood’s “temple of illusions” and attempts to rouse to historical awareness Indian audiences that had been “dreaming for five thousand years” (292). Hanif blames mainstream cinema for perpetuating exotic stereotypes of Indian culture (the very same stereotypes, in fact, that Rushdie would later be accused of perpetuating by writing *Midnight’s Children*). He commits himself instead to writing scripts with a socialist consciousness of “ordinary people and social problems” and which portray “work, not kissing” (290, 293). His final film project depicts a chutney factory run by women and includes lengthy scenes explicating the technicalities of the pickling process, prompting Saleem to describe Hanif as an “arch-disciple of naturalism” (292). Reminiscent of Woolf’s critique of Bennett, however, Hanif’s dry materialism simply kindles the spectacle with yet another simulacrum of reality in which life refuses to dwell. Rushdie echoes Orwell’s concern regarding the confusion of realism with amoral, quasi-journalistic naturalism that, like *No Orchids*, is characterized by “matter of fact descriptions of the outré and bizarre, and their reverse, namely heightened, stylized versions of the everyday” (261). Rushdie observes that while such fiction bears a material resemblance to reality, it reproduces “a picture of the world of startling uniformity” in which its capacity to elicit an ethical response is displaced by a “terrifying, nonchalant violence” (261, 262).

Perhaps among the three novels discussed here, *Midnight’s Children* is the most poignant example of how the function of meta-spectacle in the realist novel will always, to some extent, be constrained by its reception. It is possible that the cult of celebrity that attends certain authors can actually undermine the ideological awareness that they strive to generate

through their fiction. Furthermore, those who look to the novel exclusively as a recreational encounter with the familiar will often be satisfied regardless of whether visual culture is present simply as kitsch or is consciously replayed as a discourse (a chameleon-like hybridity of realist fiction that is, at least for Homi Bhabha, a blessing and not a curse). However, as we have seen, authentic expressions of realism disrupt the act of consumption by alienating readers from the generic expectations that they bring to the text and compelling them to respond ethically instead of aesthetically. Like Philip Rahv's concept of a distinctly proletarian catharsis and Brecht's non-Aristotelian theater befitting the "audience of the scientific age," the realist novel urges the spectator not to observe, but to *interfere* (Brecht 26, 193). It is through realist fiction's portrayal of social relationships mediated by visual discourses that the spectator can become empowered to respond to the conditions of spectacle.

Commenting that "I trust we are by now far enough along in our consciousness of the narrative structure of historicity that we can forget about hoary old chestnuts about the evils of totalization or teleology," Jameson expresses a desire to move beyond the apparently exhausted field of metahistory, and perhaps rightly so (*Turn* 73). It is time to shift our focus to the novel's engagement with visual culture. Acknowledging that "there is some agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional and the like," Jameson asks whether postmodern art merely "replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism" or also achieves moments in which "it resists that logic" (*Turn* 20). If the realist novel can be said to perform this function, it does so through meta-spectacle. As demonstrated by these far from exhaustive examples taken from Hardy, Woolf, and Rushdie, the novel and its various "realisms" do not so much totalize or naturalize a particular act of representation, but make visible the myriad ways in which such representations penetrate, indeed saturate, the given moment.

## Notes

1. Philip Rahv draws a similar conclusion in his essay titled "Proletarian Literature," in which he writes, "The kind of casuistry which may easily pose for truth within the pseudo-context of a political speech or editorial will be exposed in all its emptiness

once it is injected into the real context of a living experience, such as the art of fiction tries to represent” (303).

2. Walter Benjamin makes a similar observation regarding the aesthetic relationship to violence engendered by photography and cinema in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
3. Debord’s argument in the chapter of *Society of the Spectacle* titled “Negation and Consumption in the Cultural Sphere” is analogous in some ways to Benjamin’s account in “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” of the transformation over time of an art-object’s initial “cult value” within religious or civic ritual into its “exhibition value” within the spectacle of consumer culture.
4. The promotion of this event exemplifies a deep contradiction between the premise of Dada and curatorial practice. It is difficult to imagine what would have been more offensive to Dadaists: being referred to as “icons,” having their gestures staged as live performance pieces enacted by art historians during an event called the “Zapping Dada Evening,” or seeing their gestures distilled into discrete “works” in an exhibition funded by global retail and e-commerce conglomerates Yves Saint Laurent and PPR.
5. In “Strata or Historical Formations,” Gilles Deleuze refers to distinct verbal and visual expressions of an historical epoch as *statements* and *visibilities* that combine to form legible historical *strata*. Pierre Bourdieu refers similarly in *The Rules of Art* to the “field of possibles” (206).
6. Brecht regarded his initial alienation effects, such as displaying the titles of scenes on stage, as a “primitive attempt at literarizing the theater” (43). Brecht abandoned his theoretical terminology when he sensed that it was becoming distilled into formal aesthetic concepts (276, 281); regarding the tenets of “epic theater,” he warned that “temporary structures have to be built, but the danger is that they will remain” (215).
7. In *Realist Vision*, Peter Brooks identifies several points of continuity between the realist perspective and the fiction of Woolf, Joyce, and Proust. Brooks suggests that modernist literature is not a rejection of the idea that the novel can trace human experience within the world, but instead represents a shift in method from depicting the world as objectively observed to witnessing the “selectivity of consciousness applied to the phenomenal world, and the establishment of a perspective resolutely within consciousness as it deals with the objects of the world” (211).
8. For a more extensive account of the critical reception of *Midnight’s Children*, please see my article titled “Airbrushed History: Photography, Realism and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*” (*Mosaic* 38.1 [2005]: 1–16).

9. Comparing relief sculpture adorning the Ducal Palace in Venice, certain panels of which were completed during the Gothic period and others during the Renaissance, Ruskin finds that the Gothic artist lavished great effort on ornamental detail, especially with regard to the natural appearance of the veins running through each leaf. The patterns in the leaves on the Renaissance panel lack a corresponding vitality and are, in Ruskin's view, excessively schematized and repetitive, characteristics that he associates with contemporary industrial culture in England. Ruskin thus identifies the Gothic fern-leaf as a visible symptom of the age's superior moral sense (196).
10. Catherine Ingraham has observed that "architecture cannot in any direct sense embody any of the things that we have traditionally thought it could embody, such as nobility, the spirit of the age, social well-being, grandeur, harmony, the grotesque, or fascism" (137). As exemplified by Jude's ultimate disillusionment with Gothic architecture, she finds it telling that this myth of embodiment is only ever visible in its dysfunction, namely "when the embodying act fails in some way" (137).
11. Walter Pater argued in *The Renaissance* that Ruskin's spectacle of medievalism as a monolithic age of faith ignored the ubiquitous subversive elements within Gothic ornament and reduced the complexity of Gothic expression to propaganda. Sue adopts this Paterian skepticism toward Jude's obsession with medievalism, but capitulates to spectacle herself by mediating her own identity through an exclusively neo-classical iconography.
12. "About Us." *Unemployed Philosopher's Guild*. 2006. 18 July 2006 <[http://www.philosophersguild.com/index.lasso?page\\_mode=about](http://www.philosophersguild.com/index.lasso?page_mode=about)>.
13. Hardy uses this image in *A Laodicean* to describe Paula Power, an heiress to an industrial fortune who purchases a ruined Norman castle and defaces it with various neo-classical renovations.

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