

SPECTACLE

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Spectacle

GERMAN VISUAL CULTURE

VOLUME TWO

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Introduction: What is "German Spectacle"?

The present volume is the second in the German Visual Culture series, which seeks to highlight work on visual culture done within the broad and expanding field of German Studies. Many of the following essays were culled from a series of panels at the German Studies Association (GSA) conference in 2012, a panel devoted to a cross-disciplinary and intermedia examination of spectacle within German contexts. These presentations on "German spectacle" were not limited by geography nor to only those manifestations of spectacle within the historic or contemporary boundaries of the German nation state. Neither was the concept of "German spectacle" located exclusively in specific language or cultural communities, as in those communities who speak or identify with the German language. Finally, the presentations did not define themselves through a focus on a single medium of expression, such as photography, painting, or theater. Such a broad framing begs the question, what is "German spectacle"?

The initial call for presentation proposals for the GSA panel and a subsequent call for contributions for this volume were purposefully and productively open, refusing to answer the question of "German spectacle" directly:

From battlefield pageantry to political posturing, from Schaufensterhypnose to cinematic subterfuge, "spectacle" has been and continues to be a concept with multiple points of reference, as well as a site of extreme negotiation and intervention, in German contexts. But what are the unique characteristics of spectacle in the "German context," if such unique characteristics exist at all?

Taking the above call for submissions and the related openness of what precisely defines "German spectacle" as its points of departure, this volume seeks to map the concept of "spectacle" against the specific historical

circumstances of Germany, its divided heritage, its language, and its border-crossing traditions. There have been a number of texts that have sought to examine the breadth of the concept of spectacle. Few if any published texts have sought to examine the concept of spectacle in a German context. To these ends, the collected essays presented here speak directly and indirectly to what makes German spectacle distinctly "German."

Yet German spectacle cannot be examined without acknowledging spectacle's role in the influential work of Guy Debord. Writing in La Société du spectacle [The Society of the Spectacle] in 1967, Debord suggests the contours of what might be considered a decidedly national conception of "spectacle," but one that owes its orientation to a decidedly Western philosophical framework. Debord notes that what he describes as "spectacle" is "heir to all the weakness of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision."3 The ocularcentric nature of the epistemological ambitions to which Debord alludes finds itself embodied in the nation-state, as an outgrowth of the Enlightenment project within the Western philosophical tradition. Debord goes so far in his 1967 text as to suggest that the "social cleavage that the spectacle expresses is inseparable from the modern State, which, as the product of the social division of labor and the organ of class rule, is the general form of all social division." The product of both a philosophical tradition focused on ocular availability and a social order emphasizing "enlightened" hierarchy, the specific spectacle - "the" spectacle - to which Debord turns our distracted attention is readily bound up with traditions, with culture, with a social existence inseparable from the nation-state within which it functions - and to which it functions to give legitimacy.

Fast forward from 1967 to 1991. The cataclysmic, revolutionary events encapsulated in the deceptively simple phrase "the fall of the Berlin Wall"

4 Debord 20.

See, for example, Jonathan Crary, "Spectacle, Attention and Counter-memory," October 50 (Fall 1989): 97–107.

See, for a notable exception, Gayle Finney, ed., Visual Culture in Twentieth-Century Germany: Text as Spectacle (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (London: Zone Books, 1995): 17.

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became signposts, for some, of the triumph of Western democracy over Soviet-style communism. For others, however, the phrase signified a different type of victory. Debord was quick to explain the significance of this particular "fall" in spectacular terms. In the preface to the third French edition of La Société du spectacle, a preface dated 30 June 1992, he examines the end of East German communism not in strictly political terms but rather in broadly symbolic, spectacular ones. For Debord, "the fall of the Berlin Wall" becomes the epitome of the "spectacle striving toward modernization and unification," toward what he also describes as the "ideology of capitalism" or the "dictatorial freedom of the market." The emphasis on "ideology" by Debord is important. The society of the spectacle, a system of organizing the world as representation, has advanced to such an extent that democracy itself has become an empty signifier of freedom - but not freedom itself. For scholars of German Studies, "the fall of the Berlin Wall" provides another historical marker of Debord's spectacle as spectacle manifests itself in various forms, and at various times, in German contexts. For Debord and his La Société du spectacle, "the fall of the Berlin Wall" is an historical signpost marking the triumph of spectacular modernization.

If there is a distinctly "German" concept of spectacle that might be gleaned from Debord's examination of the "the fall of the Berlin Wall," it is as a signifier and a signpost. Spectacle acts as a signifier for Debord of capitalism's historical development and its contemporary domination. Given both the historical and the contemporary dimensions of Debord's theory of the spectacle, it should come as no surprise that German culture, beyond the historic and historically dynamic borders of the German nation-state, has a rich and complex engagement with spectacle. The term "Schauspiel," for example, was originally identified with any public display. The concept took on the more specific meaning of a performance sometime in the late eighteenth century, a performance that has characteristics of both a tragedy and a comedy. The Schauspiel demonstrates an historically complex relationship to spectacle, a relationship in which display gave way to a story with a happy ending and in which the hero does not die.

The German philosophical and theatrical engagement with "spectacle" cannot be contained by Debord's framework, of course, nor by the "society of the spectacle" that he is at great pains to reveal. That "society"

finds its cultural bedfellow in the so-called culture industry analyzed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in their 1947 Dialektik der Aufklärung [Dialectic of Enlightenment], a text that also questions some of the West's most radical political transformations. In Horkheimer and Adorno's "culture industry thesis," the Frankfurt school tandem provide abstract, kaleidoscopic ruminations about the role of capitalism and its impact on aesthetic sensibility and sense perception. Deep at the heart of the cultural industry thesis is a charged critique of modern capitalism and Western culture, a critique in many ways similar to Debord's intervention. Horkheimer and Adorno challenge the supposedly enlightened citizens of Debord's "society of the spectacle," individuals who operate without awareness of the limitations placed upon the very possibility of authentic humanity, to recognize these limits as themselves the conditions of late capitalism. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest it is not society that is this "false consciousness" of Enlightenment-gone-wrong. Rather, the cultural productions that take the guise of leisure, of after-work release, insidiously support individual false consciousness and the related inability for collective action and social change. Whereas Horkheimer and Adorno's cultural industry structures society, Debord's spectacle replaces it.

Debord's manifesto-like treatise on capitalism's creation of a false society as spectacle is in sharp contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectical elucidation of the impact of cultural products on sensory relations and aesthetic sensibilities. The dialectical dimension of the "culture industry thesis" is further clarified in Adorno's later writings. Among the most significant of these later texts are Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie* [Aesthetic Theory], culled from notes written between 1961 and 1969 but published posthumously in 1970, and his 1963 radio address for the International Radio University Program over the Hessian Broadcasting System, published as a German text in 1967 and later translated into English as "The Culture Industry Reconsidered." Adorno develops further an important yet simple distinction made in the radio address in his *Ästhetische Theorie*, a distinction

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); and Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture Industry