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# THE CULTURE OF MODERN SPECTACLE

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**Apstrakt:** *Savremenu medijsku kulturu određuje logika postmodernog spektakla koja se širi na sve sfere života. Postmoderni kapitalizam, uz pomoć spektakla, pretvara svakodnevni život u zabavu. Ta zabava zapravo je lažno osećanje sreće, pop kolotečina, koja guta alternative pa je, stoga, jedno pasivno potrošačko društvo. Današnji mediji poseduju jedinstvenu moć informisanja i plave ličnost raznim podacima. Oni omogućuju modernom čoveku da zna mnogo, a razume malo. Ova rasprava donekle osvetljava trenutno vrlo popularni reality show, telo i sport, i završava viđenjem modernih medija koji identitet današnjeg čoveka pretvaraju u pačvork.*

**Ključne reči:** *Medijska kultura, reality show, sport, zabava, vrednosti i etika*

## *Introduction*

“Spectacle” in its classic sense means a performance, a film of the Hollywood type with picturesque, numerous scenes, distinguished by its specific pomposity. However, the spectacle may signify a certain event or happening, attracting attention due to its nature or extraordinariness. For Guy Debord, a French theorist, the spectacle joins and explains diverse cultural phenomena, manifested through the media which aim at the consumer society. It makes use of the visual presence of the spectacle because according to Debord sight is the most abstract and mystified correspondence of the general image about the world today. Therefore, media spectacles are those phenomena of the media culture which embody basic values of the modern society and have a great influence on thought and action of a modern person, exercised by its extravagance and the possibility of misleading.

Thus, the spectacle in its radical sense is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

But if Debord understands the spectacle as a general concept which describes the society as a whole, Douglas Kellner, an American philosopher and cultural theorist, uses the concept of the media spectacle to describe specific events, phenomena and cultural forms, transmitted through the media technology. According to Kellner, the media contribute to the concealment or reproduction of power and authority relations, which nevertheless gives real opportunities for media literacy and the critical analysis of the reality. Kellner shows that the media culture of today is defined by the logic of the spectacle as the area of social life is increasingly colonized by the commercialization, materialization and bureaucratization processes.

Contrary to Debord, convinced that the spectacle is merely one-dimensional, creating quasi-totalitarian authority, Kellner believes that spectacles may have plural and heterogeneous features. Claiming that, Kellner takes a stand against the opinion that viewers are either inherently critical or passive and conformist as assumed by Adorno, Horkheimer or Debord.

Thus Kellner steers a middle course.

The discussion draws our attention to how the media spectacle has taken all areas of life from economy to fun, everyday life and politics. The last part of the article presents a critical reflection on the observations of the current situation in the modern society.

### *The Hypnosis of Reality Shows*

Contemporary television is the media of spectacular shows. Big Brother, Top Model, Pop Idol, Star Academy, Dancing with the Stars, The Bar, The Farm, The X Factor Solitary, Fear Factor, Got Talent, The Apprentice, Reality Circus, Just the Two of Us, The Biggest Loser are only a few titles of the most popular reality shows in various western countries. Obviously, the magic of film and stage has changed. There are more and more banal individuals, everyday stories, typical situations, which are happily presented by the media. What is screened is seemingly spontaneous

behaviour of anonymous people offering the intimate details of other peoples' lives. Is that an example of the culture of voyeurism or exhibitionism or narcissism or merely a culture of the reality of the spectacle? To peep through the keyhole definitely must be thrilling and viewers take a special delight in observing how other people live instead of them.

It is no secret that the idea of the first Big Brother was brought up on 4 September 1997 during a brainstorming session in the John de Mol Producties production company. Its first show was released in the Netherlands. It was named after the cult dystopian novel by George Orwell. Big Brother is a three-month psychological experiment in which fifteen contestants are closed in a camera controlled indoor area so that they may be observed. The contestants are amateurs, they compete with their own privacy: namely with their passions, habits, emotions, mind. The rules of the play require that the contestants themselves eliminate the worst one. Bad in this case means boring, annoying, incompatible, belonging to the minority. Some perceive social Darwinism others totalitarianism in the play.

The Farm is a reality show variation, created by Strix, a Swedish producer. Sold to more than 40 countries, the Farm is together with Survivor and the Bar one of their most popular reality shows. The Celebrity Farm, embellished with rural glamour has been the top-rated reality show in Slovenia in the last decade. It has the rate of 170,000 viewers per show. The Farm has been written about by Slovenian columnists in broadsheets and magazines, speculated about in tabloid stories, commented on forums, it has caught the attention of the guardians of morals, talked about also by those who would otherwise be ashamed to admit that they watch it at all.

Is such a situation a specificity of our time? Do people need as much fun as they can afford to forget about unpleasant circumstances or is the popularity of such shows due to poor programmes of other television companies? However, reality shows have become a media phenomenon. It has to be noted that contestants are chosen after a carefully planned selection process in order to achieve certain effects in the show. In any case, people who are most likely to

undergo personality transformation in their own lives are searched for.

All the happening in a reality show is actually a performance for contestants. They are forced to play their own personality 24 hours a day. However, their natural way of performance intensifies strongly by the producers' creation of stressful situations. People love watching quarrels, real and genuine emotions, stammering, frightened, weeping, enthusiastic, euphoric, furious, sweaty, dirty, lustful faces. But, is it actually as completely genuine as it seems at first sight? Nevertheless, every contestant in a reality show is deeply aware of the fact that they are being filmed.

Telereality creates a kind of "watch" and "be in the distance", which brings the reality of spectacle in every home. An anonymous viewer watches an anonymous character playing their own role and at the same time has a feeling that they themselves are being watched in their own role as if on stage. A few years ago, such a level of pathology was reached in Italy that psychiatrists had to draw attention to the addiction in senior citizens and home-makers. They synchronized their own lives with those in the Grande Fratella house residents. Psychologists warn that reality shows become problematic when people start to live their own lives through the perspective of the reality show heroes. Undoubtedly, for the population who neglects their own life due to dissatisfaction and lives in a virtual reality such a perception of reality shows is psychologically unhealthy. According to Debord, a spectacle is ideology par excellence. It highlights and manifests the core of all the ideological problems: impoverishment, enslavement and the denial of real life. The all-round presence and consumption of the spectacle actively forms our lives.

Media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture which embody basic values of modern society. Alongside, reality show causes and expands various types of disagreements. In order to prove the poor quality of a certain programme, opponents point out its surface, perverted, decadent aspects; moreover, advocates of such views feel called to act as defenders of the right of anyone to use their own bodies and to express their own opinions. Thus, reality show has been creating a new view of intimacy and a new way

of communication and has become a strong factor of the new culture development.

*Body and Sports as the Spectacle*

Scott Lasch quotes Foucault stating that contemporary authorities control people by visual body observation. Power is immanent in/to the society and therefore individualizes, normalizes and mobilizes human bodies. Power exercised on them is not visible physical cruelty but a steady gaze which has an effect on the human soul and arouses guilty conscience attached to the body.<sup>1</sup>

Public debates and social discussions are all engaged with bodies: the body which must be beautiful, properly nourished, tastefully dressed, trained and fit. Consequently, the society follows with appropriate recipes, low-fat diets, fashion novelties, recreational sports, etc. Following this logic, it is necessary for the body to be almost paranoidly protected, checked out and constantly improved. Any banal coincidence may be a fatal error. For instance, if a host or a contestant trips in the studio it is something completely different from stumbling over on the street. In TV reality that is a metaphor for personal indecisiveness, hesitation, clumsiness, slow-wittedness.<sup>2</sup>

A healthy body and health in general is widely regarded as the highest welfare, although nobody can exactly define health because it is unsusceptible to proof unlike sickness and thus cannot be created. Today, the cult of health worship is acquiring exceptional extension of the form of a new world religion. Many do not pray to go to heaven, but to get there as late as possible and preferably healthy. Life expectancy has prolonged, the media has been bringing amazing news about remarkable feats of 70, 80 and 90 plus year old people such as Former President George H. W. Bush who jumped with a parachute on his 85 birthday. Dietary movements enjoy great sympathy. Their ascetic earnest reaches far beyond the penitential movements in the Middle Ages.

<sup>1</sup> Lasch S., *Sociologija postmodernizma*, Znanstveno in publicistično središče, Ljubljana 1993, p. 65-70.

<sup>2</sup> Šturm L., Poglej in ugani, kaj je zabavnega, in: *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* XXII, Ljubljana 1994, p. 181.

Let us have a closer look of the human body from the sports aspect. On the one hand, the Olympics present a large manifestation and worship of physical abilities, self-transcendence and physical efforts; on the other hand, there are power, glory, politics and capital games behind the scenes. Sporting events today are far away from being a place of sporting, fighting spirit. Contrary, they are turning into spectacles of manipulative corporations, advertising, prize contests and various subliminal seductions.

Bourdieu's most famous work *La distinction (Distinction)* was published three decades ago<sup>3</sup>. In 1998, the International Sociological Association proclaimed it one of the ten most important 20<sup>th</sup> century sociological works. According to him, formation and control of the body is largely socially defined and together with the individual lifestyle passes into the ownership of society. Victories, medals and titles of championships are accompanying products of sports which privilege a competitor and their team. Accumulation and the number of victories have become fetish objects of judgements and classifications. Alpine skiing, for instance, is a classical example: now it is hundredths, not seconds that count, which has reached the level of absurdity, the importance of intermediate time for hysterical viewers, the absoluteness of the record, totality and glorification of the victory.

It is worth mentioning at least a few types of visual transformation of sports broadcasts. Their starting point is *prime camera* or *prime position*, the position most often used for the general viewpoint of action, which provides the viewer with an ideal standpoint. *Cutaways* are specific forms of exact short cuts, which accelerate action during time out, for example in boxing and tennis, while prime camera is remaining as the basis. Another type is *cutting patterns* with the integral combination of cameras, typical of football match broadcast.

*Spatial mobility* is used with sports such as rowing, racing; *spatial fragmentation* is relevant to the sports taking place in major areas such as Formula1, golf, skiing. Zooming in achieves a special impact in terms

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<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu P., *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1998.

of personalization, namely it makes a sporting event especially gripping for the viewer. It is able to follow the competitor to the details of their facial muscles, mime, gestures before the match or just before the end, side and back views of their bodies, which adds to the unique intimation and occasional erotization of the situation.<sup>4</sup>

### *Reflection on the Contemporary Media Culture*

“Is the Western society becoming more and more brutal?” was the headline on the front page of Spiegel, a German magazine, not long ago. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brutality, which witnessed more than 150 million violent deaths, more than any other century both in number and by percent, has been continuing in numerous new military battlefields. Violence has taken the form of spectacular terrorist attacks, starting with 11 September 2001 in the USA, then wars on a local level as well as between civilizations. Ferocity has moved to the family, school, nursery, public transport, sports ground, road, screen. It has invaded music, spectacular music videos and concerts – often on the verge of aggression tolerance – to promote style, fashion, beauty, etc. trends.

Nonetheless, spectacle has been reflected in video and computer games, which address teenagers effectively in a competitive and often an extremely aggressive tone. Today, many parents are pleased if their child is glued to the TV or computer screen as long as possible hoping that they are amusing themselves. Research has shown that parents engage with their children ten hours less per week on average as their own parents did with them. Thus, it is the media that form young people. Immanuel Kant, the thinker, had to inquire captains about the world, great events happening in other far-away countries, whereas anyone in Western society today is able to find easily what they are interested in. Today, computer and television have a greater impact on human attitudes, habits and interpersonal relationships than most measures from the ministry of the family and education. The general condemnation of the media certainly is unac-

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<sup>4</sup> Kotnik V., Neposredni športni prenos in TV gledalec, in: *Monitor* ISH IV/1-4, Ljubljana 2002, p. 99-105.

ceptable. However, it would be unwise to ignore the negative influences of the new information technologies and mass media.

Emil Durkheim, the father of western social sciences, regarded the present situation as the sign of social degradation of society or loosening of social ties among its members. There are various explanations as to why the former cultural cohesion and unity is turning into the culture of separation and shatterdness well presented in most theatre plays.

Vincente Descombes, a French sociologist, has attributed the guilt for these changes to modern information and communication technology. That is why modern people no longer dwell in a specific place, but only at a certain point in space. Staying at a definite point means that people living in their own vicinity are their neighbours. Unlike this perception, the modern media eliminates localized neighbourhood. In the electronic information net, the localization of a person communicating with another one is exchangeable, both are anonymous, geographically dispersed, deprived of their own cultural, social and emotional characteristics. Thus, communication today is a wild circulation of messages in all directions without any real social note and the humanity plays an amazing spectacle with an unpredictable end. An English anecdote has it that a traveller asks a rider how it is possible to have such an obedient horse. The rider says, "Because I always want to go where my horse is leading me."

The media today have a unique power of bringing information and overwhelming a person with various data. They enable a modern person to know much, but understand little. Above all, that is a question of ethics. The world turning into a global village is strengthening its ethical relativism, which defines itself on the premise that certain nations or members of some cultures morally condemn what others take as morally permissible or even correct. Contrary, extensive intercultural research has shown that this argument does not hold water. For instance, there is no culture in the world which does not appreciate equity and fairness. However, the media have decided to ignore that by promoting other values such as self-indulgence, reputation, power which justify also selfishness, narcissism and irresponsibility leaving a per-



son with the patchwork identity. Such a person generally does not raise questions about the meaning of life or human tasks, rather they pick up what is fashionable, grab the pleasures of life, hold the paradoxical conviction of following their own mind and will. An example of such a person is homo economicus, an economic human, who actually feels, lives and thinks as capitalists want them to feel, live and think. Thus, spectacle has subordinated live humans proportionally to their subordination to economy.

### *Conclusion*

Humanity has made a giant leap from the “cave man” to the caves in a human. Former times saw the main development of people towards becoming a good person; all efforts were made into that direction, also in terms of spectacles in the narrow meaning of the word. In contrast, the modern human has set self-indulgence as the main goal of life and the prime moral justification of their own actions. Following that stream, they seek primarily sensual and much less intellectual, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual pleasures. Due to the nature of sensual pleasures they need more frequent and stronger adrenalin stimuli in various, or better all areas of their lives in order to detect them at all because they are more and more empty and apathetic inside. Thus, people try to grab always new stimuli, becoming less and less selective, looking for easily accessible pleasures and find it hard to overcome potential obstacles.

According to Debord, Kellner researches the consequences and effects of the fact that societies are all imbued with the production and consumption of images, goods and events where entertainment industry has the central position. Kellner believes that spectacles embody central social values, wishes and fears. These dramatize social conflicts and somehow point out an escape from problems, which however happens rarely my opinion. The media, on the one hand, make it possible to develop critical literacy and analysis of the existence, on the other, it contribute to the concealment and consolidation of power and authority relations.

The more interest a media spectacle arouses, the stronger basic desires of a certain social situation are

expressed. Post-modern capitalism has turned everyday life and culture into entertainment with the help of spectacle. In fact, such entertainment is a fake feeling of happiness, pop mainstream, swallowing up alternatives and therefore a passive consumption society.

If commercial companies want to thrive in a competitive marketplace, they need to add the so called fun factor. It reflects in the working environment as well as on internet sites, advertisements, giant posters, etc. The modern, worn out and a bit depressive human needs to be flooded with as much entertainment as possible to make as much money as possible from them at the end. Marketing and advertising play a key role in that process with the help of stars and celebrities. It is less and less important what is true and real, much more vital is what looks real. It is quite relative what a certain star is, what message they bring. In fact, it is notable to have groupies and fans around, to appear in the media which enables all means for the maintenance of the artificial image of perfection.

In contrast to these guide stars and autocratic rule of market economy, the goal of all human life efforts and the society should be a fully developed harmonious, ethical and stable personality in every aspect. A human who actively strives for this goal is capable of personal development also in the circumstances which make other people choose sheep-like mediocrity, madness or suicide.

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Erika Prijatelj

## THE CULTURE OF MODERN SPECTACLE

### Summary

Media culture of today is defined by the logic of victorious spectacle expanding to all areas of life. Post-modern capitalism has turned everyday life and culture into entertainment with the help of spectacle. In fact, such entertainment is a fake sense of happiness, pop mainstream, swallowing up alternatives and therefore a passive consumption society. The media today have a unique power of bringing information and overwhelm a person with various data. They enable a modern person to know much, but understand little. The discussion has cast some light on presently very popular reality shows, body and sports. It concludes with the reflection on modern media, which leave a person of this age with a patchwork identity.

**Key words:** *Media culture, reality show, sports, entertainment, values and ethics*

