

Foucault Studies

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ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 15, pp. 176-179, February 2013

REVIEW

Yunus Tuncel, *Toward a Genealogy of Spectacle: Understanding Contemporary Spectacular Experiences* (Ålborg: EyeCorner Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-8792633071

Yunus Tuncel's *Towards a Genealogy of Spectacle* is a complex study of the many layers and forces of contemporary spectacles. While the author draws from a stimulating array of sources, such as Kant and Nietzsche to Heidegger and Foucault, he elaborates a position which expands upon some of their theoretical limitations. He is especially critical of Debord for treating mass media as the whole of modern spectacular experience. This line of critique, as well as his overall genealogical investigation of spectacle, is both fascinating and compelling. The only grievance one might have with it, as I shall put forth near the end of this review, pertains to the influential assumption that we can distinguish ecstatic social life from its homogeneous, instrumentalized appropriation.

Analyzing the problems of spectacle begins with a study of its particular historical *pathos*, which for Tuncel, corresponds to a concrete cultural system of values. (36) These values are brought together and expressed through a confluence of activities labeled by Tuncel as the 'outer forces' of his genealogical project: the spectacle itself, the spectators, and the makers of the spectacle. A second layer of this project represents the 'inner forces' of everyone participating in the spectacle: imagination, feeling, ecstasy, violence, music, the unconscious, and so forth. The entire project is therefore divided between outer and inner forces, but this hardly reflects some kind of natural dichotomy within the experience of spectacles since the latter will always include both types. This methodological approach of treating the forces separately is chosen, however, because of the *pathos* of spectacles under investigation: "Since we are operating under the Spectacle/spectacle *coupure* or cut of our age... this division has become inevitable." (39) Indeed, this acknowledgement of today's *coupure*, or the cut made between the spectacle and the spectator, helps form a significant part of Tuncel's motivation for undertaking his study of spectacles: in an age pervaded with technological reproduction and mass media, we should be concerned with how the forces of spectacle come together to affect our collective culture. It is precisely this concern which informs not only Tuncel's methodology, as well as his underlying motives, but moreover shapes his understanding of the potential role of grand artistic spectacles as a way of rejuvenating our modern malaise.

Some of the hardest problems facing us pertain to the invisible, unconscious aspects of spectacle. Very quickly it becomes apparent that exploring this hidden dimension is crucial for determining how best to remedy the modern *coupure*. In later chapters, Tuncel refers to the absence around which the signs of spectacle revolve the 'cipher' that holds them together. Lacking

this function of the cipher, the vitality of spectacle deteriorates. (119) Tuncel analyzes this modern predicament from a number of perspectives. Rethinking Freud's psychoanalytic meaning of the unconscious, for example, he elaborates the epistemological limits of both individual and collective awareness, defends perspectivism, and eloquently describes human consciousness as "only a thin slice on the surface of the ocean of unconsciousness." (87) The modern assumption that we can make everything intelligible forgets the rejuvenating roles of poetry, myth, and ecstasy. (100) It therefore follows that the silent aspects of spectacle need to be retained and cultivated as a way of celebrating the simulacra of our collective unconscious, i.e., that which exceeds "the limits of everyday communication." (65) Doing this is fundamental to the experience of raw ecstasy that keeps all of us open to the cycles of time and change, for we cannot open ourselves to something infinitely changing by reducing it to a narrowly circumscribed field of conscious knowledge. Unsurprisingly, then, Tuncel will point us in the direction of ecstatic loss: we experience ourselves in this manner when we break through ordinary modes of living and communication. (52) Some formations of culture perpetuate normalized boundaries of individuality, ethics, politics, life, and discourse; while others create outlets for the boundless, Dionysian forces pulsating within each of us. The allusions to Nietzsche are sustained in chapter 12 when Tuncel takes up the issue of temporality. Insofar as creation and destruction are intimately connected in our ecstatic experience of change, Tuncel reads the eternal return as a form of cosmic time: "This sense of time that the ancients upheld, that one can find in the primordial *mythic time* is what Nietzsche calls the eternal return or recurrence of the same." (109) This recurrence of the same extends beyond ordinary language, and thus once again we are reminded of our own limits in the experience of a truly artistic spectacle.

Ignoring these limits will set us down the path of passive spectatorship, in which the modern *coupure* finds its quintessential manifestation. The signs of this condition include, in some form or another, superficiality, pseudo-individualism, diminished empathy, loss of myth, and the abstract separation of pleasure from pain. Transgressing everyday boundaries of morality can lead to "deep and intense emotions," (52) the sort of emotions that are necessarily tied to the illimitable nature of unconscious, ecstatic experience. Doing away with such emotions is the very definition of a superficial mode of life and this superficiality is likewise accompanied by pseudo-individualism precisely because the latter follows and obeys the herd mentality. Modern spectators are obsessed with novel trends and rebellious attitudes, while distancing themselves from what is truly challenging: "The ecstatic unity, on the other hand, does not strip away the individual uniqueness of the participant; on the contrary, it enriches it." (54) Unless we open ourselves up to the ecstatic forces of artistic creativity, individuality remains an ideological trap. Of course, that should not suggest that there is an original form of self-identity to which authentic individuality adheres. To the contrary, Tuncel continually and passionately affirms the significant role of myth in our artistic spectacles: "[T]he spectacle stands in the middle of the cycle between art and culture, while myths function as the transfiguring mirror." (72) Whereas myth serves as an artistic channel for self-transformation, the ideologically imprisoned self avoids the eternal scope of change underlying its illusory captivity. The explanation for this avoidance is connected to one of the other signs of modern, reified spectatorship, namely our relationship to pain. Tuncel argues against the Socratic traditions of separating joy from pain and suffering, while observing that our "contemporary pa-

thos of pain and pleasure and the entertainment system that relies on it are taking this ontological dualism as given." (79) In the contemporary spectacle we desire only to be entertained, implying that we suppress the fact that pain and pleasure are inextricably bound together. Although we are drawn to images of war and violence, we feel very little empathy for the suffering of others: "[I]n the spectacles of war in our days (especially as portrayed by the mass media) the sufferings of people are not our sufferings." (57) In our quest for eternal happiness via the consumption of superficial goods, we alienate ourselves from the horrifying tragedies of others; we have lost touch with the uncanny mortality of life that serves as the foundation of both empathy and political justice.

What is called for is a new era in which artists and spectators alike cultivate new values and new art forms. We belong to the age of mechanical reproduction, "but this does not mean that new gods, new myths, new auras will not be born." (74) Tuncel calls for the creation of new traditions within the contemporary art forms of technological reproduction, so that we transform the fragments of our shattered human existence into something sacred and sublime: "If this were to be accepted, if most human beings looked at their creative deeds as integral, as sacred, as bound to their own selves, as their unique and authentic expressions, there would be less rubbish in the world today." (105) It is worth repeating that these authentic expressions, for Tuncel, are in no way related to an original source of either pure truth or innocent selfhood. The creation of new myths will inevitably take place within the framework of current paradigms: "Although the simulacrum presupposes the rule of the prevailing stereotype, in spectacle it destroys it." (64) The grand artistic spectacles of the future will turn power relations against themselves in the attempt to create new cultural possibilities, and in this way it becomes viable to restructure the problems of contemporary spectacles without unrealistically bypassing or transcending them. In our age the most significant problems arise from the nihilistic, commodified fissure separating the modern spectacle from potentially active spectators. This in turn results from a cultural fetishization of *techne*, according to which we have become more entranced by our technological creations than the dramatic presentations conveyed through them. (46) Drawing from Heidegger, Tuncel makes the case that our being-in-the-world has become saturated with an instrumentalized *ethos*: "[I]n no age other than ours that is knowable to the historians, what is produced in and by technology took the upper hand and shaped the very core of human existence, including our spectacular relations." (103) The challenge for artistic spirits, then, is to reorient this superficial emphasis on commodified reproduction. Throughout his entire book, Tuncel argues that we can reinvent spectacle in such a way that the dividing lines between its outer and inner forces give way to ecstatic creativity. (41) The chronic problems of our times—from complacency, narcissism, hegemony, and commercialization to the poverty of imagination and our evaporating link to cosmic temporality—converge around contemporary spectacular experience. Tuncel's proposal is to transform this herd-like apathy by way of international multi-spectacle festivals in which our mythical relations to the world, the world that cannot be reduced to conscious knowledge, help to preserve what is truly unique and singular in human existence. As opposed to perpetuating crude stereotypes and sickly notions of personhood, the total artistic spectacle strives to "create a dynamic relationship between the spectacle and the spectator through which creativity is cultivated, as a work of art expects from its spectators." (154)

Tuncel's genealogy is intended to push beyond previous critiques of spectacle, mass media, and commodification. In particular, he cites Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* as being pessimistic as well as insufficient. (35) It is insufficient because it begins and ends with mass media instead of treating it as one type of spectacle among many. (132) To say that there is nothing but commodified media in the service of propaganda is an exaggeration which makes it difficult to solve genuine problems: "Whatever the problems may be, the starting point and the ending point cannot be where the problems are densely concentrated, as in mass media (or any media that appeal to the masses and are, in turn, abused by them)." (135) This critical move on the part of Tuncel is conducive to opening up and preserving counterpoints of resistance, without which we may as well resign ourselves to the gloomy inference that all spectacles are inherently oppressive. It is not entirely clear, however, that this break with Debord goes far enough. In any fair estimation, Tuncel appears to have it right when he observes that commodification forms only one aspect of modern spectacles. It is prevalent, not ubiquitous. Nevertheless, Tuncel still agrees with Debord and other cultural critics that the metaphysical cut between the spectacle and the spectator is today's most urgent dilemma: "The biggest challenge in today's age is to get rid of the metaphysical separation, the S/s cut, between the spectacle and spectator and thereby to liberate all the inner and outer forces of spectacle." (137) The fear that we have cut ourselves off from something singular, that we have absorbed ecstatic experience into massified structures of instrumental simulacra, is a pervasive theme in continental ethics and cultural theory. This view takes many forms, the most nuanced of which distinguish between ontology and perception. As Rainer J. Hanshe writes in the introduction, "ontologically, reality can never be overtaken; the threat is actually in permitting image and illusion to dominate and supersede the *perception* of reality." (12) However, if the ecstasy of spectacle is related to something unconscious, something invisible, as Tuncel himself puts forth, then it is difficult to imagine how we can gauge the difference between more and less ecstatic experiences. Could it not be argued that all human experiences are equally singular, equally ecstatic, equally superficial? Are some of us truly closer to the infinite unconsciousness of collective life than others? If so, then the eternal return of the same within that unconsciousness is itself an empirical, measurable concept rather than something infinitely incommensurable. Tuncel contends that we are unable to attain ecstatic unity due to "epochal difficulties." (54) Such an argument is seductive, because it provides us with a way to critique normalizing power structures without succumbing to universalizing principles of religion or morality. While Tuncel himself lucidly expands upon this argument in numerous fascinating directions, it is perhaps time for continental philosophers and cultural theorists to give up this predominant line of thought in favor of radically new horizons.

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