

CHAPTER 7

Spectacles of performance: excesses of power

This vast drama of nonhuman nature is in every respect stunningly wondrous. (Murray Bookchin¹)

INTRODUCTION

Spectacle of course was not always what it became by the twenty-first century. Economics, politics, science, technology and more have changed its nature, probably irrevocably. The threat of unchecked pollution facing Earth's biosphere, a possible calamity for humanity, is adding a further twist to its future. For this potential crisis of global ecology promises to be extraordinarily spectacular. Its effects add a new urgency to gaining fresh understandings of spectacle as an element of performance ecology, and of its possibilities as a singular instrument of ecological activism. That singularity in an age of such complexity suggests a profound genealogy, and one that needs to be viewed in a longer historical perspective than those explored in the last two chapters. So I begin this analysis with three snapshots of spectacles spanning the second half of the last millennium. These will serve as preliminary pointers to some of the constant constituents of spectacle as a factor of performance ecology. They will also provide a glimpse of the late-twentieth-century paradigm shift towards performance that confirmed the spectacular as an especially potent phenomenon in the realms of excessive power.

¹ Murray Bookchin, 'What is Social Ecology?', in *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, ed. M. E. Zimmerman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993); also at, Website – Anarchist Archives: http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/socecol.html (01.10.2006).

In 1559 Richard Mulcaster described the entry into London of the future Queen Elizabeth I:

If a man should say well, he could not better tearme the citie of London at that time, than a stage wherein was shewed the wonderfull spectacle, of a noble hearted princess towards her most louing people.²

Almost two hundred years later, in 1757, a reporter from the *Gazette d'Amsterdam* described the death of 'Damiens the regicide', suffering what Foucault was later to call 'the horrifying spectacle of punishment':

Finally, he was quartered . . . the excessive pain made him utter horrible cries, and he often repeated: 'My God, have pity on me!' The spectators were all edified by the solicitude of the parish priest of St Pauls who despite his great age did not spare himself in offering consolation to the patient.³

The contrast between the future Queen's entry and the regicide's death indicates the extremities of power available to spectacle as a form of cultural performance. It also suggests how totally opposing life and death transformations through spectacle can be utterly interdependent – there is no regicide without a king or queen – but also irreconcilable, as between, say, the ecstasy of adulation and the horror of abjection.

Another two hundred years on and Jean Baudrillard, in 1981, responded to an altogether different type of spectacle, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*:

[He] makes his film like the Americans made war . . . it is a dream, a baroque dream of napalm and of the tropics, a psychotropic dream . . . [of] the sacrificial, excessive deployment of a power already filming itself as it unfolded, perhaps waiting for nothing but consecration by a superfilm, which completes the mass-spectacle effect of this war.⁴

Baudrillard's vision of late-twentieth-century 'mass-spectacle effect' indicates, in the paradigm of performance, a radical transformative dimension for spectacle. It collapses the differences between creativity and destruction, dream and reality, culture and nature in an extravagant scenario that reflexively celebrates its own paradoxical impact. In the

² Quoted by George Kipling, 'Wonderfull Spectacles: Theater and Civic Culture', in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 153.

³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 3.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glazer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 59.

process, I will argue, spectacle gains an entirely new kind of political and environmental potency.

There are some unchanging qualities, though. Spectacle is always aimed to produce excessive reactions – the WOW! vector – and at its most effective it touches highly sensitive spots of the human psyche by dealing directly with extremities of power: gods, monarchy, regicide, terrorism, war, disasters, catastrophe, apocalypse now. This is why when activism engaged spectacle in the past – Guy Fawkes and the Gunpowder Plot, the Boston Tea Party and so on – it generated such strong responses and produced lasting icons of history, even when there were few witnesses of the event itself or it happened only in the imagination. It is also why the legitimate theatre in the West, despite some wonderfully brave attempts, has rarely incorporated a significant degree of spectacle in its shows. As a result the history of spectacle is splattered with riven responses: it is loved or hated, assiduously embraced or utterly shunned.

Conventional definitions and traditional treatments of spectacle in dramatic and theatrical theory reflect this bifurcating force. Uncertainty about the true value of spectacle can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*: ‘The Spectacle [*opsis*] . . . of all the parts [of drama] is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry.’⁵ And, perhaps surprisingly, most standard modern reference works on theatre, such as *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (1967) and *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (1992), participate in the syndrome that separates serious art from spectacle. From these you can find out about theatre in Spain or the obscure seventeenth-century actor Gabriel Spencer, about Speech or even the Spectacle Theatres of Renaissance Italy, but on spectacle itself the authorities are tellingly silent.⁶ A few reference texts around the turn of the last millennium include the concept but are cautious about its significance. Patrice Pavis discusses it in his *Dictionary of the Theatre* (1996), but warns (echoing Baudrillard): ‘A general theory of spectacle would seem to be premature at present . . . because the borders between reality and spectacle are not easy to define.’⁷ *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (2003) is a little less sceptical, but still cautions that despite ‘. . . sporadic attempts to revive the Greek *opsis* as a theoretical

⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 64.

⁶ Phyllis Hartnoll (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 3rd edn (Oxford University Press, 1967); Martin Banham (ed.), *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, rev. edn (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁷ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, trans. Christine Schantz (University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 347.

concept . . . the English word “spectacle” seems destined to remain less precise in its application'.⁸

I shall return to the pathology of this critical history shortly. My main purpose in this chapter is to develop a more balanced view of the power of spectacle through a take on the topic informed by ecology. Because in the twenty-first century, as predicted by Debord, Baudrillard, Guattari and other major theorists, spectacle has become fundamentally constitutive of the performative societies, and in ways which are wholly integral to the encroaching environmental crisis.⁹ So the traditional prejudices and uncertainties surrounding spectacle have to be challenged. The deep human fascination with spectacle, including the ‘vast drama of non-human nature’, requires some unravelling. Hence, in its earlier incarnations this chapter was named for the ambivalent impact of its topic. The title of the conference paper and subsequent article on which it is based signalled the ancient conflict in human attitudes to spectacle: ‘Curiosity or Contempt’.

That was borrowed from *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*'s first definition of spectacle, which talks of ‘A person or thing exhibited as an object either of curiosity or contempt . . .’.¹⁰ There is a strong dynamic in this view of spectacle because it suggests – despite the binary assumption of that ‘or’ – that the same display of excess can be the subject of human rapture and disgust. More significantly still, it implies that the commonly human, the person, the subject – as much as any object or thing – can be, as it were, at the heart of spectacle. This is especially interesting because the magnitudes of power at play in spectacle tend to expel the merely human, to objectify it, to replace it with emblems, ciphers, symbols and other types of abstraction: the sacrificial effigy, the idealised Olympic torso, the stylised masks of gender, the nymphs at play in nature’s wonderland and so on. Hence, the great Royal Entries of sixteenth-century England ‘served as manifestations of the king’s divinity’;¹¹ the extravagant display of torture reduced the all-too-human Damiens to bits of meat and bone; and in Baudrillard’s projection of Vietnam as the first postmodern, hyperreal, and environmentally

⁸ Dennis Kennedy (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, vol. 11 (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 1273.

⁹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1977); Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995 [1992]).

¹⁰ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd. edn (Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 1962.

¹¹ Kipling, ‘Wonderfull Spectacles’, p. 161.

devastating war there are, almost by definition, no humans at all because they are transmuted into special effects. Mary McCarthy highlighted this potential with fabulous irony in a 1967 comment about the in-flight ‘tourists . . . bound for Tokyo or Manila . . . able to watch a South Vietnamese hillside burning while consuming a “cool drink” served by the hostess’.¹² Apocalypse now! Indeed.

It is the paradigmatic historical shift indicated by Baudrillard’s fevered vision that renders the notion of spectacle newly relevant to the borderlands between radical activism and theatre and performance ecologies. He marks the pervasiveness of spectacle in late twentieth-century neo-liberal societies as a major cause of the collapse of hierarchies that previously ordered culture and nature. The suspicions of excess in performance, visual or otherwise, expressed by the dramatic and theatrical theorists were a symptom of those hierarchies. But if spectacle is everywhere in the performative society, so much so that humans are constituted through it, then in theatre and elsewhere it gains new kinds of significance. This chapter explores that process by trying to rethink the place of spectacle in theatre and performance ecology historically, and this is part of an attempt to understand how spectacle in the twenty-first century became a flexible force for positive ecological change. Paradoxically, this new potential results from the abiding fact that spectacle seems always to transform the human into something more, or less, than itself. In spectacle the human may embrace the non-human to sublimely transmute humanity.

This, then, is one of the key paradoxes of spectacle that may make it ecologically sublime: it deals with the human in non-human ways. And there are others: it multiplies power through excessive waste; it plays on the visceral mainly through the visual; it can attract and repel in the same instant. But besides picking out some of the tricky constants of spectacle it is important, of course, to understand how it may have changed in history, particularly in its mediation of the powers that shape the human as subject of environmental factors. Because if the social itself has become a spectacle how might humans best realise what it is to be commonly *more and less than just human* in a world that constitutes humanity through such powerful paradoxes? If humans are thus constituted does that mean, for example, that we will be looking to deal with the ‘other’ in *inhuman* ways, that we will be addicted to excess, that we will always be

¹² Mary McCarthy, *Vietnam* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 12.

ambivalent in the world – loving and hating it, divided in ourselves and against each other? And how might that then open up new scope for the positive use of spectacle by eco-activists?

In the light of such speculations I must confess that, as I researched the history of spectacle and developed this line of thought, there were moments when I nostalgically hankered after a more comfortable dwelling place. At one point I was even tempted to draw on the very first recorded use of the word in English for my original title. This can be found in Richard Rolle of Hampole's *The Psalter*, published in 1340. Rolle was clearly a man who enjoyed an uncomplicated response to what he calls the 'spectakils' of 'the Hoppynge & daunceynge of tumblers and harlotis . . .'¹³ But while 'Tumblers and Harlots' was catchier than 'Curiosity or Contempt', I thought it might mislead readers about my actual interests in the topic.

ARGUMENT

I shall be addressing three main questions about spectacle, and a further overriding one about their implications for ecological activism through theatre and performance. First, what is it about theatre that has made most theorists of drama so suspicious of spectacle? Second, might it be possible to describe how spectacles changed generally in their articulations to power between the sixteenth and twenty-first centuries? Third, if homosapiens is constituted through spectacle what might that imply for the 'human' in the twenty-first century? Finally, when 'humanity' is subject as a matter of course to extremes of pressure from the greatest of powers (physical, political, cultural, natural, environmental) what might survive? These questions have particular relevance to the pursuit of theatricalised and performative activism, and especially eco-activism, because together they may direct us to attend to matters beyond representation, beyond issues of what any particular theatre or performance event might be made to mean discursively, and towards trying to figure what it might be *doing* to the participants' sense of the human.

I characterise the importance of spectacle to activism in this manner in order to imply that perceptions of ethical, social, political and environmental value – a 'sense of the human' – in the twenty-first century have been intensified in two main ways. Firstly, through the means via which

¹³ Martin Harrison, *The Language of Theatre*, rev. edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 252.

audiences and spectators of theatre, performance and spectacle were positioned as *participants* in the performative society. Secondly, by how spectacle in spectacularised societies tends *automatically* to engage with the circulation of especially significant magnitudes of power in culture and nature. I am aware that the formulation at the theoretical fulcrum of these claims – that ‘sense of the human’ – risks looking like an appeal to notions of an essentialised self, a transcendent subject that could form the basis for universalised conceptions of humanity. I also acknowledge that the postmodern death of the subject, which renders such appeals invalid, provides a theoretical entrance for strong claims about the primacy of performativity to the persona. So I am interested to work through how a more challenging version of *the subject as a disappearing act* opens up new ways of figuring a *sense* of the human beyond, as it were, liberal humanist visions of political or ethical global commonalities founded on logo-centric laws.

A few brief comments on performativity, ecofeminism and identity will have to serve as my pennyworth of slingshot against this phallocentric Goliath. Some sense of the full impact that ‘performativity’ might have on notions of ecology can best be gained from the concept’s uses in feminist theories of sexuality and gender. The modern ‘father’ of performativity, J. L. Austin, uses these aspects of identity more to confirm than challenge them, with the marriage vow, ‘I do’, figuring prominently in his analysis.¹⁴ But given his determined shift of attention from the factors of language (which, for example, produce patriarchal law) to the intentions of its users (for example, as a source of radical freedom) it is hardly surprising that performativity became a key concept in post-World War Two feminism. If the powers of male domination are maintained by common uses of the protein of language – so that ‘man’ becomes the measure of all things, including nature – then ‘performativity’ is a flexible platform from which to challenge them radically. The grounds for this were cleared by the pioneers of poststructuralist feminism, especially the French theorists Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, who brightly highlighted how the culture/nature divide was central in a web of binary thought and action that always subjected women to men and nature to culture. Hence Irigaray insists ‘– just as nature has to be subjected to man in order to become a commodity, so . . . does the

¹⁴ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson (Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 5–11.

“development of the normal woman”’.¹⁵ But it was Judith Butler who carried the importance of ‘performativity’ in the evolution of both feminist and, later, queer theorists to its most powerfully challenging extreme. She argued that there is nothing essential to sexual or gender differences because they are just a ‘reality effect’ caused by a ‘stylised repetition of acts’.¹⁶ Humans *create* their gender and sexuality in every moment through everyday performances.

Around the same time that Butler was making the feminist case for performativity, Val Plumwood issued a call for an ‘integrative feminism’ based on ecological principles, which she argued would involve a movement ‘towards an active, deliberate and reflective positioning of [women] *with* nature against a destructive and dualising form of culture’.¹⁷ Of course, the intent of that ‘with’ becomes all-important to the performative processes that might create radical ecofeminists. How might the non-human, with which those processes must engage, be best conceived – the pun is deliberate – as both *within* and *without* the human? This question poses an opposing, but paradoxically inversely identical, movement to performativity as theorised by Butler, who focuses primarily on identity formation of the human. For perception of the non-human within the human requires that the subject – human identity – becomes a disappearing act. From this perspective, just as Butler’s ‘performativity’ deconstructs human identity so that it can be remade afresh, so it constructs non-human identity as an integral part of the human.

It is this sense of a reflexively doubling creativity, a production of the ‘non-human in the human’, that must be evoked in order to suggest how the factors and vectors of spectacle may make the human both more and less than itself. It is on this basis that I ironically insist on the possibility of human transmutation of the human beyond itself through spectacle.¹⁸ This is crucial to creating the potential and always provisional ecological significance of the paradox of the non-human within the human, of the human-animal, of the paradoxical primate. As noted already, that does not imply some kind of transcendental signifier, a human ‘soul’. How

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which Is not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985 [1977]), p. 187; see also: Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester University Press, 1986 [1975]), pp. 63–5.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 139–41.

¹⁷ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 39.

¹⁸ Donna Haraway essayed a similar move to destabilise the ‘human’ through her trope of the cyborg, see: ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’, in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1991).

could it, when the subject is also constituted as a wholesale disappearing act? But the non-human within the human is what connects homo sapiens to all other organisms and to the world, unavoidably. It is paradoxically also the basis of a common humanity. Given that, the key concern of this chapter becomes: how, in the twenty-first century, might the human gain a stronger sense of the non-human world, and of humanity's integral part within it, through the spectacles of theatre and performance ecology?

As the performative society is characterised so crucially by spectacle then the paradoxes of spectacle could provide clues about the nature of a common humanity. Consideration of the non-human within the human of the paradoxical primate might challenge restrictive and divisive notions of class, race, gender, sexuality and so on that commonly hamper agreements about global cultural and natural justice. And a related tendency to imagine the poorest nations and peoples of the world as somehow happily ignorant of the sophisticated perplexities of its over-developed societies could also be called into question. Altogether these are complicated factors, of course, so I shall not be offering a fully 'joined-up argument' in this chapter. Rather, I will make a series of linked observations. In doing so I will concentrate on examples of Western spectacle, partly because it is the best documented, but mainly because historically it has dealt with powers great enough to shape global histories.

There are a couple of hypotheses within my approach that I should briefly explain at this stage. The first is that the ways in which spectacle has dealt with power may allow us to group it into broad types. There are certainly more, but here I am positing just four, namely:

- Spectacles of domination: spectacles of church, monarchy, state; religious rites, coronations, military parades – rituals of the powerful.
- Spectacles of resistance: spectacles of the people, the masses, the revolutionary avant-garde; charivaris, political protests, re-enacted uprisings – carnivals of the weak.
- Spectacles of contradiction: spectacles that negotiate new types of power-brokering; saturnalia, hunger strikes, non-violent resistance, terrorist attacks – festivals of division.
- Spectacles of deconstruction: spectacles that question and displace the nature of the 'real'; shamanic tricks, *trompe l'œils*, masquerades – celebrations of the equivocal.

This fourfold schema is not, of course, closed to mutation as these categories overlap and in the flux of history sometimes, as it were, bleed

into each other. It is a temporary instrument that I hope will help to keep our bearings in complicated territory. I also hope to use it against itself, to question the assumptions that theatrical theorists have tended to make about spectacle so as to introduce a degree of reflexivity into my argument. For one thing is sure in this twenty-first-century age of deep uncertainties: if subjects are constituted through spectacle then humans will need to develop an especially reflexive take on how they appear as non-humans between and among themselves in order to get anywhere near to a sense of the commonly human.

My second hypothesis is about changing relationships between scale and time. It has been customary in Western traditions to link spectacle and size, so that it has become habitual to think of spectacle as usually large-scale.¹⁹ Olympics scholar and influential theorist of spectacle John MacAloon reaffirms this: 'Not all sights ... are spectacles, only those of a certain size and grandeur ...'²⁰ But there has been a massive transformation of the human sense of scale in the past five hundred years, so that the traditional association of spectacle with gigantism has been displaced. This transformation of scale derives from a shrinking of the world. For example, between the 1500s and the 1960s the globe shrank seventy-fold or more, as the 10 mph average travel speed of horse-drawn coaches and sailing ships gave way to the 700 mph of jet passenger aircraft.²¹ In the late-twentieth century this trend accelerated exponentially. Global digitisation through the World Wide Web and Internet has scaled down the world even more. One result of this is that – at least in postindustrial Western societies, but increasingly elsewhere – spectacle can now be minute. I refer to this phenomenon later as the 'miniaturisation of spectacle'.

To get to that point I shall briefly sketch out a few stages in the history of Western spectacle using my schema of the four types. I will also briefly review the anti-spectacular bias of drama and theatre in theory and practice, as this has shaped the critical tradition that in the twenty-first century still struggles for dominance in the study of theatre and performance. I shall argue that a critique of this bias can illuminate the importance of spectacle to the circulation of power in the social, political

¹⁹ *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd edn, (definition 1) has 'A specially prepared display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale)', p. 1962.

²⁰ John J. MacAloon, *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), p. 243.

²¹ See diagram at David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 241.

and environmental spheres – and indicate some of its newly relevant importance for activism. I will approach my first question, about the historical distrust of spectacle by drama and theatre theorists, through a tight focus on the question of collapsing scenery, first using it to outline some of the paradoxical qualities of spectacles of deconstruction. Because it is, I think, such qualities of spectacle that may best carry the charge of eco-activism in the twenty-first century.

COLLAPSING SCENERY I – WATCH IT ALL COME DOWN

There is a wonderful moment in Buster Keaton's short film *Steamboat Bill Jnr* that resonates with the ambivalent pleasure characteristic of spectacles of deconstruction and paradox. I take a close look at it partly because film and cinema – in acute contrast to 'serious' theatre – embraced spectacle with untroubled warmth from the outset, but also because the reproductive technologies of film, television, video, audio and so on, obviously have been crucial to creating the society of the spectacle and the performative society. It also provides a link to my analysis of dramatic theory's habitual horror of spectacle, as well as ironically connects with the chapter's concern with the human response to environmental threats in the twenty-first century. My coda for this slightly cheeky analytical sleight of hand (a reflexive displacement, perhaps?) is Oscar Wilde's typically seductive comment on the opening night of *Lady Windermere's Fan*: The play was a great success, but the audience was a total failure.²²

Possibly there has always been a close connection between spectacle and disaster, because disaster unexpectedly unleashes extreme powers that rupture a world that human beings dream of keeping wholly intact, suddenly splitting open normality to expose its utter instability. It achieves this by threatening always to eliminate the human, to reduce it to total insignificance in the grand scheme – or chaos – of things. Hence, the classic incident of spectacle in *Steamboat Bill Jnr* plays on the human fear of disaster by heightening Keaton's trademark vulnerability, exposing his human fragility to the ultimate threat of instant extinction. Significantly, the moment can be appreciated without knowing the plot of the film, but it is important to my ecological themes that it is preceded by four minutes of Keaton wrestling with a cyclone, which eventually blows him,

²² Quoted in Peter Hay (ed.), *Theatrical Anecdotes* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 81.



Figure 8 Buster Keaton, *Steamboat Bill Jnr* – 1928. A publicity shot of Keaton in the window of the fallen wall, after the dust and the cyclone of the scene have cleared.

in a hospital bed with wheels, into a street where it stops in front of a two-storey house. The sequence cross-cuts between Keaton falling out of the bed, then crawling under it for shelter, and a man on the second floor of the house realising that the front wall is about to collapse forward. The man jumps out of the upstairs window and lands on the bed, which is blown away by the cyclone, taking him with it. Keaton stands, facing the audience and scratching his head – such a human gesture of puzzlement – while behind him the whole front wall falls intact towards the street. Miraculously, he is standing exactly where the top window is positioned, so he survives the disaster as the wall crashes around him. After a split second of brilliant comic timing, he leaps in the air as if bounced up by the impact of the fallen wall and runs off to the next scene.

I will interpret this moment in terms of the curiosity and contempt of my original title. As the wall falls the spectator obviously is encouraged to fear the worst, to entertain contempt for a world that can be so fickle. As the dust clears these worst fears are relieved by the curious – in the sense

of the oddly inevitable – coincidence of the window's position in the falling wall being exactly where Keaton is standing. So in an instant the world is made both contemptuous and curious, disgusting and alluring. The dramatic, and comic, success of the spectacle rests on this instant production of affective ambivalence. But this is not just a matter simply of reversed expectation. More fundamentally, the spectacle's ambivalence also arises from two sets of contradictory viewpoints, between, firstly, what the spectators can see, but Keaton cannot, and secondly, what Keaton knows, but the spectators do not.

In other words, the ambivalent spectacle is not so much produced in the contrast between the huge falling wall and Keaton's vulnerability, but by a sudden gap opening up between different ontologies or versions of the real, a kind of fissure in the way that knowledge of the world is usually assembled. Moreover, that gap or fissure is highly paradoxical in its relation to the real world of late-1920s silent movie-making. By this point in his career Keaton was an international star and it was well known that he chose to do his own stunts. The danger in the spectacle is manifest: the wall weighed over a ton and there is a story that 'one of the cameramen found the suspense so intolerable that he looked away at the last moment'.²³ Herein lies the paradox: the utter vulnerability on display is heightened because the distance between Keaton and his character collapses with the wall. As in Baudrillard's vision of apocalypse now, fiction and reality are, as it were, forced to collide, and in the process a star rises out of the ontological rubble. In more general terms, human mortality immortalises itself in the moment of spectacle, and the spectator sees this paradoxical process as it is happening. In this sense the spectacle is a human transmutation through which Keaton is rendered, sublimely, both human and non-human – a paradoxical primate! We glimpsed something of this quality of extraordinary acting in chapter 3, achieved by George Formby through a vulnerability that was less directly environmentally located. In Keaton's case, that the spectacle is produced by a cyclone becomes key to the scene's sublime effects.

Perhaps what survives here is an ecological ethic that is overtly biocentric in its integration of mind and body, spirit and bone, culture and nature through creation of the paradoxical primate. I think the scene may achieve these effects so powerfully because the technology of film, especially through close-ups, allows the vulnerability of the commonly

²³ Tom Dardis, *Keaton: The Man Who Wouldn't Lie Down* (London: Deutsch, 1979), p. 155.

human, as a root in the non-human, to be placed firmly – actually and metaphorically – at the centre of the spectacle, and this is a result that live spectacle finds extremely difficult to create. Through such processes, though, spectacle may produce a sudden deconstruction of the world and the nature of the human as humans thought they knew it. Unlike the ritual spectacles of state and authority as represented by Renaissance Civic Entries or Damiens's dreadful death, which aim to sew every detail of the real into a seamless scheme of power, deconstructive spectacles work paradoxically to open up new domains for radical revisions of the way things are. They are therefore an especially powerful potential force for progressive eco-activism.

COLLAPSING SCENERY 2 – OR THE EDIFICE COMPLEX

So, particularly given this kind of potential, what is it that has made dramatic critics and theorists so suspicious of spectacle? The pathology can be traced back a long way through the usual sources. We would start with Aristotle's *Poetics*, maybe give a nod to the spectacular shadows in Plato's cave, then go on to Horace warning that 'Medea must not butcher her boys before the people' (c. 20 BC), to Ben Jonson's attack (1641) on effects that leap 'from stage to the tumbril', to Schlegel warning that 'it is possible for theatre to degenerate into a noisy arena of merely bodily events' (1808) and Hegel cautioning that tragedy particularly should shun 'a lavish display of the sensuous side of things' (1820).²⁴ The tradition continues through Shaw, Eliot and others in the twentieth century, then meets major challenges from Artaud and his admirers in the post-World War Two period. In Artaud's wake recent theorists – from Kowsan to de Marinis, and from Schechner to Pavis – have, more or less, embraced spectacle within the generous rubric of performance, and we could trace this pro-spectacular bent back through Wagner to Voltaire in the eighteenth century and Castelvetro in the sixteenth century. Yet until the late-twentieth century this latter strand in Western critical history was always very tenuous. But why did such pathological contempt for spectacle get the upper hand of curiosity about its purposes? Is it just that the theorists, by definition, were logocentric; or had they sensed some serious lack in the theatre itself?

Perhaps examples of collapsing scenery in twentieth-century theatre might throw some light on this issue, because the ways in which

²⁴ Oscar Lee Brownstein and Darlene M. Daubert, *Analytical Sourcebook of Concepts in Dramatic Theory* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), p. 365.

unwanted spectacle has sometimes inserted itself into the serious business of drama offers instances of accidental deconstruction. Falling scenery constitutes a kind of theatrical lapsus, perhaps a lacuna in theatre ecology, which can open vistas on the underlying causes of the pathological distaste of the theorists. The American critic George Nathan, in a review of a production by Norman Bel Geddes of a play called *Siege*, coined a telling phrase about such underlying causes. According to Peter Hay, Geddes had ‘spent a fortune for a massive set that showed four stories of an old Spanish fortress . . .’, but the critics massacred the show. Nathan, though, penned the wittiest line of attack, when he diagnosed Geddes as suffering from an ‘edifice complex’.²⁵

There are many examples of the edifice complex, some of which show that it may even be built into the architectural ecology of certain types of theatre. One of my favourites of this kind is Bulwer-Lytton’s play *The Lady of Lyons* of 1838, which did not open on its premiere evening because the safety curtain got irretrievably stuck – producing the spectacle of an audience that wasn’t.²⁶ But brevity dictates that I be highly (and probably naughtily) selective in my choice of more pertinent exemplars. So here are a couple of possibly apocryphal stories about those archetypal principals of power: obelisks and phalluses. I quote from Giles Brandreth:

When Sir John Gielgud appeared as Oedipus at the National Theatre in London in 1968, the set in Peter Brook’s production was dominated by a gigantic golden phallus, thirty feet high. Coral Browne saw it and remarked, ‘Well it’s no one I know.’

And, more to the point, so to speak, Brandreth quotes a second case:

Another giant phallus – beige this time – was used in a modern version of Aristophanes *Lysistrata* staged in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1979. Mid-way through the opening performance, the wires supporting the phallus gave way and, as if in symbolic gesture, it fell right across the stage knocking the leading lady to the ground.²⁷

A more sombre comeuppance befell Donald Wolfit in his 1953 London production of *King Lear*. Here is Peter Hay’s version of the environmental disaster:

Wolfit . . . played the storm scene standing against an eighteen-foot obelisk, which required holding in position by a man standing behind it, and thus

²⁵ Hay, *Theatrical Anecdotes*, p. 223.

²⁶ Giles Brandreth, *Great Theatrical Disasters* (London: Grafton Press, 1982), p. 3.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

hidden from the audience. Just before the coronation [of Elizabeth II] . . . the task was carried out by a patriotic stage-hand who had begun to celebrate the forthcoming event somewhat in advance of others. On the line 'Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!' the stage-hand hiccoughed and lurched forward, causing the obelisk to strike hard the back of Wolfit's head. The actor, being enormously strong, finished the scene supporting both the obelisk and the patriot, by then paralytic. When Wolfit came into the wings, he was limping – the bump on his head was concealed by his wig and he did like his injuries to be seen.²⁸

Though these examples are flippant, I quote them to underline a crucial point of my argument. The distaste of the critics and theorists for spectacle is possibly founded in the limitations of theatre as a cultural form. At first glance these may seem to be caused by shortcomings in the theatre's mechanical means of production, creating anxiety about technical disaster. But of course there was always something more fundamental than a fear of falling principals at stake.

What is it about spectacle itself, though, which the theorists and the legitimate theatre were avoiding? Was it simply that this theatre ecology was too refined to fully embrace the carnival indulgence of the body, or could it be that it was unable to handle the full extremities of power that spectacle can unleash? The poor actor sent bowling by the toppled phallus may stand – or rather, fall – as an emblem of this weakness in theatre: theatre hardly has a chance of survival when the fickleness of absolute force is let loose. From this sceptical perspective, Coral Browne's witty dismissal of the giant golden phallus hailed the edifice complex to deny the full majesty of the Oedipus complex. Similarly, Wolfit's pretend limp looks like much more than a front for damaged pride: it speaks eloquently of failure to integrate the unpredictable might of extra-theatrical power – whether of spirits, monarchy, or the natural environment (yet another storm) – into the make-believe of the stage.²⁹ Here is an ecology that paradoxically seems frequently to prefer to seal off the energies on which it depends.

To put these observations conversely: the dominant traditions of Western theatre have aimed to tame spectacle, to incorporate spectacle in a reduced form into its disciplinary regimes. They could achieve this because those regimes are fundamentally shaped by the socio-metrics of

²⁸ Hay, *Theatrical Anecdotes*, p. 342.

²⁹ The traditional fear of actors of working with animals and children may be part of this syndrome, see: Nicholas Ridout, 'Animal Labour in the Theatrical Economy', *Theatre Research International* 29: 1 (2004), 57–65; *Stage Fright, Animals, and other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

theatre architecture, the structural norms of society reified in wood, stone, concrete.³⁰ Socio-metrics ensure that, from an activist point of view, theatre ecologies almost always play safe with especially dangerous stuff. Hence, the spectacular in theatre has been mostly in fact anti-spectacle, because the disciplinary mechanisms of the theatre automatically undermine the extreme force of the powers, but especially the ambivalent powers, that spectacle is designed to foster. This is why desire for spectacle – whether in state ritual or street carnival, say – has constructed specially designed buildings or designated areas for its production: from the amphitheatres of Roman antiquity, through the Natural Science museums and Winter Gardens of nineteenth-century England, and to the theme parks, Millennium Domes and Olympic stadiums of the twenty-first century. Compared to these, the modern theatre is a very modest, near-hermetic environment. From this perspective, the theatre was always condemned to fall short in its dealings with new types and magnitudes of power as they circulated around the monumental monarch, or in the body politic of the industrial revolution, or through the decentred networks of the neo-liberal globalised economy, or in the turbulence of the biosphere as global warming passes the point of no return. Staging the tempest just dampens it down. Little wonder, then, that historically, really radical activists have tended to shun the theatre, unless they went to prevent it by a riot, or to shoot a President.

SPECTACLES IN HISTORY

My second question, about how spectacle has been variously articulated to power in history, obviously raises many complications. But it is perhaps worth risking some historical sketchiness in order to see how spectacle may function differently in the twenty-first century from earlier times. Although I shall be comparing spectacle across five centuries, there is no teleology in my tale. Rather, I present this patchy panorama to show how the changing uses of spectacle demand that we adopt appropriate conceptual systems for their analysis. I return, then, to my scheme of the four types of spectacle for this historiographic task. The underlying method to my argument might be best described (adapting Donna Haraway's idea of 'situated knowledge')³¹ as situated theory, because it

³⁰ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 160–4.

³¹ Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, pp. 183–202; see also Donna J. Haraway

attempts to use ways of thinking that may be fit for purpose according to the period of each.

The spectacles of the English Renaissance were shaped in large part by the stark polarities of court/church and commons. On the one hand, there were the grand rituals of fealty – from the public Royal Entries to the private Court Masques, say – and, on the other hand, there were the carnivalesque fetes and fairs of streets, squares and greens, the archetype being London's Bartholomew Fair. The binary structure of this classification need not blind us to greater complexities, for example, that the civic triumphs were ideologically nuanced by the emergent humanism of the Renaissance. As George Kipling has shown: 'If the king came to judge his people in the civic triumph, the queen came to mediate, bringing mercy beyond justice.'³² But whatever gender the monarch, these street-wise scenographies left little doubt as to who was absolute top dog in the human links of the Great Chain of Being.³³ Similarly, the indoor spectacles of Court Masques and Festivities shifted the monarch from centre stage, but the designer's new command of optical perspective (also applied in the public playhouses) ensured sight lines that culminated in the best seat in the house, a throne whose occupant was flattered to know she was missing absolutely nothing. In any theatrical event, the rituals of fealty conformed to a principle of holy state power that was centrifugal, concentrating totally in the divine right of the monarch.

The fair, however, was the people's performance domain, an anarchic mess of multiple spectacles that refused to conform to any obvious pattern of power:

Here a Knave in a Fools Coat with a trumpet sounding . . . would fain persuade you to see his puppets; there a rogue . . . in an antic shape like an incubus; on the other side Hocus Pocus . . . showing his art of Legerdemain to the astonishment . . . of a company of cockoloaches . . . And all together make such distracted noise, that you would think Babel were not comparable to it.³⁴

This, of course, is the immersive spectacle of carnival celebrated by Bakhtin for its revolutionary potential. But the claim that it could

Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse™: Feminism and Technoscience (London: Routledge, 1997).

³² Kipling, 'Wonderful Spectacles', p. 164.

³³ An exception to prove the rule was Queen Mary's 1561 entry into Edinburgh; see *ibid.*, pp. 169–72; for the Great Chain of Being, see: E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963 [1943]).

³⁴ Anon., seventeenth-century pamphlet, quoted in Samuel McKechnie, *Popular Entertainment Through the Ages* (London: Samson Low, Marston, n.d.), p. 33.

out-Babel Babel also points to its chief weakness from an activist point of view. Just as the source of its energy is a multiplicity of creative voices, the people's pleasures unleashed, so it has no obvious political direction, as it operates centripetally, dispersing itself in excess. This polarisation of spectacular types in Renaissance England did not simply reflect an extreme asymmetry of powers in the period. Rather, that imbalance was produced through the astonishing magnitude of their difference. In comparison the Elizabethan theatre was timid, generally alluding to the full force of spectacle through synecdoche and other reductive tropes. As the Chorus in *Henry V* apologetically has it: 'Oh Pardon! That a crooked figure / May attest in little part a million . . .' ³⁵

We must be wary of imposing too simple a schema of analysis across time. In nineteenth-century Great Britain, for example, the growth of spectacle on the London stage would seem to disprove my argument about the anti-spectacular bent of theatre. The first aquatic dramas were floated early in the century at Sadler's Wells Theatre, on a stage that was in fact a very large water tank. During the next eighty years the machinery of theatres grew increasingly elaborate and stage effects became more complex and lavish.³⁶ Surely this shows that the Victorian theatre took on board the exponential rise in the production of power by the industrial revolution? Yet the new technologies of the stage – especially gas lighting – mostly forced the action back behind the proscenium arch, physically and visually containing it even as it grew more frenetically extravagant. This reductionism was further reinforced by the psychology of the darkened auditorium, the first step towards the twentieth-century theatre's docile audiences.

Two linguistic shifts emerging in the Victorian era seem to confirm this analysis. Gradually, 'audience' replaces 'spectator' as the most common appellation of the crowd. Through this, theatre attendees were encouraged to think of themselves as a collective paying attention to sound, particularly to words, rather than as individuals primed to enjoy the delights of scopophilic excess. A parallel shift in the term for the audience's space, from 'spectatory' to 'auditorium', underlines the point. Then in the late-nineteenth century 'spectacular' was coined as a noun to refer to a showy event of large-scale proportions beyond the scope of theatre. In 1890 the *Pall Mall Gazette* enthused about: 'An amphitheatre . . . in

³⁵ William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, ed. A. R. Humphries (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 59; Pro. 15.

³⁶ Richard Leacroft, *The Development of the English Playhouse*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1988), pp. 140–65.

which spectaculums on a grand scale might be produced before a half-million spectators.³⁷

No amphitheatres were built to this size, but Victorian science and engineering ingenuity ensured delivery of much more pervasive spectacles for the nineteenth-century imaginary to feed on. The building of the first Natural History museums, with displays of artefacts culled from almost every corner of the world, was out-matched by the great steel and glass Winter Gardens, such as Caxton's Crystal Palace in London, which housed massively popular displays of exotic plants alongside the latest inventions of the age of steam. In these key institutions of industrial society, as Carla Yanni and Una Chaudhuri have shown, the spectacular theatricalisation of nature staged both a voracious taxonomic discipline and fostered the dream of an achievable green utopia.³⁸ Such displays paradoxically produced spectacular distraction from the contradictions they created, say, vastly popular pleasures resting on the mass misery of the factory system, man lording over nature by destroying it. A more distributed spectacle was staged on a national and increasingly global scale through the new steam-driven transport systems.³⁹ The extraordinary increase of power – literally, metaphorically – in Victorian England and its expanding Empire flourished through what Chaudhuri calls a ‘hypocritical fantasy’,⁴⁰ masking deep anxieties that divided people in themselves and set the stage for Freudian psychology. Queen Victoria claimed to enjoy these new cultural performances as much as her subjects, so we might safely surmise that the spectacles of state and street were becoming deeply but ambiguously meshed with each other. These spectacles of latent contradiction covertly advertised the uneasy coexistence of monarchy and the first major phase of modern democracy, fertile ground for the international activism that eventually produced revolution elsewhere in the world.

These examples indicate a division between serious theatre and the pleasures of the masses, between legitimate stage and popular spectacle

³⁷ Harrison, *Language of Theatre*, p. 253.

³⁸ Carla Yanni, *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), pp. 149–52; Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 77.

³⁹ In 2000 I directed a site-specific spectacle in Bristol docks on one of the great icons of this expansion, Isambard Kingdom Brunel's steamship the ss *Great Britain*. This convinced me that latent contradiction was probably the Victorian pathology. See: Baz Kershaw, ‘Performance, Memory, Heritage, History, Spectacle – The Iron Ship’, *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 21: 3 (2002).

⁴⁰ Chaudhuri, *Staging Place*, p. 77.

that widened throughout the twentieth century. The growth of mass pleasures beyond theatre, first in the dream-worlds of cinema and television, and later in the theme parks, heritage centres, shopping malls and so on, promoted the society of the spectacle. These ubiquitous pleasure-zones of consumption theatricalised experience by turning the everyday into an immersive spectacle of increasing overproduction, in which people became spectators of themselves as participants in an emergent cultural (dis)order. This process was vastly hastened in the last quarter of the twentieth century by mediatisation and globalisation combined, and as the millennium turned it was hurtled into hyperdrive under the full force of the digital revolution.

Such were the conditions that extended spectacle beyond the large-scale, into a miniaturisation that personalised, and paradoxically fabulously magnified, its appeal. Making it highly accessible, for example, at the click of a mouse. Such were the sources for the emergence of a new kind of human sensorium, described most forcefully by Debord and Baudrillard, as the energies and powers of spectacle became pervasive in everyday life, no longer primarily a matter of occasion but also perfused in perception. Technology was of course a major factor in the production of this extraordinary environment, but hands-on access to high-tech gizmos was not necessary to its spread beyond the rich nations of the world. This was because reproduction through a myriad of methods and on a vast range of scales became a principle force in its creation. The humble Coca-Cola can trigger a sense of the global reach of this new cultural paradigm just as well as intimate knowledge of the World Wide Web. So the spread of technology begs interpretation in this wider sense, to indicate how billions of people came to participate in the paradigm, discovering the paradoxical ways in which it both empowers and disempowers.

For the performative society fostered the new sensorium through the coupling of liberal democracy and capitalist marketplace, so that the powers of political enfranchisement – no matter how strong or attenuated – were always inflected by the economic dominance of consumerism and its subjugations. And, integral to the paradoxes produced by uniting such incompatibles, in the second half of the twentieth century there was a growing public awareness of the fragility of planet Earth and the threat of ecological catastrophe promised by unbridled exploitation of its natural resources. Such tensions have encouraged new kinds of activism in, for example, the anti-globalisation movement, the World Social Forum, the burgeoning of green organisations and campaigns on every continent, and

their complexities have generated a new importance for spectacles of contradiction and deconstruction.⁴¹ Also, at root, this is why I think activists of all kinds, but especially eco-activists aligned with ecofeminism, could benefit from knowing of how such spectacles may be most effectively produced.

SPECTACLES OF DECONSTRUCTION IN
THE PERFORMATIVE SOCIETY

My third main question, about how humans may be constituted by spectacle in the twenty-first century, is best approached through example rather than historical survey because it is such a relatively recent phenomenon. My interest in this paradigmatic development of spectacle is twofold. First, I want to identify in more detail how the human subject may be differently constructed through spectacle than in the past. Second, I want to clarify how the society of the spectacle was being transformed into the performative society. So as this chapter draws to a close I shall briefly anatomise the work of three performance artists who have certainly provoked a good deal of curiosity and contempt: namely, Australia's semi-cyborg Stelarc, and the Chicano self-styled 'border artists' Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco. These artists are especially pertinent to my argument because they represent a new, international wave of radical performance that emerged in the final two decades or so of the twentieth century. They exemplify a highly reflexive response to the new sensorium through the paradoxes in their use of performance situated in extra-theatrical public contexts. I discuss them as exemplars of a style of performance that engaged with small-scale spectacle.

To clarify this choice, two points are worth making about key effects of global mediatisation on the human relationship to spectacle. These draw directly on the critical traditions of the Frankfurt School, of Guy Debord and the Situationists, and of Baudrillard and the postmodernists, which emphasised mediatisation as a crucial process in dispersing performance throughout culture.⁴² The eye of the camera, the ear of the microphone,

⁴¹ See, for example: Robin Cohen and Shirin M. Rai (eds.), *Global Social Movements* (London: Athlone Press, 2000); Paul Kingsworth, *One No, Many Yes: A Journey to the Heart of the Global Resistance Movement* (London: Free Press, 2003); George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996); George McKay (ed.), *Do It Yourself Culture: Party and Protest in Nineties Britain* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁴² Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995); Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a*

the dimpled skin of the keyboard, the extra finger of the mouse – these all have repositioned everything as performance for someone else and, crucially, for ourselves as well. The ghost in the global machine is a performer and we are that ghost.

First, spectacle is constitutive of the performative society, but not simply through the historical types of dominant, resistant and contradictory spectacle. Those types depended on producing a scale that would somehow match the magnitude of the powers with which they were dealing. This continues, of course: the New Labour farce of Britain's Millennium Dome and the terrorist tragedy of the collapsing twin towers are stupendous examples. But in the twentieth century there was also a wholesale scaling-down of spectacle, a miniaturisation fashioned by the shrinking of the world and the advent of new media technologies. It was implicit in the first movie cameras and projectors, became explicit with the cathode-tube, pixel and plasma screens, then rocketed towards ubiquity in the hypermobility of multimedia mobile phones, iPods and similar devices. As noted in chapter 2, the fabulous flexibility of reproduction in digital technologies fast-forwarded the vectors of deconstructive spectacle, creating new human sensoria for the twenty-first century. Of course there had been precursors, but they lacked the electronic media's technical suppleness. What was once 'unique and authentic' became ubiquitous and counterfeit⁴³ – a construction embracing deconstruction. The digital revolution made this process increasingly pervasive: every vision of disaster, every fantasy of civilisation, the carnival of deconstructive knowledge itself, could be captured in the magic of the microchip.

Second, this whole process is deeply paradoxical, as it shrinks the human to nothing – mere digital information – while dispersing the human everywhere. The contrast between tiny avatar figures on computer monitor screens and the limitlessness of the World Wide Web is a paradigm for this. That both are delivered through the same technology is profoundly destabilising of the human: where am I, the human subject, in this paradigm? Such searching then produces the further paradox of a culture founded on narcissism as millions are always looking for their selves in the spectacle. But because the performative society is primarily a spectacle of deconstruction, where the eye always sees itself looking, the

Postmodern Age (London: Routledge, 1992); Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

⁴³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 68.

search for secure identity is a lost cause. This is another outcome of deconstructive spectacle. Instead of a figure of survival, as pictured by Buster Keaton, the human becomes *only* a disappearing act, a fabulous figment, a ghost in the hard-drives of the hyper-real. But also these non-human elements of the subject can open up profound ecological resonance for the human. Then the most radical ambivalence of the paradoxical primate shimmers with uncanny energy. For the non-human within the human may remind these primates that they are just as much atoms and liquids and animals, say, as they are uniquely intelligent creatures in a world that is not, after all, just of their own making.

The twenty-first century thus may be characterised by mighty cultural and natural processes that are radically changing the ways in which power circulates through the human. Liberal democracy, late-capitalism, digital technologies and global mediatisation together create performative societies that give the human access to agency – the performative, as Derrida argued, is always carried forward by a ‘yes’⁴⁴ – but an agency that is always in danger of being totally cancelled out. The idea of the ‘posthuman’ is one response to this paradox.⁴⁵ But also turn-of-the-millennium artists such as Stelarc, Fusco and Gómez-Peña – like Buster Keaton – produced performances that aimed to negotiate this death of the human in ways that placed its survival at a premium. My trope for this potential is the ‘non-human in the human’ because that implies a necessary connection with the myriad other biotic agents upon which human futures depend. I shall briefly analyse my two examples to explore these points, focusing on questions of spectatorial participation and agency as key to the potential of deconstructive spectacle as efficacious ecological activism.

STELARC: A TWENTIETH-CENTURY CYBORG

In the final decades of the twentieth century the Australian performance artist Stelarc undertook a number of spectacular body suspension events and Internet experiments that raise crucial questions about the survival of the human in an age of ambivalent borders.⁴⁶ The suspensions involved

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘From *Psyche* – Invention of the Other’, in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 298.

⁴⁵ Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Website – Stelarc: www.stelarc.va.com.au/index2.html (01.10.2006); Website – Suspensions: www.stelarc.va.com.au/suspens/suspens (01.10.2006); Website – Ping Body: www.stelarc.va.com.

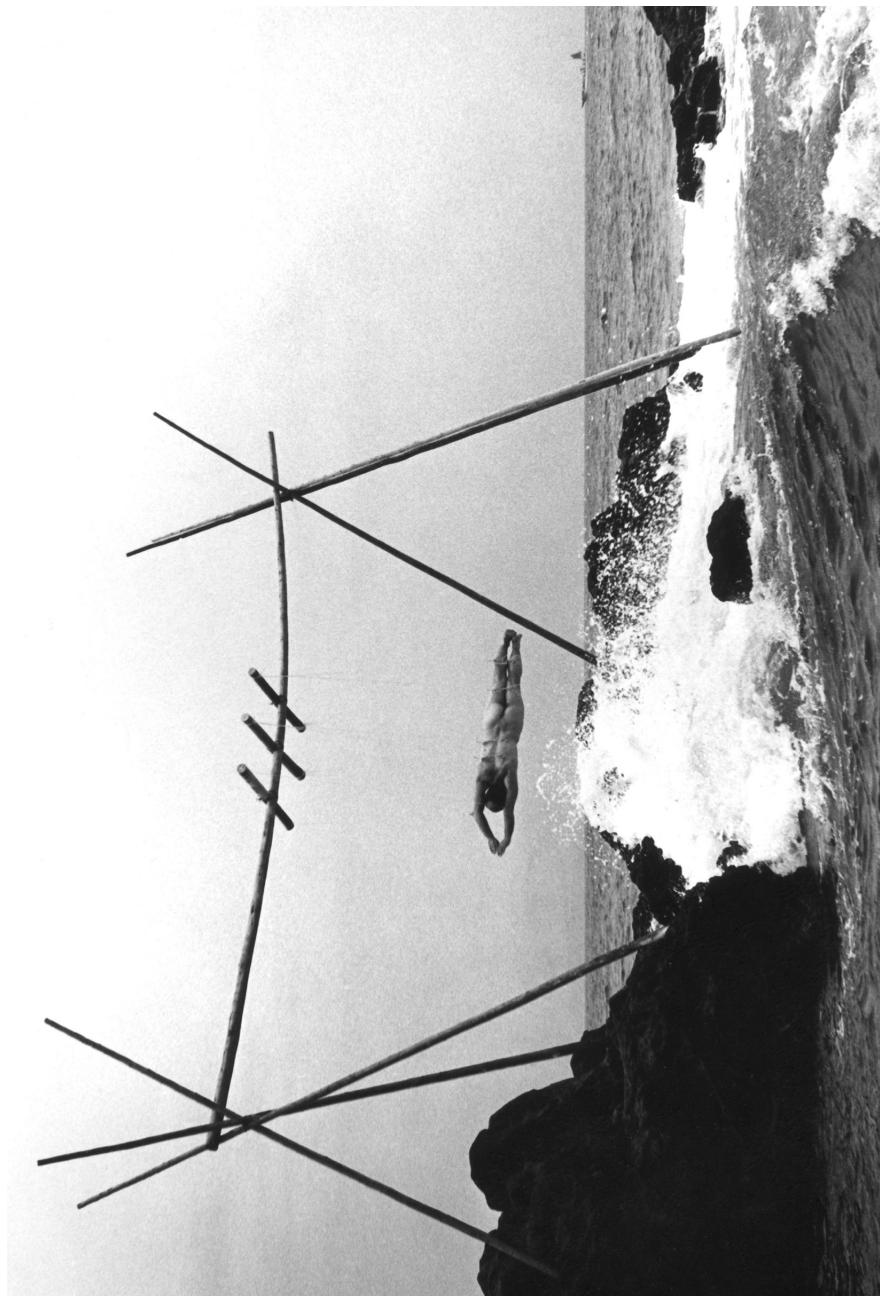


Figure 9 Stelarc, seaside suspension – 1981. Jogashima, Miura, Japan: tide coming in, weather overcast, waves crash against the rocks spraying and splashing the pierced body as it sways in blustery winds. Duration 20 minutes. Photograph: Ichiro Yamana.

hanging himself from various structures and machines by meat-hooks pierced through his skin, in a wide range of environments. In *Ping Body* (1995/6) the meat-hooks were replaced by electrical stimulators linked to the World Wide Web, so that people at computer terminals in remote locations could activate his body. The conceptual and (relative) technical simplicity of these events created, I think, quintessential deconstructive spectacles in the run-up to the millennium.

Stelarc's suspensions force a deconstruction of the human through their juxtaposition of the body in pain and the image of flying. The hooks through the skin allude to torture and butchery, processes through which the sentient being becomes mere meat and something of the non-human within the human is exposed. The regicide 'Damiens effect' perhaps. The pain of the technique gestures towards what Elaine Scarry calls 'the unmaking of the world'; because pain has no referent it is un-shareable, not just resisting language but destroying it.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, though, in Stelarc's suspensions the pain is a means to achieving an image of human transmutation, as they allude to flying free and, in the West at least, people transformed into angels and/or, ironically, 'super(wo)men'.⁴⁸ Hence these events speak simultaneously of human obsolescence and survival. They achieve this paradox so successfully because Stelarc, like Buster Keaton as Steamboat Bill, places the vulnerability of his humanity on the line 'at the heart' of the spectacle. Precisely because pain has no referent – how can we imagine what his pain must be like? – the spectator participates in what the spectacle deconstructs to reconstruct, the ineffability of 'human' survival at the moment that it is most challenged by its environment. Thus I propose this as an example of the non-human within the human that confirms an ecological connection to the biosphere as a potential source of radical activism. The performance ecology of the spectacular suspensions, particularly those set in natural environments, was well designed to manifest such a positive activist charge.

The *Ping Body* events perform similar paradoxes, but sometimes with a more immediately political charge. The muscle stimulators connected to

au/pingbody/index.html (01.10.2006); see also: Stelarc and James D. Pafrath (eds.), *Obsolete Body/Suspensions/Stelarc* (Davis, Calif.: JP Publications, 1984); Marquard Smith (ed.), *Stelarc: The Monograph* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴⁸ Compare Orlan and Abramovic: Bernard Blistene, Caroline Cros, Régis Durand, Christin Buci-Glucksmann and Elinor Hartney, *Orlan: Carnal Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004); Marina Abramovic, *Abramovic: The Biography of Biographies*, photographs Alessia Bulgari (Milan: Charta, 2005); Website – Orlan: www.orlan.net (03.10.2006).

the Internet imply that, theoretically, anyone anywhere can shift Stelarc's body about, provided they have access to the technology. Thus the individual autonomy of the artist is displaced and disempowered through mediation. But it also expresses potential empowerment of the many, as Stelarc's body becomes the repository of a partial body politic, the people sending the digital signals. 'Skin [says Stelarc] was once the boundary of the self. As interface it was once the site of the collapse of the personal and the political. Skin no longer signifies closure.'⁴⁹ Stelarc's spectacular evacuation of the self becomes an opening for a new kind of political engagement as his 'users' establish their agency through his body. In a sense, then, the event alludes to an ideal of direct democracy, in which co-present bodies collectively decide on the future. But, paradoxically, in this event bodies are replaced by dis-embodied representations, digital messages activated by spatially atomised participants. The signals they send have to be interpreted by Stelarc's computer to produce coherent commands for the muscle stimulators, otherwise his body could be damaged beyond repair. In the event, 'Stelarc' becomes a function of the system he has created.

So the 'translation' of the users' inputs ironically turns Stelarc's body into a metaphor that suggests the remoteness and relative inaccessibility of significant political power for the vast majority of people. The system of *Ping Body* reflects how effective democracy is discouraged in the wider culture of the performative society. Spectators can participate in the creation of the miniaturised spectacle, only to have it demonstrate that such participation does not amount to very much. The spectacle of deconstruction that places the commonly human at its heart may teach a key lesson about power in twentieth-century society, but it is not an especially hopeful one. Perhaps this is because the technical set-up leaves little or no room, so to speak, for the non-human in the human, as any sense of Stelarc's 'humanity' is massively overdetermined by the digital system of which it is an integral part.

Hence, Stelarc's spectacles of deconstruction generate far-reaching questions about the place of the political, and the environmental place of the human, in the performative society. They show that miniaturised spectacles in such a society may be just as ambivalent as their gigantic forerunners. Such spectacles may divide humans both from each other and themselves, and the more that this process is reinforced by new

⁴⁹ Stelarc, quoted in Tracey Warr, 'Sleeper', *Performance Research* 1: 2 (Summer 1996), 11.

technologies the more the human will need to find a radical response to transcend their enormous attenuating force. The availability of sources for such a response was demonstrated by Stelarc's suspension events, which were transmutations that made the subject a disappearing act at the moment in which they enabled the non-human in the human to appear. In this respect his suspensions were more successful than *Ping Body*, I think, because the endurance of the disappearing subject was more overtly on display. The blurring of the 'boundary of the self' in *Ping Body* suppressed that kind of potential, in the process perhaps partly confusing the issues of power at stake in the spectacle. But together these examples show that the nightmare splitting of humanity against itself that began to take hold of global society in the twentieth century has to be challenged head on if the human is to successfully head it off in the future. They may also make clear that such splitting potentially reinforces enormous powers of conflict between nature and culture, between the non-human and the human, which are leading to ecological catastrophe.

GÓMEZ-PEÑA AND COCO FUSCO – HUMAN-ANIMALS FOR
THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In 1992 the Latin American performance artists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco staged *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit . . .*. It was presented in Sydney, London, Washington and elsewhere, usually for free in museums or city squares. Gómez-Peña describes the show as follows:

Coco and I lived for three-day periods in a gilded cage, on exhibition as 'undiscovered Amerindians' from the (fictional) island of Guatinau. I was dressed as a kind of Aztec wrestler from Las Vegas, and Coco as a Taina straight out of *Gilligan's Island*. We were hand-fed by fake museum docents, and taken to the bathroom on leases. Taxonomic plates describing our costumes and physical characteristics were displayed next to the cage. Besides performing 'authentic rituals' we would write on a laptop computer, watch home videos of our native land, and listen to Latin American rock music on a boom box.⁵⁰

Now this small-scale spectacle was a border performance in a number of wholly uncompromising ways. Because it achieved a thoroughgoing ambivalence through overlapping the boundaries between fiction and fact, performance and museum display, history and contemporary culture,

⁵⁰ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *The New World Border: Prophecies, Poems, Loqueras for the End of the Century* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1996), p. 97. Here Gómez-Peña names *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit* as *The Guatinau World Tour*.

'their' culture and 'ours', desire and shame, real and fake identities. In pretending to be an exhibition of 'authentic' natives, while withholding any indication that it was indeed a pretence, it implicated spectators in its reduced spectacle of human degradation in challenging and highly contradictory ways. But also it troubled the distinctions between 'culture' and 'nature', 'human' and 'animal' through its inescapable allusions to prisons and zoos. In the process, I will argue, it hugely opened up the potential of ecological activism. Its ontological ambivalence, its refusal to settle on what was 'real', was key to the production of this effect, in the following ways.

First, the cage reanimates the histories of colonialism as spectacle. Coco Fusco: 'In order to justify genocide, enslavement, and the seizure of lands, a "naturalized" splitting of humanity along racial lines had to be established.'⁵¹ The golden cage ironically reactivates this 'splitting', and then the incommensurable mixing of signs – watching 'home videos of our native land' – potentially places that colonialist history in the kind of creative light that could produce a reflexive critique of its vicious ideologies. And second, the spectacle was playing directly with extremities of power by touching a raw nerve of the 'colonial unconscious' that still haunts the Western psyche. Coco Fusco again: 'Consistently from city to city, more than half of our visitors believed our fiction and thought we were "real" . . .'⁵² Through the simple stratagem of refusing to signal clearly the ontological status of its codes, this spectacle risked reinforcing the very forces it aimed to subvert. This is because, obviously enough, the global history it animated was constructed through and through by structural distinctions as between white skin and black skin, humans and animals, masters and monstrosities, civilisation and barbarism, culture and nature. The small-scale spectacle of the cage had the audacity to play with those contradictions as if they were invisible.

But how might this attempted wholesale destabilisation of signification have reinforced a common sense of the human in the performative society? The answer hinges on how it transmuted contradictions into paradoxes, and this in turn rests in the forms of contradictory spectator participation it encouraged. Spectators could simply stand and stare, but

⁵¹ Coco Fusco, 'The Other History of Intercultural Performance', in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 132; Coco Fusco, *English is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas* (New York: New Press, 1997).

⁵² Fusco, 'Other History', p. 134.

also they could literally 'buy into' the spectacle. For fifty cents they could purchase photographs of themselves standing in front of Fusco and Gómez-Peña in the cage, stories told by the natives (in gibberish), a sexual display of the male's genitals (wittily withheld, hidden between his legs), a chance to feed the caged unfortunates and so on. These choices raised the stakes on the spectators' interpretation of the event, potentially triggering a sense of ethical responsibility towards the 'natives'. But clearly there was always also the potential that spectators would go away entirely happy with their new 'possession', even though it was a sign of profound racism. This is the key contradiction of the event – it promotes and attacks racism – and the rest follow on: it presents humans as animals; it normalises the monstrous; it is a barbaric display of civilisation.

But the structure of the spectacle aims to work against these contradictions by creating edge-effect transactions across at least two kinds of border, two types of ecotone where contrasting performance ecologies overlap. The first is literally between the bars, on the liminal line of the cage perimeter, especially as spectators purchase participation. The second is between those who pay money to participate in the spectacle and the rest of the free-viewing spectators, a scene that potentially transforms the latter into self-conscious onlookers, reflexive viewers aware of their participation *as* spectators, and therefore still implicated in the spectacle. In these ecotones a multiple exchange is constantly constructed and deconstructed between the performers, the paying participants, and the non-paying spectator-participants. This offers the potential for a continuous re-visioning of identity as between each of the three groups (and others positioned between them). The non-payers may see spectators like themselves transformed into active consumers; the paying consumers may see the performers transformed from willing colluders in their own confinement to exploited objects of degrading entertainment; the performers may see the non-paying spectators amused, appalled or otherwise engaged by their willingness to be commodified, and see the paying spectators proud, ashamed or otherwise disaffected by their cooperative acceptance of such cultural 'sharing'. Or vice versa, for all of these possibilities and more, as the event triggers a miasma for mixed identities.

The continuous process of identity challenge and potential transmutations for all concerned is a very high-risk aesthetic and ethical strategy, reinforcing the spectacle's ambivalence. It animates the fundamental instability of identities as a product of performativity, as figured by ecofeminism, in the very process of aiming to call into question the nature of the realities on which these identities depend. Little wonder,

perhaps, that so many of the spectators ran for the bolt-hole of past prejudices. But also, surely, amazing that roughly the same number apparently became willingly involved in such a demanding task of reflexive reconstruction. Given what was historically, politically, ethically, environmentally at stake in this deconstructive spectacle, that result is, I think, very telling of a potential for radicalism in the performative society.

So the performance ecology of *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit . . .* provided radical means for both performers and spectators to encounter the non-human in the human, as it bravely dealt in the contradictions that have generated global injustice for so many, and which are now driving humanity towards ecological calamity. The magnitude of the powers it engaged ensured that how these contradictions played out for individual spectators would be unpredictable, hence the more or less riven response. But its spectacular structure also enabled the performers, in the moment of direct performative exchange, at the liminal lines of identity and through its edge effects as an ecotone, to challenge the ethical assumptions of the spectators' action, encouraging all to see the situation from at least two sides at once. This was a trigger for humans to acutely perceive the political, ethical and environmental contradictions bequeathed by their history and animated by the event, and possibly to transmute them into challenging paradoxical truths. A racist is a person enchainied by freely chosen denials. Colonialist history is a nightmare dreamed up by an Empire's murdered. Genocide favours the dead with an unbeatable wholesale deal. The paradoxical primate is an animal that knows it is all-too-human. And perhaps, given the irony that the Guatinaui islanders are presented as an endangered species: ecological suicide is man's last step to a cleaner planet. Thus spectacles of deconstruction have the potential to generate powerful reflexivities concerning the nature of the non-human within the human in the twenty-first century.

Lest these last reflections seem too painfully fanciful let me recount an anecdote that Coco Fusco relates in her luminous discussion of the production. It concerns the sighting of a real 'remnant' of the history of appalling exploitation that the golden cage aimed to bring home for all its spectators. 'And at the Minnesota Fair last summer, we saw "Tiny Teesha, the Island Princess", who was in actuality a black woman midget from Haiti making her living going from one state to another.'⁵³ Fusco's reflection on this encounter in the light of her experiences in the cage is

⁵³ Ibid., p. 133.

absolutely salutary. She writes: 'When we came upon Tiny Teesha in Minnesota, I was dumbstruck at first. Not even my own performance had prepared me for the sadness I saw in her eyes, or my own ensuing sense of shame.'⁵⁴

I propose such 'sadness in the eyes' as a metonym that indicates something of the common humanity I have been trying to evoke. Such 'sadness' bespeaks an absence that one can comprehend only by recognising something similar in oneself. A mutual vulnerability? The potential of sharing a common fate? This is a 'sense of the human' that has to be continually recreated because it emanates in a condition that all humans share in the globalised world produced by performative societies. In the twenty-first century, perhaps the most crucial predicament is that in being divided against ourselves, and between each other, we humans will continue to be divided against nature. The spectacles of deconstruction that characterise the performative society can encourage a reflexivity that enables us to see this very clearly. But then as society is constituted of such spectacles, we risk always getting caught in an endlessly recessive mirror-reflection that simply reinforces the powers of violent division, reproducing the destructiveness that usually ensues from spectacles of domination, resistance and contradiction.

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Perhaps these, then, are some of the lessons that ecological activists might learn from reflecting on the powers of spectacle in the twenty-first century. They are tough lessons because, as I hope I have made clear, the 'common humanity' in question is by no means of the traditional type imagined by liberal humanism, in which everyone can be similarly hurt or feel joy, say. Rather, this is a much more bleak and challenging version of the place of the human in the process of becoming, but one in which the disappearing act of the human may ultimately be cause for hope. This was the puzzle posed by the reiterated acts of performativity seen as both the source of identity and its continual loss. This is the challenge offered by an ecofeminism that fully recognises the identity shared by humans and non-human organisms while refusing ultimately to collapse the difference between human and non-human identity. These are the opportunities proposed by the ambivalence of deconstructive spectacle in the

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 135.

performative society as it threatens ecological disaster. The key to the positive powers of the contradictions in such spectacles lies in paradox, most crucially the paradox of what I have called the non-human in the human. Reflexive participation in spectacular performance ecologies informed by that paradox, I have argued, may connect humanity to its ecological environment in a manner that is deeply responsive and responsible. In the next part of *Theatre Ecology* I will explore means to imagine this through a series of thought experiments designed to test the bounds of intelligibility in theatre and performance ecology. These will be speculations for the future that grow from such reflections on spectacles from the past. Their aim will be to extend the scope of how we might think of human participation in ecologies yet to come. But whatever particular form those take, the participation must be of kinds that are continually renewed through humans courting, as it were, the non-human ‘other’ in themselves and each other.

Terry Eagleton, drawing on ‘one of our leading technicians of otherness’, Slavoj Žižek, suggests some of the benefits of this predicament, as follows:

It is at the point where the other is dislocated in itself, not wholly bound by its context, that we can encounter it most deeply, since this self-opaqueness is also true of ourselves. I understand the Other when I become aware that what troubles me about it, its enigmatic nature, is a problem for it too. As Žižek puts it: ‘The dimension of the Universal thus emerges when the two lacks – mine and that of the Other – overlap . . . What we and the inaccessible Other share is the empty signifier that stands for the X which eludes both positions.’⁵⁵

To install humanity as such an empty signifier ‘at the heart’ of global spectacle in order to give it a new lease of ecologically radical life means continually recognising and reproducing this mutual vulnerability. It means the human recognising in the ‘other’ of the non-human within itself something akin to the qualities of spectacle that provoke then deconstruct contempt and curiosity. Buster Keaton managed to achieve this over and over for his audiences, even as he became a star. It is an achievement that radical eco-activists might find well worth pondering as the wall of a future that is likely to be nothing if not spectacular starts to fall.

⁵⁵ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 96–7.