

Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siecle Paris*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xiii + 230 pp. Illustrations, notes, indexes. \$35.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-520-20959-1.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast, for H-France, April 1999.

Spectacular Realities is a highly readable and concise book which raises significant historical and theoretical issues concerning the emergence of mass culture in late nineteenth-century France. Schwartz's thesis is disarmingly simple: Turn-of-the-century Parisian crowds, from all social levels, were drawn to, relished in, and reinvented themselves through spectacles of everyday life afforded by a burgeoning mass consumer culture. From the bustling activity of the boulevards, the sensationalist details reported in the daily *fait-divers* press, and Sunday afternoon strolls through the morgue, to the staged spectacles of the *Musee Grevin* waxworks, panorama displays of historical and exotic scenes, and the flickering images of the Lumiere brothers' early movies, Schwartz argues that Parisians cultivated a "taste for the real" in mass culture. Far from suffering the social anxieties of modernization or the alienating effects of consumer objectification, *fin-de-siecle* commercial spectacles constituted the "mass cultural equivalent to universal education" (p. 202). Parisians did not fear modernization; rather, through the consumption of visual mass culture as pleasurable entertainment, they became moderns. It is a provocative thesis, clearly presented and smartly argued.

The organization of Schwartz's book is straightforward and pleasing to a historian's chronological sensibilities. The first chapter shows how the development of the mass circulation daily newspaper transposed the hubbub of Second Empire boulevards, department stores, and cafes onto the sensationalist pages of the *fait-divers* press during the *Belle epoque*. Covering a broad range of subjects, from international affairs to banal news about local accidents and crimes (thus, *faits divers*), serialized fictional novels (*feuilletons*) and "true story" reporter interviews (*reportage*), the mass-circulation newspaper created an imaginary cosmopolitan cultural realm where readers could learn about what was "really happening", locally and around the world. In the second chapter on the morgue, Schwartz shows that the pleasures of *la flanerie* were enjoyed by all levels of Parisian society, whose Sunday strolls might include viewing the highly advertised drowned *fillettes de Suresnes* or a chance to identify anonymous corpses set out for public display. The chapter provides a good history of the morgue as a public institution, which ostensibly served a public service in the terms of corpse identification, but had a far greater reputation as free theatre. As a "theatre of crime" (p. 82), Schwartz shows how the morgue itself became the site of *fait-divers* narratives, where spectators not only got to see real corpses, but if lucky enough they might catch a glimpse of the murderer, returned to see his victim, as well. In these ways, readers of the *fait-divers* press and visitors to the morgue were not a

passive audience, but constituted a crowd of active spectators who actively sought out and vicariously lived the sensationalism they read about and viewed.

The subsequent chapters of *Spectacular Realities* focus more particularly upon commercial entertainment spectacles of the *Musee Grevin* waxworks, the "o-rama craze" of dioramas and panoramas, and the birth of the cinema. The section on the *Musee Grevin* is the key chapter, and the subsequent chapters build upon it. Inspired by and striving to surpass Madame Tussaud's wax museum in London, conservative publisher Arthur opened the *Musee Grevin* (named after the museum's artistic director, caricaturist Alfred Grevin) in 1882 as a *journal plastique* (p. 108), a physically tangible museum three-dimensional recreations which re-enacted various scenes of modern life, from the staging of a papal cortege, a village scene in Dahoney, and a censored scene from Emile Zola's *Germinal*, to the narration of "a criminal story" through the stages of murder, to arrest, morgue identification, trial, and execution. Surpassing the ability of newspaper to recount stories from "real life", the wax museum was designed to engage its customers in them through the acts of strolling, gazing, and contemplation. Beyond the wax figures themselves, the *Musee Grevin* also featured magician acts, gypsy orchestras, Chinese shadow puppets, marionettes, phonograph recordings, and projected images (*pantomimes lumineuses*). In all its features, the museum claimed to represent reality authentically, and thereby "combined the legitimacy of the museum-form with the popularity of the press and thus found and sustained its public through its spectacular depiction of reality" (pp. 91-92). The museum proved tremendously popular with the Parisian public from the start, and grossed ticket receipts approaching a half-million francs during its first year.

Such spectacular depictions were not limited to the wax museum, but were central to the closely related entertainment industries of the panorama and the cinema as well. Panoramas were 360-degree viewing rooms which featured such spectacles as international landscapes, military and historical tableaux, and steamship voyages. Many of these panoramas were located within Parisian commercial arcades (*passages*) and grew in popularity during the nineteenth century until they constituted a veritable *panoromania* by the *fin-de-siecle*. Over the course of the century, panoramas underwent a number of important technological changes. Initially, panoramic scenes were merely painted on canvas. Over time, innovations like back lighting (which could make images painted on the back of the canvas magically appear), live action drama staged in front of the canvases, and physically rotating the canvases in order to create the illusion of movement across a landscape and enhanced the "reality effect" of the panorama and paved the way for the emergence of the cinema, the final chapter of *Spectacular Realities*. The most modern and innovative of "realistic" entertainment of the *Belle epoque*, movies built upon other forms of visual mass culture (newspaper, morgue, wax museum, panoramas) and surpassed earlier experiments in "moving

pictures" (*phenakistoscopes*, zootropes, animated - *pantomimes lumineuses*, and the high-speed snapshot, the *chronophotographe* which captured movement as a sequence of still images). After the Lumiere brothers premiered the *cinematographe* in 1895, movies quickly gained popularity as *journal lumineux* newsreels of "current events". By the eve of the Great War, cinema had branched into serial drama and had begun to out-compete both the wax museum and the panorama as the "realistic" mass-culture medium par excellence.

In the conclusion to *Spectacular Realities*, Schwartz reminds readers that the most significant social development attendant to these forms of realistic mass culture was the "visual pleasure" which Parisians derived from them. The clear organization and development of this argument should not, however, overshadow the critical importance of this book, which seriously challenges much received historical and theoretical wisdom about the social effects of mass culture. In terms of historical correctives, Schwartz cautions readers against naively accepting the negative *fin-de-siecle* French pronouncements by social psychologists Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde against "the crowd" (*la foule*) as a chaotic and violent mob. She also rejects the elitist conception of the urban *flaneur*, as penned by Charles Baudelaire into "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863), and repeatedly demonstrates that the pleasures of *la flaner* were enjoyed across the social spectrum. In Schwartz's book, French crowds are remarkably civil and socially egalitarian in their consumption of mass culture, even when its subject matter was sensationalist or morbid. Schwartz also cautions readers against the current and somewhat ubiquitous "Americanization" thesis which pits French culture against American-inspired mass culture.(1) Instead, like recent works by cultural historians Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War* (H-France review, March 1998), and Michael Miller, *Shanghai on the Metro* (H-France review, May 1996)), Schwartz's book emphasizes the unofficial collusion between modern French identity and mass cultural entertainment. While official French culture distances itself from mass consumer culture, the neglected "secret history" of mass culture reveals a French enthusiasm for it.(2)

The critical promise of Schwartz's book is somewhat less persuasively developed, however. The self-acknowledged inspiration for *Spectacular Realities* is T. J. Clark's magisterial study, *The Painting of Modern Life* (Princeton, 1984), and it is here that the critical success and shortcomings of the present work are most pronounced. In his work of art history, Clark critiqued the Impressionist movement in the visual arts for the part it played in the commodification of imagery during the rise of consumer capitalism under the Second Empire. Clark argued that this imagery, detached from direct references to its underlying socio-economic reality, produced alienating effects upon humans (a neo-Marxist critical perspective which Clark derived from Guy Debord's Situationist International manifesto, *The Society of the Spectacle* Detroit,

1967). As a cultural historian, Schwartz departs from Clark's analysis in two important ways. First, she escapes the disciplinary tutelage of art history by directly examining nineteenth-century commercial spectacles themselves, rather than having to formulate arguments about the nature of consumer society by extension from the "high brow" realm of Impressionist painting. On this point, readers will learn a great deal more about Second Empire commercial culture and spectators from *Spectacular Realities* than from Clark's book. Second, Schwartz takes issue with the perspective that commercial mass culture necessarily alienates an individual from her or his social being. On the contrary, she repeatedly asserts throughout the course of the book that commercial mass culture provided modern individuals with a basis for the reconfiguration of social identity, as urban *flaneurs* of modern life.

But it is precisely at this point that Schwartz's book stumbles over its critical elements. Is the sensibility fostered by the modern consumer crowd an actual or ersatz sociability? By alluding to pleasures of consuming without a supplemental discussion of the fetishization of commodities, from either a neo-Marxist or psychoanalytic standpoint, it remains unclear what Schwartz means when she writes, "Through flanerie, spectators commanded the spectacle: They participated in it at the same time that they believed it was constructed for them" (p. 131). Although Schwartz explicitly wishes to distance *Spectacular Realities* from the cultural output of the Hollywood "dream factory", it is unclear to this reviewer precisely what political or critical advantage, what "specific positionality of power" (ibid) was exercised by this crowd of *flaneurs*. When the mass culture presented in this book features (among other things) drowned babies, dismembered women, *coupee en morceaux*, wax figure stagings of torture, murder, and decapitation, and panoramas commemorating wars and colonial subjugation, one wonders exactly what kind of spectacle this urban crowd of *flaneurs* "commanded" and how. To make consumers "participants" in such spectacles, rather than being passive viewers, does not automatically put them in control of the spectacle being consumed. Being a paying customer does not necessarily preclude alienation, however willing the participation. By remaining silent on this critical point of how individual or social meaning is derived from consuming mass cultural entertainment, ironically Schwartz's praise for the pleasures of consumerism could easily play into the hands of established critiques of mass culture, such as Henri Lefebvre's critique of consumerism as "terrorism in everyday life" or Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's diatribes against intellectual conformity and uniformity produced by the "culture industry."(3)

Thus, critical problems concerning the social effects and intellectual status of the "spectacle" are intelligently raised but not completely resolved by *Spectacular Realities*. Yet true to the profession, Schwartz remains foremost the historian and secondarily the theorist. Where she has brilliantly succeeded is in detailing the

historical emergence of these provocative forms of mass-culture entertainment in the *Belle époque* and the enthusiasm of Parisian crowds for them. This is a persuasive and eminently readable book for both undergraduate and graduate seminars in French history, the history of popular culture, and cultural studies.

Notes

1. The "Americanization" thesis is well handled in Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, 1993), and is somewhat less skilfully and more globally applied in Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995) and Richard Pells, *Not Like Us* (New York, 1997).
2. The antipathy of both the French state and leading French critical theorists to mass culture is charted in Brian Rigsby, *Popular Culture in Modern France: A Study of Cultural Discourse* (New York, 1991). I borrow the phrase "secret history" from Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).
3. These classic critiques of mass culture are in Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch. (New Brunswick, N.J., 1984/1971), and Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming. (New York, 1972/1944).

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