

# To Mike Stubbs

25 February 2015

Mike Stubbs  
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Hi Mike

Looking back at my notes from **The Resident** last October, it's striking how much the topic of 'spectacle' came up. You, for one, raised it more than a few times.

From the group that you were in with Francesca Bertolotti, Maria Hlavajova, Kevin Hunt and others came these questions: is it still possible to bring together a significant scale of a festival with a degree of criticality? Or similarly, can we create an 'intelligent spectacle with criticality'? Is it possible to reconcile a cathartic 'big moment' with the work of research? And simply: what constitutes a 'spectacle'? For me, both 'spectacle' and 'criticality' are, by now, blunt tools. They're treacherous, too. But I get the sense of the questions.

Questions of scale are tricky too. I remember, years ago (around 2003), talking with a London gallerist about Anish Kapoor's Marsyas, which was installed in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall at that time. He was sceptical. I said, lamely, 'The public likes it.' 'The public is a size queen', he said.

Reading the notes, I see you advocating for the value of spectacle, almost in moral terms. Is that fair to say? That idea is strange to me, but I'm open to it. Where I live, the epitome of art spectacle is Leo Villareal's Bay Lights (2013): 25,000 white LED lights running up and down each cable across the two-mile western span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge. They're a pretty ornament for a pretty city. They cost \$8 million, but to get spectacular art, typically you need spectacular funding. A further \$4 million has been raised to install them permanently. I don't have a problem with that.

Funny story: the night *Bay Lights* was first turned on, a friend of mine was teaching a class nearby at the San Francisco Art Institute. The class was, by coincidence, scheduled to discuss Guy Debord's The Society of the Spectacle. So my friend — his name is Frank — marches them, Pied Piper-like, down to Embarcadero, in the light rain, while reading aloud from Debord. As they turn a corner, and the bridge comes into view, and the lights come on, he finds himself reading the lines: *The spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.*

You don't need 'cultural theory 101' from me, Mike.

I came across a new use of 'spectacle' (new to me) recently in the writings of Njabulo S. Ndebele (who's now the Dean, I think, at the University of Johannesburg). In the 1980s, during the end game of apartheid, Ndebele produced a series of essays that were collected and published in 1991 under the title Rediscovery of the Ordinary. Ndebele argued that many writers of the struggle era, out of a necessary opposition to the monstrosity of apartheid, had created art of impossible moral clarity, of good versus evil, of grand and simple histories — 'spectacular' art. 'The spectacular documents', he wrote, 'it indicts implicitly; it is demonstrative, preferring exteriority to interiority; it keeps the larger issue of society in our minds, obliterating the details; ... it establishes a vast sense of presence without offering intimate knowledge; it confirms without necessarily offering a challenge.' He called for an alternative; a rediscovery of the ordinary; a sober, unromantic attention to details, to interiority, to the challenge posed by intimate knowledge.

Both the French and South African notions of spectacle put it on the wrong side of a moral divide. What struck me about your comments during the week of **The Resident** was that you gave spectacle something of a **therapeutic** value, a healing value. Specifically, more than once you refer to the **cathartic** power of spectacle. From what I've heard you talk about since, I expect you might have in mind something to do with the experience of military veterans and the collective memory of conflict.

But I sense that, for you, the therapeutic sense of spectacle could extend further.

Thanks.

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