International Journal of Art and Art History
December 2022, Volume 10, Pages1-20
ISSN: 2374-2321 (Print), 2374-233X (Online)

Published by American Research Institute for Policy Development
DOI: 10.15640/ijaah.v10p1
URL: https://doi.org/10.15640/ijaah.v9p1

The Museum of the [Interactive] Spectacle

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Abstract

This paper examines the museum in relation to Guy Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle, contemporary elaborations upon Debord's work, and theories of postmodernism. I argue the museum is a critically important site of proximity to the realm of representations and appearances. As Debord and others argue, the realm has eclipsed authentic social life. It is more absorbing, meaningful, and contains a greater sense of truth than the real. Though this theory is traditionally linked with the mid-to-late 20th century, I argue elements of the spectacle are present in techniques of display beginning in the mid-19th century in a partial form, and in a hyper-accelerated form in the digital age.

Key words: Situationism, museum studies, spectacle, postmodernism, Guy Debord, digital media

"...we are in a new stage of spectacle… 'the interactive spectacle,' that involves an implosion of subject and object, and the creation of new cultural spaces and forms and new subjects."
-Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of the Spectacle", 1999

"If you don't share a photo from this exhibition, did you really visit?"
-Label from the Museum of Fine Arts Boston Takashi Murakami show, 2017-2018

The museum does not stand apart from the larger context of increasing media saturation, but instead should be thought of as a unique and critical site within it. In this study, I aim to examine the museum through the last 170 years as the capacities of capitalist production and distribution impact the ubiquity of representational objects and images, as well the broad social relationship with those representations.

In the first section, I provide a theoretical background of the spectacle and its relationship with postmodernism and consumer capitalism. This will allow me to establish certain key concepts which I will later tie to the museum. The first of these concepts is that objects project a world of representations and appearances— the spectacle— which captures the imagination far more than lived reality. Further, the spectacle becomes increasingly self-referential as reality is seen as inferior, inaccessible, or non-existent. I will also discuss history and politics as part of the spectacle, and postmodernism as characterized by an "over-proximity of all things" (Baudrillard, 1987/2012); ubiquitous information, aesthetics, and cultural practices easily accessible regardless of from where or when they originated.

In the second section, I will discuss how the spectacle has evolved with the development of interactive media. For this, I will use Steven Best and Douglas Kellner's term, 'the interactive spectacle'. The interactive spectacle is distinguished from the Debordian spectacle because it elicits a desire to integrate with the spectacle rather than passivity. I will explain this desire through comparison between the spectacle and myth, and through establishing the role of media with identity formation. I will also discuss the acceleration of image reproduction in the interactive spectacle.

Having established an operational set of theories for the evolving spectacle, I will discuss the museum as a pivotal point of contact with the world of representation. This section will involve more concrete observations of the museum, historically and currently. As I will explain, though the periodizing concepts of modernism and postmodernism are linked to two distinct historical periods, that which we call "postmodern" may well incidentally appear during the modern period and vice versa. I argue that museums in the 19th and early- 20th century contained elements of the postmodern, even while being founded on the principle of rationality most associated with modernism.

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This anticipates the developments of the museum later on, which will receive most of my attention in this paper. As the spectacle becomes the interactive spectacle, museums adapt to provide opportunities for visitors to become part of the world of images.

1. Methods and Key Texts

This paper examines the museum in relation to the concept of the spectacle as originally outlined in Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. Writers like Yasmin Ibrahim, Stephen Best, and Douglas Kellner have upheld the relevance of Debord's work, building upon it to theorize the contemporary media landscape. I believe Debord's work is more relevant than other thinkers who offer their own critique of the supremacy of the sign in consumer capitalism. While I will borrow partially from Jean Baudrillard in this paper, I will explain that his rejection of the distinction between appearance and reality does not hold true as we observe new behaviors of interactivity with the spectacle. As Ibrahim writes, the world of the spectacle elicits desire through its inaccessibility or distance (Ibrahim, 2019). Our continuous gestures to integrate with the spectacle, specifically through social media use, signal that we are always apart from it. In this way, Debord's spectacle provides a more useful model than Baudrillard's simulacra and simulation.

Using the idea of spectacle and its more recent elaborations, I examine the museum over time with particular emphasis on the postmodern era. To define and understand this era, I primarily look to Fredric Jameson, whose writing aimed to describe postmodernism from a critical distance. This distance is useful for my project, as I aim to *historicize* postmodern thinking and practices—namely, a skepticism towards the real— rather than employ that thinking in my analysis of the museum. I will argue that what Debord called "the society of the spectacle" could also be identified as the postmodern period or consumer capitalism. With an understanding of the role of signs, appearances, and images in this period, developments in museum practice can be contextualized.

To understand the interactive spectacle which accompanies the digital age, I borrow some initial insights from Douglas Kellner and Steven Best, as they share my view on the links between postmodernism and situationism, and were the first to consider the ways that the spectacle has transformed.

2. The Spectacle

The shift from 19th century industrial capitalism organized around production to 20th century capitalism organized around consumption, media, and technology gave rise to new theories of power which elaborated upon the work of Marx for a new era (Best & Kellner, 1999b). György Lukács wrote on the acceleration of commodity fetishism (György Lukács, 1923/1971), while the Frankfurt School focused on mass media as a means of distraction and pacification (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1947/2016).

Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* theorizes consumer capitalism as it developed in the 20th century. He characterizes this period by the abundance of commodities which result from automation and other advancements in technology. This era of capitalism requires the collaboration of the proletariat, who, after the workday, is granted new respect in their role as a consumer (Debord, 1967/1992, p. 42). The leisure time and opportunities for consumption afforded to the individual are not breaks from production but submit to the requirements and consequences of production (Debord, 1967/1992, p. 10). Debord expanded upon Lukács' writing to argue that the commodity has come to dominate all living experience. This occurs through the commodity projecting its own world, a spectacle, detached from reality and far more absorbing. The spectacle includes advertising, images, film; all mediated and represented versions of reality, which merge into a common stream, forming a unity which can only be looked at, is entirely one-way, and is the focal point of all consciousness. While the spectacle arises out of a need to manufacture desire for goods to keep up with productive capacities, over time it grows increasingly abstract and removed from materiality, shaping society more generally to the demands of late capitalism. The spectacle invokes *passivity, distraction, and alienation*, as all individuals center the spectacle as the most meaningful sphere of life, rather than authentic social reality (Debord, 1967/1992, pp. 8-11). The spectacle becomes the 'real' world of meaning, pleasure, and excitement, leaving reality dull in contrast.

Important to note is that both this description and *The Society of the Spectacle* primarily focus on a certain type of spectacle, the diffused spectacle, which Debord views as correlated with the abundance of commodities. He also identifies another type, the concentrated spectacle, which is linked with bureaucratic capitalism and totalitarianism (Debord, 1990/1998, pp. 5–6). However, decades later, Debord argued that there was no longer a distinction between the two types. He calls this new iteration the integrated spectacle, which is simultaneously more centralized but with a less knowable authority. It is associated with technological renewal, integration of state and economy, and the dominance of the present (Debord, 1967/1992, pp. 26-27).

In the integrated spectacle, ceaseless streams of information ensure that only the recent is socially significant. Known historical events "retreat into a remote and fabulous realm of unverifiable stories" (Debord, 1990/1998, p. 6). Essentially, history is assumed into the spectacle. This lack of authentic history makes it more difficult to question the current authority. Even politics is part of the spectacle, as figures like Kennedy and Krushchev exist most meaningfully in the public consciousness as icons which differ greatly from the actual men (Debord, 1967/1992, pp. 24-25) As the spectacle is experienced as ultimately real and meaningful, what does and does not appear entirely constitutes the spectator's conception of the world.

I would like to connect the spectacle to postmodernism, both as a "periodizing concept" (Jameson, 1998), and to postmodern theory. I distinguish *theories of postmodernism* from *postmodern theory*, the former which describes and critiques a development of a type of social life and economic order which is generally correlated with the rise of consumerism and mass media in the 20th century, and the latter which self-consciously or not embodies the qualities of postmodernism.

Though Debord and other members of the Situationist International did not explicitly identify their society as postmodern, the term would gain popularity in the 1970s to describe the nature of economic and social life under regimes of mass media and the related modes of production and consumption. Fredric Jameson explains that postmodernism is "often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism." (Jameson, 1998, 129) He identifies that postmodernism involves the transformation of reality into images, a concern he shares with Debord. Jameson describes the media landscape, or spectacle, as increasingly self-referential, as if there is no sense of anything outside of the spectacle. Films and literature refer to one another rather than authentic reality, a tendency he titles "pastiche":

> Cultural production… can no longer look directly out its eyes at the real world for the referent but must, as in Plato's cave, trace its mental images of the world on its confining walls… we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about the past, which itself stays forever out of reach. (Jameson, 1998, p. 135)

He attributes this to a broad skepticism about the existence of the real (including the individual subject) leading to the ascendance of the world of signs. The postmodern consciousness knows only the signifier/sign (for example, a word) and the signified (concept), but treats the referent (ex. real object), with skepticism, that it either does not exist or is inaccessible. The collapse of the high/low culture distinction associated with this era, noted by Jameson and other writers (Peretti, 1996), and even anticipated by the Situationists (Best & Kellner, 1999a), can be linked to this skepticism toward the ability to access or depict the real. As no artist or writer is capable of revealing truth, then all cultural production is equal in the same, disconnected sphere.

I also want to note Jameson's view that representations of history are based on other representations; pastiche rather than truth; spectacle rather than reality. This echoes Debord's "remote and fabulous realm of identifiable stories" (Debord, 1990/1998, p. 6), as well as his comments on political figures as part of the spectacle. This sense of narratives of history and politics as part of the spectacle is something which I will explore in more detail in the third section as it relates to the museum.

In my view, Jameson's observation of pastiche in postmodern media aligns with Debord's view of the common, unified stream of the spectacle's images. Both believe that media has become its own whole and reality has been downgraded in the conscious life of the subjects of consumer capitalism. In effect, Debord's *society of the spectacle is a theorization of postmodern society, and equally, Jameson's understanding of postmodern society is defined by the elevation of the spectacle*. Their views are not just compatible but are more illuminating when put together: Debord establishes the spectacle as a result of the current mode of production and observes that the world of images is the one experienced as "real", Jameson uses semiotics to illustrate the postmodern subject's relationship with representations and the real.

In writing about the transformation of reality into images, it is difficult to ignore Jean Baudrillard. Like the Situationists, Baudrillard observed the usurpation of reality with the world presented in media: "It is well known how the simple presence of a television changes the rest of the habitat into a kind of archaic envelope."

(Baudrillard, 1998, p. 148)[2] He describes individuals fleeing from the "desert of the real" to the ecstasies of hyperreality (Kellner, 2020), his term for the state of representations of objects, events, etc. having absorbed their original referents (Baudrillard, 1981/1994). Baudrillard is the prototypical postmodernist outlined by Jameson, as he does not believe that the spectacle is an alienated inversion of reality, but instead it is its complete substitution (Plant, 2021). He argues that though there may have been a society of the spectacle at one point (Crary, 1989, p. 98), now there is only simulation of reality, or simulations of simulations; simulacra.

This is where he departs from Debord and from my own thinking. As I will explain later, the spectacle enamors through unattainability, and its evolution into the *interactive* spectacle signals what Barthes describes as an "amorous distance" (Barthes, 1986, p. 349). However, Baudrillard provides insight into the postmodern worldview which I believe is similarly present in the museum throughout its history: a sense of *nothing outside of signification.*

What Baudrillard contributes to this discussion of the postmodern era is the "over-proximity" of all things (Baudrillard, 1987/2012, p.27). By this he refers to the ubiquity of information, which, within hyperreality, does not tie to physical reality. Baudrillard considers this to be similar to the experience of the schizophrenic, who is not out of touch with reality, but too connected. An example contemporary with Baudrillard may be MTV, showing music videos in quick succession; a rapid stream of discontinuous signifiers. One video may include a musical style or visual motif from a tradition which developed in a certain time and place. Then abruptly, another video is shown with an entirely different set of aesthetics. All of the cultural elements in the videos become recontextualized, deterritorialized, and detached from their original referents in the process, and become a part of the same general stream of pop culture. The same can be said for flipping through the television channels. Essentially, Baudrillard identifies in his time a ceaseless onslaught of information, with an imperative to exteriorize all that can be said or depicted.

To the spectator, the spectacle shows anything and everything that matters. In the process of something appearing in the spectacle, it faces juxtapositions and recontextualizations which further remove it from the original referent. This compliments the discussion of the eradication of history through its appearance in the spectacle—historical events join the unified stream of floating signifiers, becoming narratives and representations rather than real.

My aim is to establish these key aspects of consumer capitalism: *the supremacy of the spectacle, the sense of the real as less meaningful, inaccessible, or non-existent, and a ubiquity of information which leads to dislodged signifiers.* These features are what I am labeling as 'postmodern'. Essentially, the term 'consumer capitalism' refers to a specific form of production and consumption related to the abundance of commodities, while 'postmodernism' refers to a worldview which in many cases extends from these economic features. While it can be argued that postmodernism as a style of cultural production has fallen out of fashion (such as postmodern architecture), consumerism, focus on the virtual world1, and the proliferation of media has only increased (Developments and Forecasts of Growing Consumerism | Knowledge for Policy, n.d., Moody, 2022). It is for this reason that I am including the current moment in my discussion of postmodernism and consumer capitalism.

3. The Interactive Spectacle

Having established the spectacle as it was thought of by theorists in the 1960s and 1970s, I would like to move to the digital age. In the 1990s, Steven Best and Douglas Kellner wrote on the enduring relevance of the Situationists, citing examples of the growing entertainment industry as evidence of the increasing power of the spectacle. They introduce a new concept to account for the rise of interactive media: *the interactive spectacle*. This includes radio call-in shows, public polls, competition television shows which solicit votes from their audience, and the internet (Best & Kellner, 1999b, pp. 145-146). These forms of media provide the audience ways-in to the world of icons, celebrities, etc, and potentially, opportunities to witness themselves in the mediated world. With particular attention to the early internet, Best and Kellner cautiously write: "...not manipulation or domination but transformation, mutation, and alteration of the human species itself is at stake in the contemporary moment with the outcome unclear and the future open." (Best & Kellner, 1999a) Unlike the media Debord and Baudrillard observed which involved a one-way domination of the subject by the object, instead, both the object and subject are transformed through their interaction.

[2]In the UK, the average adult spends 6 hours and 12 minutes looking at a screen per day. In Brazil, South Africa, the Philippines, and Colombia, the average adult spends more than half of their waking hours looking at screens.

In my view, the interactive spectacle requires a concept of desire to explain why a subject is drawn to become part of the spectacle. Though it may seem obvious, Debord and Baudrillard both viewed the grandeur and visual pleasure of the spectacle as *pacifying* rather than *motivating* or *enticing*. The development of interactive media shows instead that perhaps this passivity was only a result of technological limitations. The complete dominance of interactive media for the past several decades shows that the public seizes the opportunity to act upon a desire inspired by the spectacle; the desire to become part of it. It is, of course, difficult to determine if the current evidence of desire for integration with the spectacle was one previously unable to be expressed, or, if the desire only formed when technology existed which provided opportunity for the expression of this desire. However, I do think that varied literature points to a desire to enter or be part of that which is considered the most meaningful or truthful sphere of life, which may not be immediate, embodied reality.

To begin theorizing the interactive spectacle, I would like to draw a parallel with Mircea Eliade's view of the role of myth. In *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, Eliade argues that "myth" has only been conceived of in opposition to reality since the 19th century. Historically, particularly in "primitive" society, myth is instead seen as containing greater truth and significance than everyday life. The role of the myth, therefore, is through retelling and enacting associated rituals, one is able to temporarily dispel their profane current time and enter the sacred time of the myth: "One is always *contemporary with a myth,"* he writes*, "*during the time when one repeats it or imitates the gestures of the mythic personages."(Eliade, 1957/1960, p. 30) [italics in original] Eliade argues that there is always something which must take the place of the myth in human society, and briefly discusses visual entertainment like bullfights and films, which take place in a "concentrated time" of heightened intensity which departs from that of "secular duration"(Eliade, 1957/1960, p. 35). His view of a religious draw to the sacred can therefore explain contemporary practices of gestures to integrate with the mediated world. One can begin to see parallels with myth and the aura of a work of art experienced in a museum, as Benjamin saw the authority and presence of a work of art to be linked with its physical uniqueness in time and space and its role in cultural tradition, an inheritance of its original "cult value" in religious ritual (Benjamin, 1936/2008). This will be expanded on later.

In addition to religious drive, media can be seen to offer opportunities for identity formation. Though I will not delve deeply into a psychoanalytic perspective, it is worth noting that psychoanalysts, and scholars inspired by psychoanalysis, studied media in relation to the development of identity throughout the 20th century. Though Freud himself was resistant, his followers explored the idea of external media technologies as part of the process of the formation of self (Kirkwood, 2017). Additionally, Lacan's view of ego-formation always involved a form of technology which provides opportunity for (mis)recognition of the self: the mirror, language (Lacan, 2001). In the 1970s, film theorists such as Christian Metz wrote on the psychic quality of film (Metz, 1977/2000).

While I believe psychoanalysis provides interesting and provocative framing, it best serves as an analogy for my purposes. It generally suggests ideas which can also be derived from structural anthropology or media theory, that an individual comes to understand themselves in relation to their society, which includes symbols/language/media. Similarly, the concepts of the mirror or reflection as it relates to self-conception can be discussed with both Lacanian psychoanalysis as well as other disciplines such as the anthropological study of myth (Lieve Spaas & Selous, 2002) or art history (Yiu, 2005). As I discuss identity formation, I do so from this generalist, interdisciplinary perspective with no particular allegiance to psychoanalysis, though I may borrow its language.

The digital age has brought together the screen and the mirror. The mirror's function of showing an image of oneself as a stable Other or object, therefore, as part of a sociality, is now the function of social media. As the spectacle contains all that is worthwhile, it becomes pivotal to see oneself in the spectacle. Consider the view of Debord: "When the spectacle stops talking about something for three days, it is as if it did not exist."(Debord, 1990/1998, p. 8) To gain a sense of oneself as a meaningful part of a social system, as existent, it becomes imperative to appear in the sacred realm of images. Yasmin Ibrahim identified the link between the screen as mirror and the screen as the portal to the spectacle: "The screen is symbolic of worlds beyond us and equally for locating us within it."(Ibrahim, 2019, p. 3) Our own reflections, once appearing in the spectacle, take on its phantasmagoric quality. The curation of one's online self is a form of self–objectification which results in an unattainable object located in the spectacle which resembles oneself. A comparison can be drawn between the online profile and Lacan's ideal-I, the imaginary self to which one aspires asymptotically as a process of the formation of the ego (Sandywell, 2011).

In pointing out that the version of oneself that exists in the spectacle is unattainable is to say that interaction with the spectacle does not prevent it from being Other. As the virtual world comes to stand in for the broad social world, in a sense, not much has changed from Lacan's view of the alterity of the social-symbolic.

The ideal-self and the social-symbolic have always been Other, but I believe it takes on a particular character in the digital spectacle that is worth noting. As has been discussed, the spectacle is not just what feels more significant than reality, it is also more absorbing and more pleasurable. This creates an altered and more profound desire for the Other. Though much has been said about desire for the Other as a fundamental principle, one can argue that it becomes even more heightened with what Baudrillard may call the obscene over-proximity of everything offered by the internet—consider the addictive user interfaces, accessibility of pornography, access to almost all knowledge ever produced. The effect of the coalescence of the spectacle and the social-symbolic is the unprecedented relegation of the individual outside of the virtual. By this I do not mean that there is social marginalization of those who do not use digital media, though I am sure one could make that case, but instead that one is always outside of the digital spectacle, and that life outside the spectacle is experienced as undesirable and insignificant compared to the hyper-stimulating digital world, where Others and the ideal-I/curated-self are located.

Therefore, the interactive spectacle can be seen as a stage for ego-formation with the specific character of the phantasmagoric, enigmatic, ambivalent/pleasurable qualities of the screen/mirror. The screen, "emblematic of fantasies and the unattainable" (Ibrahim, 2019, p. 9) remains interactive, even if it is still Other. I use the word "unattainable" only to suggest the desire created through the distance between self and Other. Best and Kellner's term remains appropriate as it usefully demarcates the current form of the spectacle from the previous form which created a passive population, and it is clear that individuals and the spectacle interact, and both are changed in the process. Individuals can never truly be the spectacle, only icons, images, and personas may be, though the seductive qualities of the spectacle provoke ceaseless attempts to be part of it, similar to the asymptotic process of Lacanian individuation.

An intriguing insight into the screen as a stage for identity formation, as well as phantasmagoria, can be found in an essay by Roland Barthes, "Leaving the Movie Theater". Written in 1975, one can see desire elicited by the spectacle during a time when technological limitations prevented interactivity: Barthes notes the darkness of the cinema as an "absence of worldliness"; (Barthes, 1986, p. 346) the cinema itself pushes reality to the margins to make the world of the screen more luminous. The film hypnotizes Barthes and he describes his identification with the screen:

> I must be in the story (there must be verisimilitude), but I must also be elsewhere: a slightly disengaged image-repertoire, that is what I must have—like a scrupulous, conscientious, organized, in a word *difficult* fetishist, that is what I require of the film…
>
> The film image… is what? A *lure*… The image is there, in front of me, coalescent (it is signified and signifier melted together), analogical, total, pregnant… In the movie theater, however far away I am sitting, I press my nose against the screen's mirror, against that 'other' image-repertoire with which I narcissistically identify myself… (Barthes, 1986, pp. 347-348) [italics in original]

Barthes then considers the self which is not absorbed by the screen, the one who maintains an awareness that he does not truly appear in the spectacle:

> ...as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exceeds it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness… I am hypnotized by a distance, and this distance is not critical (intellectual) it is… an amorous distance. (Barthes, 1986, pp. 349)

The screen enamors the viewer and elicits narcissistic identification. At the same time, the viewer is distant from the world of the screen, creating a strong sense of desire.

The final point of consideration for the interactive spectacle requires taking into account the acceleration of mass media since *The Society of the Spectacle*. In later writing, Debord identified the spectacle as beginning in the late 1920s. (Debord, 1990/1998, p. 2) This can be linked to his view of the spectacle as an effect of an abundance of commodities requiring an ideological apparatus to create demand above and beyond basic utility. The 1920s saw the expansion of credit and mass production through assembly lines lowering the price of consumer goods like automobiles. It also corresponds to the beginning of the film industry via large, centralized production companies and the increased saturation and accessibility of photography.

Of course, it is not a revelation that Debord was concerned with mass media, but I believe it is worth examining Debord's implicit view that there is a correlation between the proliferation of an image and its power in the spectacle. Another way to phrase this would be that *the more an image is reproduced, the greater its power*. Once again, Walter Benjamin is helpful here as *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* considered the possibility of a new type of gravitational force that is derived from mass reproduction.

Benjamin wrote that mechanical reproduction gives the masses more access to objects and destroys elite hierarchies of important objects by bringing everything into an equal state of accessibility (Benjamin, 1936/2008, pp. 5-6). This brings greater significance to the exhibition value of work than its cult value. This idea not only anticipates the spectacle, admittedly from a more optimistic perspective than Debord, but also makes a key prediction: that the most reproduced work takes on the greatest social meaning, and the singular becomes statistically insignificant. The truth in this idea can be seen clearly with the rise of celebrity icons, who become more revered through exposure, rather than their power diluted. Additionally, works of art increase in value when the artist's work has been widely reproduced through digital scans and prints. In this way, scarcity or exclusivity has an inverse relationship to relevance in the spectacle.2 I am therefore insisting that an image is not reproduced because it is important, but it is important because it is reproduced.

Having drawn out the implicit logic of the spectacle—that the most reproduced images have the most power—two conclusions can be drawn. The first is that digital media hyper-accelerates the reproduction of images and creates more opportunities for exposure to these images, increasing the power of the spectacle. The second is that the digital/interactive spectacle incentivizes individuals to ensure as many representations of themselves and their lives as possible in order to get closer to iconic status, usually through adapting their online behavior to what is proven to result in engagement.

To summarize, what defines the interactive spectacle is how audiences are continually compelled to become part of the spectacle. I have suggested here that this desire existed in the Debordian spectacle, though in its inability to be acted upon, it instead created a stupefied, passive populace. This desire to be part of the spectacle can be explained by viewing the spectacle as a type of myth and through its role in identity formation. It is also clear that the interactive spectacle is not just a transformation of the older iteration, but it is more powerful given its accelerated capacity to reproduce images.

4. The Museum

In this section, I will link the theoretical background of the previous sections to the museum, with my examples following a chronological order starting with the mid-19th century[3]. I will discuss the museum as it relates to spectacle, from its early pseudo-iterations through the postmodern Debordian spectacle, to the interactive spectacle of the digital age.

Objects on display intend to connect those who look upon them with some kind of world which cannot be immediately ascertained (Pomian, 1991, pp. 7-34). Collections are formed of objects which act as representatives, either as symbols or synecdoche (Bal, 1996), of something which is invisible to the audience. The invisible world may vary; it can be the sacred, a coherent national history and identity, a structurally whole system of nature, or a culture distant in time or space. In all cases, the audience belongs to the visible world, and the objects are intermediaries to a world which cannot be visually ascertained. As Krzysztof Pomian writes:

> The invisible is spatially distant, not only beyond the horizon but also very high or very low. It is also temporally distant, either in the past or in the future. In addition, it is beyond all physical space and every expanse or else in a space structured totally differently. It is situated in a time of its own, or outside any passing of time, in eternity itself. It can sometimes have a corporeity or materiality other than that of the elements of the visible world, and sometimes be a sort of pure antimateriality. (Pomian, 1991, p. 24)

Pomian identifies a homogeneity in all collections through this function. He also points out that the invisible is a result of language, as through language we can encounter that which exists beyond what our own senses can make out. I would like to extend that to other forms of technology besides language, as photography or drawing may do the same. This forms a distinction between what is perceivable, and what belongs to a discursive universe.

[3]Benjamin also argues that film had a greater sense of reality than painting and remarks on its ability to put the audience in an in-between state of attention and distraction. He quotes Georges Duhamel's response to cinema: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.". Though this compliments the discussion on the psychic power of the spectacle, Benjamin attributes this more to the mechanical nature of how films are shot and edited, which is not as relevant here.

Pomian points out that consistently across religions, mythologies, philosophies, and sciences there is a common view that the visible is subordinated to the invisible.

> The opposition between the visible and the invisible, the inevitable product of the function of language… encourages us to subordinate the visible to the invisible… It excites in us an interest in anything which somehow seems linked with the invisible, and more especially in those objects which are supposed to represent it. (Pomian, 1991, p. 27)

The invisible world to which all collections refer parallels Eliade's myth or Debord's spectacle; distant, above everyday life, out of time, with the potential to be immaterial and structured differently than what exists here and now. And like the spectacle, this world requires representation to make contact with the viewer. The objects which allow a visitor to come in contact with this realm therefore take on tremendous value. One can see that in the process of an item standing in for the invisible, even if the invisible may be historically verifiable or based in authentic reality, it becomes a sign. Even if an object is a genuine artifact, its function in the collection is to represent a larger whole (a synecdoche). Of course, this is even clearer with an art museum: the work itself may intend to represent reality, or an abstract concept, while the collection holistically aims to signal a movement or artistic greatness.

My interpretation of Pomian regards the objects which connect the viewer to the invisible as valuable not only because of their association with what lies in the discursive realm, but due to their status as signs. As I have already discussed, the spectacle, or hyperreality, is the supremacy of signification over the real. What Debord, Baudrillard, and Jameson all argue, with some differences in language, is a type of fetish for the sign. In the case of the museum, the invisible would be the signified, and the object the sign, and the museum visitor the devalued real.

To discuss this further, let me link the museum object to the commodity: like a museum object, the commodity gestures to something beyond itself. Baudrillard viewed sign-value to have superseded use- or exchange-value. This value is based on what the commodity signals about its owner; their status, competence, etc. Commodities promise something above and beyond themselves: satisfaction, mental and physical health, social status, happiness (Goldman & Wilson, 1983); that the buyer is a certain type of person they hope to be. These fantasies create their own phantasmagoric, invisible world. The commodity as above-all a sign tracks with Baudrillard's view that there is nothing outside of signification. The commodity fetish was explained earlier by Lukács as having been reified, or completely naturalized to the extent that the commodity is seen as having power over human choice (György Lukács, 1923/1971).

The museum object is similarly reified. The idea that it is capable of connecting the viewer to concepts of artistic greatness or historical truth is considered its natural power. And much like the commodity, the world it projects and its function as a sign of that world is what grants it value. As the sign becomes the fetish, the museum is a valued social institution because it offers pleasure and edification through proximity to signs and to the signified.

The Great Exhibition of 1851 has been widely studied as a watershed moment for exhibitionary practice.(Bennett, 1995, Harris, 1990, Pubrick, 2013) This makes it a useful example for examination, as it was the culmination of techniques of display which had been developing in museums, panoramas, art galleries, and arcades during the 19th century, and translated these techniques of display in spectacular fashion to have a profound and lasting influence on museums and other exhibitionary spaces which came after. (Bennett, 1995, p. 61)

There are many ways to interpret the invisible/the signified of the Great Exhibition. Tony Bennett argues it is the abstract concept of evolutionary progress, writing, "...the semiotic value of the object displayed is representative…whether a work of art or of manufacture; whether from Britain, India, France or America - most things at the Crystal Palace were displayed as representative of a stage within an evolutionary series leading from the simple to the complex." (Bennett, 1995, p. 213) It can also be argued that the signified was British hegemony, capable of extracting, transporting, manufacturing, and displaying all that appeared in the Great Exhibition. Though it may seem that these concerns are quintessential modernist rationality, an examination of the Exhibition reveals an anachronistically postmodern over-proximity of dislodged signifiers, with limited ability to offer a didactic and properly contextualized account of the world.

The setting of the Crystal Palace already begins to suggest a spectacular and abstracted space to be hypnotized by signs, like Barthes' movie theater. The space, covering 19 acres, was noted for its mystifying effect on visitors. Its interior perspective made it appear infinite, and light filled the space with a "ghostly evenness" (Wyman, 2001, p. 240). A contemporary German critic described the disorienting nature of the structure:

> There is no longer any true interior or exterior, the barrier erected between us and the landscape is almost ethereal. If we imagine that air can be poured like liquid, then it has, here, achieved solid form, after the removal of the mold from which it was poured… It is, in my opinion, extraordinarily difficult to arrive at a clear perception of the effect of form and scale in this *incorporeal* space." (quoted in McKean, 1994, p. 32) [italics mine]

The Crystal Palace almost intends to embody the immateriality of the vast and abstract worlds it signifies, hiding its own location in reality.

The Great Exhibition also brought together objects of all kinds; art, artifact, and product. As Susan Buck-Morris writes, "Industrial products were displayed like artworks among statues and fountains, ornamental gardens and mature trees. The Crystal Palace blended together old nature and new nature… in a *fantasy world* that enters the imagination of an entire generation of Europeans." (Buck-Morss, 1999, p. 85) [italics mine] It begins to become clear that the Great Exhibition was not meaningfully educational through classification of the objects on display. It was a pure spectacle of objects recontextualized into a space experienced as abstract; apart from life. Even if a visitor is in the India exhibit, within their line of sight may be a recreation of a European medieval court, Persian textiles, or a premier of the newly invented soft drink. The effect is an early form of postmodern "schizophrenic" signifiers, dislodged from their referents through decontextualization and abrupt juxtaposition. The objects, despite their variety and basis in political and historical reality, have their meaning collapsed into pure spectacle, all transforming to signal only that they come from something above and beyond everyday life.

Dickinson's comprehensive pictures of the Great Exhibition, Vol 2, Plate V, India No.4.

General View of the Interior (from Recollections of the Great Exhibition) by John Absolon.

The Great Exhibition, along with the countless museums and galleries it influenced in the 19th and early-20th centuries, exhibits an early form of over-proximity of information leading to a break in the signifying chain. Prior to the 1930s, it was common practice to hang paintings according to size (Mary Anne Staniszewski & N.Y, 2001, p. 62), and to put everything that was in the museum or gallery's collection on display at one time (Harris, 1990, p. 62). Though in other cases, art displays were based on classification, this common technique suggests the beginnings of art being valued not because of its ability to signify something revered, like history, reality, or beauty, but instead as pure sign. This is similar to what Jameson and Baudrillard point out through their linking of postmodernism or late capitalism with schizophrenia: when everything becomes a sign that is not meaningfully connected to a referent, the individual cannot make sense of the relationships between what they see. I do not believe that all early exhibitions and museums were completely postmodern, MTV-like experiences, but that elements of the spectacle appeared in the museum very early, which set it up to be a critical site for the spectacle later on.

As we consider the invisible worlds that were signified by other collections in 19th century museums, we can see Eliade's mythic (re)integration with what is truly meaningful above everyday, observable reality. The Louvre and the British Museum present coherent narratives of national history and creative greatness or may intend to transport viewers into a "realm of the spirit" (Duncan, 2002, p. 131) through exposing the public to works of profound skill and beauty. The founders of these museums had goals of public edification, and they believed that witnessing these objects allowed viewers to connect with something transcendent.

When art later becomes more based on meta-critique of the medium itself in the 20th century (pastiche), familiarity with art history itself becomes the important site of contact for the museum to act as intermediary. This can be seen as a fetish for the sign which is self-perpetuating: as the sign grows to be the focal point of consciousness for society, the museum, as a theoretically edifying institution, must give the public instruction on sign and pastiche, reinforcing the supremacy of the sign. The museum visit therefore becomes a ritual to get closer to that which is perceived as containing the greatest truth or profundity, and in the society of the spectacle, that is the realm of images.

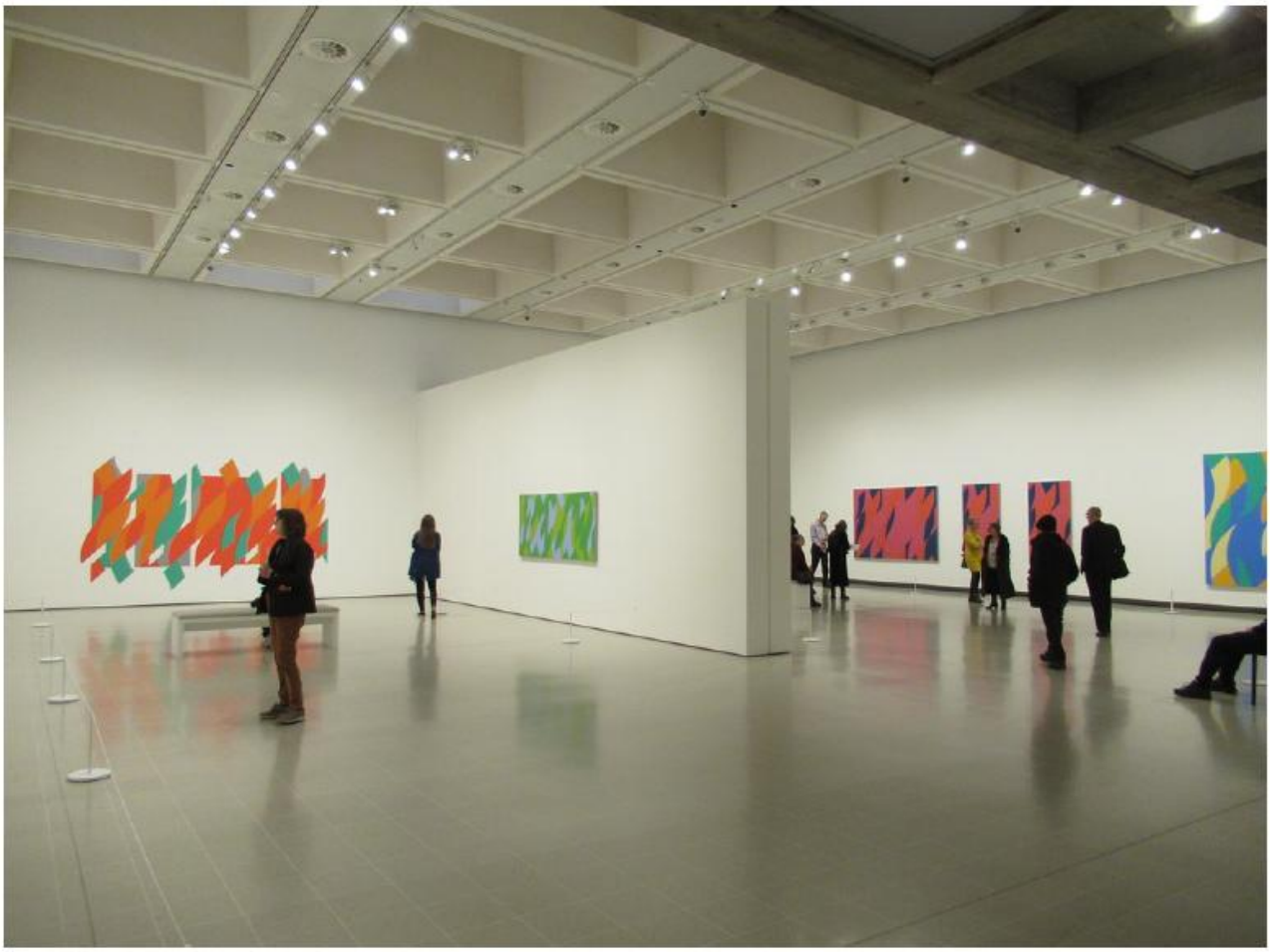
The museum's role in the ritual to reenter the world of signification is reflected in changing exhibition design. The abstract space for the contemplation of art and artifact—neutral walls and spacious arrangements—took form in the 1930s and concretized in the 1960s and 1970s (Mary Anne Staniszewski & N.Y, 2001). Though different from the disorienting space of the Great Exhibition or the salon, this blankness is a similar move towards a rejection of the real. This method of display appears as a radical change from the 19th century, as it is obviously stylistically different. However, I argue this is more accurately considered an aesthetic, rather than ideological, change. Both the dizzying Crystal Palace and the "white cube"-style gallery are designed to take the viewer outside of their quotidian environment which is sensorily apprehendable to them and bring them closer to the intangible and abstract. One can see this abstraction in official exhibition publicity photographs, which, beginning in the 1930s, were generally taken without any viewers to populate them (Mary Anne Staniszewski & N.Y, 2001, p. XXIII). This incorporeality can reveal a sort of impetus to imagine the exhibition space in an idealized form, in the space beyond the real, much like the works on display.

MoMA Airways to Peace Exhibition, 1943. Publicity photos through the 20th century were almost always taken without any visitors.

This interpretation diverges from the conventional view that austere geometric spaces are part of a modernist project to create an environment for the thriving of the individual. But a closer examination of the interior art gallery shows a continual effort to create spaces to be out of time, or beyond time, as in Barthes' dark cinema or Eliade's moments of heightened intensity. It is telling that the "white cube"-style gallery was a "*modernist format postmodernism couldn't quite kill and still shows few signs of shuffling off.*" (Herbert, 2021) [italics mine]. Though a modernist invention, it serves postmodern purposes far better than modernist ones, which may explain why it has outlasted other modernist styles of architecture or industrial design, such as De Stijl. These purposes, are of course, not to be conducive to, or celebratory of, individual self-consciousness, but precisely the opposite.

The white cube is, of course, not neutral, which is my point. "Art exists in a kind of eternity of display... This eternity gives the gallery a limbolike status… Indeed the presence of that odd piece of furniture, your own body, seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not…" (O'Doherty, 1976/1999, p. 15) It is not surprising to find the view that mind, but not body, is welcome in the gallery, as we have seen via Jameson, only the sign and signified, the parts of the semiotic operation which exist in the mind, are considered accessible to the postmodern subject.

The minimal gallery space removes art from recognizable features of living experience, casting it instead into inorganic and pristine territory, in a sense, almost an attempt at recreating the invisible space beyond time with its own structural logic described by Pomian. Art is seen to be most appropriately located in a space apart from the everyday, even removed from the subject matter which it may represent (a painting of a city street would never appear on a city street.) The gallery space contains signs and signifieds, but no referents. Even the human body is experienced as unwelcome.



The Hayward Gallery in London, originally built in 1968. A "white cube" style gallery.

During the 1960s, art activists pushed for museums to become less aristocratic and more accessible to a wide-ranging audience (Davis, 2017). Arguably, a well-intended healthy populism, it is here we begin to see a tension I would like to address through the remainder of this essay, which is that the demand for accessible art can quickly and easily turn into commercial art which is aligned with the logic and values of late capitalism. In a way, the activists of the 1960s got what they wanted in the following decade with the ascendance of the blockbuster exhibition. Beginning with the traveling King Tut exhibition of 1976, museums leaned into heavily publicized and merchandised exhibitions aimed at drawing a large, rather than elite, crowd. One can see this as linked to a postmodern turn away from the high/low culture distinction, as there is suddenly nothing above commercialization if everything, no matter how historic, is made equal in the spectacle. As Debord and Jameson have pointed out, everything, including history, is capable of being cannibalized by the spectacle and becoming narrative and aesthetic; interchangeable 'content' in the contemporary sense of the word.

Though outside the scope of this essay, much can be said about the art movements which were institutionally embraced in the postmodern turn. The collapse of the high/low brow distinction, which I have already shown to be related to the skepticism about the ability for art to access the real, is embraced by museums, particularly in the United States, with little resistance. By the 1950s, several American museums had acquired Duchamp's readymades for their permanent collections (Girst, 2003). This phenomenon is even clearer with pop art, which as soon as the movement arrived in the United States in the early 1960s, was greeted with a symposium at MoMA (Lacey, 2021, p. 624). As Jameson notes, art referencing advertising and low-brow culture aligns itself with the logic of late capitalism, even if it does so for the sake of expressing ambivalence or critique.

Countless other movements of the 20th century exhibit a meta-critique of the sign or draw from commercial inspiration, including performance art, naïve art, and in many cases, conceptual art and minimalism. Tracing the history of art turning in on itself is well-tread, though I encourage further study on this phenomenon through the lens of the Debordian spectacle. To the extent this is useful for my argument, I aim to point to how easily these movements fit into the museum as sites for exposure and mythic reintegration to histories of signification.

5. The Museum of the Interactive Spectacle

The museum's nominal role to instruct the public in visual literacy takes on a certain character when there exists a hyper-saturated visual environment that inescapably follows commercial logic. Museum collections reflect this environment, as art collections are designed to familiarize viewers with a history of representation itself. It is also reflected in art on display which must draw from the raw material available in a society of the spectacle. Because of the environment in which it is created, more and more art responds to, incorporates, parodies, or celebrates advertising and mass media. It is also clear in exhibitions of commodities (i.e., the sneaker exhibition at the Design Museum in London) and exhibitions about popular entertainment of the spectacle (i.e., the V&A's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and David Bowie exhibitions).

It would be misleading to suggest that the relationship between museums and consumerism is a recent development. Consumerism, the mass participation in the values of the mass-industrial market (Ewen, 1977, p. 54), cannot be separated from museum history since the 19th century. The South Kensington Museum (later the V&A), was an outgrowth of the Great Exhibition and its lesson to British statesmen that "industrial art [is] a factor of national wealth" (Charles R. Richards quoted in Guglielmo, 2008) (Industrial art is what may be called 'applied arts' or 'industrial design' today.) The museum sought to offer up items of good taste for manufacturers to study in the brave new world of cheap mass production (Guglielmo, 2008, p. 47) While the British model was a national project, museums in the United States were founded by private entrepreneurs. The Metropolitan Museum, also a private endeavor, was supported by many department store magnates. Inspired by England's example, the founders aimed to "foster commerce… and encourage the trades…" as "every nation that has tried it has found that every wise investment in the development of art pays more than compound interest."(Joseph Hodges Choate quoted in Guglielmo, 2008) Here we begin to see the familiar tension of "accessible" art as commercial art. J.P. Morgan, the president of the Met, hired Caspar Purdon Clarke, the director of the V&A, who advocated for industrial art, as it was "democratic" rather than "aristocratic". (Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke quoted in Guglielmo, 2008) Later on in the 20th century, museums would take cues from department stores in their display practices (Harris, 1990).

This background establishes precedent for the commodity as museum object, though there appears to be a key transition between the model of the 19th century and early 20th century and what has been seen in the last several decades. Early museum founders and directors, whether statesmen or entrepreneurs, were both interested in a top-down shaping of public taste. The elite tried to sway manufacturers or the poor based on what they hoped the market to be. To me, this differs from the affirmative nature of contemporary exhibitions of commodities. By affirmative, I mean that museums respond to what has already occurred in the market and enshrine it into social history and the history of the sign. This differentiation can be put another way, which is that in the early stages of industrialization, training the public to desire commodities was more straightforward; it was concerned with introducing objects of beauty and thoughtful design to teach desire. As the spectacle arises, the reified commodity and its associated imagery and phantasmagoric daydreams are likely to have already been the social field of the museum visitor's life. The museum then retrospectively historicizes these commodities as symbols and icons after they have already become socially relevant. The museum affirms the commodity and its impact rather than shapes the market. Additionally, the presence of commodities produced by multinational corporations also marks this period.

To illustrate this, I would like to examine the Design Museum's *Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street* exhibition from 2021[4]. The exhibition's webpage advertises

> ...discover how sneakers such as the Reebok InstaPump Fury, the Vans Half Cab and the Asics Gel Lyte III have become cultural symbols of our times… Then delve into the lucrative resale market that is currently valued at $10 billion in data visualisations from Stock X, before reliving the streetwear staple's high-fashion reinvention including sneakers by Balenciaga, Comme des Garçons and Y-3 and runway looks from A-COLD-WALL* and CRAIG GREEN. (*Sneakers Unboxed: Studio to Street*, n.d.)

From this text, we can see the museum embrace the postmodern eschew of traditional distinctions of high and low culture, essentially embracing that corporate commodities and the worlds attached to them are the raw stuff of contemporary life.3 I do not deny that this may be true, and as I have mentioned, this is self perpetuating: if a museum aims to present what is socially and artistically influential, then it could be argued that it is a glaring omission to deny the encroachment of the commodity. The museum, then, is forced into Jameson's pastiche, as art history and social history play out in the society of the spectacle.

This passage can also be illuminated by something discussed earlier, the logic of accelerated reproduction. The sneakers which have been the most reproduced, both physically and in the form of iconic inclusion of the sneaker in music videos, films, or in widely distributed images of celebrities, make the sneaker iconic. This is a case of exhibition-value over cult-value—the museum justifies the display of the sneaker because it has already been reproduced many times over. The sneaker is iconic because it is reproduced, not reproduced because it is iconic.

Once again, the museum is creating an "accessible" exhibition; it has wide appeal and opposes traditional hierarchies of both taste and of social inequality, as the sneaker is linked with youth subculture and hip-hop (both mentioned in the promotional video for the exhibition). It has, in some ways, fulfilled the goals of earlier activists, but one cannot deny the acquiescence to corporate capitalism. This is a tension that is difficult to resolve, though I think it is worth considering corporations' role in inserting their products and iconography in these subcultures (Klein, 2009), as it is not always a matter of bottom-up appropriation.

The interactive spectacle, with its glittering images mediated to us through a backlit screen, exposing us to greater beauty and horror than we would be likely to encounter without its intervention, has greater power now than at the time of the Situationists. As of September 2022, 83.4% of the world's population owns a smartphone (Turner, 2021), and in several countries, the average adult spends over half of their waking hours looking at a screen. Though it may seem obvious, anything and everything encountered on a screen is mediated, and arguably representational (including language). The logic therefore extends to suggest that the average person is engaging with a mediated, virtual world for an overwhelming portion of their time, potentially the most of their time, and likely to be thinking about and/or behaving in accordance with the virtual world even when not looking at a screen.

As the spectacle and digital world have become practically synonymous, the physical museum as subordinate to the realm it signifies takes on a different form. There is a noticeable fall in relevance of the blank, austere gallery which gives images space to signify without any debilitating context. Instead, museums have adapted to the need to offer photogenic spaces, especially as backgrounds, for documentation and uploading into the virtual world. Instead of proximity to signs, the photogenic installation and the selfie museum are charged environments existing in a state of perpetual anticipation for being turned into representation. Beyond traditional museums, the rise of selfie museums is the ultimate postmodern expression of the exhibition, one without art or artists.

While the term 'photogenic exhibitions' covers a broad range of work, another evocative phrase may be Ben Davis's 'Big Fun Art' coined in 2017 to describe a trend in the art world of financially successful exhibitions that are colorful, immersive, entertaining, experience-based, and social media-friendly (Davis, 2017). An example of Big Fun Art is Meow Wolf's permanent installation in Santa Fe, *House of Eternal Return*, built by a collective of 135 artists in 2016 (*House of Eternal Return*, 2016).[5] The installation begins as an unextraordinary home, but upon exploration (such as opening the refrigerator door) it gives way to colorful and surreal (and photo-friendly) spaces.

[4] Also relevant is the replacement of the name of the artist/designer with the brand name. As I mentioned earlier, the postmodern worldview rejects the modernist reverence for the artist because no one is capable of expressing essential truth.

[5] Art and entertainment: the installation received a $3.5 million investment from George R.R Martin.

House of Eternal Return by Meow Wolf in Santa Fe.

Meow Wolf's business model was based on 150,000 visitors a year, but it received 100,000 visits just in its first two months (Krasnow, 2016). In fact, the project was so successful that the collective opened another immersive, silly, bright, and shareable installation in Las Vegas in 2021 (Omega Mart | Now Open | Meow Wolf Las Vegas, n.d.). As Davis accurately points out, this art is "poppy and media-savvy, but its not Pop or New Media art." (Davis, 2017) Meow Wolf's work is intractably linked to the digital world, but it does not include any overt reference to the material basis of technology. This may be exactly why it is so successful: it understands that the spectacle is not the screen, the spectacle is what makes the individual forget they are looking at a screen. Instead, the spectacle is the appearances, icons, and "ecstasy" of information, it is experientially immaterial. Compare this to the documenta x show of 1997, the first to display internet art—the art was shown on office computers, which were later disapprovingly described as an "alien presence"; the show was unsuccessful (Davis, 2017). In my view, this is because the gallery context invites attention and contemplation to an object which may not ordinarily receive it (this has been an accepted idea in art since the canonization of Duchamp's *Fountain*). Attention on the computer itself does not accurately and authentically get at the experience of being online. When one is looking at their phone for five or more hours a day, it is not the phone that lives in the imagination.

Big Fun Art does not just have to include work that comes from collectives-bordering-on-businesses. It can also include work by artists taken seriously as artists, at museums which are taken seriously as museums.[6] Take, for example, Yayoi Kusama, whose work has possessed the qualities of Big Fun Art long before the digital age. On Instagram, over a million posts have been tagged with #yayoikusama, and on Tik Tok, videos tagged #yayoikusama have yielded over 51.2 million views as of September 2022.

[6] It also includes hard-to-define in-betweens of "art" and aesthetic experiences, such as the globally touring Van Gogh immersive experiences, for-profit events run by several different companies which project the artist's work on the walls with added animated movement and accompanying music. Much can be said for the low production cost of this exhibit and the size of its gift shop.

When the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC put on an exhibition of her work, membership increased 6000%. At the Broad in Los Angeles, a Kusama exhibition overwhelmed the museum to such a degree that 5 It also includes hard-to-define in-betweens of "art" and aesthetic experiences, such as the globally touring Van Gogh immersive experiences, for-profit events run by several different companies which project the artist's work on the walls with added animated movement and accompanying music.

Much can be said for the low production cost of this exhibit and the size of its gift shop. Visitors were limited to a maximum of 30 seconds in the Infinity Mirror rooms, just enough time to take a picture (Davis, 2017).

A selfie taken in a Yayoi Kusama installation.

Given the success of Big Fun Art, it is not surprising to see the rise of selfie museums. Selfie museums, for-profit initiatives that provide aesthetically pleasing backdrops for photos with no particular artist attached, have opened up in practically every major city around the world. There are institutions explicitly titled "The Museum of Selfies" in Istanbul, Tbilisi, and Los Angeles, to name a few, also "Museum(s) of Illusions" in Madrid, Tel Aviv, and Vienna, and franchises of the Museum of Ice Cream in Singapore, New York, and several other US cities. Artist Brad Troemel considers the rise of the selfie museum to be a result of several historical developments. He points out that museums were founded by wealthy robber barons, whose philanthropic efforts to expose the working class to masterpieces which were historically kept in the homes of the wealthy and powerful creates a sort of paradox: museums as both inclusive and elitist. Museums are open to the public, but they are under the control of trained, elite connoisseurs. This leads to a complicated relationship to the public, who, on all sides of the political spectrum[7], crave representation rather than avant-garde work which is not easily appreciated without extensive training in visual literacy. He argues that activists of the 60s and 70s who demanded inclusive art did not adequately reflect these demands, as they criticized the art world from the inside as a highly educated elite. The art world as it exists now, with photogenic installations, Big Fun Art, and selfie museums, is a product of the widespread technology for self-representation that allow the public to create the art they wish to see.

[7] Troemel points out that the left-wing demands representation of the noble working class, and the right-wing demands representation of the traditional, idealized family.

To Troemel, selfie museums serve as a profitable "apology" for elite museums which make a visitor feel unintelligent and excluded. There are no distinct artworks with titles or artists, no texts to explain (or complicate) the reception of an installation, "no more eating your art history vegetables" (Troemel, 2022).

Installations at The Museum of Ice Cream, the first selfie museum. Opened across the street from the Whitney in New York, the site of several protests over inclusivity, the Museum of Ice Cream was founded by a graphic designer and a private equity investor.

Selfie museums provide a direct avenue into the spectacle to the extent that it can be entered by an individual, in the form of an image with aesthetic qualities which ensure it will be widely shareable online. As the virtual space is the mythic sacred space, the visit to the selfie museum is a significant act of ritual. As I have mentioned with my interpretation of Benjamin, exhibition value (which in this context can also be called shareability) has superseded value which comes from exclusivity. The transition from earlier museums, such as the British Museum, to the selfie museum is the same transition Benjamin identified from cult-value to exhibition value. While earlier museums provided the masses access to that which was sacred because of its singularity, the selfie museum aids the masses in their own pursuit of becoming sacred themselves through exhibition; reproducibility; shareability. The selfie museum is designed to aid the icon-making of the average person according to the logic of the interactive spectacle.

As I have discussed earlier, this desire for representation comes via a desire for identity-formation through the spectacle. The self which appears in images and online appears as a coherent and stable version of oneself which aids in the process of developing an identity. Because the spectacle is extraordinary, one's reflection within it becomes especially crucial and aspirational. The traditional museum becomes an attractive place for images of the ideal-I because of its historical association with cultivation and expertise. The selfie museum attaches itself to that legacy, though with a populist twist, communicating an identity of whimsy as well.

The paradox of the museum appears once again: the museum becomes an attractive place to associate oneself for the process of identity-formation because of its cultural clout, clout which it has developed through being a site of elite cultivation and exposure to complex concepts. By adapting to commercial demand, the museum attempts the difficult task of applying its air of connoisseurship to what is popular. Though seemingly contradictory, this paradox is resolved through presenting commerciality as inclusivity and accessibility.

The postmodern sensibility reaches its ultimate form in the selfie [low culture] museum [high culture]. It is a physical space completely subordinate to the needs of the representative space. The selfie museum is often stark and undecorated outside of the areas explicitly designed for photo documentation. The visitor may attend a physical space, but superimposed upon it is another space which they truly inhabit, one which is immaterial and far more luminous, that of the spectacle.

6. Conclusion

In attempting to historicize the postmodern sensibility and how it appears in the museum, I find Jameson's view useful:

> The lapse from this austere dialectical imperative into the more comfortable stance of the taking of moral positions is inveterate and all too human: still, the urgency of the subject demands that we make at least some effort to think the cultural evolution of late capitalism dialectically, as catastrophe and progress all together. (Jameson, 1991/2019, p. 47)

As he tried to understand the increasingly influential worldview of his time, he maintained the stance that it was not unambiguously good or bad, but instead a part of the constantly developing nature of political economy. I have tried to embody his thinking in acknowledging the unresolvable tension that arises when justified calls for inclusivity and accessibility in the museum come up against the encroachment of commercialism and media in all aspects of life. Similarly, though I often share Debord's fear of the media preventing the individual from their own authentic life, I also understand the creativity, humor, and skill involved in Big Fun Art or works of pastiche. Ultimately, though there is much to criticize, my goal in this study was to historicize.

Museum professionals need to carefully consider their work as it exists in a broader context of the ever-growing importance and ubiquity of images. The museum can be a unique site for the presentation of truly challenging ideas—I urge museums to take this role seriously, and not shirk it for the easy option of exclusively showing work which is above all pleasing and in line with economic and cultural hegemony. That said, if the spectacle is what is truly meaningful, the museum ought to address it in a provocative and thoughtful way, or else be left behind in favor of private initiatives which cater to the digital.

What I hope to have illustrated with my work is that representations have reached unprecedented levels of importance, and that museums, even before the spectacle ascended to the level of the 20th century, were already primed for the glorification of the sign. Following the changes in museums and other exhibition spaces until the present day, we can see the development of the spectacle into the interactive spectacle.

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