The Spectacle of Silence and Stillness

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Abstract
This paper explores the interconnecting themes of 'silence' and 'stillness' as they relate to notions of 'spectacle'. The discussion will be illustrated with examples from Doris Humphrey's choreographic works along side contemporary reference points. The paper considers the meaning/s and occurrence of spectacle and will discuss the implications of definitions such as 'wonderment', 'breathtaking', 'mesmerising' and 'escapist' in relation to the viewer's response. A further premise is that the appeal of 'silence' and 'stillness' is a growing phenomenon in a contemporary society besieged by visual and aural stimulation, and that our notions of what constitutes 'spectacle' are shifting accordingly.

This paper explores the interconnecting themes of 'silence' and 'stillness' as they relate to notions of 'spectacle'. Spectacle might arguably be characterised by elements or combinations of elements such as 'wonderment', 'breathtaking', 'mesmerising' and 'escapist'. The paper considers the meaning/s and occurrence of spectacle and will discuss the implications of those definitions in relation to the viewer's response. To contextualise the discussion, a diversity of contemporary spectacle in relation to movement is explored through a cross-section of examples from popular culture and theatre alongside two of Doris Humphrey's choreographic works. A question addressed throughout this conference is what constitutes spectacle? For the purposes of this paper, spectacle is considered in two respects. First, as an event in itself that creates a multi-sensory experience for the viewer; then, there is the 'element of spectacle', meaning that a production or event can contain moments or specific aspects that stand out as spectacle without the whole work necessarily being considered so.

Spectacle is usually conceived in terms of the impact of mass effects – of bodies in movement, often in unison; of scale; of sound; of structural strategies which produce 'rises' or 'increases' to series of climaxes; utilising the technology of the age: all of which produce an onslaught of the senses. A work or event could be defined as 'spectacular' because of its scale, because of the unexpected nature of the unfolding action and, ultimately, because it is successful, it works. I will explore examples of these but alongside, argue that spectacle can be presented and experienced by the opposite of the large scale: the small scale; the seemingly intimate; the still.

In a recent article on spectacle and excess, film historian Erlend Lavik acknowledges the difficulty in defining what constitutes spectacle due to the term's subjectivity and historicity. He suggests that the notion of spectacle be understood pragmatically, "since what is extraordinary depends on what is ordinary at any given moment in time."[1] His observation, therefore, implies a continuing temporal shift. Also from the area of film studies, Andrew Darley asks "is an aesthetic without depth necessarily an impoverished aesthetic, or is it rather, another kind of aesthetic – misunderstood as such?"[2] Darley's position is an example of the 'not inferior, just different' argument in film studies, countering an opposing view that "spectacle connotes surface aesthetics, lack of intellectual

rigour and cultural decay."[3] As Darley and Lavik both intimate, however, what is wrong with 'different'?

In relation to experiencing spectacle, Lavik refers to a cyclical relationship between astonishment and familiarity,[4] inferring that once something becomes familiar, its prior astonishing properties cease to exist – a temporal shift this time between the known and unknown. I would define a first viewing as the 'moment of impact'; the 'eyes wide/oh my gosh/how did they do that' moment. Further encounters with the same event or artefact may be equally compelling but not quite in the same way. A return visit brings different expectations but not necessarily a lesser experience. Pleasure, enjoyment and exhilaration can remain undiminished in a familiar surround as appreciation and understanding deepen with subsequent viewings. After the 'how did they do that?' moment, one can luxuriate in the immediacy of the sensory response alone.

When I first began thinking through possible approaches to this paper, two primary aspects became apparent. The first is the rich variety of movement-based events in recent times that could be defined as spectacle. The opening and closing ceremonies of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 are perhaps the most overt examples. Alongside, however, can sit performances by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre; Mark Morris; Deborah Warner's production of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* and the Phillip Glass opera, *Satyagraha*. All of these, arguably, could be considered either as spectacles in themselves or containing elements of spectacle. In some, the aspects of silence and stillness are present to varying degrees. The second primary aspect is the emotive response to such events. I am conscious of two different states. One involves an immediate response – the 'moment of impact' in the moment of performance. The other is more cumulative, with the breathtaking wonderment described above arriving as an event or performance unfolds, reaching the 'oh my gosh' state almost by stealth.

Before considering the occurrence of silence and stillness in more detail, I would first like to look at a range of these movement-based events. 'Spectacle' as generated by massed bodies is a familiar occurrence. The opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics was possibly the apex of this form of spectacle, with its basis in mass unison movement. Such phenomena are not new – for example the equestrian ballets in the Italian renaissance courts; the ballet de cours in 16th c. France; Laban's movement choirs in 1930s central Europe – all of which, like Beijing, have a political and ideological dimension. That is, audiences are seduced by spectacle for a political purpose. The live action of the ceremony itself, to borrow Lavik's descriptor, is astonishing and quite beautiful to watch because of the scale, the unexpected and the unfolding structure. Contrasts are created within the uniform symmetry as colour and light enhance the visual experience even further. One example is the outside border of a drum, hundreds of which light up simultaneously as the stadium is plunged into darkness. In another instance, dancers' costumes collectively become the focal point as bodies merge into spreading fabric on the ground. For a short time, aesthetics and visual pleasure replace the reality of the human cost of producing this visual extravaganza. The very precision that thrills us, as it unfolds in our comfort strewn living rooms, is made possible only through months, years and, indeed, generations of militaristic regimen.

The firework spectacular in this same ceremony, directed by visual artist Cai Guo Qiang, goes beyond the human sphere but is choreographed 'movement' nevertheless. Cai's celebrated 'Footprints of History' created some controversy at the time. 'Footprints'

for each of the 29 Olympiads exploded in succession over the Beijing skyline, leading to the Olympic stadium. The simultaneous telecast showed a pre-recorded edit of the dress rehearsal rather than the live action. When criticised for using the recording, Cai countered by claiming the work can exist in two separate realms – in a 'material realm' as experienced by those physically present at the ceremony and in the streets of Beijing, and in a separate realm, as "a creative digital rendering of the artwork in the medium of video." [5] He felt it necessary to take the 'Footprints' into this second realm because "the very best vantage point is not necessarily the human one." [6] Those who saw the entire ceremony from the perspective of the TV screen would have had a different and perhaps even better experience than those on the ground because we were able to view the action from an aerial perspective that captured the full landscape and thus, could take in the complete form unfolding.

A further instance of Cai Guo Qiang's 'spectacular' work is found in his collaboration with Liu Hwai-Min and Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. *Wind Shadow* was performed in the UK at the Barbican Theatre in October 2009. The work, described as 'moving installation art', takes the audience through a series of interconnecting images and scenarios created by animate and inanimate contributors. Reviewer John Thaxter bemoaned the presence of 'spectacle' at the expense of the hitherto exquisite movement of the Cloud Gate dancers. "Where is the dance?" he asks, and continues, "I suspect the contemporary dance crowd felt cheated by spectacle in place of choreographed emotion." [7] I can see why he would ask the question, given Cloud Gate's previous offerings. One might argue whether it *is* actually dancing, if inanimate objects execute the action through manipulation of some sort. However, I did not feel cheated and would observe that exquisite movement is present and dominates the work but is embodied by 'dancing' artefacts and shadows via the human performers.

A dancing spectacle that Thaxter could not take issue with is Mark Morris's *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed Il Moderato* (1988) that returned to the London Coliseum earlier this year. I attended the first performance of this work in the UK at the Edinburgh Festival in 1994. The impact and response from the audience, was due to the elements identified above - its scale, the unexpected nature of the unfolding action and its success as a complete work, embracing as it does an extraordinary array of contributing influences including Handel's music and Milton's poetry. The resplendent colours of the setting and costumes add to the aural colour of the music and the choreography. One critic observes: "Morris's dancers sang the music through their bodies." [8] From my human perspective in the audience, *L'Allegro* was spectacular because it was astonishing and extraordinary – we had seen nothing like it in modern dance. It occurred to me, as I reviewed the work's chronology, that we've seen nothing like it since. Morris commented in a recent interview: "I try to ignore everything I've done before. If *L'Allegro* is a piece that is never to be topped then I should quit now, but I haven't." [9] He is implying, perhaps, that the scale of *L'Allegro* was so great, that he made a conscious decision to keep his distance.

Turning now to consider the perhaps incongruous notion of silence and stillness alongside the examples we have just looked at, I would argue that a different form of spectacle is created through the presence of one or both of these aspects. A single figure, for example, can be as eye catching as massed ranks because that one figure can be representative of humanity pared down to the bone. Such paring down creates a stillness that can be *as*

mesmeric as a thousand whirling forms. An inherent silence can accompany a still form that, in turn, intensifies the viewing experience.

An example of the impact created by a single figure was evident in Deborah Warner's production of Beckett's *Happy Days*, with Fiona Shaw playing the central character 'Winnie'. The play was staged at the Royal National Theatre in 2007 and subsequently transferred to New York in 2008. Warner did not explicitly set out to create a spectacle with this play. It is not a spectacular play. That she has done so, however, is worth noting because of how she achieved it. Beckett's original production in 1975 took place in an intimate studio theatre setting, with the character of 'Winnie' encased in a mound of earth throughout. Warner transposed this setting to a vast apocalyptic landscape that evokes utter devastation of the character's physical environment and personal situation. The juxtaposition of the still, immobile figure against this immense terrain throughout the duration of the play leads the viewer through a spectrum of emotion. There is an initial gasp of wonder at the scale of the environment on first sight. Then, as the play progresses, there is increasing awareness of a different scale – the complete hopelessness of the character's reality. The counter to this visual horror is the play's text, which is extremely witty and funny in places, that only serves to magnify Winnie's unending predicament even further.

An alternative example of stillness embodied through a single figure is seen in Phillip Glass's opera, *Satyagraha*, revived at the London Coliseum in April this year. One could define this performance as having elements of spectacle because of the set, which was dramatically impressive. More so, however, was the performance of the leading tenor, Alan Oke in the role of Ghandi, through the dual aspect of his singing extraordinarily taxing music without pause throughout a first act of 50 minutes, and doing so whilst still. The stillness was not that of an oratorio or concert setting when singers can be stationary for some time. This stillness seemed to come from within and was almost visible. British choreographer, Emilyn Claid identifies the "physical practice of cultivating stillness," [10] of which this is a clear example. The enormity or scale of the musical feat was one thing but the spectacle was created more through the quality of sound and stillness embodied by and through this single figure that in turn created a captivating and mesmeric experience for the viewer.

Common aspects that can be identified in all the examples discussed here include scale, the unexpected and unfolding structure. I suggest that these same aspects exist in Humphrey works such as *Water Study* (1928) and *With My Red Fires* (1936), with the sense of 'spectacle' created by the additional elements of silence and/or stillness. An example from *With My Red Fires* is 'The Matriarch' figure. In a recent staging of the dance, I considered whether the psychological drama induced by this character could be better conveyed for a contemporary context in a more subtle internalised manner than the exaggerated and pantomimic portrayal of the role as notated and performed in the 1978 film of the dance. A new interpretation was explored by extrapolating particular qualities and ideas derived from Humphrey herself. One such example is a photograph of Humphrey in the role. She is captured in profile, standing tall on top of a column that represents the Matriarch's 'house'. The hemline of her dress falls at least a foot below the top of the box, with the overlap creating the illusion of an elongated and superhuman force. The movement quality caught in the image is strong, bound and direct. In addition, the juxtaposition of set, costume and movement further emphasises the power of this character. The combination of qualities induces a sense of 'suspended stillness'.

By applying the idea of presence through stillness, the outwardly twisted, pantomimic emphasis was replaced with more understated expression, using such devices as the 'gaze' and the 'stance'. Humphrey drew on lines from William Blake in her choreographic process including "Such is the way of the Devouring Power", that conjures up the idea of an all-pervading dominating presence. One can interpret this idea as Humphrey did, through exaggerated gesture and expressive melodrama. Alternatively, the idea can be interpreted through more subtle means by capturing the sense of 'suspended stillness' as identified in the photographs to produce an effect that is equally chilling. A further idea from Humphrey's notes on the dance is that of 'emotional movement in body - no hands.'[11] Humphrey's meaning could imply that the movement is generated from the body's centre rather than the extremities, and is in keeping with her broader stylistic principles. The 'emotional movement', however, can also be generated through a process of internalisation. The resulting action becomes less explicit but perhaps more meaningful in a contemporary context.

The 'spectacular' effect of Humphrey's work became apparent during a performance of *Water Study* that I staged for Arke Compagnie D'Arte in Turin, Italy in 2007. Prior to this experience, I might have considered a Humphrey work such as *Passacaglia* as 'spectacle' for similar reasons to Morris's *L'Allegro*, with its collective infusion of scale and unfolding structure alongside an array of visual, aural and emotional stimuli. *Water Study* is an ensemble dance performed in silence. The dancers move throughout on breath rhythms that have no formalised constructs such as counts or musical phrases. Aspects of 'scale' and 'unfolding structure' interlink through the progression of the choreography. In the opening sequences of the dance there is no movement across space to amplify the silence. The viewer is drawn in, not knowing initially where to look; where the action will begin, and therein is the element of the 'unexpected'. The dance builds continuously, ever growing in terms of expanse, speed, height and volume before a climax unleashes a descent into the still and silent place of the opening phrases. During the performance in 2007 I was struck by the stillness and silence in the audience as the dance progressed. There was, literally, not a movement or sound other than that unfolding on the stage, which is unusual in a theatre of 800.

Humphrey observed, "The dance without music has a contrary effect to that which might be expected. It does not seem empty or as though the bottom has dropped out, but increases concentration and attention to movement to an astonishing degree."[12] In 2007, the audience continued to remain still and silent at the conclusion of the dance for quite some time, perhaps unwilling to leave what they had found in that still silent place. Eventually, considerable appreciation was shown, indicating possibly that they had indeed witnessed something astonishing. The silence – the absence of music and its associated structures – contributing to the 'how did they do that' mystique of the work alongside the evolving though inherently still form.

It was pleasing to observe the impact of a dance work from 1928 on an audience nearly eighty years on. I'd have settled for the work being appreciated but this kind of response indicates the capacity of the work to offer something more to a contemporary audience beyond aesthetic or historical experience. *Water Study* and other works with similar properties offer momentary release from the perpetual 'fractured noise' society has become. This theme is reiterated frequently in Constance Kreemer's recently published collection of interviews with choreographers discussing their creative and performative practices. Gus

Solomons Junior, for example, says of his mature performance group, "we do no tricks at all, but we know how to stand still. That presence is something young dancers need to see."[13]. Rosalind Newman observes that her work "is more reflective now. It realises the power of pause and simplicity as well as the power of movement."[14] Nancy Meehan comments, "I am using more stillness at a time when so much in the world is speeding up."[15]

My initial proposition suggested that 'spectacle' connotes an event that creates a multi-sensory experience, producing sensations such as wonderment', 'breathtaking', 'mesmerising' and 'escapism' for the viewer. Traditional grandiose, fantastical happenings induce such sensations. My contention is that these same sensations can be elicited from events and works not normally associated with the spectacular but that qualify as such because of the emotive impact on the viewer. I further suggest that the appeal of 'silence' and 'stillness' is a growing phenomenon in a contemporary society besieged by visual and aural stimulation, and that our notions of what constitutes 'spectacle', therefore, are shifting accordingly.

Notes

1. Lavik, 2008: 172
2. Darley, 2000: 6
3. Lavik, 2008: 180
4. Lavik, 2008: 172
5. Cai Guo Qiang in Trong Gia Nguyen, 2008
6. Ibid
7. Thaxter, 2009
8. Thom, 2001: 61
9. Cates, 2010: 16
10. Claid, 2010: 218
11. Humphrey, 1935: Notebook, Doris Humphrey Collection, New York Public Library Folder M28
12. Humphrey, 1959: 142
13. Kreemer, 2008: 166
14. Kreemer, 2008: 158
15. Kreemer, 2008: 123

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