

Rhetoric, Spectacle, and Mechanized Amusement at the World's Columbian Exposition

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Abstract

This essay focuses on the disruptive qualities of public entertainment and public spectacle at the 1893 Columbian exposition. I use my analysis of different fairgoers' responses to explore the ways public spectacle, even in its most commercialized form, can lead to a rhetorical response from the audience where alternative views of culture are made available. Rather than seeing spectacle as empty theatricality, I argue that in certain cases spectacle may speak more loudly than plot, character, and script. Just as the backdrop for a theatrical dialogue can change the story, so too can spectacle alter the story being told, and, in the process, invite the audience to redefine and altogether change the rhetorical text.

Keywords: Spectacle, Rhetoric, World Exposition, Ferris Wheel, Opsis

Introduction

The story behind the inception of Ferris's Great Pleasure Wheel at the Columbian World's Fair in 1893 began at the Saturday Afternoon Club in Chicago. Daniel Burnham, lead architect of the fair, gave a speech in which he hoped to motivate a group of American Engineer's to contribute a grand visual spectacle to the fair: "What's wrong with you scientists? Haven't you any sense of the unique, of the off-beat on a grandiose scale? We must have something, anything, that will make a publicity splash all over the world" ("George Ferris's Engineering Marvel Turns" 47). Burnham's comments, while colorful, also reveal an underlying anxiety about the fair and its success. Roman sculptures, buttresses, grand staircases, all might promote Burnham's genteel Victorian vision for the fair, but they would undoubtedly fail to attract sufficient curiosity from a fickle 19th century audience. In his study of world expositions, Paul Greenhalgh points out that the act of displaying culture or scientific progress had been a novelty during the first part of the century, but by the 1850s it had become so normal as to make the effort commonplace (41).

In addition, Harriet Monroe explains, the country was far from universally in support of the fair. East Coast newspapers, no doubt jealous of Chicago, predicted a "cattle-show" in the "porkpolis" (Monroe 218). Adding insult to injury, the Paris Exposition *Universelle* had, only four years earlier, unveiled its colossal iron

giant, the famous Eiffel Tower, the tallest man-made structure in the world, arguably the most provocative attraction at the 1889 Exposition *Universelle*. This French symbol of progress and modernity attracted throngs of spectators and worldwide public fascination.

Compelled by anxieties over Chicago's provincial reputation, in addition to responding to the widely successful 1889 Paris's Exposition *Universelle*, fair organizers asked American engineers to create something that could, as Daniel Burnham had put it, "make a publicity splash all over the world." In response to the pressing exigency, many began submitting ideas that exceeded the size and scope of Eiffel's creation. In fact, Eiffel himself submitted a similar design, a larger version of his wrought-iron triumph, a tower five hundred feet in height. But each idea was summarily rejected by the committee. Mere bigness would not create sufficient curiosity. The answer to Burnham's dilemma eventually came from a young bridge builder named George Ferris. Popular accounts say Ferris wrote on the back of his napkin a design for a grand amusement ride, a giant wheel that would collect 2,000 passengers inside carriages the size of streetcars. The cars would rise 300 feet in the air, high above the celebrated Court of Honor and other fair buildings, providing grand views of Chicago and Lake Michigan. Ferris called his invention "The Great Observation Wheel."



Figure 2. "The Big Wheel," *Hyde Park Historical Society Newsletter*, Spring 2000.

Suspended from two towers 137 feet in height, the 4,300-ton steel wheel revolved around a central axle with the help of two giant steam engines. Like the industrial designer Karim Rahid's perfect form, the boundless wheel moved as if in perpetual motion, lifting its cargo to a height greater than the Statue of Liberty. In addition to its mammoth size, the ride used 3,000 incandescent lights with globes of various colors arranged around the outside of its wheel. And behind its use of magnitude and luminosity lay a unique rhetorical rationale.

The goal of this grand amusement ride was obviously, in the first place, to enhance the image of the fair through an association with magnitude. Secondly, an impression of originality could be felt, most powerfully, through its design. A modern triumph of human achievement, a symbol of urbanism and modernity, the wheel gave fairgoers a chance to experience modernity; the Ferris Wheel connected modernity with play; it highlighted Chicago's vibrant urban culture and entrepreneurial spirit. Spectators also had the opportunity to see the fair from great heights, giving each rider critical distance from the fair. Even though among many of the organizers, including Daniel Burnham, the fair seemed designed to be an expression of Victorian values, a classical utopia, the Ferris wheel directly challenged these genteel cultural reformers by creating a modern, urban vision for America's future.

Differentiated from classical forms by the inclusion of modern materials and contemporary design, the Ferris spectacle demonstrates a human capacity for invention. The growing literature on public spectacle and world

expositions has focused much of its attention on the ways public spectacle serves to legitimize hegemony through representation, colonialism, and power. A good example of this kind of analysis is Robert Rydell's discussion of the hegemonic function of the Columbian Exposition's "symbolic universe" (2). The limits of this argument are demonstrated by the utopian artifacts Rydell selects for his analysis; they are distinctly hierarchical and serve to legitimize his argument that public spectacles such as the Columbian Exposition serve to reinforce social stratification and social hierarchies. To study this side of fair is to focus on the bourgeois imagination, the institutional mechanism used to reform and regulate public taste.

Others, like John F. Kasson, argued the Columbian Exposition was organized mostly as an expression of "a social and cultural elite eager to re-create society in its own image" (17). Certainly, organizers like Daniel Burnham, G. Browne Goode, and Wilbur Atwater demonstrate Rydell and Kasson's argument. Goode, a Smithsonian official, told reporters: "Though the Museum undoubtedly loses much more than it gains on such occasions, the opportunity for popular education is too important to be neglected" (Rydell 7). And Wilbur Atwater, a politician from the Department of Agriculture, believed the fair an opportunity for civic improvement: "the exposition should not be merely a show, a fair or a colossal shop, but also and pre-eminently an exposition of the principles which underlie our national and individual welfare, of our material, intellectual and moral status" (qtd. in Rydell 7).

On one level, then, the Columbian Exposition can be seen as a rhetorical expression of an elite group, an attempt to imbue the material landscape with a romantic nostalgia for the past and promote a particularly hegemonic vision for its future. However, I hope to show how the narrative of classism works alongside a countervailing narrative that seeks to challenge associations with the past. The symbol of unchanging classical virtues on display in the celebrated Court of Honor conflicts sharply with the cacophony of sounds and sights in the Midway Pleasance. In this essay I examine these two competing master narratives. The first promoting a "triumph of hegemony," organized to direct society toward "a particular class perspective" (2). And the second a far less heavy handed narrative endorsing urbanism, amusement, modernity, and free

enterprise. In pursuit of this second analytical perspective, my general purpose is to show how spectacle as a principle of stagecraft may speak more loudly than plot, character, and script. Just as the backdrop for a theatrical dialogue can change the story, so too can spectacle alter the story being told, and, in the process, invite audience members to redefine and altogether change the rhetorical text.

A Spectacle within a Spectacle

The whole of the Columbian Exposition occupied some 630 acres, roughly one square mile. But the famous Midway Plaisance, where the wheel was erected, subsisted on only a small strip of land running between 59th Street and 60th Street, extending west from Stony Island to Cottage Grove Avenue—a small thing when compared to the larger fair. Its neighbor, the unblemished White City, with its Greek fountains, Corinthian columns, domes, lagoons, and array of Roman gods and goddesses, was designed to transport audiences to a golden age of civilization. The Midway, says cultural critic Phil Patton, was “a motley set of entertainments encamped like Huns before Rome” (46). Consumer-based amusement, the Midway contained a menagerie of sword swallows and fire-dancing pigmies, magic shows like “The Houdini Brothers,” and amusement rides like the Giant Ferris wheel. The novelty on display was undefined, fantastical modernity. Henry Adams remarked after riding the Ferris Wheel, “Chicago asked in 1893 for the first time the question whether American people knew where they were driving” (22). The question posed by Adams seems an important one, even if the answer to such a question was, at that time, impossible to define.

Though the original Midway design was handled by distinguished Harvard anthropologist Frederic W. Putnam, he was eventually replaced because fair organizers worried about his approach to organizing the amusement zone. In his place organizers hired a theatre manager from San Francisco, Sol Bloom. After being hired, Bloom told newspaper reporters that his Midway would be remembered as “the biggest thing of its kind ever known” (120). In his autobiography, Bloom shows his predilection for size and spectacle. During a visit to the Paris *Universelle*, he describes the Eiffel tower as a “wonder of wonders... the physical and *spiritual* center of the international

Exposition which I had come to see” (105, emphasis added). Like most who visited Paris, Bloom left the Paris *Universelle* impressed by its size and original design. His reference to the tower as a “spiritual center” refers to what Mircea Eliade calls an *axis mundi*, a cultural reference point with the rhetorical persuasive power to (re)organize the material landscape (63-64). When modern spectacles like the Eiffel tower are created, they do more than change the skyline, they change the way people experience physical space (see Balzotti and Crosby).

Describing the physical magnitude of the Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C., Mark Vail explains the visual impact of 250,000 people inside the Washington Mall created a similar kind of rhetorical effect, a large spectacle that made each speech that afternoon even “more memorable” (62). Vail helps explain the centrifugal force of scale and its ability to influence everything around it. Eric Watts and Mark Orbe argue that spectacle is a process of magnification: “these processes magnify—that is, make spectacular—previously private worlds and the persons who inhabit them.” The role of spectacle, in this view, is to not only magnify a subject but to make the private public.

Discussions of spectacle are not uncommon in theater studies, and some of these scholars locate the root of spectacle in Aristotle’s notion of *opsis*, as found in Book VI of the *Poetics* (see, e.g., Carlson; Walton; Pavis). Aristotle distinguishes spectacle (*opsis*) from the other elements in a drama (e.g., plot, character, script) and in doing so, he does not suggest that the concept is unimportant. He simply argues that, in relation to the other parts of a tragedy, it has the least to do with the poet. The poet must tell the story; he is not expected to design the set. In creating this distinction, Aristotle assigns *opsis* “an emotional attraction of its own” (64). Aristotle links the concept not to the actor, the person seen, but to the “stage machinist,” the one behind the scenes, the invisible force that creates the landscape for social action (64). That is, in recognizing that *opsis* is a concept independent of the poet, he also affirms that it effectively creates its own sort of appeal, or message. Unfortunately, Aristotle does not explicate this appeal because he is concerned with the poet and plot, but by acknowledging the concept’s independence, he implies an invitation to consider more closely its role in moving the audience and its ability to magnify the inner

thoughts of the audience and to invite their participation in helping create the rhetorical text.

Michael Halloran makes a more explicitly rhetorical distinction in his discussion of spectacle when he focuses on audience involvement and defines it as “a public gathering of people who have come to witness some event and are self-consciously present to each other as well as to whatever it is that has brought them together” (5). In witnessing the spectacle, the public sees itself differently. The observers (spectators) no longer exist as individuals but are part of a collective “reaction” to what is seen (6). Citing David Procter, Halloran argues that spectacle occurs when the audience “transforms some event into enactment of their social order” (qtd. in Halloran 6). For Halloran, then, spectacle creates a body of rhetorical agents, a group whose very presence alters the message of the text. “For every ‘Gettysburg Address’ or ‘I Have a Dream,’” Halloran claims, “there are hundreds of banal drones whose significance lies more in the fact and the circumstances of their delivery than in their texts” (15).

In supporting this claim, Halloran recalls a scene from the movie *Forrest Gump* in which the simpleton hero finds himself behind a microphone before tens of thousands of angry war protestors at the Washington Mall. As he begins to speak, an anti-protestor disables the sound system. By the time the sound returns, Gump is concluding his remarks, yet he is congratulated because, as one protestor tells him, “You said it all, man.” So, in this example, the power of spectacle lies not with the speaker but with the audience and their collective response to the rhetorical situation. The emotional moment of the scene speaks through Gump’s visual presentation. The script is meaningless. Audience, in this view, is not a mere constituent or a nonessential subsidiary of spectacle; it becomes the spectacle.

Although it is often created through some material presence, like a display or exhibition, more is required for the expression to be considered a spectacle. For starters, the audience response must be factored when deciding whether the event can be considered spectacular. Some theorists, such as Guy Debord, believe the rhetorical expression must demand “passive acceptance” without “allowing any reply,” and in that sense it is a form of domination that “subjects human beings to itself” (12, 16). For Debord, spectacle is the

opposite of dialogue; it perpetuates a great lie by society and induces a hypnotic state in the audience (17). The confusion surrounding spectacle centers around its particular characteristics: spectacle displays visual expressions that stimulate the sensible experience of human perception; it is a multisensory experience that may result in shock, surprise, or awe.

However, for David Procter this memorable experience is a means of producing dialogue, not silencing it. Procter emphasizes the audience’s role in public spectacle and answers the question as to what happens—consciously or unconsciously, cognitively or psychologically—when the audience first experiences a visually arresting display. Spectacle in this view is more than “official messages at a court where no one else is allowed to speak” (Debord 23); it is a site of community building, a place where the new and unexpected is discussed by those who experience it. Spectacle in this view participates in a process of community formation but does not create passive community members. Just the opposite. As Procter writes, “interpretations or accounts of the event are the spectacles and within these spectacles exist the dynamic rhetoric of community” (118). The interpretants of spectacle create accounts of those events and through shared experience with spectacle create community identification.

My discussion of spectacle expands on Halloran’s and Procter’s respective treatments of the term by offering a useful complication. Although both Aristotle and Halloran argue that spectacle (and, more broadly, any rhetoric of visual space and design that has implications for the audience) exists within an extra textual space, it need not be tied teleologically to the given script or performance. In some cases, spectacle may, for all the audience knows, run counter to the script. Free to exist separately from the script, visual rhetoric – and spectacle specifically – can be used to reorient or supplant a given script, so that spectators can imagine new possibilities and articulate a new story being told. The architect of this kind of public spectacle presents the audience with an undefined symbol, an aesthetic resource for thinking and exploring alternate possibilities. The general point I wish to make is that complex public spectacles, such as the World Columbian Exposition of 1893, are not only monolithic sites of symbolic interpolation into conventional mores. Each is, also, a ubiquitous rhetorical

expression experienced by actual people, a site easily obscured by agendas and established theoretical frameworks. Spectacle defined as a tool of hegemony is a pale reflection of a much more interesting and rich concept.

Audience Response to the Fair: A Personal View

The individual accounts included in this essay help to highlight the subversive rhetoric on display in the Midway Plaisance. I will focus much of my analysis on the Ferris Wheel and its use of *opsis*, offering an alternative reading of the Columbian Exposition. While there are few personal accounts that offer scholars a penetrating view, even fewer deal explicitly with the Ferris wheel. I have recovered some of their stories here in the form of journal entries, interviews, and literary writing. These texts provide only a small glimpse into the public's experience of the wheel from the point of view of those who rode it and from those who helped define the World Columbian Exposition more broadly.

In this first account, Alphonse Fisher from Cincinnati, Ohio, travels with his mother and sister to the fair. Alphonse gives a 19th century perspective on riding the Ferris Wheel.

The immense wheel towered above our heads, a massive grand piece of architecture and mechanical skill. Slowly, slowly up we went stopping near the top to let on or put off passengers, and when we were at the summit, Chicago and the wide expanse of the Lake Michigan were exposed to the splendid view afforded us. Then down, down to the earth once more and another revolution around, taking in all about 20 minutes.

At first glance, Fisher's experience seems rather unremarkable. He is impressed by the wheel's "immense" size and the "mechanical skill" used to create it, and mentions its architectural design. He then describes the wheel's motion, a slow steady climb, interrupted only by the occasional need to stop for new passengers. Fisher reaches the top of his first revolution and sees Lake Michigan; a temporary reprieve from the busy fairgrounds, a reprieve with a bird's eye view of the fair and the city of Chicago. More than a pleasure ride, the wheel gives Fisher and the other passengers an opportunity to gain important critical distance

from the cultural narrative on display in the Celebrated Court of Honor. This collective experience, as each car packed with twenty-five strangers climbs into the air, gives its rider a vantage point and access to a rather strange view of their surroundings, carrying passengers away from neoclassical aesthetics towards an undefined urban and mechanized future.

Captivated by the Ferris wheel, another visitor, a steel worker named Andrew Burgess, writes about his own novel and strange experience riding the Ferris Wheel:

This revolving a circle through the air up to 260 feet is a new sensation. It combines the gliding motion of the R.R. train and the upward jerk of an elevator. But does not take away one's breath. There is nothing to cause a creepy sensation except when the car swings at the top in the down trip. Except for this cradle motion it is easy riding and the only fright comes from looking and noticing how far away the ground is and how small things look. We had a splendid view of the surrounding scenery... Some people get nauseous on the first trip, but generally enjoy the ride and wonder at the panorama, which can be enjoyed from the Ferris wheel.

Burgess, like Fisher, is impressed with the 260-foot climb into the air. The perceived danger associated with riding such a large and unproven amusement ride is evident in his account. So too is the idea of perspective, as Burgess talks about a "splendid view" and the "surrounding scenery," and offers a similar account of the views afforded to Fisher. Burgess tells his readers that most riders do not feel the expected "nauseous" or "creepy sensation" and that the only issue regarding the sensation of riding the wheel is a kind of "cradle motion" experienced on the downward plunge (14). Burgess draws on known experiences—baby cradle, train ride, lift elevator—to give himself language to describe the new experience. The novelty of this public spectacle forces riders to draw on their experiences with other mechanized modern inventions to create an analogous link with lived experience. In a sense, Burgess and Fisher become part of the rhetorical text as they become part of the ride and exert some influence over the wheel's meaning and cultural significance.

As each rider is transported high above the fair, the monumental becomes miniaturized, the spectacle of the fair comprehensible, the utopian city and its hegemonic narrative diminished. Riding the Ferris wheel in a sense frees fairgoers from the imagined world of the Columbian fair, the surrounding exposition becomes something constructed and fabricated rather than natural or domineering. The diminishment of the fair is a significant detail in Burgess's letter, as is his acknowledgement of a shared public experience: "We had a splendid view of the surrounding scenery," the plural pronoun signaling his new community of spectators, a shared experience with other members of this new, albeit temporary community. What might have been mere amusement has now become an opportunity for personal reflection and shared critical distance from the surrounding symbolic environment.

Annie Lynch, a 27-year-old, unmarried woman from the Philadelphia area, gives an account of her experience at the fair. The letter, addressed to her younger sister Bertha, shows fairgoers' personal autonomy when experiencing the fair and exploring its many spectacles. I include observations about her letter after her brief account.

Dear Bertha-

Does not this [stationery] look extremely official? I think I shall tell you about today before yesterday, it has been so pleasant. We started out about 8:30 for breakfast and then immediately entered the fair grounds... Was very agreeably surprised at the interest this awakens.

... all around the room were little tables to accommodate three persons where you were invited to sit down and have a cup of tea free of charge. We sat down and the dignified Indian waiters in their cool, clean linen tunics and turbans brought us a quaint black tea pot full of tea after giving us a pretty china cup to drink from. We took our sandwiches and ate them and the whole was very enjoyable. I think I can hear C say- "She wouldn't drink tea at home." This was exceptionally good and one half cream.

Annie tells her younger sister that the day ended with the group eating French pastries and watching fireworks at the lake. As Marvin Nathan observes, Annie's letter radiates a sense of

adventure, perhaps a bit of wonder—reacting no doubt to the myriad of sights and sounds all around her. The sheer size and novelty of the fair would certainly "awaken" the imagination of fairgoers, but Annie's firsthand account provides something else as well, a reaction that demonstrates her participatory agency as rhetorical agent in the spectacle.

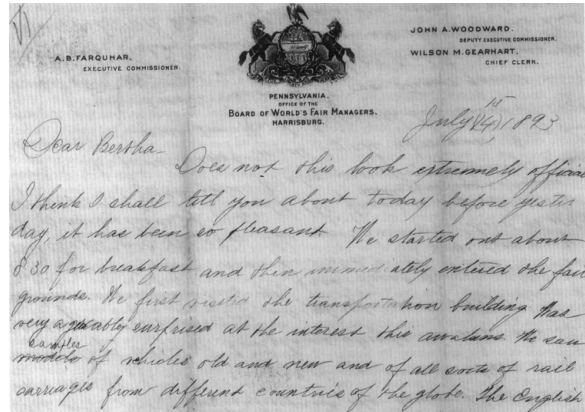


Figure 2. First page of Annie's letter to Bertha¹

In a different part of the letter, Annie provides her practical judgment about different exhibits. Despite the grandiose intentions of fair organizers, she provides little reflection on the ideal city or on her own racial superiority. In fact, just the opposite is true. Annie's account democratizes the spectacle and shows selectivity based on her tastes and personal interest: "I lay down on a big sleepy couch and dozed for an hour. Then I went up stairs after washing in the fine toilet. When we were put out we went on the lovely porch and sat in the wicker rockers until we felt like moving." Her words describe a spectator who pursued experiences without the moralistic ruminations some have argued. Perhaps the "education" so important to the small number of fair organizers was far less important to the 21 million fairgoers such as Annie.

While each individual account reflects their personalized version of the fair, each also reveals a shared reaction to public spectacle. As Halloran notes, these reactions to public spectacle "blur the roles of rhetoric and audience" (6) as the audience participates in the public display of culture. When fairgoers ride the Ferris wheel, they have a brief, momentary view

¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of Annie's letter to her sister see Marvin Nathan's essay "Visiting the World's Columbian Exposition."

of the master plan, the organizer's script. The audience's participation in spectacle, in the case of Ferris's wheel, may speak more loudly than—or at least independently of—the script envisioned by fair officials.

My goal here has been to reveal how spectacles, such as Ferris's Wheel, speak in light of, and in spite of, the political scripts from which they emerge. As Blair and Michel point out, "sometimes what appears to be the rhetorical text is not *the* rhetorical text, but an altogether different one," and "what counts as *the* text is open to question" (38, 39). The World's Columbian Exposition as a case study enables rhetorical scholars to explore the use of spectacle not only as a hegemonic device but as tool for critical reflection, as a form of public spectacle that provokes the individual to think critically about their surroundings and perhaps question, as Henry Adams did, the direction of the nation state.

Conclusion

I have argued that expositions can provide as many options for creating meaning in a participatory sense as they can for experiencing public education in a normative sense. Public entertainment, even in the case of a large state-run exposition, is rarely (if ever) so one-dimensional as to enable only one reading of, or point of view on, its subject matter. Great exhibitions can give visual expression to the political ambitions of the nation-state. They symbolize national prestige: helping the host nation to further an imperialist agenda based on

global expansion. But I have focused on the concept of spectacle to demonstrate that grand public events like the Columbian Exposition contain several options for interpretation. I am able to discuss these options precisely because rhetoric makes them available for reflection and interpretation.

Initially, Ferris intended for his idea to be remembered as a grand observation wheel, a place of education and contemplation. But his contribution did not find its way into many educational venues. Rather, Ferris's contribution to society is located mostly in America's fairgrounds and amusement parks. Thus, not only is the spectacle of the Ferris wheel created for a particular rhetorical purpose, but it is also transformed and reformed by the participants' responses. Whether personal or public, responses such as these create a participatory space replete with alternative interpretations. Working within this participatory space in rhetorical scholarship can enrich our understanding of the public's role in articulating what a spectacle means and how it will be remembered. From this perspective, spectators are never wholly imposed upon by a singular message, and in the example of the Ferris wheel, spectacle offers opportunities to resist master narratives, creating opportunities for the public to craft new interpretations of their own. Burnham's White City might have imposed a bourgeois imagination on fairgoers, but from its incredible height the Ferris spectacle also provided fairgoers the opportunity to construct a competing popular narrative of the fair.

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Biographical note

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