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# All's Fair: Love, War, Politics, and Other Spectacles

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*Conspectus*

## All's Fair?

### Love, War, Politics, and Other Spectacles

**John S. Nelson**

*Poroi*, 4, 2, July, 2005



Spectacle is one thing money really can buy.

— Terrence Rafferty (1995, p. 84)

- 1 Summer is the season for spectacle. In America, at least, it is a time for captivating the distracted attention of citizens through the outré, the outsized, and the outrageous. From hype for hurricanes to blockbusters from Hollywood, summer spectacles resist yet also reinforce the centrifugal spirals of privatizing pursuits. Vacations from work, school, government, even first-run television have traditionally taken people away from supposedly responsible preoccupations with public topics of business, education, politics, perhaps religion. Summer in America is for families, we say, but it entertains them with vistas and stories far larger than everyday life.
- 2 On the political calendar, the season of spectacle stretches from Memorial Day to Labor Day, with fireworks for Independence Day between. Thanksgiving gets pageants and dinners, New Year's Day parades and football bowls, Christmas nativity scenes and services, Halloween the trick-or-treat trail of costumed kids. Even at this level, spectacle is nothing like an exclusive prerogative of summer. Still the elective affinity is hard to miss. Summer gets Shakespeare in the park and movies after dark. It means fairs at the state capital, concert tours across the country, and adventures at Six Flags Over Somewhere. It indulges in the pastoral epic of baseball and the sunshine roar of stockcars. Even best-sellers on the beach reach for hyper-realities to draw us beyond mundane endeavors.
- 3 Spectacle is the form and setting targeted by the essays for this summer issue of *Poroi*. Writing in Wisconsin, **Michelle Brophy-Baermann** examines love on the sensational screens of reality television. Contributing from Virginia, **Joseph H. Lane Jr.** explores uses of Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War for panoramic defenses of imperial action by America, especially in

Iraq. Also working in Virginia, **Kenneth De Luca** analyzes a problem of democracy at the crux of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Then from Iowa, I analyze the inclination of recent war movies to make arguments through the silver screens of cinema. And from Delaware, **William H. Meyer** presents practices of global governance as alternatives to the principally nation-based politics that drive noticeably toward empire and spectacle. In reflecting on what these essays share, shall I make, therefore, a minor spectacle of myself?

### **No Context?**

- 4 How I spent my summer vacation this year was a family reunion in Springfield, Illinois. There my brother was born, but we were drawn this time by the newest spectacle in town: the Abraham Lincoln Museum and Presidential Library. It has been shepherded into belated being by Richard Norton Smith, who got his start with presidential museums just down the road from me at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum in West Branch, Iowa. Then Smith developed the Ronald W. Reagan Presidential Museum and Archives in Simi Valley, California. Along the way, any visitor can agree, Smith has learned a great deal about historical and political spectacle.
- 5 The challenge, as Joanna Ploeger (2004) has explained for science museums, is to engage a large popular audience and bring it back for more. The Lincoln Museum rises to the task with a handsome building clad in a bright brown marble. It is united by style and skywalk with the Lincoln Presidential Library across the street in downtown Springfield, still the state capital for Illinois. Like other city centers seemingly hollowed out for banks and insurance companies, the middle of Springfield has plenty of room for redevelopment with tourist attractions, and the old railway station across the street appears next on the agenda. Yet even its fantastic wooden eaves, carved into striking figures, are apt to prove tame in comparison to the fusillade of images fired at visitors to the Lincoln Museum. Even in its opening months, the museum just about bursts with eye-catching, ear-throbbing diversions: all offered earnestly for the edification of us as historically minded citizens.
- 6 Its largest theater surrounds the watchers with cannonade, shakes their seats, and assaults them with strobes in barrages of smoke – all while moving Civil War images of what would have been seen by “Lincoln’s Eyes” across a wide arc of big screens. It also

celebrates the museum's background crafts of archiving and historiography with another theater's holographic pantomime of chilling "Ghosts in the Library." (Excellent air-conditioning keeps us spectators comfortable, a must for central Illinois in the middle of summer, yet this theater seemed truly, intentionally frigid.) Even the less theatrical displays crackle with electronics for narration or enactment as well as some You-Are-There interaction similar to videogames. A personal favorite, of course, is the museum's playful presentation of the 1860 presidential campaign. It puts us in a fanciful television studio to view candidate spots a century ahead of their time in the technology of self-satire. Signs of corporate sponsorship are prominent, and this presumably enables the exhibits to stay fresh so that we visitors will return in years to come.

- 7 The Lincoln Museum is so spectacle-conscious that it is generating heaps of accolades for Smith – along with the inevitably edgy questions about hyper-reality and hucksterism (Lee 2005). Spectacles are clever in their virtually limitless capacity for sensationalizing and thus coöpting criticisms. The veteran Smith has anticipated complaints that his flare for spectacle trivializes the monumental importance of Lincoln or detracts from the serious enterprises of scholarship associated with the Presidential Library. In the anteroom for the museum's biggest show, Smith's energetic figure on tape commands high monitors visible in every direction by captive viewers as he pitches the spectacular approach that the museum takes. By anticipating the controversy and embracing it in yet another of the museum's spectacles, we get to see Smith himself fomenting the hullabaloo, fanning more controversy, feeding the spectacle: all working to help the museum flash insistently in the public eye. The cycle is to be ever-self-inflating.
- 8 Yet the Lincoln Museum might be the exaggeration that proves the point about spectacle. For some years, I've enjoyed visiting presidential museums when I'm in the neighborhood. Like presidential autobiographies, they mix cunning selections from the public record with intriguing takes on the unofficial individual. Unlike the memoirs, moreover, the museums omit most of the boring recitations apparently aimed at professional historians – who are not about to be fooled for a moment. Do the bold poses and hyper archetypes of the museums target us citizens as a lower class of fool, one born every minute? Do they inform an abysmally ignorant mass? Or do they engage us citizens in reputable rituals? In the present connection, a fascinating fact is that a presidential

museum's focus often is its feature film. If this testifies more to the taste of visitors for moving entertainments than it says about the civic merit of a museum's other offerings, it is still a taste I share.

- 9 I love the Truman and Carter museums especially for their evocations of the pre-political figures who could seem far from presidential material. The Hoover Museum excels in its sense of the post-presidential giant who moved the world. Nevertheless their best exhibits by far are the films shown in their main theaters. The Truman documentary by the Iowa-educated Charles Guggenheim scales again the august heights that made him the biggest Oscar-winner in history. But even much lesser films are easily the main attractions for their presidential museums, and the pattern holds elsewhere. The national park for Lincoln's Springfield home provides an engaging film that screens alternately in two sizable theaters; and it can run longer than the personal tours of the whole historical district that includes the carefully restored house. The irony is that these films are available for home play after a simple purchase from the museums' ample gift shops – or the websites that advertise the museums and their mass-produced relics. This means that none of us need experience these cinematic pinnacles of presidential spectacle *in situ* to enjoy them.
- 10 It is no surprise that spectacles can become their own habitats. The complaint has long been that spectacles destroy most capacities for context (Trow 1978; Meyrowitz 1985). But if the medium can be the message (McLuhan 1964), and in ways good as well as bad, we might notice how spectacles can merge text and context. Many a spectacle includes its context by suffusing its text with the surrounding situation. Sometimes this happens in the spectacle's subtext. Near-Nazi icons for the putative republic in *Starship Troopers* (1997) and the early Roman Empire of *Gladiator* (2000) give viewers a sense of what lurks outside the frames for these two cinematic spectacles. (Such examples also refute the familiar falsehood that spectacles somehow must lack effective capacities of self-criticism.) At other moments, context becomes explicit in a spectacle's text. *Gladiator's* talk about the popular politics of senates comments on recent American issues of empire and political leadership; while the same goes for substantial stretches of dialogue in *The Revenge of the Sith*, this summer's final installment of the *Star Wars* epic.

- 11 Since their vast scale and wide horizons often bring the context into the text, spectacles seem especially suited to the epic dimensions of history evoked in museums and classrooms, let alone movies. In particular, spectacles help vivify the “lessons of history” (Howard 1991) for their publics. Hence they can provide citizens some of the interpretation and analysis lamented by scholars as missing from everyday news (Bennett 2003). Perhaps there are times when our eyes, or even Lincoln’s, can use spectacles.

### **No Morality?**

- 12 As the title implies, another familiar knock against spectacles is that they de-moralize. If all’s fair in spectacles, it means that they trump morality with sheer necessity or mere depravity. Of necessity, anything goes for the spectacular conditions of war, or so Thomas Hobbes has been notorious for arguing all too persuasively. Does the comparison to spectacles of love arise from a realist’s recognition that lovers may rival survivalists in doing whatever it takes to prevail? Is the canard an idealist’s declaration that love can do no wrong, because its nobility is unfailing? Or is the cliché more a catty observation that lovers can stoop low to conquer? Where political spectacles are concerned, though, there is no doubt that depravity is the diagnosis. In producing and playing to the masses, the spectacles of campaigning, governing, and such supposedly make entertainment or manipulation – rather than morality – the effective measure of what’s fair. For spectacles, the accusation goes, all’s well that ends well, and endings are happy however they amuse us. The idea is that morality is irrelevant; so in the end, all’s fair. Indeed the greater the depravity, the more sensational, engaging, and successful the spectacle. Or so the critics say (Debord 1977; Baudrillard 1983a, 1983b, 1987, 1988, 1990; Foster 1985; Edelman 1988, 2001; Luke 1989; Hart 1994; Gitlin 2002).
- 13 But here it is the critics who get carried away. They forget at times that spectacles have form, even are one. In the conventions of form are clear moral commitments, even if the moral norms are not always what the critics (or I) would endorse. The principal genre of spectacle is epic, and nobody misses the hero’s morality in this.
- 14 Of course, the epic hero is a warrior and a lover (Miller 2000). Hence we might seem to be back where we started, in conditions where all’s fair. But the epic denies this. It respects yet rejects the

individual rationalities of Hobbes and modern romance. Instead it favors the ways of the warrior. Epic pursues the restraining codes of honor and chivalry rather than the unbridled reliance on preference or passion that characterizes modern – and especially bourgeois – cultures (Hirschman 1977). If there are bourgeois virtues, they are the virtues of the entrepreneur rather than the warrior (McCloskey 1994, 1996). Epic knows generically that requirements of victory or survival sometimes prevail in fact. Still epic resists treating this as inevitable; and it resists setting aside the codes for conduct, even when they – or the epic heroes – on occasion lapse.

- 15 Spectacle follows this pattern. Seldom is its suggestion that all is fair in anything. The same may be said in practice of love and war, let alone politics. The global governance that Meyer explores locates modes of international justice where Hobbes had argued there could be only chaos. Contrary to the Hobbesians associated with the present Bush administration, Lane finds in Thucydides on the Peloponnesian War good reasons that neither empire nor war justifies whatever the powerful might persuade themselves to be necessary for their victory or survival. De Luca explains how, in *Saving Private Ryan*, a warrior's code of honor can clash in some ways yet mesh in others with a democratic morality. And love them or not, the many genre conventions of reality romance TV that Brophy-Baermann explicates turn out to be codes of conduct and judgment that cannot be summarized by "all's fair" or "anything goes."
- 16 Again there should be no surprise in these findings. Is there any doubt that popular films with epic structures qualify as spectacles? Yet do any omit or rebut celebrations of heroic virtue and demonstrations of everyday morality? The roster of recent epics oriented expressly toward warriors would feature *Braveheart* (1995), *Gladiator*, *Hero* (2002), *The Last Samurai* (2003), *Troy* (2004), *King Arthur* (2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), the first three episodes of *Star Wars* (1999, 2002, 2005), and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003). Not one hints that all's fair. Epic romances are no different: *Titanic* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), *Love Actually* (2003), maybe *Cold Mountain* (2003). Epic noir – *Heat* (1995), *Magnolia* (1999), *Crash* (2004) – can be more conflicted and ambivalent, of course, but even it stays miles from anything goes. News spectacles might be freer form, but they still resemble film spectacles in many ways, including epic inclinations against all's fair. Do spectacles atomize,

massify, and de-moralize? The opposite is more accurate.

### **No Action?**

- 17 A third claim against spectacle is that spectators are passive and disconnected (Graber, pp. 1-10). Tranquilized by entertainment, they do not enter the arena where heroes, villains, or other protagonists perform. In a specifically epic sense, they do nothing but sit on the sidelines and watch. Maybe this makes some spectators objective or even dispassionate, as David Hume imagined for his calm, prudent spectators in rational judgment. As often, though, we find even classical spectators on their feet in the Coliseum. Far from silent, they bellow praise and blame, cheers and jeers. Then they turn thumbs up or down – to influence the outcomes of the contest and the careers of its producers. Are spectators passive? Not always. Is their sideline action exceptional? Not exactly.
- 18 At basketball games, especially, I am a fairly active viewer. That is the main reason to contend with the crowd in getting to the arena, rather than watching at home where the televised court is closer and clearer. Stand and yell if you want to help the home team's defense rattle the opposition, steal the ball, convert on a fast break. Noise matters. But don't wait calmly in your seat (with other polite Iowa fans) until your team does something worth cheering. Take the lead: stand and demand better defense! Fanning out behind you, others will have to stand just to see; and even the people beside and below you often follow an infectious example of loud entreaties to the team. For the Cameron crazies at Duke and the Jayhawk Faithful at Kansas, a basketball game is a two-hour workout for the spectators. Facing the frenzied conditions that they create, the best recruits rarely defect, and the visitors rarely win. Are spectators ineffective? Not really.
- 19 But what about the spectators who stayed home to watch (whatever) on television? They are couch potatoes, right? They are the spectators who put the passive in mass society and mass media, aren't they? 'Tain't necessarily so (Johnson 2005), and nobody who studies operations of popular culture should believe it for long. Even spectacles for popular entertainment get shaped decisively by the acts, some intentional and some not, of their consumers and users. This is what it means to say that individual authors, producers, directors, actors, editors, crews, and such do not simply make the genre conventions that they use in creating popular entertainments. Instead these are aspects of myths that

we all make together: bystanders as well as heroes, spectators as well as dramatists. The current issue's essay on war movies is just one venue among many for exploring some of the particulars in how this can work (Nelson 2003b, 2004; Chambers 2004).

### **No Attention?**

- 20 Certain that spectacle is always and irredeemably bad, at least for politics, distinguished scholars lobby for us citizens to turn our backs on the seductive hyper-realities of state. "Don't vote, it just encourages them," says the little old lady from Pasadena in defending her decision to stay home from the polls. The critics of spectacle go further: "Don't watch," they frown, "it just legitimates them." To give American politics any prospect of recovery from spectacle, the critics insist, we citizens must give it no mind. As Murray Edelman instructed Americans, to get better government, we must withdraw attention from the political spectacle (1988, pp. 126-130).
- 21 But again the spectacle critics are more wrong than right. It is truer to say these days that American politics need more mind and better spectacles from ordinary citizens – as well as from government leaders. Any political scientist such as Edelman knows at some level that American citizens already are withdrawing their attention *en mass* from government and politics. Political science as a discipline learns repeatedly that Americans since the Second World War know next to nothing about the high politics of state, pervasively distrust political officials and institutions, and pay negligible attention to policy or performance (Graber 2001, pp. 43-68). Long declines in viewing for the television news on politics suggest that we, as a citizenry, stopped most watching a while ago.
- 22 What happens if we give a government and no one comes? Hold an election and no one votes? Make a spectacle and no one cares? We are not as far as we might like from finding out.
- 23 Critics of "the political spectacle" portray people as mesmerized by portentous pseudo-events on the flickering screen that distract citizens from "the real issues." They complain that spectacles seduce us citizens with symbolic substitutes for true politics (Edelman 1977, 1985). Culture mongers distract us with celebrity tempests in teapots, while a few people wield the unseen government levers for the material powers that actually make or

break our world.

- 24 The mistake traces mainly to ideologies like liberalism, which is to modern politics what capitalism is to economics. The liberal supposition is that symbols, myths, rhetorics, aesthetics, cultures, and such are somehow immaterial. Words are mere – empty and misleading; deeds are dear – substantive and true. So-called cultural politics rise only to the dazzling appearances of substance and significance that charlatans of spectacle use to fascinate and manipulate citizens. In America, democratism inflects liberal realism, materialism, and individualism but leaves them pervasive.
- 25 Thus on *The Daily Show* for July 13, 2005, Jon Stewart enacted this liberal-democratic conviction when berating Bernard Goldberg for his recent book (2005) about cultural politics.

**Stewart:** But I guess my point is that so much focus is on culture and so little is on government and the real seats of power.

**Goldberg:** And you don't think culture is an important force out there?

**Stewart:** Not nearly as much as government. I think that, yes, *Friends* was a powerful program for many years. But my guess is, what's going on the Pentagon is slightly [more]. Not that Ross and Rachel weren't very important . . . .

**Goldberg:** Yeah. Yeah, okay. Okay. All right, and you know what? You know what? When the Hollywood, you know, blowhards out there throw the word "Nazi" around, I don't like that any more than I would like it if some bigot in the old days would throw the word "Kike" around. [Stewart had been campaigning for weeks against casual comparisons to "Nazism."]

**Stewart:** I understand. But I've been to L.A., and I've been to Washington: they're the same city. The only difference between L.A. and Washington is: they think they have power in L.A.; they don't. It's the same insular asshole you find in both areas. But in

Washington, they actually do have power. And that, I think, is, is the concern: so much is focused on this elitist culture of Hollywood, when they, you know: “Damn you, then I’m gonna go out and write a song.” But in Washington, they are really are controlling and changing people’s lives, and the focus should be on that.

**Goldberg:** Well . . . yes, but if you, if you, if you want to make believe it doesn’t matter what kinds of songs people write, then when they write that women are nothing but bitches and hos, let’s just sit there and say, “Hey, it’s no big deal; it’s only the culture.” It’s either a big deal, or it isn’t.

**Stewart:** No, I disagree with that. I think it is, it is the general detritus and static that exists in a world that is complex. But in Washington, transparency is the real issue. And I wish smart guys like you spent more time, not worrying about Barbra Streisand, but worrying about, you know, Richard Perle, Karl Rove, or whoever the Democrats would have had in that position during the Clinton years. That’s all I’m suggesting. The real . . . . And, and I’m suggesting that next time we’ll do it in front of your audience; and, and they won’t clap for me.

Stewart never did mention that Goldberg has devoted most of his professional life as a television newsman to reporting on official acts in the national government. Of course, satire is a better candidate than spectacle for a form where all’s fair and anything goes – if you can get away with it. As Stewart acknowledged at the program’s end, getting away with character assassination under the cover of caricature can be much easier when the audience is yours. Yet isn’t that still another way for spectators to be active and powerful?

- 26 An irony, to be sure, is that Stewart has come to the fore for practicing cultural politics. He has become the matinee idol of left-liberals because he is arguably one of the few to match the wit and vitriol of cultural politicking on the American right, which is equally but differently “liberal” in following the Lockean ideology that gives the United States its left-right spectrum in the first place (Nelson 2005). Nevertheless Stewart promotes the standards of

liberal-democracy that dis the cultural politics of spectacle as the distractions or distortions that keeps citizens from seeing their government in action.

- 27 If representation is the liberal condition for legitimacy (as in, “no taxation without . . .”), transparency is the democratic requirement (Bobbio 1987, 1990). Thus Stewart thinks that, “in Washington, transparency is the real issue.” The civic need is to see through the smoke, mirrors, curtains, closed doors, symbols, and other occlusions that powerful people in government use to block the view of any citizen who would hold them to account for their actions. There is a naïve objectivism to this norm, but then objectivist epistemology just is the philosophical companion of liberal-democracy, in much the same sense that capitalism is its fellow-traveller economically.
- 28 The question for Stewart and company is how to get citizens to look long in the direction of government. The challenge is daunting in a busy democracy that turns mostly toward private life, as De Luca rightly sees depicted in *Saving Private Ryan*. If stern declarations that the real power is Washington were to work, grade-school civics classes would suffice. On the whole, *The Daily Show* knows better. It works best when Stewart is making a spectacle, not of himself, but of politics in American government *and* culture.
- 29 When we do watch government and politics, what draws us back? Spectacle, of course. This includes all the devices that critics of spectacle denounce as tools propaganda and mass mobilization. Political spectacles attract and instruct through dramatization, personalization, normalization, fragmentation, sensationalism, celebrity, and sheer entertainment (Garth 1986; Berger 1990; Combs 1993; Exoo 1994; Fallows 1996; Bennett 2003). These epic dynamics of spectacle are not antitheses of news for well-informed citizens; they enable and purvey news.
- 30 From the start, with Thomas Hobbes, epic and spectacle are among the main devices for legitimating modern government (Wolin 1970). They attention that spectacles draw to what the nascent state is doing help it consolidate power, develop participation, and invent new modes of accountability. Nineteenth-century America brought spectacles to town to engage citizens and mobilize believers: tent meetings, touring theater, chautauquas, and stump speeches were the staples of entertainment *and* politics. Largely cultural, these devices of

spectacle brought the government to the people by catching their interest and calling them effectively together. The news sheets and taverns of the emerging “bourgeois public” (Habermas 1989) virtually required the complement of political spectacles to dramatize policy issues and excite civic engagement.

- 31 Instead of bashing spectacle as a distraction, we should be tapping it as a draw. Instead of condemning spectacle as a distortion, we should be improving it as a political form. That the politics of terrorism are specifically spectacular is no accident (Weimann 1994; Juergensmeyer 2001; Nelson 2003a). Effective responses to these or any other perverse politics require a better sense of the devices and virtues of spectacle than its critics have contemplated.

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