

## ROMAN SPECTACLE ENTERTAINMENTS AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF REALITY<sup>1</sup>

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Seneca, commenting on spectacle entertainments under Nero, describes “the arts of amusement” as “those which aim toward pleasure (*voluptatem*) of the eyes and ears. To this class you may assign the stage-machinists (*machinatores*), who invent scaffolding that goes aloft of its own accord, or floors that rise silently into the air, and many other surprising devices, as when objects that fit together then fall apart, or objects which are separate then join together automatically, or objects which stand erect then gradually collapse” (*Ep.* 88.22; trans. modified). Seneca’s comments are interesting both for what they do not say and what they do. Unmentioned are the violent aspects of these spectacles. Seneca emphasizes, instead, how the audience was struck with amazement at the spectacles because the “cause”—the technological apparatus—was hidden, and the effects—things rising, collapsing, flying, falling part, and joining together—seemed unexpected (*Ep.* 88.22). Seneca’s observations give us insight into the role of something less visible, technology, in the experience of spectacles.

Over the last several decades, “technology” has become an increasingly contested term. Technology derives from *technología*, which denotes a systematic method of doing something or accomplishing a task. The term can refer to tools and machinery, but also to intellectual tasks, including methods of reflection and examination that Michel Foucault refers to as technologies of the self (1997). Technologies, which in the modern age came to

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be associated with the instrumental application of knowledge to particular functional or commercial goals, are now seen as containing within them discourses or cultural codes about how we are to perceive and act toward ourselves, others, and our natural world.<sup>2</sup> I am starting with a somewhat narrow conception of technologies, which I understand as *machinae* (and related terms such as *artificia* and *instrumenta*): mechanical applications, operations, or instruments (such as stage machinery, systems to regulate water flow, etc.) that are used to manipulate or transform things. Following the more cultural approaches to technology, though, I argue that what I will call technologies of reality do not exist in isolation but grow out of and effect Roman cultural discourse.

Even though spectacles have attracted substantial scholarly interest, the technologies associated with spectacles have not.<sup>3</sup> When discussed, technologies emerge as a manufactured form of manipulation by a knowing elite over a gullible populace, a form of manipulation that heightened the anticipation of violence, affirmed the hierarchy of the elite, and magnified the charisma and prestige of the emperor. That is to say, technologies are seen as functional enhancements designed to divert the populace from real political concerns. Roland Auguet interprets the “tendency to play with reality” as “a sort of ‘super-production’ where the taste for death on the grand scale was allied to that of pure spectacle” (1994.71). Stephen Newmyer sees the ancient emphasis on “technical skill” as indicating a Roman preference for the “artificial over the natural” in order to demonstrate “control over nature” (1984.1–3). Richard Beacham, drawing on Walter Benjamin, a twentieth-century literary and cultural critic, views the dramatic staging of Roman spectacles through a later fascist aesthetic (captured, for example, in Leni Riefenstahl’s paean to Hitler) in which technologies contributed to a “political pageantry” that was meant to “appeal through the perceptive senses directly to the emotion of the spectators and thereby to create in

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2 See Foucault 1997.224–25. Also see de Lauretis 1987.1–30, who draws more on Althusser, and Metz 1982, who draws on Lacan.

3 There are a variety of different public spectacles, including theater shows (*ludi scaenici*), chariot races (*ludi circenses*), and gladiatorial contests (*munera gladiatoria*) that could include single combat, reenacted battles, beast hunts, and public executions. Without seeking to collapse important differences between these different spectacles, I follow a number of scholars (e.g., Potter 1996, 1999, Edmondson 1996) who see gladiatorial combat as sharing important features with other forms of public entertainment. Scholarship addressing the role of technologies in Roman spectacles include Beacham 1999, Auguet 1994, Coleman 1990, 1993, Newmyer 1984.

them a feeling of exaltation, celebration, and awe.”<sup>4</sup> And K. M. Coleman, who more than any other scholar explores the role of technology in these spectacles, describes these technologies as giving visual immediacy to the emperor’s participation in historical and mythological scenes. Such participation reaffirmed the emperor’s “charisma and authority” (1990.72). Questions of authority, social anxieties about group identity, and concerns about social status all got played out in the arena.<sup>5</sup> Blood was let, scapegoats were sacrificed, and the power of the empire (and emperor) was affirmed.

Even the collective outbursts of the people are seen as the price of popularity that leaders had to pay, but one made more controllable by these technologies. In the context of what Coleman describes as a broader Roman taste for realism, technologies enhanced the impression that one was observing or engaging in events as they were occurring, without scripts or filters. The power of these spectacles, like early cinema, as Coleman argues, was the “novelty of the genre” that engendered “a naïve belief in it,” a “gullibility” that enhanced elite control over the message of these productions (1993.73).<sup>6</sup>

The sheer frequency of these spectacle entertainments argues against their novelty and the audience’s gullibility. Suetonius comments, for example, that the audience laughed when a herald, in welcoming the

4 Beacham 1999.239–40. See also Gebhard 1996, who emphasizes the ritualized aspects of theatrical festivals for integrating conquered territories into an imperial cult.

5 The spectacles are seen variously as processes of Romanization that expressed a competitive ethos, a culture of domination, social hierarchies, and bloodlust; as mirroring the theatrical doublespeak of a corrupt empire; as forms of imperial propaganda, power, authority, and social control; as political patronage and liberality; as political diversions; or as forms of public relations and forums of public expression. Competitive ethos: Potter 1999.305–17, Toner 1995.34–52, Wiedemann 1992.34–47, Ville 1982.17; domination: Futrell 1997.8, 170, Gunderson 1996.134, Coleman 1990.72; hierarchy: Keane 2003.259, Parker 1999, Kyle 1998 (as ritualized violence to affirm social order), Walters 1998 (affirm non-deviant status), Gunderson 1996, Edmondson 1996, Plass 1995, Wistrand 1992.21, Rawson 1991 (reflect religious functions), Bollinger 1969; bloodlust: Barton 1993.46; theatrical self-presentation of emperor: Gunderson 1996.126–33, Bartsch 1994, Edwards 1993; propaganda and social control: Gebhard 1996 (promulgation of imperial cult); control over nature: Wistrand 1992.22, Coleman 1993.63, 86, Newmyer 1984.1–2; patronage: Futrell 2006.11–24, Jakobson 1999, Auguet 1994.24–30, 184 (“instrument of domination”), Wiedemann 1992, Veyne 1990 (patronage), de Ste. Croix 1981.305–06, Gruen 1974.204 (as gifts); political diversion: Coleman 1990.59, Hopkins 1983.29–30; public relations: Keane 2003.259, Wiedemann 1992.170–72, Yavetz 1969; public expression: Potter 1996, Millar 1977.368–75, Yavetz 1969, Bollinger 1969.

6 See Coleman 1990.68 and Edwards 1993.135.

people, characterized the games as never having been seen before or seen again (*Claud.* 21.2). And though there were grandiose, staged, and ritual aspects to imperial Roman spectacles, these spectacles did not appear to follow a script. But there is a connection to cinema that is worth pursuing. Benjamin identifies a profound change in the representation of reality through the invention of the movie camera that allowed for the production and transmission of reality (1968.234). This technology did not just transmit reality, though, but also altered our relationship to reality. It diminished the “aura” of the human and natural world by “bring[ing] things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” while also “overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction” (1968.223). Rather than the scripted aesthetic of the cinema described by Benjamin (or even of Roman staged performances), though, the Roman spectacles might better be compared to contemporary reality television (a form, like ancient Roman forms, that drew elite condemnation). I recognize the danger of anachronism, but the comparison helps us highlight some aspects of the technologies of spectacle entertainment that are explicable neither as forms of propaganda nor as aspects of ritual. There are three important aspects of this technology of reality that relate to spectacle entertainment.

First, the thrill of spectacle entertainment, like reality television, lay in the sense that one was witnessing unfiltered reality: unfiltered in the method of transmission because the technological apparatus staged reality while hiding its operation, and unfiltered in the content of transmission because what was transmitted did not appear scripted but, rather, spontaneous and unpredictable. With these technologies, the “filter of the present,” as Coleman writes, was not perceived “as distorting the authenticity of what was portrayed” (1993.73). The events were not purely accidental; the venues, stories, and participants were chosen for a reason. But the point was not to faithfully recreate a past event, nor even to appear to control outcomes, but to allow the story or events to seem to unfold as they were enacted. Thus myths got changed, as did history. But that may have had less to do with calculation than happenstance.

Second, technologies of reality allowed reality to be transmitted, to continue with Benjamin here, as “an object for simultaneous collective experience” (1968.234). The Circus Maximus, for example, could hold enough people to reach sixteen to twenty percent of the population, a ratings blockbuster, as Eckart Köhne remarks, for contemporary television (2000.9). The Colosseum held upwards of 50,000 people. And unknown were the numbers of spectators at some of the staged events in which nature itself was turned

into theater. More than just numbers, though, this collective response was characterized, as Benjamin notes, by the “direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment” with the audience’s critical reception (Benjamin 1968.234). The spectator in Roman society, as Carlin Barton points out, was “an inspector, judge, and connoisseur” (2002.221). The success of a spectacle was not based on the appraisal of a trained viewer (as might be the case in viewing a sculpture or even an elaborate house, for example), but coincided with (and was inseparable from) public reaction. I am pointing here to what J. P. Toner characterizes as a “growth in the power of popular culture,” a power that weakened the ability of the elite to control the boundaries of taste (1995.120).<sup>7</sup>

Third, the comparison to reality television also gives us insight into the politics of these spectacles. Rather than viewing these technologies simply as forms of elite manipulation or as an exchange of entertainment for quiescence, the technology of reality provided a shared illusion of proximity to power. Benjamin suggests that film technologies altered one’s sense of the uniqueness and mystery of, and distance from, the human and natural world by transforming reality into something that can be transported and reproduced (1968.223). These technologies of reality extracted the “uniqueness and permanence” of things from their environment, casting both nature and humanity as fundamentally equal by making them appear transitory, reproducible, and conformable to human desire (1968.223).

Equality does not have to be sameness. One can, for example, see others as endowed with shared, inviolable characteristics (such as dignity) that generate an attitude of respect. Or one can understand oneself as sharing similar situations and vulnerabilities that invite concern. Or one can believe that the surrounding world has intrinsic value that leads one to preserve and care for that world. In each of these cases, equality is a category defined by certain criteria that lie outside the individual and that imply forms of recognition (such as morals, norms, and institutions) by which those relationships are maintained. The equality fostered by these technologies of reality, though, was more consumptive than productive. The technology of reality, by its ability to transport and transform reality, rendered the world indistinct except in its ability to satisfy wants. These technologies also flattened out the texture of the world so that, to use a consumption image,

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7 On elite attempts to define themselves through taste, and their own implication in the vulgar that they decried, see Gunderson 1996.114, 136.

it could be digested. And, as the Latin *consumere* suggests in its relationship to technology, these technologies were ultimately exhaustive. They used up whatever they encountered, leaving nothing behind.

My claim intersects with views of these spectacles as forms of conspicuous consumption. Paul Plass, for example, ties the cost, the escalating pageantry, and the human and animal carnage to a larger symbolic universe that reaffirmed through displays of consumption a social and cosmic hierarchy.<sup>8</sup> Through these displays, one demonstrated both magnanimity and self-control. But however much we may read these displays as attempts to lay claim to privileged status, the exhilaration for the spectators—and I include the emperor here—lay in a common consuming impulse. In these technological sites, one sees played out the tension between the charismatic claims of the emperor, the hierarchical claims of the Roman elite, and a new cultural politics that juxtaposed participation with consumption and hierarchic distinction with democratized desire.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Plass 1995.51. Futrell notes that the “arena contained the force inherent in a totalitarian system, replicating the brutality of empire in a controlled environment, which dramatized the cost of empire paid not only by Rome’s opponents but by Rome as well, a cost that was gladly paid” (1997.4). Hopkins also describes how “the slaughter of exotic and fierce animals in the emperor’s presence, or exceptionally by the emperor himself or by his palace guard, was a spectacular dramatisation of the emperor’s formidable power: immediate, bloody and symbolic” (1983.12).

9 The complexity of the relationship of “reality” to cinema has been explored not only by Benjamin but also in the psychoanalytic tradition. Baudry associates the “reality” of cinema with its correspondence to the self that identifies not with the spectacle but with the camera that “constitutes and rules the objects in the ‘world’” (1974–75.45). For Metz, the reality of cinema lies in its constitution as something like the Lacanian imaginary that combines presence (the materiality of the film like the body) and absence (the recorded image that is no longer present like the image of the body in the mirror) (1982.43–52). Penley critiques the self-enclosed approaches of Baudry and Metz in which the subject is part of the cinematic apparatus. Although not rejecting psychoanalytic insights, Penley’s work explores ways in which subjects are engaged in constructions and negotiations of meanings and codes (1989.26–28).

I am not making an argument that there is something called “reality.” Nor am I arguing that technology and reality are closed systems that reproduce each other. Technologies contain powerful codes that grow out of society. But those codes, as they are interpreted, have the capacity to also change our understanding of and relationship to the “real” (in unexpected and uncontrolled ways). Is “reality” mysterious, something to be explored, something to be discovered, something to be manipulated, something to be used, something to be transformed, something to be enjoyed, something to be questioned, or something that inspires? I am suggesting that the technology of reality flattens out the range of ways in which one receives reality by making reality into something to be consumed.

### THE TECHNOLOGIES OF REALITY IN ANCIENT COMMENTARY

I do not mean to understate the violent aspects of these Roman spectacles, but we make a mistake in reducing the spectacular to the gruesome. Bloodlust alone was not sufficient to make a spectacle successful or unsuccessful, exhilarating or boring.<sup>10</sup> Pompey, for example, sponsored a beast fight that ended up causing the audience such distress that the crowd turned against him (Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 8.20–21). Tacitus mentions how Drusus's desire to see bloodshed in spectacles was alarming to the populace (*Ann.* 1.76.3). Tacitus also describes how Claudius exempted combatants from death in one *naumachia* (*Ann.* 12.56.3). Suetonius notes that Nero had no one put to death in one gladiatorial context (Suet. *Nero* 12.1). And most idiosyncratically, Marcus Aurelius armed the gladiators with blunted weapons so that blood would not be shed (Dio 72.29.3).

The populace, as Dio notes, wanted blood (Dio 72.29.4). But violence requires context. In particular, the excitement that attended this violence was frequently connected to (often inseparable from) a technology that altered or heightened the experience of the spectacle. Ancient commentary provides insight into the underlying excitement or amazement (sometimes good, sometimes bad) resulting from the ways in which technologies altered the experience of spectacles. This association of technologies with spectacle entertainments dates back to the republic. Pliny describes (with astonishment) how Curio sought to outstrip the achievements of Scaurus by building two theaters that could pivot together, with people still in the stands, to form an amphitheater to watch gladiators. As Pliny writes, "Truly, what should first astonish one in this, the inventor or the invention (*inventorem an inventum*), the designer (*artificem*) or the sponsor, the fact that a man dared to plan the work, or to undertake it, or to commission it?" (Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 36.24.118). The invention was at once astonishing and dangerous. More than that, though, Pliny points to how the technologies transformed the experience of the theater by making the spectator into part of the spectacle. As the theater pivoted, the audience was "entertained with the spectacle of its very self risking its life in the fighting arena, doomed, as it was, to perish

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10 Although there were discussions (even criticisms) of the violence, these criticisms were not necessarily out of any sense of humanity or sympathy; see Wiedemann 1992.128–64. Much of the criticism was elite criticism of mass taste; see Keane 2003.

at some moment or other if the framework were wrenched out of place” (Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 36.24.119).

Curio’s innovation was a first step in an ongoing fascination with technologically enhancing the immediacy of the spectacle. Caesar famously dug out a lake, an excavation that was itself an enormous technological feat, to stage a *naumachia*. In lending realism (but not historical accuracy) to the encounter, the battle was fought between “Tyrian” and “Egyptian” fleets (a battle that never occurred), “manned by a large force of fighting men,” and drew huge numbers of spectators to the banks (Suet. *Jul.* 39.4). Before the sea fight, there was combat between opposing armies, consisting of soldiers, elephants, and horsemen (Suet. *Jul.* 39.3). And Augustus recreated the battle of Salamis, staging a naval battle between the “Persians” and “Athenians” in 2 B.C.E. in a *stagnum* dug for the occasion (Dio 55.10.7, *RG* 23).<sup>11</sup> Augustus, in his *Res Gestae*, even singled out the technological accomplishment by describing the dimensions of the *stagnum* and the numbers of men and ships in the encounter (*RG* 23). As Coleman notes, hypothesizing about the technological mechanisms at work, the water levels in the *stagnum*, which measured over 500 meters long and over 350 meters wide, were likely controlled by an inflow of water from an aqueduct and outflow controlled by a gate on the canal (1993.52–53). These controls would not have been readily visible to the spectators.

But it is among subsequent emperors that we see increasingly elaborate technologies associated with the realism of spectacle entertainments. Suetonius describes how Caligula designed a “new kind of spectacle” (“novum . . . atque inauditum genus spectaculi excogitavit”) in building a pontoon bridge, complete (as Dio notes) with lodging rooms and running water, that spanned a three-mile expanse of the bay of Naples from Puteoli to Baiae (Suet. *Calig.* 19.1, my trans.; also Dio 59.17.1, 3). The bridge was built by anchoring ships in a double line and then piling dirt and fashioning it like the Appian Way. With the completion of the bridge, Caligula continued the staging of reality by dramatically appearing before the gathered crowd dressed in the purported breastplate of Alexander the

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11 See, for example, interpretations of Augustus’s *naumachia* in 2 B.C.E.: Futrell 2006.6, 8 (it demonstrates his capacity for leadership even during crisis), Zanker 1988.184–92 (Rome is an “invulnerable victor and guarantor of the world order,” and the *naumachia* is proof of “spiritual revival of the state,” 184–85), Bowersock 1984.174 (Rome is the defender of Hellenic tradition against Parthian monarchy), Syme 1984.922 (the *naumachia* foretells success in the upcoming Parthian campaign).



Great, carrying a battle-axe, a Spanish sword, and wearing a cloak adorned with gold and precious stones. He then created reality theater on a grand scale, charging across the bridge with armed horsemen as if pursuing an enemy (Dio 59.17.4). The next day, he rode back across the bridge in a chariot in a mock triumph, complete with purported hostages, spoils of war, and a speech (Dio 69.17.5). We get some sense of the vastness of the spectacle by its comparison to Xerxes' legendary feat of bridging the Hellespont (Suet. *Calig.* 19.3, Sen. *Brev. Vit.* 18.5–6). Moreover, the technology allowed Caligula to demonstrate his defiance of any limits that could be set by the gods and nature. Specifically, the reference was to an assurance from an astrologer to Tiberius, Caligula's predecessor, "that [Caligula] would no more be emperor, than he would ride on horseback across the gulf of Baiae" (Suet. *Calig.* 19).

Claudius, too, created reality entertainment on a lavish scale. Claudius staged the storming and sacking of a town "in the manner of real warfare" (*ad imaginem bellicam*), recreated the surrender of the kings of the Britons that had occurred earlier under his reign, and presided dressed in a general's cloak (Suet. *Claud.* 21.6). Perhaps most spectacularly, he reenacted a naval battle on the Fucine Lake prior to it being drained (a project that, itself, took eleven years and 30,000 men). The reenactment consisted of 100 ships and 19,000 sailors and soldiers fashioned as "Rhodians" on one side and "Sicilians" on the other and played mostly by condemned men.<sup>12</sup> The beginning of the battle was signaled by a horn blown by a silver Triton that rose from the middle of the lake by a machine (*machinam*) (Suet. *Claud.* 21.6). The vessels were surrounded with rafts so that no one could escape, but with room left in the center to display, as Tacitus writes, "the violence of oarage, the helmsmen's skills, the thrusts of ships, and battle routines" (*Ann.* 12.56.2). Tacitus gives us some sense of the vastness of the spectacle and the ways in which the landscape was transformed into a theater: "The banks, hills, and mountain heights were filled, like a theater, by an uncountable crowd from the nearest municipalities, and some from the City itself, in their desire to view or out of duty toward the princeps" (*Ann.* 12.56.3; also Dio 61.33.3: "enormous multitude"). Claudius was cloaked in a military cape and Agrippina wore a Greek cape of cloth

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12 This battle is possibly modeled after a simplified version of the struggle for west Sicily (c. 580–76 B.C.E.) between colonists from Cnidos and Rhodes, on one side, and the Phoenicians and Elymians on the other (Coleman 1993.69).

and gold. "The battle," as Tacitus continues, emphasizing the realism of the encounter, "though between convicts, was fought in the spirit of brave men, and after a considerable amount of wounding, they were exempted from slaying" (*Ann.* 12.56.3).

Nero continued where Claudius left off. His most important technological contribution to spectacle entertainments was his adoption of the amphitheater design that allowed for what Coleman describes as increasingly "realistic effects" before a large audience (1990.51–53; Suet. *Nero* 12.1). He was able to sponsor even more technologically fantastic forms of spectacle than his predecessors, including the creation of a magnificent forest stocked with wild animals in which 400 senators and 600 knights were forced to fight the beasts (Suet. *Nero* 12.1). The forest, as Seneca points out, rose mechanically into view as hidden jets sprayed saffron and water to the top of the theater and into the crowd (Sen. *Nat. Quest.* 2.9.2, Calp. Sic. *Ecl.* 7.69–72). Dio mentions the suddenness with which the new amphitheater was filled with salt water and great fish that set the stage for a mock sea fight between men representing the Athenians and Persians (Dio 61.9.5).<sup>13</sup> As Coleman comments, the combination of a battle in water with fish "achieved new heights of verisimilitude" (1993.57). Nero then drained the water, a technological feat admired for its rapidity, and had fighting continue on the dry land.<sup>14</sup> During this spectacle, Nero also had the likeness of Icarus fly about the amphitheater, with Icarus prematurely (and unexpectedly) crashing to the ground, splattering Nero with blood (Suet. *Nero* 12.2, Dio 61.9.5).

Similar technological feats were carried out by subsequent imperial lines. Titus produced "remarkable spectacles" (Dio 66.25.1), including the dedication of the Flavian amphitheater (later the Colosseum) that featured extraordinary beast hunts and gladiatorial battles followed by the amphitheater being filled with water in which animals performed tricks. Groups portraying the Corcyreans and Corinthians then fought a sea battle. Titus sponsored another sea fight outside the city in which the Athenians conquered the Syracusans by sea and then stormed and captured a wall (Dio

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13 There is much discussion about whether, and the extent to which, amphitheaters were filled with water. See, esp., the discussion by Coleman 1993; also Dodge 1999.232–33.

14 Admiration: Dio 61.9.5. Dio also reports that in A.D. 64 Nero staged a beast hunt, then "immediately" piped water into the arena to produce a sea fight, then drained the water again to stage a gladiatorial combat, then flooded it again for a banquet (Dio 62.15.1). Similarly, Martial's comments on Titus (*Spect.* 24.6).

66.25, Suet. *Titus* 7.3). And Domitian held sea fights that were noteworthy, as Suetonius writes, because they were fought “almost with regular fleets” (*Domit.* 8.2).

The realism created by these technologies was not limited to land and sea fights, but extended into spectacles of punishment.<sup>15</sup> Nero had Icarus. In Apuleius’s fictionalized account, a wooden mountain like Mt. Ida was erected through the floor, with real plants, a stream, and live goats. The mountain then sank back out of sight (Apuleius *Met.* 10.34).<sup>16</sup> The account parallels Strabo’s much earlier description of how Selurus was placed on a model of Mt. Etna that was made to suddenly collapse, plunging Selurus into the wild animals below (Strabo 6.273C). And Dio depicts Severus’s construction of an amphitheater to look like a ship that suddenly fell apart, releasing the hundreds of beasts that it held (Dio 76.1.4–5).

What appears in this ancient testimony is the prevalence of not just descriptions of violence, but of the excitement associated with these technological effects. The amazement was part of a more general unscripted atmosphere. The unexpected sight of senators and knights fighting wild beasts, for example, must have been truly thrilling to the audience, as would the sight of Icarus crashing to the ground or the impromptu fights that the emperors arranged wherever there might be crowd (see Suet. *Claud.* 21.1, *Calig.* 18.3). Lucian gives us some insight into the atmosphere with his description of the wild enthusiasm of the crowd when a mime’s act became reality as he, playing Ajax, began to rave so madly that he actually struck and almost killed the character of Odysseus (Lucian *de Salt.* 83).

Added to the unscripted atmosphere of the events, some fighters would plead their cases, some would try other ploys. One combatant, after yielding without a struggle and being condemned to death, picked up a trident and slew all the victors, to the astonishment of Caligula (Suet. *Calig.* 30.3). So the combatants in the sham sea fight on Lake Fucine added drama by claiming to have been pardoned by Claudius because they had cried out: “Hail, emperor, they who are about to die salute thee” and Claudius had responded “Or not” (Suet. *Claud.* 21.6). Claudius, after debating what to do, induced them to fight through threats and promises and ultimately pardoned those who survived. Claudius further played upon the spontaneity of

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15 On the spectacles of punishment, see, especially, Lateiner 2001.241–48, Potter 1996, Gunderson 1996.133–36, Coleman 1990.

16 On how the *Metamorphoses* reflects reality, see Millar 1981.

these gladiatorial shows. He sometimes ordered combat between individuals responsible for scenic and mechanical failures (suggestive of the critical role of technology). He engaged in additional fights after the pageant (Suet. *Claud.* 34.2). And he created what he named a *sportula*, a spectacle not on the regular list of shows to which he invited the people “as it were to a little meal, hastily prepared” (*Claud.* 21.4). The people got into the act, as well, shouting for popular gladiators, calling for death or pardon, and counting aloud, with their hands stretched out, the gold pieces paid to the victors (*Claud.* 21.5).<sup>17</sup> Claudius would even refer to the audience as “masters” (*dominos*) in encouraging their response (*Claud.* 21.5).

Claudius’s language (or Suetonius’s) is revealing because it points to how easily political boundaries were blurred in this unscripted arena, but it is hardly the only indication of such blurring. The hierarchical seating arrangements were thrown frequently into disarray, such as when Caligula scattered gifts to encourage the commoners to take the seats of the knights (Suet. *Calig.* 26.4; Wistrand 1992.35). The people in this plebiscitary atmosphere not only expressed their approval or disapproval, but also, as Auguet suggests, “the demagoguery which sustained the regime favoured this tendency” of emperors to identify with “the idols of the crowd” (1994.1). *Principes* played the part of gladiators and beast-fighters. And the emperors even perceived threats to their own prestige in the popularity of the combatants. Suetonius, for example, reports on Caligula’s anger when the crowd seemed to accord more honor to a gladiator than to the emperor after they applauded Porius, the gladiator, for setting a slave free after a victory (*Calig.* 35.3).

The spectacles served a social function: they displayed the power of the emperor (often at the expense of the aristocracy), reinforced social boundaries, affirmed certain Roman values, and entertained the people. Even the frenzied outbursts of the crowd, and the seeming violations of social conventions, could serve as mechanisms to reassert social boundaries. But the messages that emerge from these spectacles are far more ambiguous. If Augustus had the Athenian fleet defeat the Persians to demonstrate Rome’s Hellenic inheritance, then it seems difficult to explain why Caligula embraced Xerxes’ feat of spanning the Hellespont to defeat the Greeks. If these battles were designed to reinforce historical memory, then it seems perplexing why Caesar staged a fictional encounter. If the battles were

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17 On popular gladiators, see Auguet 1994.162–63.

meant to demonstrate Rome's own superiority, then it is unclear why none of these battles ever represented Roman forces. As Coleman notes: "It is noteworthy that none of the recorded *naumachiae* was set in the context of a famous Roman naval battle, which may suggest that the outcome was unpredictable."<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, if these spectacles were meant to affirm the emperor's charisma and distance from the people, then only with difficulty can we explain the emperor's embrace of the same desires as the mass of people and jealousy of the star status of those lowest in the Roman social hierarchy.

What begins to emerge is a far more complex, and less controllable, message than that suggested by associations of these spectacles with manufactured forms of imperial propaganda. Like the impression that Lucretius describes of the audience's world transformed by the dance of colors created when light shines through colored awnings, these technologies transported and transformed one's relationship to one's surroundings (Luc. *DRN* 4.82–83).<sup>19</sup> By making the boundaries of reality fluid so that everything could be made to conform to desire, these technologies created the illusion of participating in power. The effects of these technologies were not reducible to whatever the intended message about elite authority was supposed to be; rather, these technologies played an unintended role in altering the terms by which those authority relationships were conceived.

### CONSUMING REALITY, CONSUMING POLITICS

Both the emperor and the elites were performing a delicate balancing act. Spectacles were supposed to affirm elite authority. Erik Gunderson sees the arena as playing "an important role in the moralization and maintenance of Roman social roles and hierarchical relations" (1996.115). Seating and dress clearly delineated the space and marked the "ideological map of the social structure of the Roman state" (1996.125).<sup>20</sup> The arena also "solidif[ied]" symbols that associated the emperor and the empire with mythology, divinity, and conquest (Auguet 1994.106). But the symbols that

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18 Coleman 1990.71; also Coleman 1993.72–73.

19 Lucretius is talking about the theater, but there would have been a similar effect, both as awnings were used in amphitheaters and as theaters we adapted to use for other spectacles; see Dodge 1999.234–35.

20 On seating, see Fredrick 2002.243–47, Edmondson 1996, Gunderson 1996.123–26, Rawson 1991.

unified the arena became politically meaningful only as they were consumed. These spectacles, Plass argues, were a “special, institutionalized form” of “conspicuous consumption at Rome, fed not merely by economic resources but, more dramatically, by copious supplies of blood.”<sup>21</sup>

Consumption was meant as a way to distinguish elites from masses. Those sponsoring the games—the emperor in Rome as he took over the games and the elites in the provinces—could demonstrate their power and magnanimity. The remaining aristocracy, less politically powerful but no less concerned with their status, could demonstrate their taste, self-control, and power to subject the bodies of the lower class to the gaze of the upper class.<sup>22</sup> What emerged in this arena, though, was a less controllable, more diffuse assertion of power in the form of popular culture that was organized around consumption. The terms of consumption that expressed a hierarchic cosmology differentiating elites from masses were now challenged by a technologically enhanced, fluid world that dissolved the natural boundaries upon which hierarchy rested.

Elites may have tried to establish, as Toner suggests, a “new hegemony” by incorporating lower-class pleasure into elite culture (1995.125). Thus gladiatorial contests were presented as lessons in the fundamental Roman values of courage, endurance, and discipline (Toner 1995.68). But changes in political structures had loosened the political grip of elites over the people. In particular, the growth of Rome and the transfer of authority from elites to the princeps (often humiliatingly displayed in the arena), had diminished significantly the power of local elites to regulate the moral conduct of the people. Moreover, the centralization of political authority weakened traditional political institutions and mechanisms of popular expression that oriented participants toward public ends.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the people seemed genuinely reluctant to embrace attempts to return even minimal powers to them. Caligula’s gesture to restore elections to the people’s assembly in A.D. 38, for example, was such a failure that he rescinded it the following year. There was no longer a public good that oriented these institutions, nor a

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21 Plass 1995.50. “The maintenance of the emperor’s role,” as Millar notes, “demanded not only a constant outflow of gifts, but the giving of them in a magnanimous and dignified manner” (Millar 1977.136). Also Potter 1996.131, Wistrand 1992.63, Millar 1977.140.

22 On the control of the gaze, see Fredrick 2002.246.

23 There is considerable controversy about the extent to which the rise of the princeps was the beginning of oligarchy (Syme 1939) or a revitalization of Roman cultural values (Galinsky 1996, Habinek and Schiesaro 1997).

sense of efficacy that animated them. What ancient commentary points to is the tension between the assertion of social boundaries and the boundlessness of a human consuming impulse.

I am not referring simply to the extravagant consumption habits of the aristocracy, critiques of which were staples of Roman moralistic writing.<sup>24</sup> Suetonius, for example, refers to Nero's "ruinously prodigal" palace (*Nero* 31.1). The palace had, of course, the usual measures of extravagance—baths, rooms adorned with jewels, an enormous statue of Nero, himself—that Tacitus describes as "long since familiar as commonplaces of luxuriousness" (*Ann.* 15.42.1). What stands out was the transportability of nature created by technologies of reality. Tacitus emphasizes the "daring genius" of the engineers who attempted "through technology even what nature had denied" (*Ann.* 15.42.1). The palace contained within it a pond "like a sea" that was surrounded by buildings representing cities, and tracts of country that included tilled fields, vineyards, pastures, and woods, "with great numbers of wild and domestic animals" (Suet. *Nero* 31.1, also Tac. *Ann.* 15.42.1). There was also an attempt (though one that failed) to build a canal along "barren shore" and "mountain obstacles" where "no other wet area for generating water is encountered" (*Ann.* 15.42.2) in order to allow a journey to Lake Avernus from the Tiber "by ship yet not by sea" (Suet. *Nero* 31.3).

Papirius Fabianus (as preserved in Seneca the Elder's collection of rhetorical exercises) describes more generally the desire of the elite to imitate the real by transforming and transporting the natural landscape, delighting in "unnatural imitations of sea or land out of their proper places" (Seneca the Elder *Contr.* 2.1.13; trans. modified). Seneca's language points to the way in which transporting nature transformed one's relationship to that nature. When the individual encounters nature on its own terms, as Seneca the Elder observes, one is absorbed into the natural landscape: the forests, plains, and vast sea that are simply larger than the individual. But that relationship is altered when delight is found in one's ability to hold a transported and transformed nature in one's hands. As Seneca the Elder writes: "I suppose they love these things as children love things they can touch, take in their hands and clutch to their laps" (*Contr.* 2.1.13). Even more, nature could be held in one's stomach. Suetonius describes how

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24 See, especially, Edwards 1993.137–206; also McCullough 2008, Plass 1995.46–47, Toner 1995.78–88.

Caligula ate “unnatural” (*portentosissima*) combinations of ingredients in which everything in nature was quite literally devoured: drinks of pearls dissolved in vinegar and breads and dishes made of gold (*Calig.* 37.1; also Antony, see Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 9.120–21). Vastness was made immediate and conformable to desire.

The increasingly elaborate technologies of consumption were not confined to elite private residences and activities but became part of a general consumptive atmosphere. The creation of seas, mountains, and forests in Nero’s residence played itself out publicly in spectacle entertainments and public works projects that transported and transformed nature by building cliffs into the sea, raising plains to the size of mountains, and leveling mountains into plains (*Calig.* 37.3; see also *Claud.* 20, Dio 60.11.3, Seneca the Elder *Contr.* 2.1.13). It is suggestive of the public diffusion of these technologies that the Colosseum would be built on the location of Nero’s house, an opening to the Roman people of Nero’s private spectacle of transported reality.

In accounts of Caligula’s bridge, we get some sense of how boundless consumption became the measure of achievement for public spectacles. On his triumphant return across the bridge, Caligula praised his soldiers for their achievement in “crossing through the sea on foot,” an unnatural feat intended to show that there were no barriers to human accomplishment (Dio 59.17.7). In Dio’s account, what had been accomplished was the removal of any limit to consumption. Dio seems to emphasize how nature was transformed by and made to conform to human desire: the natural shape of the mountains surrounding the lake formed a “theater” that, when lit by fires, created so much light that “darkness was not noticed” (Dio 59.17.9). Indeed, as Dio continues, it was Caligula’s desire “to make (ποιῆσαι) the night day (τὴν νύκτα ἡμέραν), as he had made the sea land (τὴν θάλασσαν γῆν)” (59.17.9). The complete lack of boundaries paralleled, in turn, the boundlessness of consumption: the party continued until everyone was glutted (ὑπερκορῆς)—literally beyond full (Dio 59.17.9). The story ends where consumption ends: with the exhaustion of everything. The party culminates in mayhem with Caligula throwing his companions off the bridge and then attacking and sinking the ships of the guests. That, Dio remarks, “was the end of the bridge” (Dio 59.18.1). Moreover, as Dio also notes in drawing the connection to politics, Caligula had “exhausted” (ἐξαναλωθεῖς) the empire’s treasury in building the bridge (Dio 59.18.1; also Sen. *Brev. Vit.* 18.5–6). The descriptions of the effects of these technologies of reality interestingly



parallels the consuming impulse of public works projects of the emperors that exhausted the funds of the empire (Suet. *Calig.* 37.3).

In the revised cultural choreography that I am depicting, these technologies brought into tension visual reminders of distinction with affirmations of shared desire. The crowd may not have trusted attempts to restore political forms. Public expression had found its register in shared consumption. That is the point of Juvenal's lament that political action had become an activity of consumption. "Now that no one buys our votes, the public has long since cast off its cares; the people that once bestowed commands, consulships, legions and all else, now meddles no more and longs eagerly for two things—Bread and Games" (Juvenal *Satire* 10.77–81; trans. Ramsay). It was a shared consumption. Tacitus, for example, reports that the people took great delight in how Nero shared their hunger for pleasure, a hunger that could not be satiated (*Ann.* 14.14.2).<sup>25</sup> Like Caligula devouring pearls, Claudius is described by Dio as "gorging himself" on the sight of these spectacles (Dio. 60.13.3). "The uninhibited gaze did more than violate," Barton writes, "it cannibalized" (2002.225). As if to feed this insatiable appetite, the Roman games emerge as an almost frantic succession of spectacles: criminals, and then knights and senators, fighting wild beasts; naval battles, sea creatures, mythical reenactments, and flying apparatuses (Suet. *Nero* 12; also Tertullian *de Spectaculis* 16 on frenzy). Even during meal times, the emperor would toss unsuspecting bystanders into gladiatorial combat, lest boredom set in (Dio 59.10.3). Absent any limits, Seneca writes, humans now "seek *voluptas*, or pleasure, from every source" (*Ep.* 95.33).<sup>26</sup> Seneca also used *voluptas* to describe the pleasure that hidden technologies bring to the eyes and ears (*Ep.* 88.22, see p. 63, above). Only now Seneca spells out the implications of a world judged by the standards of consumption: nothing that feels good is considered bad. And nothing is excluded from making one feel good, including what Seneca describes sadly as the "satisfying spectacle" of seeing "man made a corpse" (*Ep.* 95.33; also Tert. *de Spect.* 12).

If "societies and people define themselves through spectacle," as Bettina Bergmann suggests in a symposium on "The Art of the Ancient

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25 See also *Hist.* 1.4; Beacham 1999.200–01, Sullivan 1985.40–41, Yavetz 1969.115, 124.

26 See also Walters, who explores how the spectator was able to "use the bodies of the deviants for their own pleasure" (1998.365).

Spectacle,” then Roman society underwent a redefinition (1999.9). In the Roman republic, the political assemblies served as a public stage on which individuals could appear, speak, and compete for the approval of the spectators (Millar 1998.225). What speaking did—both in the actions of the speaker and the reactions of the audience—was disclose the common world, as well as the boundaries that defined the world, that lay between the speaker and the spectator. “In the culture of public persuasion,” Joy Connolly notes, rhetorical discourse emerges as a “symbolic expression of desire for a sense of sameness among speakers and listeners, a common sensibility regarding taste and convention, which arises from the heart of republican anxieties about governing a necessarily heterogeneous community” (2007.213; see also Corbeill 2002.186–90). Cicero, for example, emphasizes the importance of the orator over the philosopher in giving cogency to themes “of the immortal gods, of dutifulness, harmony, or friendship, of the rights shared by citizens, by men in general, and by nations, of fair-dealing, moderation or greatness of soul, or virtue of any and every kind” (Cic. *de Orat.* 1.13.56; see, esp., Connolly 2007.118–57). Public oratory is “woven into the texture of our politics,” Cicero writes, as it “foster[s] and display[s]” the “principles of public conduct” to future generations (Cic. *de Orat.* 3.60.226). The Roman republic rested its legitimacy in the belief by citizens that they were collective participants in these public forums by (at the very least) the judgments they rendered. The enactments of these judgments varied: elections, acclamations, verdicts, and applause. But in all of these judgments, the citizens were cast as participants in the creation of the laws and rules that organized the community.

And thus it seems that the public spectacles in the imperial era resembled those earlier, political forms. And not without reason do scholars see some continuity at both the elite and popular level. Spectacles produced a “discourse” and “rhetorical effect” by which elite identity was affirmed through the “illustrative spectacle” of gladiatorial strength, courage, and endurance (Gunderson 1996.139). And for the people, the arena provided a venue for popular expression. As J. C. Edmondson notes: “After the decline of republican political institutions, they [the arenas] represented almost the only remaining opportunities for political debate between plebs and *princeps*.”<sup>27</sup> Pursuing the implications of these participatory elements, Edmondson argues that “challenges to the social order that originated inside

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27 Edmondson 1996.72; see also Tengström 1977.54.

the amphitheater” had “the strength to transcend the festive bounds and to structure social relationships in the nonfestive world outside the arena. At the very least they raised consciousness about, and suggested models for, social change” (1996.111). The arena became the site, perhaps the most visible one, in which the boundaries and limits of imperial power, as Thomas Wiedemann suggests, could be tested against the sovereign claims of the people (1992.176–77).

But the “politics of meaning,” as Clifford Geertz reminds us, “is anarchic in the literal sense of unruled” (1973.316). Whatever were the stated boundaries—the hierarchic arrangement of seating in the amphitheater, the visible position of the emperor, or even the affirmations of elite identity—the technologies of reality were unruled in the sense that they threatened to dissolve the solidity of natural and cultural boundaries. Gone was the commonality created through a shared discourse by which a heterogeneous community gave expression to public aspirations and shaped public institutions. Tacitus, for example, shows how disconnected discourse had become from expressions of purpose or meaning.<sup>28</sup> These spectacles did forge commonality, though, from the heterogeneity and vastness of the community. But it was not a commonality shaped by discourse. Technology made politics seem intimate by counterposing hierarchical distinction with a natural and political landscape transformed into the shared object of desire. In this transformed public realm, there was nothing durable or definable that lay between or separated individuals. The immovable was moved, the distant was made close, the permanent was made temporary, the exotic was made familiar, and nature was transgressed. The result was the creation of a highly fluid realm in which the only thing communicated was the common language of desire.

We go some way in this account toward understanding two seemingly different dimensions of the principate: the fearful silence when faced with the arbitrary will of the sovereign, on the one hand, and the raucous pleasure enjoyed by the people, on the other (see Hammer 2008.155–62). The technologies of reality thrived in this context. What one sees is a political reality defined by the wants and desires of the emperor, but one readily acceded to by the populace. Montesquieu, for example, describes despotism as transforming “man” into “a creature that obeys a creature that wants” (1997.3.10). That is to say, the political atmosphere of the principate was

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28 See, for example, Henderson 1990 and Hammer 2008.132–72.

not a stark wasteland governed by fear; its happiness lay in “sating the arrogance, desires, and voluptuousness of each day” (Montesquieu 1997.7.4). In the continual competition for recognition, the aristocracy catered to the pleasures of the emperor as the path to power, status, and wealth. And the people readily embraced their own role—a now perverted role—in shaping the community in their own image. Citizens no longer needed to subordinate their desires to the virtues embraced by the community; the community now took the form of the desires of each individual. For good reason there was no longer discourse about the world that lay between each citizen; that world now lay within them.

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