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Lumières – Ilustración – Illuminismo
Herausgegeben von Klaus-Dieter Ertler

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Regards sur les « spectateurs »

Periodical Essay – Feuilles volantes – Moralische Wochenschriften – Fogli moralistici – Prensa moral

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A Stranger's Strength – The *Spectator* in the crowd

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The British *Spectator* had a short life span – published from 1711 to 1714, it was discontinued for a year and a half in 1712 (March 1, 1711 to December 6, 1712-June 18 to August 23, 1714). Yet its impact was, and remains immense. Following its success in the British Isles, the *Spectator* reached the New World as well as all the main cultural capitals of the Old, whether in its authentic or adapted form, and continued to be read well into the 19th century. When one ponders on such a discrepancy, one may view the *Spectator* as a periodical exemplifying excellence both as a commercial venture and as a medium of communication, a model of efficiency, adaptability and persuasion. In the space of three years, the *Spectator* developed into a literary canon, a brand name and a prototype for other "Spectators" to come – the various transformations of the spectatorial essay in Europe. The *Spectator*, for two centuries, came to be known as an epitome of good taste, a by-word of sober analysis tempered with polite amusement – a moral and aesthetic arbiter for its readers.

And to a certain degree it may be said to have kept this reputation today. Re-interpreted in the 1960s by academics and literary critics – with Peter Smithers' biography of Addison and Donald F. Bond's edition of the *Spectator* –, the periodical, after a period of disfavour, is now read as a set of defining texts for the 18th century, the starting point of trends and practices one may still discern today in British literature and society. If C.S. Lewis credits Isaac Bickerstaff and Mr Spectator with the invention of British "hypocrisy", one may at least see an indirect proof of Addison-' and Steele's influence in the British use of Latinate words to temper direct speech and keep one's emotions in check.[1]

[1] According to Jan Lannering, Latinate words of at least three syllables provide the rhythmic regularity of Addison's prose and tow it soothingly away from sensory perceptions and responses – readers do not focus their attention on "polite, non-sensory terms" but on the line of reasoning (Lannering 1951, 192).

> That sober code of manners under which we still live to-day, in so far as we have any code at all, and which foreigners call hypocrisy, is in some important degree a legacy from the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*.[2]

This paper will therefore attempt to understand the *Spectator* in its own time as an exception – both a deviation and an exception from the norm. In the preface of his now reference edition Donald Bond describes the periodical as the threshold of new literary genres.

> The periodical essay was a unique genre of the eighteenth century: there was nothing quite like it before, and there has been nothing exactly like it since, in length, in scope, and in point of view. (*Spectator*, I: xiii)

Such individuality can either be explained as the result of or the reason for its success; yet attempting to solve such a quandary would prove fruitless. Uniqueness remains the most salient aspect of the *Spectator*; and rather than reduce it to cause or effect, one may develop the notion within three key contexts, namely the time, space and limitations that necessarily defined a periodical in the 1710s.

1. Snatched time and controlled transience

Time in a periodical presents itself as a continuous succession of disconnected readings – in the twin senses of deciphering and interpretation. The *Spectator* demonstrates a neat perception and apt management of time in this double sense, within as well as without its own frame. The essays kept their readers active and keen – at the peak of its success the *Spectator* sold 3,000 sheets a day. And Addison went as far as theorizing this specific dimension of time when he printed his aesthetic treaty on the "Pleasures of the Imagination" in a *Spectator* series (from numbers 411 to 421). Placed on a par with "Greatness" and "Beauty", "Novelty" was acknowledged as a powerful instrument of aesthetic perception and seduction. Although Addison's theory is well known, critics seldom pay attention to the examples that illustrates the notion of Novelty. In *Spectator* 412 the first object exemplifying Novelty is the sight of "Groves, Fields and Meadows" with their changing colours in Spring and Autumn, which, if they remind us of Addison's love of nature and his appreciation of spontaneous aesthetic manifestations – the concept of elegant simplicity or

[2] *Essays on the eighteenth century,* 1945, 7.

"*simplex munditiis*" developed in *Tatler* 151 and 212, the cadence of popular ballads and the natural blush of British maidens' cheeks – must have echoed far less happily in his urban readers' imagination than the more familiar metaphor of a fountain, which is the second example of Novelty in *Spectator* 412; i.e. an artificial ornamentation that frames and codifies the perception of nature.

> For this reason there is nothing that more enlivens a Prospect than Rivers, Jetteaux, or Falls of Water, where the Scene is perpetually Shifting, and entertaining the Sight every Moment with something that is new. (*Spectator* 412, III: 542)

Addison's second example is thus a body of flowing water, ceaselessly pouring forth a succession of new shapes that capture our gaze. Novelty is implicitly defined as a natural, controllable energy to be channelled for artistic use and perception. If exploited with skill, Novelty produces surprise, which in turn secures the desired visual isolation – pre-eminence from a background of déjà-vu or déjà-lu material.[3]

The *Spectator* produced unprecedented novelty on the cultural market; its very hybridity made it an object of surprise. Its handy format, representing approximately 2,500 words or a half-hour of reading thanks to a single sheet printed on both sides, induced new reading practices in places that had never been designed for study or reflection. These became unexpected loci for earnest reading. In the private spheres of salons and tea-tables, the *Spectator* replaced gossip and cards, and in the household gatherings near the fireplace it complemented Bible-reading. In the male, semi-public spheres of taverns and coffee-houses the periodical must have momentary

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[3] A remark on advertising and the use of the manicule in *Tatler* 224 can be read in this light. The author remarks on the fundamental art of his trade, Novelty or visual pre-eminence: "The great Art in writing Advertisement, is the finding out a proper Method to catch the Reader's Eye; without which, a good Thing may pass unobserved, or be lost among Commissions of Bankrupt. Asterisks and Hands were formerly of great Use for this Purpose. Of late years, the *N.B.* has been much in fashion […]. I must not here omit the blind *Italian* Character, which being scarce legible, always fixes and detains the Eye, and gives the curious Reader something like the Satisfaction of prying into a Secret". (III: 168-69)

suspended shop-talk and political debates; and clubs members must have been diverted from drinking, if only for a short while.[4]

In its form, an essay of a varying length and fragmentation, dedicated to one or several topics, the *Spectator* cannot be ascribed to a specific genre. Even the language of the periodical may have struck contemporaries as a novel mixture: Anglo-Saxon and Latinate words, often balanced in the same sentence – what Jan Lannering felicitously called "smoothing redundancies" (109). Such hybrid lexicon mirrored the blend of high and low references in the essays (Greek or more often Latin epigraphs juxtaposed with British popular ballads), which perfectly suited the aspirations of the rising merchant middle class.[5]

Of course, the *Spectator* also displayed novelty as variety, as will be shown below; a less evident temporal characteristic may however be noted in the periodical – a sense of opportunity.

It cannot be denied that the *Spectator* is uncannily apposite, as it made the best of several punctual occasions for profit and fame. When British paper production was starting to thrive following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, with the influx of French Protestant paper-makers settling their trade in England, the combined efforts of Addison and Steele, the main entrepreneurs of the *Spectator*, evidenced a steady commercial flair and employed no less than two different printers (J. Tonson and S. Buckley) to bring forth alternate numbers. Possibly under the particular guidance of Steele, once gently mocked by Addison for his proclivity to "Projects"[6] – ambitious (yet doomed) commercial ventures – the periodical made efficient use of advertisement, both in its own columns and in those of other periodicals. All in all, as Brean Hammond ("First and foremost, the Addisonian periodical was a business venture", 181) and Frank Arthur Mumby

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[4] As described by one devoted correspondent, reading the *Spectator* is a moment of stillness, or suspended time: "We could not, without Sorrow, reflect that we were likely to have nothing to interrupt our Sips in a Morning, and to suspend our Coffee in mid-air, between our Lips and right Ear, but the ordinary Trash of News-papers". (IV: 485-86)

[5] "Moral philosophy for coffee-houses required a linguistic medium identical with that of well-bred conversation, not with the emotive grandeur of thought reflected in Milton's vaulted sentences". (Lannering 1951, 90)

[6] See *Guardian* 107, 370-71.

stress, the *Spectator* was not merely a source of intellectual profit, especially for its authors and printers.

> The first two volumes of the revised edition in column form, "well bound and gilt, two guineas", were issued to subscribers by Buckley and Tonson in January 1712, the third and fourth following in April of the same year. In November 1712 Addison and Steele sold a half share in these four volumes, and in three others not yet published, to Jacob Tonson, junior – old Jacob's nephew and now his partner – for £575, Buckley taking the other half share for a similar sum. Two years later Tonson junior bought Buckley's half for £500.[7]

From a less material perspective, the *Spectator* presented itself as a mirror, an outward-looking medium of observation and feedback – hence control – for an emerging readership that had first been drawn toward the written word by the lower genres of romance and oriental tales. This inexperienced public was defined by a perhaps envious Shaftesbury as a group of inferior sub-readers: women and children.

> The Moorish Fancy […] prevails strongly at this Present Time. […] Monsters and Monsterland were never more in request; and we may often see a philosopher, or wit, run a tale-gathering in these idle deserts as familiarly as the silliest woman or merest boy.[8]

Bond's more rational comment in his preface may prove more informative. When compiling the unpublished letters sent to the *Spectator* he defines the new group of readers as:

> A new social stratum of readers which is rapidly coming to the fore […]. Ladies of fashion, business men, clergymen, players, perplexed parents, footmen and ladies' maids, lovers, and schoolboys […] A new reading public […] not confined to the aristocracy or to the learned. (I: lxxxvii)

By mixing genres, styles and linguistic registers within their essays the *Spectator* authors lured these avid readers into buying and subscribing to the periodical, as well as consuming other *Spectator*-sponsored works such as Locke's *Essay*, popular grammar books and dictionaries of hard words.[9] Spectatorial essays not only represented a popularization of learn-

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7 Mumby 1956, 145.

8 Shaftesbury 1964 [1711], I: 221-225.

9 See *Spectator* 92, the catalogue of Leonora's library (*Spectator* 37), as well as the endorsement of John Brightland's *Grammar of the English Tongue* (1711) by Isaac Bickerstaff.

ing but also provided a means to control a new public's access to a formerly elite culture, to bridle their consumption, to fashion their perception of themselves as readers.[10]

The ease and ingenuity with which time is both envisioned and mastered in the periodical may be compared to the authors' management of space –how their common mouthpiece or *persona* is set upon the stage of a blank page.

2. Space and spectatorial distance

The right distance in space for Mr Spectator is a state of ambiguous retirement, as is made clear from the first number. The *persona* is engaged yet detached; it describes London with a precision and a wealth of details that ring unmistakably true but refuses to be drawn into conversations, business, sentimental attachments or any fictional plot. Nothing momentous happened to Mr Spectator in his youth and nothing happens to him in the brief fictional episodes concerning the other members of the Spectator Club, contrary to the lively essays concerning Sir Roger de Coverley. His credibility as a fictional character is therefore ambiguous: Mr Spectator appears as a see-through *être de papier*, yet this creature of paper displays indisputable powers of reflection, and a seemingly authentic personality.

The authors' most effective means of inducing distance from their environment and readers is humour, which is not merely conducive to entertainment. For Addison in particular, the practice and perception of humour is linked to a higher awareness of the effects, and side effects, of language. In this particular, Addison heralds a particular trend in British humour. The improbably linguistic humour of an obviously transvestite usherette shouting "albatross" in a falsetto voice whilst walking the aisle of a cinema theatre with a stuffed animal on a tray harks back to a tradition – a perception of the absurd that is nowhere more visible than in Addison's essays. In *Spectator* 251 on street cries, Addison with feigned indignation observes the interesting disconnections between what is shouted and what is sold.

> The Cooper in particular swells his last Note in a hollow Voice, that is not without its Harmony; nor can I forbear being inspired with a most agreeable

[10] See Claire Boulard's informative demonstration of how female readers were addressed and defined as pupils by the *Spectator*. (Boulard 2000).

> Melancholy, when I hear that sad and solemn Air with which the Publick is very often asked, if they have any Chairs to mend [...]. Most certain it is, that People know the Wares they deal in rather by their Tunes than by their Words; inasmuch that I have sometimes seen a Country Boy run out to buy Apples of a Bellow-mender, and Gingerbread from a Grinder of Knives and Scissors. (*Spectator* 251, II: 476-77)

In *Spectator* 80, Mr Spectator interrupts the course of his essay to present a petition from a grammatical particle: "*The just Remonstrance of affronted* that" where That expostulates against a previous and longer petition signed by "*WHO and WHICH*" that had been printed in *Spectator* 78. The first plaintiffs claimed that "the Jacksprat THAT supplanted us" in the common language (I: 337). In both petitions the grammatical advantages of each party are learnedly demonstrated, with often pointless examples: the flexibility and polysemy of that, the superior precision of which and who. According to Bond's footnote, two equally silly grammatical petitions (from QUOD and WHAT), sent by readers, were rejected for publication, a proof that the reading public must have enjoyed such pieces of grammatical acrimony.

In the essays, humour absorbs, deflects, yet exploits absurd and sometimes dangerous contradictions (the fashionable elite listening to the Italian opera, blissfully unaware of the language and therefore of the plot in *Spectator* 29); gaps in view points, such as those between Whigs and Tories; blatant social imbalances, exposed and sublimated by Addison when he describes paper-making and -consuming, with cloth and paper travelling back and forth between low and high classes as they change and shift their forms and colours (*Spectator* 85, 367). But rather than accentuating rifts or targeting a specific audience (as satire does), the *Spectator*'s humour proves cathartic, as it enhances a desirable middle ground, projected by the tempered prose style of Addison, and felt in Steele's many appeals to pathos and pity for the poorest social strata.

Thus, rather than ludicrous, the word *ludic* applies to spectatorial humour and its many forms of entertainment. "Temper[ing] morality with wit" (*Spectator* 10, I: 44) is Addison's binary way of expressing what may strike us today as an unabashed encouragement to game-playing. The periodical necessarily introduced a distance from reality in its reader's mind as it required suspension of disbelief (in the case of fictional *personae* and clubs), introduced pastiche and imitations – the fake diaries of a Coquette and a Beau in *Spectator* 317 and 323, humorous bills of mortali-