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## Spectacular Distractions: P.T. Barnum and American Modernism

**Mark Storey**

Browsing a copy of the *New York Times* on March 24, 1885, readers would probably not have dwelt with much seriousness on one particular article they found inside: a report of P. T. Barnum's latest extravaganza, staged the previous evening at Madison Square Garden. As will become clear, however, despite the article's obvious purpose as light-hearted filler it serves as a prescient and perhaps surprising entry point into the arguments about the origins of literary modernism that this essay stakes out. "Spectators Crowding Around The Three Circus Rings And Curiosities," the article's headline announces, and it continues:

The round and jolly face of P.T. Barnum...beamed tranquilly down from the lofty private box . . . and the old gentleman almost bought strabismus upon himself in his efforts to look at the three rings and the stage all at once. . . . Within the rings there was so much going on at once that no one could bring away a succinct idea of what he had seen unless he brought a programme with him.<sup>1</sup>

The scale of the performance is obvious (Madison Square Garden at this time had a capacity of 10,000 people and its arena was 270 feet long), but what makes the report such an intriguing fragment within the wider history of modern visual culture is the way it emphasises and makes explicit the difficulty such dispersed spectacle posed to perceiving subjects. Barnum's problems are figured in bodily terms—his "efforts to look" are in danger of inducing "strabismus"<sup>2</sup>—while the other spectators' inability to "bring away a succinct idea" of what they have seen suggests the challenge is more one of cognition. Tucked away in the *New York Times* on that spring morning in 1885, in other words, was

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108 an unusually direct insight into a familiar and pervasive concern of the period: the problem of paying attention amidst modernity's spectacular distractions.

It is striking how often written accounts of and advertisements for Barnum's shows reiterate this distinctive perceptual problem. A few years later, in 1889, the *London Times* ran an account of Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth" that found in the show's performative excess the qualities that made it so modern:

With everything in full swing from one end of the huge hall to the other, a novel sensation of wonderment creeps over the observer, who is distantly reminded of the great 'machinery in motion' gallery of the Paris Exhibition. That it is impossible for the most lynx-eyed onlooker to follow all these performances at one and the same time Mr. Barnum has not to be told. . . . It is precisely in the immensity, the complexity, the kaleidoscopic variety, and, to use the word in its strict etymological sense, the incomprehensibility of the show that Mr. Barnum's genius is displayed.<sup>3</sup>

The larger point I want to make here is that journalistic flourishes such as these indicate an emerging mode of visual culture at the end of the nineteenth century, one that found a distinct expression at sites of popular entertainment and one that figured centrally in the broader aesthetic project of modernism. The impossibility of being fully cognizant of a Barnum production (its "incomprehensibility") stems from its deliberate effort to present a surplus of sensory information, to revel in the multiplication of spectacle for its own sake. Such displays had become synonymous with the more ambitious end of the century's entertainment industry; their stated aim—to outstrip an individual's capacity for comprehension—placed them very much at the heart of late nineteenth-century metropolitan experience.

Two conceptual terms insistently emerge at this point that will continue to frame the argument as it unfolds. They are *spectacle* and *attention*, both coming with a long critical heritage that it is important to acknowledge here even as I admit that this essay can only hope to take for granted a certain interpretation of them. Spectacle is the more well-worn of these, understood here in its narrower sense as a form of choreographed display largely insulated from a dialogic interaction with spectators and offering a certain resistance to the logic of narrative itself (more specific examples of which I will return to in a moment).<sup>4</sup> The issue of attention is less familiar in literary criticism, but has long been a subject of much debate in philosophy and psychology. In the decades around the turn of the nineteenth century, pioneering psychologists such as F.H. Bradley and Théodule-Armand Ribot commented at length on the mental functions of an attentive state, but perhaps most prominently it was William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) who identified the problem of attention as a central component of modern subjectivity:

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind . . . of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization . . . of consciousness are its essence. It is . . . a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which . . . is called distraction.<sup>5</sup>

Such a condition, it was frequently suggested, was both exacerbated and exemplified in the modern urban environment: by 1903 Georg Simmel saw “the rapid crowding of changing images” as the primary obstacle facing our ability to pay attention within the frenetic arena of the city, a notion later echoed and reflected in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*.<sup>6</sup> While the critical vocabulary employed here stems from these wider theoretical debates, I also offer a particular and less travelled path into their aesthetic implications.

In a more material sense, I build on a rich body of work in the field of fin-de-siècle visual culture. James Cook has explored the notion of a Barnumesque visual field in the period by connecting it to issues of “deception,” pointing, for instance, to how the popular reception of trompe l’oeil exhibitions signals a growing awareness of the highly subjective and potentially fallacious nature of visual comprehension. Such a condition, Cook convincingly claims, found its most popularized form in Barnum’s series of public hoaxes.<sup>7</sup> In allied fashion, Michael Leja cites Barnum’s humbugs and illusions as an influential element in the wider development of a “skeptical” approach to vision and art in the same period.<sup>8</sup> What Cook and Leja are both able to do in their remarkable studies is connect many of the apparently debased and frivolous signatures of Barnum’s gallery of amusements to the scientific, social, and artistic cultures of nineteenth-century modernity.

My point here is to complement such work whilst shifting the focus from deception and skepticism to another of the characteristic sensory qualities of Gilded Age entertainment: *distraction*. As such, Jonathan Crary’s argument that “Western modernity since the nineteenth century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention’” serves as an important starting point, convincingly outlining as he does that the ideological and sociological conditions of mature capitalist modernity demanded from the individual “a disengagement from a broader field of attraction . . . for the sake of isolating or focussing on a reduced number of stimuli.”<sup>9</sup> Although it is visual culture that informs my discussion—and I return to Crary to elaborate on these points later in the essay—my interest is in how these issues came to be central to a specifically literary response to modernity. The kinds of commercial spectacle that Barnum pioneered accentuate and foreground (even as they trivialize) the social problems of attention and distraction, insisting on a form of experience that is inimical to prolonged, analytic reflection.

My arguments about the relationship between realism and the birth of modernism are illustrated using two writers—William Dean Howells and Henry James—who have long been prominent figures in the critical understanding of American realism’s theory and praxis.<sup>10</sup> Howells is of course the High Priest of nineteenth-century American realism, while James is celebrated partly because the arc of his career moves in such an endlessly self-conscious way from something that might be regarded as high realism to something much closer to formal modernism. It is this canonization that makes them crucial figures here, because the parameters of what “American realism” is understood to be has to a large part grown out of both their fiction and their literary criticism. It is also important to state that they frequently articulated their own professional and

110 artistic position in nineteenth-century culture as an explicit disavowal of the kind of mass culture that Barnum epitomized. Nancy Bentley pursues this question in *Frantic Panoramas* (2009), a book whose stated concern is the “intersection of two large transnational currents—the institutionalization of high culture and the inauguration of a mass-mediated imaginary.”<sup>11</sup> The current essay is informed by Bentley’s important work, but turns away from questions of how “high” and “low” cultures locate their place in the public sphere to a more focused example of how the sensory experience of popular entertainment maps onto our understanding of how modernism’s aesthetic signatures started to emerge. The questions that the period’s ambitiously spectacular entertainments ask about the capacity of individuals to comprehend spatial and visual data connect the late nineteenth-century culture industry to the birth of modernism in some startling ways.

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To briefly outline what the formative relationship between popular entertainment and literary aesthetics might be, it is worth recalling Bill Brown’s argument that “recreational space” acts as a site that permits “the American novel to explore romantic possibilities within the perimeter of realism”<sup>12</sup> whilst also literalizing (borrowing Richard Poirier’s term) “American literature’s ‘modernist impulse.’”<sup>13</sup> Brown’s sense of the diachronous—a slippage between modes traditionally associated with particular literary “periods” all occurring within the realist “moment”—is compelling, and a useful signpost to the more specific point about realism and modernism I am making. Scenes of popular entertainment are rare occurrences in Howells’s and James’s work, and this reticence to represent what were, after all, increasingly prevalent and common forms of cultural life in the postbellum period is at least in part explained by the problems that they cause a certain kind of realist representation. Whether it was the artifice and frivolity of the commercial circus, the sanitized violence of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows, or the romantic histories of Barnum’s hippodromes and Imre Kiralfy’s staged spectacles (to name the kinds of shows I am referring to), the period’s popular entertainment was often a form of display that denied complete spectatorial knowledge and control.

The textual rendering of rapid simultaneous action (the very essence of the three ring circus, after all) poses a technical quandary for forms of writing not yet initiated to the experimental possibilities of modernist literary practice. Gérard Genette’s point that mimesis requires “a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer” emphasises the temporal dimension of writing, meaning “the quantity of information is solidly in inverse ratio to the speed of the narrative.”<sup>14</sup> The textural richness and investment in excess that characterise Barnumesque entertainments appears to require two incompatible linguistic maneuvers: description that accommodates the overabundant quantity of sensory information through a patient and exhaustive accumulation of detail, and description that moves swiftly between those details in an effort to accommodate the rapid unfolding of the action. As narratologists have long pondered, the temporal

experience of reading prose (in English at least) necessarily orders action sequentially, giving priority to one sight before another even if the narrative conceit somehow suggests that both things were happening at the same time. It would be the twentieth-century avant-garde—Cubism and Vorticism in the visual arts, stream-of-consciousness or typographical gimmickry in literature—that experimented with the language and spatial form of representation partly in an effort to capture the essence of simultaneity. Keeping with the focus on visual culture, one might figure this contrast in terms of what Martin Jay pinpointed as the “scopic regimes of modernity”: the withdrawn and disembodied fixity of Cartesian perspectivalism against the “ecstatic surplus of images” of the baroque.<sup>15</sup> How did nineteenth-century realism, ground at least ostensibly in the logic of the first, cope with a type of experience ground in the logic of the second?

Furthermore, as Amy Kaplan puts it, realism’s cultural work was “part of a broader . . . effort to fix and control a coherent representation of a social reality that seem[ed] increasingly inaccessible, fragmented, and beyond control.”<sup>16</sup> The moment of realism’s ascendancy explains such social understandings of its aesthetic strategies, a common enough characterisation by now that sees the rise of urban-industrial modernity in the late nineteenth century as something that “radically challenged the accessibility of an emergent modern world to literary representation.”<sup>17</sup> The perceived gap between reality and objective forms of representation is what lies at the heart of modernism’s interrogation of realist tenets, and, I argue, what makes sites of popular entertainment exemplars of an evermore ungraspable modern world. Implicit in the inability of Barnum and his spectators to comprehend the performative exuberance at Madison Square Garden is the same “inaccessibility” to representation that strained at the limits of literary realism. “[I]t is the sense of the world changing under the realists’ pens that makes the social world so elusive to representation,” Kaplan states,<sup>18</sup> the kind of unceasing and dislocated change that had tested Barnum’s ocular dexterity and alerted William James to the “scatterbrained” state of the modern individual.

It is also clear from Howells’s critique of romantic and sentimental fiction in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891) that he saw popular entertainment as the social equivalent of a more abstract generic impulse. He largely dismisses fiction that “pamper[s] our gross appetite for the marvellous,”<sup>19</sup> and although “literary amusements . . . have their place, as the circus has, and the burlesque and the negro minstrelsy . . . we had better understand that it is not the highest place.”<sup>20</sup> Securing realism as culturally superior to the supposed vapidness of mass culture is, as Bentley persuasively argues, a way in which writers like Howells could define aesthetic boundaries and so ensure their own authority within them. Alongside these issues, I further suggest that Howells and James’s brief excursions into scenes of popular entertainment tell us something important about the initiation of modernist techniques, and do so exactly because they conspicuously confront and struggle to accommodate a literary aesthetic premised on attention with a visual experience premised on distraction.

Such confrontations are, of course, central to some of James’s best-known writing. I return to him in more detail later on, but for now it is worth recalling the passage in *The American Scene* (1907) where he contemplates why America is yet to produce a social

112 chronicler of the status of Emile Zola. His answer lies in the New York that confronts him on his return to the country: the political and cultural matrix of the metropolis, its “reflecting surfaces” and “epic order,” are “monstrous phenomena” that have, “with their immense momentum, got the start, got ahead of, in proper parlance, any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture.”<sup>21</sup> One of James’s examples of these “monstrous phenomena” is, notoriously, the immigration station at Ellis Island. His palpable distaste at the sight of hundreds of people being herded through is clear enough in his repeated description of the immigrants as “aliens,” a sight which is so tumultuous that it “give[s] the earnest observer a thousand more things to think of than he can pretend to retail.”<sup>22</sup> The sense that this is an especially stark example of the inaccessibility of modern life to “dramatic capture” reaches its end point in a resonant analogy: “It is a drama that goes on, without a pause, day by day and year by year . . . and constituting really an appeal to amazement beyond that of any sword-swallowing or fire-swallowing of the circus.”<sup>23</sup> James’s reactionary recoil from twentieth-century New York is partly a confrontation with the possibility of his own cultural redundancy, an acknowledgment of the difficulties (even the impossibilities) of representation in the face of such unremitting change. It is the world of popular entertainment that furnishes James with the closest analogy he can conjure, a fleeting but significant connection between the limits of realistic representation and the “amazements” of Barnumesque spectacles.

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It would be James’s close friend and the widely acknowledged figurehead of elite literary culture in late nineteenth-century America, William Dean Howells, who would bring some of these issues more obviously to the fore. That said, circuses or circus-like spectacle hardly appear in Howells’s fiction: not once does he set a prolonged scene or episode at one of the lavish commercial shows that commanded the entertainment world at the time. As will become clearer, the challenges that these venues posed to a reflective attention to detail suggest something profoundly at odds with realism’s underpinning aesthetic approach, and it is this, I argue, that tended to put Howells off from embracing the narrative potential of such scenes.

It is not really until we get to *A Boy’s Town* (1890) that a sustained and detailed description of popular entertainment can be found in Howells’s writing, but even here it seems that he felt comfortable in doing so exactly because it centers on a far smaller and more traditional style of circus. A nostalgic memoir of his Midwestern childhood, Howells includes affectionate descriptions of the various pastimes that the boys of his village enjoyed, including a chapter titled “Circuses and Shows” where he captures the excitement that accompanied the arrival of a travelling circus. It is his approving recollection of the specific format of the performance, however, and its difference from the expansive circuses of the early 1890s, that not only hints at the issues James brought to the fore but echoes those newspaper reports of Barnum’s shows:

There never was more than one ring in those days; and you were not tempted to break your neck and set your eyes forever askew, by trying to watch all the things that went on at once in two or three rings. The boys did not miss the smallest feats of any performance, and they enjoyed them every one, not equally, but fully.<sup>24</sup>

Here again is the same anxiety towards the sheer visual profusion of modern circuses; Howells's skewed eyes would presumably require the same medical care as Barnum's strabismus, to say nothing of his broken neck. The more compact and intimate display of the single ring allows the boys to give it their due care and attention, not missing even "the smallest feats" and therefore gaining what Howells would see as a more satisfying understanding of the performance.

Bringing these points to a focus for a moment underlines one of my central arguments here. The uneasiness Howells betrays at his inability to fully comprehend the bigger modern circuses, and his boyish preference for simpler and more readily observable performances, might not be that surprising given the degree to which his own literary philosophy (however unevenly it was sometimes articulated) emphasised and valorised a method that seems peculiarly incommensurate with grand displays of incessant spectacle. Again and again in his "Editor's Study" columns for *Harper's*, as well as elsewhere in his critical writing, Howells proclaimed his kind of realism as one predicated on close textual scrutiny, and the analogy he most often employed was with the newly popular technology of photography. As Owen Clayton has pointed out, Howells "explicitly paralleled his mode of writing with the assumed qualities of photography: objectivity, attention to detail and the everyday."<sup>25</sup> The arrested and framed visual aesthetic of the photograph has a natural affinity with Howellsian realism, while the ceaseless movement and spatial dispersion of the forms of entertainment with which it shared a contemporary moment not only constantly expose the limited perceptual capabilities of the observer but also resist any kind of attentive scrutiny. James's own review of Howells's early novel *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), for instance, sees James liken his friend to a painter of miniatures—where every stroke "plays its definite part, though sometimes the eye needs to linger a moment to perceive it."<sup>26</sup> Such optical analogies posit a mode of representation that is intent on reproducing and communicating the world in verbal form, one that clearly finds something close to its antithesis in the distracting and restless arenas of mass spectacle.

These anxieties do appear elsewhere in Howells's writing, if only in passing. *Literature and Life* (1902), an incoherent collection of sketches and essays, contains his only sustained discussions of contemporary popular entertainment, and yet, despite the frequent mentions of mass cultural forms in the book, it the evasive dismissal of large commercial entertainments that seems most conspicuous. There are brief excursions into scenes of leisure scattered throughout—the hot dogs and fairground rides of "The Beach at Rockaway," Verona's Roman amphitheater in "Sawdust in the Arena," and an equestrian display at Madison Square Garden in "The Horse Show"—but the two sketches from the collection I want to briefly focus on here are "A Circus in the Suburbs" and "At a Dime Museum." What all these sketches share is an insight into

114 Howells's ostensibly whimsical (but in fact quite pointed and politicized) opinions on the modern entertainment industry.

"A Circus in the Suburbs" opens with "Howells" (it's clear that he is adopting a kind of caricatured persona) "reporting" (it strikes a tone somewhere between journalism and fiction) a trip to an old-fashioned provincial circus, in the process dismissing the lavish forms of entertainment found in urban centres:

We dwellers in cities and large towns. . . have been used to a form of circus where surfeit is nearly as great misery as famine in that kind could be. For our sins . . . we have now gone so long to circuses of three rings and two raised-platforms that we scarcely realize that in the country there are still circuses of one ring and no platform at all. We are accustomed, in the gross and foolish-superfluity of these city circuses, to see no feat quite through, but to turn our greedy eyes at the most important instant in the hope of greater wonders in another ring.<sup>27</sup>

Such comments are echoed almost exactly in "At a Dime Museum." Written as a dialogue between a somewhat patrician Howells and a younger, less laconic friend, the sketch moves from a snobbish dismissal of dime museums on the grounds that nothing intellectually worthwhile could possibly be so cheap, to the friend's frustrated account of his own visit to a large urban circus:

If I had honestly complained of anything it would have been of the superfluity which glutted rather than fed me. How can you watch three sets of trapezists at once? You really see neither well. It's the same with the three rings. There should be one ring, and each act should have a fair chance with the spectator, if it took six hours; I would willingly give the time. Fancy three stages at the theater, with three plays going on at once! . . . Or fancy reading three novels simultaneously, and listening at the same time to a lecture and a sermon. . . .<sup>28</sup>

In both of these pieces Howells reiterates a consistent distaste for modern spectacle based on the "difficulty" it poses to the spectator, but such complaints seem, on closer inspection, more to do with the difficulty it poses to the writer—and specifically to the realist.

For a start, as Bentley points out, pitting the three-ring circus against the idea of reading three novels at once acts as a particularly conspicuous point of comparison: mass culture ostentation is pitted against literary profundity even while it recognises it as a potential rival. "In their very excess such sites [as the circus] open out to multiple zones of experience and feeling, zones to which the high cultural novel has no access," Bentley notes.<sup>29</sup> Further to this, however, is the way in which these sketches inhabit a remarkably similar position to the one that James would take in *The American Scene* six years later. Urban life is again the scene of such overwhelmingly busyness that it seems "gross and foolish," engendering a spectator who is compelled to turn "greedy eyes at the most important instant" and unable to absorb the full details (or even the important details) of what is going on in front of them. Howells's own distaste for the dizzy abundance of the city circus makes the same equation between oversignifica-

tion and the impossibility of accurate representation that James would find at Ellis Island—an experience that typified his general feeling that New York was beyond “dramatic capture.”

While the big urban circuses present a surfeit of action, the smaller circuses that Howells fondly describes in *A Boy's Town* and “A Circus in the Suburbs” are far more to his liking—and far more appropriate for his literary methods. In “A Circus in the Suburbs” especially, he revels in the “extreme proximity” and “intimate terms” he has with the performers in the ring, a viewing position that allows him to dwell on his description of a horse-riding female acrobat: “One could follow every motion of her anxiety in that close proximity: the tremor of her chin as she bit her lips before taking her flight through the air, the straining eagerness of her eye as she measured the distance, the frown with which she forbade herself any shrinking or reluctance.”<sup>30</sup> Here we can see precisely why Howells chooses to dwell on the more intimate and easily observed entertainments of the pre-Barnum circus: the ability to focus on the performer, to observe her closely without distraction by other simultaneous action, permits access to a descriptive control and understanding of her as a readable subject. The ability to psychologically understand the acrobat—her “anxiety,” her “eagerness,” her “shrinking from reluctance”—testifies to the analytical powers of the realism which Howells propounded, a belief in the capacity of language to offer something like an access point to the reality of another’s subjectivity. In the modern circuses Howells rejects, the accessibility of the writer to the psychological “truth” of the subject being described is problematic because they are too far away or too bound up in ceaseless action to scrutinize. Here, that accessibility is permitted and Howells is able to translate the detailed facial expressions of the acrobat (her physical details) into a narrative of her thoughts and emotions (the otherwise concealed condition of her mental state).

I am moving towards an argument here that sees the apparent gap between linguistic communication and spectacular entertainment as a catalyst for formal experimentation, a localized form of experience that like the more abstract notion of urban-industrial modernity itself opens a rupture in the fabric of realism that requires the initiation of new aesthetic material. Howells’s evasion of those entertainments is notable because, in his relentless chronicling of late nineteenth-century American life, his large body of fiction covers virtually every other form of significant middle-class experience, public or private. The conspicuous absence from his work of modern circuses, Wild West shows, Roman hippodromes, and staged historical re-enactments—all sites, incidentally, that attracted visitors from across the class spectrum—is explained partly by the fragments left behind in *A Boy's Town* and *Literature and Life*: the way that those sites of collective experience call into question realism’s methods.

The general point about the inauguration of modernist aesthetics is one I want to dwell on for a moment, not by turning to anything literary as such but, instead, by returning to Cray’s arguments about the period’s visual culture. The experience of late nineteenth-century popular entertainments—with their scattered “field of attraction” and their multiplication of stimuli—seem a striking counterforce to what Cray sees as a growing institutional and ideological emphasis on “paying attention.” It is to

116 Post-Impressionism, and specifically to Georges Seurat's paintings *Parade de Cirque* (1888) and *Le Cirque* (1891), that Crary turns in order to elaborate on these claims. Seurat's status in art history is conventionally seen as a transitional one, identified both as "part of some modernist rupture" as well as being "in dialogue with the great masters of the past,"<sup>31</sup> and these late paintings characterise this liminal position by standing as "decisive subversions of the representational pretenses of . . . verisimilitude."<sup>32</sup> Seurat's experimentation with methods and theories that came to be deeply influential in the high modernism of the twentieth century are partly a reaction against what he saw as the artifices of realism, something that Crary demonstrates (changing tack from painting to opera) found an unlikely exemplar in Richard Wagner. The German composer and dramatist had expressed a serious dissatisfaction with mid nineteenth-century theater because it gave spectators "multiple points of attraction": "it allowed (or encouraged) audiences to look at each other, at the orchestra, at the diverse social texture of the theater."<sup>33</sup> What Wagner saw as the solution to this problem of attention appears in his plans for the Bayreuth Festival Theater: "frontal engagement with the stage for every spectator,"<sup>34</sup> intensifying the lighting on the actors whilst leaving the rest of the auditorium in complete darkness, and lowering the orchestra out of sight.<sup>35</sup> In Theodor Adorno's comments on Wagner he calls this the "[t]he occultation of production,"<sup>36</sup> what Crary describes as "the systematic concealing and mystification of the processes of production."<sup>37</sup> Seurat's last paintings, therefore, act as a demystification of the kind of aesthetics epitomized in Wagnerian stagecraft, exposing the mechanics of representation (in Seurat's case, conspicuously un-realistic subject matter which is rendered in a highly theorized painterly style) in a way that at least prefigures certain modernist preoccupations and strategies.

The route back to James and Howells is a fairly straightforward one, as what they both saw as integral to realism, albeit in strikingly different ways, was a focussing of the reader's attention by concealing the processes of production; the immersive illusion of the novel's reality and the depersonalisation of the authorial voice. It is worth remembering that both writers separately criticised Anthony Trollope for his unwillingness to adhere to these maxims: James, in an essay written in 1883, lamented that the English novelist habitually refers to "the work in hand (in the course of that work) as a novel, and to himself as a novelist, and . . . [lets] the reader know that this novelist could direct the course of events according to his pleasure,"<sup>38</sup> while in *Criticism and Fiction* Howells arraigns the same author for "interrupting the action, and spoiling the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides."<sup>39</sup> One of the chief formal efforts of realism, in this conception of it at least, becomes the tidying away of the means of fictional production in order to focus the attention of the reader on the characters and places being represented. It is significant that Seurat chose scenes of popular entertainment in order to undermine this strategy in painterly terms, and I am suggesting that similar scenes pose the same challenge in a literary sense by undermining realism's attentive demands and foregrounding the distracted and subjective nature of individual perception.

Many of the issues here find a typically illuminating expression in James's writing. I will turn in a moment to *What Maisie Knew* (1897) and *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), texts that nuance the connections made here between popular entertainment and distraction not only because they show James working at and beyond the limits of realism, but because they deal with that connection more through the technicalities of style and method than through subject matter and theme. It is worth briefly taking a wider look at this issue in James's oeuvre, however, because what makes him especially fruitful in this context is the frequency with which he employed visual metaphors and analogies in order to express anxieties over the notion of attention. Optic tropes fill the 1907 New York Edition prefaces, for instance, and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen has argued that one of the primary functions of these tropes is to insist on the kind of attentive reading James saw as both antithesis and antidote to the textual flood of mass media, journalism, and advertising.<sup>40</sup> The famous "house of fiction" analogy from the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* is, after all, premised on the notion that the embodied spectator-writer should only view the "human scene" through the delimiting frame of a window (whatever form it might take) that restricts and so focuses the narrative possibilities.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in a long parenthetical aside during his preface to *The Wings of the Dove*, James "confesses" that "[a]ttention of perusal...is what I at every point... absolutely invoke and take for granted."<sup>42</sup> The aesthetic of distraction that defines Barnumesque entertainments is clearly inimical to what James claimed to be trying to do in his fiction.

Perhaps this is why one of the crucial scenes in *What Maisie Knew* (1897) both embraces the spectacular conditions of popular entertainment and yet refuses, finally, to stylistically accommodate them. Christina Britzolakis exemplifies a general critical consensus in seeing the novel as a "turning point in the James canon," announcing, as it does, James's "increasingly anti-mimetic late style."<sup>43</sup> One of the primary means through which it explores the parameters of James's new-found "scenic method," Britzolakis further suggests, is through its "investment in spectacular forms of performance and display."<sup>44</sup> James notably calls upon allusions to and metaphors of these spectacular forms at numerous points in the novel: the "whole performance" of her parents' divorce turns Maisie into a "half-scared infant in a great dim theater,"<sup>45</sup> Sir Claude becomes the "showman of the spectacle" at one point,<sup>46</sup> and, later, a French cafe floor "sprinkled with bran" takes on "the added charm of a circus."<sup>47</sup>

It is the scene at the Earls Court exhibition which most explicitly displays this investment, however—a venue that was best known in the 1880s and 90s for hosting colossal touring shows from the United States, especially those of Barnum, Buffalo Bill, and the Kiralfy Brothers.<sup>48</sup> James chooses a visit to the exhibition to act as a conspicuous counterpart to the increasingly bitter behaviour of Maisie's parents, and in particular her father's scandalous appearance, arm-in-arm, with a "brown" American Countess.<sup>49</sup> The exhibition is a potent site of the spectacular and the distracting, and yet in the end it is the arrested and focussed moment of Mr. Beale's emergence from a sideshow that consumes all the narrative energy. James limits his account of a thronging Earls Court to one line of description: "a collection of extraordinary foreign things, in tremendous

118 gardens, with illuminations, bands, elephants, switchbacks and side-shows, as well as crowds of people among whom they might possibly see some one they knew."<sup>50</sup> The way the end of the sentence ironically foreshadows Mr. Beale's appearance is the pay-off here, of course, so that the multiple points of attraction at the exhibition that the sentence begins with are swiftly dealt with and then jettisoned because they lie beyond the perceptual field of the strictly controlled narrative consciousness. As James Wood has pointed out about this scene, James "is interested in what his subjects make of this show, not in what he, the writer, can make of it."<sup>51</sup> Only one of those "extraordinary foreign things" is to be the centre of attention in this scene; the rest are just a distraction. The proto-modernism of *What Maisie Knew* finds one of its appropriate settings in the dazzling commercial displays at Earls Court, yet it ultimately plays host not to a simultaneous panorama of distraction but to a series of carefully framed scenes of dramatic contemplation.

James would continue to experiment with the decentred modernist narrator in *A Small Boy and Others*. It acts as an appropriate chronological end point to this discussion partly because it was published at a moment where high modernism had emerged in quite notable ways—published in the same year as the Armory Show, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and the Vorticists first issue of *BLAST* were less than a year away—and also because it represents an especially late example of James's late style. An extension of the methods employed in *What Maisie Knew* and the other "major phase" novels, the reader is obliged to navigate through an often perplexing web of clauses and asides, a technique certainly quite some distance from the more conventionally realist phase of James's work in the 1870s and 80s. The crucial point is that the relationship between James's style and the deeper currents of realism and modernism (transitional as that status is) finds a compellingly unexpected match in the sites of Barnum's entertainments in 1850s New York.

During an extended and characteristically circumlocutory section of the book, James recounts (amongst many other things) his memories of Barnum's "Great American Museum," finding in the process a localized example of the book's more general fascination with the nature and narrative implications of popular spectacle. Mark Goble has argued that the memoir reveals "a mode of spectatorship we do not readily associate with . . . James,"<sup>52</sup> a writer more commonly characterised by his "commitment to the individual's isolated perspective."<sup>53</sup> I return to the narratological implications of these comments in a moment, but Goble's claim that *A Small Boy and Others* constructs James as someone "who quite flamboyantly declares himself a willing spectator of obvious spectacle"<sup>54</sup> connects usefully with the broader discussion.

The chapter in question where that "obvious spectacle" most strikingly comes to the fore opens with the immediacy of first-person present-tense narration—"I turn around again to where I last left myself"—and finds a young Henry "gaping at the old rickety [sic] bill-board in Fifth Avenue" that advertises Barnum's museum.<sup>55</sup> Once inside, just to reiterate the highly attentive point of view being implied, he remembers "moments of rapt contemplations" at the sight of "the dusty halls of humbug . . . bottled mermaids, [and] 'bearded ladies.'"<sup>56</sup> A "gaping" and "rapt" young Henry is captivated by the allure

of Barnum's world of spectacle, and James emphasises his youthful submission to such promises through a relatively controlled sense of narrative focalization.

Running parallel to this reconstruction of James's childhood consciousness, however, is a more adult sense of the kind of experience that Barnum's museum provided. He remembers waiting in line for the museum's "lecture room" (in fact a theater for popular productions), something that despite his childish concerns about available funds—he weighs up the cost of a donut against the cost of his transport home—was "flushed with the very complexion of romance."<sup>57</sup> It is the adult James that speaks here, of course, evoking "romance" in a way that according to Goble is typical of the porous way the term is more generally used throughout the book, calling on "both a prior literary tradition of Hawthorne . . . as well as a more various and mobile quality of urban life, of spectacle, of extreme sensation."<sup>58</sup> "Romance" here signals a certain knowing distance, a loosening of the childish narrative consciousness in order to let in a less captivated and less naive authorial presence. The same hand of the adult James can be felt immediately after this line when he describes his young self gazing up at a portrait of Lola Montes (the world-famous dancer had toured America in the early 1850s) and seeing in it something "dazzling and unreal."<sup>59</sup> This emphasis on the lecture hall's romantic and unreal qualities speak of a mature James looking back knowingly on his own youthful enchantment with the illusions and humbugs, the two temporally divided points of view occupying the same narrative space in a way that refuses to privilege any particular centre of consciousness.

As is clear by now, what we find at play in the scenes of popular entertainment in *A Small Boy and Others* is a self-conscious approach to a classic subject of James scholarship: narrative point of view. As Peter Rawlings has stated, at least since Percy Lubbock's *Craft of Fiction* (1921) James has been frequently cast as the practitioner par excellence of a codified and unified approach to narrative technique that amounts to, according to numerous critics, an "attenuation of the narrative voice" and a pursuit of "narrative impersonality" that "shows" rather than "tells" in a way that is closer to drama than narrative fiction.<sup>60</sup> Ascriptions of consistent narrative technique to James tend to be reductive, but the point here is that the sense of restricted focalisation operating in *What Maisie Knew*'s scenes of spectacle are, in *A Small Boy and Others*'s narration of a boyhood self, undone—in a sense, have the blinkers taken off—by a second, non-consonant focalisation operating within the same passage. James employs a young Henry as the "rapt" and attentive centre of consciousness and, at the same time, an adult Henry alert to the coercive allure of theatrical distractions.

This narrative layering is most conspicuous when James turns his attention to the play he remembers seeing inside Barnum's theater, George L. Aiken's stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).<sup>61</sup> James remembers how this production was superior to one he had seen at another theater because its staging and scenery had "less of the audible creak of carpentry," even if these innocent perceptions belong to "the simple faith of an age beguiled by arts so rude."<sup>62</sup> If we aren't already convinced of the narrative distance (which is, of course, also a distance of knowledge and knowingness) opened up between Young Henry and Adult Henry, his account of

120 the scene where Little Eva is rescued from floodwaters succinctly brings the perspectives together:

I recall [Eva]...perching quite suicidally . . . on that bulwark of the Mississippi steamboat which was to facilitate her all but fatal immersion in the flood. Why should I have duly noted that no little game on her part could well less have resembled or simulated an accident, and yet have been no less moved by her reappearance, rescued from the river but perfectly dry, in the arms of faithful Tom, who had plunged in to save her, without either so such as wetting his shoes . . . ? I could count the white stitches in the loose patchwork, and yet could take it for a story rich and harmonious.<sup>63</sup>

The awareness of such staginess is only a reiteration, in fact, of the observations James makes elsewhere in the book on William Moncrieff's "The Cataract of the Ganges," a melodramatic transatlantic hit that became famous less for its theatrical subtleties and more for what a contemporary newspaper reviewer called its "succession of splendid and gorgeous scenes, which beam upon the dazzled eye with almost magical effect."<sup>64</sup> The echoes of Wagnerian production are apt, as James's remembrance of the play encapsulates both his childish rapture and an awareness of that rapture's undoing: the heroine, "preferring death to dishonour, . . . dashes up the more or less perpendicular waterfall on a fiery black steed" —an "effect only a little blighted by the chance flutter of a drapery out of which peeps the leg of a trouser and a big male foot."<sup>65</sup> Comically condensed, this is same narrative conceit James used in his description of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: wonderment at the "reality effects" of the play and a demystification of the very same effects. The "scenic method" that metaphorically associated the limit of a narrative consciousness with the framing of a proscenium arch is, in these scenes, disrupted by exactly the kind of distracting, popularized theatrical experience that was antithetical to Wagner's "reality effects."

In typically intricate fashion, then, James describes his experience of attending a piece of popular melodrama through a narrative technique that oscillates between the attentive and somewhat naive point of view of a small boy and a more knowing adult perspective.<sup>66</sup> The narrative focalisation, in other words, shifts back and forth between two different positions that mark not just a historical distance in James's own life, but also speak to quite different forms of narrative technique. In one moment, there is the embodied spectator blind to the processes of production and caught up in the attention-grabbing effects of the performance, while in the next there is the distracted viewer who self-consciously reveals the mechanics of narrative illusion (those dry shoes, those white stitches, that big male foot) through an intimation of multiple viewpoints. Such a shift might be read as that between a crudely articulated realism and a more sceptical proto-modernism, and it is the cheap illusions of Barnum's theater that provide James with a suitably duplicitous and distracting example. The three-ring circuses and colossal commercial shows of the Gilded Age would seem a world away from the upper-class urbanity of James's usual subject matter, but we can find something like his response to such forms in the text where his techniques and methods most closely approached the high modernism he would not live to see in full flow.

At stake here, ultimately, is an assessment of American literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that sees its confrontation with popular entertainments and mass spectacles as a critical moment in the awakening of high modernism's aesthetic sensibilities. In their scale, visual complexity, illusory surfaces and simulated realities, popular commercial entertainments tested the limits of realism's narrative techniques and ideological worldview by quite deliberately producing and reproducing what William James called the "scatterbrained" condition of modernity. Omniscient and objective apprehensions of commonly inhabited reality are replaced by something more partial and more atomized, perspectives that dwell necessarily and insistently in the subjective, unfolding, distracting experiences of a newly extravagant world.

## Notes

1. "Barnum's Great Show," *New York Times*, March 24, 1885, 3.
2. A condition where the eyes do not align correctly, preventing proper binocular vision and affecting depth perception and coordination.
3. James Cook, ed., *The Colossal P.T. Barnum Reader* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 229.
4. Despite the dominance of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) in this area, it is film studies that has provided the most sustained and sophisticated analysis. My argument is partly invested in the debates around spectacle articulated in two classic essays: Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen*, 16, no. 3, 1975) and Tom Gunning's "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde" (*Wide Angle*, 8, no. 3, 1986).
5. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 1890 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
6. Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903) from *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed., David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 175.
7. James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 214–55.
8. Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
9. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1999), 1.
10. The status of James as a realist is a complex one, though Michael Davitt Bell has argued that James certainly had a "realist phase" (evidenced in part by his essay "The Art of Fiction" [1884]) that represents a different approach to the concept than the form then being practised in America by Howells and, in a different way, local color writers (Bell, *The Problem of American Realism: Studies in the Cultural History of a Literary Idea*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, 70–105). Further complicating the picture, as Nancy Glazener points out, is the fact that Howells seemed particularly keen to identify James as a fellow realist while James himself generally resisted such labels (Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850–1910*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997, 176–77).
11. Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 9.
12. Bill Brown, *The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 20.
13. Brown, *Material Unconscious*, 23.
14. Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 166.
15. Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 10, 16.

- 122 16. Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8.
17. Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 8.
18. Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 9.
19. William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1891), 96.
20. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, 111.
21. Henry James, *The American Scene*, 1907, ed. John F. Sears (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 65.
22. James, *American Scene*, 66.
23. James, *American Scene*, 66.
24. William Dean Howells, *A Boy's Town* (1890), in *Selected Writings of William Dean Howells*, ed. Henry Steele Commager (New York: Random House, 1950), 779.
25. Owen Clayton, "London Eyes: William Dean Howells and the Shift to Instant Photography," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 65, no. 3 (Dec 2010): 376.
26. Quoted in John W. Crowley, "The Portrait of a Lady and The Rise of Silas Lapham: The Company They Kept," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Realism and Naturalism: Howells to London*, ed. Donald Pizer (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 120.
27. William Dean Howells, 'A Circus in the Suburbs' in *Literature and Life* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1902), 125.
28. William Dean Howells, "At a Dime Museum" in *Literature and Life* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1902), 199–200.
29. Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas*, 38.
30. Howells, 'Circus in the Suburbs', 128–9.
31. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 158.
32. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 255.
33. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 249.
34. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 251.
35. Another major literary figure of the period, Mark Twain, would comment directly on the issues of attention and distraction when he visited Bayreuth himself in 1891. In an essay sarcastically titled "At the Shrine of St. Wagner," Twain has this to say about the differences between the Festival Theater and the rather more rambunctious sites of entertainment back home: "All the lights were turned low, so low that the congregation sat in a deep and solemn gloom. . . . This profound and increasingly impressive stillness endured for some time – the best preparation for music, spectacle, or speech conceivable. I should think our show people would have invented or imported that simple and impressive device for securing and solidifying the attention of an audience long ago; instead of which they continue to this day to open a performance against a deadly competition in the form of noise, confusion, and a scattered interest." ("At the Shrine of St. Wagner," in *The Complete Essays of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider, Da Capo Press, 2000, 61–2).
36. Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (1952), trans. Rodney Livingstone (NLB, 1981), 85.
37. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 251.
38. Henry James, "Anthony Trollope" (1883) from *The House of Fiction: Essays on the Novel by Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), 101.
39. Howells, *Criticism and Fiction*, 76.
40. Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen, "Attention! Henry James and the Distracted Reader," *The Henry James Review* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 18. Stougaard-Nielsen argues that James's New York prefaces act as a paratextual frame insisting on a notion of 'attention' that includes a "mode of reading" (15) at odds with the distractions of "modern textual and visual culture" (16). Realism's implicit construction of a focused, attentive reader is also something Bentley discusses at some length, and while the physical conditions of reading are not part of my discussion here they do form an important context in which realism must be understood.
41. Henry James, "Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*" (1907) from *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 46.

42. Henry James, "Preface to *The Wings of the Dove*" (1907) from *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 304.
43. Christina Britzolakis, "Technologies of Vision in Henry James's *What Maisie Knew*" *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 370.
44. Britzolakis, "Technologies of Vision," 370.
45. Henry James, *What Maisie Knew*, 1897, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Penguin, 2010), 8.
46. James, *What Maisie Knew*, 104.
47. James, *What Maisie Knew*, 237.
48. Stephen Inwood, *City of Cities: The Birth of Modern London* (London: Macmillan, 2005).
49. The race of the Countess and James's use of a racially-marked figure has drawn much commentary; see Kendall Johnson's chapter, "The scarlet feather: racial phantasmagoria in *What Maisie Knew*" in *Henry James and the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
50. James, *What Maisie Knew*, 123–4.
51. James Wood, "The Cult of the Master," *The Atlantic*, April 1, 2003, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/04/cult-of-the-master/302716/>
52. Mark Goble, "Delirious Henry James: A Small Boy and New York," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 50, no.2 (Summer 2004): 352.
53. Goble, "Delirious Henry James," 353.
54. Goble, "Delirious Henry James," 353.
55. Henry James, *A Small Boy and Others*, 1913, ed. Peter Collister (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 126.
56. James, *A Small Boy*, 127.
57. James, *A Small Boy*, 127.
58. Goble, "Delirious Henry James," 366.
59. James, *A Small Boy*, 127.
60. Peter Rawlings, "Narratives of Theory and Theories of Narrative: Point of View and Centres of Consciousness," *Palgrave Advances in Henry James Studies*, ed. Peter Rawlings (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 36.
61. Peter Collister suggests that Henry and William James would have seen various versions of the play (130 n285).
62. James, *A Small Boy*, 132–3.
63. James, *A Small Boy*, 134.
64. Quoted in Gerald Bordman and Thomas S. Hischak, eds., "The Cataract of the Ganges," in *The Oxford Companion to American Theatre*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 116.
65. James, *A Small Boy*, 92.
66. Much has been written on James's treatment of childhood; see Muriel G. Shine, *The Fictional Children of Henry James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969); Andrew Taylor, *Henry James and the Father Question* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Maeve Pearson, "Re-exposing the Jamesian Child: The Paradox of Children's Privacy," *The Henry James Review* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 101–119.