

WATCHING THE CITY WITH PLEASURE: POLITE DISENGAGEMENT, AESTHETIC PLEASURE AND LIFE IN THE CITY IN *THE SPECTATOR*

Tue Andersen Nexø

ABSTRACT

The essay examines the intersection between aesthetic theory and representations of the city in the periodical essay *The Spectator* (1711-1714). Focusing on this intersection allows for an analysis of the cultural work aesthetic pleasure is supposed to do according to *The Spectator*, and also shows key differences between “spectatorial” and later, Kantian aesthetics. In *The Spectator* aesthetic pleasure has to do with producing a model for how one should relate to the realm of politics—rather than disinterest, the precondition of aesthetic pleasure turns out to be disengagement. Read through the lens of the city, aesthetic pleasure turns out to be a key component in *The Spectator*’s vision of how to live a good life as a privileged subject of a modern state.

KEYWORDS:

aesthetic pleasure, intersubjectivity, 18th century, representations of the city, *The Spectator*

The Spectator was an exceptionally influential series of short essays, first published as half-sheets—with text on the back and the front—in London on a daily basis in 1711, 1712 and 1714, and later collected and republished in multivolume sets—and copied by writers all over Europe throughout the 18th century. Supposedly written and narrated by “Mr. Spectator”, a fictional character walking the streets of London, it was in reality edited and almost exclusively written by Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and Richard Steele (1672-1729). Through its varied subject matter—theatre- and opera criticism, introduction to literary classics, vignettes of daily life in the city, discussions of life in coffee-houses and clubs, publication of letters sent from readers, denunciations of dueling and of political conflict, and a fair bit of moralizing—a common thread is visible. *The Spectator* introduced and propagated a new model for the good life, the life of genteel politeness, to the more well-to-do inhabitants of London after the Glorious Revolution

of 1688. It tried to give moral guidance to and moral justifications for a post-revolutionary life of retirement and consumption in the modern city, but tried also to show how attractive such a life could be.

The Spectator includes a set of essays, which lays out an explicit aesthetic theory. No. 409-421, written by Addison, are a discussion of what Addison calls “the pleasures of the Imagination”, and are today widely seen as one of the starting points of the 18th century tradition of aesthetic theory. In his *A History of Modern Aesthetics* Paul Guyer, for instance, credits Addison with connecting aesthetic pleasure with “the free play of our mental powers”, so important in Kantian and later Schillerian aesthetics.¹ However, the idea of an aesthetic pleasure born out of a sensuous, especially visual perception of the world is a motif in many of the essays of the *The Spectator*, and not just those explicitly discussing the nature of the imagination and the perception of art and nature. It is found, for instance, in quite a few of its depictions of chance meetings and crowds on the streets of London.

The relationship between aesthetic theory and these depictions of the city is the subject of this article. Even though *The Spectator*—and especially its representation of life in early 18th century London—has been subject to a vast and ongoing critical reception, this connection has rarely been discussed. The interweaving of polite life in the city and an aestheticized gaze should not come as a surprise, however. According to *The Spectator*, the ability to enjoy the sight of what is “Great, Uncommon, or Beautiful”—the theme of Addison’s explicit aesthetic theory—is a component of a specific type of subjectivity.² Only the polite imagination is able to feel such pleasure; it is a pleasure, one could say, which can only be felt by the kind of subjectivity the periodical essay itself presents as a model for its readers.

In this article, I want to argue that a focus on the pleasure of gazing upon city life makes evident what cultural work Addison and Steele imagine being done by aesthetic pleasure. As the first part of this article will argue, in *The Spectator* aesthetic pleasure becomes part of the payoff one gets when one submits to a polite form of life and molds one’s self into a polite self. This polite self is, however, not so much conceived to be disinterested as it is impelled to be politically and socially disengaged. To be more precise, in order to be polite, and to feel aesthetic pleasure, one has to quell any passion that binds one’s self-understanding to the regard of others. One has to create an emotional distance between one’s self and the intersubjectivity of living together.

The second part of this article will then argue that *The Spectator's* depictions of the aesthetically pleasurable city create a new way of representing social life. In a marked break from the literary tradition, Addison and Steele represents city life as pleasurable to the extent that it is both varied and harmonious. It will furthermore argue that this representation of the city has affinities with the emergent 18th century discipline of political economy.

POLITENESS AFTER THE REVOLUTION

One way of understanding *The Spectator's* vision of genteel politeness is to see it as a double negation of two earlier conceptions of life in the city. Again and again, its essays return to these conceptions in order to condemn or gently ridicule them. It is in contrast to them that its own vision of how to live in the city attains its contours.

The first of these conceives of the city as if it were a court and every citizen a courtier vying for attention and status. Throughout *The Spectator*, true politeness turns out to be an alternative to a more theatrical conception of life in the city, where the constant management of your self-presentation in the eyes of others is a primary concern. “Fops” and “beaus”—people who dress too flashy in order to make an impression, and for whom fashion and social status is of primary importance—are ridiculed throughout the essays, and are often depicted as mechanical, comical and vain. In no. 275 Mr. Spectator dreams that he is invited to the anatomical dissection of “a Beau’s Head”, and discovers that it is filled with perfume, ribbons, and lace, and with “Billet-doux” and “Love-Letters” (vol. ii, 271). Throughout its essays, however, *The Spectator* also depicts its ideal of genteel politeness as an alternative to a life of civic engagement. According to *The Spectator*, to be polite is to disengage from life in the city as a life within a political community, within a polis. “Mr. Spectator” himself insists that he himself will stand “a neuter”, as he calls it in no. 16 (vol. i, 72)—that is: never articulate any position with regards to politics.³ He recommends his readers to do the same. *The Spectator* also ridicules those who read too many political pamphlets, and presents itself as an alternative to such publications as newspapers and political essays, which aim to inform their readers about current political debates and conflicts (no. 125-126).⁴ It roundly condemns those who as mere citizens engage in political action or debate, arguing that this inflames destructive passions within us—and social conflicts between us. It eulogizes the officers of the professional army rather than the older, civic ideal of the

citizen-militia (no. 139, 152). It suggests that questions regarding how to interpret the law are not to be left in the hand of country squires, but rather—one understands—in the hands of professional lawyers and judges (no. 124).

The negated ideals of courtly life and of civic engagement have specific historical resonances. They are the cultural echoes of the royalism and the republicanism of 17th century England, and of that era's political conflicts, the conflicts, that is, which the Glorious Revolution and the following establishment of a modern British State, with a standing army and a national debt, had tried to relegate to the dustbin of history.⁵ Thus ostensibly non-polemic and non-political, *The Spectator* is ideologically aligned with what now is often called the "Court Whigs", the group of politicians supporting the post-revolutionary constitutional order, England's active engagement in the wars of the European continent, and the establishment of a fiscal-military state. Historically, this is no surprise, given that both Addison and Steele were Members of Parliament in the House of Commons and were aligned with the Whigs.⁶ By depicting a new kind of city life, however, they were in reality drawing the contours of a new kind of political subject, the "leisured, cultivated, and acquisitive man, who paid for others to defend and govern him", as J.G.A Pocock has formulated it.⁷ They were promoting an ideal for the better-off citizens, who strove after a life as gentlemanly rentiers, having—perhaps—invested in the national debt. They were articulating a cultural ideal of a citizenry living under a new political order, the order of a modern state: benefiting from the rule of law, protected by constitutional rights, consuming the goods of a London formed by peace and prosperity, disengaged from the administration as well as from the day-to-day conflicts of statecraft.

What courtly life and civic engagement share is a conception of subjectivity as existing in constant interaction with other subjectivities—for both traditions life in the city is understood as a life in constant and active interaction with the city's other inhabitants. It is thus both logical and paradoxical that *The Spectator's* conception of genteel politeness demands a prior, inner disengagement from intersubjectivity. In a marked break from the 17th- and 18th century tradition of conduct books, *The Spectator* never gives concrete or specific instructions on how to behave when you are in the company of others.⁸ In its pages you do not find discussions of how to sit at a table, when to use a fork and a knife, how to dress, how to bow or how to greet strangers, what stock phrases to use to greet or take your leave. Instead, its essays have a more

general point: according to *The Spectator*, in order to behave politely towards others, you have to give up the idea that your own happiness and self-esteem are dependent upon how others regard you. In order to live a polite life in the city, you have to crave anonymity.

Thus, Mr. Spectator, who in the first essay presents himself to his readers, insists that his primary mode of being is to *walk in the streets of London unknown*. He has no ambition to make people notice him, to be something in somebody else's eyes, he is proud that nobody on the street recognizes him or really notices him. However, he also *never speaks in public*, he writes, that is: he never engages in debates or articulates judgments in a public, intersubjective space. "Thus I live in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species," he concludes in his self-presentation (vol i., 4). This disengagement is paradoxical to the extent that "Mr. Spectator" constantly communicates with and quite directly addresses his readers through the medium of print. Without this communication, he could not function as the eidolon of *The Spectator*. He also could not function as a discrete model of politeness, a model not so much in his outward behavior as in his way of observing and reflecting upon everything happening around him—he could not present his mode of subjectivity as a mode of sensibility one ought to emulate. The condition of possibility of this address and this sensibility is an anterior silence, however. It is presented as the product of the choice not to be visible to, nor to engage with the people on the streets of London.

EMPATHY AND PLEASURE, DISINTEREST AND DISENGAGEMENT

The spectatorial ideal of disengagement is not just a question of public behavior, however. It is also an inner disengagement from the passions that bind one's conception of self to the lives of others. Furthermore, this disengagement is not only necessary in order to behave the right way. It also transforms the way one sees and experiences the city. This can be seen in a passage from *The Spectator* no. 4, written by Richard Steele:

He who comes into Assemblies only to gratify his Curiosity, and not to make a Figure, enjoys the Pleasures of Retirement in a more exquisite Degree, than he possibly could in his Closet; the Lover, the Ambitious, and the Miser, are followed thither by a worse Crowd than any they can withdraw from. To

be exempt from the Passions with which others are tormented, is the only pleasing Solitude. (vol. i, 19)

As Michael Ketcham and others have argued, this is a neo-stoic ideal. One should retire from the “negotium” of public life into the much calmer “otium” of retirement—with the addition that “otium” is not dependent upon a physical retirement from the city, but is understood as the calm of one’s mind. “The ideal state of life is a type of retirement, a harmony and completeness in one’s self, isolated from and indifferent to the demands of the public world,” as Ketcham puts it in his monograph on *The Spectator, Transparent Designs*.⁹ The way to reach this inner retirement is to dampen or root out those passions, which force your self-esteem to be dependent upon others, and force you into rivalry or political disagreement with others.

Ketcham describes this demand for a prior disengagement primarily as a moral stance, especially to the extent that it allows for the development of an empathetic understanding of other people’s worth and circumstances. And in fact, one thread, probably the dominant thread, running through the many essays of *The Spectator*, insists that Mr. Spectator’s polite disengagement allows him to see the character of his fellow men in a truer light. It allows him to see “their inward Manner of bearing their Condition”, as he writes in the first essay. It allows “Mr. Spectator” to read the minute physical expressions of people around him and through them understand their inner worth, and also feel their anguish and their true happiness. In his description of a chance meeting with a young sex worker in no. 266 he is, for instance, able to see the injured innocence hiding behind her “forced Wantonness” (vol. ii, 535), and is thus able to feel pity rather than contempt for her. In these moments, “Mr. Spectator” becomes a very early—and very polite—example of an 18th century culture of sensibility.

The chance meeting in no. 266 are just one of many such moments in *The Spectator*. Nevertheless, Ketcham’s interpretation ignores or downplays the role of pleasure in the above quote from no. 4. As the quote shows, Steele’s argument is not only that one can *understand* the life of others in a better way when one watches them with “an unprejudic’d Eye” (vol. i, 19), but also that one can *enjoy* what one sees in a superior way. He argues that it is more pleasurable to retire from social life and just watch the city than it is to engage with city life. Retirement allows you to move among people with curiosity, as if assemblies of men were a veritable

Wunderkammer of interesting, and yet strangely passive—since one is only a spectator—experiences. A similar argument can be found in no. 270, also written by Steele. “Mr. Spectator” is in the theatre and finds that the most pleasurable thing to watch are all the beautiful women among the audience—not one of them in particular, but the group as a whole. Such a view allows for an aesthetic pleasure rather than the ambiguous pleasures of desire:

He that dwells upon any one Object of Beauty, may fix his Imagination to his Disquiet; but the Contemplation of a whole Assembly together, is a Defence against the Encroachment of Desire: At least to me, who have taken pains to look at Beauty abstracted from the Consideration of its being the Object of Desire, at Power, only as it sits upon another without any hopes of partaking any share of it, at Wisdom and Capacity without any pretensions to rival or envy its Acquisitions: I say to me who am really free from forming any hopes by beholding the Persons of Beautiful Women, or warming my self into Ambition from the Successes of other Men, this World is not only a meer Scene, but a very pleasant one. (vol. ii, 553)

The movement from erotic desire to political desire and to the desire of status is seamless in this passage. In order to be free of all three, one has to disengage from the passions, which bind us to other people. Only then is one able to feel a superior kind of pleasure, which turns out to be an aesthetic pleasure, the pleasure of contemplating beauty. In fact, the argument of the passage runs parallel with the one found in Addison’s series of essays on “The Pleasures of the Imagination”. In no. 411, Addison declares that a “man of a polite imagination [...] looks upon the World in another Light, as it were, and discovers in it a Multitude of Charms, that conceal themselves from the generality of Mankind.” (vol iii, page 538). But what becomes clear in Steele’s writing in no. 4 and no. 275 is the precise meaning of the epithet “polite”. To live in a polite way is to live among people and yet be disengaged from the self-centered passions that bind you to them. Only those who are able to do so are able to feel the pleasures of the imagination. This pleasure, however, is more preferable to any kind of life among men. As Steele concludes in no. 270: “Did Mankind but know the freedom which there is in keeping thus aloofe from the World, I should have more Imitators, than the powerfulest Man in the Nation has followers.” (vol. iii, 538).

The quotes from no. 4 and no. 270 also shows a subtle difference between *The Spectator* and much later aesthetic theory. The focus on disengagement from passions—the passions of being seen and acknowledged, the passions of being engaged in the work of the political community—is not often found in classical aesthetic theory, which puts the relation between a perceiving subject and a perceived object at its center and then focuses on disinterest as a precondition for aesthetic pleasure. *The Spectator*'s description of disengagement does not primarily describe a way of relating to an object, however, it describes a mode of life among other people, which allows for a different way of looking at the world. As a contrast, the first sentence in the chapter on “disinterest” in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* simply says: “Interesse wird das Wohlgefallen genannt, was wir mit der Vorstellung der Existenz eines Gegenstandes verbinden.”¹⁰ For Kant, “interest” is to be engaged in the existence of an object, and disinterested pleasure is a pleasure that is independent of whether we imagine the object to exist or not, and thus independent of our desire to possess it. However, as the seamless movement from erotic to political passions in no. 270 attested to, according to *The Spectator*, the antithesis of aesthetic pleasure is not so much, or not just, a material or economic interest in the existence of the objects of the world. Instead, aesthetic pleasure has as its condition of possibility a prior disengagement from all the self-centered passions emanating from life lived among other people.

MR. SPECTATOR AT THE ROYAL EXCHANGE

In *The Spectator*, aesthetic pleasure has as its condition of possibility a prior detachment from the passions of intersubjectivity. But it is also connected to a specific way of representing London, especially the social life of the city, a way that is highly original when compared with other representations of life in the city in the early 18th century. The idea of an aestheticized gaze upon social life is thus intimately connected, I would argue, with an attempt to reimagine how social life can be represented. This is especially seen in those of the essays, which concentrate upon the representation of trade.

Mr. Spectator does not just feel the pleasure of watching city life at the theatre. He also enjoys scenes from the streets of London and from the institutions of the city. The most famous instance of this can be found in no. 69, where Mr. Spectator visits and eulogizes The Royal Exchange, the main site for international trade in London in the late 17th and 18th century. After describing

all the different nationalities gathered there, and assuring that he neither has any business nor is known to the “busie Multitude of People” congregating at the Exchange, Mr. Spectator declares:

This grand Scene of Business gives me an infinite Variety of solid and substantial Entertainments. As I am a great Lover of Mankind, my heart naturally overflows with Pleasure at the sight of a prosperous and happy Multitude, insomuch that at many publick Solemnities I cannot forbear expressing my Joy with Tears that have stoln down my Cheeks. For this reason I am wonderfully delighted to see such a Body of Men thriving in their own private Fortunes, and at the same time Promoting the Publick Stock; or in other Words, raising Estates for their own Families, by bringing into their Country whatever is wanting, and carrying out of it whatever is superfluous. (vol. i, 294, my cursives)

The passage conforms to the general motif of the whole essay, which concentrates on the way the economic activities at The Royal Exchange both emulate and exceed political life. At the beginning of the essay, Addison describes how he likes to imagine that the tradesmen are like “ambassadors”, their economic dealings like political treatises; he concludes the essay by boasting that “trade, without enlarging the British territories, has given us a kind of additional Empire” (vol. i, 293, 296). And in the middle of the quoted passage above, he compares the multitude of the Royal Exchange with the “prosperous and happy Multitude” one would meet at “Publick Solemnities”—for instance a coronation.

In this eulogy, trade is like politics, and the world of trade is like the political realm, only better, since it allows the interaction of private citizens, guided by their private interests, to accomplish what an earlier epoch would do, or attempt to do, through the means of military might and political intrigue. In that sense, the quote from *The Spectator* is an almost programmatic instance of what the German literary historian Joseph Vogl calls “the idyll of the market” in his book *The Specter of Capital*. According to Vogl, “the idyll of the market” is one of the founding topoi of liberal economics and bourgeois society—a figuration of its hope and aspirations, as he calls it. It articulates the dream that behind its apparent chaos and conflicts, social life, the life of humans interacting with each other, is as well-ordered in its movements as the stars are in their heavens, and that the job of politics is to allow this hidden order to flourish. The passage from *The Spectator*

articulates many aspects of the topos that Vogl enumerates in his book: here, too, trade is what produces a spontaneous social order out of disparate elements—in a sense, produces a “happy” rather than a fractured or conflictual multitude. Here, too, private interest produces public, general wealth, and does so in a way that is superior to the works of politics proper.

And here, too, the idyll of the market can only be seen from the perspective of a non-participating observer. This last aspect is central for Vogl’s understanding of the idyll of the market and its skepticism towards the realm of politics and political power. He writes:

Transparent nontransparency thus prevails here. On the one hand, there is evidently some quasi-divine point from which the workings of the whole system appear fully transparent. On the other hand, the system only works if no agent occupies this position.¹¹

“The idyll of the market” is only visible from the position of a spectator who renounces any kind of participation in social life, who accepts not to interfere with the idyll he is watching. It can only be seen by “no agent”. This is, as I have argued, the exact position of Mr. Spectator, not only with regard to trade, but with regard to life in the city, that is: life as it is lived within an intersubjective space. It is because he is a looker-on that he can watch the life of the city unfold before him as a “Grand scene of Business”.

It should thus not surprise us that Addison’s depiction of the Royal Exchange has affinities with many of the other 18th century examples, Vogl mentions in his book, such as Bernard de Mandeville’s work *The Fable of the Bees, or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (1714). Here, Mandeville argues that it is the egotistical economic interest of the population rather than their moral virtue, which produces the wealth of the English nation. It also has, of course, affinities with the argument in Adam Smith’s much later *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). For me, however, the most interesting aspect of the above quote from *The Spectator* is not caught by Vogl or by the lineage of early political economy he writes so brilliantly about. The quoted passage clearly describes Mr. Spectator’s trade-watching as *pleasurable*, and to be more precise as an example of aesthetic pleasure. To watch the conduct of trade is to see a multitude of people, whose interactions are at the same time harmonious and filled with variety. This combination gives Mr. Spectator a potentially unending series of “solid

and substantial entertainments". It delights him, it lets his heart overflow with pleasure.

Furthermore, and in contrast to Vogl's argument, which connects "the idyll of the market" with an attempt to apply the laws of the emerging natural sciences to the social world, Mr. Spectator does not really depict "the workings of the whole system". He does not exactly see that which, according to Vogl, should become visible when one watches the idyll of the market from the position of a disengaged spectator. He is not concerned with delineating any actual mechanics or laws of social or economic life. In fact, his eulogy of The Royal Exchange is relatively short of actual description. Instead, he describes the aesthetic pleasure of *being able to watch the system work*. He describes an aesthetic reaction to the experience of seeing how variety and order seems to co-exist in the social world of trade—a world, and I think this is important, where every relation between men are mediated by money and goods, so that nobody, in a sense, stands in a direct relation to anybody else.

He thus posits or assumes a social harmony, the specific contours of which he never delineates. In that sense, the relationship between *The Spectator's* depiction of the city and political economy are much like the relationship between aesthetic theories highlighting the harmonious beauty of nature and the emerging natural sciences of the 17th and 18th century.¹² At the same time, he is showing his readers that such a sight is only possible for those who choose to disengage from the life of the city.

THE HARMONIOUS CITY

This way of depicting the city as varied and harmonious can be found in several other of *The Spectator's* essays. So can the specific representational strategy, which posits a harmonious circulation of social life without highlighting too many specific details—or, to be more precise: which insists on letting every highlighted detail conform to a larger pattern, but never attempts to depict or explicate the logic of this pattern. In no. 454 for instance, Steele writes about trying to move through as much of the city as possible in a period of 24 hours. Mr. Spectator's stated goal is to experience as much variety and novelty as possible, to constantly stimulate the imagination in a pleasurable way. He begins his tour, however, by giving a general maxim regarding the logic of variety in London:

The Hours of the Day and Night are taken up in the Cities of *London* and *Westminster* by Peoples as different from each other as those who are Born in different Centuries. Men of Six-a-Clock give way to those of Nine, they of Nine to the generation of Twelve, and they of Twelve disappear, and make Room for the fashionable World, who have made Two-a-Clock the Noon of the day.

When we first put off from Shoar, we soon fell in with a Fleet of Gardiners bound for the several Market-Ports of *London*; and it was the most pleasing Scene imaginable to see the Chearfulness with which those industrious People ply'd their Way to a certain Sale of their Goods. (vol. iv, 99)

Only one who is of no specific hour, who is not inscribed into the city's daily activities, is able to see and describe how the city is made up of a multiplicity of people. This is literally the position of Mr. Spectator in no. 454, as he has decided to "rove by Boat and Coach for the next Four and Twenty Hours, till the many different Objects I must needs meet with should tire my Imagination" (vol. iv, 98), thus crossing through the varied, but seemingly isolated chrono-habitats of city life. Just as interesting, however, is the way these different people seem not to interact with each other at all. In fact, they seem almost ignorant of each other's existence. Yet they move according to the same rhythm—the rhythm of the clock—allowing a well-ordered pattern to be visible from the perspective of the detached spectator. The details of this pattern is, however, not of any interest to Mr. Spectator. It is enough to posit its existence, to posit, that is, the coexistence of variety and harmony.

The rest of the essay strings together a series of pleasurable, varied scenes and events—the first one of boats with fruits, flowers and vegetables arriving to London markets and instantly producing pleasure in the breast of Mr. Spectator. All of these scenes or vignettes are written with a remarkable descriptive economy, however; their goal never seems to be to describe the minutest details of an event, but to show how these scenes seem to fit into a larger pattern of city life. This representational strategy is part of the novelty of *The Spectator*. There are plenty of descriptions of economic life in Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*, and also quite a few that are more detailed and "realistic" than those found in *The Spectator*—both in the sense that they attend to everyday materiality and in the sense that they make room for those affects, which are traditionally not part of an

idealized depiction of life. But you find no descriptions of the city as a harmonious place. In fact, in 1705, in its earliest published version, the satirical poem at the heart of *The Fable of the Bees* was called *The Grumbling Hive*. Apparently, for Mandeville a society without private virtue would give off a constant sound of grumbling, that is, of dissatisfaction, even if his poem's provocative argument was that lack of private virtue produced benefits for the general public—most importantly wealth, which could be taxed.

Another point of contrast can be found in one of *The Spectator's* most important predecessors, Ned Ward's monthly periodical *The London Spy* (1698-1700). The narrator of *The London Spy*, who has just arrived to the city from the countryside, walks the streets of London in order to be entertained. Rather than doing so alone, however, and using his power of observation to understand the people of the city, he does so in the company of an experienced friend, who acts as a guide to the mysteries of city life. Furthermore, *The London Spy* describes life in London as merry, but also exceptionally dirty and chaotic; for Ward, the city is a not a very polite place, and more importantly not a place that will allow for any form polite, gentlemanly detachment.¹³ Even if he would want to remain a spectator—nothing in the text suggests that it is his desire—people and events are constantly bumping into the narrator of *The London Spy*, demanding not only his attention, but also his active participation in dialogues or roguish tricks. Furthermore, Ward represents the city through an unending series of paratactic details, allowing for a vivid, overwhelming, infinite variety, but absolutely no harmonious synthesis. When Ward describes a visit to The Royal Exchange, for instance, he represents it as an overcrowded space, full of beggars and foreigners with strange habits and strange ways of walking and talking—the Dutch have hair the color of excrement, the Italians smell of garlic and sausage, the Spanish move slowly and deliberately, like snails:

We had no sooner jostled through this cluster of Commonwealth's-men, but we were got amongst a parcel of lank-haired formalists, in flat crowned hats and short cloaks, walking with as much state and gravity as a snail o'er the leaf of a cabbage, with a box of tobacco-dust in one hand, and the other employed in charging their nostrils from whence it drips into their moustaches, which are always as full of snuff as a beau's wig is full of powder.¹⁴

We are very far away from the measured cadences of *The Spectator's* prose. Ward's sentences are instead positively overwhelmed by all the impressions he wants to communicate. They are full of incongruous details and irreverent similes, chaotic and highly entertaining. No wonder that the narrator's senses are overwhelmed when he immerses himself into the city in all its evening glory: "nothing I could see but light, and nothing hear but noise".¹⁵

As represented by Ward, to be in the city is to be in the midst of a group of atoms moving around in chaotic ways, bumping into each other without any discernible pattern. Though the city is full of entertainment—the first issue explains how the narrator goes to London because he is bored of life in the countryside—the entertainment has to do with the thrill of adventure, with chance interactions with other people, and with the *schadenfreude* of seeing strangers being pelted with dirt. It has nothing to do with the detached pleasures and the harmonious scenes of city life propagated by *The Spectator*. It goes without saying that there are no eulogy of the benefits of trade and that no descriptions of the synthesis of harmony and variety are to be found in *The London Spy*.

A BOURGEOIS IDEOLOGY?

As I have tried to show, the novelty of *The Spectator's* representations of city life lies not so much in its amount of details or any "realism", but in its ability to represent the city as a space for the enjoyment of aesthetic pleasure. This entails a presentation of city life as at the same time varied and harmonious; it also presupposes a specific kind of polite subjectivity, the basis of which is a prior detachment from other people. The resulting depictions have clear affinities to what Vogl describes as the idyll of the market, but they depict the pleasure of watching this market—that is, the interactions of private citizens going about their business. They do not try to articulate the inner logic of social and economic life, but leave such ambitions to the emergent political economy.

One question remains, however. Can we with the support of Vogl—and following a quite large critical tradition—conclude that *The Spectator* participates in the articulation of a bourgeois ideology, and that its originality lies in the way it uses the concept of aesthetic pleasure to do so? I would answer yes, but add that my reading of *The Spectator* also suggests that such an ideology is not necessarily a reaction to the emergence of a capitalist economy, even if this has been assumed by an older critical tradition.¹⁶ On the contrary, *The Spectator's* cultural ideal of disengaged politeness got its contours through an implicit polemic with aristocratic

and republican concepts of subjectivity—through a rejection of the courtier and the politically active citizen as models for a good life. According to *The Spectator*, to live a polite life is quite explicitly to live a life as a disengaged, non-political subject of the modern state. Rather than a reaction to the exigencies of life in a commercial society, it is in order to promote the attractiveness of the life as a well-to-do state subject that Addison and Steele describe the pleasures of watching city life. As we have seen, *The Spectator's* depiction of the emerging commercial and capitalist society, a society of trade, consumption and finance, is almost wholly positive, and is furthermore subservient to its distaste of politics.

It is also to promote a life of polite disengagement, that *The Spectator* ends up articulating a distinct version of the idea of aesthetic disinterestedness. According to the arguments of Addison and Steele, aesthetic pleasure does not primarily stand in contrast to—for instance—modes of being in the world dominated by instrumental rationality, material greed or private interests. As we saw in the depiction of the Royal Exchange, the aesthetic gaze and private interest are complementary, but also compatible with each other in these essays. Instead, *The Spectator* premises aesthetic pleasure on a prior suppression of those passions, which connect our conception of self to the life of others—passions such as vanity and ambition, but also those that lead to political engagement and action. In that sense, *The Spectator's* depictions of city life and aesthetic pleasure posits a question, which seems as relevant today as it was in the early 18th century: what if the other of the subject of aesthetic pleasure is not man as a self-interested, economic actor, but man as a—virtuous or cynical—political being?

- 1 Paul Guyer: *A History of Modern Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2014), 64. See Paul Guyer: *Values of Beauty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2005), 21cc, and Brian Michael Norton: "Aesthetics, Science, and The Theatre of the World", *New Literary History* vol. 51.3 (2020): 611, for other readings of Addison as an important precursor to Kant.
- 2 Donald F. Bond (ed.): *The Spectator* (Oxford: the Clarendon Press 1965), vol. iv, 540. Further references to *The Spectator* will be made in the text.
- 3 See Anthony Pollock: "Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere", *ELH* vol. 74.3 (2007): 710.
- 4 There is a quite large critical literature on the relationship between the periodical essay, especially *The Spectator*, and the printed, public sphere of political pamphlets and newspapers in England in the early 18th century. See for instance Brian Cowan: "Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* vol. 37.3 (2004); Tue Andersen Nexø: *Ikke de voldsomme* (København: Museum Tusulanums forlag 2014), 195cc.
- 5 I am following the interpretation of 17th and 18th-century English history presented by Jonathan Scott: *England's Troubles. Seventeenth-century Political Instability in European Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000). See also John Brewer: *The Sinews of Power. War, Money, and the English State 1688-1793* (London: Unwin Hyman 1989)
- 6 Charles A. Knight: *A Political Biography of Richard Steele* (London: Pickering and Chatto 2009), 84.
- 7 J.G.A Pocock: *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985), 235.
- 8 Philip Carter: *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society. Britain 1660-1800* (Harlow: Longman 2001), 60.
- 9 Michael Ketcham: *Transparent Designs. Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press 1985), 61.
- 10 Immanuel Kant, *Werkausgabe in 12 Bänden. Band 10. Kritik der Urteilskraft*, ed. Wilhelm Weishedel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1996), 116.
- 11 Joseph Vogl, *The Specter of Capital* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 2014), 24.
- 12 See Brian Michael Norton, "Aesthetics, Science, and The Theatre of the World", 611: "Addison, fully persuaded by natural philosophy's distinction between the micromechanical reality of things and their phenomenal appearances, framed aesthetic experience wholly in terms of the latter. Aesthetics, in other words, would concern itself not with things themselves but with the looks of things." I would add that this distinction is replicated in *The Spectator's* way of depicting city life.
- 13 Catharina Löffler, *Walking the City. Urban Experience and Literary Psychogeography in 18th-Century London* (Wiesbaden: J.B. Metzler 2017), 217cc, reads the Ward's narrator as a spectator who attempts to put distance between himself and the seedy life of the city. Be that as it may, the city – as depicted by Ward – constantly thwarts the narrator's ambition, making him a participant in everything from drinking bouts to a baptism in excrements. For another recent essay comparing *The Spectator* and *The London Spy*, see David McNeil, "Watching the Watchers. The Spectatorship Game in Ned Ward's *The London Spy*" in *Early Modern Spectatorship*, ed. Ronald Huebert and David McNeil (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press 2021).
- 14 Ned Ward, *The London Spy*, ed. Paul Hyland (East Lansing: Colleagues Press 1993), 59.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 16 A very influential example of such an interpretation can be found in Jürgen Habermas: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, where *The Spectator* – and more generally, the ideology of the bourgeois public sphere – attempts to reconcile a conception of man as private economic actor with a conception of man as bearer of a universal humanity. See Erin Skye Mackie: *Market à la Mode. Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in the Tatler and the Spectator* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997) and Brean S. Hammond: *Hackney for Bread. Professional Imaginative Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), 145cc, for other interpretations of *The Spectator* in the context of an emergent commercial society.