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Maurice Samuels, *The Spectacular Past: Popular History and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. xi + 280 pp. Illustrations, notes, appendix, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-4249-0; \$22.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8014-8965-2.

Review by Peter Fritzsche, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In this intelligent, wide-ranging study, Maurice Samuels explores the "historical renaissance of early nineteenth-century France," a period when historical themes were displayed and commodified to an unprecedented degree by traditional media such as painting and the novel as well as by new visual entertainments from wax displays to "phantasmagoria shows, panoramas, dioramas and Boulevard theater" (pp. 4-5). For sale were even wallpaper designs depicting *Kléber in Egypt*, *The French in Italy*, *The Battle of Austerlitz*, and the *July Revolution*. In 1830-31, there were dozens of theatrical productions about Napoleon playing simultaneously in Paris. The public was treated with the "pleasure of watching Napoleon Bonaparte on his death bed at Saint Helena dying three or four times a night, all week long, at three or four theaters at once" (p. 142). This was the popular culture of the period: conjuring up historical moments very much constituted the spirit of the age. Samuels examines the representational genres and the often perceptive criticism they garnered in a careful, even exhaustive manner. I was surprised, nevertheless, that the "pictures" of history, produced by the media here under consideration, were not more rigorously analyzed in terms of their placement and juxtaposition, or with regard to their characters' social class and degree of activity or passivity. The panoramas themselves appear in this account as generic and oddly static or univocal, and readers are led away from discovering different positions which might have generated alternative interpretations among nineteenth-century audiences. In other words, "local color" is left unscrutinized and thus its referential powers not fully understood. In a way, Samuels takes the ironic role of the Realist novel, which uncovers the mechanics and illusions of historical spectatorship and thereby eschews the loving (and cherished) description found in the Historical Romance. This distinction allows Samuels to concentrate on smart readings of Balzac's novellas, especially *Adieu* and *Le Colonel Chabert*, and of Stendhal's *Le rouge et le noir* in which, Samuels convincingly demonstrates, historical spectatorship had become exposed as empty and even dangerous play-acting that held in place rather than threatened contemporary structures of power. Samuels claims here: "The classic Romantic historical novel presents the past as a drama; the Realist novel brings us backstage—the *échafaudage* visible, the illusion never taking hold" (p. 262). Samuels's contribution is to focus on the commodification inherent in the practices of looking at history, although I think Balzac and Stendhal are less interested in criticizing the reproductions of history than in the hyperventilated process of reevaluation and commodification as such: their work owes too much to history and the public's consciousness of it. Samuels is very adept in reconstructing the critical context in which the novels were written and the theoretical stakes for interpreting them today. This adds up to a very accomplished analysis.

Samuels primarily aims to introduce and critique the spectacularization of history for profit, but he is well aware that the historical renaissance of the Restoration and July Monarchy period is more complex. "Through the consumption of popular and visually realistic forms of history," he writes, "bourgeois spectators were able to envision the process of historical change that had created their new subject positions" in relation to the past, the possibility of political redesign, and French national identity (p. 270). This is convincing because historical detail was the means by which was established historical periodization, which was the premise for dramatizing discontinuity and historical fidelity. Only the

addition of "local color" across time and space permitted the construction of distinctive and sovereign cultural identities.[1] An awareness of the historical breakpoints, and a dramatization of their violence, was a precondition for the discovery of fields of difference. As a result, 1830 was different from 1770 just as France was different from Germany. All this could be commodified, but the production of a monumentalizing, basically static picture of history was always inhibited by the acknowledgement of the fragility of all historical forms, including contemporary renditions, and the opacity or non-self-evident nature of the past. As a result, memory became a practice just when it was considered in crisis.[2] In contradiction to what Samuels suggests, history did not simply replace memory. I would argue that history is not memory because history generates plot and narrative and a system to map characters onto those structures to create meaning. Samuels shows history to be a mass media, a means of recognition.

I think Samuels is on less firm ground when he relates the specificity of spectacles to the general management and mastery of history. What about the gory, unmanageable details of piked heads and guillotined corpses? Linda Orr argues that it was just these details that disrupted post-Revolutionary narrative.[3] It would have been interesting to see Samuels reckon more with Orr's work at a theoretical level. (Ann Rigney's work is also passed over too hastily; James Chandler's very useful work is unfortunately not engaged.[4]) Historical spectacle could also, in ways Samuels might have further explored, both accelerate and decelerate the sense of movement in history; it could induce passivity as well as raise doubt. Samuels's overall point is nonetheless convincing: that spectacle could overcome "the shock of the new by fixing a certain vision of the past and making it available for contemplation" (p. 38). It is true that Napoleon is all empire and grandeur in the theater productions Samuels surveys. Yet wasn't Waterloo implicit in the drama--its failure crucial in the first place to the rise of the improbable hero? In the end, Samuels raises the question of the monumental. He rightly points out the dangers in the modern age of surrendering identity to "irrational passions and hero worship" (p. 267); the Napoleon plays are a case in point. The other side of the question is worth pondering too. Baudrillard is summarized by Samuels to warn against "absolute visual realism," a spectacularization that inhibits "the kind of myth that gives history its power" (p. 269). Perhaps, but the peek onto the backstage of historical productions, provided by Balzac, Stendhal, and Samuels himself, disables the myth-making work as well; myths about power, agency, and exemplarity are necessary to make history.

## NOTES

[1] See James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[2] See Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993); and my *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[2] Linda Orr, *Headless History: Nineteenth-Century French Historiography of the Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

[3] Ann Rigney, *Imperfect Histories: The Elusive Past and the Legacy of Romantic Historicism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001); Rigney, *The Rhetoric of Historical Representation: Three Narrative Histories of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Chandler, *England in 1819*.

Peter Fritzsche  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
[pfritzsc@uiuc.edu](mailto:pfritzsc@uiuc.edu)

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