

Jim Igoe, *The Nature of Spectacle: On Images, Money, and Conserving Capitalism*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780816530441 (paper); ISBN: 9780816537549 (ebook)

The society that brings the spectacle into being does not dominate underdeveloped regions solely through the exercise of economic hegemony. It also dominates them in its capacity as the society of the spectacle. Modern society has thus already invested the social surface of every continent—even where the material basis of economic exploitation is still lacking—by spectacular means. It can frame the agenda of a ruling class and preside over that class’ constitution. (Debord 1994: 37)

In Jim Igoe’s *The Nature of Spectacle*, a career’s worth of fieldwork on conservation and development in Tanzania is refracted through the concept of spectacle, which Igoe has strongly grounded in, but not exclusively based on, the work of the French Situationist Guy Debord. Debord’s focus was on consumer culture, and by drawing out Marx’s understanding of commodity fetishism in novel directions, he developed the notion of spectacle, which he describes as “not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (1994: 12). Igoe’s focus on spectacle and his engagement with Debord and others provides a critical extension of the growing body of work on capitalist conservation (e.g. Brockington and Duffy 2010). This thread of scholarship is concerned with how capitalist imperatives—like economic development and profit-making—come to be entwined with the goals of global land and biodiversity conservation. While accumulation and environmental protection have been historically understood to be at odds, notions of sustainable development, combined strategies of conservation and development, and even emerging payments for ecosystem services programs offer up novel ways of “selling nature to save it” (McAfee 1999). Through his engagement with spectacle, Igoe extends existing critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism within this body of work, demonstrating the critical mediating role that images (including

photos, films, marketing materials, and web content) play in compressing complex socio-natural relationships into consumable products.

While Debord's formulation of the spectacle, communicated through 221 sprawling theses, paints a compelling broad-brushed picture of alienation under late capitalism, its format and sweeping generalizations make it a difficult text to apply to social science inquiry. Readers will be happy to see that Igoe has distilled the essence of Debord's theses, combining them with relevant and adjacent work, including Anna Tsing's (2005) conception of "spectacular accumulation" and Henri Lefebvre's (1991) work on the production of space. Separation—a key theme in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* and particularly apparent in his discussion of unity and division—is also a central theme of *The Nature of Spectacle*. As Igoe argues, it is through separation that unification becomes possible, as images, consumed at a distance, ultimately come to stand in for the whole. Complex natures come to be portrayed through highly curated images, and it is through these images that it becomes possible for a range of money-making ventures to crop up around consuming and reproducing those simplified, repeated, and highly controlled images.

The story of the advent of Tanzania's tourism industry, introduced at the beginning of the book, serves as a central metaphor for understanding the simultaneous production of spectacle and nature. Undertaking what historian Thomas Lekan called "the greatest bluff in German media history" (2011:224, quoted on p.29), conservationist and Nazi propagandist Bernhard Grzimek used his widely viewed nature films and television series about the Serengeti to force the postcolonial Tanzanian state toward continued and expanded conservation efforts. As Igoe explains it, "Grzimek encouraged his millions of viewers to purchase inexpensive package safaris to experience directly the wondrous nature they saw on his program. The only catch was that the safaris did not exist. However, Grzimek wagered that tour companies would create them in response to the resulting outpouring of demand, and he was correct" (p.16). By suggesting that his viewers book non-existent safaris to visit the Serengeti that they've consumed on television and at the movies, Grzimek not only forced the creation of a large-scale safari tourist industry,

but in doing so, he set in motion decades of land-use patterns, wildlife management strategies, and trajectories of development. These trajectories have been fundamentally shaped by the gaze of the Western filmmaker and subsequent images in the same spirit, and as such, they continue to instantiate colonial visions, boundaries, and hierarchies long after formal independence.

What makes the story of Grzimek's bluff so captivating is that these safaris did not pre-exist their portrayal. While many of Debord's theses in *The Society of the Spectacle* are focused on the role that images play in mediating social relations and relations of production—the spectacle is, as he famously puts it, “a social relationship between people that is *mediated* by images” (1994:12, emphasis added)—this and other examples from Igoe's book are fascinating because they push so far on this central notion of *mediation*, which assumes a sort of negotiation between two existing worlds or entities, rather than the *production* of new ones altogether. To address the element of production, Igoe uses a borrowed metaphor—“space is produced, ‘through a process that is like a balloon being blown up’” (p.11, quoting West 2006:27), where, certain aspects come to be exaggerated and enlarged, and as such, “a part of the object and what it offers comes to be taken for the whole” (Lefebvre 1991:286). In Chapter 3, Igoe gives a fantastic example of how this works, describing the northern circuit through which tourists travel across selected sites in Tanzania and the specific ways that the tour guides and safari drivers work to curate and control those experiences to match up with tourist expectations. Nearly all tourists come to know the same Tanzania, but this version is tightly controlled to allow for the experience to track with the spectacle, leading to a situation in which these spaces “both represent and visually displace the wider realities from which they were selected” (p.70).

Chapters 4 and 5 zoom out from the specific historical context of safari and rural development tourism in Tanzania, focusing in a more generalized sense on the centrality of spectacle in modern-day international conservation efforts. Drawing a line from Teddy Roosevelt to Pavan Sukhdev—the principal architect of the EU's TEEB (“The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity”) framework—Igoe shows how the “concentrated spectacle” of the World Conservation Congress reproduces many of the same theatrical and spectacular tropes that were

present in the Tanzanian case. Additionally, as he demonstrates, the advent of the internet and the growing ubiquity of social media has only exacerbated the situation, as imperatives for sustainable consumption bring spectacular imagery into the everyday. In the 1950s, spectacle was being used to sell safaris; today, as his example of the Procter & Gamble Everyday Wildlife Champions initiative shows, the same spectacular portrayals of nature are being used to sell us dish soap.

Finally, I found the conclusion to be very compelling, though I found myself wishing that the author had done more to tie the preceding chapters together. The book moves around quite a bit from chapter to chapter, taking the reader from colonial Tanzania to the World Conservation Congress. Given the breadth of the material and cases being explored, I would have greatly appreciated it if the author had taken a few pages at the beginning of the conclusion to summarize each chapter and discuss them within the context of the theoretical framework introduced at the beginning of the book. While I was seeking more closure, I did appreciate that the existing conclusion strikes a hopeful tone, and that the author managed to draw that hope from the same place as his critique: the Situationists. The notions that we might hijack the masters' tools to build something different (*détournement*), or that breaking free from the constraints of spectacular capitalism might require new forms of encounter (*dérive*), are closely aligned with the practices of Guy Debord and his contemporaries. For example, Igoe points out that the same circuits of space and spectacle explored throughout the book could easily be modified through "creative engagements with existing modes of representation" (p.113) like charts, graphs, and images toward a radical reimagining of biodiversity conservation.

While I enjoyed the book a great deal, and I do believe that it fills an existing gap in the literature, I wondered if it would have been as accessible to a reader who is not already versed in the topic. Since the book is very short (117 pages, excluding notes and references), there is a huge amount of information crammed into very limited space. The author frequently points to his previous work, as well as the work of his collaborators in the fields of neoliberal conservation (Brockington and Duffy 2010; Igoe and Brockington 2007) and conservation and development,

as a way of making key points without taking up much space. For the uninitiated, however, this means that a lot of relevant information gets bypassed. For these reasons, I feel that this book may not be the best starting point for a more generalist reader. Secondly, while I believe his close engagements with the concept of spectacle and with Debord's writings to be one of Igoe's most important contributions to the nature/society literature, I would have liked to see the theoretical framing come through more strongly in each chapter. In the introduction, for example, the author writes that the book considers separation through three major optics: dissociation, control, and commodification (p.7). I felt that this was a really clever way to organize the book, and while I do see how the themes run through the text, I thought it was a missed opportunity not to better foreground them.

In sum, *The Nature of Spectacle* was an enjoyable read which draws on decades of field experience in Tanzania and beyond to put forward a historically-grounded and novel argument about conservation and capitalism. While it may not be the best book for a generalist audience, those who are familiar with the literature on neoliberal conservation will find a lot to enjoy. The book brings together many of Igoe's most important contributions and interventions in a manageable and readable format, underscoring the critical links between the production of images, the production of space, and the commodification of nature.

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