

Roman spectacle entertainments and the technology of reality.

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## Roman Spectacle Entertainments and the Technology of Reality

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### Abstract

Roman spectacle entertainment has attracted substantial scholarly interest because of renewed ways in which politics is seen as culturally enacted. Less attention has been paid to the technologies associated with these spectacles. When discussed, technologies emerge as a manufactured form of manipulation by a knowing elite over a gullible populace that heightened the anticipation of violence or magnified the charisma and prestige of the emperor. I suggest a more paradoxical result. These technologies, in their ability to extract that which is distinct and permanent from the environment, make both nature and humanity transitory, reproducible, and conformable to human desire. What I call technologies of reality produce a tension between the status-affirming function of spectacles and the status-collapsing effects of a new cultural politics as spectacles combined participation with consumption and hierarchic distinction with

## ROMAN SPECTACLE ENTERTAINMENTS AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF REALITY<sup>1</sup>

DEAN HAMMER

Seneca, commenting on spectacle entertainments under Nero, describes “the arts of amusement” as “those which aim toward pleasure (*voleptatem*) of the eyes and ears. To this class you may assign the stage-machinists (*machinatores*), who invent scaffolding that goes aloft of its own accord, or floors that rise silently into the air, and many other surprising devices, as when objects that fit together then fall apart, or objects which are separate then join together automatically, or objects which stand erect then gradually collapse” (*Ep.* 88.22; trans. modified). Seneca’s comments are interesting both for what they do not say and what they do. Unmentioned are the violent aspects of these spectacles. Seneca emphasizes, instead, how the audience was struck with amazement at the spectacles because the “cause”—the technological apparatus—was hidden, and the effects—things rising, collapsing, flying, falling part, and joining together—seemed unexpected (*Ep.* 88.22). Seneca’s observations give us insight into the role of something less visible, technology, in the experience of spectacles.

Over the last several decades, “technology” has become an increasingly contested term. Technology derives from *technologia*, which denotes a systematic method of doing something or accomplishing a task. The term can refer to tools and machinery, but also to intellectual tasks, including methods of reflection and examination that Michel Foucault refers to as technologies of the self (1997). Technologies, which in the modern age came to

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the University of Michigan, Pennsylvania State University at York, and Franklin and Marshall College.



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