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Spectacular Realities

Early Mass Culture
in *Fin-de-Siècle* Paris

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley / Los Angeles / London

36284104

99/05/10

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Revised versions of the following previously published pieces have been incorporated into this volume. "Cinematic Spectatorship before the Apparatus," in *Viewing Positions*, ed. Linda Williams (Rutgers University Press, 1994). This essay also appeared in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (University of California Press, 1995). Copyright 1995 The Regents of the University of California. "The Morgue and the Musée Grévin: Understanding the Public Taste for Reality in *Fin-de-Siècle* Paris," in *Spectacles of Realism*, ed. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Prendergast (University of Minnesota Press, 1995). Copyright 1995 The Regents of the University of Minnesota. This essay originally appeared in the *Yale Journal of Criticism* 6, no. 2 (1994). "The Musée Grévin as Monument of Modern Life," *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 7-26.

DC
715
S39
1998

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schwartz, Vanessa R.

Spectacular realities: early mass culture in fin-de-siècle Paris /
Vanessa R. Schwartz.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographic references and index

ISBN 0-520-20959-1 (cloth: alk. paper)

1. Popular culture—France—Paris—History—19th century.
 2. France—Civilization—19th century.
 3. Leisure industry—France—Paris.
 4. Spectacular, The—Government policy—France—Paris.
- I. Title.

DC715.S39 1998

944.06—dc21

97-2201

Printed in the United States of America

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standards for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

on the popular imagination. Some sources point to Balzac's *La vieille fille*, which appeared in *La Presse* in October 1836, as the first serial novel, others to *La Presse*'s publication of *Le Rhin* by Victor Hugo.⁸² Regardless, even before newspapers had a massive audience and were sold by the issue, the *feuilleton* was seen as a way to augment subscriptions. For example, Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* published in *Le Journal des débats* boosted subscriptions by several thousand; his *Le juif errant* raised the circulation of *Le Constitutionnel* from 3,600 to an exceptional figure of 20,000.⁸³ As one contemporary noted in 1845, "One no longer subscribes to a newspaper because it has an opinion similar to one's own; one subscribes, without paying attention to political colors, instead determining which serial novel is more or less amusing."⁸⁴

(Launching a *feuilleton* became an event in which the newspaper could barrage the city with publicity (fig. 3). It involved a "veritable capture of the city streets," and as such "the serial novels of popular newspapers . . . become public events."⁸⁵ Newspapers employed men and women to plaster posters all over the city and as many as four hundred peddlers went shouting through the city streets, distributing illustrated handbills containing the beginning of a novel.

If fiction in installments drew public attention, the *faits divers* improved on the formula by creating sensation out of the quotidian. "Future historians of Paris will only need the *faits divers* recounted day by day in the newspaper to write the history of the customs of the capital,"⁸⁶ noted the Parisian writer Charles Virmaître. Technically, the *fait divers* was a newspaper rubric. Yet the term denoted a certain kind of story and a particular style of reporting. The genre included an enormous range in subject matter, but all *faits divers* represented contemporary and real-life events. As Georges Montorgeuil asked rhetorically, "At bottom, is the *fait divers* not life, all of life?"⁸⁷ Its definition, which

82. Anne-Marie Thiesse, "Le roman populaire," in *Histoire de l'édition française*, ed. Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin (Paris: Fayard, 1990): 3:511; and Wolgensinger, *Histoire à la une*, 80, respectively.

83. Charles Brun, *Le roman social en France au XIXe siècle*, cited in Walter Benjamin, *Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle*, ed. Rolf Tiedmann, trans. Jean Lacoste (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989), 760.

84. Montlville, before the Chamber of Deputies, March 14, 1845, cited in Palmer, *Des petits journaux*, 26.

85. Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Le roman du quotidien* (Paris: Le Chemin Vert, 1984), 90.

86. Charles Virmaître, *Les curiosités de Paris* (Paris: Lebigre-Duquesne, 1868), 87.

87. *Le Paris*, August 6, 1886.

LA VIE POPULAIRE

PUBLIE

LA BÊTE HUMAINE

GRAND
ROMAN INÉDIT



LA
VIE POPULAIRE
PARAIT
LE MERCREDI
ET LE SAMEDI
16 PAGES
DE TEXTE

15^c. LE N^o.

Par **EMILE ZOLA**

3. Ad leaflet for Emile Zola, *La bête humaine*, in serial novel form. Musée Carnavalet. © Photothèque des musées de la Ville de Paris.

appeared for the first time in the 1872 edition of *Le Grand Larousse universel*, seemed to include an incredibly broad range of subjects:

Under this rubric, the newspapers artfully group and regularly publish stories of all kinds that circulate around the world: small scandals, carriage accidents, horrible crimes, lovers' suicides, roofers falling from the fifth floor, armed robbery, showers of locusts or toads, storms, fires, floods, comical tales, mysterious kidnappings, executions, cases of hydrophobia, cannibalism.⁸⁸

The term came into use only in the last third of the nineteenth century to denote a particular kind of newspaper fare. (In many ways, the *faits divers* can be understood as the modern equivalent of the *occasionnels* (pamphlets) and *canards* (tall tales), which had been part of the repertoire of *colportage* (printed material peddling).) Early one-sheet "broadsides," they most often featured a simple woodcut image accompanied by text in prose or in verse, full of "blood and lies."⁸⁹ As Gérard de Nerval explained, the *canard* was "sometimes true, always exaggerated and often false."⁹⁰ Criers paraded through towns and lured their populace with parts of the story and then sold them the rest. Due to technological limitations, the *canard's* image was a summary one, attempting to capture the entire story or perhaps its critical moment in one image. A single image appeared over and over, suggesting both the standard repertoire of tales and a lack of demand for precision and detail.

(The *fait divers*, by contrast, reproduced in extraordinary detail, both written and visual, stories that might have seemed unbelievable but were actually true—as opposed to the earlier genre's tall tale. The genre consisted of exceptional events that happened to ordinary people. The newspaper *faits divers* implied that the everyday might be transformed into the shocking and sensational and ordinary people lifted from the anonymity of urban life and into the realm of spectacle.)

88. In Alain Monestier, *Le fait divers* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1982), 50–51.

89. Robert Simon, "Cézanne and the Subject of Violence," *Art in America*, May 1991, 125.

90. Jean-Pierre Séguin, *Nouvelles à sensation* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1959), 194. A significant departure from the structuralist analysis of the *faits divers* (such as Georges Auclair, *Le mana quotidien* [Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1970]) is Michelle Perrot, "Fait divers et histoire au XIXe siècle: note critique (deux expositions)," *Annales: économies, sociétés, civilisations* 38, no. 4 (July–August 1983): 911–19.

(Stylistically, graphic detail filled *faits divers* newspaper columns in support of the veracity of the story whose visual specificity lent credence to its truth. As Dubief noted in his book on journalism, "The need to see is no less universal than the need to understand."⁹¹ The illustrated press became the ideal venue for the *faits divers*. Illustration in this case meant an attempt at nearly exact reproduction as opposed to the caricatures that could be found in much of the *mondain* or radical press before the advent of the mass press.⁹² The first of the illustrated popular newspapers was *Le Journal illustré* founded in 1864, but it was not until the nineties that both *Le Petit Journal* and *Le Petit Parisien* published weekly illustrated supplements with color engravings that often featured the latest *faits divers* (fig. 4).)

Technological limitations prevented the widespread use of photography until the turn of the century, although it became the metaphor for what newspapers hoped to achieve.⁹³ As Georges Montorgeuil noted, "The impression made on the senses by a photograph of a human nude cannot be compared to that made by a photograph of a drawn nude. The *fait divers* is photography drawn from life; ugly, stupid, brutal, but cynically sincere in its stupid reality."⁹⁴ (The attraction of the newspaper's *fait divers* was its representation of reality, no matter how base or brutal)

The centrality of *faits divers* in the mass press stemmed in part from historical circumstance. Because *Le Petit Journal* was a nonpolitical newspaper, it turned to "daily life" for its material. It was not until 1869, however, with the explosion of "l'affaire Troppmann" that the *fait divers* sealed its success by exploiting the murder of the entire famille Kinck in late September of that year.⁹⁵ From start to finish, this case

91. Dubief, *Le journalisme*, 235.

92. For more on caricature, see Philippe Roberts-Jones, *De Daumier à Lautrec: essai sur l'histoire de la caricature française entre 1860 et 1890* (Paris: Beaux-Arts, 1960); Jacques Lethève, *La caricature et la presse sous la IIIe République* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961); Chartier and Martin, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française*, part 3; Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, ch. 3.

93. For a precise history of the use of photography in the illustrated press, see Anne-Claude Ambroise-Rendu, "Du dessin de presse à la photographie (1878-1914): histoire d'une mutation technique et culturelle," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 39 (January-March 1992): 6-28.

94. *Le Paris*, August 6, 1886.

95. For an interesting account of the Troppman affair and the public who attended trials, see Katherine Fischer Taylor, *In the Theater of Criminal Justice: The Palais de Justice in Second Empire Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

Le Journal illustré

DIX-NEUVIÈME ANNÉE — N° 25

DIMANCHE 18 JUIN 1882

PRIX DU NUMÉRO 2 CENTIMES

Genève

*Le crime de Pecq, par Henri Mayer et Ed. Maistre de Sulpis
sare comparés, par Hubert Gougeon. — Les Femmes de Paris,
d'après des documents de police, par Eugène Meyer. —
La façade de la Bibliothèque Nationale, par Spitzer Gougeon.
— Une illustration de Jean-Louis, par Paul Huguier.*

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Administration et Rédaction à Paris, 104, rue de Valenciennes
— rue Lafayette, 62.

Tout

*Cronique de la semaine, par Armand Legras. — Roman-Fris et
Tendres, par Charles Baccus. — Une genève. — La re-
cherche de la Bretonne, suite de Testament d'un honnête,
par Y. Faisie (de). — Roman Anacréon. — Une soirée de
loisange.*



Le crime du Pecq : Découverte du cadavre
Dessin de Henri Mayer. — Voir l'article, page 194.

4. The "crime de Pecq," from *Le Journal illustré*, June 18, 1882.

was its newspaper coverage as the press investigated alongside the police.⁹⁶ The press, in fact, became so associated with the story that rumors circulated that one of the *Petit Journal* reporters actually helped with Troppmann's execution.⁹⁷

The affair also cemented the real power of the new mass press to construct a shared culture of daily life. *La Chronique illustrée* captured this quality in 1869 when it explained, "The emperor, who keeps himself informed of the inquiry, hour by hour, worries from his imperial residence about Troppmann as the worker worries about it in the cabaret and as the bourgeois does, calm in his house."⁹⁸ The emphasis here on the different locations of the affair's public only serves to underscore how the newspaper constructed common ground. Through representation, the newspaper drew these separate audiences together and endowed them with a common frame of reference.

(The historian Michelle Perrot explained the genre's function by suggesting that the *fait divers* valorized the private and asserted the "triumph of the subject."⁹⁹ Yet more than anything else, the *fait divers* constructed a new kind of public life by thrusting ordinary people, even innocent victims and murderous transients, onto a vast stage for inspection by the "universalized" eye of the newspaper reader.) The *fait divers* indicated that all life, no matter how banal, could be rendered spectacular through sensational narrative. In addition, the *faits divers*' precise location in contemporary and ordinary Paris meant that readers could identify with the narrative. At any moment they might find themselves the subject of a notorious *fait divers*.)

(The *fait divers* also embodied a genuinely commercial logic. For such columns did not always report such extraordinary tales as the Troppmann affair. Even as small an item as a three-line statement reporting an accident, a lost pet, or a theater opening, could count as news in the *fait divers* rubric. After all, in "the big city" something was always happening. The daily newspaper was a commercial form that had to entice

96. On the press's role in creating, pathologizing and normalizing "criminals," see Marie-Christine Leps, *Apprehending the Criminal: The Production of Deviance in Nineteenth-Century Discourse* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1992).

97. Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 230. See also Michelle Perrot, "L'affaire Troppmann," *L'Histoire*, January 30, 1981.

98. *La Chronique illustrée*, October 1869, cited in Pierre Drachline, *Le fait divers au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Editions Hermé, 1991), 149.

99. Perrot, "Fait divers," 916.

readers daily by creating interest in and stimulating desire for their product. By taking everyday life and transforming it into sensation, the press guaranteed a constantly renewable "news" source.)

The sensationalized banality of the *faits divers* spawned what by the 1880s and 1890s became known as the *presse d'information*; new titles such as *Le Matin* (1883), *L'Eclair* (1888) and *Le Journal* (1892) began to rival the popularity of such standards as *Le Petit Journal*.¹⁰⁰ *Chroniqueurs* such as *Le Petit Journal's* Timothée Trimm were surpassed in popularity by reporters such as Charles Chincholle and Fernand Xau, who were thought to better serve "the recently developed taste for precise information."¹⁰¹

In particular, contemporaries pointed to the novelty of the interview in the *presse d'information*. Anatole France simply declared that "the interview is the order of the day."¹⁰² Emile Zola called it "the public's favorite plaything."¹⁰³ *L'Actualité* had become the *soupe du jour*—and papers served up *l'homme du jour* as an essential ingredient. In fact, the newspaper *L'Eclair* had a column called *L'homme du jour*, through which newsworthy individuals were commodified and turned into news. Like the popular *fait divers*, the interview became an indispensable press rubric because it was a perfect vehicle through which to fabricate news in a press that was driven by the requirements of daily purchase. The *fait divers* banked on sensationalizing the banal events of everyday life, and the "interview" could attest to the range of newsworthy individuals roaming the city streets. Additionally, the interview form mimicked elements that were vaunted as the value of the *presse d'information*: speed, spontaneity and a kaleidoscopic range of facts and information transformed into "news" by the press.

"Interview," as is fairly apparent, is not a French word. It first turned up in the pages of *Le Petit Journal* in 1884, according to the *Grande Encyclopédie* of the same year. The term made its way into the second supplement of Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire universel* of 1890, where it was explained as American in origin. In fact, most histories of the modern press point to the conversation in 1836 between James Gordon

100. Henri Avenel, *Histoire de la presse française: depuis 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1900), 816

101. "L'interview," *Le Temps*, October 21, 1894.

102. Anatole France, "A propos de l'interview," *Annales politiques et littéraires*, August 26, 1894, 131-32.

103. Henry Leyret, "M. Emile Zola, interviewé sur l'interview," *Le Figaro*, January 12, 1893.

Bennett, publisher of *The New York Herald*, and the mother of a murder victim as the first press interview.¹⁰⁴ But interviews did not catch on. The American press did not return to the genre until the late 1860s.¹⁰⁵ The French press only used it when it moved to *reportage*. Yet the popularity of the interview prompted Henry Fouquier to urge a French name, given the form's popularity: "It's a banality to note that the interview—which I would like to see have a French name since it has become very French—has triumphantly entered the ways of the press."¹⁰⁶

So what exactly was the interview and its value, as discussed by contemporaries? Anatole France defined it as "a meeting in which a well-known person, M. Coquelin cadet or M. Pasteur, confers with a journalist, particularly a reporter, a Chincholle, regarding a recent event."¹⁰⁷ This seemingly economical definition says quite a bit because it sets up the essential elements of the interview: audience (by whom the interviewed is already "well known"), the celebrity, the interviewer and some recent event as the point of departure. In his definition, France further specified that written responses were not sufficient: "Written response has neither the spontaneity of dialogue, nor the charm of words that trip off the tongue, nor the revelatory truth of intimate talk."¹⁰⁸ Maurice Barrès explained that the advantage of the interview "seems to me to give an exact impression of a well-known fellow as he really is in flesh and blood."¹⁰⁹ The interview thus used the spoken word to provide what the mass press offered in spades—the unpredictable, the spontaneous, the unresolved and the true.

Spontaneity and truth were meant to guide the interview and thus became the subjects of scrutiny in discussions concerning the popularity of the form. For example, Léon Say complained that the interview was dangerous "because it encourages politicians to improvise their opinions," and that it was better to use the rostrum than take "the whole world, by way of the journalist, as their interlocutor."¹¹⁰ Victorien Sardou complained that reporters exaggerated and made a travesty of

104. See Schudson, *Discovering the News*; and Helen Hughes, *News and the Human Interest Story* (New York: Greenwood, 1968) for more on Gordon and the press in the United States.

105. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 66.

106. *Le XIXe Siècle*, October 1, 1891.

107. France, "A propos de l'interview," 131.

108. *Ibid.*, 132.

109. Maurice Barrès, "Les beautés de l'interview," *Le Figaro*, August 22, 1890.

110. Léon Say, cited in France, "A propos de l'interview."

what was said and made the interviewee responsible for their faulty memory.¹¹¹

The interview became the means through which journalists, supposedly relegated to the background by the "facts," maintained their roles as guides. In particular, reporters circulated in more open and apparently democratic space than did the earlier columnists. As Hughes Leroux explained in *Le Temps*, "*chroniqueurs* belonged to the salon, the theater, the boudoir, and the back rooms, the reporter was "the man of the street." Whereas the *chroniqueurs* had "remembrances," the reporter was supposed to have legs.¹¹² Those legs gave them and newspaper readers through them, access and proximity to a host of city people. The big interviewers such as Fernand Xau, Pierre Griffard, Paul Ginisty, Hughes Leroux, Gaston Calmette, Charles Chincholle, Séverine (the only woman) and Adolphe Brisson became the readers' stand-ins.¹¹³ Rather than encourage readers to feel as though they had witnessed a conversation between the reporter and his source, interviews were set up to encourage the reader to identify with the interviewer. In this way, the interview was as much about the heroism and shamelessness of the reporter (and the public) as it was about those interviewed.

Cynics, in fact, mocked the foppery of reporters desperate for an interview. The columnist for the *Courier de Paris* section of *L'Illustration*, who wrote as Rastignac, often took aim at the excesses of reporters. As he explained, a reporter presents himself at the home of a general during mealtime. The annoyed prospective interviewee says that the reporter has interrupted his dinner and, besides, he has nothing to say. The reporter insists: "What kind of soup had you just finished when I had the bad fortune to interrupt you? A consommé? A bisque? That'll be enough for my article." The next day the general opens the paper and to his surprise reads four columns "containing a description of his furniture, his living room, his table setting, his noodle soup."¹¹⁴

In his discussion of the new press, Eugène Dubief pointed to the pushiness of interviewers. He recounts that a ship transporting a celebrity on a transatlantic voyage found a small boat coming up along its side. "It's not pirates, it's the interviewers. . . . They throw them-

111. Ibid.

112. *Le Temps*, February 22, 1889.

113. For more on Séverine, see Marie Louise Roberts, "Subversive Copy: Feminist Journalism in fin-de-siècle France," paper delivered at the Western Society for French History, Las Vegas, November 1995.

114. *L'Illustration*, May 15, 1886.

selves on the stranger . . . ask whether he is married or single, if he prefers his meat well done or rare."¹¹⁵ The cartoonist Caran d'Ache took his own swipe at journalists. In a series of illustrations, César Beaucrayon is refused entry to a private club, denied a seat at the theater, a table at a café, a place in a coach. He throws himself into the Seine, which promptly regurgitates him. At the morgue, the other corpses insist on his removal. Finally at the gates of heaven, Saint Peter tells him he has no place in heaven, purgatory or hell. "So, come over here, mumbled Saint Peter, seizing the soul by the collar: Over there is the court to decide on journalists."¹¹⁶

Pirates, opportunists, liars—interviewers perfectly negotiated the demands of modern urban life. Dubief again: "He entered like a breeze, he speaks like a train whistle, with staccato, panting words. Dressed in the latest fashions, he's restless, he draws attention to his own importance. It's he that visits all the lively characters, big and small: just as you see him, if he's not leaving the Ministry, he's coming out from visiting a diva, if not the assassin of the moment."¹¹⁷ But the interviewer did not merely negotiate the challenges of the city, the adjectives used to describe him double as descriptions of the urban context.

Beyond their often shared subjects, the *roman-feuilleton* and the *fait divers* and *reportage* promised narrative suspense, novelty and a faithful representation of a city that seemed both remote and yet strangely familiar to the vast majority of Parisian readers. This familiarity became the measure of the readers' sense of participation and belonging to a broader urban collective. By promoting a sensationalized reality, the mass press offered its readers evidence of Paris as a community—as a community they, or any newspaper reader for that matter, might join.

In a letter from Paris to his future sister-in-law, Minna Bernays, Sigmund Freud wrote in 1885,

I don't think they know the meaning of shame or fear; the women no less than the men crowd round nudities as much as they do round corpses in the morgue or the ghastly posters in the streets announcing a new novel in this or that newspaper and simultaneously showing a sample of its content. . . . If you do come here you will probably first of all be attracted by what captivates most people exclusively—the brilliant exterior, the swarm-

115. Dubief, *Le journalisme*, 96.

116. *L'Illustration*, January 14, 1888.

117. Dubief, *Le journalisme*, 95.

ing crowds, the infinite variety of attractively displayed goods, the streets stretching for miles, the flood of light in the evening, the overall gaiety and politeness of the people.¹¹⁸

Freud's letter suggests that he was dazzled by the surfaces and exteriors of Paris—by everything that could be seen. Parisians, he noted, were shameless because life in the city was neither hidden nor remote, it transpired in “the swarming crowds” and in the “brilliant exterior.” In the new Paris, life was thought of as something to be seen as well as lived. (Lived experience or “reality,” whether on the boulevard or in the newspaper, became the matter represented. In the capital's newly organized spaces in and around the old *grands boulevards* and through the modern mass press, viewing became an essential means of participating in Parisian life.)

The boulevard and the press are no doubt most obviously linked through their blatant ties to a burgeoning consumer culture. As Guy Debord theorized and as many historians of consumerism have argued, the spectacularization of everyday life epitomizes its saturation by capital.¹¹⁹ Yet to tie them to consumerism does not explain the particular forms they took and why these forms and not others were popular with the urban masses whose support and participation was essential to their success.

In the chapters that follow, the reader will recognize large and socially diverse crowds gathered as spectators, clamoring to see “the real thing.” At the city morgue, dead bodies displayed behind a large glass window drew as many as a million visitors a year. In a number of commercial entertainments—wax museums, panoramas, dioramas and cinema—crowds delighted to see “real life” realistically represented. Through the spectacularization of reality, urban dwellers could assume the pleasures of looking as the very means of constructing a new collectivity. Rather than subsist as alienated and detached individuals lost in the crowd, the urban mob happily assembled as a new collective in front of the spectacle of the real. In, and thus as, the audience, they became “Parisians.”

118. *The Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. Ernst L. Freud, trans. Tania and James Stern (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), letter 87, December 3, 1885. I thank Toby Gelfand for drawing my attention to this letter.

119. See Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*; Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, eds., *Everyday Life*, Yale French Studies no. 73 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); and especially, T. J. Clark, *Painting of Modern Life*, for Paris.