Not long ago I met with a film director from the former Soviet Union, Nikita Mikhalkov. He stood six feet, four inches, wore a heavy walrus mustache, and spoke in a booming voice. His conversation was full of parables, belly laughs, and wry pessimism in the vein of Gogol. In short, Mikhalkov exemplified, and knew he exemplified—moreover, he tried to exemplify—what we think of as Russianness.

In conversation, Mikhalkov spoke at length of the Russian sensibility, the Russian way of life, Russian values and spirit. "Democracy can't work in the former Soviet Union," he said, "It's against the Russian character. The idea of democracy in Russia reminds me of when Gorbachev visited Sweden during the glasnost period. He saw the ample housing and social services, stores full of goods, comfort, and cleanliness. Back in Moscow, Gorbachev announced to the press, 'We should have more Swedish-style socialism in the Soviet Union. To which I said at the time, 'There aren't enough Swedes in Russia!'"

Mikhalkov has brought plenty of Russianness to the screen. Oblomov (1979) concerned an indolent aristocrat who was so apathetic he could not raise himself from the sofa to engage in the courtly rituals appropriate to his station. Dark Eyes (1987) won an Academy Award nomination for Marcello Mastroianni's performance as a charming bamboozler in late Czarist Russia. And Close to Eden (1991) told the story of a Russian truck driver stranded in the steppes of Mongolia.

After we had talked for a while, I asked the Russian filmmaker, "What is the Russian spirit? Can you encapsulate it for me?" Mikhalkov responded with a parable:

It's night. You're in the forest. Frost on the ground. A wooden cottage among trees. The sound of balalaika music in the air: 'dinga-long-a-long-a-long-a-long.' The music stops. The cottage door swings open. A barrel-chested man, shirtless, barefoot, a balalaika in his hand, steps out. He bellows at the top of his...
lungs: "FuuuuuckYooooooouu!" He slams the door and disappears.
The balalaika resumes. That's the Russian character!

War Tourism
Mikhalkov's performance of "the Russian sensibility" presents an example of constructed ethnicity. A constructed ethnicity is a national, regional, sometimes racial identity produced in the presence of, and for, a spectator. This performative dimension within ethnicity is based on the presumption that culture is not written, as theorists of language might build their metaphor, but staged.

The tourist industry contains the clearest examples of ethnicity produced as an event. In fall 1992, I went to ex-Yugoslavia to write a newspaper story about the bombing of the Croatian city of Dubrovnik. A thousand-year-old settlement on the Adriatic Sea, Dubrovnik was once the seat of a trading empire. In the twentieth century, the city became the main hub of the Yugoslavian tourist economy, which extended several hundred miles along the coast.

For an eight-month period in 1991-92, and again in early 1993, Dubrovnik was shelled with gunfire from the Serbian army. The old town was perforated by thousands of mortars, artillery from gunboats offshore, and Howitzers perched on nearby hills. When I visited, a United Nations truce had been agreed upon, and the Serbs had withdrawn from the perimeter of the city in the direction of Montenegro, twenty miles to the southeast. The worst damage was not in Dubrovnik itself, but in the tiny, picturesque villages in the path of the Serbian retreat. As they withdrew, the Serbs had burned everything.

Cilipe, a village with a population of 500, was once a showcase for the folklore of the Dalmatian coast. A former peasant village, Cilipe had been developed in the 1960s by the Tito government to attract tourists carrying so-called hard currency. The community was arranged in a circle around a central church. There were gift shops selling regional costumes, performances in the town square, and a little museum of peasant life. In short, Cilipe had an economy based entirely on constructed ethnicity. Then the Serbian army arrived. After they had gone, 167 of the village's 184 houses had burned to the ground. When I visited, the village was empty of human life, save two or three people shoveling at the ruins.

Walking through the rubble, I met a woman called Marina Desin. She introduced herself as the director of the former museum of ethnography. We stood in the roofless hulk of her old offices and talked. She told me about the folk festivals that had been staged every Sunday in front of the church. People had dressed in the old local costume, played music, and organized dances. The museum had artifacts from around the region and was the center of village activity.

Looking around the ruins, I tried to imagine the former street life. A constant stream of tourists. Crowded cafes, people selling costumes and crafts, free-flowing wine, concerts in the town square. None of this was recognizable among the shards. Nothing was left except, standing in the museum's ruins, a giant stone wheel. The former director explained that the stone was once used to press olives, showing tourists how cooking oil had been extracted in the old days.

I asked Marina Desin whether she had any hope of rebuilding what had been lost, and she replied, "We aren't going to rebuild. We're going to restore." It was a cryptic remark. Only later did I realize what she meant. It was not "merely" that people might move back to Cilipe, take up their lives and put roofs back on their houses. The museum director meant that the whole apparatus of the tourist performance, seamlessly fused with everyday life—the consciousness of self and nation as an interlocking unit to be displayed—would somehow be put back together.

Returning to Dubrovnik, I found an architect who was assisting in the
repair of buildings fractured by bombs. His name was Zvonimir Franic. He had a different idea of the effect of the war on the tourist economy. "No one will come here," he said pessimistically, "as long as the Serbian guns are nearby. Eventually tourists may come; but merely to see the damage. They will spend a day or two, look around, then leave. They will come to see what the war has done."

Franic’s suggestion was alarming. The damage would not soon be put back to rights and the ethnic performance resumed. Instead, Croatia might see the formation of a new branch of “war tourism.” Once the war was suspended, he implied, people might fly in to see the aftermath. And the locals, to carry the conjecture further, would obligingly show them around.

War tourism would differ from the traffic around historical monuments; a traditional destination in the travel economy. Many of us have been to old battlefields, climbed on towers, and looked out at the horizon, or stood at the war memorials in cities far from the old front lines. War tourism, by contrast, would take place at a site during the actual moments of shifting national identity. In place of displays of ethnic selfhood, there is substituted the destruction of cultural life. The destruction itself becomes the focus of interest.

Spectacle

In the shadow of such cultural developments, our ideas about display and visuality seem narrow. One of the most progressive notions of display seems still to derive from a text of the 1960s, The Society of the Spectacle. When Guy Debord and the Situationists, the avant-garde art cell, first began to circulate the notion of “the spectacle,” it was as a principled attack on reification and commodification. Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle (1967) observed the spreading out of the rule of exchange to the furthest precincts of daily life. For Debord, the spectacle meant the panoramic landscape of advertising, motion pictures, and television—an image world that transformed lived experience, depleted it, and finally substituted a homogenous performance of consumption in its place.

During the 1970s and 80s, picking up where Debord and the Situationists left off, Jean Baudrillard took the measure of the culture of simulation. In the realm of the simulacrum, representations have so far escaped lived experience that they do not even brush up against the flesh of events. Even war can appear to us, via the news media, as a visual and enthralling performance that does not link up with phenomenal reality. After the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Baudrillard wrote a pamphlet called The Gulf War Did Not Take Place. The essay argued that media coverage of the bombing of Iraq—being bloodless, and notoriously resembling a video game—displaced the war up to the realm of the signifier: There it remained, inaccessible, frozen as an experience.

I would like to embellish the notion of spectacle by linking into three additional terms: Otherness, ethnicity, and performance. The spectacle is not restricted to economic phenomena (the intensification of capitalism), or to the culture of images (the growth of visual media). The spectacle is also an encounter with Otherness. It appears as a moment in the consciousness of the subject. For example, the individual witnessing representations of the Gulf War experiences in addition to a narrative of bombing and military "success"—a consciousness of an object of wonder and ambiguity. The spectacle of the war appears as a shock, an unintelligible Otherness, which produces self-consciousness. This definition of Otherness corresponds to the Sartrean sense of "the Other" as a mysterious, existential alterity.

In recent years, there has been added to this existentialist meaning an additional connotation of Otherness, that of the ethnic/national/cultural
Other. Ethnic Otherness differs from philosophical Otherness in its being historical in content. Unlike philosophical Otherness, ethnic Otherness yields to the naming of difference (Chicano, Italian-American, Chinese, African American, white). Yet ethnic Otherness can be no less powerful a defining moment for individual identity—what "I am" versus what "they are."

I would like to import these twin senses—existential Otherness and ethnic Otherness—into an understanding of the notion of the spectacle. By doing so, we might have, finally, an idea of display that incorporates an experience of difference.

Carnival
In 1992, I was in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. The carnival season in New Orleans, the time of "masking," is a spectacular instance of crossover into ethnic and sexual difference. Tourists come to the city hoping to experience the "pure" difference of the public masquerade—women dressed as men (or vice versa), blacks dressed as whites, workers dressed as royalty, and so on.

One of the most popular aspects of the New Orleans carnival is the parading of the so-called Mardi Gras Indians. The Indians include seventeen clubs or "tribes" of mostly poor people, all black, who dress themselves in fantastical costumes of Native American derivation. The "Indian" tradition dates from 120 years ago, when black people, excluded from participating in white carnival balls and parades, formed Mardi Gras organizations of their own, with names like the White Eagles and the Wild Apaches. On Mardi Gras day, these "tribes" march through the streets chanting and drumming.

Why do black people imitate Native Americans? I put this question to the "chief" of an Indian group called Creole Wild West, Bertrand Butler. Butler explained that when black slaves ran away from their masters, Indians were the only people who took them in. He added, "Africans and Indians are almost identical people, anyway. They have a witch doctor, we have a voodoo man. They were warriors, we were warriors. We both lived in tents or huts. We both wore feathers. We're almost the same."

On Mardi Gras day, the marchers of Creole Wild West sometimes bump into other Indian groups in the street. When the tribes meet, each lets go a rant or chant in Afro-Caribbean patois. One of them sounds like this:

Hey-an clan dalu wild mamboula!
Handa wands o mambo.
Said uptown rulers and downtown too!
Handa Nyanda o mama.

Indians coming from all over town.
Big chief singing gomta put them down.
Click-a-mo feny hey de icy.
Indians the rulers on the holiday
How do we talk about this subculture in the context of spectacle and display? The Mardi Gras Indians become "themselves" by encountering Otherness-specifically, the idea of the Native American. This encounter, in turn, is publicly performed in the street. I hope I do not exterminate the life of this beguiling show by applying to it the phrase from the beginning of this paper-constructed ethnicity. The case of Cilipe, (lie town in Croatia, presented an instance of constructed ethnicity in which the participants had created a modern tourist economy from the disused remnants of their peasant society. The Mardi Gras Indians, by contrast, construct an identity by assimilating the emblems of an Indian culture to African-American life. They recognize Otherness and absorb it, making the process of absorption into the act of self-creation.

Cultural Authenticity

Today, there is a compelling demand for more and more forms of Otherness. We clamor for the display of local cultures in their redolent authenticity. I'm reminded of the story of the indigenous Tasaday people of the Philippines. In the early 1970s, a group of anthropologists, working in a remote jungle far from Manila, discovered the Tasadays, a "primitive" tribe unruffled by the winds of modernity. A mere twenty Tasadays had managed to sequester themselves in the jungle. There they lived in thatched huts, used stone-age instruments, and foraged for food. The Tasadays had somehow escaped the grasp of colonialism, and more strangely, the even more powerful hand of industrialization. But following their discovery by an ambitious scientist, the Tasadays were sought out by ethnographers and subjected to numerous studies and interviews. Surprisingly, the "primitives" enthusiastically cooperated with their newfound fame, answering the questions of all visitors, and actually traveling to Manila to be interviewed on television.

A few years after this remarkable cultural emergence, a Dutch journalist traveling in the Philippines became a confidante of one of the Tasadays, and learned that the whole thing had been a hoax. Evidently the Minister of Interior in the Philippines government wanted publicity for his department, and to get it, he had arranged for a few native people in a remote village to perform a kind of "primitive" behavior for visiting scholars and news reporters. When the anthropologists and reporters were scheduled to arrive,
these natives would take off the jeans and T-shirts that they normally wore, paint their bodies, and wait in a remote village of thatched huts built by the government. After the visitors left the Tasaday camp, the "tribe" put their jeans and T-shirts back on, and went back to their everyday life, driving pick-up trucks, listening to the radio, and carrying on like the hybrid cultural subjects that they actually were.

There is an insistent demand for the display of "genuine" ethnic identity, which is not often forthcoming. We ask for ethnicity to be performed, and we are disappointed when the result appears to be staged. By way of a conclusion, I would like to offer a final example of constructed ethnicity that appears to embody the ambiguities of cultural identity.

Japan is the capital of cultural hybridity. On the one hand, the Japanese historical culture—including traditions such as Shinto, tea ceremony, flower arranging, martial arts, cuisine, etc.—continues with great intensity, though at times some of these traditions appear to be performed by rote. On the other hand, the imported forms of especially American popular culture fill much of the daily life of the generations born after World War II.

In Tokyo, a vivid subculture grown from American popular music has become as Japanese as any tea ceremony or shogun's palace. Every Sunday, in the neighborhood known as Harajuku, in the parking lot that lies outside the Olympic Stadium, groups of high-school students perform dances. The teenagers are devoted fans of rockabilly. They have immersed themselves in 1950s American music, wavy hairstyles, and clothing (tight leather jackets for the boys, frilly dresses for the girls), and learned dances that date from the years after World War II. The teens dance in groups, the boys with each other, and the girls likewise.

The rockabilly dancers, in addition to affirming themselves as a group in an encounter with American Otherness, are an attraction for tourists, who go to the Olympic Stadium to watch the performance. In this way, the dancers have quite strangely come to represent (at least for the tourists) something essentially Japanese. Throwing themselves against a popular music that was once a creation of mass marketing to Americans, these Japanese kids extract some identity for themselves, and at the same time, for the nation of Japan. The rockabilly subculture is personal, as well as being emblematic of Japan, a country whose social forms we have come to see as hybrid in the extreme. Here is the beguiling paradox of constructed ethnicity—the act is repeated until the performance itself becomes the authentic expression.