

The Operation of the Spectacle in Architecture: A Case Study of the CCTV Headquarters

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Abstract: *In modern cities, the significance of landmark buildings often goes beyond their spatial functions, becoming a visual domain where power narratives, capital logic, and public discourse interweave. This paper takes the China Central Television Headquarters (CCTV headquarters) as a case, using Guy Debord's theory of the The Society of the Spectacle, and examines the spectacle operation of the building from three dimensions: Construction of the governmental spectacle, capital spectacle appreciation, and public ridicule and dismissal. The analysis shows that the government uses the CCTV headquarters as a visual symbol of official authority; the capital transforms this authoritative symbol into consumption value, making the CCTV headquarters a symbol for property premium and brand return; the public, through "Big Pants" and other playful expressions, daily dismembers it in their narrative tone. This paper employs an analysis based on Guy Debord's theory of the The Society of the Spectacle to reveal the dynamic negotiation process of the meaning production of landmark buildings.*

Keywords: *CCTV headquarters, The Society of the Spectacle, consumerism*

1. Introduction

The CCTV headquarters was designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and is a circular building (as shown in Figure 1). It is a twisted, ring-shaped skyscraper constructed using 100,000 tons of steel. It is located at the junction of the Chang'an Avenue Extension and the middle section of the East Third Ring Road, covering an area of 405,000 square meters and standing at a height of 230 meters, with a total of 55 floors. Its front facade is an inverted U-shaped giant window, and the side is a zigzag frame. From the angle of the CBD, it appears as a suspended ring. As a symbol of the national media, the CCTV Headquarters is the most recognizable visual symbol of Beijing's CBD. The government calls it a symbol of the new era in Beijing, while the public refers to it as "Big Pants". It is a landmark building for the capital during the Olympic broadcasts and is also visual material that is constantly being deconstructed by social media. Therefore, from its architectural design to its public reception, this building demonstrates the deployment of the 'spectacle'.

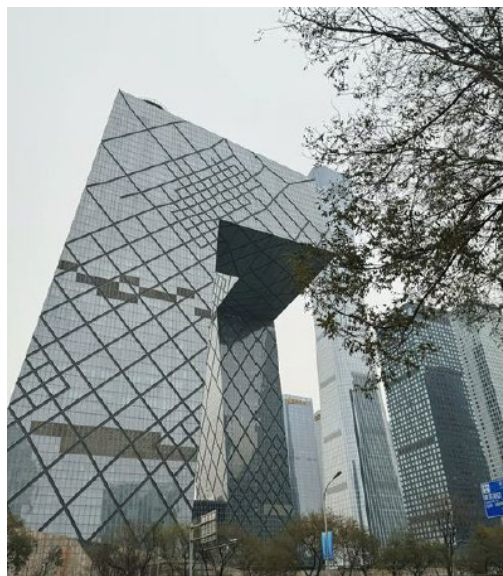


Figure 1. The CCTV Headquarters

Therefore, this paper uses Guy Debord's concept of society of the spectacle as the theoretical basis to study the operational process of the spectacleization. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle* published in 1967, Debord proposed that the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a form of governance in modern society - power and capital use the creation of visual spectacles that conform to their own narratives to consolidate their legitimacy. However, Debord also pointed out that the spectacle is not a one-way domination; the daily interpretation of the spectacle by the public may constitute a reverse deconstructive force [1]. Therefore, this paper analyzes the dynamic construction process of the society of the spectacle from three mechanisms: the power narrative of the CCTV Headquarters, the logic of capital, and the public counter-narrative.

2. Theoretical and Literature Review

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord defined spectacle as a social relationship, stating that "Spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relationship between people, established through the mediation of images." [1] In other words, the dominant feature of contemporary society is essentially manifested as a displayed subjectivity. Furrer and Best defined Spectacle as a certain performance performed by a few while the majority merely watch silently.[2]The relationship between people and the CCTV Headquarters is established through the medium of images. Ordinary people cannot enter the interior of the CCTV Headquarters to experience and use it. Instead, they establish a connection with the building by taking photos. The building has become a fixed stop on the Beijing CBD tourist bus route, An object for social media check-ins destination repeatedly featured on social media, and a work repeatedly screenshotted and analyzed on architectural design websites. The number of photos taken far exceeds the number of people entering the building. For ordinary people, the social function of the CCTV Headquarters unfolds through images. For the government, the construction of the CCTV Headquarters was a process where power and capital transformed abstract identities and legitimacy into visible visual symbols, embedding them into people's daily visual experiences, thereby turning living objects into symbols and representations. Moreover, the landscape itself is a commodity: in modern conditions, the spectacle is not only the visual presentation of material goods after packaging, but is itself a form of capital that can be increased in value. A landmark building not only generates office space but also land price premiums, brand effects, and subsequent market opportunities. Lastly, the spectacle is not one-way: the public are not passive recipients of the spectacle; they will reinterpret the narrative created by the government using their daily experiences and vernacular language, sometimes even undermining or reversing it.

However, few scholars have combined architectural design, architectural analysis, and spectacle social theory. Li Ailin (2024) took urban development as a case study to explore spatial alienation in spectacle society and the role of spectacle society in spatial development [3]. Wang Hui (2019) used the example of industrial heritage renovation to reveal the critical stance of design practice when dealing with "landscape creation" [4]. Li Jiewen and Wang Hongyang (2023) started from the issue of urban space homogenization, pointing out that the localization operation might become a more concealed superficial replication under the spectacle logic [5]. The common contribution of these studies lies in introducing spectacle social theory from cultural criticism into urban space analysis, but their focus objects are urban planning and renovation, urban space design, and none focused on individual buildings. Krupar and Al (2010) further pointed out that star architects and branded cities have turned architecture into the core carrier of "brand spectacle" [6]. These studies have revealed the effectiveness of spectacle social theory in spatial analysis. Therefore, this paper conducts research from the unified effect of spectacle: how the government constructs the CCTV Headquarters as a visual symbol of media authority. How the building evolves into an investable spectacle commodity in the global capital context. The public dismembers the spectacle narrative through playful discourse practices. These three paths are used to explain the construction process of the symbolic meaning of landmark buildings.

3. Analysis of the Threefold Spectacle of the CCTV Headquarters

3.1 The Media Authority Spectacle under the Government Narrative

In 2002, the tender document for the international design competition of CCTV Headquarters stated that the primary expectation for the proposed design was to "reflect the new image of China's national television station". The proposal submitted by Rem Koolhaas and OMA responded to this demand with a continuous loop structure, consisting of two leaning towers connected by a 75-meter cantilevered bridge.

[7] The CCTV Headquarters features a three-dimensional looped spatial structure consisting of two towers, a cantilever, a podium, and a base. This structure dismantles the conventional architectural formula of traditional skyscrapers—typically characterized by a 'podium-rhythmic shaft-crown' configuration. By subverting the power hierarchy inherent in the vertical axis, it symbolizes the openness of the media and the continuous circulation of information. This design strategy perfectly aligns with the official repositioning of CCTV at that time: China's national television station is attempting to transform from a traditional propaganda institution into a modern media group oriented towards the global market, and an unprecedented architectural form precisely converts this abstract identity transformation into a visible material symbol.

The main structure of the CCTV Headquarters adopts an integral spatial tubular structure, which is composed of beams, columns and steel components that intersect at an angle. The curtain wall support structure is arranged parallel to the structural diagonal support system. The standard rhombic panels have a height spanning over four floors, forming the irregular rhombic pattern of the exterior wall of the CCTV Headquarters (as shown in Figure 2).

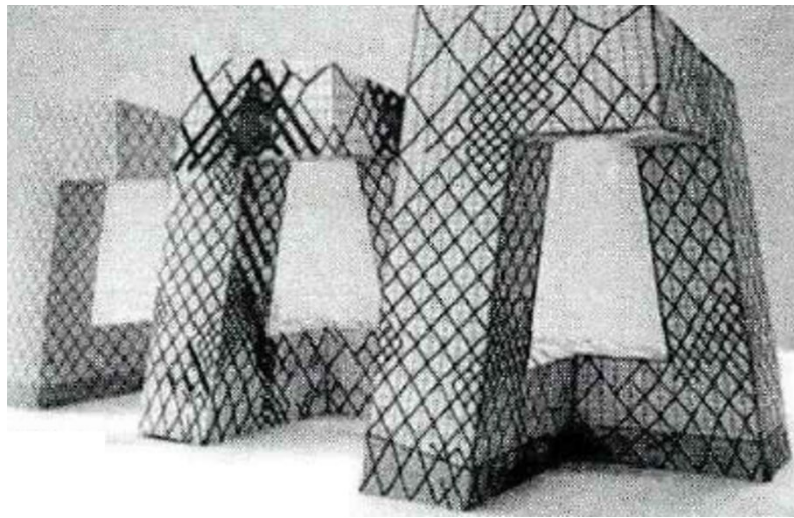


Figure 2. The exterior wall of the CCTV Headquarters

The structural design of the facade dictates the density of its steel members based on stress distribution: the grid is denser at corners and areas of stress concentration, while it becomes sparser in areas with lower structural loads. This structure involves approximately 140,000 tons of steel, a 75-meter unsupported cantilever, and a seismic fortification intensity of 8 degrees. Each of these elements represents a genuine engineering challenge, and every challenge has been addressed with a tangible technical solution. When the public stands in front of this building, there is a visual "shock". Although the government did not promote much, in the spectacle society, the shock naturally slides from the technological wonder to the creator of the wonder. The national television station, as the core institution for image production, its own headquarters building itself became the produced image - a visual statement about "media authority" and "national openness". There is no need for anyone to elaborate on the legitimacy and authority of CCTV. The shape of the building itself is the argument. During the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when global television broadcasts showed the still-under-construction building alongside the Bird's Nest and the Water Cube to the world, the juxtaposition of these three technologies (structural wonder, biomimetic aesthetics, membrane structure innovation) conveyed a message far more effective than any functional description: this is a country capable of building all of this. This is exactly what Debord refers to as the 'unifying effect': technological, national, and global narratives are fused into an indivisible whole. It is not about intentional propaganda; rather, when you attempt to strip the ideology away from the 'awe', you realize that there is simply no pure, context-free structural aesthetic left to be extracted independently [1].

3.2 Spectacle Commodities in the Global Capital Context

The government narrative endowed buildings with symbolic value, but this symbolic value did not remain at an abstract level. It quickly transformed into economic value in the market. On the one hand, the accumulation of capital is realized through the consumption of spectacular spaces; on the other hand,

it is intricately linked to broader and more profound formal planning and urban regeneration strategies aimed at shaping a new city image [8].

The first dimension of capital accumulation for the CCTV Headquarters is the direct real estate premium. After the CCTV Headquarters was completed, the value of the surrounding plots continued to rise. Liu Hongyu et al. discovered that after the landmark high-price project was sold, the housing prices within 5 kilometers of the building could increase by approximately 16% [9]. For instance, in the Capital Tianxi project located merely 50 meters from the building, housing prices surged from approximately 30,000 RMB per square meter in its early stages to between 250,000 and 300,000 RMB per square meter, with an average unit price reaching around 100 million RMB. Similarly, Sino-Ocean Group's CBD Z6 project explicitly incorporated the phrase 'standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the CCTV Headquarters' into its commercial positioning copy. 'Being immediately adjacent to the new CCTV site' is not merely marketing rhetoric; rather, it is a spatial fact that can be priced.

The second level is OMA's brand value-added. The CCTV Headquarters is OMA's first major project in China. In the following ten years, OMA won a series of large-scale projects in China, such as Shenzhen Stock Exchange Headquarters (2013) and Poly International Plaza (Beijing) [10]. The brand of star architects and the brand of landmark buildings form a two-way value-added loop here.

The third level is the diffusion of the model. The path of celebrity architect + extreme form + international competition adopted by the CCTV Headquarters has since been widely replicated. Landmarks with peculiar shapes such as the Oriental Gate in Suzhou (Big Long Johns), the Sheraton Hotel in Huzhou (Toilet Cover), and the Fangyuan Building in Shenyang (Coin-shaped Building) have emerged in large numbers. During the process of model diffusion, it can be observed that the spectacle logic of the CCTV Headquarters has evolved into a replicable product. As long as the budget is sufficient and a celebrity architect is available, any city can have its own iconic landscape.

3.3 *The Public's Playful Subversion of the Spectacle*

After the fire in the North Annex Building in 2009, the nickname "Big Pants" quickly spread on the online community and became the most widely known term for this building - its usage frequency far exceeded that of formal names such as "CCTV New Headquarters Building" or "CCTV New Site". "Big Pants" gave rise to a large number of image remixes on social media: some photoshopped the building into a real pair of pants, some placed it in various absurd scenarios, and some made up jokes about it. Around 2022, this building was voted by netizens as one of the "ugliest buildings in China" in an informal online poll. There is a significant gap between the narrative of "The Architectural Version of China's Great Ambition" attributed to the authorities and the "Big Pants" described by netizens - this is not the different opinions of two different groups of people, but rather the same group of people participating in two different narratives simultaneously: they know it is a structural wonder and take photos and take selfies of it on social media, but they also participate in its playful reproduction.

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord notes that the spectacle must be understood as 'a social relation among people, mediated by images' [10]. This implies that the spectacle is not something fixed within a building or a photograph; rather, it is a relationship that is constantly redefined through social practice and use. When CCTV Headquarters is replaced by "Big Pants", what is replaced is not the shape of the building in the physical space, but the dominant narrative about "what kind of building this is". The official narrative desires authoritative and open visual symbols; the public's playful pulls it back to the experiential order of daily life. This precisely proves the specific aspect of Debord's assertion that spectacle is not one-way. The recipients of the spectacle can reject the imposed narrative framework, opting instead to redefine the spectacle object in their own terms. Under the logic of the consumer society, the nickname "Big Pants", originally carrying the meaning of undermining authority, eventually evolved into an extremely successful urban marketing IP. It proves that contemporary spectacle have a inclusiveness: the system not only tolerates its ridicule but also transforms this ridicule itself into new traffic, commodities, and part of the spectacle. Public thinks they have gained freedom by naming. But in fact, they have unintentionally become the "free pusher" that maintains the popularity and visibility of this building worldwide. Making more people consume for it and invest in real estate around it. The public's playful disintegration does not challenge the existing power and capital structure; instead, in a life-like way, this landmark carrying a grand narrative is faster embedded into the urban memory of ordinary people, and unconsciously further expands its dissemination and symbolic influence. Up to now, "Big Pants" has transformed from an anti-establishment nickname among the masses into a universal public symbol, and many urban tourism promotion and commercial promotion have openly

accepted this term: the original deconstruction of the official elite narrative eventually became part of this spectacle symbol, and even amplified its popularity and capital appreciation potential.

4. Summary

The tripartite mechanism of power narrative, capital logic and public counter-narrative in the CCTV Headquarters confirms Debord's core proposition: The spectacle is never a static symbol fixed in the physical building; it is essentially the dynamic social relationship generated by people through images as an intermediary. The three entities of power, capital and the public constantly engage in negotiation and competition around the symbolic meaning of the CCTV Headquarters, eventually making it a composite spectacle with multiple attributes: It is both the official visual carrier of the national media authority, a capital spectacle that drives the appreciation of urban areas, and a daily urban symbol that the public can freely ridicule and participate in constructing. The three attributes coexist without contradiction, jointly constituting the complete social life of this building.

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