

THE TALL AND THE MOBILE: A MEDIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE MEDIATIZATION OF OUTDOOR SPACES

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This paper tries to understand the current modalities of outdoor media use by excavating the processes of their becoming and the various cultural forms that have anticipated them. The theoretical issue informing the paper is the formation of the "outdoor subject" - the observer, the listener, the interactor - of media culture.

Media scholars have traditionally focused on audiovisual forms that are experienced indoors and in static settings; cinema-going and television spectatorship provide good examples. Researchers are slowly beginning to realize that such an emphasis covers only a part of the complex terrain that constitutes media culture. That part may even be shrinking, thanks to current developments within urban environments and experiences. Not only are metropolitan cities covered by high-tech media attractions such as giant LED-display screens; a growing number of citizens are walking or cruising through such spaces with media devices in their hands. The current smart phone revolution may be just a beginning for much more dramatic technological, behavioral and cultural changes.

This paper will approach this situation from a media-archaeological perspective, trying to understand the current modalities of outdoor media use by excavating the processes of their becoming and the various cultural forms that have anticipated them. These earlier forms are not treated as clear genealogical steps leading to the present condition. Rather, they are analyzed as symptomatic manifestations of contradictory motives and discursive fragments that have at various times and contexts highlighted issues the current media culture may erroneously believe it is encountering for the first time. Such issues cover, for example, the saturation of the city space by commercial messages like billboards, and the attitudes toward them; the varied early forms of "mobile media" such as "walking human posters" (sandwichmen), and the practices of using fans, watches, and other forms of "proto-wearable" media; and the complex relationships that developed between them. Ultimately, the theoretical issue informing the paper is the formation of the "outdoor subject" - the observer, the listener, the interactor - of media culture. The process of its becoming is far from clear-cut, involving numerous detours, lacunas and pot holes of history, buried deep underneath the "officially" recognized and legitimized media cultural developments.

The evolution of outdoor advertising in the nineteenth century is an important topic to investigate, not only because of its proliferation and institutionalization, but also because of the enormous enlargement of the ads themselves. The earliest signboards and broadsides were relatively small. Their scale could be characterized as anthropomorphic, which more or less corresponded with the dimensions of the living environments. From the Middle Ages to the early modern times, the elements that did not conform to this principle had to do with power. Cathedrals, city walls, castles and town halls were meant to impress the 'common people' by their size. Gothic cathedrals had enormous rose windows made of thousands of pieces of stained glass. Standing under Bernini's immense cupola at the new St. Peter's in Rome was meant to convince the visitor of the might of the catholic church. Still, even extraordinary public sights, such as the astronomical clocks built into the walls of churches or townhalls (sometimes on the outside) often consisted of relatively small elements. Their clockwork-operated *Jaquemarts* performed at regular

intervals, but the mechanical moving figures weren't necessarily larger than the automata demonstrated at fairs by itinerant showmen.

An indication that the situation was likely to change was provided by an early nineteenth century French cartoon that shows two men trying to read announcements posted on the wall. [1] One of them is peeking at the densely filled sheets from a ladder, while the other is using a telescope. Although the point of the cartoon is the absurdity of posting long official notices on the wall, its 'statement' can be generalized. Broadsides began not only piling up, but also climbing up along the wall, which made reading their messages difficult. Interestingly, broadsides were sometimes called 'handbills,' which refers to their other use: the practice of distributing them from hand to hand.

During the nineteenth century the situation changed dramatically, partly due to economic developments and changes in the urban environment, partly because of improvements in printing techniques. Toward the end of the century it had become possible to produce very large chromolithographic posters in multiple colors. Graphic designers learned to deal with large size, concentrating on elements that could raise interest, and be detected from a distance. They simplified the textual part of the message, focusing on the trademark and what came to be known as branding. Advertisers also began to take into consideration the placement of the billboard within the 'adscape,' playing with issues of scale and perspective. An 'aesthetics of the gigantic' was in the making.

The development led to the opposite direction as well: from enlargement to shrinking. Lithography and its improvement, chromolithography, as well as the techniques of photographic reproduction, provided possibilities for an unprecedented production of "smaller than usual" pictures. Illustrated magazines were part of the trend. Tiny mass-reproduced images spread to any imaginable place, even though the fashion among society ladies to dress up in photographs (a strange echo of the 'animated sandwiches' walking on the streets) proved to be short-lived. [2] Pictures filled up photographic albums and scrapbooks, and were also used as raw material for parlor pastimes, such as the creation of colorful collages of 'found' imagery on the common folding 'screens' (room dividers). So the enlargement of public images was accompanied by its reverse: miniaturization and privatization.

The mediatization of public space was reflected in the cultural imaginary. The dream worlds of emergent consumerism were internalized as shared (day)dreams. These were expressed in complex ways by cartoonists. A well known motive was the "bill poster's dream" that showed a bill poster sleeping next to a wooden fence completely covered by overlapping broadsides; their combinations led to the formation of surrealist-sounding sentences (anticipating the Exquisite Corpse). This idea was anticipated already in the 1830s in a series of prints titled "Cross Readings" (W. Jeffery, London), but without the dreamer (the composite messages were read column by column from top to bottom, in the manner of a newspaper page). The dreamer of consumerist dreams turned into a cultural topos that appeared in numerous versions, including political and propagandistic ones. In the time of the American Civil War, the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis, was put into the dreaming bill poster's place as the "rebel bill-poster" by *Harper's Weekly* (March 1862), seeing the war as nightmarish "writings on the wall."

The outstanding summary of this topos tradition was Busby Berkeley's "optical illusion" sequence for the Warner Bros musical *Dames* (dir. Ray Enright, 1934). Young lovers, who are traveling in a tram, fall asleep in their daydreams. At the moment of losing consciousness, the seductive posters on the walls of the tram are associated by the male's (Dick Powell) mind with his girlfriend's face. This provides the entry point to an outlandish dream sequence, where scores of girls carrying advertising boards (with the girl's iconic face, doubling as the character and the star actor, Ruby Keeler) are transformed into a series

of elaborate fantasies following one another. The spectators are transported deeper and deeper into the logic of the capitalist dream worlds. The external is merged with the internal. The concrete manifestations of commercial media culture are situated in the lead mail character's, and as a consequence, into the spectator's head. The musical film (ironically and significantly, produced in the heart of the Great Depression) provides the device that weaves the outside and the inside together.

To understand the peculiar ways in which the large and the small, the external and the internal were merged together, one might use the idea of the "gulliverisation" of the visual environment, as I suggested twenty years ago. [3] The concept refers to a two-directional optical-cultural 'mechanism' that worked against the idea of a common anthropomorphic scale. The size of the human observer kept on shifting between gigantic (in relation to the *carte-de-visite* photographs or tradecards) and lilliputhian (in front of large billboards or below advertising spectacles in the sky). Something similar happened in the field of media: 'immersion' into an enormous circular panorama or diorama painting (and later, the cinema screen) found its counterpart in the act of peeking at three-dimensional photographs with the ubiquitous hand-held stereoscope.

Gulliverisation operated at the divide between the public and the private. The dimensions of the urban environment, with the skyscraper as its ultimate manifestation, became more and more 'inhuman' – as the cultural reformists readily pointed out – whereas the home provided a welcome return to the anthropomorphic scale. The countless miniature objects and images that dotted the Victorian parlor were a way of handing the inhabitant an illusion of control that s/he was more and more clearly losing in public outdoor spaces. The gulliverisation also raised the issue of the relationship between things that are near (tangible) and distant (unreachable). Mediating between these opposites became a part of the advertisers' strategies, even if it may not have been always explicitly formulated. The billboards gave products a monumental and 'universal' quality, associating them with the urban environment. Tradecards, newspaper ads and other tangible forms brought them close, making them tangible and 'personal.' At the fingertips such paraphernalia functioned as temporary placebos for the products the subject did not (yet) possess. Everything was mediated by 'magic' transformations – in particular, by changes of scale that were inseparable from the perceptions and motions of the observer (the potential buyer).

Similar 'bipolar optics' manifested themselves somewhat later in phenomena like the movie stardom and the ideological manipulation of the masses in totalitarian societies like the nazi Germany. From around 1920 pictures of film stars became one of the most popular topics for *figurines*, collectable trade cards. The uncannily large faces that stared at the observer from promotional billboards and the cinema screens were shrunk to the size of one's fingertips: the object of adoration from afar suddenly was close and tangible. These pictures had an assignment in the expectations, promises and lust-evoking machinery with which the star cult was maintained. But they could be, if kept just like family pictures in the wallet, more than just a picture: the representation of someone who wasn't there, almost a part of that someone, a way of touching the thing that avoided being touched. The religious qualities that are often associated with the star cult may be the most apparent in the star figurines. In fact, they resemble mass-produced devotional cards, whose iconography derives from altar paintings and other large-scale religious representations. Advertising, the star system and the religious worship share the interplay between the monumental and the intimate. In this sense commercial billboards could perhaps be characterized as altar pictures for the cult of capitalism.

The nazis were aware about the ideological possibilities inherent in the gulliverisation of the visual sphere. They harnessed new media, such as cinema, radio, and even television (still at an experimental

stage) for their purposes. They organized carefully 'orchestrated' mass events and symbolic acts, including 'spontaneous' book burnings, and the dramatically staged *inferno* of the Reichstag (for which they accused the Jews). Leni Riefenstahl's state-sponsored 'documentaries' *Triumph of the Will* (1934) and *Olympia I-II* (1938) were part of the media façade the nazis built to impress both the Germans and the foreigners. Massive billboard-like images of Hitler's face were displayed in the nazi rallies (reminding one of the strategies used by other totalitarian regimes), but the nazis also understood the power of the ephemeral. The ideological indoctrination of a nation depended not just on explicit propaganda and mass rituals relayed by the media, but also on seemingly insignificant channels. A company named *Cigaretten-Bilderdienst* was established by Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry to produce series of collectable cards placed in cigarette packs. [4] Their subjects included the life of Hitler, nazi uniforms, the *Anschluss* of Austria and the *Wehrmacht*. Predictably, there was also a series about the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936, which provided the lilliputhian counterpoint of Riefenstahl's colossal film. Handsome collectors' albums, with carefully scripted captions, were also produced; the nazi ideology was internalized as a 'side-product' of 'innocent' hobbyism.

Adding the fascination of the media apparatus to the collecting experience, the Munich-based Raumbild-Verlag published sets of 3-D picture-pairs of Germany's war efforts. [5] These were viewed with a stereoscope that was stored, together with the stereocards, within the album. The first volume depicted the Polish campaign of 1939. This evokes an important issue that cannot be elaborated on here: the proliferation of portable gadgets. [6] It may not have been very evident at first. In the late nineteenth century the amateur photographic camera was one of the few options. Portable radios, sometimes in the guise of everyday objects, like purses or even pinkie rings, were introduced already in the 1920s, decades before the breakthrough of the transistor radio. Eventually, mass-marketed gadgets like Sony's Walkman, Apple's iPod and the nearly endless variety of pocket-size mobile communication devices would change the users' relationships to their surroundings, including the public screens. In a few experimental cases (mostly in the media arts) the personal portable devices have been turned into terminals for manipulating the content of public screens. Understandably, this has been limited by the authorities, who want the ultimate control over the public space. Handheld mobile screen-based devices may be a challenge to the giant screens, but this challenge is perceptual, rather than interactive. It has to do with the quality of looking, its direction, mobility and intensity. These issues began with the gulliverisation of the visual culture in the nineteenth century.

References and Notes:

1. Repr. in David Bernstein, *Advertising Outdoors: Watch this Space!* (London: Phaidon, 2007, orig.1997), 12.
2. See my "Cyborg is a Topos," in *Synthetic Times: Media Art China 2008*, ed. Fan Di'An and Zhang Ga, 52-71 (Beijing and Cambridge, Mass.: National Art Museum of China and The MIT Press, 2008), (in English and Chinese).
3. See my "Gulliver in Figurine Land," in *Mediamatic Vol. 4, No. 3* (Spring 1990): 101-105.
4. See Antonio Faeti, "Il tabacco di Goebbels," in *Figurine! Pubblicità, arte, collezionismo e industria 1867-1985*, ed. Rolando Bussi and Enrica Manenti, 76-89 (Modena: Edizione Panini, 1989).
5. *Die Soldaten des Führer's im Felde* (München: Raumbild-Verlag Otto Schonstein K.-G., n.d.). The albums contained 100 photographic stereoviews.
6. For details, see my "'Pockets of Plenty: An Archaeology of Mobile Media,'" in *The Mobile Audience*, ed. Martin Rieser (Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming).