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CHAPTER

6 Public Screens and Urban Life 🔓

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Abstract

This article appears in the *Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media* edited by Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson. This response to Sean Cubitt's "Large Screens, Third Screens, Virtuality, and Innovation"looks at urban screens in relation to two key developments in the history of urban modernity. One of these is the expansion of electric lighting in cities from the nineteenth century onward.In what historians have called "nocturnalization," cities have seen an expansion of the cultural and social uses of the urban night. Another development is the growth of urban transportation systems, wherein screens work both to distract travellers from the physical experience of travel and to offer forms of information, entertainment, or advertising. As media from newspapers to public screens books and digital tabloids have come to fill the social space of cities, they have engaged the look of viewer-citizens in a variety of novel and culturally significant ways.

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[A]ll the visible forms expressive of a period are to be grasped according to a double and paradoxical figure, that of the restless[*mouvementé*] pertrification of things, of objects, of beings.

—Alain Mons[1]

Thus, the notion that mobile technologies are new is indeed shortsighted. Throughout history, when a medium that was once understood as geographically fixed becomes mobile, a cultural shift accompanies this transformation. As writing moved from inscriptions on stone to marks on a piece of paper or papyrus, the world changed.

—Jason Farman[2]

OF the many intriguing ideas in Sean Cubitt's essay "Large Screens, Third Screens, Virtuality, and Innovation," one of the most productive is his claim that the difference between large and small screens condenses a variety of relationships broadly symptomatic of the social status of media in the current moment. These differences in the scale of screens, Cubitt suggests, express distinctions between spectacular and intimate forms of address, low and high levels of interaction, states of subordination and immersion. In this brief response, I pursue the relationship of large to small screens a little further in relation to two strands within my own work on urban culture. One of these strands has to do with the status of the urban night, as that temporal unit of city life in which public screens came to find their significance. The other is the relationship of urban screens to transportation systems, wherein such screens have served to both resist and underscore characteristically urban forms of mobility.

The history of public screens, as Cubitt shows, is part of the history of advertising, of the seductions of the commodity. I would add to this, in an obvious point, that such screens are also part of a history of light and, in particular, of the illumination of cities. ↳ Within this latter history, in a process long recognized, the seductive powers of the publically available commodity have enhanced the attraction of urban space itself. The transformation of urban space by light has provided new contexts in which the commodity might be "staged" (in the sense that one now speaks of houses being staged for potential buyers). This staging enhances the public visibility of commodities themselves (as they sit, highlighted, in shop windows or adorn the bodies of those moving through cities), but it also makes the city a space of competing attentions, as lighting and its absence differentiate the spaces of cities in increasingly complex ways. As commercial lighting came to reshape urban life, it produced a wide array of ethical/moral judgments about the extent to which the attentions it elicited were noble or debased, unifying or divisive.

Urban screens, large and small, now shine throughout the 24-hour cycle, but their meaning is inseparable from what historian Craig Koslovsky calls the process of *nocturnalization* in Western societies—"the ongoing expansion of the legitimate social and symbolic uses of the night."[3] Within this lengthy process of nocturnalization, gas-based and then electric light came to elicit different, even contradictory effects that anticipated the later differentiation between large and small screens. Spectacular clusters of light, in city centers, became the objects of collective attention. They served as displays of symbolic power with which the traditional bearers of power now had to compete or which the powerful labored to employ for their own purposes. Koslovsky traces a long series of transitions in which the aristocratic rulers of Europe first mobilized the lingering medieval and supernatural associations of night within their own, baroque displays of power. Subsequently, these rulers saw this power dissipate as an ascendant bourgeoisie made the illuminated urban night its own terrain.[4] By the late nineteenth century, the urban textuality of advertising and the lighting that nourished urban nocturnal sociability and commercial entertainment had displaced (or shrunk to relative inconsequence) displays of light once used in the flaunting of aristocratic power. It was not simply that one class had usurped another. As Karlheinz Stierle has argued, in the development of Western cities like Paris, the orchestrated display of unitary power became less important to the experience of urban grandeur than the richness of innumerable details.[5]

In this respect, the differences of scale that Cubitt observes with respect to present-day public screens perpetuate contrasts we may trace back at least as far as the nineteenth century. With the illumination of cities, the dispersion of light into more peripheral regions of urban life encouraged the differentiation of innumerable spaces of circumscribed illumination and shadowy obscurity. The well-lit centers of cities were spectacles to be viewed but so, too, were the countless "things seen" (*choses vues*), as historian Alain Montadon has noted.[6] For almost two centuries now, cities have been caught between the drive toward monumentality—in which collective or commercial power is condensed in a few spectacular sites and places—and the dispersion of a city's attractions across countless small objects and minor spaces.

In an age of digital screens, this dichotomy may be grasped as that between the large liquid crystal display (LCD) screens we associate with city centers (like Times Square) ↳ and the smaller "third" screens of

smartphones, tablets, and other devices carried by thousands of individuals moving through cities. For Sean Cubitt, the high resolution of the large-scale installed public screen means low interaction, whereas the low resolution of the handheld device goes hand-in-hand with greater intimacy, interactivity, and possibilities for individual manipulation of content. I would add, to complicate this dichotomy just a little, an additional way of understanding these differences of scale. Large screens, attached to the surfaces of large buildings, more and more strain after the interpellative function of audiovisual media, a function represented (often in parodied or paranoid form) in science-fiction movies like *Robocop* or *Minority Report.* Here, the content of audiovisual screens employs the rhetorical features of direct address, reaching out to viewer/listeners in the moment of this address to elicit a specific response. (The persistent hucksterism of the advertisements seen in *Robocop*, the personalized entreaties to consumers in *Minority Report*, and the network talk shows shown live on Times Square screens all exemplify this.) The fleeting, blatant appeals to attention that mark this interpellative mode cannot help but make this content seem vulgar, "minor" on any scale of cultural value, as in the constant demands for live audience response in New Year's Eve broadcasts.

In contrast, tablets and smartphones lend themselves more easily to the viewing of self-contained television episodes, videoclips, or feature films than to the consuming of "live" audiovisual messages in which the user's attention is constantly demanded. The audiovisual discourse of the handheld device is rarely, at this historical moment, marked by direct address, which is relegated to the residual forms of the text message or audio phone call. The monumentality of the large, installed public screen is thus undermined by its desperate claims on attention, which recall television in what have been seen, historically, as its lowest forms. The small "third" screen, conversely, is ennobled by its capacity to carry finished, professional content, curated and archived by its owner, in a relationship that recalls that of a book to its owner (an analogy developed, in other directions, by Sean Cubitt in the essay to which this is a response).

If city centers adorned with large display screens constitute one privileged terrain for the investigation of new *audiovisualities*, another is the public transit systems that have been intertwined with media structures in complicated ways for at least 150 years. In the 1920s, Siegfried Kracauer saw the newsstand, typically located near nodes in urban transportation systems, as emblematic of urban tolerance: "Out of the hubbub rise the newspaper kiosks, tiny temples in which the publications of the entire world get together for a rendezvous. Foes in real life, they lie here in printed form side by side; the harmony could not be greater."[7] The fragmentation of collective attention represented in the newspaper kiosk, with its multiple titles and peaceful existence of opposed political positions, is here taken as evidence of the civic/political pluralism that was a virtue of great cities. Alongside this diagnosis, other versions of social theory would come to see the same pluralism as evidence of the weakening of social bonds, as furthering the atomization of the modern individual. These competing accounts of the effect of media proliferation on collective life run through most discussions of contemporary handheld media.

p. 95   In 1967, following the opening of Montreal's futuristic underground transportation system ("The métro"), designer François Dallegret imagined a futuristic playground, Palais Metro, at the main intersection of the system's two original subway lines.[8] Never realized, Palais Metro nevertheless expressed the dream that the multiple energies of technologically mediated movement might be absorbed and held within a multimedia spectacle that used public screens and multimedia installations to sustain a public gaze. Throughout their history, urban transport systems have felt the impulse to harvest collective attention, for profit or civic virtue, by employing media that could overcome the dispersion of attention that inevitably transpires within them. Transport systems struggle against the proliferation of portable media, from free commuter newspapers through handheld tablets, that were designed precisely to direct that attention away from the transportation environment and its own messaging systems. Present-day airplanes, which must address all passengers as the collective object of institutional care while allowing them to pursue their own itineraries of distracted entertainment, exemplify this struggle over attention even more explicitly.

In the ways in which they deflect attention from transportation systems, portable media devices—Cubitt's "third screens"—threaten the monumentality of these systems and the extent to which they may stand as evidence of civic purpose. When Montreal's métro was opened, in 1967, the challenge was that of finding cultural forms whose modernity was equal to that of the system itself. Displays of abstract art and signage employing up-to-date design principles ensured that the semiotic materials adorning the system were roughly contemporary with those of the transportation system itself. Ever since, as the subway cars and lines have decayed, contemporary media technologies have been employed to restore a modernity—a futuricity—which the underlying system itself no longer possesses. In aging public transport systems around the world, media have come to fulfill the classical function of the architectural facade, joining the system to a history of technological progress from which its own underlying infrastructure has become detached.

In the case of Montreal's métro, this has led to an endless series of experiments with installed media stretching back to the early 1990s. At that time, streams of informational text in digital form were installed in a strategy seemingly designed so that the fluid movement of words would disguise the increasingly bumpy motion of the métro cars themselves. It is as if, no longer able to offer its own technological monumentality as the source of its value, the Métro system was obliged to install media whose own fluid mobility might be taken as its own. More broadly, transportation-based media now seem perpetually torn between two strategies. One of these involves rushing to capture the "essential fragility of collective existence" in cities, as Alain Mons has described it.[9] Streams of text on tickertape-like displays or bits of poetry affixed to bus walls express prejudices about the fugitive character of urban attention and betray the effort to devise equivalences between textual and vehicular movement. The other strategy, intermittently deployed in Montreal over the last two decades, involves large-scale screens installed on waiting platforms and visible from virtually all possible directions. These screens perform at least two functions. In the first

place, their own technological ↳ up-to-datedness now exceeds and obscures that of the subway system itself. Like so many of the buildings around Times Square, whose architectural age, scale, or novelty could never sustain a sense of that area's centrality, Montreal's métro stations require large-scale digital screens as proof of the system's capacity to look forward. At the same time, the content of these screens, which has ranged from works of contemporary art through news reports and advertisements, works to produce a temporary centering of public attention in the midst of personal itineraries that resist that centering.

All these sorts of screens work to diminish the prominence of sound. The large, fixed screens of Times Square, by assembling crowds of noisy spectators in front of them, make their own audio communication difficult and must find, in the display of busy, exuberant human movement, visual equivalents for noisy sociability. Small, handheld screens, on the other hand, are subject to legal or etiquette-based restrictions governing noise in public places. Detached from the image, sound has found its "publicness" most fully in semipublic spaces like automobiles. Here, automobiles join with audio media in assemblages that rarely interact with the realm of technologicallymediated visuality. In France, the decline of newspaper reading has been blamed in part on the movement of middle-class commuters out of public transportation systems and into their own private cars, where they no longer read newspapers but listen to radio (and, increasingly, to their own archives of music).[10] In Mexico City, as Rosalind Winocur has shown in intriguing detail, new circuits of communication link the automobile driver, caught in traffic, to talk radio programs whose content consists of cellphone calls in which these drivers comment on the state of traffic and on social-political issues more generally.[11]

Sean Cubitt usefully sets the electronic screen within a history of public media that includes the paperback (carried on transportation systems) and the poster. Of the many ways in which the histories of print culture and electronic display have been interwoven, one of the most intriguing involves shifting relationships between two axes:one that separates the flat from the perpendicular, another that divides the tall from the wide. As David Henkin suggests, invoking Walter Benjamin, forms of public textuality in nineteenth-

century New York, like the signs that came to adorn the sides of buildings, instituted a "dictatorship of the perpendicular" (Henkin 1998:63). The immobile, vertically oriented poster or advertisement struggled for attention (and generally won) against multiple, scattered forms of print culture (like the newspaper or magazine) designed to be laid flat. By the twentieth century, the contrast between perpendicular, immobile media and portable, flat forms of textuality would become confused. As the newspaper front page, originally organized around parallel "tombstone" columns, came to be criss-crossed by modern, banner headlines (which, reaching across the page with larger typefaces, sought graphic means for expressing loudness), it was conceived more and more to be held upright on public transportation systems and elsewhere.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, we might have set the conventional, horizontally rectangular advertising billboard against the tall, vertical screens of Times Square or Piccadilly Circus. This verticality followed the up-and-down movement of buildings themselves, producing a popular sense of inner-city commercial centers as canyon-like. More recently, these spaces have lost some of their "verticality" as

newly ↳ installed public screens mimic the horizontal spread of flat-screen television sets. The screens of Times Square have assumed dimensions that enable them to send back, to their street-level viewers, broad images of the crowds assembled to watch them.

At the same time, in recent years, we have been able to distinguish between handheld devices like the cellphone or e-reader, whose vertical orientation carries over the familiar dimensions of older printculture forms (the written letter in the case of the cellphone screen, the book in the case of the e-reader), and other portable technologies, like the tablet, driven to horizontality by the dominance of audiovisual forms like movies or television programs. If the tablet's horizontality is likely to dominate the handheld and publically installed screens of the future, we might ask about its effects on the experience and perception of public space. The vertical screens of mid-twentieth-century Times Square underscored the monumental depth of that place, reinforcing a well-entrenched association between physical height and symbolic centrality in urban structures. Horizontally oriented screens, which deflect attention across series of such screens, express the sense that a city's richness lies in the contiguity of its innumerable "things seen" rather than in a single, monumental object of collective attention.

Notes

1. Alain Mons, *La traversée du visible: Images et lieux du contemporain* (Paris: Editions de la passion 2002), 69.

2. JasonFarman, *Mobile Interface Theory: Embodied Space and Locative Media* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 2.

3. Craig Koslovsky, *Evening's Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1.

4. Ibid., 92.

5. Karlheinz Stierle, Jean Starobinski, and Marianne Rocher-Jacquin, *La capitale des signes: Paris et son discours* (Paris: Ed. de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2002), 47.

6. Alain Montandon, *Promenades nocturnes* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009), 7.

7. Siegfried Kracauer, "Analysis of a City Map," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995 [1926]), 43.

8. For images of this never-realized project, see Palais Metro, http://arteria.ca/realisation/palais-metro/.

9. Alain Mons, "La ville ou l'espace de l'errance Cinéma," in *L'urbain et ses imaginaires*, ed. Patrick Beaudry and Thierry Paquot (Aquitaine, France: Maison des sciences de l'homme d'Aquitaine, 2003), 114.

10. "Les tendances et les perspectives." in Les Comptes du Groupe, *Le Monde* (Paris 2004), 2–3.

11.   Rosalía Winocur, "Media and Participative Strategies," *Television & New Media* 4, no. 1 (2003).

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