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Poetics and public space: an investigation into animated installation

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Abstract

We live in a society not only dominated by the screen but increasingly colonized by multiple moving-image 'screens'. This article investigates aspects of the phenomenon of viewing multi-channel animated work that coexists with architecture. Referencing historic projections, such as Glimpses of the USA *by Charles and Ray Eames (1959) as well as my own animated installations, I raise questions on how the brain may be processing multiple images and explore the concept of light in a window from the perspective of Gaston Bachelard and Thomas Kincaid in order to suggest differences between projecting on or projecting from – a difference between emanation and reflection. The article closes with brief thoughts on the window – illusion and collapse of 3D space, the image and the archetype and the idea of spectacle with content.*

Installation, animation

We live in a society not only dominated by the screen but also increasingly colonized by multiple moving-image 'screens'. This article, originally presented as an illustrated paper at the Animation Deviation Symposium in Bristol, UK (2010), explores aspects related to the phenomenon of viewing multi-channel work that cohabits in architectural space. Sparked by practice-based research and largely reflective – it came after the creation and presentation of five large-scale animated installations: *Illumination No. 1* (Portland, 2002 and 2003), *Gates of Light* (New York City, 2004), *Intra Muros* (Portland, 2007 and Holland, 2008), and most recently, *Broadsided!* (Exeter UK, 2010). The article is structured in thirds and begins with setting a context for twentieth-century multi-screen projections; moves to questioning the placement of the spectator; and closes with ideas on a light in the window and how space is full.

Context

To set a context, the human experience of multiple flickering images may date to the earliest appearance of 'art' as evidenced by the Chauvet Cave paintings of 30,000 BC. Touring a replica cave at Lascaux, one experiences a kind of active sensory viewing – from looking out for rocks, to the chill of the cave, to head turning required to see multiple overlaid animals that, according to the guides, were lit from below with animal-fat lamps. Though scholars may differ on interpretations of the viewing situation, the element of multiplicity seems to be present. It is interesting to note that the images evidence a mix of those basic elements of cinematic practice: the wide shot, the mid and the close-up. Zooming ahead on a very compressed timeline but braking before Expanded Cinema of the 1960s, one finds the designer/film-maker team of Charles and Ray Eames. Beatriz Colomina offers a well-researched view of their work and their inspiration in her essay 'Enclosed by Images: the Eameses' Multiscreen Architecture' (Douglas and Eamon 2009: 36–56).

To briefly summarize, in 1959, in collaboration with Buckminster Fuller, the Eameses suspended seven 20-foot x 30-foot screens across Fuller's 250-foot geodesic dome. Engaging seven interlocked film projectors, they presented *Glimpses of the USA* to 5000 people every 45 minutes over a six-week period during the American National Exhibition in Moscow. Colomina identifies the significance of this work: 'The huge array of suspended screens defined a space within a space. The Eameses were the self-conscious architects of a new kind of space. The film breaks with the fixed perspectival view of the world' (Douglas and Eamon 2009: 40). With multiple-channel work there is no single camera shot. In a break from western vanishing-point perspective, there is no privileged point of view. Worth noting as well, is that throughout the screening, viewers were required to stand. *Glimpses of the USA* relied on the idea of the mobile spectator – a spectator who, dwarfed by scale and placement

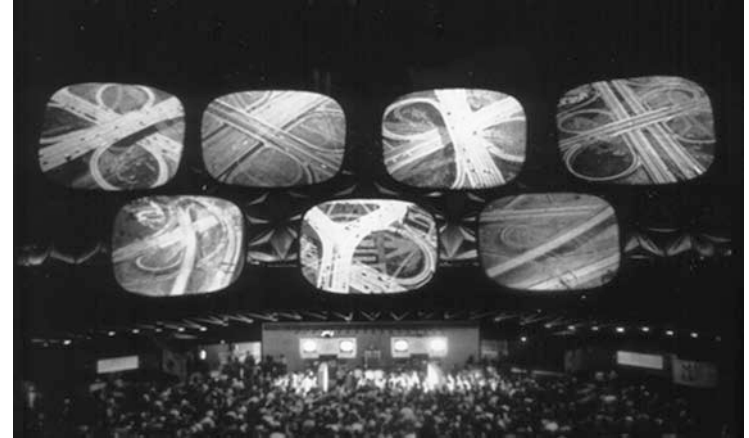*Figure 1: Rose Bond's* Intra Muros *in the Utrecht City Hall, Holland.*

Figure 2: Charles and Ray Eames, Glimpses of the USA, *interior of the geodesic dome with suspended screens.*

Figure 3: Sound Images promotional media display.

in the room, must make conscious choices about which she sees even if those choices are evidenced by what she misses.

Colomina suggests that it was the military's war situation rooms that inspired the Eameses. Modelling on that multimedia design, the designer/architects furthered innovation and orchestrated multi-screen information flow and its narratives. Close on their heels was the 1960s avant-garde with projects like Andy Warhol's *EPI* or *Exploding Plastic Inevitable* (1966); however, independent artists were largely confined to the throwaway 16mm gear from TV stations and schools to stage their happenings. An argument can be made that the equipment and technology needed to succinctly orchestrate multiple projections was simply out of the price range and reach for artists. Corporations on the other hand used the World's Fairs of the 1960s as a vehicle to engineer innovative works utilizing the new technologies. The fairs did provide some opportunities for collaboration between artists and engineers such as Bell Telephone Laboratories and EAT[1] (Experiments in Arts and Technology) on the Pepsi Pavilion in 1970. Disney was also active in this period. His 'Imagineers' used the 1964 New York World's Fair to develop Audio-Animatronic characters for two new Disneyland rides: Pirates of the Caribbean (1967) and the Haunted Mansion (1969).[2]

Perhaps the forgotten or overlooked players in the rise of multi-screen environments are the trade show production companies. By the 1980s media production was subcontracted out by large corporations. Outfits like Projection Media expanded on the promise to create ' large scale advertising opportunities which will generate excitement, deliver a message, highlight your company and spotlight your products'. My own benefactor, Portland-based Sound Images, made millions over the last 30 years producing multi-channel uplifting spectacles for Nike's regional sales rep meetings at the tune of $100,000 for eight minutes of video show. So, in the late 1980s and 1990s while artists were begging for the dimmest projector on the block, industry's internal communication desires propelled R&D tech companies like Dataton forward in developing software and expensive dongles that powered synchronization systems like TRAX and WatchOut in the service of slick, often awe-evoking spectacle.

The place of the viewer

Without a doubt the gear or 'kit' plays a major role in multi-channel projections, but its placement and operation is generally obscured. From Etienne-Gaspard Robertson's *Phantasmagoria* to Musion System's 3D holographic virtual band *Gorillaz* the spatial relationship between the optical apparatus and the audience is key to the viewing experience. Tom Gunning describes Robertson's use of the rear projection process as a way to hide the means of image production from the audience in order to create a 'total illusion that also contained its own critique' (Gunning 2009: 30). Within *Phantasmagoria* one has the rationality to know that ghosts are a figment of the imagination while in

Figure 4: Etienne-Gaspard Robertson's rear projection from Phantasmagoria.

3. Hasson (2008: 459)
continues: 'When
narrative content is
stressed, as in the
present study, we find
that a brain network
previously implicated
in various aspects of
social cognition, shows
significant intersub-
ject correlations that
are enhanced during
successful memory
formation.'

the midst of a dark and murky room the senses take over as spectral images hover and shimmer as eerie sounds assail the ears and as people lurch from their seats in terror.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *World of Perception* lectures, originally published in 1948, uses Descartes's enlightened rationalism as a foil in credentialing the body's experience of the world. In doing so he points to the role art must play in getting us to see again – or as he says 'to take a sideways look' 'at a world structured from a plurality of overlapping perspectives' (Merleau-Ponty 2009: 16). In this light, it becomes interesting to consider differences between the fixed and relatively immobile space of the movie house and the freedom or imperative to move that is often associated with multi-channel projection. How do mobility and choice figure into perception of multiple moving-image screens? Be it an animated installation like *Illumination No. 1*, which wraps around the second storey windows of the Portland Seaman's Bethel Building or the multiple boxes on a Fox newscast – the viewer is challenged to move head and body. Yet, even with their best attempts, it is seemingly impossible to take it all in.

Charles and Ray Eames were intentional in their orchestration of multiple images and discussed the budding concept of information overload. According to Colomina, they saw the Barnum and Bailey circus as the model for techno-spiked information flow. Using the three-ring circus as a meta-phor and design inspiration, they created *Glimpses of the USA* as multiple simultaneous experiences that seemingly exceed the human capacity to absorb. Using 'high speed' editing of stills, perhaps akin to Robert Breer, the Eameses sought to orchestrate bits and pieces to create connections between the 'unrelated'. What the Eameses did was to edit so that similar content from varied points of view and locations were presented simultaneously in all the screens – milk bottles on the porch, husbands leaving for work and cloverleaf freeway exchanges.

Distinct from Warhol who seemed to revel in random, loud and discomforting chaos, the Eameses appear to have held a beneficent and reassuring view of new media, a view stoked with American optimism and moulded with a handsome sheen that was devoid of the dark side – no ghettos, no racial strife, no poverty. They believed modern communication would be multiply channelled. Rather than seeing the seven screens as a negative, an overload, Colomina argues that the Eameses saw the modern paradigm, and urban architecture in particular, as 'multi-channel information machines' able to produce a new 'state of distraction' – one that actually produces a new form of attention.

Though much work remains to be done by hard science, researchers like Uri Hasson of the Center for Neural Science at New York University are breaking ground. In a 2008 paper entitled 'Enhanced Intersubject Correlations during Movie Viewing Correlate with Successful Episodic Encoding', Hasson and his associates report on research using MRI technology to study brain activity during movie view-ing and in subsequent memory testing (Hasson 2008). Without going into detail beyond this article, Hasson concludes, 'One may speculate that the engagement of the temporal poles in our paradigm may reflect the integration of the unfolding narrative into a coherent structure' (Hasson 2008: 458).[3]

Figure 5: Rose Bond's Illumination No. 1 *in the Portland Seamen's Bethel Building, Portland.*

Again, as limited as the research is into brain function during movie viewing, anecdotal evidence in the form of overheard conversations, first and second reports from my own installations, seems to support the contention that viewers not only derive meaning from snatches and fragments but that a kind of constructivism – which may involve imagining what is missed – can have significant resonance.

Light in the window – when space is full

'O light in the sleeping house!' Gaston Bachelard quotes the poet Richard von Schaukal at the closing of his chapter on the significance of the hut (Bachelard 1994: 37). In summarizing his thoughts Bachelard concludes that 'the light that keeps vigil on the horizon' evokes a 'concentration of intimacy', for the hut represents a powerful and simplified refuge (Bachelard 1994: 37). Someone who has taken this notion to heart, and to the market, is the painter of light, Thomas Kinkade. Perhaps the hallmark of Kinkade's work is the cottage lit from within. Positioned deep in the forest or along a deserted shore, Kinkade 's cottage becomes the focal point for his paintings and appears to fulfil his stated goal 'to explore light and imaginary worlds'.

According to his website, Kinkade is America's most collected living artist. On *Wikipedia* his marketing company, Media Arts, claims that one in twenty homes feature some form of Thomas Kinkade's art. In Kinkade's *Wikipedia* entry, essayist Joan Didion weighs in with a descriptive critique:

> A Kinkade painting […] typically featured a cottage or a house of such insistent coziness as to seem actually sinister; suggestive of a trap designed to attract Hansel and Gretel. Every window was lit, to lurid effect, as if the interior of the structure might be on fire.
>
> (Didion 2003: 73)

So, while Bachelard extols the primal image of the hut as an invitation to 'start imagining again' (Bachelard 1994: 33) he cautions that over-picturesqueness in a house can conceal its intimacy. For Bachelard a house must retain its shadows – mere mention is better than minute description. In this sense, animation, especially animation that itself holds back on specific representation in favour of the silhouette or the Scott McCloud 'iconic' character (see McCloud 1994: 24–59) affords greater opportunities for suggestion.

Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the greatest achievement of modern art and philosophy is 'to allow us to rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are always prone to forget […] to get at things as they really are' (Merleau-Ponty 2009: 32). In this discussion of sited animated installation, architecture again rises to the forefront. For Bachelard the house is not an inert box because inhabited space transcends geometric space (Bachelard 1994: 47). In the relationship between the image and the archetype lies the poetic – a suggestion that opens to interpretation.

Figure 6: Thomas Kinkade cottage.

Figure 7: Detail of Mr Wu from Rose Bond's Illumination No. 1.

In particular, it is through the triggering of memory that this notion of things 'as they really are' is realized. Throughout the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard makes a case that poetry summons more of reality than a listing of the facts. Buildings hold stories in the same way that Svankmajer's objects are keepers of memories. The mix of architecture and animation – light in the window – has the potential then not only to illustrate events but also to actually resound or reverberate with the past. To further explain, Bachelard footnotes the analytical writing of Eugene Minkowski: 'the essence of life is not a feeling of being, of existence, but a feeling of participation in a flowing onward, necessarily expressed in terms of time, and secondarily expressed in terms of space' (Bachelard 1994: xvi). Minkowski explains how a form, or a building, comes to life – or fills with life – through the property of reverberation 'as if a well-spring existed in a sealed vase and its waves, repeatedly echoing against the sides of this vase, filled it with their sonority' (Bachelard 1994: xvi).

To quote Esther Leslie: 'The sign is imprinted. The mark emerges' (Leslie 2004: 59). In animated installation meaning emerges from sculptural space. Rear projection in windows evokes a feeling of emanation and differs from front projection on a building façade – an imprinted image from an outside source. Seen from the street, animated markings become a presence. As light in the window they play upon a most intimate place. My recent works, particularly the pieces that evoke history of the site, are attempts to tap a reservoir of memory. Though the story is not theirs – it can be recognized as one of ours. Their content, researched yet fragmentary, is presented framed by window shapes and hidden by walls. Scrolling text, names, dates, statistics and shadowy silhouettes hint at gesture, combine in glimpses profoundly tied to inhabited space.

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