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Situating Urban Moving Images: Illuminating Place

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Situating Urban Moving Images: Illuminating Place

Annie Dell’Aria

Contemporary urban spaces are filled with screens. From the mobile screens we carry with us to the massive animated billboards of city centers, the city is a decidedly more mediatized space. As a result, spectatorship is increasingly mobile and distracted. On the one hand, we could view the contemporary mediated city as the realization of what Guy Debord discussed as the all-comprising, debilitating “society of the spectacle.” On the other hand, some laud the arrival of new technologies for their ability to connect people across vast spaces, generating what Marshall McLuhan predicted would be the “global village.” Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, neither the dystopian world of Debord nor the utopian vision of McLuhan has come to fruition. Nevertheless, media screens both large and small have redefined the very definitions of public and private space and significantly alter our daily lives. Our experience of public spaces today is defined nearly as much by screens and moving images as it is by architecture and urban planning. Our movements are directed, distracted, and even tracked through an ever more complex web of screen technologies.

In step with the increasing presence of screens in urban space, contemporary public art has also become more cinematic and mediatized. While there are certainly negative connotations with private capital’s increasing presence in public life (in the form of the proliferation of mediated advertising screens), there are also positive uses of visual spectacle and enchantment through screens in public space via public art projects. Major permanent works such as Jaume Plensa’s Crown Fountain (2005) in Chicago and spectacular temporary projections like the work of Doug Aitken have the potential to generate as much appeal and visual interest as a traditional public sculpture or mural — perhaps even more, given the inherent attraction of the moving image. However, these projects and others are not merely riding the wave of contemporary trends in media art or urban planning or generating only fleeting spectacles in urban spaces. They rather interact with a longer history of the moving image outside of the theater and viewing paradigms that are completely distinct from theatrical viewing codes.

For over a century, electric lights have illuminated city streets and public

events in major cities. Even before the twentieth century, panoramas, transparency paintings, and shadow play enchanted groups of people as they navigated public spaces, forming historical precedents to places like Times Square in New York, the Quartier des Spectacles in Montreal, Shibuya in Tokyo, or Chiado in Lisbon. The screens and images in these spaces have a fundamentally different relationship with the bodies of audience members and the places the screens inhabit. Rather than existing within the darkened theater of cinematic absorption, the moving image in public space is decidedly situated.

This essay examines a small sample of work where artists use nocturnal projection or screen technologies in order to engage a notion of place. In many ways, moving image media has been discussed in terms of its ability to dislocate the spectator through immersion, mirroring, or emotive travel. Televisual media has a similar association with collapsing differences in space and time, suggesting that screen media promotes a type of placelessness. Furthermore, the proliferation of urban screen media is often linked to increasingly homogenized urban spaces of global capital and the loss of place-specificity within the city. While these arguments are in many ways true, they do not tell the whole story of how spectators engage with a variety of moving image content in public space. Anna McCarthy has discussed televisions in public spaces in terms of their material presence and site-specificity by looking at the particular configurations screens generate in public space. I similarly argue that there are also ways that artists can critique and layer upon existing notions of place in order to use moving image media to articulate the social or political specificity of a given site. This does not represent the whole spectrum of moving image public art, as clearly artists like Doug Aitken work in a more cinematic and spectacular manner and artists like Raphael Lozano-Hemmer are much more concerned with generating temporary, ludic, social spaces through interactive media technologies than reflecting on place. However, place can and does surface as a significant modality for moving images in public space, much as it is a central concern for many contemporary artists working in the public realm in other media. How place surfaces in public screen environments, however, varies significantly from case to case. Nevertheless, I have identified three distinct strands within this constellation — augmentation, generation, and disruption — in order to begin to reflect on the urban screen’s relationship to place.

To begin, let us define the term “place” in a useful, meaningful way.

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3 Here I am thinking of traditional views of film as an escape to another world as well as apparatus theory such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Alan Williams, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus," *Film Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Winter, 1974): 39–47.

Unlike the more generic term “space,” “place” suggests specificity, both in time and space. Any city square is a space whereas St. Peter’s Square is a place. Yi-Fu Tuan distinguished between space and place by calling the former “freedom” and the latter “security”—a site where one feels “at home.”5 Place has not only a greater specificity than space, but also an accumulation of histories and a layering of meaning—a site where collective identities are formed and contested. Screens and moving images negotiate these networks of meaning that make up the construction of place as much as they deliver to the viewer content from elsewhere. Certain artists working with the moving image in public space, such as Krzysztof Wodiczko and The Macula, deliberately engage with social and architectural iterations of space in their use of screen media. These can take the shape of both positivist and negativist relationships to place.

**Augmentation**

Firstly, let us look at architecture, which has historically been linked to place. In the past decade in particular, the technology of projection mapping has become increasingly part of nocturnal urban projections, particularly in continental Europe. Projection mapping involves projecting animations on an irregular surface by digitally reading the contours of that surface and manipulating the image. The result can give the illusion of three-dimensional animations, and often artists use projection mapping to visually disintegrate the surfaces of architecture. While many of the uses for projection mapping are decorative or part of marketing or advertising there are examples that engage with place more deeply. The Macula, a contemporary Czech collective, uses projection mapping on historical buildings, often celebrating local histories. Casting elaborate animations on clock towers or churches, The Macula create incredible nocturnal spectacles that tell the history of a place through animation. The Durham Light Festival in northern England similarly engages with highlighting significant historical architecture with technologically sophisticated projection, often in images that recall stained glass windows, light spectacles particular to the place of illumination but visible only with daylight. Beyond projection mapping, major architectural sites are also engaging with more permanent media spectacles. Though originally intended as a temporary project to commemorate the 75th anniversary of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, Leo Villareal’s *The Bay Lights*, an illumination made by 25,000 LED lights, will now be a permanent fixture of the iconic landmark. Similarly, sites like the Eiffel Tower in Paris and

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the Empire State Building in New York have engaged with new technologies of illumination and animation to reinforce their iconic status at night.

The illumination of significant buildings in spectacular ways of course precedes the advent of projection mapping. In the 1950s, Paul Robert-Houdin introduced “Son et Lumière” shows in France. These “open air museums” used a series of projectors to “re-inject” the past into important sites, creating spectacular events aimed at generating a sense of place and history upon the physical projection screen. Moving images serve to highlight existing places, making their histories or structures spectacular. Projection and illumination serves not to cast shadows onto a surface in order to create a window into another world, but rather to highlight and augment the sense of place generated by the monument’s position within the larger community.

**Generation**

Moving images in public spaces can also be a way for forming places, of generating new sites of meaning and communal life. Urban screens are part of plans to revitalize cities and attract desired demographics to particular neighborhoods by creating a sense of place through screens and spectacle. Contemporary initiatives like the Quartier des Spectacles in Montreal or the BBC Big Screens program in the UK seek to revitalize urban centers via public projections or the consistent presence of screen technologies in a city center. In Montreal, projections on the facades of eight large buildings within the quarter happen nightly, forming intermittent moments of spectacle for the passerby and prompting viewers to explore more of the entertainment district. The illuminations range from abstract animations, playful images, or interactive events, and though the individual projections rotate, their consistent nightly presence within the area generates a new sense of place. In the UK, the Big Screens program began in a handful of city centers in the north of England as a way to revitalize urban centers with a single ten-meter LED screen that had both rotating ambient content and event-driven screenings. The former, which included video art and film in addition to news bulletins, kept the screen interesting to passersby and the latter, which included live sports events, movies, or opera simulcasts from London, uses the screen to bring people back to the city center, to generate a sense of community. Like in Montreal, the moving image is integral to creating a new sense of place, be it projected and dispersive or illuminated and singular. Though we can critique this model of generating place as rather top-down (and indeed the position of many of the BBC Big Screens recalls science fiction depictions of Big Brother), I find there is still a positive potential in them. Particularly

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in the generation of an event-site, the Big Screens bring people back into the city center and generate social interaction.

The two initiatives above are decidedly non-commercial, using the model of sponsorship rather than advertising. Although this created a tenuous funding situation in the case of the BBC Big Screens (which have effectively discontinued as a network as of 2013), there is a movement here towards making public screens service public good. We can still, however, locate some of their origins in the most commercial of urban mediascapes, New York’s Times Square. Currently covered with over fifty-five LED screens and over 200 billboards, the famous “Bow Tie” in Times Square is entirely commercial. Though the images and animations that cover its screens have next to nothing to do with place — in fact they very often deliberately attempt to transport the viewer to exotic locales — the site of Times Square itself is one of the largest tourist destinations in North America. As crassly commercial as it may be, Times Square does offer a unique form of spectatorship where the viewer is completely overwhelmed by a complex array of movements and colors. The site also has a nuanced relationship with both place generating uses of illuminated screens and public art. Many recent critics cite the “Disneyfication” of Times Square since the 1990s — a collaboration between municipal government and corporate entities to rid the area of its seedy elements and raise property values — as part of the shift towards more homogenous urban spaces of global capital. The connection between illuminated advertisements and safety, however, is not at all a new one. In fact, going back to the early history of Times Square, we find the same debates as today. Michelle Bogart has noted that some of the earliest defenders of electrified signage in Times Square in the beginning of the twentieth century cited the increased safety such a space would provide. Screens, be they commercial or not, can generate a sense of place by virtue of their mode of spectatorship and sense of safety. In an interesting flip back to art, contemporary initiatives in moving image art in Times Square are folded into the rhetoric of generating place by groups such as the Times Square Arts. Their projects, such as Midnight Moments, where video art is screened for 2-3 minutes every night on a select number of advertising screens, attempts to define the place as one “of risk, innovation, and creativity”… ”where ideas are tested and new possibilities explored.” Screens in the instances discussed in this section are folded into the creation or redefinition of new places.

Disruption

Projections and illuminations in public spaces, however, are not always affirmative. They can be used to critique constructed definitions of place in a manner that opens up a new space for multiple voices. This practice is perhaps best exemplified by what artist Krzysztof Wodiczko coined “slide warfare.” This necessarily ephemeral use of projection attacks and critiques the underlying systems of power embodied by existing urban architecture or memorials. Wodiczko’s slide warfare began as still slide projections and shifted to incorporate video and sound in the late 1990s. In *Bunker Hill Monument Projection* (1998) he used projectors to illuminate the Revolutionary War monument of official memory with the testimonies of families of victims of violence, illuminating the community’s hidden histories. In a recent work in New York's Union Square, *Abraham Lincoln: War Veteran Projection* (2012), the personal stories of trauma from US veterans of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam were projected onto the archetypal figure of holding together a nation through war. Central to Wodiczko’s practice is the notion of healing through public testimony and disrupting traditional urban spaces of memory and public identity with the voices of the disenfranchised. This critical practice also happens at the level of guerilla interventions, such the New York-based collective The Illuminator or artist and activist driven projections of censored material onto the museums that shut them out.9

The durational, ephemeral nature of the projections (indeed what makes them cinematic) is essential to this function, though the image’s effects on its site are quite different than in the animating and place-generating functions discussed above. Wodiczko’s projector illuminates (rather than dematerializes) the screen’s surface — both visually and figuratively — to call attention to the violence, lies, and oppression we normalize and even aggrandize in our urban landscape. This collision of meanings between image and screen are a spatial iteration of Sergei Eisenstein’s dialectical notion of montage — a critical synthesis of ideas — however with Wodiczko the collision does not happen at the cut, but rather on the surface of the screen. This screen and the image become a site of contestation over the meaning of place, opening up the possibility of radical pluralism in the spaces in-between identities — a shift that challenges hegemonic definitions of place.

9 Particularly I am thinking of two instances in Washington, D.C. The first, in 1989 when artists projected the work of Robert Maplethorpe onto the Corcoran Gallery of Art and the second in 2010 when David Wojnarowicz’s film *Fire in My Belly* (1987) was projected onto the National Portrait Gallery.
Conclusion

Moving images in public places, be they overtly critical or affirmational, interact with the many layers of meaning operating at the site of the screen and its surroundings. As spectators’ bodies negotiate new modalities of spectatorship, they enter into this network of meaning and come to formulate diverse and constantly shifting definitions of place. While on the one hand projections can serve to regenerate urban spaces, on the other they can deconstruct them through an antagonistic relationship between image and screen. The moving image screen, then, becomes site-specific and locates both the image and the viewer within the material world around the screen. Though in many ways we use media in order to escape the spectacle that surrounds us, such as through iPods and mobile devices and even the situational use of advertising to avoid eye contact on a train, public screens can and do return viewers to the places they occupy. Screens and projections are not merely useless distractions that prompt pedestrians to navigate streets as if wearing “urban blinders” to block out the constant barrage of advertising imagery. Moving images in public spaces can actually be used to return us to our specific moment in place and time, making them an essential medium for any public art that wishes to foster a sense of place or social interaction in public spaces.

O Chiado e o Cinema.  
Do Cinematógrafo ao Videomapping.  
Artes na Esfera Pública  

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Introdução

International Board

Critérios para a apreciação dos abstracts enviados pelos autores convidados

Notas sobre o acolhimento do projecto em Paris
Ana Paixão e José Manuel da Costa Esteves

Textos sobre o Chiado, a esfera pública e o cinema

O Chiado e o(s) Cinema(s)
José-Augusto França

Cinema e «Orpheu» — Momento Essencial...
Guilherme d’Oliveira Martins

O Chiado e o Cinema. Um Ensaio entre História e Memória
Margarida Calado

Modernidade, flânerie e cinema
António Cadima Mendonça

O Carmo na esfera da Arte Pública. O documentário como plataforma de preservação patrimonial
Célia Nunes Pereira

Arte Pública e Cinema no Chiado
José Pedro Regatão

Textos sobre Videomapping e outras tipologias de imagem em movimento no espaço público

Vidéo mapping dans l’espace public : publicité, célébration ou subversion ?
Marlène Rautureau

Projecções sobre o espaço público
Helena Ferreira

Situating Urban Moving Images: Illuminating Place
Annie Dell’Aria
O Chiado e a technopoly. Imagens em movimento / panem et circenses
José Quaresma
105

As cores da «Cidade Branca» — Lisboa no ecrã (olhares do cinema estrangeiro sobre a cidade de Lisboa)
Fernando Rosa Dias
177

Textos sobre cinema
Seul parmi ses voisins, dans la salle obscure.
L'expérience du spectateur de cinéma.
Notes de lecture
Jacques Lemière
116

Short “dialogues” with Harriet Senie, Cameron Cartiere and Patricia Phillips
203

O novo ecossistema cinematico
João Maria Mendes
126

Sinopses / Abstracts / Sommaires
213

Le cinéma : une anti-philosophie?
José Moure
134

CV's dos ensaístas e dos membros do International board
219

L'Invention de la salle de cinéma. Premiers lieux pour la projection de vues animées en France et aux Etats-Unis
Benoît Rivière
148

CV's dos artistas
250

Du flâneur au spectateur. Logiques modernes du cinéma
Wissam Mouawad
156

Chiado em Campo
Da realidade à imagem real
Elsa Bruxelas
167

As cores da «Cidade Branca» — Lisboa no ecrã (olhares do cinema estrangeiro sobre a cidade de Lisboa)
Fernando Rosa Dias
177

Short “dialogues” with Harriet Senie, Cameron Cartiere and Patricia Phillips
203

Sinopses / Abstracts / Sommaires
213

CV's dos ensaístas e dos membros do International board
219

Catálogo
228

CV's dos artistas
250