MESSAGES ON THE WALL
AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF PUBLIC MEDIA DISPLAYS

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Tracing Monumental Media
Visual media culture does not exist solely in interior spaces. This becomes evident if one thinks about today's urban screens, the largest concentration of which may well be the square in front of the Shibuya railway station in Tokyo. The walls of the surrounding buildings have been covered by screens of different sizes and shapes, and the spaces in-between coated with neon signs. A kind of artificial horizon has been created. 1 Except for celebrating and promoting the values of commercial capitalism, the moving and flashing images don't connect with each other either thematically or formally. 2 They constitute a mutating mosaic that is part of the cityscape and at the same time becomes the cityscape. Passers-by glance at the screens, but don't get easily 'absorbed' into them. The wall-mounted screens form an ambience rather than a set of targets for sustained attention.

In spite of their growing prominence, public screens remain peripheral when it comes to media scholarship. Cinema and television studies, as well as 'new media' research, have largely ignored them. Most scholars of audiovisuality seem prone to look toward segregated and 'interiorised' (both psychologically and physically) experiences. In a way, it is surprising that public screens have received little attention, considering the huge impact of Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle and the re-assessment of commercial public environments by postmodern architectural and urban theory, most notably Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour's classic Learning from Las Vegas. 3

This article develops a tentative archaeology of public media displays, discussing their 'formative' stages from trade signs, banners and broadsides to billboards and the earliest dynamic displays. 4 It demonstrates that this development was constantly accompanied by discourses that commented on it and affected its forms. The main attention will be on the monumentalisation of displays, but it will also be pointed out that this issue cannot be separated from the simultaneous miniaturisation and proliferation of reproduced imagery and media gadgetry.

1. See Peter Callas, 'Some Liminal Aspects of the Technology Trade', Mediamatic 5.3 (Fall 1990): 107-115.
2. In a few cases two screens have been used simultaneously to display the same subject in Shibuya. Likewise, there have been experiments, where mobile phone messages by people on the street have been displayed on the screens.
From Signboards to Placards and Billboards

Painted or carved wall inscriptions to attract attention were already known in ancient Rome. Romans also used signboards to identify craftsmen’s workshops and various services. Similar practices existed in Medieval Europe, although more decisive evidence is only available from the sixteenth century onwards. Metal emblems with symbolic objects or coats-of-arms suspended from a rod protruding from the front of a house were widely used as means of identification; before the adoption of house numbering, they also served as address indicators. The habit of posting printed bills on doors and walls made more varied linguistic messages possible. It began in the late fifteenth century in the wake of the Gutenbergian revolution. As communities grew and the hold of capitalism became stronger, the role of public advertising gained more importance. Signboards also developed into vehicles for distinguishing between similar competing products and services. This was related to the introduction of other forms, such as printed tradecards and eventually newspaper advertisements.

Strategies of persuasion gained force over the seemingly neutral notices that announced ‘services’. As we have already seen, fairs, carnivals and other public gatherings played a role in this development. Market stalls for touring theatre troupes, circuses and other entertainments had large painted banners as attractors and ‘previews’ of the show’s content. The itinerant theatrical entrepreneur John Richardson (1766-1836), who began his successful career as a humble ‘penny showman’, used the services of the most famous scene painters from London’s Royal patent theatres. 5 Together with the cries of the barkers, the banners became weapons on a discursive battlefield that anticipated the role of movie posters. The notorious father of ‘humbug’, P.T. Barnum adopted this practice, displaying large banners of the curiosities he was exhibiting at the American Museum (New York) on its facade facing Broadway, the busiest thoroughfare of the city. 6

Printed attractions in outdoor spaces became widespread in the early nineteenth century. In London, printers and booksellers began to display satirical political engravings and novelty prints in their shop windows, turning these into kinds of free galleries for ‘media imagery’. 7 Advertising broadsides promoting products and popular spectacles began to be used in great numbers on any available surfaces, from fences to walls and even doors. This did not only have to do with the growth of metropolitan cities like London and Paris, or the intensifying competition in the capitalist economy, but also with other issues, such as the heavy taxation of paid advertisements in newspapers. Advertising in public spaces was a cheaper channel

5. See Richardson’s obituary in The Gentleman’s Magazine 7 (Jan-June 1837): 326-327.
and could reach a wider audience. The first half of the nineteenth century was its wild period, as the histories of advertising testify. Billposters obeyed no rules, using any available surfaces. Layer upon layer, they pasted their broadsides on walls that were often already covered. They competed and even physically fought with each other, paying little attention to the official edicts meant to control the situation.

The cityscape turned into a constantly metamorphosing, tension-filled patchwork of overlapping textual and visual messages. In the *palimpsest* covering the wall of the Park Theater in New York, the journalist George Foster thought he perceived the following message, which would have appealed to the surrealists and the Situationists: ‘Steamer Ali – Sugar Coat – and Pantaloons for – the Great Anaconda – Whig Nominations – Panorama of Principles – Democrats rally to the – American Museum’ – and so on ...’. There were innovations, such as messages painted on the ground with invisible colours that only became visible when it rained, as well as ‘peripatetic’ and ‘vehicular placards’. The first referred to humans walking on the streets either holding advertising boards or being ‘dressed up’ in them, front and back (Charles Dickens named them ‘the animated sandwich’). The latter meant omnibuses and carriages covered by moving advertisements. In the most extreme cases, the vehicles themselves were camouflaged as large three-dimensional objects. All this contributed to what Jean-Louis Comolli characterised as the ‘frenzy of the visible’. Public imagery, both static and dynamic, came to envelop the lives of the city people at every step.

It would be tempting to say that posted broadsides functioned as ‘proto-screens’, but this might go too far. As an information interface, the definition of the screen should incorporate a separation between hardware and software. It should function both as a frame and a gateway through which messages are transmitted and retrieved. In the limited sense such conditions appeared, when after decades of billposting anarchy, enterprises began to acquire legal rights

9. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light*, p. 152. For Foster, the true message of the overlapping ‘handbills’ was ‘mutability’.
13. The phenomenon was ‘the effect of the social multiplication of images ...’; and also ‘of something of a geographical extension of the field of the visible and the representable ...’; Comolli also pointed out that ‘there is a visibility of the expansion of industrialism, of the transformation of the landscape, of the production of towns and metropolises’, Jean-Louis Comolli, ‘Machines of the Visible’, in Teresa de Lauretis and Stephen Heath (eds.) *The Cinematic Apparatus*, London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980, pp. 122-123.
to use certain surfaces and rent them out for advertisers. In England, this practice came to be known as 'placard advertising'. Advertising space was rationally divided into framed 'lots', and these were 'cultivated' by companies who had bought rights to use them. The newly organised 'adscape' was realised early at railway stations. The constant flow of passers-by made them attractive, and passengers could be forced to see placards from the train as well. In the United States, the word 'billboard' was adopted, reflecting a similar institutional and commercial development.¹⁴ Catherine Gudis has aptly summarised its significance: 'like the buildings rising in growing metropolises, billboards contributed to the accretion of commercial centres and formalised the incursion of pictures and texts to the public sphere'.¹⁵

Although billboards represented an effort to tame the wild advertising, they did not manage to dampen criticism against its harmful effects. On the contrary, a heated and long-lasting public debate ensued. It manifested itself in the formation of trade organisations to defend the business, including the International Bill Posters' Association of North America (1872) and the Associated Bill Posters' Association of the US and Canada (1891), which eventually developed into today's Outdoor Advertising Association of America (OAAA). Citizens' watch groups were also formed, such as the British SCAPA (Society for the Checking of Abuses in Public Advertising, 1893). Like similar organisations elsewhere, it encouraged its members to document misuses and excesses of public advertising and fought for the removal of misplaced and improper billboards.

The tension became even more intense when the introduction of the automobile encouraged advertisers to erect billboards not just in the cities, but also by the roadsides. They were frequently accused of blocking access to scenic landscapes. This issue did not escape the attention of satirical cartoonists. A cartoon titled 'Go Prepared if you Wish to Enjoy American Scenery' (1925) depicts a car parked by a roadside flanked by billboards.¹⁶ The passengers are seen enjoying the scenic view from the top of long ladders leaning against them. The fight against 'rubbish, weeds, and billboards' was declared a 'crusade'.¹⁷ Taking it literally, the pioneer feminist Frances Power Cobbe attacked billboards with a 'pot of paint and a long-handled brush on her rural drives in order to deface defacements', setting an example for the 'adbusters' and critical street artists of later times.¹⁸

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¹⁴ This happened probably in the 1870s, although the *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions a British example from 1851: 'The bill-boards of the Park... still continued to style the Park "The Theatre"'. This doesn't seem to be directly related to the later American usage.


¹⁷ Clinton Rogers Woodruff, 'The Crusade Against Billboards', *The American Review of Reviews*, July-December 1907, pp. 345-347. Woodruff was the first President of the American Civic Association.

Enlarging and Shrinking: the Gulliverisation of Media

Outdoor advertising in the nineteenth century is interesting not just because of its proliferation and institutionalisation, but also because of the enormous enlargement of the messages themselves. Early signboards and printed broadsides were relatively small. Their scale could be characterised as anthropomorphic, which more or less corresponded with the dimensions of the environments in which most people lived. Elements that did not conform to this principle usually 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 astronomical clocks built into the walls of churches or town halls (sometimes on their outside walls) 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 early nineteenth century French cartoon points toward change. It shows two men trying to read announcements posted on the wall.\(^{19}\) One of them is peeking at the densely filled sheets from a ladder, while the other is using a telescope. The point of the cartoon is the absurdity of posting long official notices on the wall, but its 'statement' can be generalised. Broadsides were not only piling up, but also climbing up along the walls, which made reading their messages difficult.\(^{20}\) The situation changed dramatically during the century, partly because of economic developments and changes in the urban environment, partly because of improvements in printing techniques. By the end of the century it became possible to produce large chromolithographic posters in several colours. Graphic designers learned to deal with large size, concentrating on elements that could be detected from a distance. They simplified the textual part of the message, focusing on the trademark and 'branding'. Advertisers began to consider the placement of the billboard within the 'adscape', playing with issues of scale and perspective that enhanced the power of their message in relation to the surrounding elements.

The development also led to the opposite direction. Lithography and its improvement, chromolithography, as well as techniques of photographic reproduction, provided new possibilities for the production of 'smaller than usual' pictures. Tiny mass-reproduced images spread to every imaginable place. Pictures filled up photographic albums and scrapbooks, and were also used as raw material for parlor pastimes, such as the creation of colourful collages of 'found' imagery on the common folding 'screens' (room dividers). Illustrated magazines were part of the trend. The enlargement of public images was, therefore, accompanied by its reverse: miniatu risation and privatisation.

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20. Broadsides were sometimes called 'handbills', which refers to their other use: the practice of distributing them from hand to hand.
One could refer to this phenomenon as the ‘Gulliverisation’ of the visual, as I already suggested nearly twenty years ago.\textsuperscript{21} 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 operates at the divide between the public and the private. The urban environment, with the skyscraper as its ultimate manifestation, became more and more ‘inhuman’, whereas the home provided a return to the anthropomorphic scale. The countless miniature objects and images that dotted the Victorian parlor (including miniature souvenirs of public monuments) gave the inhabitant an illusion of control that s/he was losing in public outdoor spaces. Gulliverisation also raises the issue of the relationship between things that are near (tangible) and distant (unreachable). Mediating between these opposites became an important part of the advertisers’ strategies, even if it may not have always been explicitly formulated. Billboards gave products a monumental and ‘universal’ quality. Trade cards, newspaper ads and other forms brought them close, making them tangible and ‘personal’. At the fingertips, such paraphernalia functioned as 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’ later manifested themselves in movie stardom and the ideological manipulation of the masses practised in totalitarian societies like Nazi Germany. Pictures of film stars became a popular topic for figurines, collectable trade cards. The enormous faces on promotional billboards and cinema screens were shrunk to the size fit for one’s fingertips: the object of distant adoration was brought to tactile reach. These minuscule pictures were an essential part of the play of expectations, promises and lust of the star cult. Like family pictures kept in the wallet, they could be more than just a picture, becoming representations of the absent, almost the ‘thing itself’. The religious implications of the star cult are apparent here.\textsuperscript{22} Advertising, the star system and religious worship share the interplay between the monumental and the intimate. In this sense, commercial billboards could perhaps be characterised as altar pictures for the cult of capitalism.

The Nazis understood that the ideological indoctrination of a nation depended not just on explicit propaganda and mass rituals, but also on seemingly insignificant channels. They ‘orchestrated’ mass events and symbolic acts. Massive billboard-like images of Hitler’s face were put on display. Leni Riefenstahl’s state-sponsored ‘documentaries’ \textit{Triumph of the Will}...
(1934) and *Olympia I-II* (1938) were part of a media facade to impress both Germans and foreigners. However, the Nazis also operated in the other end of the scale. Joseph Goebbels’ Propaganda Ministry founded a company named *Cigaretten-Bilderdienst* to produce series of collectable cards placed in cigarette packs. 23 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 Lilliputian counterpoint of Riefenstahl’s colossal film. Handsome collectors’ albums, with carefully scripted captions already in place, were produced for the cards; the Nazi ideology was internalised as a ‘side-product’ of ‘innocent’ hobbyism. 24

**The Advent of Dynamic Displays**

By the end of the nineteenth century the billboard had become a prominent part of the urban environment. Cartoonists displayed people walking within maze-like adscapes, where billboards had replaced everything else, becoming a shared ‘virtual reality’. 25 It is no wonder that billboards were constantly criticised by cultural reformists, and targeted by modernist architectural critics calling for a city cleaned of ornamentation, historicist references and non-functional(ist) features. As usual, Oscar Wilde expressed an opinion shared by few of his peers among the cultural elites, when he praised street advertising for bringing ‘colour into the drab monotony of the English streets’. 26 Whatever attitude one adopted, the billboard could not be ignored. And yet, considering it a ‘screen’ in the media-cultural sense would not be justified. A billboard could suggest a narrative, but it wasn’t a medium for sequential presentations. No matter how gigantic, it was a frozen printed image. It was able to move or evolve only in dreams or fantasies, as Busby Berkeley’s extravagant ‘Optical Illusion’ sequence in the Warner Bros musical *Dames* (1934) suggested. 27 It really was a huge emblem supposed to imprint an idea – the trademark – into the minds of the passers-by.

However, new dynamic elements were introduced to the urban adscapes. Technically, the *primum mobile* was electricity. The new role of electric light in the streets and at mass-events such as the world’s fairs, led to an ‘electric landscape’ that ‘sprang up in patch-

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24. The Munich-based Raumbild-Verlag published sets of 3D picture-pairs of Germany’s war efforts, see *Die Soldaten des Führer’s im Felde*, München: Raumbild-Verlag, 1940. The albums contained 100 photographic stereoviews and a folding stereoscope.


27. *Dames* (dir Ray Enright 1934). Young lovers, interpreted by Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell, are traveling in a street car. He falls asleep and sees a dream featuring her girlfriend and other females in a fantastic stylised dance spectacle that takes place in an adscapes turned into a dreamscape.
es’. Particularly in the United States, electricity became associated with symbolic values — progress and ‘things American’. Soon after the incandescent bulb had been introduced in the late 1870s, it was applied to advertising. In New York, the Broadway became known as the ‘Great White Way’, which referred to the electrified advertisements and illuminated shop windows that turned the street into a luminous attraction after dark. ‘The transparent posters on which electricity wrote advertising texts with letters of fire’ (Jules Verne) had qualities lacking from normal billboards. Not only did they lengthen the daily hours passers-by were exposed to their messages, animations could be produced by switching the illuminated parts rhythmically on and off. A particularly complex sign was erected on the roof of Hotel Normandie in New York. It was seven stories high and had twenty thousand light bulbs, depicting an illuminated Roman chariot race. One reporter found it ‘more perfect and natural in its movement than the finest coloured cinematograph picture’. 

Although electricity made spectacular light effects an everyday experience, they were not without predecessors. For centuries, fireworks had been used to illuminate architectural structures to celebrate royal births and weddings or war victories. As George Plimpton explained, ‘machines’ (also known as ‘temples’) were used for this purpose already in the seventeenth century. They were ‘elaborate ornamental structures, usually in the form of buildings, which were decorated with paintings, usually of allegorical figures, flowers, and lamps which were cut out in silhouette to glow from behind’. The ‘machines’ often resembled fountains, palaces or boats erected on floats on a river, or on bridges and open squares, for obvious reasons. When the fireworks were set off, a ‘multimedia spectacle’ avant la lettre was unleashed. While ‘normal’ fireworks express at most simple icons (flowers, etc.), the representational elements of the ‘machine’ added allegorical and political meanings to the show. For the observers, the ‘machine’ produced a kind of picture that was ‘animated’ by the explosives and finally consumed by fire.

There was a relationship between such extravaganzas and the late nineteenth century electric illuminations of bridges, buildings, statues and other elements of the urban envi-

33. Plimpton, Fireworks, pp. 34-35.
According to Carolyn Marvin, the transformation of the traditional effects from the era of fire to that of electricity was 'very gradual'.

Many classical motives, including fountains of fire, were simply translated into the 'vocabulary of electric light effects'. We should also note the influence of fireworks on spectacular, but 'safe' media forms, such as the feux pyriques (or feux arabesques), and chromatropes, mechanical magic lantern slides also known as 'artificial fireworks'. Feux pyriques did not involve fire or explosives. The effects were created by slotted and coloured pictures that had abstract patterned discs rotating behind them (sometimes by means of a clockwork mechanism). They were displayed indoors, usually in combination with other optical 'marvels', such as magic lantern projections that often used chromatropes as a visually intoxicating culmination (and indication it was time to go home).

**Magic Lantern Projections as an Anticipation of the Urban Screen**

Another way of bringing dynamic images to the public environment was magic lantern projection. Since its introduction in the mid-seventeenth century, the magic lantern had been considered only suitable for darkened interior spaces. This is understandable, because the available light sources were weak, and the projected images dim. What made projections in public outdoor spaces possible were dramatic improvements in lighting technology, in particular the oxy-hydrogen limelight ('calcium light') and the electric arc-light. According to Schievelbusch, powerful arc-lights were experimented with as early as the 1840s to illuminate public monuments in Paris. The idea of projecting not just a beam of light, but pictures and texts as well, followed as a logical step. An intermediate form was the use of searchlights on night-time river cruises to isolate scenes from the dark riverbanks. According to an enthusiastic participant, ‘the magic shaft of the search-light swung from point to point making pictures of which the details were more clearly shown than they could be by day’.

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38. An original eighteenth century device for feux pyriques with a large set of 'software' has been preserved in the Jonathan and Jacqueline Gestetner Collection in London, where I have had an opportunity to explore it. The words 'artificial fireworks' were used about their chromatropes by the well-known British manufacturer Carpenter and Westley. There are some examples in the author's collection.


41. Later the French used them during the colonial wars in Africa to scare away the enemy, thus proving the ideological and military benefits of a 'blinding' technology, Schievelbusch, *Disenchanted Night*, pp. 54-57.

Particularly in the United States (where the magic lantern was often known as the ‘stereopticon’), slides were projected outdoors on screens, blank walls and even public monuments since the 1860s. In Boston, an enterprise named The Automatic Stereopticon Advertising Company promised that ‘the Automatic Stereopticon Advertiser Works All Night’, displaying ‘your Advertisement to wondering crowds’. An illustration on its tradecard depicts a large magic lantern on a scaffolding in a town square, projecting the company’s name and address on a screen erected on a horse-drawn cart. Although it is night-time, a large crowd of spectators is present (or so the promoter wants us to believe). Commercial outdoor projections became a well-established tradition, although their full extent is not yet known. Later in the century the well-known American soap manufacturer Benjamin T. Babbitt advertised his free touring ‘Magnificent Stereopticon Exhibition and Musical Entertainment using the Oxyhydrogen or Calcium Light’. It was shown in different cities after dark at some well-known street corner. The views were claimed to be of ‘a greater size than the largest Panorama’, and the ‘Magnificent Horses and Wagons used for transportation’ provided additional ‘pleasure to thousands’.

In 1904, the magic lantern manufacturer T.H. McAllister described five modes of projecting slides in outdoor spaces with its ‘advertising stereopticons’: on walls, shop windows, screens mounted on moving horse-drawn carts and screens erected on the roof (using either front or rear projection). The roof projections were recommended for displaying ‘latest news bulletins’ or ‘election returns’. Indeed, the last mentioned had already been used for decades. In a typical case, on November 24, 1866, Harper’s Weekly published a full page illustration about the presentation of ‘election returns’ by means of a magic lantern outside the New York Tribune’s office building. Similar reports appeared frequently over the years. More than one magic lantern and screen were sometimes used. The projected slides contained handwritten statistical data about the ballot count, scribbled on the spot.

44. Undated tradecard (c. 1860s), author’s collection.
45. Undated broadside (c. 1880s), author’s collection. The exhibition in question was at corner of Broad and Middle streets (city unknown) at 8 o’clock. The broadside mentions earlier presentations in Charleston (South Carolina); Augusta, (Georgia), and Hinesville (Georgia). Babbitt’s soap works was based in New York City.
47. Harper’s Weekly, Nov. 24, 1866, p. 744. The event had taken place around midnight, Nov. 6-7, 1866.
48. For example, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, Nov. 23, 1872 (cover); Oct. 25, 1884 (cover); Nov. 17, 1888, pp. 223-224; Nov. 15, 1890, p. 262; Harper’s Weekly, Nov. 17, 1888, p. 877; Collier’s Magazine 34.4, Oct. 22, 1904, cover. I have found these from the archives of the Magic Lantern Castle Museum, San Antonio, Texas (thanks to Jack Judson).
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on blank slides coated with emulsion. The data was received by the telegraph (or later, the telephone). Although a short time lag was unavoidable, the use of visual media for this purpose anticipated today’s election-night broadcasts on TV. In 1896, *The Century Magazine* published a lively report about the spectacle:

> The crowd ... gathers early in City Hall Park and Newspaper Square to read the messages written upon glass ‘slides’, and magnified upon broad screens outside the buildings by means of a stereopticon. At first these bulletins are vague and partial, but toward midnight they increase in breadth and importance. At intervals the operator presents a summing up like this: ‘418 districts out of a total of 600 in Ohio give John Smith, Dem., 117,926, and James Brown, Rep., 180,460.’ or: ‘Georgia elects the whole Democratic ticket by an estimated plurality of 20,000’. When he has nothing to report the operator displays a portrait of a candidate, or an impromptu cartoon, exhibiting in comical allegory the success of his man, or his side, and the discomfiture of the other fellow. Of late a favorite bit of fun has been to throw upon the screen a question like this: ‘What’s the matter with Cleveland?’ Promptly comes the answer from ten thousand throats: ‘He’s all right!’ Then shines out: ‘Who’s all right?’ And the windows rattle with the acclamation: ‘C-i-e-v-e-a-n-d’

The information about audience interaction is interesting; however, an election night was a special festive occasion. Most accounts about public projections emphasize the relative passivity of the onlookers as recipients. This was reflected in discursive form in the cartoons about public figures as outdoor lanternists published by satirical magazines like *Puck* and *Judge*. On September 19, 1888, *Puck’s* front page featured President Coolidge projecting his idea of the income tax reform on the dome of the Capitol. Years later, *Judge* depicted the notorious newspaper publisher Joseph Pulitzer with a magic lantern, presenting an economic-political commentary from the balcony of his newspaper building to a crowd on the street.

**Postscript: Los Angeles, 2009**

In the short time span of a few months, the media landscape of L.A. has undergone a major transformation: with astonishing speed the traditional billboards are being replaced by dynamic super bright LED billboards. Hundreds of them have already been installed, and more

49. Two boxes of such slides, with a needle-pointed stylus, have been preserved in the author’s collection. They are titled ‘Primus Diagram Lantern Plates For Showing Diagrams, Drawings, Writings, etc. in the Lantern’ and produced by Butcher and Son, Ltd, London. Cover illustration shows a picture of a slide with election results.

50. This is confirmed by the T.H. McAllister catalogue already referred to: ‘LANTERN ADVERTISEMENTS for temporary use – Election Returns, etc. – can be easily made by writing or painting them on glass, with India Ink, or with the “opaque” used by Photographers’, McAllister, *Catalogue of Stereopticons*, p. 35.


52. ‘A Great Democratic Editor in the Greatest Democratic City Sheds Light on a Dark Subject’, *Judge*, Sept. 25, 1909. Although the cartoon is hand-drawn, Pulitzer’s magic lantern can be identified as a common cheap model sold by Sears-Roebuck around that time. The cartoonist may have used their mail order catalogue as model.
are on the way. LED billboards not only extend the principle of ‘heavy rotation’ – familiar from commercial radio and music television – to the public urban environment. The matrixes of thousands of backlit LEDs glow with power that makes the messages visible in bright sunlight, not to say anything about the night. They not only try to attract, but capture the gaze. Those who are unfortunate enough to live under their glow have begun to experience ‘false sunrises’ and demand public regulation. A social movement is rising, but whether it will have any impact in an environment dominated by corrupt politics and a general capitulation in front of the interests of corporate media and crony capitalism, remains to be seen. 53

I have chosen to conclude with this jump ahead in time to assure the reader that the developments described in this article have more than antiquarian interest. The emergence of public media displays did not take place automatically. There is nothing self-evident in the roles they came to play in urban spaces and beyond. It happened as a consequence of economic, political and social developments that were accompanied by discursive commentaries, cultural debate and social struggle. A media archaeological excavation of the factors, attitudes and forces that were involved can provide us weapons to counter corporate excesses like the ones taking place in Los Angeles right now.

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