Locating Desires—Screens and Urban Culture in Asia: Notes on the Special Issue

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Digital LED billboards, while having been around for more than ten years as a functional media format, are rapidly becoming major public media objects/spaces/surfaces, transforming the face of urbanity as we know it. Their main material characteristics include: high brightness, high resolution, mounted or mobile, weather and dust resistant, displaying multiple and looped (animated) messages in a shared surface, etc. They are typically delivered by large media companies (e.g., JCDecaux) who own both the hardware and software of networked screens. In terms of public screens as spectacles, the mode of attention engendered by them vary from captivated attention (e.g., in a subway car or in a lift), directive attention (e.g., in a railway depot or an airport), or simply random view. Their materiality, economic and technical operation, and modes of spectacle-making are only some of the fundamental aspects of public screens. As they proliferate, public screens have deep and wide-ranging implications for urban everyday life, and public culture at large.

The Terrain

The interdisciplinary field of urban screen studies is nascent, marked most notably by the publication of *Urban Screens Reader* by Scott McQuire, Meredith Martin, and Sabine Niederer.[1] Yet it is a late bloom, given that the presence of urban screens is about forty years old, if we take the installation of the famous Spectacolour Board in New York's Times Square as a convenient point of origin, and if we remember the burgeoning of digital media research dating back to the 1980s. If Spectacolour in the mid-1970s was clearly about assembling a

new cultural platform for advertising, and if digital media research since the 1980s has been about understanding forms of mediation that are separated from everyday life (e.g., virtual reality and cyberspace), by the mid-2010s cumulative changes in technology, urban space, and public culture have brought about new questions in ever-multiplying contexts, invariably changing the way urban screens are understood and theorized.

Context matters in our emplacement of public screen culture. Broadly, the study of public screen culture is rooted in the assertion that our current epoch has (a) transformed our understanding of the notion of "media in the environment" into one of "media *as* environment"; and (b) rejected the "skin vs. substance" distinction of public media screens to embrace the recognition of them as a vital constituent in the material formation of new urban spatiality. Clearly, for (a), the modernist understanding of media, as perhaps epitomized by McLuhan, has given way to a postmodern realization of the "baffling media totality," with its "shimmering multitude of images and sounds" that makes "[the] iconic plenitude…the contemporary condition."[2] As for (b), the realization that public screens are not seen as mere surface on a building structure in fact was not first made by postmodern media theorists, but by professional architects. For it is architecture that has always insisted that the outer layer of a building is like skin on a human body: it is not mere surface, but a vital bodily organ! (a point reiterated in Chow's essay here).

So, what are the critical questions that have been raised about the urban screen culture? Broadly speaking, there are three major domains of critical questions. First, there are questions concerning object specificity and aesthetics. For instance, given the manifold presence of public digital screens whose messages bathe and flow through our urban field of visuality, how do we begin to delimit them as proper "media objects" and "architectural form"? How are they used, framed, appropriated, and integrated into our everyday life? If digital screens elicit "techno-enchantment,"[3] in what ways are they rearranging our relations with commodities, places, spaces, as well as inter-subjective relations? Second, there are questions about how screens are altering

the urban environment. For instance, when considering the size, location, and degree of illumination of a large screen, what are the appropriate forms of urban planning, design, and governance? By and for whom? When a screen is installed in public space, who should have access to it and who has control over it? As a result of these series of inquiry, the third set of questions brings us to the politics of public culture. For instance, how might we conceive alternatives to commercial grids of social and economic power underlying digital screen cultures? What kinds of partnership enable innovative screen programs that can enrich public cultures? In what conditions can public screens contribute not only to new avenues of public interaction but to the deeper ambitions of democratizing public culture? In the East Asian urban networks (e.g., Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, etc.), how is cultural citizenship constructed through public screens (big and small), including the engendering of a cosmopolitan outlook and the consumption of aesthetics that shapes an inter-Asian sense of subjective world-making? How are all these questions related to power?

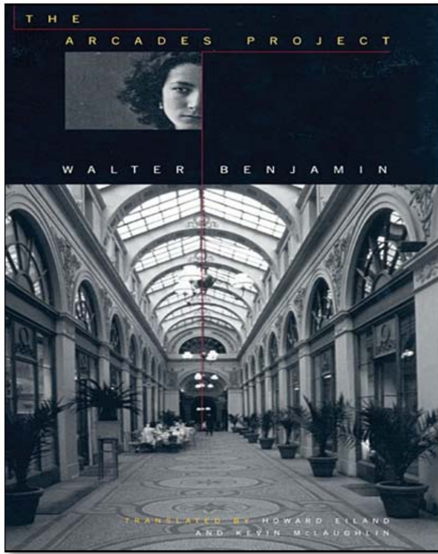
This special issue brings forth the problematic of "locating desires" from within the broad set of research inquiries outlined above. First, screens are both located and locating. Despite talks of the tendency of globalization to create "generic cities,"[4] public screens in fact have a highly site-specific type of presence in cities when it comes to their social and aesthetic functions and usages. Indeed, contemporary digital display culture is about the carriage and projection of context-sensitive information and images, forming a new sense of publics, aesthetic enchantment, and transformative social agency in specific locales.[5] Second, screens both express and elicit desires. Strategically placed, screens on tall buildings, bus stops, shopping centers, airport lounges, etc. are all too often a rearticulation of hyper-commercialism (and in some cases, also that of state power). They mediate the compulsion to consume, to be informed and directed (by state agencies), or simply to be distracted. If such expressions often work through a mixture of curiosity and awe elicited from the viewing public, how are these screens integrated into the

structure of feeling of urban living and mobility that take place in a highly saturated visual surrounding? Put simply, who are the subjects of viewing in public space? What does a subject *see*, and how does she or he *connect* all the visual spectacles with their living conditions, sense of being watched, political opinions, and memories? What can they do with this meshwork of observation and experience? I want to use the trope of "locating desires" to bring about a closer attention to spaces and subjectivities, to how they intertwine through the matrix of urban screens. A pressing issue, as pointed out by all of the essays in this special issue, is about how to *intervene* in an urban structure of feeling compressed by a screen culture that has taken on a sense of domination by the logics of commerce and state control.

Phantasmagoria

An important, and somewhat expected, source with which to think about "locating desires" in relation to urban screens is Walter Benjamin (Guy Debord is, perhaps, over-expected here). Filtering from some of the early chroniclers of modernity, namely Martin Heidegger's angst about questions of existence in modern dwelling, and Georg Simmel's concern about the sensory translation work that takes place between the space of society and the space of inner experience, Benjamin undertakes to extend their framework of (nineteenth-century) generalized urban modernity to greater depths for the (twentieth-century) *cultural* modernity.[6] Most notably in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin provides his critical notes on the spatial and experiential implications of modern city life, a life formed through architectural, mechanical, and spatial forms and the all-too-surreal psychic "conversations" engendered by them. One of the key material forms of Parisian urban modernity mentioned by Benjamin again and again, was glass. To Benjamin, Paris–home to the genesis of mass culture and the birthplace of artistic modernity–stands as the epitome of a new cultural modernity built by glass. When writing his notes for *The Arcade Project*, he would meander through the many indoor alleyways, Haussmann style. Crisscrossing the buildings in Paris, he

encountered arcades (*passages couverts*) that were covered by glass (sometimes stained, but often translucent, ready for illumination by the manipulation of light). (For him, the other major component of this urbanscape was, of course, iron construction, symptomatizing mass culture and the entertainment sphere originating from the world expo). Esther Leslie reminds us: "Arcades were passages through blocks of buildings, lined with shops and other businesses. Montaged iron and glass constructions housed chaotic juxtapositions of shop-signs, window displays of commodities, mannequins and illuminations."[7] Whether as mere surface of reflection, or as a portal of the gaze, the glass captivated Benjamin. It is in the glass form that Benjamin found an associative manifestation of modernity, for the *glass-screen* was the prototypical dialectical image, making possible manifold reflections and refractions, creating "the *passage* [as] a city, a world in miniature,"[8] even carrying dreams/nightmares. The infamous flâneur, so often interpellated by cultural critics of modernity, is precisely the interlocutor of the glass-screen. The flâneur thrives in the bustling, cluttered commercial dwellings of the city, in which the flâneur is ultimately constituted by the kaleidoscopic distractions and displays of ephemera offered in part by the *glass-qua-cinematic-form* within the arcades/city. In this way, we may perhaps speculate how Benjamin might have treated the glass-form, which materializes a "screen" by presenting the latter as a concrete architectural surface, as a major symbol indicating the habitual hallucination of the bourgeoisie. Margaret Cohen clarifies: " … the arcades' ambivalent half-light facilitated the blurring of boundaries between human and commodity, thereby producing the allure of the commodity fetish."[9] This hallucination, perhaps induced by the glass-form, occurs not only through an ideological transposition, but also through constituting an immediacy of a perceptible presence.



Book Cover of The Arcades Project (1999)

Image captured from “Tokyo night 夜” (2011)[1]

Let us briefly consider the hallucination-producing screen and its relation to the urban (capitalist) structure of feeling. We should first raise this: is it any wonder that Marx in his theorization of the commodity fetish, Benjamin in his treatment of the glass-and-iron built Arcades, and scores of writers in the romanticist tradition (like Baudelaire) have all converged around the term “phantasmagoria” as a vivid vocabulary with which to signify the economically and technologically structured sense of modernity? The phantasmagoria was based chiefly on the centerpiece of the magic-lantern. The phantasmagorian would take the magic-lantern from city to city as a kind of mobile commercial theatrical show. What made this a wildly successful form of urban screen performance was, for Benjamin, the effacement of the old vocabularies of the dream and the dialectical image so favored by the romanticists. Benjamin insists that the screen is no longer a mere surface of signification; instead, it has passed into a material form that gives urbanity its concrete existence. Just as the glass in the Arcades stands as a concrete material form that mediates the meaning of bourgeois modernity, the screen of the phantasmagoria is erected as a living architectural construction. Today, our urban screens, erected on the skin of buildings, in the public transport system, and in the interiors of commercial spaces, manifest the same world of the phantasmagoria, equally materialist in its form and displaying a structure of feeling through the same trick, that of *reification*.

In sum, the theoretical agenda set forth by the four essays in this special issue is one that (a) throws a particular light on the forces that contribute to the accretion of a located/locating structure of feeling in urban screen culture, and (b) attempts to insinuate an intervention into that (phantasmagoric) formation so profoundly governed by the reifying logic of the market and of the state. There are, of course, other possible and equally urgent agendas, such as the uses of urban screen by various segments of the masses, and the reflection on the interrelation between big screens and the small portable screens of smartphones and tablets. These questions, too, intersect with the

problematic of "locating desires," and await further probes in this emerging field.

The Essays

With respect to "locating desires," Chris Berry enters into the everyday world of the Shanghai public transport system, to locate a field of vision where "watching cannot be avoided." Through collaboration with the local photographer Yu Wenhao, Berry examines the inventory of situated screens mounted at various junctures of the public transport system (in the transport hubs, at major road intersections, and on the buses). Like the world reflected/refracted through the glass in the Parisian arcades, it is the logic of "persistent exposure" that deserves our critical attention. In departing from the view that persistent exposure must mean a "total control fantasy," Berry intervenes into this deterministic view by drawing our attention to the centrality of the *anxiety of escape* that ironically structures the field of vision of the screens in the Shanghai public transport system. Berry suggests that besides a certain desire to elude the ubiquitous screens (and therefore escape from expected consumerism), Shanghai citizens traveling in the city's public transport system are in fact caught in an "antagonistic relationship" with the corporations and the state who, by being so eager to subject the citizens to persistent exposure, in turn exposes their anxiety of capture. Public screens thus become a battle ground between consent and coercion.

Looking wider into the cityscape of Shanghai at large, Audrey Yue and Xin Gu locate the city's "obsession with image" in the state-led imperative of mounting the discourse and practice of "creative industries" onto urban development. This imperative, Yue and Gu suggest, is both a forward-looking refashioning of a Western modernity expected of global cities in the twenty-first century and a nostalgic backward-looking reimagination of decadence germane to the chaos of the city's industrialization in the second-half of the twentieth-century. The result is an experience of everyday urban life "caught between the pull of rapid development and the inequalities

they present." The glitzy screens of the 2010 Shanghai Expo, Yue and Gu argue, epitomizes such a cultural imbalance with important stakes for civic life. In a parallel way, their project echoes that of Berry in highlighting the public screen formation in Shanghai as an unstable cultural frontier, poised to be disrupted by emerging alternative publics (e.g., digital art project, screens as personalized message boards, etc.).

To Helen Grace, in her essay on community-appropriated screens to express an alternative, non-monetized spectacle of "informal urbanism," screens do not only represent; they pulsate. She locates her reflection in the Magic Carpet projects in urban renewal zones in Hong Kong and Taipei, projects that utilize screens propped up in public streets to showcase student documentaries of long-time residents whose ordinary lives have been dislocated by urban gentrification. Exploring the imaginative possibilities offered by the Magic Carpet projects, Grace realizes how screens can almost become a means for "measuring" urban rhythms. The students' video-ethnography, as it were, came about not just by capturing stable vignettes of "small stories," but also by drifting through the neighborhood punctuated by seasons, sounds and ambience of small spaces, repetitive regularities of everyday life, and oscillations of lived enjoyment, fear, and disappointment. In the geopsychology of these neighborhoods, Grace suggests, one discovers a biorhythm: an assemblage of lives, bodies, and experiences flowing through time and history. Like Yue and Gu in their critique of the "screen life" in Shanghai dominated by grand (state and corporate) calculations, Grace proposes that we attend to small-scaled biorhythmic diversity of ordinary lives and use the screen as an apparatus for community engagement.

There is in this special issue an exemplar of practice that takes the screen as a tool for community engagement seriously. In Chow Yiu Fai's meditative visual essay, the location of screens is in an artist studio. These are scaled-down screens, distanced from the grandiose of the projected commercial world of the popular music industry. The primary thought exhibited in Chow's art-piece-turned-visual-

essay is that of "inevitables." In the process of assembling a video art project for a small local art space in Hong Kong, Chow journeys through people, technologies, and events that reveal the ambivalence of the inevitables. In many ways, all four essays featured in this special issue face their own located inevitables and the desires so stirred, whether they revolve around the problem of persistent exposure in the public transport system, the imperative of creative industry growth mandated through an obsession with screens, the imposed rationalities of standardized and calculated urban renewal time, or in Chow's case, the market mechanisms, whether at the corporate or individual scale, that govern the sights and sounds of, and lived relations in, urban living. To Chow, as to the other authors, the inevitables must be disrupted. Yet Chow's essay brings out something that connects back with Benjamin.

In Benjamin's critique of bourgeois modernity as exemplified in the Parisian arcades (the "inevitable" of his days), he always keeps a certain sense of wonderment reserved for none other than the figure of the flâneur. This drifting figure, in his endless encounter with the phantasmagoric, never ceases to be amazed by the reflective possibilities offered by the inevitables. Likewise, Chow's visual essay centers on the author's journey through various encounters with the inexorable forces at the intersection of commercialism and art. Yet to him, these encounters—whether it is about the entanglements with the Cantopop industry, the curious desire to be gazed at among the ordinary women requested to provide amateur sound recordings, or the technological glitches in the video loops–are occasions for wonderment. In the end, perhaps what the screens for an artistic project capture are the unexpected "leakages" of the inevitables.

In Asia, we are well aware of the big-scaled ambitions pushed by the immensity of neoliberalist urban development. We are also all too familiar with the connection between these ambitions and screens, whose largeness, brightness, and ubiquity are imposingly refashioning our cityscapes across Asia. Together, the essays featured here represent robust theoretical reflections on urban screen cultures that stem from specific locales in Asia. It seems to me that what desires to

be gleaned from those screens, and more importantly, how they can be *rearranged*, ought to be on the agenda of this emerging field.

Notes

[1] Scott McQuire, Meredith Martin, and Sabine Niederer, eds. *Urban Screens Reader* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2009).

[2] Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 11, 14.

[3] John Nguyet Erni and Y. H. Anthony Fung, "Public Screen Cultures: An Emerging Field in Cultural Studies," *Communication & Society* 21 (2012): 17-22.

[4] Rem Koolhaas, "The Generic City," in *S, M, L, XL*, eds. Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, Jennifer Sigler, and Hans Werlemann (New York: Monacelli, 1995), 1238-69.

[5] Media theorists who study public screens have persuasively argued about the everyday local specificity of public screens, the most influential of which is Anna McCarthy's influential book *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[6] Besides Heidegger and Simmel, other early chroniclers of modernity that also influenced Benjamin, of course, includes Karl Marx and Georg Lukacs.

[7] Esther Leslie, "Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project,*" accessed August 1, 2014, *Militant Esthetix*, http://www.militantesthetix.co.uk/waltbenj/yarcades.html.

[8] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1999), 3.

[9] Margaret Cohen, "Benjamin's Phantasmagoria: The *Arcades Project*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 212.