

The Commoditable Block Party: Electric Signs in Manhattan, 1881-1917

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ABSTRACT

This text interrogates the form, and to a lesser extent the content, of the electric bulb sign as it manifested in Manhattan from 1892 to 1917, and how this unique medium both engaged with its environment and may have been read by its audience. Manhattan, like many other cosmopolitan cities at the *fin de siècle*, continually negotiated between the 'hyperstimulus' of urban life and systems to control or redirect these stresses into appropriate channels. The urban resident similarly courted certain types of spectacular entertainments while obviating others. Outdoor advertising in Manhattan, however, was a difficult spectacle to avoid: handbills, billboards and posters all competed for the urban consumer's attention.

The first advertising electric bulb sign appeared in Manhattan in 1892 and stylistically mimicked existing print advertising conventions. Over time, however, the sign developed its own unique style of visual iconography shaped in part by the limited representational capacity of the sign itself and its commercial message. Film, a medium with similar origins but with fewer limitations, ultimately modeled itself after the theatre trope by incorporating both narrative elements and establishing fixed spaces of cinema display.

While a single sign may have been considered either vulgar or harmless enough, a constellation comprised of multiple signs threatened to overwhelm its environment through refutation of textual presentation, its level of performativity, dimensions and position in the landscape, its relation to the promoted commodity, and its degree of luminosity.

The balance of the study offers possible readings of multiple electric bulb signs in Manhattan. The urban spaces transformed by electric bulb signs may have been read by audiences as liberating, confusing, spectacular, amusing, threatening, or a combination thereof, each position presented substantiated by theoretical arguments by such scholars as McLuhan, Bakhtin, Baudrillard, and Debord. No preferred reading is endorsed by the author; however, she suggests that electric bulb signs may be considered early examples of postmodernist media.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not until the electric light is used to spell out some brand name that it is noticed as a medium. Then it is not the light but the “content” (or that is really another medium) that is noticed.¹

It wasn't long after the appearance of the first electric bulb sign that similar signs, theatre marquees, and advertising ‘spectaculars’ colonized Broadway and Times Square, earning the strip its “Great White Way” moniker. And it wasn't long after electric bulb signs had spread throughout the area that they were denounced as morally degenerate, physically debilitating, and a fire waiting to happen. Such criticisms highlighted that even more troubling than the sign's commercial mission was the medium's novel method of presentation: its colorful, flashing, and mesmerizing light display which captured the imagination and lit up the sky.

While a historical treatment of a century-old artifact may appear irrelevant compared to contemporary digital and online discourses, electric bulb signs engage with highly contested terrains such as the links between commerce and entertainment, spectacle and tourism, individual bodies and urban economies. Substantive investigations of this dataset could provide an intriguing point of entry, for instance, into the discourse around democratic practices and the decline of dynamic cultural and civic participation², the similarly nontextual promotions of twenty-first century global advertising³, and the ongoing debate concerning postmodernity and its indicators. Spectacle and its iterations are also currently popular topics of academic discourse; electric bulb signs stand as a early,

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 25.

² For more information on populations and amusements in New York (and Chicago), see David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993).

³ Rance Crain, "Push for world ads has price: The bland leading the bland." *Advertising Age*, October 23, 2000.

important example of mediated display, mechanized performance, and commercial entertainment in a public setting.

Yet electric bulb signs have been overlooked amidst the digital focus of much contemporary media discourses. In the existing literature, interrogations of the electric bulb sign are mainly utilized as supporting evidence towards a broader thesis, or are neglected altogether. David E. Nye's texts on electricity and American culture—*Electrifying America* (1992) and *American Technological Sublime* (1994)—arguably offer the most nuanced and rigorous treatments of the medium, locating it within multiple historical framings.

However, he omits a rigorous examination of the signs' construction, and placement, and situates electric bulb signs firmly within the camp of the spectacular with no exploration of alternate readings. The quote which prefaces this introduction is from Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964), and while McLuhan connects electric bulb signs with a larger 'message', he does not explore this particular medium in depth.

Alternately, Philip Tocker's essay "Standardized Outdoor Advertising: History, Economics and Self-Regulation" in John W. Houck's volume *Outdoor Advertising, History and Regulation* (1969) and Tama Starr and Edward Hayman's *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (1998) were both invaluable resources for images and histories of electric bulb signs, but were compromised as seminal texts by their lack of substantive analytical content.

More common is the omission of electric bulb signs from historical cultural discourses. The oft-cited and widely-acclaimed cultural history of electricity *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialization of Light in the Nineteenth Century* (1988) by Wolfgang Schivelbusch deals with the incorporation of electric lighting into social spaces as well as the spectacular lightings displays of World Fairs, but eschews any substantial treatment of electric signs.

Historical treatments of advertising fare little better: Roland Marchand's classic *Advertising and the American Dream Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940* (1985), for instance, addresses

the content, not the form, of advertising and is located after the time period under consideration. And Jackson Lear's *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (1994) dismisses electric bulb signs as the overwrought product of advertising men out of touch with the common man.⁴

Thesis Parameters

A comprehensive academic study of electric bulb signs as media has yet to be written, nor can it be written here in the space of ninety-odd pages. This text specifically addresses two separate and novel elements of electric sign discourse: the electric bulb sign as a technological object, and the electric bulb sign as an object within the context of Manhattan's urban setting. The parameters of this analysis allow only for an abbreviated examination of this rich vein of inquiry; it has been unfortunately necessary, therefore, to eliminate a substantive analysis of certain dimensions of electric bulb sign discourse. Excluded topics include nuanced treatments of audience reception or constructions based on gender or class, and non-electric bulb display signage (such as billboards, neon or backlit plastic models).⁵ The time frame for this text are 1881, when Edison's electric bulb sign first premiered, and 1917, when the Great White Way was temporarily dimmed in support of America's World War I campaign.

Manhattan remains a desirable site for interrogation: cultural shifts throughout 19th century and early 20th century urban America were intensified in Manhattan, making such shifts simpler to examine. Also, the city was the site of the first electric sign, and of a subsequent electric sign boom. That having been said, however, the size, scope, intensity, and local

⁴ Jackson Lear, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 103.

⁵ I use the term "electric bulb sign" to differentiate the specific dataset from these other iterations of electric signs.

particularities of Manhattan make it a less representative iteration of electric bulb signs in an urban environment than an analysis of, say, electric signs in Detroit or Paris during the same period. This discrepancy has no bearing on the examination of sign form and content presented in Chapter Two, and is hopefully mitigated by extensive analysis in Chapter Three.

The electric bulb sign was, above all, a destabilizing artifact, and that readings of this destabilization are as varied as the individuals who did the reading. The parameters and possible effects of this destabilization are explored throughout, but no preferred reading or dominant effect of electric bulb signs will be consciously asserted; after many months of research and writing, the author acknowledges the validity of each conjectured reading as well as her own mixed feelings as to the wonder, the delight, and the promotional mission at the base of the electric bulb sign.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE URBAN SPECTATOR/CONSUMER, 1881.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One establishes the nineteenth century city as the product of both destabilizing forces and of institutionalized managerial forces which sought to tame them. Unpredictable fluctuations in populations and local geography, as well as the insertion of new technologies, resulted in an unstable urban core and an environment characterized by “hyperstimulus”. While some urbanites reveled in the increased pace of city life, more often individual responded not with enthusiasm but with exhaustion.

Both medical paradigms and philosophical musings of the period positioned the individual as a spectator, but like the larger institutions which sought to manage social life in the metropolis, individuals similarly sought to manage their experiences of stimulation and the city. The bourgeois, for instance, chose to engaged in elective spectacles such as the theatre, parlor amusements and museum visits. These novel pastimes reinforced the spectator position as well as located entertainments within a capitalist, profit-oriented mechanism.

In contrast, outdoor advertising, a natural outgrowth of a dynamic, growing marketplace, constituted a nonelective spectacle. Lights as promotional elements were first employed in Manhattan by P.T. Barnum, and presaged the introduction of electric bulb signs in the 1890s.

I. CAPITALISM, CHAOS AND THE METROPOLIS

Modern Manhattan as a Site of Destabilization

Capitalism jibed neatly with Enlightenment tenets of freedom, liberty, rationalism and positivistic technological progress. The small-scale entrepreneur, in competition with other small entrepreneurs, would be rewarded for hard work both materially and in the eyes of God, at least in theory. And there is persuasive evidence that in eighteenth-century Britain, the effect of cheaper consumables available for purchase coupled with a real rise in personal income did indeed improve the quality of life for the lower classes in society.⁶ Overall, the distance between the upper and lower classes appreciably narrowed, and as the number of successful merchants grew, so did the ranks of a new class, one situated between the aristocracy and the poor—the middle class. Measures of this rising tide were calculated by tallying the commodities and property one owned at the time of one's death, and demonstrated appreciable gains for all but the lowest classes.

Capitalism's early successes also set into motion a series of less salubrious effects which reverberated throughout society, the magnitude of which were inadequately foreseen or articulated by Smith and other early boosters; it wasn't until Karl Marx gave voice to the simmering resentments of the working classes in 1848's *The Communist Manifesto* that these effects were acknowledged and critiqued. Significantly, Marx realized what Smith did not grasp: the truly revolutionary nature of capitalism's paradigmatic drive for development, a drive which could equally propel society to either unparalleled heights of achievement or its destruction in a chaotic frenzy. The impetus to relentlessly innovate embedded in capitalism leads to the

constant revolutionizing of production uninterrupted disturbance of social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation...All fixed, fast-frozen

⁶ Neil McKendrick, *The Birth of a Consumer Society : the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1985), Chapter One.

relationships with their train of venerable ideas and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become obsolete before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profane...⁷

As scholar Marshall Berman puts it, “Our lives are controlled by a ruling class with vested interests not merely in change, but in crisis and chaos.”⁸ What capitalism constructs, then, capitalism can also tear asunder, and little is spared from its transforming compulsion.

These expansive, frenetic, dynamic energies generated by the heat of capitalism lay at the heart of cities such as London, Paris and New York; it is in these bustling metropolises where one locates the essence of modernity in the nineteenth century, where business transactions, commerce, and strangers from numerous cultures all converged in a concentrated social stew.⁹

At the base of this city stew was a disparate list of accidental ingredients subject to constant revisions. This ongoing experience of flux, or destabilization, manifested itself through shifting populations, spaces, and flows of information, and swiftly incorporated them into a system growing dependent on both new technologies and less skilled labor to operate them. These shifts were predicated by innovations such as the telegraph, the steam press, and later the harnessing of electricity as a viable energy source to power these new inventions.¹⁰

⁷ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 12.

⁸ Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 2nd printing (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 95.

⁹ See George Simmel, “The Metropolis and Modern Life”. In: *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, Donald N. Levine, ed., The Heritage of Sociology Series. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324-339.

¹⁰ However, to assert the importance of technology in the marketplace is not to assume technologically determinant position; on the contrary, the cultural shifts detailed below were more often than not unexpected, and belied pre-existing fault lines and points of cultural vulnerability.

By 1880, New York City was home to 3.4 million individuals, up from just 12,000 in 1740, 125,000 in 1820, and to over a million by 1860; the population would swell to nearly five million residents by 1910.¹¹ The metropolis' tremendous growth is attributed to the incorporation of neighboring boroughs but also to the migration of populations to the city, the most destabilizing of which were the new arrivals from other countries. Since its inception, New York City had been recognized as a city comprised of a multiplicity of nationalities and races. As early as 1643, Isaac Jougues uttered a remark long since made famous: that in New York City, eighteen languages could be heard on its streets.¹² By 1898, 85% of its population of 3.4 million was foreign-born or had foreign-born parents.¹³ Irish and freed African-American populations were being replaced on the bottom of New York's socioeconomic ladder by new waves of immigrants who were typically young, poor, male, rural, single, and Catholic hailing from Italy or Greece, and by semi-skilled, educated (and often Jewish) families driven from Eastern Europe.

Many Manhattanites lived and worked in structures which, much like the city's fluid populations, arrived and disappeared in relation to market requirements. Although buildings were considered relatively permanent fixtures in the urban environment, theorist David Harvey noted that they, too, were a component of the fluctuating system, and could be leveled just as easily as they could be assembled:

[There exists a] permanent tension between the appropriation and use of space for individual and social purposes and the domination of land through private property... Where the land market is dominated by money power, the

¹¹ Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 107; Kasson, John. *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 71.

¹² Daniels 1990, 89

¹³ Howard B. Rock and Deborah Dash Moore. *Cityscapes: A History of New York in Images* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 201.

democracy of money takes charge. Even the largest palace can be bought up and converted into office or slum.¹⁴

The geography of nineteenth-century Manhattan changed in ways both perceptual and physical, reflecting the impermanent nature of the cityscape. Businesses which were once clustered in lower Manhattan migrated northwards as New York's downtown expanded uptown. Former residents returning to visit the island struggled to locate familiar landmarks, known markers of location, and of memory. "A man born in New York forty years ago today", bemoaned a contributor to *Harper's* in the 1870s, "finds nothing, absolutely nothing, of the New York he knew. If he chances to stumble upon a few old houses not yet leveled, he is fortunate. But the landmarks, the objects which marked the city for him, as a city, are gone."¹⁵ While Manhattan was spreading northwards, it was also expanding upwards. Innovations in building construction such as the steel girder, the elevator, and the plate glass window combined with the necessity to maximize the profits on high-priced land parcels to construct the modern skyscraper. The rush to build skyscrapers began in New York City in the 1880s and enjoyed close to forty years of negligible zoning regulations before the collapse of the speculative market in 1929.¹⁶

Just as overall rates of material affluence rose during the nineteenth century, so did rates of literacy. And as more individuals could read, more publications catered to working-class viewpoints. Printing presses cranked out penny newspapers, cheap magazines, "dime" novels and the like,¹⁷ articulating a plurality of viewpoints often at odds with the more elite

¹⁴ David Harvey, "Money, Time, Space and the City". In: *The Denman Lectures*, (Cambridge: Grant, 1985), 1-36.

¹⁵ Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 25.

¹⁶ Fogelson 2001, 114.

¹⁷ Michael Denning, "'The Unknown Public': Dime Novels and Working Class Readers". In: *Mechanic Accents* (London: Verso, 1987).

publication. This dizzying proliferation of printed materials, oscillating physical spaces and shifting populations were not unique to New York but was also characteristic of larger metropolitan areas from Hamburg, Germany to smaller, growing ones such as Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.¹⁸

In his article “Modernity, Hyperstimulus and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism”, Ben Singer identified a neurological component to modernity proposed by Benjamin, Kracauer and Simmel characterized by ‘hyperstimulus’, or “physical and perceptual shocks of the modern urban environment.”¹⁹ These shocks were administered acting upon the individual body by the barrage of sensory assaults such as chaotic, crowded streets, noise, garbage, and strangers.²⁰ The results of prolonged exposure to this extended state of disorder and hyperstimulation, it was conjectured, wore out the urban resident.

Structures for Stabilization

As New York City’s population expanded, so did its systems for regulating or managing its population’s behavior. As early as the 1650s, when New Amsterdam was a more homogeneous entity than it was to become in the nineteenth century, the city was already being managed by a council of settlement leaders. The leaders levied taxes on beer and wine, and regulated the marketplace by establishing standards and measures. New Amsterdam also enforced laws pertaining to minimum street widths and the productive development of abandoned city lots.²¹ By 1811 Manhattan itself was to be physically ordered

¹⁸ Ben Singer, “Modernity, Hyperstimulation and the Rise of Popular Amusements.” In: *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Leo Charney and Vanessa K. Schwartz, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 72-99, 73.

¹⁹ Singer, 1995, 72.

²⁰ Singer 1995, 73.

²¹ Nan Rothschild, *New York City Neighborhoods: the 18th Century* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Publishers, Academic Press, Inc., 1990), 10.

by the imposition of a uniform street grid (with the exceptions of lower Manhattan and Greenwich Village).²² Bird's eye maps of the time promoted a vision of urban coherence and uniformity which reinforced the demands of capitalist development. Such visuals presented an idealized, holistic vision of Manhattan distanced from the city's dirt, grime, overcrowding and slums such as the notorious Five Points area. Bird's eye views also gave the map reader a privileged, colonizing perspective in relation to the city, flattening out differences and making the fragmented seem cohesive.²³

By the 1880s, New York City abided by systemic institutions dedicated to the orderly management of city life. The city's government, police force, judicial system, prisons and social workers were each dedicated to managing less orderly populations of poor, immigrants, the criminal, the mentally ill, and insufficiently supervised youth. Such agencies were either charitable groups or punitive, "correctional" ones in the Foucauldian sense, dedicated to disciplining inappropriate behaviors or removing such actors from engaging with the general social body at large.²⁴

Control of the individual body was also manifested through voluntary adherence to more Gramscian, consensual behavioral norms. The nineteenth century saw the codification of an elaborate standard of individual 'manners' which frowned upon even the relatively minor bodily infractions and valued the control of personal impulses²⁵, as well as the preemption of the body by machines and other labor saving devices. Indeed, rhetoric on the machinic

²² Rothschild 1990, 15.

²³ John Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990),71.

²⁴ A pamphlet for the 1893 World's Fair categorizes procedures for dealing with a detailed list of "defectives, dependents and delinquents." See *World's Columbian Exposition Department of Liberal Arts. The Bureau of Charities and Corrections* (Chicago, IL: 1893).

²⁵ See "Table Manners and the Control of Appetite." In: Kasson 1990, 182-214.

construction of the human body blurred appreciable distinctions between man as animal and man as machine.²⁶

Although the frenetic pace of urban life wrought chaos and confusion within city streets, it also increased individual tolerances and appetites for such psychic assaults within certain, proscribed spaces.²⁷ The rise in attendance at amusement parks and destinations such as Coney Island, both John Kasson and Singer maintain, is evidence of a sensation-seeking public ironically leaving the heart of the city to experience similar sensory assaults in an environment constructed solely for that purpose.²⁸

But there is considerable evidence that overall, the American appetite for stimulation and in particular visual spectaculars markedly increased throughout the nineteenth century, codified in part by the shift of the interpretive framework for sight from a holistic model to a compartmentalized, scientific one around mid-century. This shift temporally overlapped with the abolition of formal strictures against spectacle such as theatre and the rising popularity of amusements such as the aforementioned Coney Island as well as the museum and parlor-based pastimes. Like the experience of chaotic urban spaces of the late nineteenth century, vision similarly embodied "... transience—that is, from new temporalities, speeds, experiences of flux and obsolescence, a new density and sedimentation of the structure of visual memory."²⁹ By the 1880s, the eye—which held a privileged role in the assessment of cultural destabilization and fragmentation—had been acculturated towards consumption of

²⁶ Jonathan Crary, "Unbinding Vision: Manet and the Attentive Observer in the Late Nineteenth Century." In: *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Leo Charney and Vanessa K. Schwartz, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 46-71, 73

²⁷ Singer 1995, 88.

²⁸ See Nasaw 1993.

²⁹ Crary 1990, 21.

visual stimulations over the course of time: “thus technology has the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.”³⁰

We turn now to a consideration of the modern medicalized construction of both vision, and how that paradigm, in conjunction with cultural shifts, contributed to the manufacture of the role of the “modern” spectator. Nineteenth-century science formally positioned the viewer as separate from the viewed; in doing so, the concept of a shared visual reality was problematized. Just as the onslaught of excessive visual stimulus assaulted the individual urbanite, the individual was also responsible for interpreting and responding to it. A frequently recommended strategy for coping with the dizzying array of visual offerings, the “innocent eye”, further distanced the individual from the observed both emotionally, intellectually, and analytically. The allegedly pure and unaffected pose of the innocent observer was, in effect, the conscious and defensive pose assumed by the modern spectator.

II. NEGOTIATION OF THE SPECTATOR/ CONSUMER POSITION

Science and the Innocent Eye

Donald M. Lowe suggests in his ambitious text *History of Bourgeois Perception* that human perception is the bridge between formal thought and the social construction of culture, and that the senses—hearing, smelling, touching, tasting and seeing—can be organized according to a set of epistemic rules. Lowe posits that the sensorial order of nineteenth-century bourgeois society, in response to a growing emphasis on typography and the

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” In: *Illuminations* (New York : Schocken Books, 1969), 175.

advent of photography, led to the extension of the importance of sight versus the other senses as well as a heightened sensitivity to the progression of time.³¹

Engaging with the discourse of sight and spectacle from a less deterministic position, theorist Jonathan Crary argues that the seeds for this perceptual shift were sown before the popularization of photography. Rather, these new ways of seeing were

inextricably dependent on a new arrangement of knowledge about the body and the constitutive relation of that knowledge to social power. These apparatuses are the outcome of a complex making of the individual as observer into something calculable and regulatable and of human vision into something measurable and thus exchangeable.³²

In an extension of similar arguments put forth by Michel Foucault and others, Crary alleges that the human body is a site of cultural contestation, and that the sense of sight was measured, codified, and rendered quantifiable in the nineteenth century in order to better serve a broader cultural agenda. The subsequent popularization of photography and related visual materials did not result in a relocation of the spectator, Crary argues, but rather this shift helped to facilitate the widespread adoption of visual consumption.

Nineteenth-century scientific and philosophical literature repositioned the observer as a separate entity from the observed, and separate again from the act of observing. The accepted seventeenth century paradigm, claims Crary, imagined the act of sight as operating like a camera obscura: a single central operator enclosed in a protected darkened space was a metaphor for man, secure in his consciousness and positioned within the scene, if not visible.

³¹ See Donald M. Lowe, *The History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), Chapter one.

³² Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1990), 17.

But nineteenth-century researchers destroyed this concept of the fixed, singular perspective and challenged the veracity of what the eyes actually perceived. Around the same time, scientists were experimenting with the concept of sight itself. It was during this period that the practice of physiology, division and fragmentation of the human subject into specific organs and mechanical systems, was codified. The net effect was a general skepticism towards sight, and a separation of sight from other bodily functions.³³

In the early 1840s, John Ruskin and others were promoting, as a defense against environmental manipulations, a brand of regressive optical neutrality coined as “the innocence of the eye, that is to say, of a sort of childish perception of these flat stains of colour, merely as such, without consciousness of what they signify—as a blind man would see them if suddenly gifted with sight”.³⁴ A component of modernism called for a rejection of reason and a return to a simpler time, for the triumph of individual perception over collectively determined objectivity, and at the same historical moment that Ruskin et al. called for a return to innocence, Charles Baudelaire was extolling the virtues of the “barbarous”, similar to innocence in its removal from civilized, corrupted man.

Baudelaire, like Edmund Burke before him, perceived beauty in the terrifying and stunning; unlike Burke, he locates the spectacular in the modern city, not in nature. He identified a new archetype for the spectator, the urban *flâneur*, or the dispassionate observer of humanity. The city—chaotic, overstimulating, and confusing—forces a conscientious man, implies Baudelaire, to assume Ruskin’s posture of the “innocent eye”, to view the world as endlessly spectacular. In his essay “The Painter of Modern Life”, Baudelaire valorizes the

³³ Later nineteenth-century discourses on sight reinserted the spectator as an active participant in the mechanics of visualization; the spectator still continues to be granted and denied varying degrees of visual agency to this day, and is the focus of contemporary reception studies.

³⁴ Crary 1990, 95.

quick pen sketches of one “Monsieur G.”, as well as that artist’s broad consciousness of the (seemingly hallucinatory) convalescent:

It is by this deep and joyful curiosity that we may explain the fixed and animally ecstatic gaze of a child confronted with something new, whatever it be, whether a face or a landscape, gildings, colours, shimmering stuffs, or the magic of physical beauty....³⁵

In Baudelaire’s imagining, the trappings of spectacle—the “something new”, the “colours” and “shimmering stuffs”—are woven in the fabric of the city that only the innocent at heart can truly appreciate. Mr. G. has not only mastered the “innocent eye”, but he is the embodiment of the *flâneur*, one who moves among the crowds observing them, but is not one of them. “Far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates.”³⁶ Mr. G., we are told, delights in spectacles such as “fine carriages and proud horses” and the “glittering equipment, music, bold determined glances, heavy, solemn mustaches” of a passing regiment.³⁷

It is the spectacle of the commercial, modern city, bursting with unpredictable energy, which was thought to emotionally torment the individual traversing its streets. Walter Benjamin’s incisive essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” furthered explored the idea of shock and the modern consciousness, positioning the psyche as a “shock absorber” against the barrage of visceral overstimulation which threatened to overwhelm nineteenth-century urban citizens.

As the strategies of innocence and barbarism gained in currency, Crary pointed out,

³⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”. In: *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Xth printing, Jonathan Mayne, ed. (New York: Ado Capo Paperback, 1986), 8.

³⁶ Benjamin 1969, 169.

³⁷ Baudelaire 1986, 11.

The achievement [of] ... the reduction of the observer to a supposedly rudimentary site was... a condition for the formation of an observer who would be competent to consume the vast amounts of visual imagery and information increasingly circulated during this same period.³⁸

The *viewer* of images is remade, therefore, as a *consumer* of images; the individual, whether visually overwhelmed or innocent, cannot escape the environmental deluge of the city.

As the free market expanded throughout the nineteenth century, prohibitions against spectatorship correspondingly declined, although what types of visuals were permissible and acceptable for different populations to consumer was determined in great part by an individual's cultural affiliations. In the sections to follow, I briefly examine two types of visual spectacles consumed by nineteenth century middle-class Americans inside and outside of the home—parlor amusements and museums.

Bourgeois Spectacle

Facilitated by elevations in discretionary income and leisure time and buoyed by positivistic Enlightenment rhetoric, Victorian culture for the most part enthusiastically supported technological innovations. The Victorian distrust of the street and affection for the protected space of home and hearth, coupled with the requisite time and money (and a strong didactic impulse), led to the appropriation of scientific materials as home amusements.³⁹ Instruments used for ocular research during the 1820s and 1830s such as the thaumatrope, the telescope, the phenakistocope (or zoetrope), the daedalum, the kaleidoscope and the stroboscope found a second life as entertainments in the Victorian parlor.⁴⁰ Photography and other

³⁸ Crary 1990, 96.

³⁹ For more information on the social and cultural tenets of American Victorian behavior, see Peter N. Stearns, *Battleground of Desire: The struggle for self-control in modern America*. (New York and London: NYU Press, 1999).

⁴⁰ Siegfried Zielinski, *AudioVisions: Cinema and television as entre' acts in history* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 45.

visually oriented amusements such as scrapbooks, picture books, magic shows and stereoscopes⁴¹ were subsequently introduced into the bourgeois parlor, usurping the popularity of the earlier machines.⁴²

Parlor amusements competed with new forms of visual entertainment located outside the privileged space of home and parlor for middle-class audiences. The relatively new institution of the American museum, for instance, offered spectacular displays of its own fashioning. Baltimore's Peale family founded and ran what is credited as America's first museum in Philadelphia in the early 1820s. Rubens Peale, the son of patriarch Charles Peale, was a staunch advocate of the 'rational amusement' argument of enlightened entertainment, and insisted that the artifacts of the American Museum served to both amuse and educate its visitors.⁴³

While it was certainly spectacular in its day, by modern classifications the contents of Peale's museum collection appears to be a mishmash of science fair demonstrations, flea market remainders, and amusement park diversion:

offered magic mirrors that distorted a viewed into a giant, a dwarf, or a monster with seven heads; a speaking tube mounted in a lion's head that allowed one to shout back and forth with one's friends in another room a physiognotrace that would sketch one's silhouette; a pipe organ of eight stops that talented visitors

⁴¹ The stereoscope consisted of two components: a card featuring two nearly identical photographic images, and the card reader. The stereoscope lenses functioned much like 3D glasses in that the viewer ultimately saw a composite of two separate images. The subject matters could be classified as nominally spectacular, but certainly novel: exotic lands (India, China, the American West), nature studies ("Songbirds of North America"), architectural landmarks (the Eiffel Tower) or spectacular events, such as coronations.

⁴² Theorists such as Adorno have since suggested that, over time, the thaumatrope and its cousins were not "phantasmagoric", or spectacular *enough* for Victorian audiences. See Crary 1990, 132.

⁴³ The rational amusement argument had been gaining currency in the eighteenth century, as evidenced this 1789 repeal of a law which prohibited theatre in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: "Citizens have a right to enjoy any rational and innocent amusement, which as the same time, that it affords a necessary relaxation from the fatigues of business is calculated to inform the mind and improve the heart." In Victorian society, therefore, it became acceptable to visually consume something if there was some ostensible educational or spiritual value to be gained from the looking.

might play; an electrical machine that gave those who touched its extension a moderate shock; and a compound blowpipe to demonstrate the wonders of chemistry.⁴⁴

Peale's museum became a site of contestation between the more serious and investigative-minded scientific community, and the general public, who enjoyed the exotic and spectacular collections of mummies, mermaid and machines. Against shouts of sensationalism, Peale insisted that the museum's doors

have ever been closed against the profligate and the indecent, it has been preserved with scrupulous fidelity, as a place where the virtuous and refined of society could meet to enjoy such pleasures as can be tasted by the virtuous and refined alone.⁴⁵

While Peale voiced concern over the inclusion of some spectacular museum hoaxes such as the FeeJee mermaid in his American Museum, his infamous compatriot in New York City, P.T. Barnum had few such qualms. Barnum presented not only the same exotic mummies and chopsticks Peale offered, but also "spectacular people": Joice Heth (allegedly George Washington's nanny), Tom Thumb, or Jenny Lind the Swedish Nightingale, and Chang and Eng, the "Siamese Twins". The combination of the quasi-scientific coupled with the unusual, thus affording visitors at Barnum's museum the opportunity to shamelessly gawk at the exotic exhibits, and not necessarily under the guise of education as Peale insisted.

The Bourgeois Spectacle Examined

Parlor amusements and the museum were both versions of tame, permitted consumption of spectacle, phenomena which engaged with broader elements of the genre which deserve further specific consideration. In earlier, pre-Industrial era iterations of spectacularity, for example, the viewer was either actively engaged in the event (a festival) or was physically

⁴⁴ *Mermaids, Mummies and Mastodons: The Emergence of the American Museum*, William T. Alderson, ed. (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1992), 19.

⁴⁵ *Mermaids* 1992, 73.

present at the locus of the event (a parade). But with the aid of optical instruments, it became possible to view the exotic, the fabulous and the terrible out of harm's way at home through new media technologies which brought the spectacle to the viewer. No longer was a direct presence or participation a prerequisite for experiencing the marvelous; instead, one needed to be in close proximity with a machine. These mediating machines, in fact, required the viewer to be virtually immobilized while in use.⁴⁶

In earlier instances of the spectacular, individual participation signaled one's conscription to a larger, more powerful entity (church, state, or God). But these visual parlor activities, what one might call "wholesome family entertainment", were divorced from engagement with such cultural entities and an ostensible "higher purpose". Parlor diversions and trips to the museum sidestepped the cultural prohibition against "looking for looking's sake" by being framed as an "educational" pastime for scientific, geographic or historical edification. But not only was marveling at phenakistoscopes educational, went the argument in support of "rational amusement", amusement was necessary for the well-balanced individual to mitigate the stresses of marketplace engagement. Earlier musements in the American colonies, in contrast, were permitted only begrudgingly by community leaders⁴⁷, and not granted high priority.

These visual entertainments also differed from their predecessors in that participation in these activities required money. Both Peale and Barnum charged a nominal fee for museum attendance, and the zoetrope, the thaumatrope, and other parlor amusements required a modicum of expendable income, an interest in fashionable pastimes, sufficient leisure time,

⁴⁶ Similarly, nineteenth century theatregoers were trained to not talk during performances, and to remain relatively immobile in assigned seats, which curtailed the traditional sociable aspects of attendance. See Kasson 1990, 247.

⁴⁷ See Robert Mechikoff and Stephen Estes. *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education: From the Ancient Greeks to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1998).

and adequate room at home in which to employ them—all assets which were not universally available to all populations in antebellum America. The bourgeois could afford to play with kaleidoscopes or marvel at Peale’s exhibits, while the lower classes could not. Less skilled and educated urban populations such as factory workers and immigrants, who either could not measure up to or did not care about meeting Victorian standards of behavior, indulged in their own brand of the spectacular such as drinking copiously in local taverns and watching cockfighting, bullbaiting, traveling entertainment outfits, or engaging in impromptu (illegal) gambling, nude bathing, and carousel riding.⁴⁸

The telescope, Barnum’s Museum and cockfighting can all be categorized as types of visual amusements in which the individual actively chose to participate, a selective engagement with a particular type of spectacle. But another variety of visual spectacle, one which was not deliberately chosen by the spectator, was a significant actor within the ‘street theatre’ of urban spaces—the commercial, ubiquitous and aggressive spectacle which was outdoor advertising.

III. OUTDOOR ADVERTISING: THE NONELECTIVE SPECTACLE

Technology, spectacle and commercialization converged in the urban sphere in the many forms of outdoor commercial promotions cluttering nineteenth-century cities.⁴⁹ When the spectacle was situated in public space and promoted an explicitly commercial agenda, the delights of spectatorship could quickly mutate into an experience more akin to harassment.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 53.

⁴⁹ See Benjamin 1968.

⁵⁰ It needs to be acknowledged that while some individuals and populations loathed outdoor advertising, others enjoyed it and still others engaged with it in their own ways. A more

Given the popular nineteenth century dictum that vision was an individual, perceptual sensation, advertising promoters maintained that in order for advertisements to be noticed in a media-saturated environment composed of dismissible moments, it was necessary to cast a compelling spell of the spectacular which could not be ignored or forgotten. The novel, the fascinating, the grotesque, and the bizarre all jockeyed for attention in the commercial zones of the *fin de siècle* metropolis.

An examination of nineteenth-century outdoor advertising practices reveals two antithetical approaches: the repetitious and the spectacular. Early outdoor advertisers, aided by nonexistent zoning ordinances, competed in a war of what might be called “repetitive spatial dominance” in order to get the message out. Along the outskirts of the larger American cities and towns by the 1860s, one was assaulted by

a clutter of crude signs and fading and fluttering paper on board fences and other surfaces, to say nothing of painted rocks of all sizes, from boulders to rather substantial cliff displays. Few surfaces were sacred; the itinerant billposters, as well as those who were in the employ of the circus or local theatre, did not hesitate to paste posters on any available surface—including other posters they may have hung a few days previously.⁵¹

The introduction of the lithographic process in the 1870s further regimented the size and appearance of printed outdoor promotions, referenced by Benjamin in his lament of the “standardized and denatured perception of the masses”.⁵² Hundreds of uniformly produced posters, pasted as far as the eye could see, were thought to be hard to ignore. Advances in printing technology resulted in the production of many smaller sized posters, but it also enabled the creation of larger, unique presentations as well. By the 1830s, promotional posters could be produced in sizes as large as six feet by nine feet; later, the introduction of

comprehensive examination of the range of engagement with outdoor advertising, and electric bulb signs in particular, can be found in Chapter Three.

⁵¹ James Fraser, *The American Billboard: 100 Years* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 10.

⁵² Crary 1990, 22.

both wider presses and presses which could easily print in color allowed for ever more spectacular posters and billboards.⁵³

P.T. Barnum and Spectacular Promotions

Before electric lighting and commercial signs illuminated the “Great White Way” in the late 1890s, P.T. Barnum experimented early and often with varied media, including light, to entice visitors into his American Museum. Soon after Barnum purchased the museum, he rounded out the existing collection of scientific curiosities with sensational displays. Similarly, he festooned the exterior of the building with flags and banners, and at one point even added a live band which played “Free Music for the Millions” from the front balcony.⁵⁴

Barnum was prescient in his deployment of electric light technology to gain the attention of potential customers. The entrepreneur positioned several Drummond lights⁵⁵ on the roof which not only illuminated the museum building, but Broadway below; the street illumination allowed pedestrians to more safely traffic the area at night, and made it profitable for Broadway shopkeepers to keep their businesses open after dark. Additional promotions employed by P.T. Barnum which have implications for the electric bulb sign in the future included the lit billboard, and the circus parade. Barnum’s billboard, installed in the 1840s outside the American Museum, was illuminated by a series of gaslights. An observer at the time marveled that the lights were visible from a distance of three city blocks.⁵⁶ A Barnum circus parade, which took to the streets in the 1870s, was comprised of individuals carrying ad banners or wearing sandwich boards, and accompanied by a brass

⁵³ *Billboard Art*, eds Sally Henderson and Robert Landau (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980), 10.

⁵⁴ Janet H. Weller, *Barnumism and Broadway* (PhD thesis, Communication Arts University of Wisconsin, 1975), 52.

⁵⁵ A Drummond light was an early predecessor of the modern spotlight.

⁵⁶ Nye 1994, 173.

band or two all promoting Barnum's new circus venture, characterized by one scholar as an "animated billboard." What is of significance here is the performative nature of this brand of promotion, of advertising as street-centered entertainment. Implicit in this form of presentation as well is the sense of movement, which will later be disembodied and appropriated in a machinic representation by electric bulb sign spectaculars.

P.T. Barnum was far from the only one hoping to catch the attention of the distracted urbanite through spectacular promotional gimmicks. One entrepreneur, for instance, attempted to spell words out against the clouds; eye catching light reflectors threw messages on the sidewalks. Other tried carriages draped with banners. A New Yorker might also have witnessed a three dimensional, large-scale model of a particular product being dragged through the streets.⁵⁷ Augmenting the list of unique advertising spectacles afforded the nineteenth century city-dweller were hot air balloons and the use of wearable "sandwich boards" like the ones mentioned in Barnum's circus parades.

The spectacular eye-catching promotional gimmicks performed in metropolitan spaces by Barnum and others highlight the dialectic of modernity for the 19th century businessmen: to foster a successful enterprise, one needed among other things cheap labor (usually furnished by immigrants), a more compact infrastructure (usually accomplished by the clustering of associated goods and services within a compact physical space⁵⁸) and enough advertising to bring the customers in. In other words, standard business practices inevitably engaged with multiple, dynamic systems at street level with little regard for the consequences beyond the profit sheet. The ever-expanding marketplace and the fluidity of commodity circulation, combined with the injection of technological advances which

⁵⁷ *Billboard Art* 1980, 20. Also see Starr, Tama and Edward Hayman. *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (New York: Doubleday Books, Currency Imprint, 1998), 24.

collapsed the distances of both space and time, created an interdependent system.⁵⁹ As Berman notes, “If we look behind the sober scenes that the members of our bourgeoisie create...we see that these solid citizens would tear down the world if it paid.”⁶⁰ Period advertising which stunned and dazzled may have offended many, but it was an embedded outgrowth of a system constantly in redefinition.

CONCLUSION

What constituted acceptable modes of viewing in nineteenth century America was remade in the wake of the transformational energies of the chaotic capitalist marketplace and the scientific compartmentalization of the individual human body. Mores restricting the once-forbidden pleasures of spectatorship were relaxed as the origins of sight was located in the makeup and functioning of one’s own sensory apparatus⁶¹ and not in the stimuli per se. This facilitated the construction of the act of viewing as an engaging pastime with no clear civic, political, or religious agenda. Populations pursued their preferred manner of visual stimulation according to class-based taste categories, from the tastefully exotic domain of the museum to the less genteel action of cockfighting or the complex and rich ‘theatre of the street’.

Viewing or spectatorship was also recognized as a potentially exploitable resource. The use of outdoor advertising sought to capture errant attentions through either repetitious or

⁵⁸ See Fogelson 2001.

⁵⁹ See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the origins of Culture Change* (Oxford, England, and New York: Blackwell, 1989) and Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880–1918* 8th printing (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁶⁰ Berman 1988, 100.

⁶¹ Crary 1995, 46.

spectacular displays. Visuals such as P.T. Barnum's billboards, parades and promotional lighting spoke of the cultural tensions between the freedom of the marketplace and the sanctity of private property, and the escalating concentration of sensory stresses in urban spaces.

The electric bulb sign, yet another type of outdoor advertising, first appeared in Manhattan in 1892 and struck a nerve with visitors and residents alike—although not necessarily the same nerve. The following chapter will interrogate the electric bulb sign as a discrete media artifact and describe in detail the medium's unique attributes.

CHAPTER TWO:

ELECTRIC BULB SIGNS AS UNIQUE MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

First introduced to the world at the Paris International Exposition of 1881⁶², Edison's electric bulb sign featured an array of lights which, in typically self-promotional fashion, spelled out the inventor's name. A generation later, large-scale electric bulb sign spectacles and theatre marquees in Manhattan had colonized Broadway from 23rd Street, past Times Square and up through 54th Street.

Chapter One detailed the tension between the growing appetite for visual amusements deemed proper and educational, and the heightened destabilization of the urban streetscape in nineteenth century Manhattan. Chapter Two closely interrogates the electric bulb sign repetition as a discrete and unique medium as it relates to tropes of textual and pictorial representation, and performativity. The electric bulb sign is also compared with another medium which emerged around the same time, early film cinema.

I. ELECTRIC LIGHTING AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The Introduction of the Incandescent Bulb

The first electric bulb sign in 1881 was spectacular more in its use of the relatively new technology electricity than in its presentation. It was anyone's guess what electricity's ultimate impact would be, or what kind of challenge it might pose to existing sources of

⁶² Whether this auspicious event occurred at the Paris World's Fair in 1881 or the London Exposition in 1882, however, remains a point of contention. David Nye cites Paris, while a less reputable source cites London.

energy. An editorial cartoon that year portrayed an infant Electricity suckling on a bottle named Force; figures of a King Steam and a King Coal are seen looming over the crib and wondering “I Wonder What He Will Grow to Be!” It was clear from the illustration, however, that the two established monarchs looked worried, and with good reason: electricity as an energy source was cleaner, safer, and simpler to control than either coal or steam. Not pictured is King Gas, whose attendant soot, flickering flame and danger of explosion when used for illumination purposes would soon be eclipsed by electrically powered illumination made feasible by the incandescent bulb.

When Thomas Edison’s electric bulb sign was first demonstrated, electric lighting was not new per se; the electric arc light had been in existence since 1809. But its uses were limited. Before the construction of operational electric generators, arc lights ran on battery power, and the light it cast was both too bright and too cold to be employed within smaller or domestic spaces, casting an unflattering bluish tint onto its immediate surroundings.⁶³ It was several decades later, in 1879, before the light bulb was rendered practical by Edison:

You must all have seen electric lights, either in the streets or in large buildings, for so many electric lights are used now... perhaps some of you have only seen the dazzling lights that are used in the streets, and do not know that there is another kind of electric light which is in a globe about the size of a large pear, and gives about the same light as a good gas jet... the large, dazzling lights which you see in the streets are called ‘arc lights’, and the small pear-shaped lamps, which give a soft, steady light, are called ‘incandescent lights’.⁶⁴

Electric lighting was enthusiastically embraced by the general population in both America and Europe. Aside from its practical benefits, electric lighting was promoted as the “key to

⁶³ *Light! The Industrial Age 1750–1900: Art & Science, Technology and Society*, Andreas Bluhm and Louise Lippincott, eds. (van Gogh Museum: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 158.

⁶⁴ *Light!* 2000, 49.

the future”⁶⁵; not only was electric lighting seen as a wonder which would render gas lighting obsolete, but it bespoke of a larger faith in the positivistic benefits of technological innovation, dominance, and industrialization. Although period dystopian and romantic literature had their respective audiences,⁶⁶ the prevailing cultural consensus was an optimism in the positivist gains new and better tools would afford society. More popular than dystopian or romantic selections were utopian constructions such as the one created by Edward Bellamy in 1887. His novel *Looking Backwards* spoke of an America at the turn of the millenium where machines function as benign entertainment and labor-saving devices, freeing the citizens of Boston 2000 to selectively listen to more fine music, to read more fine books, and to engage in more gentlemanly, edifying pursuits.⁶⁷

America, already the site of the highest concentration of arc street lighting in the world, had demonstrated a strong affinity for electric lighting. The year Edison unveiled his incandescent bulb to admiring crowds, the Paris Exposition drew throngs at nighttime to a fairground lit by 1,300 electric arc lights; only three years earlier, the Paris Expo had closed at dusk.⁶⁸ And in an illuminating adjustment, the Statue of Liberty’s torch, originally designed to be gilded in gold leaf, was converted early in the construction process by French artisans to electric illumination in 1883.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ *Light!* 2000, 180.

⁶⁶ Perhaps the most well-known dystopian publication of its day, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* spurred significant reform in the meatpacking industry. The return-to-nature movement was more prevalent at this time, however, an extension of strains of cultural resistance evinced by the earlier Romantic movements.

⁶⁷ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (New York: Viking Penguin Group, 1986).

⁶⁸ Nye 1994, 176.

⁶⁹ *Light!* 2000, 186.

Once Edison's pear-shaped electric bulbs became commercially available, they were quickly adopted for more intimate, decorative uses not possible with arc lighting. World's Fairs, the site for the display of technological innovations, were quick to integrate decorative lighting displays alongside existing arc lights. The 1893 Columbian World Exposition for instance, featured a marvelous array of lights at the Electricity building. Other festive outdoor events such as carnivals, parades, civic pageants and festivals were also quick to incorporate electric bulb lighting into their displays.⁷⁰

Neither directly exploitative or overtly useful, electric bulb signs appropriated nascent incandescent bulb technology and electric power and used it for explicitly commercial purposes. But electric bulb signs were more than simply jazzed up versions of billboards or handbills; the restrictions and capabilities of this technological form were necessarily reflected in its representations, which in turn informed a specific visual vocabulary. Electric bulb signs⁷¹ proposed an alternative beyond the utopia / dystopia dialectic: technology as visual spectacle.

II. THE INDIVIDUAL ELECTRIC BULB SIGN

Although the primary subject of this analysis is the large-scale electric bulb sign "spectacular", it is necessary to briefly mention both theatre marquee bulb signs, as well as bulb's broader usage in select metropolitan areas as celebratory and decorative elements, and the distinct usage of both text and images (still and animated) with electric bulb signs will be discussed here in depth. It is impossible to capture all the characteristics and effects

⁷⁰ For more on electric bulb lights in public spaces, please refer to Chapter Three.

⁷¹ And, it must be noted, cinema. Both media are characterized by visual display, narrative capabilities, and a large-scale display format which should be viewed from a distance.

of these larger electric bulb sign ‘spectaculars’ through mere textual depictions; pictures and detailed descriptions have been included whenever possible.

Theatre marquees

By 1892, the function of bulbs had expanded from strictly utilitarian uses to decorative ones, much as they had insinuated themselves in the broader culture. Strings of ornamental electric bulbs, for instance, could be found at wedding banquets, ballrooms, formal dinners, and club houses in larger metropolitan markets, where electric power was available.⁷² It was the electric lights employed at New York’s Metropolitan Theatre at the reception of King Henry of Prussia which allegedly prompted the guest of honor to comment that he had never seen anything in any auditorium to surpass their wondrous beauty.⁷³ Electric bulbs as decoration both perpetuated existing traditions of employing festive lighting for occasions of significance, and expanded upon the more particular practice of strings of electric bulbs as seen at the World’s Fairs and International Expositions throughout the 1880s.

Throughout the 1880s, electric bulbs were also rapidly adopted for use by individual theatres as stage illumination and for general house lights, replacing the existing arc lights and gaslights.⁷⁴ San Francisco’s ‘California’, London’s ‘Savoy’ and Boston’s ‘Bijou’ theatres all had adopted electric bulb lighting throughout the house by 1882.⁷⁵ From its adoption within the interior theatre space, electric bulb lighting quickly spread to the facades of theatres, as well; the New York theatre owner Adolf Zukor, for one, used approximately one

⁷² That meant larger metropolitan areas, since the electricity generated from Edison’s direct current (DC) conveyance could not travel significant distances. See Starr 1994, 33.

⁷³ *The Elblight System, for Electric, Display Illumination, Decorative Lighting, Signs, Emblems, etc.* (New York: Elblight Company of America, 1910).

⁷⁴ The Theatre Historical Society. *A Pictorial Survey of Marquees*, Annual No. 7. (Notre Dame, IN, and San Francisco: Theatre Historical Society, 1980), 2.

⁷⁵ *Light!* 2000, 166; Nye 1994, 177.

thousand bulbs above his theatre to spell out 'Crystal Palace'. In competition for the same theatregoers and eyeballs, other theatres rapidly followed suit.⁷⁶

The Introduction of Electric Bulb Signs

It is a testament to the often ephemeral nature of historical artifacts that the occasion of the first large-scale electric bulb sign is a point of contestation. One source claims that in 1891, New York's Madison Square was host to a large flashing bulb sign fifty feet tall and eighty feet wide imploring viewers to "See the Turtle a Snapping Success".⁷⁷ Another source alleges that the first such sign promoted a brand of soup.⁷⁸

Most sources, including period photographs, maintain that the honor goes to what is referred to as the "Swept by Ocean Breezes" sign. In July 1892, Manhattanites in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue and Broadway between dusk and midnight were greeted by the following sequential messages blinking at them in green, red, yellow and white lights from the side of a nearby building: "BUY HOMES ON / LONG ISLAND / SWEPT BY OCEAN BREEZES / MANHATTAN BEACH / ORIENTAL HOTEL / MANHATTAN HOTEL / GILMORE'S BAND / BROCK'S RESTAURANT". This commercial electric bulb sign "spectacular" was the brainchild of Austin "A.J." Corbin, then the president of the Long Island Rail Road, in an attempt to entice urbanites to embark on a train out of the city.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ The nineteenth century saw the relaxation of both formal and informal strictures against the theatre. For more information on "rational amusement", refer to Chapter One.

⁷⁷ Weller 1975, 94-5.

⁷⁸ *Billboard Art*, eds Sally Henderson and Robert Landau (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980), 20.

⁷⁹ By 1892, tourism was a popular practice, as was vacating the metropolis on holidays. A 1881 *New York Times* editorial went so far to suggest that Fourth of July celebrations in the city were a waste of valuable taxpayer money, as most residents fled to seaside resorts, anyway. The editorial was later challenged by a forlorn citizen who requested more civic entertainments on the holiday to benefit those New Yorkers who were stranded in the city.



Figure 2.1
“Swept by Ocean Breezes” Sign,
1892

*Courtesy New York Public Library
Picture Archives*

It wasn't long after the success of “Swept by Ocean Breezes” spread up Broadway to 44th Street and beyond, earning the twelve-block strip the moniker “The Great White Way” for its proliferation of electrified business signs, theatre marquees, and advertising ‘spectaculars’.

Anatomy of an Electric Bulb Sign

In the following section, electric bulb signs from Manhattan between 1881 and 1917 can be read as a definitively modern medium: embodying both the promise of a utopian future transformed by the miraculous powers of electricity, as well as its dystopian counterpart of a ruptured society riddled with shallow, commercial entertainments.

Reasoned vs. Iconic Text

When electric bulb signs were first introduced into the urban landscape, they perpetuated the longstanding advertising practice of relying on text, and not images, to promote a product in a respectable fashion. Despite the proliferation of sensational advertising images during this period⁸⁰, rational text arguments were preferred in part because it was believed to demonstrate earnestness, and helped to counteract the public's image of ad men as "bootlegging and bootlicking." "Earnestness in advertising is the prime essential", *Judicious Advertising* noted in 1903. "Earnestness is hypnotism; earnestness is inspiration."⁸¹ Textual communication was favored by the literate classes, as many ad men still carried the intellectual baggage of nineteenth century Protestantism, including the assumption that words conveyed meaning more honestly than pictures.⁸²

In the late nineteenth century, however, the more elemental revolution which contested hegemonic nineteenth century paradigms of text, logic and reality itself was already well underway. In advertising practices in particular, the use of text and logic-based arguments grew increasingly problematized.⁸³ The rise in mass production made it more difficult to distinguish one commodity from another: since two brands of soap may well have been manufactured at the same facility using the same materials, identical in every practical way, one was hard put to argue the logical merits of one over the other.⁸⁴ A shift towards more succinct, less wordy arguments was necessitated, too, by the accelerating pace of city life, the growth in urban audiences which could not read English, and the reality of a busy

⁸⁰ Stearns 1999, 97-8.

⁸¹ Lears 1984, 368.

⁸² Lears 1984, 359.

⁸³ By the early twentieth century, proponents of rational argumentation vied with those touting the use of slogans, jingles, illustrations, and advertising texts devoid of information for the soul of advertising. See Lears 1984, 369.

consumer with no time or patience to read a lengthy textual presentation. With text-based, earnest descriptions growing problematic for advertisers—and growing stale for an urban population easily distracted and accustomed to hyperstimulus—other tactics for differentiating commodities in a competitive economy were required.

One such possible differentiating strategy was to use an electric bulb sign to display text in a novel fashion. Early electric bulb signs, in fact, consisted of virtually all text, regarding the electric sign space as a variation of a blank page to be filled with words. The promotional contents of the “Swept by Ocean Breezes” sign (Fig. 2.1) and the “Snapping Turtle” sign, for instance, comprised of single or multiple strings of text. The “Heinz Pickle” sign (Fig. 2.3), which later replaced the “Swept By Ocean Breezes” sign at the Herald Square location, consisted of multiple text strings augmented by a flashing Heinz pickle logo. I call this use of abbreviated text on electric bulb signs comprised of a single word or a string of words and presented in a recognizable visual style “iconic text.”

The manner in which this iconic text on electric bulb signs presented itself was, in fact, radical, a deconstruction of the trope of ‘rational argumentation’. Far from the reasoned and articulated arguments found in print copy at the time, electric bulb signs were limited to displaying at most a handful of short, declaratory statements.⁸⁵ The three text-intensive signs mentioned here were animated in the sense that one line was lit at a time⁸⁶; during the day, the sign was much like a large billboard but under the cover of darkness, the viewer

⁸⁴ Lears 1984, 370.

⁸⁵ Text on signs were limited in part due to the size of the letters in order to be legible on the sign as seen from the street. The large dimensions of signs and their impact will be discussed in Chapter Three.

⁸⁶ In the early days of electric signs, animated effects were provided manually, by a crew of workers situated near the sign (usually in a small house on an adjacent rooftop) tugging on a series of lever. See Starr 1998, 54.

was led through sequentially-animated phrases.⁸⁷ Since it was quite possible that the viewer would not linger to witness the execution of the entire sequence, a string of statements which constructed a linear argument ran the risk of not being read in its entirety.

Accordingly, such signs favored independent, discrete declarations; the “Swept By Ocean Breezes” and “Heinz Pickle” signs both featured phrases for which viewing order was immaterial to the larger argument.⁸⁸ The necessity of linearity had been, in a matter of speaking, short-circuited.

In order to be legible during the evening as well as the daytime, it was necessary for iconic text on electric bulb signs to be illuminated, the text often composed only of light. The injection of the technologically luminous into the formation of standardized letters and words lent a spectacular dimension to an otherwise formalized typeface, further dislocating the text from the staid, traditional, nonspectacular realm of linear argumentation. It was in fact iconic text, and not images, which comprised the preponderance of electric bulb signs along the Great White Way during the period under investigation. Figure 2.2 shows two examples of iconic text.

⁸⁷ The crucial differentiation between electric bulb signs as viewed during the day and as viewed during the dusk and nighttime will be explored in Chapter Three.

⁸⁸ The Heinz Pickle sign read "Heinz 57/Good things for the table/As Exhibited at Buffalo and at Heinz Pier." A later iteration maintained the same construction, but changed the text to read "Heinz 57/Good things for the table/Sweet Pickles/Tomato Ketchup/India Relish/Tomato Soup/Peach Butter." See Figure 2.3.



Figure 2.2

Two examples of “iconic text.” Before brand logos were designed with simpler composition in mind, brands were built upon both the company name and its representation through specific font style. Such representations were reiterated in print advertisements.

From *Outdoor Advertising: History and Regulation* John W. Houck, ed. (London and Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1969).

The text featured on theatre marquees was a combination of branded, font-specific iconic text used for theatre identification, and less specific illuminated text used to list the frequently changing attractions.

As period photographs of Broadway and in Times Square will attest, theatre marquees and electric bulb signs consisting primarily of text comprised the majority of bulb signs in the Manhattan landscape. But the images found on many electric bulb signs further facilitated the decline of textual arguments, as well as cultivated an appealing visual representation which could be easily grasped by just about anyone, regardless of education or background. Even if one couldn’t speak or read English, the broader metatext of electric bulb signs was hard to overlook. “What a magnificent spectacle”, remarked one spectator at the time, “for a man who couldn’t read.”⁸⁹

Iconic Images

The movement away from traditional text-based arguments in advertising was predicated not on the practical problems of differentiating mass-produced commodities or capturing the attention of the hectic pedestrian, but also on a conscious effort by advertisers to employ

⁸⁹ Starr 1998, 61.

a simpler, more emotive language based on visual representations. Iconic text was still text, and required a measure of literacy and intellectual processing for the message to travel, but the uncomplicated lines and curves possible with electric bulb sign technology, however, were thought to be suitable for simple, uncluttered representations able to pierce the protective psychic armor of the modern consumer.

Corporate logos—simple, graphically oriented branding mechanisms—would seem to be a natural choice for adaptation to electric bulb sign display. The “Heinz Pickle” sign (Fig. 2.3) first appeared in 1896 in the same space previously occupied by “Swept by Ocean Breezes.” “Heinz Pickle” for the most part mimicked its predecessor’s compositional structure of sequentially flashing lines of brief, declaratory text⁹⁰, but with one crucial difference: situated at the top of the sign was the Heinz logo, a bright green pickle, above the Heinz’ “57” designation.

Even by modern standards, this construction bordered on the violently psychedelic. The pickle, an incandescent green, measured fifty feet in length and flashed against a pulsating orange and blue background. The adjacent white numerals, eight feet high, also flashed, but not necessarily in tandem with the pickle’s own flashes.⁹¹ Critical condemnation of the pickle sign as “vulgar” delighted Henry “H.J.” Heinz, the company president. Heinz allegedly composed the poetic text for the sign’s final iteration when the building was slated for demolition (to be replaced by the Flatiron Building):

⁹⁰ by 1896, the flashing effect was accomplished technically and not manually.

⁹¹ Starr 1998, 57.



Figure 2.3
"Heinz Pickle" sign, 1890s
Note the poem at the bottom.
Photographer unknown.

From: Outdoor Advertising: History and Regulation John W. Houck, ed. (London and Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1969).

Here at the death of the wall of fame
We must inscribe a well known name
The man whose "VARIETIES" your palate did tickle
Whose name is emblazoned in the big green pickle.⁹²

Budweiser, as well, utilized their logo, a flying eagle, when the company's first electric bulb sign was installed in Herald Square in 1905.

However, deliberate attempts to cultivate brand allegiances through the use of simple graphical elements were still approximately half a century in the future. New communities of identity were constructed around the consumption of specific goods and services⁹³, but while individual and collective bonding with brand names was a way to foster affiliations of identity, it is important to remember that the concept of branding as it is understood in 2002

⁹² Starr 1998, 58.

⁹³ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 89.

had not yet been realized.⁹⁴ Established brand visuals such as the Kellogg's "Sweetheart of the Corn" girl or the "Cream of Wheat" servant figure, for instance, were widely reproduced on product packages and in print advertisements⁹⁵, but they did not appear on electric signs.⁹⁶ Static brand images appeared on electric bulb signs, but due to their complicated composition, they were usually not electrified and faded into illegibility when sunset arrived.⁹⁷ In general, the presence of brand logos on electric bulb signs was minimal, the brand communicated instead through the hyperarticulations of iconic text or, as often was the case, projected instead through other textual means such as frequently reiterated "catch phrase" ("Lucky Strikes - It's Toasted!")

For all its identification with modernist tropes of progress, electricity, and technology, electric bulb sign iconography borrowed heavily from a contemporary obsession with Beaux-Arts style in an attempt to both appease and appeal to a wary middle class public.⁹⁸ One commentator in 1910 spoke of the signs which "metaphorically 'smashed' those who saw them squarely in the face and called the wares to attention as if with a bludgeon." The writer then assured the reader that the days of such visual brutality were over. "Now it is

⁹⁴ For more on the foundations of branding, see Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: the Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁹⁵ Lears 1994, 118-122.

⁹⁶ At least, none of the electric bulb signs this researcher could find records of, which does not preclude the possibility that they did not exist at all. Judging by the signs which did populate the Times Square area, however, it is reasonable to say that signs rarely represented human figures, and when they did they were not realistically rendered.

⁹⁷ For instance, the "Chesterfield" cigarette sign with the iconic text previously mentioned also featured a static image of a couple, the gentleman lighting the woman's cigarette. The flame was constructed of an electric light, but the couple wasn't. This construction rendered the peculiar effect at night of a match lighting apparently nothing.

⁹⁸ The industry, much like the billboard industry at the turn of the century, tried to evade formal regulatory strictures with promises of self-regulation, and portrayed their productions as tasteful. While billboard executives concocted the concept of elaborate billboard frames, electric signs demonstrated their bourgeois aesthetic proclivities in terms of voluntary size and content controls.

different. The whole tendency is to have designs displaying good taste, to work for beauty not size, to make passersby stop in admiration of the ingenuity..."⁹⁹ Popular iconography included dragons and lightning bolts, garlands and laurel wreaths, shields and weapons, lions and peacocks, ribbons and vines, and—the overwhelming favorites—fountains and torches.¹⁰⁰ Representatives from a particular sign company, when negotiating design with an indecisive client, would allegedly offer, “How about a fountain?”¹⁰¹ The inclusion of vines or fairies on an electric bulb sign may appear as an anachronistic coupling traditional visual tropes painted with the brush of modernist technology measured by twenty-first century sensibilities, but period consumers were already accustomed to the depiction of electricity personified by elves and fairies from print literature and promotions.¹⁰²

Along with the inclusion of Beaux-Arts iconography in an electric bulb sign, the images of the advertising product was electrified by simply outlining it with lights. Such was the case with the Trimble’s Whiskey sign, the first electric bulb sign to be displayed in Times Square proper¹⁰³; similarly, the earliest version of the Wrigley’s gum sign featured an illuminated pack of gum accompanied by the phrase “Buy it by the box.”¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910. V. 13.

¹⁰⁰ Starr 1998, 54.

¹⁰¹ Starr 1998, 54.

¹⁰² The cover of Captain E. Ironside Bax’s *Popular Electric Lighting* (London, 1882), for instance, featured a naked sprite soaring upwards on what appears to be a bolt of electricity. See *Light!* 2000, 189-181.

¹⁰³ The Trimble’s sign was situated at West 47th street between Broadway and Seventh Avenue; in 1903 Times Square was still known as Long Acre Square.

¹⁰⁴ Starr 1998, 66.

Later images featured on electric bulb signs were frequently part of a larger pictorial sign narrative, a massive animated and frequently comic tableaux staged on behalf of quotidian products such as cleanser powder, for example, or a petticoat company, or a manufacturer of thread. This is the “spectacular” as it has come to be known, the construction of words and images by electric lights.

Mechanized Performativity

The relatively austere exploitations of electric bulb sign technology through the use of iconic text appeared tame next to the medium’s future generations, which featured a stunning array of moving elements. “It is no longer considered sufficient to have signs, no matter of what size, to shine in various colors,” bemoaned one electric bulb sign critic in 1910. Instead they must appear and disappear in alternations of brilliancy and darkness.”¹⁰⁵ The “Heinz Pickle” sign, which shocked the genteel populace with its blatant phallic imagery and clash of colors, is an elemental example.

The narrative possibilities of the electric bulb sign were curtailed by the media’s limitations per se, but also by the signs’ explicit promotional agenda. Future iterations of automated signs, it could be argued, signaled a return to a more linear, or at least serial, use of flashing techniques to suggest a story. But that story was necessarily brief to arrest the attentions of a passing audience in this nonelective spectacle, and the engaging visual displays of electric bulb signs are perhaps best understood not as narratives but through the broader trope of ‘performativity’.

¹⁰⁵ *The New York Times*, September 8, 1910.

Sometime between 1900 and 1905 a “girl stenographer” employed by an ad agency is credited with proposing the use of an electric sign to promote the Heatherbloom petticoat company:¹⁰⁶

Until the girl stenographer suggested the fluttering petticoat idea the ingenuity of electric sign designers had taken only a few groping steps.... Nothing like the audacity of that petticoat idea had struck the minds of sign-makers.¹⁰⁷

In 1905, the “Petticoat Girl” sign made its debut, featuring “the illusion of fluttering skirts... produced by a series of very rapid flashes of bulb form the bottom of the skirt and the petticoat, while the rain was switched on and off every twenty seconds.”¹⁰⁸ While electric bulb signs featuring iconic text and images continued to comprise the majority of signs along Broadway and in Times Square, the introduction of Petticoat Girl’s animated narrative signaled a significant development in representation.¹⁰⁹

The popular success of the “Petticoat Girl” electric bulb sign prompted a spate of successors throughout the 1910s¹¹⁰ which similarly incorporated primitive iterations of animation. The Corticelli Spool Silk sign, for instance, featured a frolicsome kitten playing with a spool of silk snatched from the pumping needle of a sewing machine and the brief tagline “Too Strong to Break” (Fig. 2.4). The Eyptienne [sic] Straights Cigarette Girl appeared to balance coyly on a tightrope, dancing with her parasol. Porosknit Summer Underwear’s electric bulb

¹⁰⁶ The tale featuring the “girl stenographer” dialogues with gender and class discourses in relation to electronic bulb signs. While a thorough analysis of these issues are beyond the scope of this paper, class will be addressed in a limited fashion in Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁷ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910. V. 13.

¹⁰⁸ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910. V. 13.

¹⁰⁹ The ‘Petticoat Girl’ sign also signaled a representational shift away from primarily pleasure-oriented commodities (liquor, cigarettes, vacations, the theatre) to more quotidian ones on electric bulb signs.

¹¹⁰ The preceding electric bulb spectacles were situated in and around midtown Broadway and Times Square in Manhattan between 1900 and 1917. The significance the local environment played in encouraging the institutionalization of electric bulb signs in urban spaces will be explored in further depth in Chapter Three. Starr 1998, 63-66.

sign featured the “Man-Boy Boxing Match” as two lit figured clad in seasonal longjohns did battle. And Lipton tea’s sign featured a teapot which appeared to pour chubby drops.



Figure 2.4
Corticelli Kitty electric bulb sign,
1912.

From: Starr, Tama and Edward
Hayman. *Signs and Wonders: The
Spectacular Marketing of America*
(New York: Doubleday Books,
Currency Imprint, 1998).

The narrative impact of such sign performances is debatable. By introducing a performative element to signage display, the “Petticoat Girl” sign and its successors marked a creative departure away from electric bulb signs like the “Heinz Pickle” sign, which vied for the attentions of a fleeting audience through technologically stunning effects. The “Petticoat Girl” bulbs were not employed to flash gratuitously for attention like those of the infamous “Pickle”, nor did they simply outline an existing product. Rather, they engaged the spectator in a narrative with a subject engaged with a series of events: the girl struggled against the downpour, her petticoats fluttering.

However, if it was in fact a narrative, it was an extremely brief one, since the audience for electric bulb signs were hurrying from one destination to the next. In reality, the new breed of performative electric bulb signs were only slightly more nuanced than Heinz’ pickle. “Look for the label”, the “Petticoat Girl” sign read, but most spectators were still riveted by the display of technological wizardry. In fact, such signs did not narrate in any meaningful

manner, but instead performed a series of simple tricks for spectators: a match was lit, a teapot poured tea, a girl smoked a cigar.

Also of importance was the mechanized nature of the performances in which the representative mechanized human body was set to repetitive tasks ill-suited for a real body. Barring mechanical dysfunction, human figures on such signs smoked, balanced, and boxed incessantly from dusk long into the night, flawlessly performing their simple tasks at a rate a flesh and blood counterpart could not possibly master.

Repetition

The duration of even the most elaborate electric sign performances ranged between a few seconds in duration to close to two minutes. One of the longer performances, White Rock's 1915 electric bulb spectacular promoting its table water, for instance, featured fountains, streaming sprays of gold-tinted "water" and a minute-long sequence in which the illuminated face of an operational clock transformed from blue to pink to yellow and back to blue.¹¹¹

The length of individual sign performances were temporally fixed, as were visual elements such as the sign's form, color, and brightness of the illumination. The fixity of this presentation accentuated the signs' automated, machine-like construction behind the dazzling lights and charming presentations. But not only was a sign's performance fixed, it was repetitive, with no legitimate beginning or end.¹¹² As such, the visual experience over time for the spectator was transformed from a performance to a refrain, akin to the

¹¹¹ Starr 1998, 65.

¹¹² Attempts to affix markers such as 'beginning' and 'end' to a sign's repetitious performance are technically meaningless, and speak more of the spectator's predisposition to organize visual information into familiar categories of meaning.

recitation of a jingle. versus a song or poem. Repetition is also associated with childhood verses, and meshes well with period sentiments regarding the childlike nature of the consumer turning to the secular world of commercial goods to relieve the stresses of modern life. "... their advertisement shackled fantasy to commodity, assimilating the recovery of primal irrationality into the needs of corporate capitalism."¹¹³

III. THE ELECTRIC BULB SIGN AND EARLY CINEMA

To better explicate electric bulb sign representation and performative content, it is useful to compare it to another nascent technology which emerged at approximately the same time as the electric bulb sign which also displayed animated subjects within a single frame—the cinema.

Both electric bulb signs and early cinema, for instance, offered mechanized entertainment by presenting sequential progressions of motion in quick succession.¹¹⁴ But cinema's higher frame rate per second¹¹⁵ produced a smoother, more credible presentation of motion, while viewers of electronic signage animation were often asked to make relatively large visual and cognitive leaps between gaps in the action.

More realistic representations were possible on film since the medium could *capture* only that which transpired in front of a camera lens, a process which conferred legitimacy and

¹¹³ Lears 1984, 377.

¹¹⁴ The frame rate per second of film during this period was sixteenframes per second; this rate increased to the now-standard twenty-four frames per second with the integration of sound and film.

¹¹⁵ Film's higher frame rate and more fluid representation was facilitated by the optical phenomenon known as 'persistence of vision'. Persistence of vision theory maintains that the mind retains an image of the viewed subject for a split second. When a film projects a series of progressive images, then, the viewer sees not each individual frame but a continuous flow of images, creating the illusion of motion.

authentication to its subject matter.¹¹⁶ Electric bulb sign representations, conversely, were not composed of realistic imprints; in fact, as mentioned in the section concerning iconic text and images, realism was virtually impossible to render on a sign given its technical limitations. While film was adopted as the primary medium for securing and fixing physical actualities¹¹⁷, pre-1906 cinema wrestled with the portrayal of magical effects and non-real content. Limited success in the portrayal of the non-real through illusions of disappearance or flight¹¹⁸, but the images which flickered past were still thickly-described representations of objects, scenes or individuals.¹¹⁹ This is not to say that early film was devoid of special effects; far from it. However, the thick descriptive capabilities of film combined with its faster frame rate made it possible for that medium to render realistic tableaux, while the simpler iconic representations and limited frame rate of electric bulb sign animation shared more in common with practices of sequential illustrated panels or cartoons than with film.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ This held true for photography as well. See William Mitchell, *The Reconfigured Eye* or Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* for meditations on the representational abilities of film.

¹¹⁷ See also Carlo Ginzberg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm": In: *Myths, Emblems Clues* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), and Tom Gunning, "Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema". In *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of Los Angeles Press, 1995).

¹¹⁸ Although camera tricks were common in early film (and were put to clever use in Georg Melies' classic short *A Trip to the Moon*,) they did not manufacture a credible version of visual reality. Considering the deep shadows and fanciful sets of Melies' film, it is unlikely that many viewers believed the footage to accurately reflect the moon's surface.

¹¹⁹ Tom Gunning, "Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectators and the Avant-Garde." In: *Early Cinema: Space, Frame and Narrative*, T. Elsaesser and A. Barker, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 1990), 57.

¹²⁰ However, one sign in particular was celebrated for its realism. Proclaimed to be "awesomely realistic", 1910's "Leaders of the World" sign atop The Normandie Hotel at 38th Street and Broadway depicted a Ben-Hur-style chariot race. Realism was accomplished by employing a series of flashing lights to detail the movements of the chariots, horses, and drivers, while a rotating cylinder depicted the stadium audience (moving in the opposite direction than the racers). The "Leaders of the World" sign demonstrated that to some extent realistic representations were technically feasible with electric bulb signs, but to call it "awesomely realistic" required a disavowal of a host of contingent factors or represented period hyperbole. See Starr 1998, 59.

For both film and electric bulb signs, content ultimately followed both form and mission despite early similarities, and the two media both featured short, sensationalist visuals; early content for both often consisted of representations in which technology trumped narrative. Cinema was seen at first as “less as a way of telling stories than as a way of representing a series of views to an audience”, which film scholar Tom Gunning labeled ‘the cinema of attractions.’¹²¹ Brief films dominated early productions, with actors in the habit of acknowledging the audience as was the practice in vaudeville. Similarly, electric bulb signs displays, wedded to their commercial mission, were designed to engage and to sustain to some degree the spectator’s interest amidst a distracting urban environment.

To some extent the subject matter rendered by these two opposed systems of representations bore a striking similarity. Topics for electric bulb sign narration included boxers, kittens, harlots with pipes, and fountains. Topics for early cinema shorts likewise included

women workers coming out of a factory, boxers sparring, people on bicycles, car driving past and pedestrians at busy crossroads, parades, marches, trains pulling into stations, variety artists performing serpentine dances, jugglers on stage, smiths shoeing horses...¹²²

Later in the decade, film would reject its vaudevillian origins and embrace a theatre-based narrative model¹²³, and its sensationalist visuals rapidly declined. The storytelling system of the electric sign, in contrast, was limited by a necessary commitment to articulate a commercial message to a weary audience in transit; while films angled for middle-class respectability, electric signs stayed firmly situated in performative strategies of distraction,

¹²¹ Gunning 1990, 57.

¹²² Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entre’acts in History*(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 67.

¹²³ For more on the spatial institutionalization of film, refer to Chapter Three.

amusement and display. The 'consumer as frightened child', it was conjectured, responded positively to simple, nonverbal and whimsical displays of kittens and thread, or flashing pickles. And many consumers did respond enthusiastically to electric bulb signs, but not as 'comforted children' per se. The complex and nuanced positions of the audience will be addressed next in Chapter Three.

CONCLUSION

The lavish "Wrigley's Spearmint" sign, erected on Broadway between 43rd and 44th Streets in 1917, embodied several archetypal characteristics of electric bulb sign spectaculars of the period, such as a national company branding through the use of iconic text, repetitive



Figure 2.5

The Wrigley's sign 1917.

From Starr, Tama and Edward Hayman. *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (New York: Doubleday Books, Currency Imprint, 1998).

animation of mundane tasks, and an adherence to incongruous Beaux-Art iconography (Fig. 2.5). The sign, the length of a city block, was composed of

Twin peacocks fac[ing] off on a tree branch, their tails forming a feathery canopy over the central portion of the display. Beneath the branch were the familiar Wrigley's signature and the flavor of the gum -- spearmint... Flanking the text were six animated "Spear men", three on each side, sprites in pointy hats... Brandishing spears, they comprised a drill team that went through a series of twelve calisthenics the populace quickly dubbed "the

daily dozen." Flanking them were fountains spraying geysers of bubbling water, and the whole spectacle was frame in vined filigree.¹²⁴

Electric bulb signs were spectacular, constructed to entice and hold the attention of a transitory audience with a curious mix of traditional iconography (text, Beaux-Art garlands) activated within the modernist practical and ideological framework of illuminated display. Chapter Two has probed the particular characteristics of the electric bulb sign as a discrete medium. But no medium exists in a vacuum, and, harkening back to the individualization of visual experience outlined in Chapter One, audience members rarely engage with media in the same way; the following chapter will map the engagement of the signs' spectacular elements to the trope of the city, and examine how signs engage with an urban environment, and with an urban population with divergent experiences and backgrounds.

¹²⁴ Starr 1998, 66.

CHAPTER THREE

ELECTRIC BULB SIGNS AS TRANSFORMATIONAL DESTABILIZERS

INTRODUCTION

Radical in its employment of iconic text, traditional in its appropriation of existing iconographic Beaux-Arts styles, and sensational in its riveting performative light show, the electric bulb sign harnessed the technological capabilities of electricity and the incandescent bulb to create an emotive display intended to stimulate commodity consumption. Chapter Three extends the interrogation of these early electric bulb signs to their engagement with the urban realities of Manhattan between 1881 and 1917, and postulates upon several models of reception.

With their deliberate, almost childlike simplicity of designs and performances, signs were intended to be perceived as entertainment. But they were not explicitly intended to destabilize their immediate environment as they did; multiple dimensions of this destabilization are explored in depth here, through the signs' relocation of meaning and commodity within the urban scape. This destabilization can ultimately be read in several different ways: as a value-neutral stage set open to interpretation and appropriation, as a touristic return to carnivalesque forms of market engagement characterized by play and consumption, as a representation of a problematized spectacle which both distracts the spectator from reality and creates a new reality, or as a sign for retreat, in which engagement in the space is curtailed by a perceived threat.

“Indignant over the threatened deterioration of property values”, began a column in the July 19, 1910 *New York Times*, “some of the foremost merchants on that thoroughfare [Fifth Avenue] said yesterday that they were at a loss to know exactly how the growing evil could be stopped.”¹²⁵ The ‘growing evil’ identified by merchants here was the proliferation of electric bulb signs on and adjacent to the street. The article continued with one businessman lamenting that he had relocated his business to Fifth Avenue because it was “high-class”, but now “[if] monstrosities crown the roof of every building... Fifth Avenue [will] look like the ‘Midway’ of a world’s fair.”

Of particular relevance to the debate regarding the phenomenon of electric bulb signs in Manhattan between 1881 and 1917 is the articulated assumption that they transformed their urban environment into the “midway”-type space associated with contemporary carnivals, circuses, and fairgrounds. It will be argued here that electric bulb signs situated in urban spaces have the capacity to generate multiple, and sometimes overlapping, readings, problematizing the “good/bad” dialectic which often characterizes public discourses concerning public, commercial displays. Rather, electric bulb signs ultimately map along a spectrum of reactions ranging from appropriation, enjoyment and horror depending on the personal and cultural position of the individual spectator.

I. □ *FIN DE SIECLE* COLLECTIVE LIGHTING

Prior to the insinuation of electric bulb signs into the Manhattan landscape in the 1890s, artificial lighting visible from the street ranged from the controlling tools of the police to the culturally chaotic displays of carnivals and fairs. Instruments of urban control and surveillance such as the streetlight and the “bull’s eye” lamp, for instance, were employed

¹²⁵ *The New York Times*, July 9, 1910.

by 19th century law enforcement to root out poverty and crime hidden under the cover of darkness.¹²⁶ The augmentation of institutional force through the use of lighting devices such as the police “bull’s eye” spotlight, used in part to control a growing urban underpopulation, support a Foucauldian reading of lights as tools of the establishment.

Similarly, streetlights ostensibly functioned to protect urban pedestrians from petty criminals after nightfall by rendering their movements transparent.¹²⁷ However, streetlights were initially installed in major metropolitan centers along heavily trafficked streets not as instruments serving public safety, but in the hopes of facilitating pedestrian circulation throughout their retail district after nightfall. While the public was encouraged to see these “White Ways” as civic improvements, utility companies pitched a rational argument to business interests that streetlights established the city’s dominant business district as well as increased sales and visibility.¹²⁸ Early versions of electric arc streetlights were intentionally constructed to cast shadows upon adjacent store windows, prompting businessmen to purchase additional lighting to highlight their window displays.¹²⁹

Decorative public lighting presentations, intended to both illuminate and decorate their immediate environment, adhered to a more Gramscian assertion of cultural power, through consensual subscription to a single agreed-upon definition of what constituted a “proper” and attractive public display (characterized by an orderly arrangement of tiny white bulbs). Like the electrified interiors of theatres, opera houses, public arenas and private club

¹²⁶ *Light!* 2000, 162.

¹²⁷ Although intended to illuminate the street and therefore render them safer, many citizens feared that lit streets would actually facilitate the work of the urban underworld, notably robbers and prostitutes. See *Light!* 2000, 212.

¹²⁸ Nye 1994, 179.

¹²⁹ Nye 1994, 178.

functions mentioned in Chapter Two, ornamental lighting in the cityscape adorned the exteriors of buildings or the landscape. By the 1890s it had become common practice to trim the edges of buildings, streets, and boats with strings of small lights as part of a larger celebration, such as the 1893 Columbian World Exposition in Chicago, Illinois, the 1901 Buffalo exposition in 1901, or New York City's 1909 Hudson-Fulton pageant.

Electric lights were quickly incorporated from the stage into civic carnivals sanctioned and organized by "members of the hereditary elite...who sought to reassert their public presence by trying to reshape public cultural forms and institutions."¹³⁰ The aforementioned Hudson-Fulton parade was one such example of a typical affair, as was the "Around the World in Search of Fairyland" pageant held in Central Park in August, 1912. The "Fairyland" pageant featured "three thousand children in gay costumes", as well as 10,000 white electric lights and 15,000 spectators who bore witness to maypole revelry, flag drills, dancing, and the crowing of a child 'King' of ceremonies. According to the *New York Times*, however, an electric bulb sign on the premises which announced the event, however, irrevocably marred the "fairyland illusion".¹³¹

Similarly, the 6-mile parade route of New York's 1909 Hudson-Fulton Celebration—lit by 1.2 million light bulbs, 7,000 arc lights and even more searchlights—deliberately circumvented Broadway and instead proceeded down Fifth Avenue both to avoid competition with Broadway's lights and to implicitly endorse the chosen route's Beaux-Arts architecture.¹³² The blaze from the festivities was brighter than Broadway's signs,¹³³ yet the

¹³⁰ David Glassman, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 32.

¹³¹ *The New York Times*, August 4, 1912.

¹³² Nye 1994, 161.

resultant blaze was not censured by bourgeois concerns. Although the lights themselves in such celebrations did not directly promote commercial interests¹³⁴, the millions of plain white bulbs highlighted the straight lines of architecture was a symbolic representation of the commercial order. The displays of the Hudson-Fulton Celebration were appropriated by cities such as Philadelphia, New Orleans, Washington D.C. for their own lavishly lit “civic” celebrations.

The fantastic lighting displays of the World’s Fairs, despite their more spectacular flair, were also surprisingly noncontroversial and perhaps speak more of the growing appetite for visual spectacle within a controlled, elective context as discussed in Chapter One. Fairs held at Chicago, Paris, Buffalo, St. Louis and San Francisco attempted to outdo one another in the display of novel lighting effects, ranging from colored lights bathing the newly-constructed Eiffel Tower to light “flowers” and naturalized effects such as a virtual “sunrise”.¹³⁵ Interestingly, many of these effects were intended to mimic or duplicate the effects of nature.

At the far end of the spectrum were carnival and outdoor amusement lighting. Glaring exceptions to the rule of hegemonic public lighting, such illumination was comprised of an eclectic hodgepodge of flashing signs advertising games of chance, rides and events.¹³⁶ Soon after the employment of outdoor decorative lighting at World’s Fairs, similar events across

¹³³ "The Hudson River from the Statue of Liberty on Bedloe's Island to Spuyten Duyvil, was ablaze with light. The entire Jersey coast... was illuminated." See Nye 1994, 162.

¹³⁴ Displays such as the Hudson-Fulton parade were ostensibly civic productions, although they were heavily underwritten by a host of corporate interests.

¹³⁵ David E. Nye, *Electrifying America*, 1st paperback edition (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1992), 62-65.

¹³⁶ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century*, American Century Series (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979).

the country were similarly transformed by electric lighting into glittering examples of what David Nye called “the electrical sublime” .¹³⁷

The 1893 Columbian Exposition/World’s Fair

The 1893 Columbian Exposition (also known as the “World’s Fair”), held in Chicago a year after the introduction of the first large-scale electric bulb sign in Manhattan, is instructive in its use of electric lighting split neatly along tropes of hegemonic presentations and archaic commercialism. On the main campus of the “White City” were numerous Beaux-Arts buildings¹³⁸ featuring displays of industry organized along technological categories, as well as entries from each American state and select representatives from Europe and the East.¹³⁹ The Electrical Building, a temporary Beaux-Arts structure on the Fair’s main campus, was privileged by a spectacular display characterized as much by its deliberateness as by its splendor:

...numberless arc lights strung around in great profusion a dazzling glare... upon the buildings and grounds. The interior was simply in a blaze of effulgence. Flash followed flash in quick succession from every part of the building, and here and there were towers and shafts and pyramids , gleaming from base to summit with the most fantastic array of colored lights. The scene was one of gorgeous splendor and the spectators thronged about in a daze of wonder and admiration.¹⁴⁰

Not so privileged, however, were the attractions of the Midway Plaisance. The Midway, the brainchild of fair organizers, annexed traditional carnival-like activities such as

¹³⁷ See Glassman 1990, and Nye 1994, 152.

¹³⁸ As much as the temporary structures erected on the fairgrounds can be considered 'buildings' in a true sense, although the structures were constructed with period architecture conventions in mind. Upon close examinations, one could detect that the buildings were really a material called 'staff', a mix of plaster, fibrous matter, and steel. See Kasson 1979, 18.

¹³⁹ The embedded orientalist and racist practices of the Fair are too numerous to detail in a modest project such as this.

¹⁴⁰ *Photographs of the World’s fair; an elaborate collection of photographs of the buildings, grounds and exhibits of the World’s Columbian Exposition with a special description of the Famous midway Plaisance* (Chicago: The Werner Company, 1894), 209.

consumption (the Midway featured restaurants and commodities for sale) and sensational entertainment (the Midway was the site of the first Ferris Wheel as well as ‘exoticized’ populations) while physically and linguistically distinguishing these activities from those of the legitimate Fair. “‘Why not’, [suggested planner Frederick Olmstead], ‘hire exotic figures in native costume—varieties of ‘heathen’”?¹⁴¹

The Midway was physically located on the outskirts of the exposition, along the western edge of the fairgrounds, and had its own separate entrance. Along with the Ferris Wheel, the Midway featured representatives from nations which for one reason or other did not merit inclusion in the Fair proper¹⁴² housed not in whitewashed faux Beaux-Arts buildings, but in the vernacular architectures of their respective cultures. Moreover, the Midway featured the aforementioned dining facilities and shops where fairgoers could purchase mementos of their visit. The combined effect of the Midway Plaisance is one of explicit commerce, sensation, and visually mismatched buildings, a stark contrast to the uniform, all-white constructions of the fairground proper. One presumes lights were employed at the Midway,¹⁴³ but there is no mention of them in the 1893 publication *Photographs of the World’s Fair*.

The ‘legitimate’ Fair, with its exotic cornucopia of commodities and its celebration of Western civilization, was devoted to the consumption of tasteful spectacle in the name of education.¹⁴⁴ The carnivalesque activities of the Midway, however, offered the visitor more

¹⁴¹ Kasson 1979, 23.

¹⁴² The Midway included representatives from Syria, Ireland, Austria, Java, Finland, Fiji, South Sea Islands, Labrador, and Samoa, among others.

¹⁴³ Evidence as to lights at the Columbian Exposition’s Midway is derived from the aforementioned letter to *The New York Times*, July 9, 1910.

¹⁴⁴ For more on the hegemonic rationalization of “rational entertainment”, see Rubens Peale’s comments in Chapter One.

than the opportunity to respectfully observe representations of “the acme of human genius”¹⁴⁵, but to engage in less intellectual and more sensational activities. The tensions evidenced in the “White City” between electric light representations of the spectacular and the carnivalesque were a prescient example of the tensions and the behavioral responses exacerbated upon the introduction of electric bulb signs *en masse* into the authentic cityscape of Manhattan.

II. ELECTRIC BULB SIGNS AS ENVIRONMENTAL DESTABILIZERS

The chaos here lies not in the movers themselves—the individual ... each of whom may be pursuing the most efficient route for himself—but in their interaction, in the totality of their movements in a common space. This makes the boulevard a perfect symbol of capitalism’s inner contradictions: rationality in each individual capitalist unit, leading to anarchic irrationality in the social system that brings all these units together.¹⁴⁶

To understand the impact of electric bulb signs, it is necessary to interrogate them not just as discrete media, but as social actors performing on an urban stage. The above citation from Marshall Berman refers explicitly to the experienced *fin de siècle* pedestrians, but it is also applicable to the phenomenon of electric bulb signs. Marshall McLuhan’s edict “the medium is the message” is similarly pertinent, as the deeper technological message of such signs is the assertion of electricity’s technological promise and emotive, non-rational displays which eschewed rational argumentation.¹⁴⁷

Individually, a sign pursues a route of its own internal logic to communicate its message; collectively, however, and in social spaces, signs can fashion an anarchic jumble of words

¹⁴⁵ *Photographs of the World’s Fair 1893*, I1.

¹⁴⁶ Berman 1988, 159.

¹⁴⁷ However, as period commentary will attest, “electricity’s promise” was interpreted as both a utopian and dystopian future.

and images which subsume the message and operate to further destabilize an already stressed urban system. The following analyses will elucidate the varying degrees of destabilization perceived as being wrought by electric bulb signs in the urban landscape.

It is important to distinguish between media which, it is conjectured, freely circulate in a system of “flows,” and outdoor advertising. Outdoor advertising such as the electric bulb sign is tied to a physical location and as such, it does not so much as “circulate” a message to a market of buyers; rather, the market “circulates” around the message.¹⁴⁸ This message, fixed in space, is also targeted at a mobile audience that is actively trying to reach some destination elsewhere; it is estimated that six seconds is the average exposure of an individual to an outdoor message at one passing.¹⁴⁹ The presentation must be made quickly, then, as there is no time to argue the details.

Finally, before the analysis can begin, it is necessary to emphasize that descriptors in the following section such as “unnatural”, “chaotic”, or “absurdist” are employed in what is intended to be strictly descriptive capacity. The array of cultural value judgements which may or may not be imposed by such descriptors will be dealt with in depth in Part III of this chapter, which proposes theorized readings of electric bulb signs as they engage with the environment.

¹⁴⁸ As a medium, outdoor signage does not circulate in the formal sense and suggests a “planet/satellite” relational model between medium and audience. One could argue that sign content, however, is capable of broadly circulating through other media.

¹⁴⁹ Phillip Tocker, “Standardized Outdoor Advertising: History, Economics and Self-Regulation”. In: *Outdoor Advertising, History and Regulation*, John W. Houck, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 15.

Granulations of Destabilization

Although the electric bulb sign was a radical deconstruction from advertising practices of the period, not all signs were created equal; it is necessary, therefore, to delineate the nuanced spectrum of the different varieties and effects of electric bulb signs. The destabilizing effect of an electric bulb sign in the mediated environment in and around Broadway during this time was predicated by a number of factors: its immediate relation with its environment, its reliance on textual presentation, its level of performativity, its dimensions and position in the landscape, and its degree of luminosity.

The Electric Bulb Sign Constellation

While one electric bulb sign could be read as disruptive, several located within close proximity of one another along Broadway could be considered unnatural and chaotic. Despite the period rhetoric exalting electricity and its effects, ambivalence towards to the artificial unnatural glow produced by electric lights lingered. “Luna, queen of the Night,” waxed one observer after the Columbian Exposition’s light show, “is the sole illuminant, and her sweet slivery beams are in restful contrast to the fierce splendors of the electric lights.”¹⁵⁰ Later World’s Fairs, too, showcased impressive lighting technology not through flashes and arcs, but through credible representations of natural light: San Francisco’s 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition, for instance, featured an imitation sunset and aurora bourealis.¹⁵¹

It was also argued that electric bulb signs, by amassing in vivid clusters, both blinded and desensitized an already overstimulated urban audience to an individual electric bulb sign’s specific advertising pitch:

Already on several streets there are so many of them that they produce little more than a general glare in which not details are visible... advertisers

¹⁵⁰ *Photographs of the World’s Fair 1893*, 209.

¹⁵¹ Nye 1992, 63-5.

should ponder well, moreover, the fact that they do not really know how efficient these signs are in making and bringing business, or even if they are efficient at all. There are no reports of customers who admitted their patronage was thus secured...¹⁵²

The opportunity to cognitively ‘master’ an electric bulb sign’s repeated sequence mentioned in Chapter Two was compromised if the sign was part of a constellation, since the visual noise generated by its neighbors distracted the consumer eye and further destabilized the viewing experience. One of the more common complaints leveled against electric bulb signs was that so many of them vied for attention that the messages themselves were obfuscated.

Advertising and the Location of Commodity

Outdoor advertising falls into one of two categories: on-site advertising, and off-site advertising. On-site advertising, the bulk of outdoor signage, refers to signs which promote activities associated with the physical location of the sign: the baker’s sign outside the bakery and theatre marquees and electric signs situated on the site of the businesses they promoted are examples of on-site advertising. Figure 3.1, a photograph of 1920s Broadway looking north, shows a night landscape punctuated by illuminated onsite advertising signs such as the dance and cabaret hall to the left, and numerous theatre electric bulb signs. (Fig. 3.1)



Figure 3.1
On-site advertising on
Broadway

From: Tocker, Phillip. “Standardized Outdoor Advertising: History, Economics and Self-Regulation”. In: *Outdoor Advertising, History and Regulation*, John W. Houck, ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969).

¹⁵² *The New York Times*, July 9, 1910.

Like the implementation of streetlights and illuminated store windows, on-site advertising was the brainchild of ambitious entrepreneurs seeking new ways to promote their respective businesses. The practice was recognized as a useful one, as it promoted both general commercial interests and imposed order on public spaces by clearly identifying the function of businesses from the perspective of the pedestrian in the street. Legislation requiring on-site advertising was adopted in London in the 1300s, and the practice crossed the Atlantic with early English and Dutch settlers to America.¹⁵³

Conversely, off-site advertising such as billboards and electric bulb signs did not organize the local environment, but disrupted it by promoting a commodity in absentia; the very definition of “off-site” promotion implies the insertion of a mediated version of a commodity or venue where one does not already exist. Signs in this instance are shorn of their traditional signifying function of instructing “this is the place”, “this is here”, or “this is the way to that”. Rather, off-site advertising launches a mediated commodity into incongruous space. In the case of electric bulb sign spectacles, cartoonish iconic product representatives such as kitten and chariots, boxers and fish. These unrelated, simplistic icons erupted in the absurdist context within the urban skyline, absurdist in that kittens, chariots, boxers and fish are not only rarely found collectively cavorting, but cavorting in defiance of gravity against the clouds and the moon.

The Shifting Message

The commodity advertised by electric bulb signs may or may not have been available at the site of the sign, which challenged the implicit informational function of the sign. Similarly,

¹⁵³ Tocker 1969, 16; Howard M. Chain, *Early American Signboards* (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1926), 2.

an electric bulb sign which featured flashing iconic text and performative images evinced a similar capacity through disrupting the intended message and subsequently destabilizing the immediate environment, especially when performing at night.

The electric bulb sign is essentially a frame; while its basic form and dimensions remained stable, other elements within the frame changed.¹⁵⁴ In the least disruptive forms of electric bulb signs, the fluid content field was utilized to convey information. Theatre marquees in the mid-1910s, for example, were onsite signs which provided information about current and future attractions, usually comprised of a series of white bulbs which surrounded a changeable letter copyboard on a white background.¹⁵⁵ The bulbs associated with such signs were more decorative than informational (no iconic text here), and their flashing was akin to the ocular stimulations associated with the Heinz Pickle sign (Fig. 2.3). The basic text message of such signs, however, were transmitted with comparable clarity during the day and the evening.

¹⁵⁴ This construction brings to mind an even more fluid construction of frame and content, the cinema screen and projected film.

¹⁵⁵ *A Pictorial Survey of Marquees* 1980, 2.

More environmentally disruptive than theatre marquees were flashing electric bulb sign spectacles. Signs such as the text-only "Swept by Ocean Breezes" sign featured sequential lines of illuminated text (Fig. 2.1); during the day, the entire message could read at once; in the evening, however, a viewer needed to wait for each line to be serially lit. The nonlinear nature of the sign's content also allowed for the replacement of one line of text with another.¹⁵⁶ While the content of iconic text representations could at least be puzzled out during daylight hours, the "Daily Dozen" dance routine of 1917's Wrigley's sign (Fig. 2.5) and the performing clock of the 1915 White Rock sign offered no such transparency for the daytime pedestrian, displaying instead an inert, illegible tangle of tubes and bulbs, steel support girders, and other structural elements (Fig. 3.2).¹⁵⁷ With electric bulb sign spectacles, what was once apparent becomes invisible in a moment of time; the actual message presented by a electric bulb sign spectacular dependant on both the time of day and the moment in time the sign was viewed.

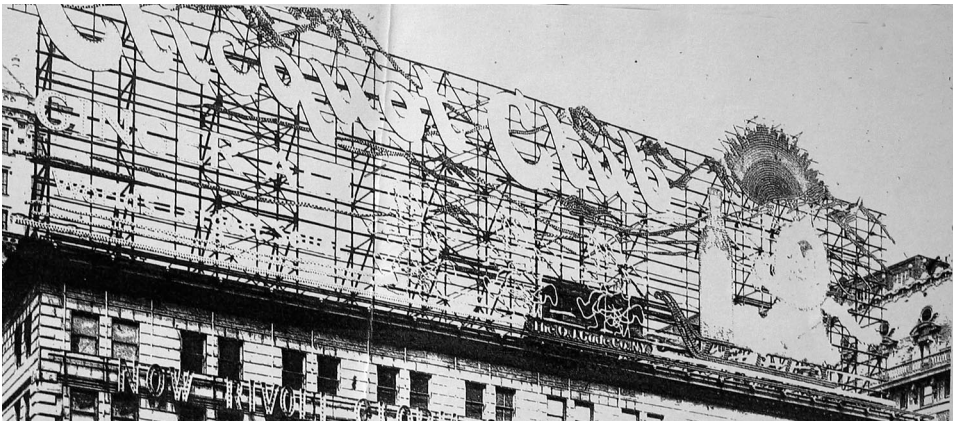


Figure 3.2
An electric bulb sign
spectacular for Cliquot Club
Soda as seen in daylight.

*Courtesy NYPL Microform
Picture Archive*

¹⁵⁶ A.J. Corbin, who owned the "Swept" sign, was president of the Long Island Railroad. In an early example of cross-marketing, Corbin ostensibly charged each commercial interest on the sign for the privilege of inclusion. Over time, Sousa's band edged out Gilmore's, Brock's Restaurant was replaced by Hagenbeck, and Pain's Fireworks were added. See Starr 1998, 56.

¹⁵⁷ The illusion of the signs' animation depended on the construction of each "pose"; a series of poses needed to be built into the sign and illuminated sequentially. Image if for a filmic action, each frame was superimposed over the next.

Performative electric bulb signs can be read as part of the larger experience of nineteenth-century Manhattan geographical instability not only in presentation, but in physical duration. The public careers of such signs were short-lived¹⁵⁸; at the time, the longest-running electric bulb sign spectacular was seven years, with the average life running about two or three. Just as former residents struggled to locate familiar landmarks, known markers of location, and of memory¹⁵⁹, such signs manufactured their own brand of ephemeral 'landmarks' not long for this world.

Distance and Desire

On-site and off-site promotions enforced varying degrees of material separation between consumer and commodity. On-site advertising legible to the passing pedestrian fostered desire much like that manufactured by department store window displays, in which a more intimate, familial appeal in close physical proximity was mediated by plate glass. Such displays may have caught one's attention, but it necessarily held a diminished capacity for commodity fetishism, since one could presumably enter the premise and either witness the manufacture of the commodity or purchase it for oneself.¹⁶⁰

Onsite signs such as theatre marquees were easily accessible on the front of the theatre building above the entrance, and were usually lit by the hegemonic mix of white bulbs and

¹⁵⁸ One can blame in part the necessity of new attractions, along with abusive from weather, fragile flashers, short-lived bulbs, and primitive construction. See Starr 1998, 72.

¹⁵⁹ For more on memory and shifting urban landmarks, see Chapter One.

¹⁶⁰ That is, for consumers with expendable income. Issues of class, display and desire in *fin de siecle* Manhattan department store displays are explored in depth in William Taylor's *In Pursuit of Gotham: Culture and Commerce in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

text.¹⁶¹ Some non-theatre onsite electric bulb signs, as well, were located within the first story of businesses, allowing them to be read by immediate passersby (See Fig 3.1).

An electric bulb sign spectacular promoting an absent commodity, though, was freed from the obligation to appeal to consumers at or near a given establishment in a specific space.¹⁶² Liberated from the need to be situated at a specific location, spectaculars were usually positioned along the roofs or walls of buildings, and above street level; this highly visible location required a large physical size in order to maintain reader legibility; much like a Seurat painting, if seen from too close a vantage point, the patterns dissolved into incoherent shapes.¹⁶³ The 1917 Wrigley's gum sign which featured the garland, peacocks and elves (Fig. 2.5), for instance, spanned a New York city block. "Few realize how enormous [these signs] are... " one contemporary commentator remarked. "The playful [Corticelli] kitten was thirty-six feet long and thirty feet tall, and its "toy" was fifteen by ten feet."¹⁶⁴

Such spaces also prohibited close viewings, and necessitated that the viewer be situated an adequate distance away from the sign itself. Observing a commodity¹⁶⁵ from an insurmountable distance suggests a connection with distance, aura and cult value in Walter Benjamin's work "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction".¹⁶⁶ Like the unique and frequently inaccessible works of art which Benjamin described, the electric bulb

¹⁶¹ The Theatre Historical Society. *A Pictorial Survey of Marquees*, Annual No. 7. (Notre Dame, IN, and San Francisco: Theatre Historical Society, 1980), 2.

¹⁶² Signs for national, mass-produced commodities engaged in an economy of production, distribution and the 'new consumer' chronicled in Chapter One.

¹⁶³ The same discourse on viewing and distance, incidentally, can also be said for cinema.

¹⁶⁴ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910, V. 13.

¹⁶⁵ In this instance, the term 'commodity' is applicable to both the sign itself and its content.

¹⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.". In *Film Theory and Criticism*, Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen and Leo Braudy, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 665-681.

sign spectacular also existed as a singular, inaccessible instantiation. However, unlike Benjamin's aura-laden works of art which linked man to the divine, electric bulb sign spectaculars linked man to the mass-produced commodities they promoted. It was the mediation of the commercial message, the electric bulb sign spectacular, which was unique; a sign in effect assumed the role of a celebrity spokesperson.

Both *fin de siècle* cinema and electric bulb signs shared an affinity for darkly lit viewing spaces surrounding the feature, and an early history of a haphazard spatial location until the establishment of nickelodeons, film halls and (later) palaces specifically devoted to cinema projection. Initially both film and electric bulb signs scrambled to occupy available spaces, with signs slipping into publicly-viewed locations above and along the edges of buildings, and movies exhibited in taverns, beer halls and similarly distracting environments where the film was only one of a host of attractions.¹⁶⁷ The development of spaces marked exclusively for cinema eliminated the raucous, carnivalesque environment of the tavern and instead situated the medium more as a form of legitimate entertainment to be observed and appreciated. These spaces, moreover, had chairs; this addition allowed for more comfortable viewing of extended narrative productions, and proclaimed that cinema attendance was, like the theatre, a sedentary and civilized behavior. Theatres also often housed a piano or had an internal space set aside for musicians to accompany a film. By giving cinema a fixed home, the medium became domesticated within the protected four walls of a sanctioned space. With the advent of fixed projection spaces, moreover, control of theatres could be exerted by the application of an institutional framework such as fire and occupancy laws.

¹⁶⁷ Zielinski 1999, 76.

Electric bulb signs destabilized their immediate environments, fashioning sites open to multiple interpretations; the site of electric bulb sign constellations meant nothing, and everything.

The electrical sublime eliminated familiar spatial relationships... at night the urban landscape no longer seemed physically solid. An immense sign bulked larger on the sky than a far more substantial building, and gargantuan electrified objects distorted the sense of scale. The city as a whole seemed a jumble of layers' angles, and impossible proportions; it had become a vibrating, indeterminate text that tantalized the eyes and yielded to no definitive reasoning.¹⁶⁸

How can one interpret this fluidity of message, and of meaning? Did electric bulb signs topple existing cultural structures and invite a return to the carnivalesque where quotidian roles and mores were temporarily discarded? Or did electric bulb signs instead hypnotize the masses with seductive commercial entertainments, rendering the authentic meaningless and blurring the lines between commerce and entertainment? Or, perhaps, was the result a hybridic combination of these multiple positions?

The answer to these questions is, not surprisingly, yes. Electric bulb signs as social actors may operated to destabilize a space, but the effects of this destabilization are open to multiple interpretations based on variables such as the cultural and spatial position of the individual viewer, one's level of exposure to the signs, the environment which the signs inhabited, and the time of day.

III. READING COLLECTIVE DESTABILIZATION

Below are some ways electric bulb signs along Broadway and in Times Square in the 1900s and 1910s may have been read by a variety of audiences. The interpretive frameworks below are purely conjectural creations of the author and are guided by a body of theoretical

¹⁶⁸ Nye 1994, 196.

texts primarily from media studies, urban studies, history and literature, as well as from limited period artifacts and correspondences. Despite the obvious methodological pitfalls inherent in speculations of this sort, this theoretical approach aspires to both address gaps in historical accounts¹⁶⁹ as well as integrate more modern media research from the last century. Each reader of this text will, one imagines, prefer some reading(s) over others; the author makes no claim as to a preferred reading. Similarly, the form and content of signs shifted from 1881 to 1917, and certain readings gained currency while others declined. In general, electric bulb signs morphed from a shocking new medium to a celebrated and accepted, if controversial, fact of urban life.

Electric Bulb Signs and Cultural Conflicts

By 1910, the proper course of action contributors regarding electric signs bulbs counseled by newspaper was not to abolish the ‘evil monstrosities’ altogether, but rather to regulate sign content, placement and size through taxes and ordinances gained by the application of the “public will”¹⁷⁰: “[The public] only has to make clear beyond the possibility of mistake that it is repelled rather than attracted by this form of advertising. That once done, the big signs will fade and wither like the grass that is cut down.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Perhaps with more time and resources one could unearth adequate reactions of diverse populations; however, neither text-based or image-based historical resources can adequately replace the absent voices of non-English speaking or illiterate viewers. I do not attempt to presume such reactions, either, but rather, anecdotal reports of their behaviors influenced the crafting of reception possibilities described in detail below.

¹⁷⁰ Both electric sign boosters and detractors agreed that the rights of private property owners should not be impinged upon; rather, it was a matter of managing those rights in the public interest.

¹⁷¹ *The New York Times*, July 14, 1910.

That this impassioned discourse chronicled on the pages of the *Times* raged throughout the following decade¹⁷² suggests that the “public will” concerning electric bulb signs in the cityscape was not in fact unanimous, as the last gentleman writer had presumed, but a site of contestation between warring factions. One’s position *vis a vis* electric bulb signs frequently correlated to one’s income, age and social standing: older, more established scions of New York society allied with businessmen who catered to a similar audience (such as the letter writer quoted at the beginning of the chapter) in mounting spirited civic campaigns to battle the vulgar ‘public nuisance’. Not surprisingly, individuals in the anti-sign camp held positions of relative power within borough government as well as leadership positions within the civic associations. In Queens, Aldermans Hamilton, Connolly and Curren were intimately linked with Manhattan’s Municipal Art Association, the strident anti-sign organization. Leading the charges against electric bulb signs was the organization’s vice president, Arnold W. Brunner, also a Manhattan alderman.¹⁷³

However, younger Manhattanites, rural visitors to the metropolis and non-English speaking populations expressed an appreciation for the display on Broadway. “May I ask what has made Broadway famous as the “Great White Way” all over the world?” asked Glenn Marston, in *The New York Times* July 1910.

Is it the skimpy dozen street lights between Thirty-fourth and 42nd Streets, or is it the illumination with is used for advertising purposes?...People, no less than moths, flock to the light, and it is this fact which has brought about the wide use of electric signs. The beauty of electric advertising is a matter of opinion. Most foreigners like it. Most of our country cousins like it.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² Major ordinances restricting the execution and placement of electric bulb signs were enacted in 1906, 1916 and 1922 (see Starr 1998, 65), which suggests extended negotiations concerning signs.

¹⁷³ *The New York Times*, September 14, 1910 and January 28, 1914.

¹⁷⁴ From *The New York Times*, July 20, 1910. The *New York Times* demonstrates itself to be of two minds on electric signs, both providing many a column inch for arguments against signs, as well as publishing dissenting opinions. It also printed a lavish Sunday “Extra” section in September 1910 which celebrated electric bulb signs, complete with pictures and explanations of their construction.

There are apocryphal reports of newly arrived immigrants standing for hours beneath huge spectacles marveling at the display.¹⁷⁵

If Broadway and Times Square were sites of contestation, what possibilities and precursors defined this destabilized space? This analysis interrogates four possibilities: one could treat the site as a stage set ripe for appropriation to be reinscribed by individual agents; a touristic fairground ready for the re-enactment of the traditional carnival trope; a spectacular performance; a hybrid of both fairground and spectacle; or a signal for retreat from a chaotic destabilization of the already fragmented cityscape.

(a) *Electric Bulb Sign Sites as Stage Set*

Theatre marquees, compared to other types of electric bulb signs, did not visually disrupt their environment in any appreciable way other than to contribute to the overall luminosity of the Great White Way; one might wonder as to their inclusion in this analysis. But theatres marquees and the theatres they adorned, although less destabilizing than its signage brethren, provided a context for interpreting the destabilized environment: the urban space as stage set. "Setting foot in the Square is just like stepping into a theatre lobby," raved Edward Hayman, the co-author of *Signs and Wonders*. "And what a lobby!"

In Times Square there is a synergy between the show inside the theatre and the show on the street. The light on the stage—the fearless light of art and ideas, so proudly independent of commercial sponsorship—would fade quickly if the great advertising signs that light these streets went dark¹⁷⁶... at the same time, the theatres give the signs a ready-made audience and a sense of place, a performance center to be the combination lobby and art gallery for.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ *Billboard Art* 1980, 22.

¹⁷⁶ When the electric signs in Times Square were first dummed for WWI safety and conservation purposes, attendance at local theatres and restaurants declined precipitously. See Starr 1998, 74.

¹⁷⁷ Starr 1998, 14.

The descriptive elements of the stage trope—lighting, stage and audience, and performance—helps to clarify how electric bulb signs could be interpreted as performers on the vast stage of Broadway, as argued by Hayman and others.

The destabilizing characteristics of the electric bulb sign constellation transformed its immediate environment into a postmodern site of performativity where ‘reality’ was subjectively defined by the viewer, and where each spectator was a potential actor on the stage set. Both electric bulb signs and the theatre stage, for example, were designed to be read against a dark background; for electric signs, the backdrop was the night sky, and the bright lights of electric bulb signs shining against the evening sky appeared much as did onstage actors against a darkened theatre house.

An important element of stagecraft is the ability to allow the audience to suspend disbelief and enter an alternate physical reality. Electric bulb signs, too, constructed a fantastic physical space free of fixed definitions, logical argumentation, and physical and social realities. Before technology was able to construct signs which flashed and performed, signs presented the illusion that they could: for both the “Snapping Turtle” and the “Swept by Ocean Breezes” signs, for instance, a shed on a nearby rooftop housed workers who tripped the appropriate circuits by hand. Lights performed tricks with the immediate environment, as well, making most of it ‘disappear.’¹⁷⁸ Buildings edged with strings of white lights, for instance, were transformed at night as the physical form of the building disappeared and was replaced by a skeletal outline free from grime, dirt and other urban detractions. Constellations of electric bulb signs, however, overwhelmed even the forms of buildings, as well as everything not lit in the immediate vicinity.

¹⁷⁸ It also made the darkness disappear: "No municipality can afford to provide enough illumination to make its streets thoroughly safe...[there is a need for] some form of illumination in which the

Considering the relation of electric bulb signs to the trope of theatre and the preponderance of theatre marquees along the area under interrogation, one might speculate that theatre not only furnished a framework for reading electric bulb signs of other varieties, but that these signs functioned as adjuncts to the existing theatre district. It is certainly a valid claim that the institutionalization of the theatre arts along Broadway did much to situate electric bulb signs as performers, and Broadway as a performance space.¹⁷⁹ However, the typical text-heavy, non-animated theatre marquee comprised mainly of white incandescent bulbs was hardly spectacular in its own right. Indeed, the case can be argued that since electric bulb spectacles such as the "Swept" sign and the "Heinz Pickles" sign actually predated the emergence of decorative theatre marquees, their presence compelled theatre owners to similarly compete for visual attentions. Theatre marquee signs as well mimicked older representations of theatre lighting; the 'flickering' of marquee bulbs, for instance, was allegedly designed to reproduce the unsteady flicker of gaslight.¹⁸⁰

Although the signs themselves were immovable, images of electric bulb signs along Broadway and in Times Square circulated throughout the world; by 1905, images of the area were circulated through postcards, newspapers and stereoscope slides,¹⁸¹ and Broadway and Times Square were increasingly seen tourist destinations in the 1900s. While the area grew to support close to twenty theatres and dance halls and several hotels (with more under construction), manufacturing concerns such as the nascent automobile industry were driven

illumination itself is the secondary factor. This is the office of electric signs." See *The New York Times*, July 21, 1910.

¹⁷⁹ Among the factors contributing to the decline of comparatively modest "Great White Way"s in smaller American cities by the 1950s was the incongruous presence of electric bulb signs in primarily retail and business districts, coupled with the negligible density of theatre and touristic oriented businesses in the vicinity. See Starr 1998, 38.

¹⁸⁰ *A Pictorial Survey of Marquees*, 4.

¹⁸¹ Marshall Berman, "Women and the metamorphoses of Times Square." In: *Dissent*; Fall 2001(48:4), 71-82.

out of the area.¹⁸² Visitors went to Times Square at the turn of the century to attend theatre productions (and, after 1906, to watch movies), to dine in restaurants, to check out the breaking news bulletins posted beside the door of the new *New York Times* tower, and to enjoy the glowing electric bulb sign displays.¹⁸³ It was, in short, becoming a vacation destination along the lines of Niagara Falls, the Everglades, Yosemite, the Grand Canyon.¹⁸⁴

Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, the authors of the seminal 1968 text *Learning from Las Vegas*, recognized the growing significance of the sign over the architecture, the “decorated shed” style of construction represented by Modernism’s bland, functional style and the humorless and relentless demands of capitalism.¹⁸⁵ They instead implored architects and citizens alike to cast aside aesthetic preconceptions and revel in the creative possibilities offered as evidenced in pleasure zones such as Las Vegas (and Times Square).¹⁸⁶ Such spaces, the authors argued, are characterized by “lightness, the quality of being an oasis in a perhaps hostile context, heightened symbolism, and the ability to engulf the visitor in a new role.”¹⁸⁷ Broadway and Times Square at the turn of the last century were arguably such pleasure zones, spaces of light, symbolism, consumption and entertainment marked by the ubiquitous electric bulb sign.

The theoretical works of Stanley Fish, Janice Radway, Ien Ang, John Fiske and Michel de Certeau all invigorated discourses concerning audience agency. They asserted that

¹⁸² *The New York Times*, January 1, 1911.

¹⁸³ Starr 1998, 63.

¹⁸⁴ Berman 2001, 71-82.

¹⁸⁵ Robert, Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*, revised edition 17th printing (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2000), 53.

¹⁸⁶ although they don’t explicit state the parallel, it is clearly implied in the text.

¹⁸⁷ Venturi 2000, 53.

audiences engage with media content in a strategic fashion, and that meaning is ultimately the construction of the individual. Their texts suggest that despite the commercial and technological messages broadcast by electric bulb signs, the medium's meaning ultimately lies in the hands of the spectator / consumer.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, Anju Appadurai maintained that media "flows" are appropriated and retrofitted for use within a local culture, and that media's meaning is dependent on one's cultural perspective and invested by individuals.¹⁸⁹

(b) *Electric Bulb Sign Sites as Carnavalesque Opportunity*

Touristic spaces such as Las Vegas and Manhattan tread a fungible line between neutrality and agency, between presenting a value-free stage open to interpretation and crafting a carnival of its own designed to subsume identity and promote liberal values. Carnival can be strictly defined as 'denial of meat'¹⁹⁰, but the term refers to the period before Lent's practices of fasting and sacrifice characterized by "revelry and riotous amusements". Traditional carnival also entailed a particular kind of revelry in which rebellion against hegemonic authority was demonstrated through consumption and transgression of social norms.¹⁹¹

If electric bulb signs potentially destabilized Manhattan's nighttime streets and reconfigured them as virtual stage sets, then the individuals positioned in the space may be transformed

¹⁸⁸ Landmark texts addressing contemporary reception studies include Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?" In: *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), John Fiske, *Media Matters* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd printing (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

¹⁸⁹ Arjun Appadurai, "Here and Now". In: *Modernity at Large: Cultural dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

¹⁹⁰ The OED Online defines the etymology of the word 'carnival' as derived from the root 'carne' or meat, referring to the practice of not eating meat during Lent.

¹⁹¹ The Introduction deals in depth with the definition of 'carnival'.

into potential actors provided with, if not an exact script, suggestions for appropriate behaviors.

Destabilized sites where electric bulb signs congregated—such as Coney Island or Manhattan’s Broadway—constructed a space where carnival-type transgressions were not only possible, but permissible and expected.¹⁹² The use of electric bulb lights at a *fin de siècle* carnival and along Broadway were similar, or at least perceived to be similar by the general public, as expressed by an irate letter writer at the beginning of this chapter. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s short story “Basil” A Night at the Fair” likewise noted the similarities, and brought the identification between the carnival and Broadway full circle:

...the substance of the fair’s cardboard booths and plaster palaces was gone, the forms remained. Outlined in lights, these forms suggested things more mysterious and entrancing than themselves, and the people strolling along the network of little Broadways shared this quality, as their pale faces singly and in clusters broke the half-darkness.¹⁹³

Luna Park, the ostensible jewel in the Coney Island crown of amusement parks, was lit at night with a quarter of a million electric lights, reinforcing visitors’ impression that this was a space in which “violated conventional rules. Luna turned night into day, a feat which symbolized its topsy-turvy order. Its buildings [achieved] a more festive air and invited visitors to do the same.”¹⁹⁴

Sites where electric bulb signs collectively destabilized the environment may foster both temporary transgressive behaviors and long-term cultural metamorphoses like their carnival forebearers through reactivation of the individual body of the participant, tamed and absent from the public sphere in the nineteenth century, as a site of contestation and

¹⁹² The limited scope of this paper unfortunately does not afford the opportunity for a detailed examination of audience engagement with spaces of electric bulb sign constellations.

¹⁹³ F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Basil: A Night at the Fair”. As cited in Nye 1994, 152.

¹⁹⁴ Kasson 1979, 66.

resistance.¹⁹⁵ An integral component of the traditional carnival is faith in the redemptive powers of the grotesque; it was believed that limited engagement with the alienating Otherness of carnival's grotesqueries allowed a participant to transgress behavioral norms to reactivate his essential "humanness".

Electric signs, called "monstrosities" and "evil" by critics, could also potentially function as that alienating, grotesque Other furnishing release and rejuvenation from traditional mores. Transforming the familiar urban Manhattan landscape, electric bulb signs might have actualized Germany literary critic Wolfgang Kayser's analysis on the power of the grotesque rooted in the known: "In the grotesque, on the contrary, all that was for us familiar and friendly suddenly becomes hostile. It is *our* own world which undergoes this change." [italics added] ¹⁹⁶

Within the parameters of this grotesque world, personal behavior is liberated through carnivalesque freedoms as "the id...uncrowned and transformed into a "funny monster." When entering this dimension...we always experience a peculiar gay freedom of thought and imagination."¹⁹⁷ Through engagement with the alienating grotesquerie of electric bulb signs, then, lies a potentially transformative path which sluices through limits on language and behavior.

Marshall McLuhan's philosophical waxings on electricity's potential is a compatible theory to the popular discourse on cyborg-like extensions to humanity's capabilities. Although

¹⁹⁵ Similarly, in *Spaces of Hope*, Harvey argues that resistance to globalization hegemony is possible through individual practice. See David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁹⁶ Kayser, cited in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Helene Iswolsky, trans. (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1968), 48.

¹⁹⁷ Kayser, cited in Bakhtin 1968, 49.

McLuhan only briefly addresses the subject of electric bulb signs in his analyses, if pressed he might posit that the electric bulb sign is indicative of a call for a return to “the tribal and oral pattern with its seamless web of kinship and interdependence.”¹⁹⁸ In response to the ubiquitous numbness experienced by overstimulated Westernized populations, McLuhan argues, media will be adopted to further stimulate our depleted nervous systems and lead humanity towards a renewal of primitive, prelinguistic, pretechnological tribalism. And electric bulb signs, as man’s own tools of mechanization, function as translating the primitive, visual eye back onto oneself aided by their relatively primitive visual vocabulary.

But perhaps, as many have suggested, electric bulb signs share less in common with the cultural heritage of the carnival than that of spectacle. Even Bakhtin argues that a stage set—virtual or otherwise—does not a carnival make:

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle...[but] in fact, carnival does not know footlights in the sense that it is does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance.¹⁹⁹

If the liminal spaces of electric bulb signs create a virtual stage, and if the signs’ medium is the *messenger*—celebrities in their own right—perhaps its occupants are not actors, but members of the audience.

(c) *Electric Bulb Sign Sites as Commodified Spectatorship*

Furthermore, in today’s western and westernized cultures, larger, often more abstract and distant entities try to substitute themselves for the older, smaller, tightly woven communities as reference groups and centers of the symbolic life of the people.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: The Extension of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 58.

¹⁹⁹ Bakhtin 1968, 7.

²⁰⁰ *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival*. Alessandro Falassi, ed. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 6.

It is problematic to impose strict distinctions between carnival and spectacle, as suggested by the earlier quote by Bakhtin, as collective social action and spectatorship sometimes commingled within the same space. Similarly, an individual's spectatorial position within a single site could shift from participant to spectator and back again; sometimes, these divergent positions could even overlap. And to confuse the issue even more, the transformation of spaces for the display of spectacle could be temporary, much like the pitched tents and simulated buildings of carnivals and fairs. For example, how should one categorize the annual Times Square New Years Eve ball drop event? From 1905 to today, it fused the elements of personal carnivalesque liberation to an explicitly spectatorial function (watching the ball drop). The result has been the temporary creation of a ceremonial, and distinctly hybridic, space.²⁰¹ Similarly, the march of blue-class laborers in response to the workplace fatalities of 1911's Triangle Shirt fire down Broadway was both an collective expression of classist outrage and a parade for onlookers to consume.²⁰²

The examples above, however, with their sense of temporary mobilization, collectivity and transgression map more accurately to the trope of carnival than spectacle. In both instances, the individual body of the participant was a defining feature of the experience. Electric bulb signs as markers for potential carnivalesque engagement and transformation are contested by the persistence of marketplace tropes even on virtual stages, and by the clear demarcation between performer (the signs) and spectator.

Participation in traditional carnival, for instance, was limited to a relatively stable circle of celebrants—one's village, for example—and to a finite, seasonal, ritual rooted in religious

²⁰¹ Nye 1992, 71.

²⁰² See "Class Relations, Social Justice, and the Political Geography of Difference." In: David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 338.

practice; admittance to Broadway's virtual carnival, in contrast, was open to a diverse, fungible population and was a perpetual practice, its commercial displays deeply rooted in the marketplace. There is also evidence that behavior in liminal spaces such as turn of the century Coney Island has been miscast as transgressive or carnivalesque when in reality its entertainments were decidedly hegemonic in nature.²⁰³

The argument that constellations of electric bulb signs facilitated a return to carnivalesque behaviors was countered by the absence of grotesque, and therefore the more liberating and radical aspects bodily transgressions, in the behavior of passersby.²⁰⁴ However, the mechanical performances of electric bulb signs were seen as grotesque, and their grotesquerie engaged with a broader relocation of the imperfect or grotesque carnival body from the sacred to the abnormal.²⁰⁵ Electric bulb signs, in particular the spectacular variety, were termed "monstrous", "atrocities" and "freak", usurping critical language used in discourse on physical bodies which differed from the norm. A single article under the headline "New Electric Signs Offending the Eye" referred to "freak designs", "signs so extraordinary, if not freakish", architectural monstrosities", "architectural freaks", "freakish sign", and "freak signs".

Sigfried Kracauer's explication of the "mass ornament" was originally inspired by a troupe of dancing girls, but it also applies to the phenomenon of electric bulb sign constellations.

²⁰³ See Jon R. Sterngass, *Cities of Play: Saratoga Spring, Newport and Coney Island in the Nineteenth Century*, Ph.D. thesis, 1998, City University of New York.

²⁰⁴ The body practices of prostitution and pornography manifested in Times Square in the 1960s. One can also argue that such practices are not 'carnivalesque' in a genuine sense as they are inextricably tied to concept of the body as saleable commodity within market parameters.

²⁰⁵ The streamlining, rationalizing forces of modern science defined what a 'normal' body was supposed to look like and behave, and all deviations from the norm were labeled 'abnormal'. See *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary* Rosemary Garland Thomson, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 12.

The mass ornament was defined as a self-referential zeitgeist whose mechanized movements were aesthetically pleasurable and the collective impact of which was greater than its individual components.²⁰⁶ “...these communal groups—which share a common destiny to their ornaments, endowing these ornaments with a magic force and burdening them with meaning to such an extent that they cannot be reduced to a pure assemblage of lines”.²⁰⁷

While the electric bulb signs which constructed the mass ornament each possessed various idiosyncratic characteristics, refuting the uniform sameness of Kracauer’s example, the end result was a mechanized collection of forms whose sum was greater than its whole. The synchronized movements of electric bulb signs, stripped the personal, the natural and the organic from performances and replaced it with collective, mechanized motion. The machinic construction of electric bulb signs was also free from the earthy passions and fleshy excesses of traditional carnival representations; rather, the passion ignited by signs was passion as commodity fetishism promoted from an insurmountable distance.

Off-site electric bulb signs’ dislocation of the commodity engages with modern critics of display, commodity fetishism and representation. Like McLuhan, the postmodern media theorist Jean Baudrillard would agree that the medium here is the message. Unlike McLuhan, however, Baudrillard might counter that the message here is not technologically-facilitated return to a tribal utopia, but that the electric bulb sign represents an elevated order of hyperreality.²⁰⁸ The flashing iconic animation and illuminated display of electric

²⁰⁶ Sigfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament". In: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 75.

²⁰⁷ Kracauer 1996, 76.

²⁰⁸ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

bulb signs constructed an irresistible signifying system which bears little relation to the reality of the commodities advertised. But the signs themselves promoted an actual product for sale—Corticelli Silk Thread, Budweiser beer and Wrigley’s gum were all genuine commodities available for purchase. So, despite the distance between commodity and signifying system and the unreal nature of commodity representation, the individual electric bulb sign as a medium cannot be cast as Baudrillard’s ‘simulacra’ (replication of the real).

However, one could make the argument that electric bulb signs as a collective constellation both concealed urban reality and presented itself as a simulacric replacement. Both electric bulb signs and more utilitarian forms of public lighting were aligned with urban business districts at the turn of the century.²⁰⁹ But just as electric bulb signs on the urban ‘stage’ commanded notice, they alternately drew attention away from other, less mercantile-oriented areas of the city, and transformed what might otherwise have been an uninviting physical space into a sensorial playground after nightfall. What wasn’t lit ceased to exist both visually, commercially and politically, and a spectator situated some distance from an assemblage of electric signs fail to notice the dirt, garbage and other problematic signifiers of urban life:

The lights promise releases from toil, the expressed “something mysterious, hinting at romance.” The electrical sign was an eye-catching part of a new landscape that imparted dynamism and rhythm to a night scene that, like Times Square, was far less impressive during the day...²¹⁰

Consumption and play were significant behaviors shared by both traditional carnivals and spaces of electric bulb sign constellations, but the Situationists sharply denounced an active

²⁰⁹ The first commercial electric bulb sign, "Swept By Ocean Breezes", appeared in 1892 at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and Broadway at 23rd Street. Electric signs slowly migrated uptown along Broadway and merged with theatre marquees to create the "Great White Way".

²¹⁰ Nye 1994, 192.

position for the spectator in relation to spectacles such as electric bulb signs.²¹¹ For Guy Debord, corporate marketplace interests permeated the liminal spaces created by electric bulb sign constellations, thereby preserving—and not disrupting—cultural codes of hegemonic behavior. Mediated market interactions between buyer and seller, for instance, personified by the adorable “Corticelli Kitten” sign or the coy Egyptianne girl smoker sign, enticed viewers with charming performances but left no room for dialogue, explanation, or exchange.²¹² In Debord’s postulation, the spectacular has been elevated as a pseudo-sacred entity which regulates all social relations in accordance to market demands.²¹³ A spectator’s raptuous absorption in a spectacle is, in effect, the opposite of carnival liberation, as the spectator willingly subverts his own authentic life for participation in the fraudulent community centered around the revered spectacle.

Cultural geographer David Harvey, too, fretted that what he saw as “estheticization of space” leading to a new totalitarianism in which the manufacture and consumption of commercial spectacle would trump civic engagement:

“if aesthetic production has now been so thoroughly commodified and thereby commercially subsumed within a political economy of cultural production, how can we possibly stop that circle from closing onto a produced, and hence all too easily manipulated, aestheticization of a globally mediatized politics?”²¹⁴

²¹¹ In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord pointedly does not distinguish between different mediums of spectacle.

²¹² Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), canto 11.

²¹³ It should be noted that Debord positioned the spectacular as primarily a set of social relations, one’s reaction to media and not the media itself.

²¹⁴ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: an Enquiry into the origins of Culture Change* (Oxford, England, and New York: Blackwell, 1989), 305.

(d) *Electric Bulb Sign Sites as Signals for Retreat*

Finally, one could envision that this visual cacophony might prove to be the final straw in the already stressed fabric of city life for many residents. Woven throughout strategies for urban planning was an implicit sense that city life itself was ‘unnatural’ and ‘un-American’; New York’s extension of the streetcar into less crowded urban areas, coupled with city zoning restrictions imposed on skyscrapers and various ‘tenement laws’ against high levels of occupancy, speak to a generalized fear of high densities of population.²¹⁵ As early as the 1860s, the suburbs were promoted as destinations for

...middle-class families... seeking an escape the burdens of urban life—the noise, the filth, and tumult, the crime, disorder and poverty...[and offer] a good community, a rustic, spacious, largely homogeneous, and almost certainly exclusively residential environment...²¹⁶

“Mole’s eye” perspectives of Manhattan often found in period publications were the representational doppelganger of the bird’s eye views mentioned in Chapter One. Here, the city was not comprised of a unified, coherent mass, but of a loose jumble of fragmented pieces, sinkholes of class divisions and material greed, marked by the degradation and exploitation of its poorer residents. A coherent read of the city was rendered impossible by any number of deceptions perpetrated by its residents.²¹⁷ Electric bulb signs, too, through its destabilizing practices²¹⁸, disrupted any attempts to coherently read the city.

²¹⁵ Fogelson 2001, 67. To be fair, the overcrowding and unsanitary conditions of tenements facilitated the potential spread of disease and fire

²¹⁶ Fogelson 2001, 333.

²¹⁷ Kasson 1990, 71-77.

²¹⁸ It should be noted that electric bulb sign's function as advertising, in addition to its technological form, presented another level of obfuscation.

CONCLUSION

The 1893 Columbian Exposition's "White City" is an instructive entry point into an examination of the impact of electric bulb sign constellations upon the environment, as it elucidated both the use of certain types of lighting to reinforce a hegemonic cultural agenda and the ghettoization of the tropes of sensation, pleasure and chaos in even a faux-city environment. Both the effects of and public reactions to lighting in Manhattan would mirror this microcosmic entity.

Through its fluidity of meaning, electric bulb sign constellation destabilized its surroundings. By obscuring its own messages through a collage of visual clutter, individual mastery of the form is contested. Off-site advertising spectaculars in particular inserted an absent commodity into the landscape, mediated commodity desire, and appealed to the senses. Its message shifted depending on where and when one viewed the sign, challenging traditional notions of architectural stability and spatial markers.

How this visual, commercialized destabilization impacted on Broadway and Times Square, it is conjectured, depended upon the perceptual and cultural reception of the spectator. As a virtual stage set available for appropriation to touristic, carnival-like entertainment center, or as a spectacle which either transfixed and delighted or horrified the audience member, electric bulb signs during this period defied concrete classifications.

CONCLUSION

Though electric bulb signs continue to figure prominently in Broadway and Times Square (and still do today), significant changes marked the end of an era at the end of the 1910s. Zoning regulations, the introduction of the automobile into urban spaces, the standardization of advertising campaigns, the high costs associated with maintaining and replacing electric bulb signs, and the normalization of signs within the context of the visual urban landscape all contributed to the demise of the electric bulb sign as both a flashpoint for controversy and as an attractive advertising vehicle.²¹⁹ While Broadway and Times Square remain significant sites of sign constellations, the signs themselves have dramatically changed. Perhaps most significant is the adoption of digital technologies, which has enabled the integration of filmic representations such as movie clips and sophisticated animations into sign spectacles, such as the “talking” Motorola cellphones below (Fig. 4.1).²²⁰



Figure 4.1
Motorola “talking” cellphone
display, Times Square, March
8, 2002.

Photo by Margaret Weigel

²¹⁹ An adequate treatment of the decline of electric bulb sign deserves its own thesis; it is briefly included here only for the purposes of closure of earlier arguments.

²²⁰ The applications of digital technology on contemporary outdoor advertising is a complex topic and cannot be explored in this text. For a detailed treatment of digital representation and vertical integration, see Siegfried Zeilinski, “No Longer Cinema, No Longer Television: The Beginning of a New Historical and Cultural Form of the Audiovisual Discourse” in *AudioVisions: Cinema and television as entre’acts in history* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 219-272.

The Future of Electric Bulb Sign Scholarship

It is clear that electric bulb signs were a destabilizing medium in their own right, as well as a disruptive presence within their Manhattan setting. But how this destabilization along Broadway and in Times Square was interpreted by period viewers had the potential to vary widely. Depending on the individual's position in relation to the site—both socially and physically—the electric bulb sign could be interpreted as a stage set, as a touristic destination, as a site for carnivalesque liberations, as a concentration of mesmerizing spectacle, as its own simulacratc reality, or as an indicator to flee the city. The possibility for such diverse readings problematize the popular 'spectacle' theory of electric bulb signs posited by Guy Debord and others; in fact, they problematize any attempt to craft a single coherent reception theory for signs. altogether. Far from rendering this analysis frivolous, this multiplicity of viewpoints highlights the necessity for a more nuanced approach when considering media and its effects.

Perhaps the electric bulb sign medium should be read as an early participant in the ongoing discourse concerning postmodernism. Characterized by surface display, an ability to fragment existing lines of vision and reconfigure reality, and a self-referential existence capable of transcending both the medium *and* the message, the electric bulb sign maps to fundamental tenets of postmodernism.²²¹ If upon further analysis this indeed proves to be the case, it would be a substantial argument for locating the origins of postmodernism not in the economic accords of the early 1970s or the aftermath of World War I's savagery²²², but

²²¹ The definition of postmodernism is nearly as fluid as its experience, but Lyotard's famous assertion that postmodernity is characterized by "incredulity towards metanarratives" is a broad, useful definition which works with Jameson's 'pastiche', Deleuze and Guattari's 'rhizome', etc. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

²²² For instance, David Harvey asserts that postmodernism's starting point correlates with the Bretton Woods accord of 1973; Morris Eckstein argues that its beginnings were part of a reaction against modernism and the technologically-fueled destruction of World War I. See Harvey 1989 and Modris

even further back in time. In which case, is postmodernism, like globalization, a modern phenomena or do its roots extend back through history, with only the tools changing?

This is just a small sampling of the potential engagement in contemporary discourses further scholarship on electric bulb signs may reap. These destabilizing, entertaining technological artifacts constitutes a rich dataset which both answer numerous questions, and provoke several more.

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