

Digital screens in public space. Advertising, actors, and the remaking of place

[DRAFT VERSION]

Leif Dahlberg
School of Computer Science and Communication
Royal Institute of Technology (KTH)
SE-100 44 Stockholm, SWEDEN
dahlberg@csc.kth.se

1. Introduction

This paper will begin in the form of travelogue, describing the uses of digital signage in Beijing and Shanghai (from December 2008 and January 2009).¹ The travelogue will not stop on returning back home to Stockholm, but will describe familiar public and semi-public places being transformed by digital screen media.² The second part of the paper will put these events in context by relating them to developments in the media and advertising industry. The third part of the paper will return to the media events themselves and try to understand what is happening and how these events are transforming these places and our understanding of both advertising and media.

2. Beijing, Shanghai, Stockholm

Arriving at the new terminal 3 at Beijing Capital Airport is quite an experience. The terminal, built for the 2008 Olympics, is very spacious and with a high flying roof. The human beings moving about, passengers and service people, and the various structures on the floor, are dwarfed by the large space between floor and ceiling. The building looks light, quite a contrast to the heavy style favoured by official buildings in China. The building you enter from the airplane, where passport control takes place, is connected with the terminal building through a short train. After retrieving luggage and going through customs you enter the arrival hall. Again you enter a large space and with a high roof. Next to the large displays on the wall showing arrival information, there are two large screens (perhaps 4x8 meter) on which is shown advertising and information films.

At night, when it is dark outside, the images from these screens are mirrored in the glass wall separating the large interior space from the even larger view of heaven and earth outside. Although arriving passengers may not pay attention to the large screens, the people waiting for them certainly have ample time to watch the advertisings – for consumer products (cars, perfume, underwear), films, travel and various services.



Picture 1. Terminal 3, Beijing Capital Airport

The arriving passenger will instead head down to the bottom floor where he/she can find taxis and the express train to the city. Taking a taxi, you may be lucky – or unlucky – enough to find yourself in a car with an interactive screen behind the right front seat. The screen offers you a number of advertising channels, but also the option to turn it off (although it will turn itself on again after a few minutes). At the moment these screens are not very common and during my one month stay in Beijing I only encountered it once.

The airport is northeast of the city. I was going to live in Haidian, in the northwestern part of the city. Driving from the airport to Haidian you will pass by the

Olympic stadium (commonly called the birdnest) and the Aquatic centre (the bubble building). A few minutes before getting to these two striking structures, one sees a tall building with a large screen about two thirds of the way up. As you come closer you can not only discern the moving images, but also that the building has large video screens on all four sides and that it is connected with three lower free standing buildings with smaller screens. The building complex is commonly called the Dragon building, the tall tower representing the neck and head, and the lower buildings the body of the dragon. The short films shown on the screens are various kinds of advertisements, not only for sellable goods and services, but also films celebrating sports, the Olympics, and patriotic feelings. The Dragon building towers over its surroundings and in clear weather it can be seen from far away. At night, also in clear weather, the lights from the screens are clearly visible from many kilometers. In fact, one can use the visibility of the Dragon building and its screens as an indicator of the air quality in Beijing.



Picture 2. Dragon Building (next to Olympic stadium, Beijing)



Picture 3. Dragon Building (next to Olympic stadium, Beijing)

As can be understood from the description of the arrival to Beijing, the large digital display screens have established a strong presence in the city. This is obviously connected to the Olympic games in 2008, both in order to provide the locals with video access to the events and as part of the effort to remake Beijing into a modern looking city.³ They can be seen on many structures, in particular mounted outside shopping malls. However, in most places these large screens appear in splendid isolation, one at a time. A striking exception from this rule is the many screens on the shopping street Wangfujing in downtown Beijing. This is the most shop dense area in Beijing, not only on street level. Adjacent and perpendicular to the Wangfujing street extends the indoor shopping mall Oriental plaza with hundreds of shops ranging from exclusive western shops to local brands. There are also many restaurants and cafés.

In the indoor mall there are no large screens (but many small ones inside shops), but on Wangfujing street you can count five large screens situated either parallel to the street or on the corner of buildings. On the street itself – part of which is pedestrian and with no cars – there are a number of smaller screens, on eye level with pedestrians. These

digital screens are not the only pictures trying to get the attention of the crowds. On planks fencing off construction sites there are large billboards showing brand names, logotypes, as well as a collage of images commemorating the most important events of the year 2008. I noted that the passersby paid more attention to the latter (in particular pictures from the earthquake in Sichuan) than to the advertising on the large screens. The moving images on the large screens were promoting individual products and services, but also consumer behaviour in general. Several clips were celebrating recent achievements of China and in particular the Olympic games. However, in Wangfujing the screens were also showing films that had a stronger emphasis on branding high end brands, in the sense of telling stories that create meaning around a brand and its products. This is probably connected to the presence in Wangfujing of a large number of exclusive European brands (such as Burberry, Gucci, IWC, TAG Heuer, Tiffany and others). One large screen also showed what appeared to be news clips, but at the times when I visited Wangfujing there were no live feeds but only a series of clips connected to the Olympic games in Beijing.



Picture 4. Wangfujing (down town Beijing)



Picture 5. Wangfujing (down town Beijing)

It was striking that people paid little or no attention to the moving images, regardless whether the images were promoting products or services, celebrating China's history, recent achievements or the value of other brands. This is interesting since Wangfujing is indeed a shopping street, and you go there – at least in part – to shop (even if only window shopping). However, this apparent lack of interest in advertising from passersby is quite common in this kind of places, as I could observe on many occasions. This was also the case when showing trailers for new movies. It is of course possible that the images help create a certain ambiance rather than promoting particular products. It seems in general that a screen does a better job in catching people's attention when they are at rest, but even then most people appear to prefer to watch other things.

In a rather different kind of place, the large open space in front of the main railway station in Beijing, a place intersected by fences and intense traffic, and disrupted by pedestrian overpasses, you find a single large screen. This one shows live news programmes (interrupted by commercials). But as far as I could see this was not

enough to attract people's attention in such a busy place. On the inside of the station building, where people are patiently waiting for their trains to depart (or for people arriving on them), smaller TV-screens were more successful in gaining people's attention. In the waiting room area one can also find screens in a rather unusual place: behind the glass of the restroom mirrors.



Picture 6. Square in front of main railway station (Beijing)

Between Beijing and Shanghai there runs a comfortable night train (with no video screens). Outside the main railway station in Shanghai there are five large screens (of various sizes), placed on buildings opposite the station building. These show commercials with a look and feel of TV-commercials, showing social scenes and playful narratives. The open space outside the station, although busy, is less stressful than outside the railway station in Beijing, mainly because the taxi station is situated on substreet level. Nevertheless, people did not seem to pay much attention to the video messages displayed on the large screens.

In downtown Shanghai, there are several shopping areas. The most well known are the Bund and East Huaihuai Lu, which also are where the high-end western shops are situated. However, the shopping and restaurant areas where most people seem to be milling around are on the pedestrian part of East Nanjing Lu (from Central Henan Lu to Renmin Park) and on a stretch of Xizang Lu running between Renmin Park and East Huaihuai Lu. Throughout the day and in the evenings, these streets are full of people moving about in a leisurely fashion. On the intersection of Nanjing Lu and Henan Lu there are two large screens placed on the corner of a building and one above the other. The lower screen shows news and sports clips, running in loops. The upper screen shows commercials. Since people were often standing waiting for green light to cross the street, they would have ample time to watch the moving images on the two large screens.



Picture 7. Nanjing Lu (down town Shanghai)

Walking on East Nanjing Lu towards Renmin Park, one is easily overwhelmed by the slow moving mass of people, the many shops and restaurants, as well as the many individuals who will approach western looking people in the street trying to sell fake

copies of western branded goods. When arriving at Renmin park, taking a left towards East Huaihuai Lu, the crowds disperses into couples and small groups. The first stretch is dominated by restaurants on the left and the park on the right. On the intersection of Xizang Lu and Yan'an Lu, one has to cross the street on a pedestrian overpass, and from this overpass it is difficult not to see (at least at night) the large screen mounted on the corner of a building on the intersection of Xizang Lu and Jinling Lu. But it is only at the intersection itself where people actually are forced to stand and wait in front of the screen, waiting for green light to cross the streets.

So far I have primarily described the screens in outdoor environments and visible from street level, and it is now time to enter the lower regions of the city, to see what kinds of screens are found in the subway systems in Shanghai and Beijing, and how people interact with them. Above the platforms in many Shanghai subway stations, there are two or three flat TV-screens on each side of the platform. The screens are divided into different fields, showing time, traffic information, and a window for commercials. The commercials appeared often to be about food, regardless of the time of the day. Entering the train themselves, there are several screens in each car, located on the right of each door. The screens showed mainly advertising and informational film (about public behaviour), and when the train approached a station, it would display the name of the station. This was perhaps the first place where it would have been possible to have sound together with images, and it was noticeable that the sound was absent. It was also noticeable that few people, if any, paid any attention to the screens.



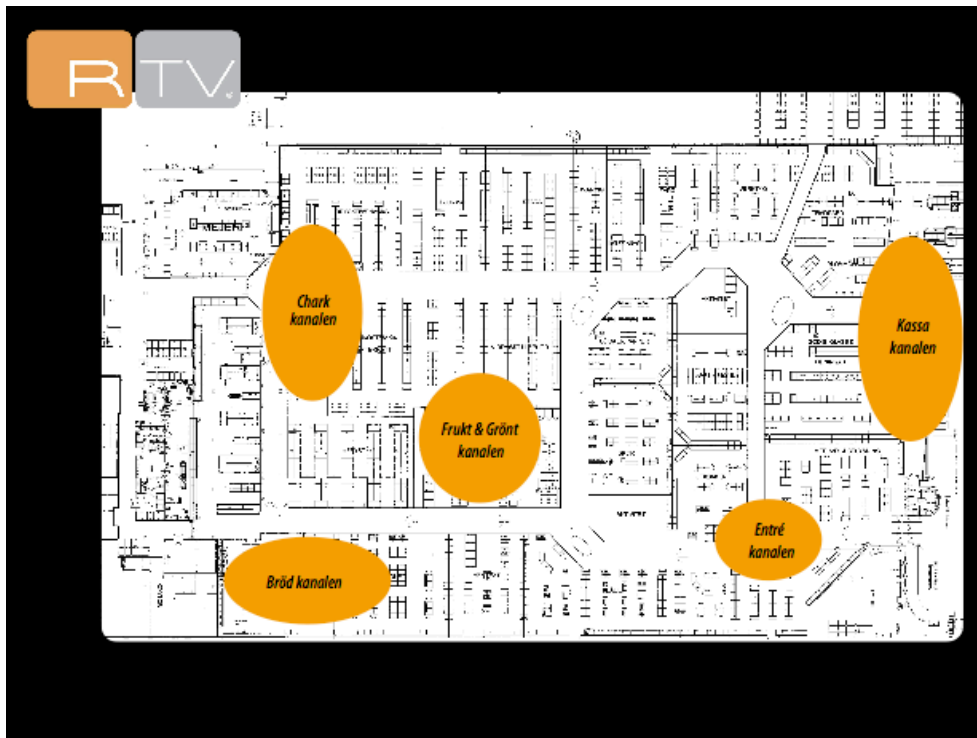
Picture 8. Subway (Shanghai)

In the Beijing subway, the picture is somewhat similar to Shanghai. The flat TV-screens placed over some station platforms (not the ones above ground) are divided into different fields, showing time, traffic information and a field for moving pictures (advertisements and other visual information). Inside the subway cars, the screens are located in almost the same place as in Shanghai, but usually to the left of the doors. However, in Beijing it was sometimes the case that there was sound together with the images, but the sound was constantly interrupted by announcements about the next station, possible connections and the like. In the Beijing subway it was also striking that many infomercials were about the Olympics, even though these were over six months ago. One of my favourite short films is one that tells the viewer about soccer, the rules of the game and the organization of the tournament. On the same theme there is one where two elephants are being taught to play a soccer-like game. As mentioned above, there are also video screens in some taxis, although this is still a rare treat in Beijing. On the buses, which people use for shorter transportation, there are screens showing similar content to what you find in the subway cars.

The digital screens do not only appear in public places and public transportation, but also in what one could call semi-public places like restaurants and shops. It is perhaps not surprising to find TV-screens in fast food chains like McDonalds and KFC (with their own programming), but in Beijing screens are ubiquitous in restaurants in the whole range (and they are usually not discretely placed, but are placed directly in your face), usually showing TV-shows or TV-series.

The large use of video screens for advertising and other purposes in public and semi-public space is obviously not limited to large Chinese cities, but is a global urban and sub-urban phenomenon. In Stockholm, my home town, there are as yet only a limited number of large screens, but smaller screens have over the past five years made their appearance in supermarkets, small shops, hair dressers, department stores, shopping malls, and other places.⁴ For instance, in a large supermarket on Kungsholmen in Stockholm, Daglivs supermarket, there are several screens (above head level) greeting you when you enter the shop, there are several screens (in eye level) in the vegetable and fruit area, there are two screens (above head level) in the dairy section, there are screens above the cashiers, etc, etc.

The company who runs the screens at Daglivs supermarket, R-TV, has developed a system of zones in the shopping area (they call them "channels"), where each zone has a special theme (certain kinds of foods, certain kind of adresse, but also with or without a sales pitch).⁵



Picture 9. Different media zones in supermarket (source: <http://www.r-tv.se>)

The video content shown on these screens is adjusted to where the customer is in the shop, not only in terms of what kinds of products are advertised, but also the non-advertising content.⁶ The company R-TV produces editorial content (mainly about food and cooking), but also show news content delivered from one of Sweden's major evening papers (*Expressen*) displayed on the screens above the cashiers. In fact, R-TV conceives of their content not primarily as advertising but as TV ("*MatTV kanal*"), and they believe it is important that the consumer should appreciate the informational value of the content. The company puts great emphasis on the auditive and visual uniformity, so that the content is perceived as a continuous flow, not disparate advertisements strung together. It is also important for them that the content is not perceived as intrusive or annoying, in particular by the employees at the supermarket. Like other media companies dependent on selling advertising space, R-TV continually evaluate the perception and retention by consumers. In one such study, it was revealed that consumers generally do not retain longer messages better than shorter ones.⁷ However, since the difference was between 15 seconds and 30 seconds messages, this might not be very significant. From my own

observations, the costumers do not pay much attention to the screens in Daglivs supermarket, with the exception of the screens above the cashier. However, this may in part be due to the fact that the content on these screens do not try to sell products but rather serves the intention to keep the costumer happy.⁸

The company R-TV main market niche is in supermarkets in Sweden, but they also have screens in shopping malls. According to their own figures, they currently run the system in some 116 supermarkets all over Sweden and six shopping malls in the greater Stockholm area.⁹ There are also other producers of similar services and content in Sweden, for instance Q-Vision and Visual Art.¹⁰ It is also the case that some supermarket chains have started (or are going to start) their own screen media systems.¹¹

Whereas screen based advertising in the supermarket is directed to the ordinary (and everyday) consumer, there are also screens targeting other people and desires. In the public square Stureplan in central Stockholm, there exists since 2007 a large curved screen that runs from the facade of the building to its left side. Stureplan is one of the main and more exclusive shopping and restaurant areas in Stockholm, it is also a place around which business people work. At night Stureplan is also home for fashionable nightclubs. In other words, Stureplan offers a high concentration of people that are interesting for advertisers to reach. A company that appears to have specialized on this particular site is AdCityMedia.¹² For instance, they have introduced audio advertising in restaurant and nightclub toilets. But the most striking example is the already mentioned large video screen that they produced together with the company Visual Art.



Picture 10. Stureplan (down town Stockholm)

The large screen on Stureplan is well situated to catch the attention of the pedestrians. When you walk from Norrmalmstorg on the pedestrian street Biblioteksgatan (towards Stureplan), you will have the bright screen straight in your face. The screen is also clearly visible from most places in the square itself, and the changing lights from the screen illuminates the facades of the surrounding buildings. The screen displays shorter commercials for high-end branded products, as well as longer loops celebrating fashion (e.g. clips from fashion shows). However, despite the promising location, from my own observations it appears that people pay little or no attention to the screen. There can be several reasons for this, of course, depending on the time of day and different kinds of people, but also on the content displayed on the screen. But it is noticeable that even people who are sitting at cafés or who just hanging around are not watching the screen. In other words, just like in Beijing and Shanghai, people seem to have other things on their minds than to watch screen media in public places.

3. Background, horizons of attention

It is possible to discern several reasons behind the recent proliferation of video screens in public and semi-public environments. One important reason is the technological development of screens, as well as the hardware and software needed to produce and distribute digital video and to update these system. It should be remembered that most of these appliances have a lifecycle no longer than three years, not only because of limitations in durability, but also (and perhaps more importantly) due to technical developments that make older equipment incompatible with new hardware and software. Related to the technical developments is a radical decrease in price both for the screens themselves and the costs for producing and distributing content.¹³

However, the technical and economic factors are not the only reasons why public screens of all sizes suddenly are spreading in the urban and suburban environment. Just as important are developments in certain sectors of the media market, in particular those driven by and dependent on advertising. This regards on the one hand commercial broadcast media supported by advertising, both radio and TV, and on the other hand printed news media. The development of cable TV and the multiplication of TV channels (both public and commercial), the spreading praxis of watching TV-series and film either on purchased DVD:s or from downloads, from the increasing use of digital recording devices that automatically filter out commercials have the combined effect that commercial TV channels are loosing the audience they can sell to advertisers (and hence that the advertisers will go to other media in search for their audiences).¹⁴ Likewise, the younger generation both in the East and the West are shifting their media use from traditional mass media toward what is still often called "new" media: computer games, free websites; mobile media (cell phone, mp3-players); social media (social network sites); and in general using the web as the main media environment (for entertainment, information, and mediated social interaction).¹⁵ Although this younger group of media users is not necessarily the prime or only target for advertisers and their clients, some of the new media practices are quickly catching on among the older generation, and at the same time the younger people are getting older (and more affluent) every year.

In order to confront these changes in media use, there has been devised several advertising and marketing strategies. One is to find ways into the new media and media

uses (perhaps most successful in this area are Google and Yahoo); another is to move outside traditional broadcast media and to use alternative or guerilla advertising.¹⁶ A third strategy is perhaps more conservative, but not necessarily less efficient, which is to strengthen the presence of advertising in the out-of-home sector: billboards on buildings and road sides; signage on and in buses and subways; on bus stops and on subway stations; in supermarkets and shopping malls. The advantages with the billboard as advertising medium are that it is relatively cheap, reliable and easy to target the different audiences. As one of the main actors in out-of-home advertising space in Sweden puts it: "All of Sweden, around the clock".¹⁷

In order to understand contemporary screen media in public places, it should also be remembered the provenance (and genealogy) of screen advertising and screen media, from TV and movie theatres (before films), but also in public and semi-public spaces.¹⁸ That is, much of the advertising and other content now made for and shown on screens in public spaces are either made by the same people who make TV-advertising, or is made like TV-advertising. This is both for the better and the worse, but in particular it means that much material shown on these screens is not tailored for the format and the environment. This could be one reason why it fails to attract the attention of the passersby, but there are also other reasons. Further, there already exists a minor tradition of using large screens both for advertising and public broadcasting (including public art), for instances in places like Times Square in New York City or the Exchange Square in Manchester.¹⁹ The experiences from these media places can be instructive, although not necessarily generalizable or applicable to other places and other audiences. In order to attract the attention of urban citizens, it seems that the video messages need to be relatively short, visually interesting, preferably with some local connection, and possibly use interactive media that project live images of the audience on the screen(s).²⁰

In this paper I have described quite extensively digital video screens and their locations in Beijing, Shanghai and Stockholm and I have said something about the content and the audiences in these places. But in order to better understand recent developments in out-of-home advertising it is also necessary to study the actors that own and produce content for the media space. The two dominant actors in out-of-home advertising space worldwide, ClearChannel and JCDecaux, have so far been rather slow

in moving into the market of digital signage on a large scale. For instance, in Stockholm, ClearChannel plans to put up their first digital signage aside the escalator in a subway station in the spring of 2009.²¹ Likewise, JCDecaux Sweden has not yet explored this new market. However, internationally JCDecaux have been more aggressive and they are developing standard products to be used worldwide.²² This means that ClearChannel and JCDecaux have let other companies, often new ones, explore and develop the emerging market. Examples of such small new media and advertising companies in Sweden are the already mentioned companies Q-Vision, R-TV, AdCityMedia and Visual Art. The first two companies focus primarily on supermarkets. They are medium sized companies (20-30 employees) that recently have been purchased by larger companies.²³ These two companies own and maintain their own screens, they produce and edit the content, and they have their own selling division.

Whereas Q-Vision and R-TV have a rather narrow focus on supermarkets and shopping malls, the company Visual Art has a broader concept. Although they usually do not own and maintain screens, they produce the content and manage the content flow. This means that Visual Art has a stronger emphasis on production and also on creativity, and in some ways they feel more like a production company than a media agency. Today Visual Art has about 35 employees. The company AdCityMedia prides itself with being an innovative and creative media company. Like Visual Art their product line is not limited to advertising, but they design and produce content to broadcast TV as well as collaborate in film productions.²⁴

It should be evident from the above that what we see happening in public and semi-public spaces is not the result of single or necessarily well defined factors. That is, what we can see emerging in these spaces is not the effect of an organized effort to further mediatize public space. An important, and difficult, question is how to figure this development. In other words, if what we can see emerging in public and semi-public spaces may be brought together as a united development, then what kind of ensemble are we dealing with? It is possible that we are indeed witnessing the emergence of a new kind of visual media, one in which traditional TV – at least to some extent – is migrating from the private sphere of the home to public places and spaces, and that TV is being

transformed in the process. Perhaps it is not even proper to use the notion TV to describe this phenomena.

In order to grasp and try to understand the current happening (*événement*) of this medium or medium-to-come (*medium-à-venir*), I think it is fruitful to use the notion of institution, and in particular the conception of institution developed by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

By institution one should understand these events in an experience that provide it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will have meaning, form a thinkable suite or a history, – or the events that deposit [déposent] in me a meaning, not in the name of survival or residue, but as a call for a continuation [suite], a demand of a future.²⁵

In other words, one should not limit oneself to view the ubiquitous emergence of digital video screens in the urban environment as a shift from print media (billboards) to digital media, but think of these screens as a possible new public medium, although not necessarily in the way Joseph Goebbels imagined radio and television in the 1930's.²⁶ Also, it is not enough to look at the media background, the historical horizon against which these events take place or to probe behind the scenes, to study the actors that are exploring and developing its potential. In order to understand more imaginatively what is happening to these places – how these events are changing, transforming these places, how they are opening up new ways of thinking about media and space – I believe it is also necessary to disregard, un-think, and even negate the present historical situation.²⁷ Only then can we begin to trace and understand the current media events as a radically performative and transformative institution.

4. Remaking media places

When reflecting on how the different audiences – shoppers, sales people, pedestrians, or what have you – consumed the digital video displays in public places in Beijing, Shanghai and Stockholm, it is striking that they did this in a distracted manner. That is, hardly anybody appeared to be consciously taking in and looking at the screen content.

Instead, they were behaving very much like the distracted film spectators that Walter Benjamin describe in his well known essay from 1936 on the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction.²⁸ In this essay, which deals with the relation between modern media technology and politics, Benjamin argues that the distracted way of taking in the world is characteristic for our relation to certain objects, or rather environments: buildings and cities. According to Benjamin, there exists a similarity between the way we experience architecture as a lived environment and how we watch films. In other words, one could argue that when the moving pictures today are moving out from the living rooms and movie theatres and into the streets, and more and more become an intergrated – although to some extent ignored – part of our public places, it is not an exile but a return. That is, in contrast to both the art gallery (the white box) and the cinema (the black box), there is no longer a tension between the distracted attitude and the environment. Whereas the art gallery demands contemplation, and the cinema enforces it, the open space of the streets and squares in modern cities encourages a distracted consumption of video content.

In his essay, Benjamin makes a point about how the crowd (the masses) responds in a reactionary way to progressive or radical art (Picasso and Surrealism), but progressively towards a Chaplin movie or a "grotestque" film.²⁹ I wonder what these notions – reactionary and progressive – might mean today, and if they still have any meaning at all. In other words, what would be a progressive response to commercial video messages in public places? What would be a reactionary response? Although today communism no longer presents itself as viable alternative to capitalism, as it did in the 1930's, this does not mean that capitalism is unchallenged. According to the news media we are currently living through the worst economic crisis since the 1929 depression, but apart from in France there are no mass demonstrations, there is today no organised political resistance against the capitalist economic system. But would it make sense to look for a possible connection between the present un-political and un-organised masses and the digital screens in public and semi-public spaces? I think not.

This does not mean that this possible new medium does not have political implications. Only that it is more complicated. For instance, digital screens in public and semi-public spaces are only a small part of the digital screens that constitute

contemporary visual culture. Digital screens in public space may constitute a new medium (perhaps), but not a dominating new medium. It is nothing like the film in 1920's and 1930's, the TV in the 1950's and 1960's, or the computer in the 1990's. Today mobile media and social media are perhaps the most striking forms of new digital media, but they are also part and parcel of the larger social and technological phenomena usually called media convergence or convergence culture.³⁰ In comparison with these media, the digital screens in public places appear old fashioned in that they adhere to oneway communication models. Things would be considerably more interesting if these video screens in public places would interact with mobile media and social media – that would really change things. For instance, an interesting scenario is to give the public access to some of these screens, which was partly realized in a media project in the Exchange Square in Manchester.³¹ This could mean that these public places became more public, in the sense of open to everybody, which in turn could have interesting political consequences.³²

Another interesting aspect of the migration of moving pictures from the private sphere to public space has to do with the use of the notions *media landscape* and *society of spectacle*, terms used by sociologists to describe how society is influenced by modern mass media.³³ Whereas earlier these terms were used as cognitive metaphors to make us see the *real* impact of mass media on society, they are now becoming material descriptions of media in society. That is, digital video screens are today increasingly part of the urban landscape in a very concrete way. The question then is how these screens fit in and what they add to the cityscape. Do we want them to open windows in the urban landscape? Not only like illusionistic city windows, but windows that open the closed space to other places. Digital video screens in public spaces could indeed turn the city into a real social spectacle, not only an imaginary one.

Inversely, digital screens in public and semi-public places could also function as mirrors, showing us images of ourselves in these places. In many supermarkets today we are greeted by a video image of ourselves entering the store. The purpose here is obviously to show that you are being watched (and hopefully to prevent you from stealing anything). In a similar way one could connect some of the innumerable

surveillance cameras in public spaces to some of these screens, at least part of the time. This may have interesting effects on people's behaviour in these places.

If these possible scenarios may seem far fetched and unrealistic today, this is due to political conditions (and contradictions) in the contemporary construction of public spaces as dominated by private interests. These contradictory conditions are formulated very well by Anna McCarthy in her study on TV in public places:

The TV screen embodies all the political contradictions that come with art in public spaces, as well as those more particularly associated with television. As a public medium governed by private logics, as a private medium that comes to stand in for the public it addresses, as a private, domesticated possession that regularly appears in, and alters, public places, television spans utopia and critique as it brings modes of spectatorship into the illegible terrain of the everyday. These video installations [...] involving TV's commercial logics in a dialogue with radical alternatives to consumerism [provide] us with provocative and instructive inkblots not for thinking about how to begin making rapprochements between utopian and critical ideas about TV, social change, and public space but for recognizing and exploiting how much these rapprochements are already available in the spaces of everyday life. This means taking seriously the site-specific power relations which become visible in ambient television installations.³⁴

In other words, there are certainly strong and complicated relations between digital screens and contemporary politics. And only when we realize this can we devise policies, programs and practices that develop these ideas about sociality and collectivity that the presence of screen media in public places raises

Finally, another notion – from cultural studies this time – that may help understand the nature of this possible new public screen medium is Raymond Williams' idea of *flow* as a defining feature of broadcast TV.³⁵ According to Williams, the guiding ambition of TV producers is to produce a flow of programmes that keeps the viewer attached both to the TV and to the channel. Although the flow on and in front of the digital screens in public space today is quite different both from the TV sets and the

living rooms in the early 1970's (when Williams made his study), the notion may still be a guiding idea for this possible new medium. That is, it would not be a very good idea if consumers in shops or pedestrians on sidewalks would stop and get absorbed by the moving images on the digital screens. This could create serious traffic problems. Instead, the digital screens should distract and slow down, and gently guide the consumers in their flow through public and semi-public spaces.

5. Conclusion

This paper has described a number of different uses of digital signage in public and semi-public spaces in Beijing and Shanghai (in December 2008 and January 2009) and in Stockholm (in November 2008 and February 2009). The paper has put these uses of digital screen media in context by relating them to developments in the media and advertising industry. The paper has also attempted to understand the implications of these media events and how they are transforming these public places as well as our understanding of advertising and media. [...]

Personal interviews:

Jonathan Forster, Spotify (Sweden), November 19, 2008

Magnus Heljeberg, JCDecaux Sweden, December 2, 2008 (telephone interview)

Fredrik Horn, R-TV (Sweden), November 25, 2008

Ted Johansson, ClearChannel Sweden, November 26, 2008

Christian Kull, R-TV (Sweden), November 25, 2008

Stefan Noble, Visual Art (Sweden), March 26, 2009

Notes

¹ The sejour in Beijing and Shangahi took place during December 2008 and January 2009.

² The descriptions of places Stockholm were made in November 2008 and February 2009.

³ References [...]

⁴ Göran Bolin, "Spaces of Television. The Structuring of Consumers in a Swedish Shopping Mall", in N. Couldry & A. McCarthy (eds.), *MediaSpace. Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age* (London, Routledge), pp. 126-144.

⁵ See <http://www.r-tv.se>.

⁶ Personal communication with Fredrik Horn and Christian Kull, R-TV (Sweden), November 25, 2008.

⁷ Personal communication with Fredrik Horn, R-TV (Sweden), November 25, 2008.

⁸ Personal communication with Fredrik Horn, R-TV (Sweden), November 25, 2008.

⁹ These 116 shops are divided as follows: 23 Vi-shops; 12 City Gross; 22 st Coop Forum; 59 st ICA Maxi (see <http://www.r-tv.se/OMRTV/Butiker/tabid/58/Default.aspx> visited February 10, 2009).

¹⁰ See <http://www.q-vision.se> and <http://www.visualart.se>.

¹¹ For instance ICA-Maxi, although the content will be produced by Visual Art.

¹² See <http://www.adcitymedia.com>.

¹³ References [...]

¹⁴ References [...]

¹⁵ Christina Spurgeon, *Advertising and New Media* (London, Routledge, 2007).

¹⁶ References [...]

¹⁷ ClearChannel Sweden, product brochure, 2008 ["Hela Sverige dygnet runt"].

¹⁸ Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television. Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, Duke University Press, (2001) 2003).

¹⁹ In Times Square in New York City, the project "59th minute" has been running since 19???. In the Exchange Square in Manchester, the [??] and The Bigger Picture has run since 2003. See Kate Taylor, "Programming video art for urban screens in public space", *First Monday*, Special Issue #4 (February 2006).

²⁰ References [*First Monday* et al.] [...]

²¹ Personal communication with Ted Johansson, ClearChannel Sweden, November 26, 2008.

²² Personal communication with Magnus Heljeberg, JCDecaux Sweden, December 2, 2008.

²³ The company R-TV was purchased by the Swedish media company *Expressen* in September 2007 and Q-Vision was purchased by the Swiss media company Neo Advertising in November 2008.

²⁴ See <http://www.adcitymedia.com>.

²⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Cours du jeudi (Résumé), L' 'institution' dans l'histoire personnelle et publique", in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'Institution / La Passivité. Notes de cours au Collège de France 1954-1955* (Paris, Belin, 2003), p. 124. ["On entendait par institution ces événements d'une expérience qui la dotent de dimensions durables, par rapport auxquelles toute une série d'autres expériences aurent sens, formeront une suite pensable ou une histoire, – ou encore les événements qui déposent en moi un sens, non pas à titre de survivance et de résidu, mais comme appel à une suite, exigence d'un avenir."]

²⁶ Lutz Hachmeister & Michael Kloft (eds.), *Das Goebbels-Experiment. Propaganda und Politik* (Munich, München Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt 2005).

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Signature événement contexte" (1971), in *Marges – de la philosophie* (Paris, Minuit, 1972).

²⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. by H. Arendt (New York, Schocken Books, 1988), p. 239.

²⁹ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction", pp. 234-235.

³⁰ See e.g. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York, New York University Press, 2006).

³¹ Taylor, "Programming video art for urban screens in public space".

³² Leif Dahlberg, "On the Open and Closed Space of Public Discourse", *Nordicom Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2006), pp. 35-52.

³³ Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (????).

³⁴ McCarthy, *Ambient Television*, p. 251.

³⁵ Raymond Williams, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) (London, Routledge, 1990).