

The (Theatrical) Mediation of Urban Daily Life and the Genealogy of the Media City: Show Windows as Urban Screens at the Rise of Consumer Capitalism in America (1880–1930)

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Following the understanding of the contemporary city as a media-architecture complex with a long history, the article deploys the concepts of liminality, imitation, and theatricalization to show how urban daily life at the dawn of American consumer capitalism (1880–1930) was mediated by show windows, which were conceived as stages on which the drama of social life was enacted. Building the theoretical framework on insights drawn by literature studying urban screens and “ambient” media, coupled with the literature on urban consumption and urban modernism, the article shows how show windows became social tableaux that, in trying to relate their products with the plural social scenes of urban life, ended up in shaping and promoting the new mode of living within the city. Rather than following the naïve “mirroring perspective” of media representing reality, the work shows that a (theatrical) mediation was at the foundation of the modern media city.

Keywords: media city, consumer capitalism, historical sociology, urban screens, liminality, imitation, theatricalization

Following the dissemination of media-related consumer practices out of the domestic environment and into the public spaces of cities and elsewhere, a growing body of literature (Foth, & Sanders, 2008; Graham, 2000, 2001, 2004; Graham, & Marvin, 1996; McQuire, 2008; McQuire, Martin, & Niederer, 2009; Ridell, 2010; Ridell, & Zeller, 2013; Tarantino & Tosoni, 2013) has advanced a new theoretical framework that helps understand the strong interrelationship among media-related practices (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997; Morley, 2007; Williams, 1974) and sociospatial production processes, especially among those taking place in urban environments (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1984). Although the field of urban media studies has been developing to shape and advance a research agenda on contemporary forms of media-related practices in urban spaces, an increasing amount of attention has been given to the long-term history of the media city (McQuire, 2003, 2006, 2008; see also Krajina, 2014; Silla, 2013). Based on this foundation, in this article I incorporate a historical-genealogical perspective of the urban media complex and attempts to reveal a connection between the new “postmodern” media and the previous “old-modern” media (Friedberg, 1993; Huhtamo, & Parikka, 2011; Parikka, 2012).

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This strategy enables new light to be shed on the theoretical premise that the rise of the media-infused urban environment is related to the displacement of production-oriented industrial modernity in favor of a new consumer-oriented social organization (Baudrillard, 1970/1998; Bauman, 2007; Featherstone, 1991; Kellner, 2013). Indeed, if one considers the discussion of urban modernism and urban consumption (Cohen, 2003; Glennie, 1998; Glennie, & Thrift, 1992; Jayne, 2006; Miles, & Paddison, 1998; Williams, 1982), much evidence emerges on the strong links among media-related practices, urban environments, and consumption, which suggests that a significant role was played by old media in the emergence of the consumer practices of urban daily life at the turn of the 19th and into the 20th century. From Benjamin's (1999) reflections on the Parisian arcades and the shaping of urban spectatorship, to Simmel's (1950) discussion of the relationship between "the intensification of nervous stimulation" (p. 410) and the development of the blasé attitude, the city has been understood as the key site where the changing modes for experiencing reality within modernity have taken shape (Frisby, 1986; Schorske, 1980; Sennett, 1977). Building on these historical insights, I attempt to demonstrate how the transition from the *flâneur* to the consumer, from the "unproductive" practice of urban spectatorship to the "productive" practice of urban consumption (Bauman, 1993; Clarke, 1997; Featherstone, 1998; McQuire, 2008; Sassatelli, 2007) was mediated by an earlier form of urban screen: the show window with its commoditized spectacle. In particular, I present the case of the rise of American consumer capitalism during the decades from 1880 to 1930 (Leach, 1993; Lears, 1981/1994b; Silla, 2018) and demonstrate how show windows became social tableaux that, in trying to relate their products to the diverse social scenes of urban life, ended up molding and promoting a new mode of living within the city. They became veritable urban screens that mediated urban life through the portrayal of images of social relations that fit the new consumer turn of capitalism.¹

Media-Related Urban Consumption in American Consumer Capitalism (1880–1930)

As has been demonstrated by cultural and social historians (Leach, 1993; Lears, 1981/1994b; see also Bronner, 1989; Fox, & Lears, 1983), in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America underwent a dramatic shift from an agrarian, rural economy to an industrial, urban economy over a span of only 50 years. The connection between the American system of manufacturing and the principle of flow in the modern business enterprise established a level of production that had never been realized before, and this deeply affected, through the managerial revolution, the organization of work (Best, 1990; Chandler, 1977; Hounshell, 1984; Nye, 2013; Rosenberg, 1969). Parenthetically, the use of electricity in transportation, artificial illumination, and the preservation of food affected the daily life of ordinary people deeply,

¹ Given the focus of this article on the role of show windows as urban screens in the rise of the media city, less attention will be paid to the important differences in terms of gender and ethnicity that the literature has analyzed extensively for their relevance and implications. This is because the story of the turn-of-the-century consumer is a history of predominantly upper- and middle-class women, albeit not exclusively, especially during the Roaring Twenties. In addition, the history of urban consumption in American cities is connected to the exclusion of the poor and ethnic minorities. For an elaboration on the construction of consumption as feminine and woman as the consumer in Europe and America, see Leach (1984), Lears (1994a), de Grazia and Furlough (1996), and Roberts (1998). Among others, Carbine (1990), Wiese (1999), and Lands (2001) address issues of class and ethnicity.

incorporating rural areas into the urban environment, especially through the diffusion of the mail-order catalogue (Boorstin, 1974; Cronon, 1991; Emmet & Jeuck, 1950; Nye, 1990; Schlereth, 1989; Walsh, 1982). The days of island communities fed by local markets gave way to a new age of the business nation dominated by institutions of mass retailing, most notably the department store (Benson, 1979; Best, 1990; Chandler, 1977; Fischer, 2010; Leach, 1993; Porter, & Livesay, 1971; Strasser, 1989; Trachtenberg, 1982). The transition from various local markets feeding relatively autonomous and stable communities to that of a national market laying the foundation for a mobile society was part of a larger restructuring that greatly affected people's lived experience. That lived experience was still composed of, even if increasingly dissatisfied by, a world view and ingrained habits that had already begun to slip from people's comprehension. William Ogburn (1922) fashioned his hypothesis of the cultural lag specifically to understand the imbalance between the extensive material progress unfolding during those years and the lagging social adjustment. In other words, the institutional basis for the establishment of a consumer society was fairly set, but the new vision of the good life in "goods" that supported the necessary consumer culture had yet to be ingrained into the social imaginary of the American population.

That an "education" to create consumer desire was needed for the economic system to work and for material prosperity to grow was clear to the social economist Simon Patten. In his 1907 bestseller, *The New Basis of Civilization*, he wrote about the education through the eye that was needed for the new age of abundance to succeed; for him, "instead of restraining impulses and instincts," consumer education "seeks to free the imagination, to stir and spur the desire, and to concentrate pointless energies on the coordination of man and city" (p. 126). This new principle underlined an epochal conversion that was made clear by advertising pioneer Earnest Elmo Calkins (1930), who contended that within modern capitalist societies, "prosperity lies in spending, not in saving" and "increased profits come from increased production made possible by increased consumption" (p. 117). Patten (1912) was no less explicit when he candidly admitted that "the non-saver is now a higher type of a man than the saver," and the nonsaver's aim was to "create a flow of income to enjoy and not an accumulating fund for future support" (p. 66). The practical consequences of this consumer revolution were outlined by Paul Mazur of Lehman Brothers, who in 1928 looked back on the causes and consequences of American prosperity. In this book, Mazur (1928) asserted that American consumer capitalism had been successfully established because "desire was enthroned in the minds of the American consumer, and was served abjectly by the industries that had enthroned it" (p. 50). He then revealed the secret engine of American prosperity: "The community that can be trained to desire change, to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed, yields a market to be measured more by desires than by needs"; it is by educating people to ever-changing desire that "the productive capacity of the country will actually groan under the burden of the enormous demand" (p. 225).

This was the task for the commercial entrepreneurs, captains of industry, and advertising men: They must attune a population accustomed to a household economy, composed of domestic and local goods and measured by limited and daily needs and face-to-face relations in familiar contexts, with a new world of goods stemming from the newly developed industrial capacity and attached to greater varieties of desires, material choices, and options for self-fulfillment. It was the way by which that goal of the

economic system was realized—that is, turning countryside savers in urbanite consumers—that contributed to the shaping of modern urban life.²

The literature contains much evidence describing the importance of the show window's role in the context of expanding urbanization and consumer capitalism. Resonating with a media-archeologist perspective (Huhtamo & Parikka, 2011; Parikka, 2012; see also Friedberg, 1993), I suggest considering show windows, which were specific marketing tools deployed by commercial actors to “educate” the consumer, as the antecedents of urban public screens (Krajina, 2014; Manovich, 2002; McQuire, 2008).³ Indeed, show windows, along with billboards, streetcar advertising, and electric signs, contributed to the

² This transformation was fostered also by an aggressive promotional orientation and cities built on institutional collaborations among boards of trade, retailing institutions, and progressive reformers, to promote a new commercial aesthetic made of special events like fashion weeks, and spectacles like Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. For examples on the promotional orientation, see *Printers' Ink* (PI), July 30, 1890, p. 110, A Coming Profession; PI, July 2, 1890, p. 10, Advertising Your Town; PI, November 19, 1890, p. 531, Advertising in Philadelphia; PI, July 15, 1891, p. 27, Town Booming; PI, November 18, 1891, p. 580; PI, December 16, 1891, p. 731, Advertising a Town; PI, September 18, 1892, p. 371, Building a City by Ad; PI, April 20, 1892, p. 505, Advice on Town Advertising; PI, July 12, 1893, p. 35, Advertising Real Estates Investments; PI, February 9, 1911, p. 54, Advertising a City as a Department Store. For examples on the development of a distinctive commercial aesthetics through special events, exhibits, and show window displays, see PI, October 26, 1892, p. 516, Advertising at New York Food Exposition; PI, February 22, 1893, p. 290, The Food Exposition; PI, November 1893, p. 575, The Philadelphia Food Exposition; PI, July 1895, p. 20, The Circus in the Wild and Woolly West; PI, July 24, 1895, p. 21, Spectacular Shows; *Dry Goods Economist* (DGE), July 6, 1901, p. 6, All About Street Fairs; *Merchant Record and Show Window* (MRSW), April 1910, p. 44, Fete Internationale; MRSW, February 1920, p. 44, Merchants Plan Art Week; MRSW, March 1920, p. 30, Notes From New York; MRSW, April 1924, p. 20, Radio Exposition at Wanamaker's; MRSW, December 1924, p. 24, Macy's Parade; MRSW, May 1925, p. 21, The Last Show Window Stunt; MRSW, December 1926, p. 22, Macy's Christmas Parade; MRSW, December 1927, p. 18, Parades Open Christmas Season; MRSW, December 1928, p. 36, Notes From New York; MRSW, December 1929, p. 38, Macy's Christmas Parade.

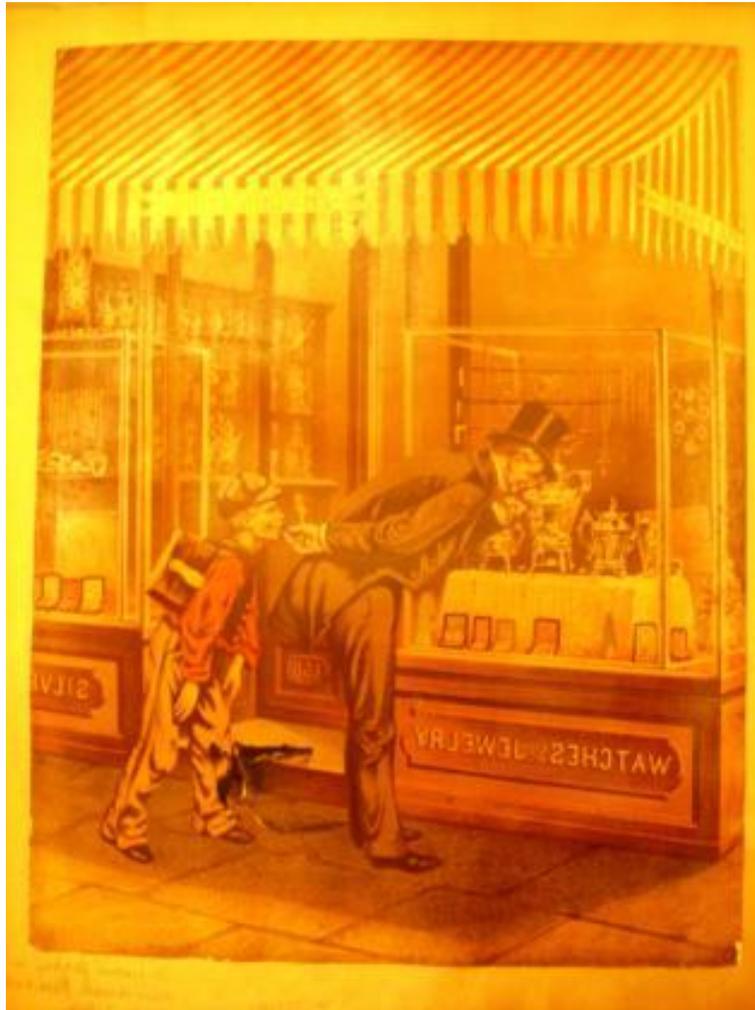
³ Show windows as a type of commercial display began as one part of a remarkable flourishing of other forms of displays, most notably those set up by public and “social” institutions, such as museums, theaters, and amusement parks, all directed toward the promotion of a new ideal of modern life along the lines of those suggested by Patten (1907) and Mazur (1928). Even if an analysis of the mutual influence between “commercial” and “cultural” displays greatly exceeds the limits of this article, suffice it to mention the pivotal role played by world's fairs in disseminating throughout the social tissue displays of different types. In the span of just more than 40 years from the Great Exhibition of 1851 to the Columbian Exposition of 1893, world's fairs underwent a deep reconfiguration from being manufacture-oriented to being consumer-oriented festivals. They knitted together cultural, entertainment, and commercial displays and eventually ended up in promoting a veritable “object” lesson for the new mass audiences: a form of education that depended less on language than on pictures and images and that stimulated a notion of a visual vocabulary as the most effective medium for knowledge. Incidentally, exhibitions of the world's fairs greatly influenced display techniques used in department store interiors and show windows (Bronner, 1989; Harris, 1978, 1990, 1993; Silla, 2013).

shaping of the ambient commons (McCullough, 2013) of the city at the turn of the 19th and into the 20th century. It is important to note that show windows played a crucial role in channeling the attention of city dwellers into the broad restructuring of the relationship between subjectivity and the environment that was taking place in the transition to modernity that Crary (1999) has labeled as a patchwork of disconnected states of attention. This argument will be sustained through an empirical examination of the evolution of show windows and their role in marketing.

By the end of the 19th century, the joint use of electric illumination and larger sheets of glass in shops and stores transformed the windows at street level. They were no longer simply openings that admitted light; they became, literally, "show windows," in which the goods themselves could be shown to attract the passersby (Leach, 1989; Marvin, 1988; Schivelbusch, 1988). Although many turn-of-the-century window dressers considered the aesthetic attractiveness of their work, what was actually needed was to transform the attention of the passerby into a desire to own the products displayed. In fact, entering into the 20th century, the profession underwent an important shift from the idea of the window dresser as being a decorator—the window trimmer—to being considered as the person in charge of the display of goods—the display manager (Leach, 1989; Silla 2018). The display manager had to promote sales through the display of goods, and this was done by providing dynamic and moving displays that showed goods in a living context. The windows began to tell an entertaining story, and, through mechanical devices, special displays were developed that gave life to the enchanting scenes.⁴ A sidewalk generation flourished and was attracted to the panorama of goods along the city streets of not only big eastern cities, like New York, but also of medium-sized towns in the south and west, as the window displays discussed below demonstrate. Soon, show windows attracted crowds of people and became a part of the social imaginary of the city. As reported by one commentator in 1901, show windows "are never without their crowds about them" and people, especially the less affluent newcomers, "look at that which, seen from the outside becomes an education to them."⁵ The power of their appeal was depicted humorously in many chromolithographs, such as one of a street urchin stealing a puff from a cigar held by a man behind his back while gazing at a jeweler's window display (see Figure 1).

⁴ For examples on the shift from beauty to stimulation and the professionalization of window trimming, see DGE, January 18, 1896, p. 70, *Wide-Awake Window Dressing*; PI, June 1, 1898, p. 38, *Window Dressing Again*; PI, February 13, 1895, p. 13, *Straw Hat Fleischman*; DGE, August 22, 1903, p. 79, *Window Dressing*; PI, July 16, 1914, p. 26, *Making the Window Display "Say Something"*; MRSW, April 1919, p. 17, *Display Man Publicity and Sales Promoter*. For examples on living displays and mechanical devices, see PI, January 14, 1915, p. 49, *Timeliness in Window-Display "Copy"*; PI, August 12, 1915, p. 20, *Experiences in Building Window Display*; PI, December 27, 1899, p. 12, *Holiday Window Attraction*; PI, April 9, 1914, p. 71, *An Investigator's Report on Windows Display*; MRSW, April 1913, p. 38, *Mechanical Display*.

⁵ *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, March 1901, *Shopping in New York*, p. 651.



**Figure 1. Gazing at a window display, advertising card, ca. 1875.
Collection of the New York Historical Society.**

To understand how successful these displays were, one needs only to consider that new displays often created sidewalk congestion outside the department stores where they were shown (see Figure 2).⁶

⁶ See DGE, June 13, 1896, p. 74, Wide Awake Window Dressing; MRSW, August 1909, p. 54, The Power of Window Advertising; MRSW, March 1924, p. 28, Crowd Viewing Display; PI, November 18, 1915, p. 20, The Retailer's Store Window as an Effective Advertising Medium for the Manufacturer; *Bella Landauer Collection*, Series I Scrapbooks, Box 94, Folder 5, Wood Bros. Jewelry, Collection of the New York Historical Society.



Figure 2. Crowd viewing display. Motter-Wheeler Co., Walla Walla, Washington, 1909.

To grasp fully the significance of show windows as early urban screens, and to understand how they mediated social relations in the context of rising modern urbanism, the framework must be completed by reworking the concepts of liminality, imitation, and the theatricalization of social life.

Liminality, Imitation, and the Theatricalization of Social Life

The concept of liminality was first used by Arnold van Gennep (1960) to describe the middle stage of ritual passages that are marked by conditions of uncertainty and dislocation of established structures. The term was then revived by anthropologist Victor Turner (1967) as an important concept to go beyond structuralism and functionalism and move toward a processual approach to culture and social life (Horvath, Thomassen, & Wydra, 2015; Thomassen, 2014). Although initially introduced as a concept connected to the study of passage rites—denoting the transitional stage in which a person that has been separated from a previous identity but has not yet incorporated a new identity—it provides a useful analytical concept for the social sciences for describing social change. As Eisenstadt (1978, 1995) understood, this concept can be adapted from its application to small-scale settings to fruitfully address the dynamics of large-scale changes. In terms of its analytical qualities, liminality is able to capture the transient phase of social life as characterized by a joint dynamic of dissolution of order and order formation, involving the experiences and agencies of individuals and collectivities living through “the in-between.” The in-between is a condition under which ordinary distinctions between structure and agency and ideas and interests as drivers of rationality cease to function properly, opening the field for unexpected outcomes (Szokolczai, 2003, 2009).

Under liminal conditions, the ordinary course of life is unsettled and the structure is eroded; accordingly, the institutionalized patterns of social conduct and social intercourse cease to function in directly governing human agency, while the lived experience of the transition pushes people toward a new form of stability. Here, the concept of imitation comes into play. Imitative behavior—which was already recognized for its significance by Simmel (1904), when speaking of a “psychological tendency” (p. 132),

and by Veblen (1899/2007), when reasoning about conspicuous consumption spreading in urban environments—increases under liminal conditions. Rational choices are prevented because both the stability of the social structure is undermined and the condition of living through times of transition is stressful. Therefore, prescriptive ideas about proper behavior and social conduct are not rationally deliberated in a fully free public sphere, but are instead disseminated in the urban arena, first by the image making of the media and then often adopted through imitative behavior.

This leads to the third concept of the theatricalization of social life, which is related to the idea of action as a social performance (Alexander, 2004; Alexander, Giesen, & Mast, 2006). Building on dramatist approaches and speech act theory, but also referring to Goffman (1956) and Turner (1974) as classic reference points, the performative turn in the social sciences seeks to understand social actions as theatrical performances of meaning formation, the success of which is measured by the ability to convince others that the performance is true. By connecting reflections on urban modernism and the concepts of liminality and imitation, it is possible to historicize the idea of action as a social performance (Silla, 2018; Szakolczai, 2015). First, the idea is related to the modern (and especially urban) conditions of the relations among strangers, unleashing the calculating dimension of action, as brilliantly explained by Simmel (1950). In the modern city, the social differentiation and plurality of social spheres (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1974), excluding the immediacy of social intercourse that is mediated by roles and social positions, has fostered a theatricalized concept of social action. Second, this condition is especially connected with liminal phases, when the grasp on reality is loosened as structures are weakened, and the distinction between reality and representation is blurred, sparking both the power of human agency and imitative tendencies. It is under the conditions of urban modern liminality that the theatrical character of social action is exacerbated, imposing on social life a web of “reality effects” that are produced by successful performances.

With this framework in mind, it is now possible to show that windows have acted as urban screens in mediating emerging urban life as it relates to the social performances enacted with the help of the expanding world of consumer goods.

Show Windows and the Theatrical Mediation of Urban Daily Life

In a time of transformation, and with a population caught amid an epoch-making transition, show windows, which directly aimed at selling goods and attracting customers, indirectly became agencies for the socialization to urban life. The way they were conceived to increase sales made them representations of social life and the new urban self. Show windows eventually came to be understood as an actual stage on which the drama of social life was displayed (Leach, 1993; Schivelbusch, 1988). In his seminal work on advertising in America, Roland Marchand (1986) established a direct connection between the *tableaux vivants* that became popular in the last decades of the 1800s and the advertisements that appeared in magazines during the 1920s and 1930s. This conceptualization may also be safely applied to the show windows that flourished at the turn of the century and expanded in number and sophistication throughout the 1920s. If *tableaux vivants* staged a snapshot taken from a story (often a religious one) that could easily be recognized by the spectator, show windows portrayed and represented scenes of everyday life, where the social relations, roles, and settings of life in the metropolis were enacted. Although advertisements and show windows depicted a “slice of life” by mirroring a limited, well-to-do stratum of

American society and reflected life ideals and social habits closer to the social environment of their creators than of their viewers, they were actually portrayals of an ideal of modern life to which the middle and working classes aspired, amounting, in the new urban landscape, to veritable "wish images" of consumer capitalism (Buck-Morss, 1989; see also McRobbie, 1994).

The use of mannequins must be considered first to appreciate fully the development of show windows as urban screens that mediated urban daily life. Soon, wax figures became genuine works of art, making their similarity to real people more convincing as they reproduced life-like flesh tints, a growing range of human expressions, and a remarkable number of natural poses (see Figure 3). As a contributor to *Merchants Record and Show Window* testified in 1914, "the better class of wax figure today is a real work of art in modelling and finish," for "the old strained and artificial smirk has given way to a really human expression and the flesh tints are as lifelike as art and skill can make them. Consequent to the 'humanizing' of wax figures," he concluded, "their use has increased to a remarkable degree among stores of the better class."⁷

⁷ MRSW, July 7, 1914, p. 31, Wax Figures. Koerber's display can be seen in MRSW, September 1913, p. 21. On wax figures, see PI, September 1, 1897, p. 18, Window Dressing; PI, August 5, 1903, p. 8, The Shop Window Figure; PI, October 30, 1907, p. 34, The Wax Window Dummy; DGE, July 11, 1903, p. 115, Store Equipment; PI, November 19, 1908, p. 19, Wax Figures That Sell Goods in the Show Windows; MRSW, April 1909, p. 62, Wax Forms; MRSW, September 1923, p. 10, Better Homes Through Better Displays; MRSW, October 1923, p. 25, Opening Display; MRSW, July 1924, p. 34, Kickernick Underwear Demonstration; MRSW, January 1926, p. 18, "Wax Mannequins Do Great Job." For a brief account of the history of mannequins, see Strege (2013).



Figure 3. Display by Jerome A. Koerber for Strawbridge & Clothier, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1913.

The possibility of “humanizing” mannequins allowed shops to display a product in a concrete relationship with its owner, or, more precisely, with an idealized representation of the owner, often portrayed as the authentic modern woman or man.

In addition to the use of mannequins, the construction of a proper background setting became essential to producing the required life-like effect and for creating an alluring window atmosphere. This technique was already well-known and largely adopted by the young, cosmopolitan generation of new American painters, who gave their studios a consciously planned “art atmosphere” to generate the desire for their pieces and boost sales (Burns, 1996). This was not the only connection between commerce and the arts, because retailers and commercial actors also drew extensively from the theater as a narrative model. Just as successful theatrical productions required the proper set management, the successful dressing of commercial show windows required a shift from the idea of the window being a mere space for decoration to that of it being a professional stage setting. Display managers therefore began to draw systematically on the professional repertoire of theater stage managers.⁸

⁸ MRSW, December 1917, p. 39, Good Background. See also MRSW, July 1908, p. 28, How to Paint a Background; MRSW, February 1917, p. 30, The Value of Scenic Painting; MRSW, August 1924, p. 28, Special Window Display Always Pays Dividend. See also Burdgo (1925) and Rogers (1924).

In many cases, the connection became an allegiance because the know-how was imported directly into the world of commercial promotion through well-known set designers and architects offering their services to department stores. This was the case with Lee Simonson, a consultant working for Macy's, and Norman Bel Geddes, a display manager at Franklin Simon and Co., in New York City, who were both successful set designers and architects who contributed to imbuing show windows and department store interiors with theater-like staging.⁹ There is also the case of famous writer Frank Baum. In his early years, the world-renowned author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* pioneered a systematic study of window trimming and decoration, building on his previous experiences in theater (Baum, 1900). He founded the National Association of Window Trimmers and the first-ever monthly journal entirely devoted to store windows: *The Show Window: A Journal of Practical Window Trimming for the Merchant and the Professional*.¹⁰ Another example is Joseph Urban. Having moved to the United States from fin de siècle Vienna, Urban was a successful architect, stage designer, and decorator who created successful displays for department stores in New York City. Over the years, he promoted a vision of the commercial aesthetic through his work that was intended to transform the urban landscape, combining music, colors, lights, and decorations as a liberating experience for modern life. Urban's architectural vision was theatrical in nature, as he believed that public spaces should be designed according to the same rationale with which a stage setting is created (Aronson, 2000).

The joint use of wax figures and a proper background setting created a subtle idea: In show windows, portray stories about products and their owners that show the proper use of these products in various social roles and contexts of urban daily life. An increasingly popular idea was to stage consumer goods in relation with their owners in the widest range of circumstances of everyday life: from children in a classroom, suitably dressed and provided with all the equipment that a perfect student needs, to leisure time spent in sporting activities or social events. In each case, the message was that every social occasion demands its proper consumer goods if people want to carry out their own social role in the proper way (see Figures 4, 5, and 6).

⁹ By Simonson, see "The Necessary Illusion," *Theatre Art Magazine*, December 1919, p. 91, and "The Painter and the Stage." *Theatre Art Magazine*, December 1917, p. 3. By Bel Geddes, see "The Store Window a Stage; Merchandise the Actor," *Women's Wear Daily*, November 19, 1927, p 1.

¹⁰ For an explanation of Baum's philosophy of life and the role played by his bestseller in promoting a positive view of the incoming world of consumer goods among youngsters and adults, along with a special reference to urban daily life, see Leach (1991a, 1991b, 1993).



Figure 4. Bathing suit display, San Antonio, Texas, 1908.



Figure 5. Skating display, Detroit, Michigan, 1917.



Figure 6. Golf display, Portland, Oregon, 1914.

The same rationale was used for special displays inside stores. Jerome Koerber, the display manager at Strawbridge & Clothier (see Figure 3), stated, when organizing a special display, that "in all of these displays, different as they are, there is the same idea and that is to provide a setting that will eliminate the 'store.'" Koerber was explicit about the idea underlying his display: "The intent has been to show the gowns in surrounding somewhat similar to that in which they are to be worn," and, therefore, "they are exhibited amidst surroundings that are congenial, so to speak, instead of being shown in an environment of showcases, shelf boxes and other store furniture."¹¹

The act of displaying consumer goods in the setting where they would be used meant staging a representation of reality that would help elicit the desired effect: stimulating the imagination and creating desire. Such a portrayal, designed to sell products, corroborated the new image of urban life and, in contributing to the strengthening of its theatrical nature, carried out a role that went well beyond the economic sphere, such that it penetrated into social relations themselves. Therefore, show windows of this kind mediated the new forms of social conduct in the urban arena. Show windows encouraged a trend in social theatricalization where consumer goods played a central role as essential tools for the success of various performances that take place on the urban stage. As far as this aspect is concerned, it is worth considering the arrangement of Macy's show windows for the opening of the autumn season in 1913. Described by *Merchants Record and Show Window* as

an epoch making event in window display . . . they portrayed scenes during intermission at a theater: The figures were of well-bred women and a man or two, with wraps, gowns and evening clothes exactly suited to the occasion, the background furnishing just the right setting. You have seen Du Maurier's pictures. Well, there is something of the refined, half-bored expression in the faces of those

¹¹ MRSW, April 1912, Formal Interior Display, p. 16.

women—something studious, fully conscious of their preferred social position, and nothing of the ingratiating smile that seeks to win the place. . . . Their attitudes, clothing and relation to each other were charmingly apropos.¹²

This humanizing of the wax figures, and the accurate reproduction of everyday life, deeply affected people who saw them displayed in show windows of commercial centers and as urban screens depicting images that literally “embodied” the self. The new addition to the range of artistic reproductions of the human form filled society with mirrors of the self, of others, and of various relationships. These stylized but lifelike copies made by the mass market stretched beyond the well-defined bounds of theaters and museums, penetrating into everyday life through show windows. As they were an imitation of life, they earned the opportunity to become life models to be imitated during a time of liminal transition.

Another example of this education on the presentation of the self in everyday life is the autumn opening display of a department store in Pittsburgh. Here, the portrayal of everyday life was made clear by the scheme adopted: the setting was composed of a life-sized photograph used as a background that showed different well-posed men and women in attractive and appropriate surroundings and wearing the identical garments that were displayed in the foreground. The idea that show windows with their goods were actual representations and images mirroring real life was made explicit through the use of a photograph of real social scenes. One picture showed a luncheon at a fashionable restaurant where a lady and her companion were about to sit at a table that had been reserved for them, but not before handing their coats to the zealous waiter, who would serve them throughout their meal (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Photography display, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1915.

¹² MRSW, October 1913, Notes From New York, p. 36.

Another photograph depicted a mother and daughter at the entrance to a movie theater as they bought their tickets, looking confident and relaxed, and, above all, properly dressed and sporting the right accessories. Another showed a lady as she got out of a car parked directly outside a club that she was about to enter, but not before allowing passersby to admire her as she posed seductively and self-confidently, dressed and made up in the most appropriate way for someone who must be seen in public.¹³

Perhaps the most extraordinary examples of show windows staging the right forms to support the presentation of the self in a setting of social prestige and refinement were by Arthur Fraser, display manager at Marshall Field's in Chicago.¹⁴ Fraser, who was also inspired by theater professionalism, managed to merge the value of art into his displays with mannered elegance. Having grasped the growing influence of the commercial aesthetic that raised consumer goods to the status of artistic objects, he used this potential to suggest, through the use of images in his windows, that the owner of the goods displayed would be elevated to the position of a man or woman of elegance and refined taste (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. Window display, Chicago, Illinois, 1919.

¹³ See MRSW, December 1915, p. 13, Something Different.

¹⁴ About Arthur Fraser and his style, see Marcus (1978) and Leach (1993). Examples of Fraser's windows are in MRSW, August 1909, p. 19; MRSW, September 1909, p. 19; MRSW, November 1913, p. 25; MRSW, October 1919, p. 30; MRSW, April 1920, p. 24; MRSW, September 1921, p. 20; MRSW, November 1921, p. 40; MRSW, November 1922, p. 27; MRSW, October 1924, p. 7; MRSW, October 1927, p. 7, The Highest Point of Display Achievement.

This type of display exploited the mimetic nature of desire, stimulated by the presentation of consumer goods endowed with a performative power: that of shifting the subject from a condition of scarcity to one of plenty. The suggestion was that the ownership of the products displayed could change the status of the owner, and not just in terms of social position. It also referred to more private and intimate aspects of existence by prompting a desire for existential fulfillment through the portrayal of a meaningful life. The image of well-dressed men and women in refined and elegant poses and in settings of luxury or idyllic harmony was a powerful way of stimulating the desire to imitate, and it fed the theatrical imaginary of social relations.¹⁵ The expressions on the mannequins' faces—whether they looked at each other or at their image reflected in a mirror—exuded satisfaction and self-confidence; they seemed to offer observers advice on how to be elegant and refined too, to be successful in social relations and, last but not least, to feel satisfied with life.

In sum, the range of elements needed to inject life into the show windows and to display products as they would be used in everyday life indirectly played an educating role, and very often without the practitioners being aware of it. At the same time, the "world of goods" (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979) was becoming a strong ally of the modern urban trend toward social performance and the presentation of self in urban everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Show windows were urban screens that portrayed the images of social life revolving around the emerging trends of urban life: action as a social performance and the self as an actor playing different roles in different social contexts. Indeed, window displays helped make this urban trend the dominant one, disseminating it along the streets of modern cities. Consumer goods were shown as the proper tools for social performance and the presentation of the self and, at the same time, the social performance and the presentation of the self were displayed as the proper mode of living in the city. Face-to-face, intimate relationships with acquaintances were replaced by mediated relationships among strangers who perform, playing the right social roles to exert the right impression on others to win social recognition and the self-confidence that comes with it.

Conclusion: Urban Media Studies and the Genealogy of the Media City

This article has investigated the way in which show windows theatrically mediated the images of social life that intercepted an emerging trend of urban life—that is, the action as a social performance and the self as an actor playing different roles. In doing so, show windows contributed to making the emerging trend the dominant one, disseminating it along the streets and helping it to penetrate into the emerging social imaginary of urban life, taking shape under liminal conditions through imitative behavior.

Rather than following the naïve "mirroring perspective" of media representing reality, this work has demonstrated how a mediation was at the foundation of the modern consumer city and its forms of social life. From this viewpoint, not only must we say that no urban process can be fruitfully tackled

¹⁵ For more examples of windows associating consumer goods and success in social relations, see MRSW, April 1914, p. 41, An Early Spring Setting; MRSW, December 1914, p. 14, A Display of Lingerie; MRSW, February 1915, p. 17, An Opening Display; MRSW, May 1915, p. 15, A Black and White Display; MRSW, July 1915, p. 17, Spring Opening Display; MRSW, June 1916, p. 11, Spring Opening Display; MRSW, April 1916, p. 18, A Beautiful Display.

without taking into account the involvement of media and forms of mediation, but we also recognize that the modern city and its daily life went through a process of "mediation" at their origin. The mediation of urban daily life through show windows as urban screens contributed to the emergence and development of the media city itself. Therefore, it is possible that the relationship between the "urban" and the "media" has a longer history than has been understood when restricting attention to new digital media and their urban enactment. Following this historical path may open new, fascinating territories of investigation for urban media studies and furnish an "external reference point" to escape the risk of presentism in theory building for a field of research with a relatively short, thus promising, history.

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