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Intermediality of Hunger, Intermediality of Effect: Two Commercial Models Developed in Early Twentieth Century New York City

Looking at early twentieth-century commercial entertainments where different media shared the same space, this essay defines two forms – or rather two aspects – of commercial intermediality as they were developed in early twentieth century New York City. The thriving mixed media scene in the city’s Jewish immigrant neighborhood, the Lower East Side, developed what I call an intermediality of hunger, which often (but not only) emerges on the cultural periphery and refers to a market-driven media voraciousness, where the incorporation of additional media increases the range of appeals, thus diversifying a potential audience. A little bit later, Times Square developed what I call an intermediality of effect, which is more often located at the cultural center, seeks to orchestrate a more coherent and unified media and sense experience but remains indebted to the intermediality of hunger.

The late nineteenth century, at least in the United States, saw an unprecedented explosion of leisure practices: vaudeville theaters, amusement parks, dime museums, music halls, nickelodeons, legitimate theater, and a bit later movie palaces. Workers were advocating for eight hours of work, eight hours of sleep, and eight hours “for what we will”.¹ This explosion of increasingly cheap leisure was both a symptom and a part of a larger cultural change, eroding Victorian values and ushering in a century of mass consumption. It is thus not surprising that at this moment “play” became a crucial part of the very definition of “culture” (in either its Arnoldian or anthropological definition), or that metaphors drawn from the theater dominated the ways in which people understood urban space.²


Given the number and forms of entertainment and media available, one could certainly expect them to intermingle. But few scholars have looked carefully at media interaction. To be sure, early film scholars have increasingly placed early cinema in the context of other visual entertainments. Tom Gunning and Lauren Rabinovitz, for instance, have drawn our attention to how early cinema grafted itself onto the entertainments available at world’s fairs and amusement parks. Most of these studies presume a particular conception of intermedia: how film references and borrows from, but does not literally incorporate, other media. Thus accounts of the relationship between theater and cinema have focused on full-length dramas and films, documenting how one medium transformed stylistically into another. And yet, in the early decades of the twentieth century, different media – music, performance, film etc. – inhabited the same spaces surprisingly often, most famously but not exclusively on vaudeville’s “variety” bill.

What follows represents a preliminary and partial foray into early-twentieth-century commercial mixed-media spaces. The first part of the essay explores media cohabitation on the Lower East Side, New York City’s immigrant neighborhood. The second part moves to a consideration of analogous phenomena on New York City’s emerging cultural center, Times Square. Because this essay focuses on media cohabitation rather than mutual incorporation or interreferencing, it might be more appropriate to call such practices

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