

Electronic Bulb Signs in *fin de siecle* New York City: Technology, Spectacle and Commerce
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ABSTRACT

Contemporary commercial advertising relies on an emotive, visual approach; low on words and heavy on images, sensational persuasions and cross-cultural myths, these packages easily jump cultures and finesse language barriers to create portable one-bullet' global campaigns. But even before digital technology simplified vertical integration of commercial media, another type of spectacle were already wowing urban audiences with strong visuals and minimal written texts at the turn of the nineteenth century – the electronic bulb sign. Many of the issues present in contemporary globalization discourse can also be found embedded these earlier cultural battles pertaining to this discrete medium.

INTRODUCTION

You may not have heard, but horizontal integration is all the rage now in global promotions.¹ Chances are, however, that you have already *seen* evidence of this phenomenon: television ads which resemble print ads which resemble in-store displays and packaging, all which bear the same distinctive branded identity. Cross-platform promotions

¹ See Lehrer, Jeremy. "Border Crossing". In: *Print* Nov/Dec. 2000, and Crain, Rance, "Push for world ads has price: The bland leading the bland." In: *Advertising Age*, 10/23/00.

which assert a single identity for an advertising campaign is not news, but increasingly, these campaigns are being constructed specifically for a global audience.

In order to manufacture campaigns which fluidly translate across cultural and language borders, advertisers have employed two primary strategies. First, the campaign's basic theme needs to be positioned in universal, humanist terms which avoid any culturally specific references: for instance, broad tropes which reference flying or children are good; the re-enactment of a 15th century Samurai legend Chinese legend or local Appalachian hero are not. Landscapes and locations too should ideally be fungible, as should the racial identification of the primary actor(s). Overall, the campaign's narrative should engage with mythic tropes shared by cultures across the globe.

Second, these campaigns are constructed with a minimum of textual content. Besides the obvious fluidity and cost savings of languageless media in a multilingual global marketplace, the lack of textual argumentation in advertising neatly circumvents problematics embedded in modern commodity production. Since there the difference in the composition of, say, Ivory Soap and Camay is negligible, product differentiation is accomplished through stylistic, emotive appeals.

Much of global advertising, then, consists of all style, no substance, and a lot of flash: it does not explain the commodity's legitimate benefits or provide substantive information on commodity price, manufacturer, physical location or eco-friendly production policies. Rather, it emphasizes the structural underpinning of advertisements, its fundamental core

mission: to be looked at. In that, one could argue that it constitutes a spectacle.² In that, modern advertising practices actually share a lot in common with one of the very first mergers of technology, advertising and spectacle: the electric bulb advertising signs which loomed large over Broadway more than 100 years ago. And yet, the viewing of modern advertising has become normalized such that its spectacularity is contested by its intimacy, repetition, and manageable physical scale.

Compare this then to the electric bulb sign of fin de siècle Manhattan, which was both an exemplary artifact of efficient marketplace communication, and a transgressive, disruptive commercial medium. Its bright, flashing bulbs, iconic presentations, performative essence and grand scale were reminiscent of lighthearted carnival experiences, and yet its machinic and nonresponsive existence transported it from the realm of the carnivalesque to that of the spectacular. In this text I will focus primarily on how the form, content and environmental engagement of certain electric bulb signs rendered this medium spectacular, and how it employed many of the same bag of tricks as modern-day global advertising pitches.

It is important to distinguish between media which freely circulate in a system of "flows"³, and outdoor advertising. Outdoor advertising such as an electric bulb sign is tied to a physical location and as such, it does not "circulate" a message to a market of buyers; rather,

² Global advertising conforms to the *OED*'s definition of spectacles as "'the sight of view of something"; "a thing seen or capable of being seen"; " A person or thing exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object either (a) of curiosity or contempt, or (b) of marvel or admiration."; " A specially prepared or arranged display of a more or less public nature (esp. one on a large scale), forming an impressive or interesting show or entertainment for those viewing it.; "a thing seen".

³ For information of "flows", please reference the work of Manuel Castells and Anju Appadurai.

the market "circulates" around the message⁴; This message fixed in space is also targeted at a mobile audience that is actively trying to reach some destination which is most likely 'not there'; ergo, the presentation must be made quickly as there is no time to argue the details, since it is estimated that six seconds is the average exposure of an individual to an outdoor message at one passing.⁵

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. It is impossible to capture all the characteristics and effects 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 also expanded, from strictly utilitarian uses to decorative ones, much as their function had expanded in the broader culture; strings of ornamental electric bulbs could be found at wedding banquets, ballrooms, formal dinners, and club

⁴ Outdoor advertising, it could be argued, therefore does not participate in the paradigm of "media flows" popularized in the work of Appadurai and Castells, but rather suggests more of a "planet/satellite" model.

⁵ 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), 15.

houses wherever electric power was available.⁶ 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.⁷ Employing electric bulbs as decoration both continued 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 being rapidly adopted for use by individual theatres, appropriating incandescent bulbs to use as stage illumination and for general house lights, replacing the existing arc lights and gaslights.⁸ San Francisco's 'California', London's 'Savoy' and Boston's 'Bijou' theatres all had converted to electrical lighting throughout by 1882⁹. 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 thousand bulbs above his theatre to spell out

⁶ That meant larger metropolitan areas, since the electricity generated from Edison's direct current (DC) conveyance could not travel significant distances. See Starr, Tama and Edward Hayman. *Signs and Wonders: The Spectacular Marketing of America* (New York: Doubleday Books, Currency Imprint, 1998), 33.

⁷ *The Elblight System, for Electric, Display Illumination, Decorative Lighting, Signs, Emblems, etc.* (New York: Elblight Company of America, 1910).

⁸ The Theatre Historical Society. *A Pictorial Survey of Marquees*, Annual No. 7. (Notre Dame, IN, and San Francisco: Theatre Historical Society, 1980), 2.

⁹ *Light! The Industrial Age 1750-1900: Art & Science, Technology & Society*, Van Gogh Museum, and the Carnegie Museum of Art (Amsterdam: Thames & Hudson, 2001) 166; Nye, David E. *The American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press 1994), 177.

'Crystal Palace'. In competition for the same theatregoers and eyeballs, other theatres rapidly followed suit.¹⁰

The Introduction of Electric Bulb Signs

It is a testament to the ephemeral nature of historical inquiry 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"¹¹. Another source alleges that the first such sign promoted soup.¹²

Both 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 first example of a commercial

¹⁰ The nineteenth century saw the relaxation of both formal and informal strictures against the theatre. Although expressed Victorian hegemony held that all manners of artificial behavior (such as lying or acting) were sinful, it was maintained that theatre and other manners of 'light amusement' could be beneficial in small quantities as long as they served to refresh the mind and body. It is a question of debate whether the formal relaxation of legislation pertaining to the theatre was the result of rising public opinion, or of entrepreneurial pressures to broaden the scope of theatregoing audiences.

¹¹ Weller, Janet. *Barnumism and Broadway*. PhD thesis, Communication Arts University of Wisconsin, 1975, 94-5.

¹² *Billboard Art*, eds Sally Henderson and Robert Landau (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1980), 20.

electric bulb sign "spectacular" was the brainchild of E.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.¹³



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 earned the twelve-block strip the moniker "The Great White Way" for its

¹³ 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.

proliferation of electrified business signs, theatre marquees, and advertising 'spectaculars'. And it wasn't long after the success of "Swept by Ocean Breezes" that cries of outrage were articulated by the agents of hegemonic control, the bourgeois and the local constabulary.

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: they both embodied 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. The electric bulb sign will also be defined as a spectacular artifact.

(a). 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 at this time discussed in Chapter One, rational text arguments were often 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."¹⁴ Textual communication was favored by the literate classes, as many ad men

¹⁴ Lears, Jackson. "Some Versions of Fantasy: A Cultural History of American Advertising, 1880-1930". In: *Prospect* 9 (1984) 349-406, 368.

still carried the intellectual baggage of nineteenth century Protestantism, including the assumption that words conveyed meaning more effectively than pictures.¹⁵

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. 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.¹⁶ A shift towards more succinct, less wordy arguments was necessitated, too, by the accelerating pace of city life, and the reality of a busy 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 change – other tactics for differentiating commodities in a competitive economy were required.

One such possible differential was to use an electric bulb sign to display the 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

¹⁵ Lears 1984, 359.

¹⁶ Lears 1984, 370.

replaced the "Swept By Ocean Breezes" sign at the Herald Square location, consisted of multiple text strings augmented by a flashing Heinz pickle logo. Even the *New York Times*¹⁷ joined the flurry of textually-based electronic bulb signs, with its modest entry in 1896: "Have you seen it?"¹⁸ I call this use of abbreviated text on electric bulb, comprised of a single word or a string of words "iconic text."

The manner in which this iconic text used in electric bulb signs presented itself was, in fact, radical, a deconstruction of the trope of the rational argument. 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.¹⁹ All three text-intensive signs mentioned here were animated in the sense that one line was lit at a time²⁰; during the day, the sign was much like a large billboard but under the cover of darkness, the viewer was led through the animated phrases sequentially.²¹ 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. Instead, such signs favored independent, discrete declarations; the "Swept By Ocean Breezes" and

¹⁷ Then known as the *New-York Daily Times*

¹⁸ *The New York Times*, __/__/1896.

¹⁹ 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 later.

²⁰ 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 the roof) tugging on a series of lever. See Starr 1998, 54.

²¹ The crucial differentiation between electric bulb signs as viewed during the day and as viewed during the dusk and nighttime will be explored in depth in Chapter Three.

"Heinz Pickle" signs both featured phrases for which viewing order was immaterial to the larger argument.²² The necessity of linearity had been short-circuited.

In order to be legible by both night and day, it was necessary for iconic text on electric bulb signs to be illuminated, the text constructed from its own light source. 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.

²² 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 simple composition in mind, brands were built upon both the company name and its representation through specific font. This representation was 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 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 illuminated images found on many electric bulb signs further facilitated the decline of textual arguments, as well as cultivated an appealing visual representational style which could be easily grasped by just about anyone. Even if one couldn't speak or read English, the 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."²³

(b). *Iconic Images*

²³ Starr 1998, 61.

Much of 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 on a conscious effort by advertisers to employ a simpler, even more emotive language predicated on visual representations. But iconic text was still text, and required a measure of literacy and intellectual processing for the message to travel. 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, even more so than could iconic text.

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), previously mentioned in the discussion of textual representation and electric bulb signs, first appeared in 1894 in the same space previously occupied by "Swept by Ocean Breezes." The "Heinz Pickle" sign for the most part mimicked its predecessor's compositional structure of sequentially flashing lines of brief, declaratory text²⁴, 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

²⁴ by this time, the flashing effect was accomplished technically and not manually.

not necessarily in tandem with the pickle's own flashes.²⁵ Critical condemnation of the pickle sign as "vulgar" delighted ?? Heinz, the company president, and he 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):



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

*From: Outdoor Advertising:
History and Regulation*

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.²⁶

²⁵ Starr 1998, 57.

²⁶ Starr 1998, 58.

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 was still approximately half a century in the future²⁷. New communities of identity were constructed around the consumption of specific goods and services, but while individual and collective bonding with brand names was a way to foster affiliations of identity, it is significant to remember that the concept of branding as it is understood in 2002 had not yet been realized. 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 advertisements²⁸, but they did not appear on electric signs.²⁹ 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.³⁰ 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 medium or means.

²⁷ Boorstin, Daniel. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 211.

²⁸ Lears, Jackson. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) 118-122.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ 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.

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.³¹ 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 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..."³² Popular iconography included dragons and lightening bolts, garlands and laurel wreaths, shields and weapons, lions and peacocks, ribbons and vines, and the overwhelming favorites: fountains and torches.³³ The inclusion of lightening bolts or vines on an electric bulb sign represented an uncomfortable union, an anachronistic coupling of traditional ribbons and vines painted with the brush of modernist technology. Representatives from a particular sign company, when negotiating design with an indecisive client, would allegedly offer, "How about a fountain?"³⁴

Along with the integration of Beaux-Arts iconography onto an electric bulb sign, the integration of electrified elements into the advertisement was accomplished by simply

³¹ 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.

³² *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910. V. 13.

³³ Starr 1998, 54.

³⁴ Starr 1998, 54.

outlining an image of the advertised product with lights. Such was the case with the Trimble's Whiskey sign, the first electric bulb sign to be displayed in Times Square proper³⁵; similarly, the earliest version of the Wrigley's gum sign featured an illuminated pack of gum accompanied by the phrase "By it by the box."³⁶

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.

(c). *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."³⁷ The "Heinz Pickle" sign, which shocked the genteel populace with its blatant phallic imagery against a clash of colors, is an elemental example. Future iterations of automated signs, it could be argued, signaled a return to a more linear, or at least serial, use of flashing

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ Starr 1998, 66.

³⁷ *The New York Times*, September 8, 1910.

techniques to suggest a story. However, upon closer examination, the narrative possibilities of the electric bulb sign were curtailed not by the media's limitations per se, but by the signs' explicit promotional agenda. The engaging visual displays of electric bulb signs are perhaps best understood not as narratives, but through the broader tropes of 'performativity'.

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 a petticoat company:³⁸

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.³⁹

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 from the bottom of the skirt and the petticoat, while the rain was switched on and off every twenty seconds."⁴⁰ The popular success of the "Petticoat Girl" electric bulb sign prompted a spate of successors which similarly incorporated primitive iterations of animation during the 1910's. The Corticelli Spool Silk sign 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 Straights Cigarette Girl appeared to balance coyly on a tightrope, dancing with her parasol. Porosknit Summer Underwear's electric bulb sign featured the

³⁸ The tale featuring the "girl stenographer" dialogues with gender and class discourses in relation to electronic bulb signs. A thorough analysis of these issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

³⁹ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910. V. 13.

⁴⁰ *The New York Times*, September 25, 1910. V. 13.



Figure 2.4
Corticelli Kitty electric bulb sign,
1912.

Photographer unknown.

"Man-Boy Boxing Match" as two lit figured clad in seasonal longjohns did battle. Lipton tea's sign featured a teapot which appeared to pour chubby drops.⁴¹ The preceding electric bulb spectaculars were situated in and around midtown B roadway and Times Square in Manhattan between 1900 and 1917; examples of primitive narrativity in such signs include selections both after 1917 and in locations other than Manhattan.⁴²

By introducing a similar narrative 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

⁴¹ Starr 1998, 63-66.

⁴² The significance the local environment played in encouraging the institutionalization of electric bulb signs in urban spaces are dealt with in more depth in my thesis, "The Commoditable Block Party: Electric Signs in Manhattan, 1881-1917".

product. Rather, they engaged the spectator in a mini-narrative with a subject engaged with a series of events: the girl struggled against the downpour, her petticoats fluttering.

However, it was in fact a *mini*-narrative, since the audience for electric bulb signs were hurrying from one destination to the next, and in reality 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. Rather than narrate, such signs performed a series of simple tricks for spectators⁴³: a match was lit, a teapot poured tea, a girl smoked a cigar. Of equal importance was the mechanized nature of the performances in which the representative human body was bent to tasks ill-suited for the authentic body. Barring mechanical dysfunction, humans on such signs smoked, balanced, and boxed incessantly from dusk long into the night.

(d). *Repetition*

Even the most elaborate electric sign performances, which 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 transitioned from blue to pink to yellow and back to blue.⁴⁴

⁴³ Spectatorship and electric bulb signs will be addressed in depth in my thesis, "The Commoditable Block Party: Electric Signs in Manhattan, 1881-1917".

⁴⁴ Starr 1998, 65.

The length of individual sign performances were temporally fixed, as well, as were visual elements such as the sign's form, color, and brightness of the illumination. This fixity of presentation accentuated the signs' automated, machinic 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 end⁴⁵. As such, the visual experience over time for the spectator was transformed from a performance to a refrain, akin to the 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."⁴⁶.

A sign's repetitive performance were designed to both capture the viewer's conscious mind and worm its message into her unconscious mind. But a repetitive message also runs the risk of engendering 'mastery' or familiarity to a viewer who can anticipate every motion in a sign's performance, and familiarity by definition dissolves the spectacular. Mastery of the message lasted only as long as the sign did, however, and signs were replaced approximately every two to three years.

⁴⁵ Attempts to affix markers such as 'beginning' and 'end' to a sign's repetitious performance were technically meaningless, and speak more of the spectator's predisposition to organize visual information into familiar categories of meaning

⁴⁶ Lears 1984, 377.

SUMMARY

The lavish "Wrigley's Spearmint" sign, erected on Broadway between 43rd and 44th Streets in



Figure 2.5

The Wrigley's sign,
1917.

Photographer unknown.

1917, embodied several archetypal characteristics of electric bulb sign spectacles of the period, such as a national company branding through the use of iconic text (and not a graphical logo), repetitive 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 veline filigree.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Starr 1998, 66.

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.

Like their modern progeny, electric bulb signs dispensed with lengthy textual explanations and instead aimed to create a transformative, fanciful viewing experience. However, unlike modern global campaigns, electric bulb signs were idiosyncratic lobs in a company's promotional campaign, and were not part of a larger package of billboard and print material.

Electric bulb signs, too, destabilized their immediate environment in a number of ways;⁴⁸ while the digital portability of modern media also enables it to appear on new digital sign displays in public spaces, such technology at this point in time is limited to the epicenters of only the largest and most cosmopolitan metropolises such as New York or Hong Kong.

Unlike electric bulb signs, modern advertising does not seek to hit us over the head with spectacularity, but rather insinuates itself into the very fabric of our waking lives: through television and newspapers, magazines and film, packages and stickers on fruit in the produce bin at the supermarket, ads which cycle through the display panel on the newer elevator systems. In conclusion, electric bulb signs provide a novel perspective towards both

⁴⁸ For more information on the collective destabilization of electric bulb signs in the fin de siècle landscape, please see Chapter Three of my forthcoming thesis "The Commodifiable Block Party: Electric Signs in Manhattan, 1881-1917".

the relatively tame spectacularity and the practices of flattened, 'mythic' themes and minimal textual explanations of much of modern global advertising.

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