

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Alice Arnold**, *Electric Signs*, New York: Icarus Films, 2013. 58 minutes; colour

In her film *Electric Signs*, film-maker Alice Arnold sets out to explore the ways in which new forms of screen-based signage are transforming the public domain in cities around the world. This very interesting film, which draws our attention to crucial developments in advertising technology which stand to have profound impacts on the nature of urban public space, was funded through Kickstarter.<sup>1</sup>

In the film's opening minutes, Arnold tells us that her explorations are inspired by the observations of Walter Benjamin, who was similarly fascinated with what the advertising displays of his day could tell us about the nature of modern urban life. Following Benjamin, Arnold sets out to "investigate this economy of signs and the new urban space of the media city".

In pursuing this investigation, *Electric Signs* focuses especially on historical and recent developments in New York City, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, and Prague, with passing discussions of other cities including Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo. In seeking perspectives on the economy of signs, Arnold's own narration is mixed with interviews with advertising insiders, city officials, academics, and activists, as well as vox pops from the streets of her chosen cities. The film is also full of striking images of outdoor media landscapes in each of those cities—a point to which I'll return later.

The story that emerges as the film progresses is one of "electric landscapes" full of signs and screens, with potentially harmful impacts on the democratic nature of urban public space: "As more and more screens light up, the public spaces of our cities are starting to resemble a TV screen. But the channels are full of commercials, and we can't change them". Loy Ho, an activist from Hong Kong featured in the film, seems to speak for Arnold too when she says: "Public space is no longer public space, it is a media channel".

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

In charting the forces that have given rise to this new electric landscape, Arnold focuses particularly on the ways in which the advertising industry has seized on new digital screen technologies in its relentless pursuit of our attention. For advertisers, moving images on screens have a number of advantages over static displays and others forms of media: they grab attention or ‘eyeballs’ in a manner that static poster displays cannot; they offer new potential for interactive displays; and when connected to the web, they offer potential for ‘narrow-casting’ by adjusting content according to different demographics present at a given time and place. Arnold also notes how this “attention economy” interacts with the real-estate market, as developers rush to install screens in order to add value to buildings and/or neighbourhoods. The film also notes in passing that urban authorities stand to benefit from the growth of signs too, if they are able to capture part of the advertising revenue generated by the installation of screens and media facades.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Electric Signs* is the way in which Arnold traces how these various interests came together in different ways in different cities. Hong Kong is explored for its role as a kind of test-bed for screen technologies that would soon roll out in other cities; screens were seen as an effective means to communicate in an already cluttered visual landscape. In New York, the focus is particularly on Times Square, which the city established as a special ‘sign district’ as part of its efforts to ‘clean up’ the area; here, buildings are required by statute to carry screens for advertisements. In Los Angeles, we learn how community opposition to so-called ‘billboard blight’ led to the city attempting to ban new billboards in 2002. This provoked a lawsuit by outdoor advertising companies, which was settled by allowing companies to convert existing billboard sites to LED screens—the proliferation of screens across the city’s landscape was the result. Finally, in Prague, we are briefly told the story of the introduction of billboards during the transition to

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

capitalism, such that advertising in public space came to be associated with the new political freedoms and economic relationships of the Czech Republic.

While the focus of the film is very much on new technologies, *Electric Signs* does a terrific job of situating current screen technologies in a longer history of outdoor messaging. I was particularly interested in the sections tracing the history of electric light signs and ‘magic lanterns’ in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in spaces like New York’s Times Square and Hong Kong, where the lit-up nighttime was known by locals as ‘pale daylight’. The film also does a good job of situating the growth of outdoor screens in the contemporary context of screen technology more broadly, noting that the illuminated surfaces of screens (billboards, mobile phones, digital cameras, televisions, tablets, etc.) are becoming “devices through which we frame our experiences”.

So, at the end of these investigations, what are Arnold’s conclusions about the impact of the new ‘electric signs’ on urban public space? Wrapping up the film, she argues that:

“The city has become a platform for the media to utilize, to project their messages and information to all the passers-by. The media city is a matrix of physical and networked space, that expands our experience of the city, and alters the dynamics of public space. This urban lightscape is a visible sign of the power of the market economy. The signs shine seductively, with messages of modernity and freedom, of free consumer choice. But they eclipse the public aspects of our public spaces.”

The commodified city of the advertisers is contrasted with the city of the Occupy movement and others: “The protestors are asking an important question: who has the right to shape the city?”.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

But even as Arnold's voiceover draws this fairly unambiguous conclusion, her film's imagery and interviews give voice to a degree of ambivalence about the outdoor media landscapes of the contemporary city. Her camera is undoubtedly entranced by the electric landscapes she visits, and the film is indeed beautiful to watch. And her informants—particularly those on the street—are frequently ambivalent about the presence of electric signs in their urban environment, registering them as both advertising and art, as commodification and communication, as unwelcome intrusion and enticing atmospherics.

Given this ambivalence, it would have been interesting for *Electric Signs* to have further explored the ways in which the new electric signs might be re-regulated or re-programmed. In relation to regulation, the film does not really discuss the ways in which urban authorities themselves have become increasingly dependent on outdoor advertising companies for the provision of basic urban infrastructure like bus stops, benches, bins, and news stands (a development I have attempted to analyse in a recent *Antipode* paper entitled 'Branded cities' - see Iveson 2012). These new public-private partnerships are surely one of the impediments to the implementation of measures such as the one sought by a resident of Hong Kong who appeared in the film, arguing that a certain percentage of time on the screens ought to be set aside for non-commercial communications.

In relation to re-programming of the screens, we must ask whether these screens are able to be 'hacked' just as billboards and other forms of static advertising have been in the past. One of my favourite parts of *Electric Signs* is its coverage of artist Jason Eppink's 'pixelator', an ingenious invention which converts the digital advertising screens adorning New York's subway stops into dynamic works of light art.<sup>2</sup> I wondered whether there were any other hacks of commercial messaging being developed in any of the other cities Arnold covered in *Electric Signs*?

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

I'll certainly be using this film in my teaching, not only to show students what's happening in other cities around the world, but for its ability to inspire a critical re-examination of aspects of our urban environment that we tend to take for granted all too soon after they have been introduced.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1650321431/electric-signs>; for more on the film and its director, see [here](#) and [here](#); and you can watch the trailer [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> You can find video of some of his installations, as well as his instructions for how to construct a pixelator, [here](#).

## Reference

Iveson K (2012) Branded cities: Outdoor advertising, urban governance, and the outdoor media landscape. *Antipode* 44(1):151–174

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