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Experiencing TV: the screen space of the media museum

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From: Alice Anteliano, ed.
 The Cinematic Experience:
 Film, Contemporary Art, Museum
 Filme, arte contemporanea, museo.
 Pasion di Prato: Campanotto,
 2010: 201-211.

In December 2006 the Media Experience in Hilversum, the Netherlands, opened its doors to the public. The spectacular building, with its multi-coloured glass façade, houses a unique, permanent exhibition on the history of radio and television in the Netherlands¹. Fourteen thematic pavilions inform and entertain visitors about the history and impact of Dutch radio and television, from children's programmes and news broadcasts to soaps, advertisements and amateur media productions. The main emphasis is on television programmes, besides a smaller collection of equipment, props, amateur films and radio programmes. The clips taken from radio and television programmes from the 1950s until today are shown on monitors and screens, played in loops or activated by the visitor and explained by virtual guides. Interactive exhibits invite the visitor to take part in the production of newscasts, soaps or special effects and thus gain insight into the constructed nature of the media and their impact on our perception of reality. In a separate gallery, temporary exhibitions highlight specific episodes or themes from the history of broadcasting. Besides the exhibitions, the building houses the collection of the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, the national archive for broadcasting materials of which the Media Experience is a part. The over 700.000 hours of archival material are stored in the basement of the building² (fig. 1).

The Media Experience is an unusual museum. On the one hand, like other museums, it contains a thematic presentation of a selection from a historical collection, exhibited in permanent displays accompanied by written or spoken explanations, housed in a building especially designed for this purpose. At the same time, it has many features that set it apart from other museums. For one, the Experience does not consider itself a museum, in that its name deliberately avoids any reference to the museum³. The use of the term *experience* emphasises that above all, a visit should be entertaining and fun – something associated more with a theme park than with a museum⁴. Besides, contrary to the objects in other museums, in the Experience most of the exhibits are virtual: the main objects on display are digitised fragments of films, television and radio programmes. Finally, the specific nature of these media objects requires screens in order to make them visible and loudspeakers to make them audible. Consequently, the space of the Media Experience is filled with screens and monitors in different shapes and sizes and with sounds coming from different sides and sources.

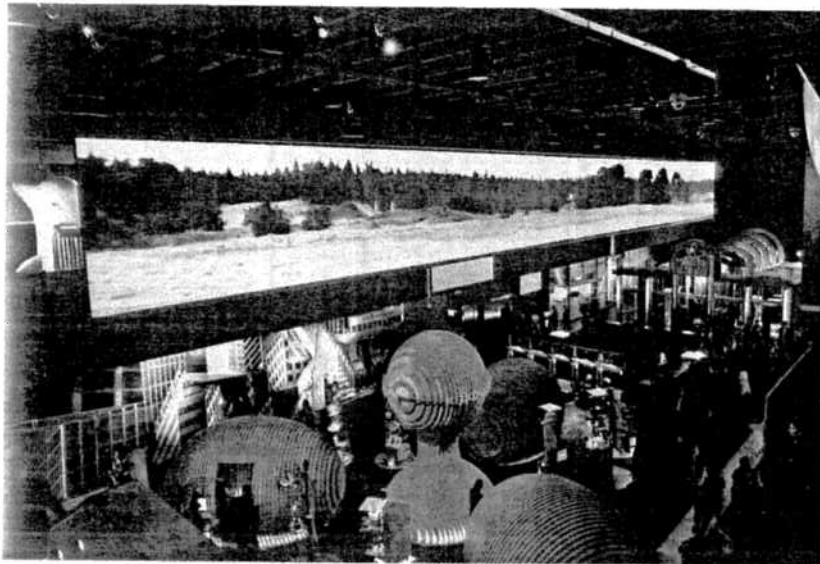


Fig. 1 Overview of the Media Experience with the pavilions for children's programmes and stars and the Media Panorama, a 140 feet wide screen on which each hour a five-minute compilation film is shown. Photo Paul Ridderhof. Courtesy the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision.

In this article I want to contribute to our understanding of cinema in the museum by making an excursion to the museum for mass media, with a particular focus on the presentation of television. To what extent is the museum an appropriate space for presenting a placeless medium like television? How should we conceptualise the interaction between "object" and viewer in the screen space of the media museum? How does this relate to the interaction between cinema and viewer in the gallery space? And what does this teach us about the place of cinema in the museum? As Wanda Strauven argues in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, «film should [...] be considered [...] within a complex constellation of various and mutually interpenetrating cultural series»⁵. Part of that constellation is the contemporary art gallery, where multimedia installations have extended the screen into space and deconstructed the unified, single viewpoint of classical cinematic spectatorship, creating room for «an other cinema»⁶. I argue that the museum for mass media is another part of that constellation where cinema gets a second life. I use Anna McCarthy's approach of television as *site-specific* and recent ideas on spectatorship in multiple screen spaces to articulate the relation between viewer, "object" and screen in the media museum. Rather than cinema vanishing in art, as in the art gallery, I propose that in the screen space of the Media Experience it is television that is vanishing into cinema, through a return of the cinema of attractions. Before I come to that, though, we take a closer look at the Media Experience.

THE MEDIA EXPERIENCE

Upon entering the Media Experience, each visitor receives a ring. This ring contains a chip that can store information and that can be activated at each exhibit in the experience. Visitors are asked to submit their name, date of birth and e-mail address. Besides, visitors are asked to choose a personal, virtual guide among 12 well-known Dutch media personalities. At each exhibit, the guide can be recalled by using the ring, and will give his or her personal comment on the topic on display. So anchorwomen Sacha de Boer speaks for almost half an hour about the exhibit *This is the News*, whereas the presenter of a historical programme, Hans Goedkoop, speaks in great detail about the exhibit on amateur film and the past it documents.

In total, the Experience offers one hundred hours of radio and television material, presented in fourteen different pavilions that each have a different theme and design. Close to the entrance are the pavilions on show programmes and children's programmes. Both pavilions are very popular with visitors, because they offer content that is immediately recognisable for the viewers. In order to enhance this effect, the content has been personalised. For example, upon activating your ring the pavilion with children's programmes presents you a selection of fragments of children's programmes from your own youth. Besides recognition, this evokes a sense of nostalgia in visitors.

Other pavilions are more geared towards developing a critical perspective on the media. Especially the many interactive parts of the exhibition focus attention on the way mass media productions are made and how they shape and influence our perception of the world. For example, in the pavilion *This is the News* visitors can compile their own edition of the eight o'clock news. Within five minutes you have to select a maximum of 5 items from a total of 16, and the weather has to be one of them. This teaches visitors about the dilemma's that the editors of the news face: which of the three earthquakes should you pick? And do you select the item on the Dutch royal family or the one on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict instead? Upon completion of your selection, your news edition is played back to you, after which the editor in chief gives feedback on your selection. If this has inspired you for journalism, you can afterwards test your ability as an anchor person by reading the "Sound and Vision News" from autocue. In yet another pavilion, called *The Enchantment*, visitors can get insight into the creation and possible manipulation of media productions by experimenting with special effects and editing a film from separate shots. Upon returning home each visitor receives an e-mail with a link to the server of the Institute of Sound and Vision, where all your media productions are kept and available for downloading.

The Experience thus offers visitors the option to watch compilation programmes, review their own favourite programmes, take a look behind the scenes of media production and actively participate in the production of programmes and quizzes. In doing so, they work with digitised fragments of radio and television programmes that are projected on screens or activated on touch screen monitors. In that sense, one could say that the visitors "perform" the radio and televi-

sion archive: their input largely determines what kind of material is shown. What, then, exactly is the nature of the objects on display? In the Media Experience, television is primarily presented as heritage. Although the museum strives to incorporate even the most up to date material, clearly once it is on display it is no longer considered "live". To what extent is it really *television* that is on display in the Media Experience?

THE MATERIALITY OF TV

Television is generally considered a medium that transgresses time and place. TV brings various places from all over the world into the living room, at the same time suggesting that you are a live witness to what you see. While during a live report on riots in Kenya the correspondent in Nairobi, the anchorman or -women in the studio and the viewer at home are located in three different places, we hardly experience that distance: as viewers we get the feeling that we have been briefly present at the scene ourselves. In the case of live broadcasts the event takes place at the same time it is being recorded, broadcasted and viewed and this further supports the feeling that we are ourselves present at the scene. Moreover, the technical ability of TV to broadcast live causes viewers to experience even previously recorded items as "live" at the moment of transmission. As media scholar Jane Feuer explains:

by postulating an equivalence between time of event, time of television creation and transmission-viewing time, television as an institution identifies all messages emanating from the apparatus as "live." The live program is thus taken as the very definition of television. In this way, television as an ideological apparatus positions the viewer into its "imaginary" of presence and immediacy,

or into an «ideology of *liveness*», as she calls it⁷. The global scope of television and the experience of *liveness* the medium entails obviously has deeply influenced our experience of time and space. Besides, the simultaneous viewing of the same broadcasts establishes a sense of community. One can argue that this effect has somewhat diminished with the arrival of multi-channel TV and *viewing on demand*. Nevertheless, in this sense television still is an important medium for the construction and dissemination of cultural identity.

As media scholar Anna McCarthy has shown, besides its global and virtual characteristics, television also has local and material dimensions⁸. In her book *Ambient Television* McCarthy studied the specific, semi-public places in which people watch television, like bars, stores, airports and malls. She warns against a too one-dimensional approach of television as a placeless medium, because we also encounter it as a material object that shapes the space in which it is seen and influences the way people use this space. And this also works the other way around: the space in which the TV set is located and used also influences the interpretation of its images⁹. It makes a difference whether you watch TV on a small screen in your own living room, direct a casual glance at a TV monitor in a

bar, or pass by the mega screens on Times Square. Television, in McCarthy's view, can only be properly understood if we take its materiality into account. We should see it as a concrete object, that takes shape in a network that is at once general and specific: «television technologies are complicated spatial forms, at once "global" in their scope and infinitesimally "local" at the point of reception»¹⁰. Besides, this local dimension is not limited to the place of watching television – a network can encompass the whole world but at the same time remains local at all points¹¹.

McCarthy's conception of television as *site-specific* offers a few interesting perspectives on the nature of the objects on display in the Media Experience. First, her attention for the TV set as a concrete, physical object enables a positioning of the medium in a museum context, that traditionally has focused on the material dimension of culture¹². And although most of the objects on display in the Media Experience are "intangible", the museum also presents television in its more concrete, material form. The *Media Lounge* pavilion is a kind of media library, where one can choose to watch and listen to any of the 14.000 radio and TV programmes available on the server. This pavilion also contains a long glass case where television sets and radios in all shapes and sizes and from various periods are presented. This exhibit focuses attention to a specific aspect of watching TV, namely, the design of the console itself. Naturally, this presentation does not literally demonstrate the settings of watching TV that McCarthy describes, because the television sets and radios do no longer broadcast content and most of these sets were originally situated in the private home, whereas McCarthy focuses on TV in public and semi-public space. Nevertheless one can argue that the viewing of historical television programmes in the adjacent *Media Lounge* connects the consoles to the broadcasts and thus evokes the setting of watching television at home. In that sense, this presentation focuses attention on one specific aspect of the settings that McCarthy mentions, namely, that the devices are all shaped differently and thus have influenced the spaces in which they were used in different ways.

Second, the exhibition design of the pavilions often aims to evoke the specific places and technologies that are relevant for the production, dissemination and viewing of television. The pavilions for children's programmes and the *Media Lounge* evoke the setting of the private home, with benches, carpet and wallpaper. *This is the News* evokes the setting where television is produced, in the editorial room. Other pavilions evoke the place of the studio, such as the one on shows and stars where you can rehearse and perform the entry through a door in a television studio and afterwards review your own performance on a playback monitor. And the documentary in the *Global Village* pavilion, about the impact of mass media on our daily lives, is continuously shown on a screen hanging in the middle of the Media Experience, evoking the experience of watching television on large screens in public space. In this sense, the presentation of television in the Media Experience is a nice example of what McCarthy describes as «thinking about the TV set, and TV images, as material things that shape experience in the sites in which they are viewed and used»¹³.

Third, we can recognize McCarthy's description of television as a network that, although global, also remains local at all points. This local dimension

becomes most clearly evident in the content of the exhibits: fragments of Dutch radio and television programmes, mostly from the public broadcasters, and the props like costumes, scripts, etc. that are related to them. The Dutch broadcasting system is unique in the world; it is the product of the pillarisation of society in the post-war period, where each segment of society had its own broadcaster. So the Catholics, Protestants, Socialists, Humanists, and other groups each had their own radio and TV programming. According to Experience director Pieter van der Heijden it would take so much time to "translate" the content for foreign viewers that they decided not to do so and to aim primarily at an audience that is familiar with Dutch radio and TV history¹⁴. The only help foreigners get is from a virtual "Rembrandt" who gives an English language tour of the museum. Here, the in principle global medium of TV suddenly takes on a very local, site-specific dimension.

THE SCREEN SPACE OF THE MEDIA MUSEUM

So looking from the local and material side that McCarthy stresses, television can be considered an object for an exhibition like any other museum object. This is even more so since in contemporary museum theory objects are no longer defined as material evidence of reality but rather seen as «sites of experience», that could just as well be replaced by replicas, representations or other interactive interfaces¹⁵. At the same time, the Media Experience cannot be considered a standard museum: it is dark, visitors are confronted with a cacophony of sounds and many different screens in varying sizes. So how exactly should we conceptualise the "screen space" of the media museum, and the interaction between object and viewer it entails?

The presentations in the media museum differ from those in "regular" museums in one important respect: the media museum always shows fragments of programmes that are taken out of their original context and presented in a new one. Although one can argue that in any museum exhibition the object is being re-contextualised, in the case of the media museum the unity of the original objects is broken as well. Still, although this fragmentation of the object in the media museum seems different from regular museums, where the objects are usually shown in their entirety, on the level of perception there is a similarity with the perception of media art works in the art gallery. As in the case of time-based installations in contemporary art galleries, the spectator of the exhibits in the media museum is invited to actively compose and make sense of the objects on display¹⁶.

In the case of the interactive exhibits of the Media Experience this active role of the visitor is very clearly visible. Where in the case of multimedia installations the composition of the work takes place in the visitor's mind, in the Media Experience the construction of the objects on display is externalised: the viewer activates the fragments of his/her choice and it is his or her age that determines which children's programming they get to see and their answers to the *Power of*

the Media quiz that will influence the overall score. It is not so surprising that it is in a museum for *television* that this active participation of the viewer is so easy to recognise. Over the past decades television viewers have increasingly gained influence over the content they are watching. The introduction of VCR's and more recently digital TV enable viewers to decide what programmes they want to watch at what moment and place. Interactive elements like phoning or sending text messages have given the television viewer direct influence over the content of the programmes. These tools have moved the viewer «from a passive position to a more interactive one, from an observer separate from the apparatus to a participant»¹⁷.

This type of spectatorship seems far removed from the passivity and absorption characteristic of classical cinematic spectatorship. As Malte Hagener has argued the multi-screen set up in exhibitions, like split-screen film and experimental installations, entails the explosion of a single viewpoint that offers a privileged perspective on the film. He describes the new frame of perception created in this multi-screen space as *kaleidoscopic perception*: «the dialectic contrast of fragmented perception and immersion, of contemplation and distraction, of stasis and kinesis typical of the split-screen that has become a model of media spectatorship in the past decade»¹⁸. For Hagener, the pleasurable nature of contemporary media culture lies exactly in this ability «to experience multiple temporal and spatial dimensions at the same time, to be here and to be there, to be now and to be then»¹⁹. This adequately describes the interaction between viewers, objects and screens in the museum for mass media and it may also explain why contemporary viewers seem to enjoy it so much that they spend much more time at the Media Experience than the average museum visitor would.

A CINEMA OF ATTRACTIONS

At the same time, the fragmentation and multiplication of perception in the screen space of the media museum does not mean there is no place for cinema. In fact, one can argue that spectatorship in the Media Experience is inherently cinematic in nature, be it the spectatorship of "the cinema of attractions" rather than classical cinematic spectatorship. This becomes most apparent in one particular exhibit: the *Media Panorama*.

Every hour, a huge, 140 feet wide projection screen comes down from the ceiling. The level of lighting in the building is lowered and the upcoming performance is announced by light and sound effects and through messages that appear on the monitors at the various exhibits. On the screen, six HD projectors project one seamless image. The screening lasts five minutes and provides a true audiovisual spectacle. There are three different programmes: one on the way grand themes like war and beauty are being shaped by the media; one on the archive as a treasure trove, where the shelves literally come to live in sound and vision; and one on an explorer, played by Rutger Hauer, who in the 23rd millennium in a basement in the desert recovers the remains of what once was the Institute for Sound and Vision.

Each of the films aims to establish a connection with the archival holdings in the basement of the building. The films contain many short clips from various programmes that illustrate the vastness and variety of the collection: sports, news events like disasters, wars and politics, soaps, comedies and show programmes, youth culture, stars and highlights from the life of the royal family. At the same time, the clips also represent the highlights from Dutch television history: because the clips are very short, they have to be instantly recognizable for the viewer. The link with the archive is most clearly made in the treasure trove film, which features the archival shelves in the basement with the tapes on them. As an employee picks out a tape here and there, the images that the tapes supposedly contain are superimposed over them. This film also contains two interesting sequences of sports events, where for example images of football matches from various periods are edited together from left to right in a way that suggests we see one and the same match (with the direction of the football as the binding factor). The films thus attempt to invite the visitor of the Media Experience to also pay a visit to the archive and explore the richness of the institute's collection. A literal explorer appears in the *Discovery* film, where Rutger Hauer plays "Alexander Stuyvesant", an explorer from the 23rd millennium who, while driving through a desert-like landscape, discovers the remains of the Institute for Sound and Vision in an underground basement and explores its contents. In the voice-over Hauer's character suggests that the media archive is a place where you can trace what mankind was like in the past: «What scared them? What made them happy?».

The media panorama evokes many aspects of the cinema of attractions as defined by Tom Gunning. Like the cinema of attractions, the panorama «directly solicits spectator attention», incites «visual curiosity» and supplies «pleasure through an exciting spectacle – a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself».²⁰ With its exceptional width, the panorama certainly is an attraction in itself. Not only is it presented as such – the screenings are unique events that are announced as audiovisual spectacles – the content is similarly spectacular, because it comprises highlights of television history, including spectacular footage of natural disasters, terrorist attacks and stars, edited horizontally and at a quick pace. The sequences with sports events from different periods that seamlessly blend into one another can be seen as examples of «tricks films in which the cinematic manipulation [...] provides the films' novelty».²¹ As in the cinema of attractions the media panorama films contain many «recreations of shocking and curious incidents»: footage of floods, accidents, war and terror (such as the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York), and fictional scenes of disaster in the archive – in the treasure trove film the shelves catch fire (announcing footage of «the world in flames») and afterwards are flooded with rain and covered in smoke, where in the explorer film Hauer's character finds the archive in ruins. In that sense, the panorama provides what Gunning terms «exhibitionist cinema».²² Although there is some narrative in the films, this is clearly of secondary importance – the images take centre stage and are to be valued on their own. Besides, the films also contain «showmen exhibitors», such as

the actor Rutger Hauer who introduces the images and provides comments on them. The difference with the cinema of attractions of the late 19th- and early 20th-century is that here the explicators are not in front of the screen but appear within the films themselves.

At the Media Panorama, television thus transforms into cinema – be it the exhibitionist cinema of attractions rather than classical cinema. In retrospect the other exhibits also demonstrate characteristics of the cinema of attractions, such as the emphasis on the technology of producing, distributing and watching television, the interactivity of the displays, and the virtual guides that act as «exhibitor showmen» at each exhibit²³. The final question is, then, why exactly the cinema of attractions reappears in the media experience. Why do we need this type of «exhibitionist cinema» in the museum for mass media?

As Hagener indicates in his discussion of split-screen cinema, where television is seen as a medium of multiplication, film is «able to encompass and contain these multiple screens and views in a single image»²⁴. In that sense, the media panorama gives unity to the otherwise fragmented objects in the exhibits below. It borrows the immersive effects of the 19th century panorama – even though the media panorama is not circular, the screen is so wide that the viewer feels enfolded by it²⁵. Its illusionary effect is that of cinema, in that it is a projection on a large screen in a darkened room, which invites visitors to stop for a moment, take a fixed position, and gaze at the spectacle of the screen in awe and wonder. After the performance the spectacle of the cinema of attractions of the panorama «spills over» to the other exhibits below. The Experience exhibits television in both its virtual and its material dimensions and emphasises the spectacle of the content of the programmes and the technology behind it. In the end, it is exactly the hybrid nature of the Experience as between *museum* and *attraction* – a place for both «monstration» and attraction – that invites a second life for exhibitionist cinema²⁶.

Notes

¹ The building, situated at the entrance to the so-called Media Park, where all the broadcasting facilities of the Netherlands are located, is designed by Neutelings Riedijk Architects and the glass façade, consisting of abstract stills of television programmes, by Dutch designer and artist Jaap Drupsteen.

² Besides collecting, describing, preserving and making accessible the programmes produced by and broadcasted on Dutch radio and television, the institute comprises the film collections of the State Publicity Department, the Foundation for Film and Science and the national Amateur Film collection, as well as a substantial collection of documentary film. See <http://www.beeldengeluid.nl>.

³ Being a part of the Institute for Sound and Vision, it would have made sense to name the Experience «Museum for Sound and Vision». According to Experience director Pieter van der Heijden this name did not appeal to the stakeholders – besides governments, broadcasters and producers also representatives of the expected audience – and this was one of the reasons the institute opted for «Experience» instead.

⁴ In contrast to most museums, the Experience was deliberately designed for a specific target audience: grown ups between 20 and 49 years old, with children in the age of 5-18, with a preference for

informative but light programming. E-mail from Pieter van der Heijden to the author, January 25, 2008. This strategy has proven extremely successful: within eleven months they received their 200.000th visitor and on average people spend up to 4 hours in the exhibition, whereas in a regular museum they spend 2 hours. "Beeld en Geluid Experience: een jaar later", *Beeld en Geluid Journaal*, December 3, 2007.

⁵ Wanda Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, p. 25.

⁶ Raymond Bellour, "D'un autre cinéma", in *Traffic*, no. 34, 2000.

⁷ Jane Feuer, *The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology*, in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches - An Anthology*, University Publications of America, Frederick, MD 1983, p. 14.

⁸ Anna McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and Its Place", in *October*, no. 98, Fall 2001, pp. 98-99. McCarthy uses the term *site-specific* in the sense that art historians use it to describe works that are related to a specific place.

⁹ A. McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2001, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 10.

¹¹ A. McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and Its Place", cit., pp. 94-95.

¹² The official definition of the museum by the International Council of Museums states that: «A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, *material evidence* of people and their environment». <http://icom.museum/definition.html>, January 4, 2008, emphasis added. At present the ICOM is already working with a broader definition, replacing «material evidence» with «the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment», which would include audiovisual content in any format. See the glossary of the ICOM Code of Ethics, <http://icom.museum.ethics.html>, January 4, 2008.

¹³ A. McCarthy, "From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and Its Place", cit., p. 101.

¹⁴ Personal communication from Pieter van der Heijden to the author, Hilversum, November 6, 2007.

¹⁵ Naomi Stead, "Performing Objecthood: Museums, Architecture and the Play of Artefactuality", in *Performance Research*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2007, pp. 38 and 40. See also Hilde Hein, *Museums: From Object to Experience*, in Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, Blackwell, Oxford 1998, pp. 103-115.

¹⁶ See R. Bellour, "D'un autre cinéma", cit., p. 8. As the Finnish artist Eija-Liisa Ahtila puts it, «The viewer in an installation is constantly in the process of editing the information he or she gets». In Magdalena Malm, *The Idea of Linearity Bothers Me: An Interview with Eija-Liisa Ahtila*, in Sara Arrhenius, Magdalena Malm, Cristina Ricupero (eds.), *Black Box Illuminated*, Propexus, Lund 2003, p. 43.

¹⁷ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 1994, p. 144.

¹⁸ Malte Hagener, "Kaleidoscopic Perception: The Multiplication of Surfaces and Screens in Media and Culture", in *CINEMA & Cie.*, no. 8, Fall 2006, p. 43.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 46.

²⁰ Tom Gunning, *The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde*, in W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, cit., p. 384.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Perhaps one could argue that the Experience assistants, recognizable by their white suits, function as showmen exhibitors in the more traditional sense in that they help visitors in operating the displays.

²⁴ M. Hagener, "Kaleidoscopic Perception: The Multiplication of Surfaces and Screens in Media and Culture", cit., p. 41.

²⁵ See Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2003.

²⁶ W. Strauven (ed.), *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, cit., pp. 16-17.