Prolifération des écrans / Proliferation of screens

Poissant, Louise, Tremblay, Pierre

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The Proliferation of Screens and the Toronto/Montréal Conferences

Combining new technologies and video, interdisciplinary artist Pierre Tremblay’s work has been exhibited in France and Canada for over 20 years. Tremblay’s Continuum, was screened in festivals in Canada, Australia, China, Italy and Brazil. An Associate Professor of Visual Studies at Ryerson University’s School of Image Arts, Tremblay coordinates a French visiting artist program, sits on the Board of Directors of InterAccess New Media Centre, and collaborates with France’s prestigious le Fresnoy art school on a variety of projects. Tremblay lived and worked for many years in Paris, where his work can be found at Musée Carnavalet, Bibliothèque nationale and the Musée Rodin.

Invading our private and urban landscapes, screens in proliferation are taking on increasingly complex and diverse functions in society, raising many questions. Screens render the imagination visible; they become cultural windows. Multi-channels/split screens propose a myriad of visual and informational transactions – a fragmented discourse that engenders cognitive shifts. Recognizing this reality, the School of Media and Visual Arts at the Université du Québec à Montréal, in cooperation with the School of Image Arts at Ryerson University and a number of institutions, along with arts administrators in Toronto and Montréal, came together to create the conference Toronto/Montreal: The Proliferation of Screens in February 2006. The conference featured presentations by specialists coming from varied backgrounds in the Arts and Sciences, all of whom examined the infiltration of multi-screens into public and private spaces.

This book highlights the contributions of the collected artists and scholars involved in this exciting forum to reflect on and explore aspects of the cultural phenomena of multi-screens in our global culture. It identifies four areas as principal themes: History – Perception – Challenges – Artistic Devices.
Today there is much interest and excitement about multi-screen environments – a general agreement that they are now ubiquitous in media and in urban environments. How do we select what we see? How do we choose what to hear? How do we process and synthesize the various stimuli that act on us to construct the experience we have (and the space that we experience)? Do we feel overwhelmed? Do we crave constant flux? The many multi-screen environments we encounter in the course of a single day invite us to reflect on the hectic experience of individual “seeing.”

Depending on how attentive a person is, in which direction her head is turned, or when he blinked, the experience of what was seen and heard will always be slightly different – different from one day to the next, different from the experience of the other: subjective. We necessarily make meaning, define what is real and not real through this fundamentally individual, independent process of seeing. Technology, offering velocity and flexibility in information delivery, has further contributed to the freedom of the spectator, while raising many questions about the nature of attentiveness.

Increasingly, we are exposed to this proliferation of screens – an overload of information, a dizzying multitude of messages. Screens are where we have grown to expect them and in places that still surprise, even appear preposterous. Enormous multi-screen landscapes light up Toronto’s Yonge Street and New York’s Times Square, creating seductive communal urban spaces full of colour and information. More privately, living rooms are lit with the most familiar screen of all: the television. We work on computers, usually several applications open simultaneously and a drop down menu just a click away. The cell phone exposes us to a menu on a screen (a choice), a picture (a memory), and video (a means of production and of live transmission). Even pumping gas often means being bombarded with video and sound announcing news or pushing a brand of potato chip. Our conference speakers reminded us that these screens filling our environment necessitate what John Cage has called polyattentiveness or what Abel Gance called polyvision. More colloquially, we eventually find ourselves paying continuous partial attention, a phrase first coined by former Apple and Microsoft executive Linda Stone.

While these cacophonous combinations of screens fight for our attention, they also challenge our neurons to make new synaptic connections. The screens disrupt and interrupt, diffuse our ability to focus. These screens within screens give us new ways to tell stories, to understand the stories of others. Millions of narratives are broken and reformed on Facebook walls; identities are constructed, broadcast and deconstructed on YouTube. By next year, we know there will be still more technological possibilities offered, facilitating still more instant interaction through a multitude of screens. It all seems so new and certainly ephemeral given the speed of technological change. But how long
have humans really been creating multiple screens to communicate? When does perception become production? Are there limits to multitasking? These are some of the many questions our conference participants address in this book.

Thierry Bardini talks about the archangel Metatron, who is represented with multiple eyes and a voyage to the hyperworld.

Marc Boucher examines peripheral vision in the context of immersive video, making particular note of the gCd system he has developed to enhance polysensorial experience.

Jean-Paul Boudreau describes his current research: in his lab at Ryerson University, he is examining precisely how human infants process information from multiple/simultaneous sources, in order to better understand multi-perception and multitasking in adults.

Jean-Claude Bustros and Albéric Aurtenèche start with the history of image production and move on to examine the overload of images we confront daily in our public and private spaces. They also examine the speed with which humans process images.

Grégory Chatonsky observes that our interaction with screens, our exposure to Wii or to Second Life or to virtual reality, etc., alter collective and individual perception of the world, of reality. As an additional consequence, the global and constantly accelerating proliferation of screens engenders a push to extend the screen’s limits through multi-screens and splitscreens, or further still to obliterate the screen’s borders entirely in immersive environments.

Luc Courchesne discusses how virtual, artificial or augmented reality is now becoming simply our own reality. Courchesne examines immersive systems, particularly the Panoscope he created to give the spectator the experience of an entire horizon.

Nina Czegledy reminds us how shopping has been compared to religious sacred experience – repackaged reality brought by global culture industries shifts perception into an augmented reality.

Jean Dubois’ artistic explorations are rooted in notions that obsess, even disturb, him. The proliferation of screens is an example of a notion that worries Dubois. He wonders if we should question the amount of time spend in front of our computers – does this time undermine human relationship?

Starting with a reflection on Abel Gance and his coinage of the term “Polyvision,” R. Bruce Elder discusses the concept of perception as production, offering his perspective on the freedom of the spectator.
Luc Faucher examines the paradox of fiction in the context of the philosophy of cinema.

Hervé Fischer reminds us that *The Proliferation of Screens* is a call to artists to occupy these new spaces.

Frédéric Fournier looks at how screens are used for the teaching of science and technology.

Jean Gagnon talks about how the proliferation of screens is facilitated by the mobility and portability of the screen and questions the seduction of projection in contemporary art.

François Giard believes in the importance of understanding the hidden structure of computer images to understand them better. He discusses how we visualize what we cannot see, how we mix the real and the virtual.

In the movie *Timecode* (split-screen in four screens), Mike Figgis chose to keep his multiple stories separate over a long period of time. Michäel La Chance explains his understanding of this work: a perceptual juxtaposition and emotional amplification, provoking a cross-activation of different cerebral functions.

Wieslaw Michalak examines Vilem Flusser and the qualitative shifts in technology that lead to new forms of consciousness.

Dominique Païni articulates a brief history of what can be described as the *transport* of images through his detailed examination of image projection.

In *Some Assembly Required: The Screen and the City*, Kathleen Pirrie Adams observes the manner in which the proliferation of screens creates “augmented urban space” and challenges our capacity to pay attention all at once.

Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof uses the psychoanalytic writings of Anton Ehrenzweig to demonstrate how the aim of polyphonic compositions is to stimulate the active engagement of the viewer. Pruska-Oldenhof also discusses the concept of primary process used by avant-garde artists, especially R. Bruce Elder.

Yves Racicot discusses the screen as an interface for representation whose shape is in constant definition – a changing crossroad of human relationship.

Patrice Renaud and Jean Décarie discuss how the single screen evolves to multiscreen and becomes immersion in relation to virtual reality and interactivity. Perception is analyzed through their own *système de coordination de la perception visuelle*. 

Multi-screen films at Expo 67 were hailed as revolutionary, Edward Slopek tells us, but the revolution did not happen; reasons included expense and the complexity of technology involved.

Don Snyder indicates that as much as “we have always known that the process of image diffusion began with Cubism,” we can look to art history to find precursors of a “long tradition reforming itself.” He looks to gothic stained glass, medieval tapestries and Celtic manuscripts and finds parallels to current screen environments.

Will Straw describes audio-visual evolution – the dissolution of the boundaries of the screen.

Ariane Thézé talks of the desire to enlarge screen space in her own artistic practice and reflects on the creation of her split-screen work Requiem.

This conference was a joint partnership and the result of a significant initiative to bring together artists and scholars from Québec and Ontario. There was no equivalent forum for bi-provincial cooperation, discussion and cross-pollination of ideas before we launched this project. From its inception, the project had wind in its sails. People were ready for the idea and eager to make it work.

The first step was an invitational brainstorming session one weekend in October 2001 at Ryerson University. Numerous artists and scholars from various regions of Québec made the trip to Toronto; local artists and representatives from arts institutions also came to the table. There were 36 participants in all and a lively weekend ensued. The group worked out what a biennial of artistic exchange between their provinces could look like, should look like – and they laid down a framework for a future symposium with hopes that students would be exposed to artists and theoreticians from both provinces and that all involved would be enriched by the interchange.

The three principal objectives for the future symposium were to present new work in a variety of forms to the Ontario and Québec arts communities, to encourage interaction between academic and artist-run organizations in both provinces, and to document the discussions and presentations as the beginning of an ongoing, interactive media dialogue and biennial exchange.

Among the activities during that weekend were the Kodak Lecture Series presenting Montréal artist Nicholas Baier and Gallerist René Blouin, and an exhibition of Baier’s work at Gallery TPW. The Ryerson Gallery presented Andréea Szilasi.
The meetings were sponsored by Ryerson University and the cultural agency of the Québec Government in Toronto. The project received financial assistance from the Centre interuniversitaire des arts médiatiques (CIAM), Ryerson University’s Faculty of Communication and Design, and Ryerson University’s Chang School of Continuing Education.

The first interdisciplinary conference/exchange – Quebec/Ontario: New Forms New Work, Québec/Ontario: Formes neuves et nouvelles œuvres, a biennial of artistic exchange – took place February 6-9, 2003. It was hosted by Ryerson in cooperation with other arts organizations in Toronto and featured new work in film, installation, new media, photography and collaborative projects by Québec and Ontario artists, and also was supported by an exchange of ideas and a series of open meetings, screenings, performances and discussions. All sessions took place in both French and English according to each participant’s choice, and documentation in both languages was also provided.

One of the events we associated ourselves with was the Toronto launch of the new Michael Snow DVD, Anarchive 2, Digital Snow, thanks to Jean Gagnon, Director of Programs at the Fondation Daniel Langlois, and Epoxy Communication. The Kodak Lecture Series presented Luc Courchesne with an exhibition at Gallery TPW. The Glendon Gallery of York University presented Generic by Alexandre Gastonguay, curated by Marc Audette. Vid Ingelevics and Patrick Altman presented Codicologie(s) at Gallery 44; Gilles Morisette and Ed Pien exhibited Liminal at the Ryerson Gallery. Bertrand Carrière’s work, Signes de jour, was on display at the Stephen Bulger Gallery, and Karilee Fuglem’s Many Things Were Left Unsaid was shown at the Oakville Galleries. Speakers included Marie-Jeanne Musiol, Bastien Gilbert, Alayn Ouellet, Pierre Blache, Jacques Doyon, Lisa Steele, Ian Carr-Harris, Richard Kerr, Monique Savoie, Bill Vorn, Nicolas Reeves, Éric Raymond, David Rokeby, just to name a few. Also VU in Québec City presented Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge from Toronto.

The project received financial assistance from Ryerson University’s Faculty of Communication and Design, Kodak Canada, the Bureau du Québec in Toronto, the Fondation Daniel Langlois, the University of Toronto and the CIAM (Centre interuniversitaire des arts médiatiques) from Université du Québec à Montréal.

The Québec office in Toronto sponsored a mission to explore the possibility for the next symposium to be in Montréal. Louise Poissant, now Dean of the Arts Faculty at the Université du Québec à Montréal, who had already participated in the symposium through her research group, CIAM, expressed an interest in hosting the next conference. Together we decided to focus on a single theme, The Proliferation of Screens, and asked scholars and artists to participate.
The second edition of this biennial of artistic exchange happened February 9-11, 2006 at Hexagram/Université du Québec à Montréal in Montréal under the title: Toronto/Montreal: The Proliferation of Screens. So many thanks are extended to the participants who made the symposium so informative and thought-provoking.

Louise Poissant (Université du Québec à Montréal) and myself, representing Ryerson, made the introduction. The opening remarks were graciously delivered by Monique Richard, Chair, Université du Québec à Montréal, and Don Snyder, Chair, School of Image Arts, Ryerson University, Toronto.

The speakers were: Lynn Hugues (Concordia, Hexagram), Jean-Claude Bustros, Nelson Henricks (Concordia), Nina Czegledy (artist, curator), Thierry Bardini, Jocelyn Faubert, Luc Courchesne (Université de Montréal), Michaël La Chance (Université du Québec à Chicoutimi), Hervé Fischer, Jean Gagnon (Fondation Langlois), Patrice Renaud (Université du Québec en Outaouais), Jean Dubois, Luc Faucher, Yves Racicot, Frédéric Fournier, Marc Boucher (Université du Québec à Montréal), Jean-Paul Boudreau, Wieslaw Michalak, R. Bruce Elder, Edward Slopek, Kathleen Pirrie-Adams (Ryerson University), and Francine Périnet (Oakville Galleries). Among the moderators were: Josette Féral, and Louise Déry (Director of the Université du Québec à Montréal Gallery), whose participation included an exhibition at the Gallery.

An Evening of Screenings was organized at SAT by Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof (Ryerson University) and Monique Savoie, VJ's multi-screens, MixSessions.

The project received financial assistance from the Centre interuniversitaire des arts médiatiques (CIAM), Ryerson University's Faculty of Communication and Design and Ryerson University's Chang School of Continuing Education as well as the School of Image Arts at Ryerson.

The third biennial will be held at Ryerson University in Toronto in February 2008. We are looking forward to this event.