FASCINATING MUSEOLOGICAL AUDIENCES, OR THE CINEMATIC APPEAL

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ABSTRACT

This review of Elisa Mandelli's book *The Museum as a Cinematic Space: The Display of Moving Images in Exhibitions* (2019) explains how, according to the author, several viewing dispositifs, understood as a rather flexible assemblage of elements, are increasingly being used in museums to combine education with entertainment. Thus, museums are becoming "cinematic spaces" with an ideological perspective. Mandelli's approach to the projection technologies of moving images in museological venues is not only chronological but also phenomenological. A three-way interest is recognizable in the alignment of chapters, encompassing the educational value of the *dispositifs*, their artistic nature, and the experiential factor. As the book provides an interesting overview of two fields that usually are not taken together and contains an assortment of case studies described in detail, it should make a good addition to the fields of Museum and Film Studies.

Keywords: Moving image; Museum; Cinema; *Dispositif*; Exhibition.

Mandelli, E. (2019). *The Museum as a Cinematic Space: The Display of Moving Images in Exhibitions*. Edinburgh University Press.

Elisa Mandelli's book *The Museum as a Cinematic Space: The Display of Moving Images in Exhibitions* (2019) is about publicly presenting documentation through cinematic apparatuses, or *dispositifs*[1] placed at the service of education and of the transmission of knowledge. At stake is not a single *dispositif*, as in traditional cinema, but rather an assortment of them, depending on the type and goal of the information to be conveyed. The author claims that although museums and movie theatres require different reception modalities, the use of moving images in museological spaces can generate powerful combinations, as was the case during the early twentieth-century avant-gardes (cf. chapter 3). For this purpose, Mandelli resorts to a more flexible definition of *dispositif* than that usually employed by screen theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry or Christian Metz in the 1970s. Therefore, she calls upon Michel Foucault's idea of "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble" (in "The Confessions of the Flesh"; Foucault in Mandelli, 2019, p.5) and Gilles Deleuze's "assemblage" (in "What Is a Dispositif?"; Deleuze in Mandelli, 2019, p.5) to advocate for "heterogeneous elements that stripped from former combinations […] enter into a new relationship with one another," as Francesco Casetti (in Mandelli, 2019, p.5) clarifies in *The Lumière Galaxy* (2015).

Mandelli's book covers a lot of historical and technological ground, from the beginning of the twentieth century to well after the new

1. As the author prefers to call them.

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millennium. It is divided into two parts: the first concerns the machinery used by some museums in the last century to project non-fictional moving images; the second analyzes the increasingly sensorial nature of reception in recent immersive museological environments. Yet, in both centuries, museums are purported to be interested in engaging audiences, just like cinema. Indeed, with today's expanded cinematic practices, the relationship between the two media is stronger than ever, causing Mandelli to claim that museums are becoming "cinematic spaces" by fostering a new reception dynamic with respect to the quantity, variety, and creativity of the documental moving images presented.

Mandelli stresses that there is no incompatibility whatsoever between spectacle and education and that entertainment is being used increasingly often as a strategy to attract fascinated audiences within a didactic context. Although the author attributes great importance to the immersion that moving images can induce in museums, she does not neglect the educational role of each curatorial project used as a case study in the book. She is careful to attribute a specific meaning to the use of certain technologies and/or cinematic *dispositifs*, which are never presented as being gratuitous or just aligned with entertainment. As the author claims, museums are not neutral spaces, therefore the use of moving images in permanent or temporary exhibitions marks a perfectly assumed ideological stance undertaken by such cultural agents. This positioning on Mandelli's part is fundamental because it ensures that the book is truly placed at the confluence of museology and cinema, which constitutes its greatest originality, as the author herself is aware of: "Moving-images installations in non-artistic museums, such as those of history or science, have long been overlooked […]" (Mandelli, 2019, p.4). The approach is even more interesting as Mandelli goes beyond the production and reception of images, delving into the relationship between museums and cinema from an institutional perspective as well. Indeed, the author claims that resorting to moving images and to consumption practices akin to those of cinema is quite beneficial for museums in terms of financial sustainability, modernization, and the interest generated. Although the author does not put it this way, curated spaces become cinematic in a more pragmatic way that has to do with institutional survival beyond the educational role performed, which is a plus to the overall argument that she makes.

In *The Museum as Cinematic Space*, Mandelli's approach to the projection technologies of moving images in museums is not only chronological but also phenomenological. A three-way interest is recognizable in the alignment of chapters, encompassing the educational value of the *dispositifs*, their artistic nature, and the experiential factor. In what pertains to education, the aim to project moving images in museums to produce cultural memorials gave way to a desire for reaching a broader, less specialized, more popular type of visitor. At the Imperial War Museum in the UK, in the 1920s and 1930s, Mutoscopes were placed in the galleries close to artifacts so that the moving images they showed could stimulate viewers' curiosity and their direct engagement with the objects

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and the issues at hand. Artistically, the design of the museological space and the nature of the exhibition practices were extremely influenced by some European avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s. El Lissitzky, Fredrick Kiesler, László Moholy-Nagy, and the Bauhaus members "contributed to rethinking the exhibition as a complex and dynamic system articulated across multiple media" (Mandelli, 2019, p.46). They attracted audiences through clever manipulation of the space and the use of visual effects intended to convey a certain argumentative, narrative, logical or emotional perspective. Given how Mandelli describes their activities, they may be perceived as early curators. These artists were, additionally, responsible for the ensuing connection between the arts and the universal exhibitions from 1958 onwards. Brussels in 1958, New York in 1964–5, and Montreal in 1967 were true laboratories of expanded cinema, helping to invigorate the museums as living organisms (Mandelli, 2019, p.61). This, in turn, led to more recent displaying techniques, such as the non-linear visitors' itinerary and the dark environment with an absolute separation from the outside world (known as the "black box" model), which reinforce the experiential factor in attending museums nowadays. These venues increasingly educate through enactment and visceral sensations, corresponding to what Paul Williams in "Memorial Museums and the Objectification of Suffering" (2011) calls the "performing museum," in which the visitor is "fully immersed in a context that solicits emotional participation, appealing to the senses and bodily experience" (Williams in Mandelli, 2019, p.75).

The author is careful to point out that the immersive museum —partly corresponding to the recent trend of memory museums, where old incidents often experienced by minorities or anonymous people come alive in a new perspective— is a contentious topic. The critics of such venues claim that they anesthetize the visitors, whereas their apologists argue that they provide knowledge in a sensitive and empathic way (for more on this issue, cf. chapter 5). This immersion depends, as Mandelli recalls, on the type of audiovisual products consumed in said venues. Archival footage, educational documentaries with voice-over, historical reenactments with actors conveying emotional reality more than authentic information, and video testimonies of intimate and personal matters are overviewed in chapter 6. Like the very immersion, the audiovisual materials used can contribute to the manipulation of the audience, which calls for some pondering that Mandelli does not avoid. The nostalgic atmosphere of some History and Memory museums, oriented towards the preservation of the past, further activates the spectral relationship of both media.

The pinnacle of this interweaving of emotions and sensations is the "cinema-material installation," as per Maeve Connolly (in Mandelli, 2019, p.115) in *The Place of Artists' Cinema* (2009). These installations recreate the architecture of cinema itself, generating a hybrid form of consumption in which the entire exhibition room becomes a surface of (audio)visual inscription —the very opposite of the Mutoscopes first placed in museological galleries, where the viewers had to join the images

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through a peephole and activate a mechanism. The tactile dimension of museological reception is enhanced through a wide range of technical interfaces that act as further ways of bodily involvement.

The Museum as Cinematic Space: The Display of Moving Images in Exhibitions is, therefore, a very complete and interesting overview of two fields that are not usually considered together. Early cinema *dispositifs* and the black box type of museological reception have been dealt with on numerous occasions —the former on studies related to cinema and entertainment, and the latter with respect to art gallery installations. Their combination here is of extreme intermedial importance and cannot be stressed enough. Although Mandelli does not adopt an explicit discourse on intermediality, the subject is present in the very title of the book, and museums and cinema are treated by the author as hybrid media in themselves. Both "are naturally multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary and cross-pollinate with a variety of other fields" (Mandelli, 2019, p.7), as it is noted for museums; they are competing but mutually independent and complementary media or media practices, working in a cultural network (Mandelli, 2019, p.9).

To conclude, Mandelli's book is crystal clear, concise, chronologically well-organized, and contains crucial examples of *dispositifs* that are described in considerable detail for those who did not have the opportunity to attend the exhibitions in which they were employed. For example, the exhibition *The Trentino and the Great War. The Disappeared People / The Found History* (2008) at the Trento Tunnels; Peter Greenaway's *Peopling the Palaces* at the Venaria Reale Palace; the multimedia spectacle The Big Picture Show at the Imperial War Museum North at Manchester; and the Museo Laboratorio della Mente, created in a former psychiatric hospital and dealing with the very subject of madness, to name only a few, are worthy of the readers' scrutiny. These exhibitions —Italian and British— are richly illustrated in the book, contrary to others in which the dispositifs, although amply described by Mandelli, cannot be visualized. Had this gap been overcome, the readers would have benefitted even more from it. Nevertheless, I consider Mandelli's *The Museum as Cinematic Space* of high pedagogical value for all scholarly levels, providing an important and much-needed addition to the fields of Museum and Film Studies.

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