

Crystal Gazes:

Moving Images, Commodity Staging, and Display Practices of the Modern

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The present research aims to reread the aesthetics of the modern through the mapping of recurring forms traceable in different spheres: in early twentieth-century cinema, in places designated for consumption, and in the artistic practice of the historical avant-gardes.

The first chapter of the thesis is devoted to essential terminological issues, and, within the section, terms such as *display*, *dispositive* and *medium*, which are most commonly used to refer to the constellation of forms, architectures and technologies examined, are contextualized (see, among the vast literature on the terminology: Agamben 2006; Albera and Tortajada 2015, 21–44; Baudry 1970, 1975; Bellour 2012; Bolter and Grusin 2000; Casetti 2005, 2015; Deleuze 1988, 185–95; Foucault 1975, 1969; McLuhan 1964; Simondon 1958, 2014; Staniszewsky 1998; Wollen 1995).

The main object of research was then identified: the store window. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the storefront embodies the manifestation of consumption in the form of image. Single framing or montage in the continuity of urban space, the window turns out to be one of the gestures of showing (Friedberg 1993, 73–83). The analysis of the history and development

of the store window (see, e.g., Kiesler 1930; Friedberg 1993; Chung, Inaba, Koolhaas, Leong 2000), the materials used to compose it (see, e.g., Benjamin 1999 and Nichols 2013, 23–46, among the others), and its imposition as a form and as a cultural form (Benjamin 2002, vol. 2, 734), made it possible to detect the relatedness of these displays to the order of visibility established by cinema and their contiguity with the cinematic device. Genealogies of the cinematic device and consumer architectures were traced, describing their display component and respective spectatorship (Friedberg 1993, 47–94, 109–48). The tools of film and media archeological investigation were applied to the storefront, bringing out a construction which recalls the one adopted by the “cinema of attractions” and, at the same time, an organization comparable to the display of goods in a storefront was recognized in the space of the cinematic frame (Gunning 1983, 1989; Gaudreault 2006; Musser 2006). It investigated the migration to places of consumption of the aesthetic codes developed by the avant-garde to renew the exhibition space (Gough 2003; Levi 2010, Klonk 2009, 87–134; Staniszewsky 1998, 1–58), marked by a recurring *cinématisme* (Eisenstein 2009, Somaini 2014,

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2017), a kinetic tension that moves visitors' gaze and thought. The first part of the thesis constitutes an interdisciplinary and composite mapping of the visible, strained between the virtualization of the gaze that characterizes the cinematic viewer and its simultaneous re-materialization at the moment when, outside the theater, he finds himself immersed in a city-exhibition space, whose fragmentary surface is littered with *quasi-filmic* devices.

The second part of the text explored the theory and practice of Frederick Kiesler, one of the most representative figures of the aesthetic renewal taking place at the beginning of the last century. The description and analysis of the practice of the architect, theorist and artist—Viennese by birth and American by adoption—testified the successful integration of the aesthetic codes of the avant-garde into extra-artistic and extra-European spheres (Makaryk 2018; Held 1982, 42–47). Kiesler's Correalist theory is introduced, although fully formulated by the author only later (Kiesler 1939, 1949, 1965), as anticipated, during the early 1920s, by group show installations and thematic exhibitions where he has the opportunity to test his intuitions regarding the balance of forms and bodies in space, as in the Viennese exhibition *Internationale Ausstellung neuer Theatertechnik* in 1924. The Correalist thought, rooted in the theories of the De Stijl movement, is brought into dialogue in an unprecedented way with the philosophy of technique, in particular with Gilbert Simondon's theories regarding the genesis and development of technical objects and the human need from which they originate (Simondon 2014).

Kieslerian thought finds accomplished materialization in revolutionary technical innovations for the display of artworks, such as the "Leger und Trager" system, which, by dislocating the works in an insular pattern allows for complete navigation of the exhibition space (Klonk 2009, 114), and in visionary scenic interventions for the theater, such as 1923's Berlin staging of Karel Čapek's play *Rossum's*

Universal Robots (R.U.R. 1920), a media apparatus that transforms the stage into a viewing machine and anticipates future media such as closed-circuit television and virtual reality (Held 1982, 15; Graham 2013, 112–42; McGuire 2019). Kiesler is concerned, in theory and practice, with issues related to the cinematic device and in particular the screen, which he relates to other viewing technologies (McGuire 2007). In 1929 in New York, he set up the Film Arts Guild Cinema which included a new type of modular screen, the "Screen-o-Scope," and a never fully used multiple projection system (McGuire 2007, 52; Bruno 43–4), the "Project-o-Scope". In the manifesto *100% Cinema*—published in the magazine *Close up* in 1928 - he takes a position in the lively debate on the technical reproduction of film, taking angles shared or opposed by his contemporaries (see, e.g., Arnheim 1957, 4–6, 33, 75, 84, 106–11, 204–5, 217, 218, 226 and Kiesler 2014, 31–32).

The fourteen storefronts set up by Kiesler between 1927 and 1928 for Saks Fifth Avenue in New York manifest, again, the ideal of spatiotemporal continuity pursued by the architect. They construct a seamless narrative path, a sequence where the rarefied narrative is activated by a carefully emptied profilmic (Phillips, 2017; Haran 2013; McGuire 2017). Kieslerian window displays and the utopian designs for museums and consumer spaces collected in the volume *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display*, published in New York by Brentano (Kiesler 1930), take up the dual significance of the *screen* concept: on the one hand a generator of visibility and, at the same time, an instrument of masking (on this subject see, e.g., Huhtamo 2006; Casetti 2014; Rogers 2019; Carbone, 2020). The architect, in the final chapters of the volume (Kiesler, 1930, 100–42), envisions the scenario of the development of consumer architectures through the evolution of storefronts on the *façade*, anticipating the emergence of the shopping mall as a place of spectacular entertainment (Friedberg 1993, 122) and foretells the transformation of spectator and

consumer behavior through the penetration of European avant-garde thinking into American everyday life.

To the conclusions of the thesis, through the analysis of a corpus of filmic works—which comprises *Ghiro Ghiro Tondo* (Yervant Gianikian, Angela Ricci Lucchi, 2007), *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962), *One from the Heart* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1981); *The Creators of Shopping Worlds* (Harun Farocki, 2001), *Nocturama* (Bertrand Bonello, 2016)—is delegated the problematization

of the opposite and complementary issue to the crystallization of the storefront window as a *para-cinematic* device. If the storefront offers itself as a device that produces images and shapes a new gaze—the mobile, episodic but not yet virtualized gaze of the cinematic image—conversely, cinema can become a display and space of the staging of object repertoires and identities mediated by the relationship with commodities.

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