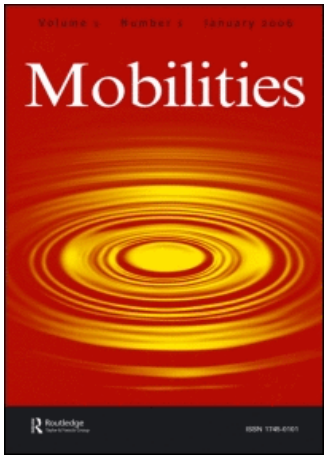

Mobilities
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t724921262

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Online Publication Date: 01 March 2008
To cite this Article: Cronin, Anne M. (2008) 'Mobility and Market Research: Outdoor Advertising and the Commercial Ontology of the City', Mobilities, 3:1, 95 - 115
To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/17450100701797349
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17450100701797349

Mobilities
Vol. 3, No. 1, 95–115, March 2008

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Mobility and Market Research: Outdoor Advertising and the Commercial Ontology of the City

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ABSTRACT *This article explores the centrality of mobility in the practices of the outdoor advertising industry, analysing how commercial conceptualisations of mobility orient the production and sale of advertising space on roadside billboards, panels in pedestrian zones, on buses and taxis, and in train stations. I explore how the industry's market research practices conceive of urban space as mobility, and how understandings of mobility impact upon the design of advertising structures and their textual content. I conceptualise as a retroduction the relationship between market research practices, the aesthetics of advertising design and the visual engagement of people with advertisements. This is a performative relationship that produces a commercial ontology of the city. These retroductive relationships do not merely reproduce the hegemony of an urban commodity culture; they open up alternative ways of knowing the city.*

KEY WORDS: city, market research, commercial ontology, commercial aesthetics of mobility

While much of the recent work on mobility and space has explored social change (such as in migration or tourism), technological change (e.g. mobile phones), or travel policy, there has been much less emphasis on commercial and marketing understandings of mobility. This is a significant omission as commerce and commercial knowledge-producing activities are central to shaping what the city is and can be – that is, they play a key role in producing a commercial ontology of the city. Based on ethnographic research on the outdoor advertising industry in the UK, this article explores the industry's conceptualisation of mobility in its market research and graphic design practices.[1] As the industry's assets are based in outdoor urban environments, including transport environments, it is unsurprising that questions of how and why people move around these spaces should be a focus of the industry's research. Perhaps more surprising is the relationship that has developed between these market research practices, the design of outdoor advertisements and the visual reception of the advertisements by people in these spaces. The first section of the paper examines the literature on mobility and cities, and notes the paucity of

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1745-0101 Print/1745-011X Online/08/010095–21 © 2008 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/17450100701797349

analysis of contemporary outdoor advertising. The following sections explore the industry's market research practices and their focus on mobility, and these practices' relationship with the development of what I call 'a commercial aesthetics of mobility' in the graphic design of outdoor advertisements. The final sections of the paper analyse how movement is framed by the industry as *attention* or a kind of 'mobile reception', and then goes on to explore how the interaction of these market and graphic design practices creates for the city's inhabitants alternative modes of seeing and knowing urban space.

Thinking the City Through Mobility

There is a well-established academic interest in movement, bodies and cities, and several studies have sought to understand cities *through* the conceptualisation of movement. Sennett notes that the discovery of the circulation of blood in the body influenced 18th-century understandings of the ideal design of urban space: 'planners sought to make the city a place in which people could move and breathe freely, a city of flowing arteries and veins through which people streamed like healthy blood corpuscles' (Sennett, 1994, p. 256). Social relations in modernity also came to be viewed through the lens of movement: Simmel argued that analysis had for too long focused on the static configuration of place, for 'humanity in general only gains the existence that we know through mobility' (1997, p. 160). Benjamin (2003, p. 65), too, proposed that with modernity came 'the advent of new mobilities, which gave life an altered rhythm' and 'new tempo' which he saw in the urban speed and rhythm of traffic but also in the cycle of fashion and the temporality of news-reporting. Park, Burgess & McKenzie's (1968 [1925]) classic study, *The City*, placed mobility at the centre of its understanding of the morphology of the modern metropolis:

> Transportation and communication, tramways and telephones, newspapers and advertising, steel construction and elevators – all things, in fact, which tend to bring about at once a greater mobility and a greater concentration of the urban populations – are primary factors in the ecological organization of the city. (Park, Burgess & McKenzie, 1968, p. 2)

For them mobility was 'the pulse of the community' from which one could read off social change (ibid., p. 59).

The significance of advertising, flagged but not fully analysed by Park, Burgess & McKenzie, received some attention in the 1960s and 1970s from studies of road systems and their relation to the sign systems of outdoor advertising. Kevin Lynch's (1960, p. 2) seminal analysis, *The Image of the City*, focused on people's mental image of urban space and argued that 'moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts'. Appleyard, Lynch & Myer's (1966, p. 63) later study of American highways proposed that 'the experience of the city is basically a moving view' and focused on the visual sequencing of various elements of roadway infrastructure such as bridges in relation to moving observers. In both these studies outdoor advertising was cited as part of the visual landscape but received only cursory analysis. It was only with Venturi, Scott Brown & Izenour's study of Las Vegas' 'commercial vernacular

architecture' of shop fronts and billboards as a 'communication system' that outdoor advertising came to be analysed in any detail (1977, pp. 8, 119). For them, highway signs and advertising billboards formed the 'megatexture of the commercial landscape' through which cars moved, forming a 'brutal automobile landscape of great distances and high speeds' (ibid., p. 119). Movement was not merely incidental to their analysis – it took a central place: 'the Las Vegas Strip is not a chaotic sprawl but a set of activities whose pattern, as with other cities, depends on the technology of movement and communication and the economic value of land' (ibid., p. 76).

The relationship between outdoor advertising, movement and urban space that Venturi *et al.* explored is far from new. Nineteenth-century English cities were nightly replastered in advertising posters by 'external paper hangers'; the streets teemed with 'sandwich-men' carrying advertising boards and people distributing handbills; advertisements were projected onto buildings by magic lanterns (Elliott, 1962; Fraser, 1981; Nevett, 1982; Wischermann & Shore, 2000). Advertisers exploited cities' densities as efficient means of communicating with large numbers of people but also enlisted mobile means of circulating their advertising 'puffs'. Turner quotes a 19th-century commentator's description of one such mobile device:

> An indescribable column mounted like the tower of Juggernaut upon the body of a [carriage] – a hybrid between an Egyptian obelisk and the ball-surmounted column of an English country gentleman's estate. It bore the inscription of 'washable wigs'. (cited in Turner, 1965, p. 74)

In another of Turner's examples of mobile commercials, a hatter in the Strand 'mounts a huge lath and plaster Hat, seven-feet high, upon wheels; sends a man to drive it through the streets' (Turner, 1965, p. 75). Indeed, the expansion of outdoor advertising in public space – visible to all members of society – caused considerable consternation which was directed primarily at its perceived effects on public morality and decency, and on the impact outdoor advertising was having upon the aesthetics of the countryside and cities. In 1893, the National Society for Checking Abuses of Public Advertising (SCAPA) was set up to attempt to curb the impact of advertising on such spaces (Fraser, 1981), to the derision of the United Bill Posters Association which described it as the 'Society of Busybodies' (Turner, 1965, p. 107). Mobile forms of advertising were seen as particularly invidious as they encroached on public space in all manner of ways. In 1894, a leading pill company offered a free mainsail bearing the company's advertising slogan to every boatsman and fisherman in the country, to which Eastbourne Council responded by prosecuting a local fisherman who had taken up the offer on the charge that he was 'disfiguring the foreshore' (Turner, 1965, p. 109). This historically-rooted emphasis on advertising's effects on the aesthetics of space has been taken up in contemporary times by the Campaign to Protect Rural England which seeks further restrictions on advertising such as that on trailers parked in fields next to motorways. More general concerns about decency, as well as honesty in advertising, are dealt with by the Advertising Standards Authority which is the conduit of a complex range of social critique (see Cronin, 2004c).

There were clearly few limits to the ingenuity of advertisers and their exploitation of the circulation of people and vehicles in 19th-century cities. The visual landscape

was cluttered with a variety of forms of promotion and the result was, as Henkin (1998) argues, that outdoor advertising came to play a significant role in helping build a public space formed through words and images. Advertisers were coming to appreciate the significance of people's mobility and were seeing them as mobile target markets: in 1927 one promoter bragged of Times Square in New York, 'more people were passing through [the district] than any other spot, creating a concentrated purchasing power of potential customers' (cited in Leach, 1996, p. 236). And by the 1920s, America's outdoor advertising industry was exploiting an understanding that 'the road now comprised a boundless marketplace ''millions of miles long'' …. The highway had become the ''buyway''' (Gudis, 2004, p. 1). Writing from the perspective of an advertising practitioner in 1930s America, Agnew (1938, p. 149) noted how the outdoor advertising industry came to understand and exploit this new mobile market of 'people on wheels':

> The increased mobility of the people, due principally to the automobile and the new highways, has greatly extended the boundaries of retail trading areas…. This moving population is 'the outdoor market' which is reached only by advertising outdoors. (ibid., p. 93)

The outdoor advertising industry had taken mobility seriously and had understood what Simmel called 'the miracle of the road' which succeeds in 'freezing movement into a solid structure that commences from it and in which it terminates' (Simmel, 1997, p. 171). It is therefore surprising that following the 1960s and 1970s studies of commercial architecture and highways, there have been very few detailed analyses of contemporary outdoor advertising.[2] More attention has focused on market research on space but such studies tend to emphasise residential location and identity (especially socio-economic group) over mobility (Burrows & Gane, 2006; Gandy, 1993; Goss, 1995). Monmonier (2002, p. 140), for instance, argues that for market researchers, 'knowing where we live is nearly as useful as knowing what we might buy'. Recent work in social theory, however, has taken up Simmel's call for a focus on movement, understanding mobility as 'socially produced motion' (Cresswell, 2006, p. 3). This new 'mobilities paradigm' aims to go beyond 'terrains' as spatially fixed geographies (Sheller & Urry, 2006). But while there is growing interest in data gathering in sites of mobility such as airports (Adey, 2004; Curry, 2004), there is still little work focusing on how market research conceives of mobility. The following section addresses this absence and focuses on the market research of the outdoor advertising industry, examining the particular significance that the industry places on mobility.

Market Research and Mobility

In his classic work *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre plays with understandings of energy, time and space that have been developed by the disciplines of physics and astronomy to comprehend the material world. These conceptualisations, he suggests, offer interesting avenues for analysis should we include social as well as physical energies in the conceptual framework:

> When we evoke 'energy', we must immediately note that energy has to be deployed with a space. When we evoke 'space', we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so: the deployment of energy in relation to 'points' and within a time frame. When we evoke 'time', we must immediately say what it is that moves or changes therein. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 12)

Elsewhere I have explored the production of the city through this nexus of energy–time–space by focusing on the outdoor advertising industry's calculative practices of measuring and classifying people and spaces (Cronin, forthcoming). In that analysis I identified a particular form of energy – a calculative energy that forms what the industry understands as a 'commercial vitalism'. Here, I am supplementing that analysis with a focus on energy as *mobility* and I examine how the industry attempts to understand and exploit the productive nexus of mobility–time–space.

The outdoor advertising industry constructs and maintains advertising sites (billboards, panels on buses, panels in pedestrian zones of cities etc) and sells advertising space on them to clients, usually via media agencies or specialist poster buying companies. My study focused on the media owners, companies such as J.C.Decaux, Clearchannel, CBS Outdoor (formerly Viacom), Titan and Primesight. To promote their assets, media owners commission market research companies to produce data on the benefits of the types of sites they hold and the people or 'target markets' likely to view those sites as they move around urban spaces. These data are then selectively edited into PowerPoint presentations which the media owners use as a form of promotion to persuade clients to advertise with them. Indeed, all project findings are presented by the industry in ways which integrate a pitch – they are all oriented towards persuading media agencies and clients of the value of using a particular company's services. The data produced by the research projects of the industry are not necessarily viewed by its practitioners as accurate or 'true', but they function efficiently as a currency for the industry in their everyday practices of producing and maintaining commercial relationships between media owners, media agencies and clients. In its role as an industry currency, data can be used as a decision-support technology, a post-rationalisation, or an alibi for commercial decisions, and as all parties in the industry agree to the system, this use of data 'stitches together' these market relationships enabling them to function smoothly (see Cronin, 2004a, 2004b).

In producing understandings of urban space, the practitioners of the outdoor advertising industry place some emphasis on specificity of location with the aim of targeting particular groups of potential consumers. 'Personicx Geo' is a market research tool used by the industry which is promoted as a 'segmentation and GIS solution'. It classifies domestic postcodes into 60 'predictive clusters' based on lifestyle, lifestage, income and attitudes. For example, the 'Social Explorers' cluster is defined in these terms:

> These households enjoy an income of £25,000 to £29,000 from their job in middle management. That income allows them to indulge in the hobbies they enjoy such as gourmet foods and wines and going to the pub. They like going skiing and taking holidays in the sun in the Caribbean and Asia. They are

> generous with their money and donate to animal welfare, wildlife and human rights charities. They make good use of their digital and satellite televisions, using them for betting, home finance, home shopping and internet access. These people also own premium products and services which may be unconventional. (Personicx Geo database)

But while the emphasis on locale – here refined to postcode area – and specificities of topography is important for some of the industry's clients, the industry places far greater stress on people's mobility and understands space through *movement* rather than location. For instance, the Institute for Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), an industry body representing the interests of the media owners, has recently produced 'Touchpoints', a marketing database which aims to provide an industry standard for marketing data and classifications. It was based on a research project conducted by a major market research company, TNS, and studied seven days in the life of 5,000 people in the UK in late 2005. Research subjects filled in PDA diaries every 30 minutes for seven days. The main findings of the project emphasised increasing time spent outdoors (or 'out-of-home'), a focus clearly of interest to an industry selling outdoor advertising space in competition with broadcast and press media. The findings were presented in such a way as to stress a broad segmentation of 'The Outsiders' and 'The Insiders' – 'The Outsiders': 19 million adults; 41% of the population; more important to them to be outside the home than at home; spend at least 7.5 hours a day OOH [out-of-home]; mean hours out of home 9.6 per day. 'The Insiders': nearly 17 million adults; 35% of adults; spend five hours out of home or less per day; they spend an average 12 hours a day awake and at home. The findings were used by media owners in their pitches to potential clients to claim 'mobility as a new segmentation':

- There is a structural shift in time in-home/time out-of-home
- We spend 6.5 hrs a day OOH, but this is much higher for valuable groups
- 19 million adults – The Outsiders – spending 9.6 hours or more OOH per day
- Younger, upscale, affluent, active
- Traditional in-home media exposure is more and more polarised to Insiders – spend 12 hours in-home
- The growing car commute is impacting on availability to read – Outsiders penetration and engagement time much reduced
- Outsiders are early adopters of new technology
- Their communication channels are increasingly Outdoor, Internet and Radio and converging mobile technology[3]

These companies are increasingly using ideas about mobility as a marketing taxonomy, supplementing conventional marketing segmentations of socio-economic class. The research director at a major outdoor advertising company described this group of highly mobile people: 'they're not all young people, they're not all old; they're a broad spectrum. They're not all ABC1, they're not all C2DE. The definition of them is their mobility, either the amount of travel or the amount of time that they spend outside of their home' (interview with Research Director).

Another company, CBS Outdoor, commissioned a study it called 'The Mobile Pound' which aimed to understand people's movement in cities and then pitch it as a

sales point to clients who might be persuaded to use outdoor advertising. Part of the pitch was that people on the move had a 'mobile mindset' which predisposed them to search out new products and be open to spontaneous purchasing. As one practitioner in the company described it:

> The more mobile you are the more you are actively looking for new products and new things to try, and it's not to do with how much money you have or what type of person you are…. it's the mindset…. you are out and about more, you do more things, you're more spontaneous, you're actually looking for new brands….. On the high street [people] tend to be awake, they tend to be alert….. Obviously they're doing something, they're trying to avoid some of the people around them, they're actually looking for shops, looking in shop windows…. The mindset is open to opening a dialogue with them when they're on the high street…. And the more mobile people are, the more likely [they] are to be exposed to outdoor advertising in this receptive state. (interview with marketing practitioner)

This company translated these understandings into claims about 'consumers on the move' that would be attractive to their potential clients:

- 75% of purchase *decisions are made* out of home
- 61% of adults agree they are *more interested in* things to buy when they're 'out and about' as opposed to sitting at home
- 54% of people have *bought things on impulse* that they have seen advertised when 'out and about'[4]

Here, the mobility of people in urban space is not defined solely in abstract terms through their movement; it is understood by the industry as a social practice situated in specific contexts. Thus, the movements of travel are interspersed with moments of stasis that the industry calls 'dwell time'. This time waiting on tube platforms, in train stations, at bus stops and in airports is highly valuable and is carefully researched and quantified. The average time spent waiting on a tube platform, for instance, was found to be three minutes, a fact that was much played upon in the industry's promotional strategies.

New technologies are deployed within the industry to tap into the perceived benefits of people's mobility and their dwell time. As well as more established techniques such as viral marketing or experiential marketing,[5] various companies in my study were starting to deploy technologies such as Bluetooth-enabled posters (e.g. from which a passerby could download a short video or electronic coupon), interactive advertising at bus shelters (in which people can press a button to hear a promotional music or film clip), and roadside digital poster sites which can be updated in real time and sold according to time of day (known as 'day part') for time-sensitive advertising such as lunch offers. Some such panels show five advertisements per minute interspersed with travel information such as news on traffic jams. But it is easy to overstate the ubiquity and power of such new technologies in outdoor advertising. Almost all of these technological innovations are restricted to advertising sites in London and, due to cost, there are still very few of them. Media owners are concerned about 'ROI' (return on investment) and it has not been easy to sell space on some of the new sites. For

instance, advertising space on new digital panels on tube escalators sold rapidly when the technology was being launched – many companies want to achieve a 'media first', that is, the extra promotional benefit of being featured in trade press accounts of a new advertising form, technique or technology. But after its much-heralded inception, the media owner has found it hard to sell that space. Industry practitioners speculate that this is because the brand managers in the client firms tend to be conservative about their choice of media (the 'safe', default choice is television advertising). So while the new technologies attempt to tap into and benefit from people's mobility, it is less clear that these technological innovations amount to a rapidly spreading, ever-more sophisticated exploitation of people on the move – the picture seems rather more uneven and complicated.

From my research, then, it became clear that the industry's conceptualisation of the city as energy–time–space was based primarily on mobility and that the impact of the industry on the city is not restricted to its visual effect on the city's image-scape or its economic input (in subsidising transport systems, for instance). The outdoor advertising industry plays a key part in forming the commercial ontology of the city through its production of marketing knowledges about people and space. By continually generating measurements and calculations of people *moving* in urban space, the industry represents the city in quantitative figures (e.g. the numbers of people passing every panel is assessed and collated by the industry body POSTAR), and qualitative accounts (e.g. the 'mobile mindset').

While understandings of spatiality, bodies and movement have been the subject of numerous academic analyses (e.g. Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Goffman, 1972; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), it seems clear that commercial knowledges and practices of these same themes have more immediate, tangible impacts on the world as it is apprehended and lived by most people. Such marketing representations do not mirror or distort the reality of spaces; they function actively to make or perform spaces. This can be understood through the concept of retroduction. For Massumi, this is more than a retrospection or an incorporation of elements learnt from previous interactions. Retroduction is a performance which is 'a production, by feedback, of new movements. A dynamic unity has been retrospectively captured and qualitatively converted' (Massumi, 2002, p. 10). This is a recursive feedback relationship in which understandings and practices performatively loop back on one another. In this conceptualisation, 'space itself is a retroduction, by means of the standardization of measurement' (ibid.). My focus in the following section is how such marketing practices of measurement and classification form a retroductive production in which spaces come to be constituted and understood *as movement*. By feeding back marketing understandings of mobility into the practices of targeting 'mobile' people, the industry creates for city space a commercial ontology of mobility. One element of this can be tracked in the production of a commercial aesthetics of mobility.

The Commercial Aesthetics of Mobility

> When nothing arrests our gaze, it carries a very long way. But if it meets with nothing, it sees nothing, it sees only what it meets. Space is what arrests our gaze, what our sight stumbles over: the obstacle, bricks, an angle, a vanishing

> point. Space is when it makes an angle, when it stops, when we have to turn for it to start off again. There's nothing ectoplasmic about space; it has edges, it doesn't go off in all directions, it does all that needs to be done for railway lines to meet well short of infinity. (Perec, 1999, p. 81)

Outdoor advertising forms part of what our sight 'stumbles over' in the busy visual clutter of contemporary cities. As part of a broader sensory regime, space and sight articulate to produce the lived city, and it is this relationship that is both influenced by, and acts to constitute, advertising's commercial aesthetics of mobility. Companies' appreciation of the mobility of potential consumers in urban spaces impacts upon the graphic style and textual content of ads and also upon the structural form of advertising panels, such as the size of billboards which aim to capture the attention of people in cars. But it is a common complaint within the industry that creative advertising agencies – the agencies which produce the textual content of advertisements – misunderstand outdoor formats and tend to produce inappropriate content which makes little visual impact in the specific outdoor environment, for instance, on a bus travelling along a high street or on a billboard by a busy road. This is of concern to the industry as poor graphic design of advertisements reflects badly on the outdoor advertising sector as a whole because such advertisements are less likely to generate positive responses from people in post-campaign research when they are asked to recall specific campaigns. This has led one company to produce material to coach creative agencies in the most appropriate design of outdoor advertisements centred on an understanding of mobility and reception whilst mobile. 'Project Leonardo' aimed to provide a benchmark for graphic design on bus advertising:

What makes a top campaign?

- Contrasting colour schemes
- Noticeable ad colours
- Fewer rather than more words
- Clear, concise branding
- A simple proposition
- Some degree of familiarity with product or advert

Now we know great bus ads have…

- Around 7 words
- Clear branding
- Large text
- Primary colours / b/w for backgrounds

These rules of graphic design, linked to an understanding of the mobility of the target viewers, are well-established in the practices of the industry. In 1938, Agnew outlined the principles of good poster advertising emphasising bold lettering, brevity of message and appealing clear-cut images. These graphic techniques 'that may be absorbed quickly and from a distance are effective for displays showing to automobile and fast-moving mass traffic on the important streets, highways and boulevards' (Agnew, 1938, p. 220). Unlike the urban environment that they will inhabit with its rich semiotic 'noise', advertisements must be uncluttered and

unambiguous. Contemporary practitioner-oriented accounts emphasise these same rules of legibility, colour and simplicity, all designed to attract and hold the attention of the moving urban target market:

> The poster has been called the pictorial equivalent of a shout. Today we might replace shout with sound bite…. Today the outdoor ad is a SITE BITE, ideally an integration of image and message – simple but not simplistic. (Bernstein, 1997, pp. 212–213)

The 'site bite' of the poster, however, orients itself less to the static audience understood in terms of location, than to the mobile audience that sees on the move. Gudis (2004, p. 94) proposes that roadside advertising embodies 'an aesthetics of speed'. In her analysis of the growth of automobile culture, highways and roadside billboards in America, this is an appropriate way of conceiving the graphic design of posters which were designed to be seen at a distance and at speed. But once you include an analysis of other outdoor advertising formats that are typically found in UK cities, such as panels in pedestrian areas, building 'wraps' in urban centres, advertising on buses and taxis, bus shelter advertising, advertising in underground train stations, the more appropriate phrase would seem to be 'an aesthetics of mobility'. In the UK travel landscape, quite distinct from the wide open spaces and super-extensive highways of America, imagining an aesthetics of mobility rather than speed takes account of the rhythms of movement and stasis (or 'dwell time') typical of UK travel practices and also flags a particular way of seeing oriented by those practices.

This concern with movement and mediation is part of a long-standing academic interest in the 'ways of seeing' that various forms of mobility elicit. Schivelbusch (1980) famously noted how the blurring of the foreground view on railway journeys shifted emphasis to the distant or panoramic view thus instituting the panorama as the new norm for apprehending and appreciating the landscape. Cinema studies have also sought to understand the relationship between moving bodies and moving images. Several accounts emphasise not merely the abundance of images of the city in film, but the co-informing relationship of film and the city. City life with its speeds and stimulations produced particular modalities of vision – fragmented, saccadic, saturated with signification – and film offered ways of understanding and inhabiting the constantly moving and evolving city (AlSayyad, 2006; Clarke, 1997; Donald, 1999). Others have suggested how driving in the city resonates with the experience of viewing film sequences. Robertson draws on the visual sequencing work of Appleyard, Lynch & Myer (1966) to suggest the cinematic quality of automobility: 'the melting of one scene into another, one view disappearing before another is set up, echoes and hints of past and future views, sudden transitions and connecting links' (Robertson, 2007, p. 86).

So while advertisements certainly aim to conform to a distinctive commercial aesthetic in which their graphic design is bold, simple and striking, people's visual engagement with them is also influenced by other urban ways of seeing generated by various transport technologies and cultural forms such as cinema and photography. Moreover, the visual engagement with urban texts may be influenced by other sensory inputs such as smell or hearing. In individuals' mediated urban journeys, for instance, static advertising texts may become animated by their car's internal

soundtrack creating 'a sonic envelope', as Bull (2005, p. 247) puts it, in which sound and vision meld to form a sensory amalgam. 'Mobile reception' of stationary advertisements, integrated with other sensory inputs, creates an ambiguity about what is moving and what is not, a paradox summed up by de Certeau's observations of a railway journey as, 'a travelling incarceration. Immobile inside the train, seeing immobile things slip by. What is happening? Nothing is moving inside or outside the train' (1998, p. 111). The impression produced by the retroduction of marketing understandings of 'mobile people' and the commercial aesthetics of mobility is that the city itself is moving – its buildings, its inhabitants, its ways of knowing and being known – creating a commercial ontology of mobility. This fluid sense of movement creates interesting research problems for the industry which responds by focusing on perception as a form of attention.

Mobility as Attention

The recursive feedback relationship, or retroduction, of commercial aesthetics, marketing understandings of 'mobile consumers' and the experience of mobility in urban space is particularly evident in the example of car advertisements. As an advertising format, the outdoor sector is especially popular with clients advertising products associated with mobility such as mobile phones and cars. The UK telecommunications industry spent £102,468,775 on outdoor advertising in 2006, while the motor industry and the travel and transport industries spent £57,856,745 and £53,606,272 respectively. It is the mobile nature of the urban experience, the outdoor use of mobile phones, and the opportunity to advertise on mobile billboards such as buses and taxis that make outdoor advertising attractive for such industries. The telecommunications firm T-Mobile, for instance, 'wrapped' 450 taxis in London and 160 in Birmingham for a year in branded 'liveries'. While mobile phones are a recent arrival on the outdoor advertising scene, cars have long been advertised in this way.

While there is some work on the textual content of car advertisements (Dery, 2006; Shukin, 2006; Wernick, 1991), less attention has been directed at car advertising's role in the performative production of space and mobile reception. This occurs through the interaction of several elements: (1) a commercial aesthetics of mobility; (2) marketing knowledge practices; and (3) the perceptual experience of moving in urban space. Within the industry, cars have come to be understood as 'the new mobile living room', as the MD of a media owning company put it, paralleling academic understandings of 'dwelling in the car' (Urry, 2006, p. 22) which may involve a range of leisure activities but may also include office work (Laurier, 2005). But the industry is interested less in what people may do in cars than the amount of time they spend en route where they will come into visual contact with a range of advertising sites such as billboards.

Car advertisements speak in an affective register offering pleasure, pride, glamour and status, and try to tap into the range of emotions that cars elicit in their owners such as attachment or feelings of independence (see Sheller, 2005). At home in their urban environment, car advertisements on roadside billboards are thought to speak in direct ways to 'consumers on the move'. But what is involved in this communication? The industry has found that people moving in urban space register

the brand names and advertising messages in advertisements far less often than the industry would like (Cronin, forthcoming). So although the advertisements are created with an ideal target market – or receiver of the message – in mind, the communication is rather more of a diffuse and often unheeded monologue than a direct dialogue. This is a mediation with lacunae, misunderstandings and often indifference or hostility on the part of the viewer.

But there are other forms of mediation taking place. Thrift (2004, p. 51) notes that with the development of sound and video systems, climate control, sound insulation and ergonomically designed interiors, the car has come to function as a monad which 'refers to the world outside itself via heavily intermediated representations'. But in their status as commodity, cars also refer to the world via the measurement and calculation practices of market research. As a retroduction, cars engage in dialogue with urban space via the feedback loops of the measurement systems of an industry body called POSTAR. This body produces vehicular and pedestrian counts by estimating the traffic that flows past each of the 100,000 roadside advertising panels in the UK, and then classifies each site according to a broad range of criteria including 'panel orientation' (angle of panel to incoming traffic), 'set backs' (distance from the kerb to the panel), 'eccentricity' (the angle a driver would have to turn their head to see a panel). These classifications emphasise the visual accessibility of panels to a moving 'consumer' or 'target market' and the data they help produce frames an understanding of space as densities of target markets and, more precisely, as the mobility of these targets. This is then fed back into the more qualitative practices of how marketing practitioners classify consumers.

In effect, practitioners' understandings of the mobile modes through which people may engage with advertisements impacts upon how those practitioners imagine specific target markets of consumers. In crude terms, outdoor advertising companies' assets are based on people moving around urban space (especially in cars) and some of the spaces they sell, for instance, on buses and taxis, themselves move around that space. The mobility of people as 'consumers' or 'target markets' is emphasised in their promotional pitches, as is their disposable income that their mobility purportedly makes them predisposed to spend (as we saw in the 'mobile mindset' example discussed earlier). In another example of this recursive effect, a research project carried out for the London Underground to explore potential advertising opportunities produced a classification of tube users as:

> interesting people e.g. experiences, hobbies/interests; independent mindset; appreciate and thrive on the buzz, diversity and opportunities of London; outgoing, energetic and enthusiastic personalities; social people who enjoy going out and having fun. (slide from industry Powerpoint presentation)

I have argued that the industry understands urban space primarily in terms of mobility, but what is most striking in the industry's identification and classification of potential consumers is the conceptualisation of mobility *as attention* or a kind of mobile perception. While academic research tends to cast modes of attention in urban spaces in terms of distraction (Benjamin, 1999) or the 'blasé attitude' of inattention and reserve (Simmel, 1995, p. 24), for evident commercial reasons the industry promotes an ideal of visual attentiveness as the epitome of urban modes of

mobility. Research commissioned by the Outdoor Advertising Association described the visual attention to digital escalator panels in the London Underground in these terms:

- An escalator ride is a classic 'empty moment'
- 'Up' and 'down' trips take about 60 secs – passengers actively seek distraction or stimulation
- People look once or twice per minute – around 4–9 secs duration
- Screens act as one – cumulatively can elicit long duration glances (46 secs longest recorded)
- Eyes pass progressively from screen to screen – linear media
- Lots of creative potential – not a TV showroom window but linear content

Source: Outdoor Advertising Association Powerpoint presentation

This form of 'mobile reception' or attention is framed as an active seeking of stimulation to fill the 'empty moments' of mobility and as a temporally extended set of visual engagements. This understanding is fed back into the production of advertisements on escalator panels to form a narrative sequence. To return to the example of car advertising, mobile reception is understood and implemented in the textual production of ads as a kind of mimesis: the car-in-motion on the road is re-presented in the form of a static, textual car-on-billboard. The graphic design or commercial aesthetics – itself defined by the textual 'rules' for targeting moving consumers – emphasises movement. In turn, the advertisement of the car situated in the car's urban environment impacts upon people's own understandings of their mobile practices: the glamorous associations of the ads that populate billboards may rub off on the experience of driving in the city, but equally may jar and irritate when juxtaposed with the reality of traffic jams and pollution. The understanding of consumers as increasingly 'on the move' (and therefore aptly targeted by billboards) is fed back to clients in the promotional material that the media owners produce and circulate in which the promotional images typically mimic the movement of traffic by the use of slow shutter speed in the camerawork (see Figure 1).

This retroductive looping of measurement data, aesthetics and ideas of mobile reception produces a strange form of dialogue between cars and car advertisements inhabiting those same urban environments. This raises questions which, although intriguing, go beyond the scope of this article: if perception is fundamentally embodied in the way suggested by Merleau-Ponty (1962), and if the 'driver-car' is neither thing nor person but 'an assembled social being that takes on the properties of both and cannot exist without both' (Dant, 2005, p. 74), then the embodied experience of driving a car interfaces in complex and surprising ways with outdoor advertisements. The retroductive quality of the outdoor advertising industry instigates a set of relationalities that disturbs conventional configurations of dialogue, agency and mobile experience. Alongside the standard (intended) communication between advertisement and 'consumer', the car ads on billboards 'speak to' the cars passing them via the representational activities of market research. In effect, the data gathering, processing and retroduction into material and aesthetic form connects texts and material cars in new ways and creates a form of mediation not based on standard linguistic communication. So, if the driver engages with the

Figure 1. Media owner's promotional image. *Source*: courtesy J.C. Decaux

car in a hybridised fashion, and the car is engaged in its own modes of communication with ads, what might this mean for the driver? Might this be another, differently mediated, form of 'mobile reception'? These questions aside, my task in the next section is to imagine how outdoor advertising impacts upon the viewer and their experience of urban space, and to sketch out the ways in which these mobile experiences may create new ways for people to apprehend and understand the city.[6]

Knowing the City Through 'Mobile Reception'

Advertising in urban space is often assumed to be a hegemonic or conservative force. The artist Krzysztof Wodiczko, for instance, claims that:

> An intense presence of historic monuments, advertising, communication media and urban events merge with our daily personal performance into one uniform aesthetic practice dangerously securing the continuity of 'our' culture. (Wodiczko, 2000, p. 87)

But I would argue that outdoor advertising's impact on urban space is far more nuanced and ambiguous than a mere homogenisation of the visual landscape, or hegemonic consumerist force. Instead of creating a semiotic conformity and deterministic visual coagulation of place, brand and sign, the mobility of people engaging with ads – combined with *ideas* of mobility that are worked into the production of advertising structures and textual content of ads – opens up the visual

field in unanticipated ways. Sheller & Urry (2006) ask if mobility is transforming our ways of knowing; below I suggest that in their emphasis on mobility, the outdoor advertising industry's knowledge practices create possibilities for those who move through urban space to that know that space differently.

For instance, outdoor advertising continually remakes the perceptual relationship between spatial generality and the specificity of location. People moving through urban spaces are likely to come across the same advertising campaigns many times in different locations and in various formats: on billboards, buses, panels in pedestrian zones, taxis (this is framed as valuable to clients wishing to raise or reinforce 'brand awareness'). This acts to bind together places in temporary, loose formations which are nowhere formally mapped. Advertisements on buses trace out shifting, advertising-intensive patterns in and around urban centres as they travel on their daily routes. Advertising companies rarely have control over where their advertising will be seen as specific buses may work different routes each day – such campaigns are not the strategies of the powerful in de Certeau's (1998) terms – so these semiotic sorties re-pattern the city daily with their commercial exhortations and help to remake people's sense of the city as amorphous and as mobile. As advertising space on roadside billboards and panels is bought in standard two-week blocks of time, so advertising content changes before any real connection between the billboard's contents and its location can be established. This continual changing of textual content and its spatial distribution disturbs perceptions of place specificity at the same as emphasising the transitivity of what counts as 'the city'.

The London Underground train system is an interesting example of advertising's re-patterning of urban space. There are elements of specificity to the practices of siting Underground advertising: companies code certain tube stations as male (Tottenham Court Road station with its proximity to an intensity of shops selling various technologies such as computers and cameras) and others female (such as Kensington High Street or Sloane Square with their proximity to clothes shops). These codings are then offered to potential clients as spatially gendered modes of targeting. But in general, marketing knowledges of the Underground see it as a spatially amorphous zone and therefore open to opportunity. The Underground map of stations and routes has, at best, an ambiguous referential relationship to the patterns of distance and place that exist above ground (as many a tourist has discovered). In this strange underworld – that Benjamin (2003), thinking of the Paris Métro, imagined as the subterranean unconscious of the city – which is denuded of above-ground perspective and signifiers of distance and place such as landmarks, advertising panels can inhabit and mark the space more fully than those above ground. Although they may not succeed in permanently associating particular spaces with specific brands, the placing of the panels and their changing textual content etch out a particular a subterranean geography and offer travellers ontological and spatial markers of their relationship to urban space in this barely legible zone. Well-known images, brands and text are distributed in tube stations, opposite platforms and in train carriages, and people's familiarity with the advertising form itself makes this unusual space seem less alien. This geography is defined first and foremost by mobility (and its companion element of 'dwell time'). Advertising acts to inhabit this dwell time and creates a strange effect of domestication, or making an 'interior' space of an urban exterior, in ways that Perec (1999) and Bachelard (1994) may have

Figure 2. London Underground advertising. *Source*: courtesy CBS Outdoor

appreciated (see Figure 2). If place can be seen as 'a knot tied from the strands of the movements of its inhabitants, rather than as a hub in a static network of connectors' (Thrift, 2006, pp. 141–142), then in the Underground the rhythms of movement and stasis, and the commercial aesthetics of mobility in the ad texts, combine to create a curious interior/exterior place. It is a place that is marked by the changing patterns of advertising texts which tie together localities in a space where conventional spatial cues are absent.

This focus on mobility means that the practices of the industry make 'place' as a tension between generality and specificity that is played out in commercial terms. In effect, this facilitates a shift in the terms of referentiality, a shift which allows new configurations of space, mobility and attention and also creates the conditions of possibility for spaces of dissonance. By tying ideas of mobility to understandings of people's attention, the industry's commercial practices open up the visual field to slippages. By producing outdoor advertisements according to the principles of a commercial aesthetics of mobility, the textual content favours bold text and simple messages. But viewed, as intended, when mobile in a car, on foot, on a bus or train, reception of these commercial messages may be reduced to snatches of text and glimpses of colour and images that are detached from the semiotic coherence of the original advertisement.

The result may be unanticipated juxtapositions with the urban environment that may speak of the city to the viewer in ways not intended by the advertiser. Figure 3 shows a partial view of a billboard on a busy road near a railway station that may well be representative of how people in motion engage with advertisements. The exhortation to 'expect more' juxtaposed with the debris of urban decay – evidence of the city council's

Figure 3. Suggestive juxtapositions between text and the city. *Source*: author's own photograph

under-funding? exemplifying industrial decline? – speaks to viewers in ways that may be subversive and is certainly quite distinct from the intentions of the company that produced the advertisement. Seen in this disjointed fashion, such fragments of text and image are detached from the commercial orientation of the advertising message and may

be received as colourful urban wallpaper – an imagistic substrate – or innocuous conversational gambits of apparently inanimate textual forms (Figure 4).

The marketing practices of the industry, and their retroductive relationship to ideas of mobility and aesthetics, thus make available to people moving through urban space alternative ways of understanding that space. The formal measurements of space, mobility and consumers that are produced by the industry do not necessarily create homogeneity or reductive visions of the social landscape. Discussing the artist Julie Mehretu's work, Thrift (2006, p. 141) argues that while much analysis has posited the metrics of measurement, division and calculation as antithetical to creativity – and, we might add, have understood the commercial operations of calculation as antithetical to the ideals of people's spontaneous, organic, lived reality – it may be more useful to think about metrication otherwise: 'metrics have added in as much as they have taken away, producing not only new practices and apprehensions of motion but also fertile sources of conflict' (ibid.). Such a combination of calculation and a commercial aesthetics may perhaps allow new ways of knowing the city to unfold, or make available alternative ways of apprehending those very capitalist (knowledge) practices that help constitute the city. Writers have noted how the high visibility that advertising affords brands can rebound and make those corporations prime targets of criticism (Goldman & Papson, 2006; Klein, 2000). But if, as Park *et al.* (1968, p. 1) argue, the city is as much 'a state of mind' as a composite of institutions and infrastructure, then might not the

Figure 4. Conversational gambit. *Source*: author's own photograph

mobile imagination of the outdoor advertising industry create new ways of knowing the city that are not necessarily determined by advertisers' intentions or the textual 'steer' of the advertisement?

Venturi, Scott Brown & Izenour's (1977) analysis of commercial architecture and roadside billboards in Las Vegas foregrounded outdoor advertising's impact as visual text on a sign-scape of images, texts and building facades that was oriented around a mobile consumer. While it is clearly the case that such advertising marks the space in striking ways, it would be wrong to restrict an analysis of outdoor advertising's significance to a straightforward 'input' of semiotic content into a preformed urban context. The outdoor advertising industry takes part in *performing* that space by retroductively incorporating market research understandings of mobility into the form and content of advertising, which in turn impacts upon how people experience their mobility in urban space and how they come to know the city. We can see that the relationship of mobility, advertising and cities is long-established; what is new is the intensity and recursive character of these market research practices and their explicit focus on mobile attention. Thus, if we can still imagine the city as a body composed of arteries, the circulation must include not only people but flows of knowledge, scopic regimes, affect and fragments of text. Moreover, the city is a body that produces ways of knowing itself, the most striking of which is mediated by a commercial ontology of the city in which the nexus of energy, time and space that Lefebvre conceived is refined to mobility–time–space.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following for their helpful comments on drafts of this paper: Anne-Marie Fortier, Ruth McElroy and anonymous reviewers.

Notes

1. The research was supported by ESRC grant number RES 000221744. The project involved 28 in-depth interviews of 45–90 minutes with practitioners in a range of London-based media-owning companies, media agencies, specialist poster agencies, trade associations, research companies and one client company. In addition, data such as briefs, research questionnaires, research project results and PowerPoint presentations was collected from these companies. The project also involved a two-week ethnography in 2006 with one media owner including observation of directors' meetings, brainstorming and creative sessions, construction and presentations of pitches, visits to clients and media agencies, staff training, and a range of in-depth interviews with staff. Other parts of the project involved a case study of the visual impact of outdoor advertising in Manchester.
2. Gudis' (2004) historical analysis of American roadside advertising is an exception.
3. A slide taken from an industry PowerPoint presentation directed at clients.
4. A slide taken from an industry PowerPoint presentation directed at clients.
5. On experiential marketing, see Moor (2003).
6. There has been almost no social science work on the reception of advertisements, so accounts (including this one) remain speculative.

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