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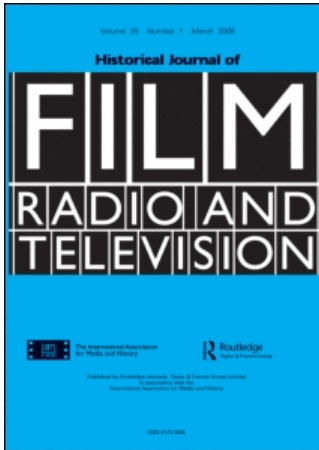
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PRESENTING THE 'WINDOW ON THE WORLD' TO THE WORLD. COMPETING NARRATIVES OF THE PRESENTATION OF TELEVISION AT THE WORLD'S FAIRS IN PARIS (1937) AND NEW YORK (1939)

Andreas Fickers

The progress made in the development of television gives us reason to believe that television will soon become of as great cultural importance as broadcasting is at present. Realizing that television is not merely a future business for a few manufacturers and businessmen but that television concerns everybody in Germany, the *Deutsche Reichspost* has taken up to the rule itself all matters concerning television. Being at that time encouraged by the impulses rising from the national socialistic idea, the development of television was encouraged with the aim to bring these valuable means of communication to as complete a state as possible and to place it as soon as it may be at the service of the whole nation.¹

It's with a feeling of humbleness that I come to this moment of announcing the birth in this country of a new art so important in its implications that is bound to affect all of society. It is an art that shines like a torch in a troubled world. It is a creative force, which we must learn to utilize for the benefit of all mankind. This miracle of engineering skill which one day will bring the world to the home also brings a new American industry to serve man's material welfare. Television will become an important factor in American economic life.²

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'At the service of the nation' or an 'industry to serve man's material welfare'—these two quotes perfectly introduce the central interest of this article, i.e. to demonstrate the competing visions of television promoted at the World's Fairs in Paris and New York. When television made its first appearance at these two World's Fairs, the 'new technology' had already run through a phase of inventions and technological developments of as many as 50 years! Since the late 19th century, the miracle of 'seeing by electricity' had been a prominent topic in science fiction literature and popular magazines. From the mid-1920s on, the literary popularization of television was paralleled by the public staging at numerous industrial fairs and exhibitions, so that critical observers of television's development began to question the euphoric promises of early television pioneers and enthusiasts.³ Despite these impatient voices, the World's Fairs—in their quality as politically and symbolically charged showcases of modernity—created a qualitatively new frame of exposition for television. In Paris and New York, television was no longer presented as a 'technical miracle', but shown in its potentiality as a new mass medium. Because of their high symbolic capital as prophets of a new time and icons of modernity, telecommunication technologies always benefited from their outstanding presentations during various World's Fairs (telephony at Philadelphia 1876, wireless telegraphy at St. Louis 1904, radio broadcasting at Ghent 1913 and San Francisco 1915). While the presentation of these technologies perfectly reflected the nature of the long 19th-century fairs as symbolic battlefields of western nations on their way to modernity, the way television technology was promoted at the World's Fairs in Paris and New York already mirrored the world in the era of ideological confrontation.

Using a comparative historical approach, the aim of this paper is twofold. In a first step, the different ambitions and devices of the two World's Fairs in Paris and New York, which formed the symbolic background for the presentation of television technology as national or industrial champion, will be the object of a structural comparison. Building on that broader cultural contextualization and historical placement, an analytical comparison will focus on the different political, economic and cultural contexts, which shaped the staging of television at these two occasions. The presentation of television—which often was promoted as 'the new electronic window to the world'—at the two 'world windows' in Paris and New York will thereby serve as a prominent case study for a comparative cultural history of technology and media. The metaphor of the 'window to the world' both used for the characterization of the World's Fairs and for television will be exploited for a broader interpretation of television and World's Fairs as cultural artifacts.

Paris and New York—between 'old Europe' and the 'world of tomorrow'?

When the 1937 World's Fair in Paris opened its doors in 25 May after quite a turbulent phase of preparation, only five of the 330 planned pavilions and representational buildings had been finished.⁴ Among these were the pavilions of Germany and the Soviet Union, which formed the architectural frame for the vanishing point of the exhibition plane: the Eiffel Tower, steely witness of the great Paris exhibition of 1889. Both characterized by a neoclassical monumental style,



FIGURE 1 The Paris World's Fair 1937: View from the Palais de Chaillot (Trocadéro) with the German (left) and the Soviet pavilion (right). Source: James D. Herbert, *Paris 1937. Worlds on Exhibition* (Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 1998), 15.

the two buildings on the banks of the Seine virtually symbolized the confrontation of two totalitarian 'Weltanschauungen'.

But in the plans of the chief architects of the exposition grounds, the French Charles Letrosne and Jacques Gréber, the two wings of the Palais de Chaillot—the face-lifted version of the old Trocadéro Palace (built in 1878)—symbolically embraced the two class enemies. With a 'peace column' placed in front of the main entrance of the Palais Chaillot, the general architectural plan was inspired by the idea of a peaceful alliance of all nations. The French minister of Trade Fernand Chapsal in his opening speech expressed this hope too: 'France's decision to hold this major event in insecure and difficult times demonstrates faith in its fate and the future of peace. And by taking up the invitation, the peoples of the world have demonstrated their solidarity with this faith and that they also intend to direct their efforts in the same objective. The World Exposition will have fallen short of its goal if it were merely a spectacle—whatever its brilliance.'⁵ The German minister of national economics, Dr. Hjalmar Schacht, echoed Chapsal's sentiments. In his inaugural speech at the German house, he said:

World exhibitions where nations display their achievements in the domain of economics as in other fields are always a means of peaceful advance of the nations towards each other [...] The world exhibition in Paris is an appeal to the nations to build bridges from country to country: bridges of flourishing trade, bridges for tourism, but also bridges for a more intimate contact in civilization, and thus bridges for a solid political understanding to the benefit of all participants. Germany's exhibition at Paris wishes to contribute its share in attaining this end.⁶

But contemporary critics had already questioned this peaceful rhetoric and the harmonious interpretation of the architectural structure of the Fair. In fact, what was planned as a peaceful encounter of ideological enemies turned into a symbolically charged confrontation of political systems and nationalistic self-portrayal. As Paul Sigel has aptly observed, the whole arrangement was not designed as a place of traditional product-show, but rather conceived as a forum for the staging of

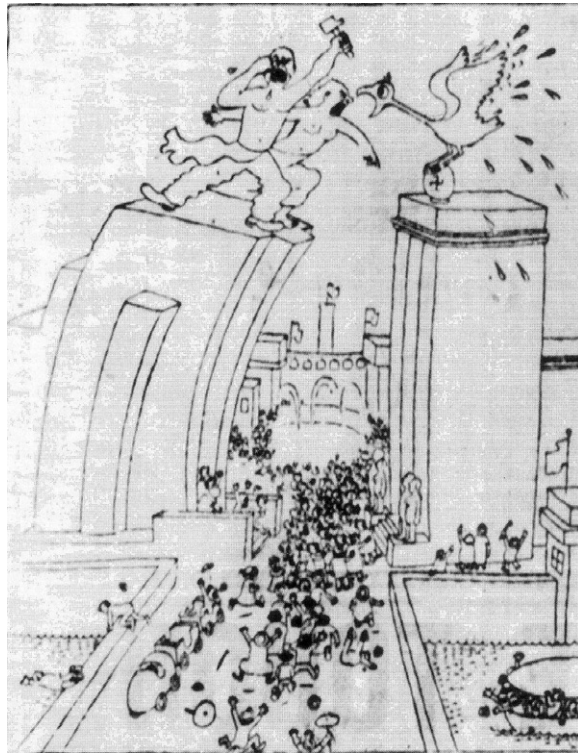


FIGURE 2 A Dubout, 'At the Exposition: once again, these two are the ones fighting'. Published in: *Candide*, 15 July 1937. Source: James D. Herbert, *Paris 1937. Worlds on Exhibition* (Ithaca/London, Cornell University Press, 1998), 37.

national—often nationalistic—self-portrayal.⁷ While the central theme of the exposition—'arts et techniques dans la vie moderne'—reflected the vision of a symbiosis of the useful with the beautiful in the tradition of a functionalist aesthetic, the architecture of the national pavilions can be interpreted as a challenge of political positions and ideological convictions. Both the German and the Soviet pavilion bear witness to this 'architecture parlante', inspired by the ambition to combine neo-classical forms with the functionalist aesthetic of the industrial era and apparently visible political messages. For Nazi Germany, the world's fair in Paris offered the first—and last—opportunity to stage the performances of the 'new Germany' on international parquet. Because of the problematic German–French relationship, the German appearance in Paris was a sensitive diplomatic action and therefore monitored closely by the German chancellor and architectural hobbyist Adolf Hitler in person. In official documentation of the German exhibition at the Paris fair, the 'architect of the Reich', Albert Speer, emphasized his gratitude at being in charge of the 'construction of a new monument of the national socialist disposition realized after the will of the Führer'.⁸ But the sensitive political nature of this diplomatic mission didn't cut the ambitions of the German appearance in Paris. On the contrary, the German pavilion was a perfect demonstration of the Führer's dictum, that architecture had to fulfil the function of a 'steingewordene Weltanschauung', a world view turned

into stone. This 'Germanic architectonics' had not only a memorial function, but was conceived as an image of the national socialistic state, of its authoritarian ideology and inspired by the idea that architecture could and should serve as a principle of law and order that leads the masses. It is within this logic of a disciplinarian function of architecture and design that one has to place the promotion of television as a technology in the service of the creation and stabilization of the German 'Volksgemeinschaft'.

Like the Paris Fair in 1937, the New York Fair too must be interpreted as both a political and artistic representation of American culture and society in the late 1930s. While the Paris Fair reflected the signs of a continent at the dawn of a new political and ideological conflict, the New York Fair turned the line of vision from past to future. Despite the fact that the United States of America—like all other big European national economies—had been struck by an unknown phase of economic regression causing tremendous social and political tensions, the 1939 Fair was designed as a faithful answer to the Great Depression. Just because Americans were so uneasy about the present and seriously worried about the future, the Fair had—in the eyes of their responsible designers and planners—to offer 'temporary transcendence'.⁹ Driven by the ambition to face the three central concepts that had dominated the agenda of American social reform efforts in the first decades of the 20th century (i.e. the importance of culture as a tool of social analysis, the application of the idea of cultural lag to explain the dysfunctions of American society, and the search for a national cultural identity),¹⁰ the Design Committee of the Fair was convinced that art, society, technology and culture were part of the same equation. Their ambition was not to present the actual state of the art in various fields of human activity, but to design a future American way of life, in which technology, provided by industry but guided by social and cultural ideals, would lead to a better society where consumerism and democracy triumphed.¹¹

To realize such far-ranging aims, a new kind of Fair philosophy was needed. From an exhibition-theoretical perspective, the New York Fair marked a decisive shift away from World's Fairs as being mainly arenas for national self-portrayal and technological product exhibition to a concept of fairs as platforms for the creative competition of ideas and concepts about contemporary and future problems of the society.¹² This direction towards a thematic structure of the exhibitions had consequences for the display of the artefacts too. The New York Fair's form of display had appropriated much that was on offer in the amusement zone, e.g. the staging of models, dioramas and magic constructions. The combination of miniaturization and utopia aroused the fantasy of the industrial designers who were in charge of the construction of gigantic dioramas, like Edison's 'City of Light', General Electric's 'House of Magic', or—the most impressive of all—General Motor's 'Futurama' and 'City of Tomorrow'.¹³ Following David Nye, all these fanciful constructions were so successful because of the dramatic form of their presentations, which combined all conceivable kinds of visual and aural persuasion to 'create a synthesis of sublime experiences: an Olympic view to the future'.¹⁴ By simulating the world of tomorrow through magic productions, the big American corporations invited the fairgoers to be part of their utopian vision.¹⁵ The 27,000 people that daily visited General Motor's 'Futurama' all left their 16-minute trip to the world of 1960 in a comfortable 'moving sound-chair' with a button on their coat that stated: 'I've seen the future'. General Motor's 'Futurama'

stands exemplarily for the public relations soft sell that dominated the Fair exhibits: the main objective was no longer to sell GM products as to promote a vision of a prosperous tomorrow shaped by the networks of high-speed super highways ‘which just happened to make GM cars seemingly indispensable’.¹⁶ As Lisa Rubens has shown, the specific mass culture of spectacle that emphasized fantasy and illusion, which heightened the sense that a better life was possible for all, had already successfully been realized in San Francisco.¹⁷

What distinguished the New York Fair from the Paris Fair two years earlier was not only the shifting of central exhibiting actors at the Fairs—from nations or states in Paris to big companies and corporations in New York—but a change of the general narrative structure. While underlying political and ideological tensions dominated the narrative of the Paris Fair in 1937, most visibly expressed in the ‘speaking architecture’ of the national pavilions, the central narrative of the New York Fair was that of a dramatic display of the future, perfectly staged in the industrially designed dioramas. Cultural historian of technology David Nye has highlighted the specific quality of experience that had characterized a visit at the New York Fair:

The 1939 fair was a quasi-religious experience of escape into an ideal future equally accessible to all. It offered a new version of republicanism—one that retained only a few vestiges of the classical architecture that had once articulated that vision. No speeches given at the fair were as memorable as its technological exhibits, which were less designed to sell particular products than to synthesize the technological, electrical, and geometrical sublimes into one that formed the future. [...] The fair was a shrine of modernity, offering what seemed an achievable future.¹⁸

Television at the World’s Fairs: mass education or mass entertainment?

On Monday, 19 June 1882, the French Count Théodor du Moncel presented a study entitled ‘Le microphone, le radiophone et le phonographe’ at the French Academy of Science in Paris. In his later published book, Moncel presented a special chapter about the so-called ‘Téléphote’, in which he referred to some recent inventions made by American inventors. He wrote:

Three or four years ago, the newspapers have announced an invention which—at least at a first short look—seemed unlikely, but has nevertheless found the attention of some savants . . . As American journals have reported, it is the case of a phenomenon called ‘seeing by telegraph’. With this apparatus, so the American sources, it is not only possible to communicate from Europe to America through the telephone, but to talk and see at a distance—just like one would put the person at the other side of the line under a giant magnifying glass! It is self-understanding that this invention presented as such has encountered the harshest critics; but at the end, the question could be of some interest, and some scientists have started to make some serious investigations . . .¹⁹

As the citation of Du Moncel shows, the phenomenon of seeing at a distance (literally 'Fern-Sehen' in German) occupied a prominent place in publications of honourable scientific societies as in newspapers and popular magazines as well. The widespread science-fiction novels from the French authors Albert Robida ('Le Vingtième Siècle', 1893) and Jules Verne ('La journée d'un journaliste Américain en 2890', 1891) successfully introduced the technology of tele-vision into the popular imagination of the French. But the French public had to wait another half a century before the vision of television mutated into an experienced reality at the World Fair in 1937.²⁰ On this occasion, however, people were able to see television at two different pavilions: from the 25 July, the French office of Post, Telephone and Telecommunications (PTT), provided regular television transmissions from the 'Palais de la Radio', and the German Post Office staged a daily television show and exhibited its latest innovation: the television–telephone system called 'Visitelephonie'.

Even though the new French minister of Post and Telecommunications, Jean Lebas, proudly declared on the 25 July, thus more than two months after the official opening of the fair, that the PTT had started four days ago with regular television transmissions in the new 455-line standard, the quickly developed experimental service was characterized by lots of technical problems and scandals.²¹ Because of its character as a stage for an international public sphere, the World's Fair has been a symbolic battlefield for the confrontations between French unionists and the social politics of the Front Populaire under the cabinets of Prime Minister Léon Blum.²² Constant strike actions and work stoppages had seriously endangered the realization of the big construction projects, and the hacking of the precious high-frequency coaxial cable that linked the television antenna at the top of the Eiffel Tower with the television studio of the PTT at the 'House of Radio' nearly foiled any French television activities at all.²³ In addition to that, the French press criticized the post office for using television equipment from the French enterprise Thomson, which was based on the latest technical achievements in camera technology of the British company EMI



FIGURE 3 Outside television broadcast of the French PTT in front of the Palais de la Radio. Source: IBU/EBU Archives Geneva, box 58 (photographs).

(Electrical and Musical Industries Ltd.). The headlines of some French newspapers—‘Television equipment of Thompson made in Britain’ or ‘French television fine-tuned with English threads’—were mirroring the anxiety that this highly representative technology was to be a matter of national interest and pride.²⁴ Despite these technical problems, the French PTT succeeded in presenting this new communication device as a means of promotion of high-culture values and as a technology in the service of the education of its countrymen. Under the authority of a ‘homme de lettre’ who had a rich radio broadcast experience, Georges Delamare, the PTT produced a daily one-hour live televised programme, composed of dance and music performances, interviews and theatrical contributions.²⁵ On 19 September, for example, a comedy in one act called ‘Évocations. Mozart enfant’ was broadcasted live at the Fair and could even be received at two receivers placed at the ministry of Post and Telecommunications and at the central city hall.²⁶

In contrast to popular but rather modest French activities on the promotion of the ‘window to the world’ at the Paris World’s Fair, German television had already passed its official inauguration at *the* other ‘media event’ of modernity: the Olympic Games.²⁷ The Berlin Olympic Games of 1936 were the first ones ever broadcasted live by television: about 150,000 people in Berlin could attend a daily television programme up to eight hours in 28 so-called ‘television halls’, public viewing rooms for about 50–100 spectators.²⁸ Already one year before, the Reich Director of Broadcasting, Eugen Hadamovsky, had declared open the ‘first broadcasting in the world with regular television programming’. In his speech from 22 March 1935, Hadamovsky left no doubt about the cultural mission and first of all the political goals linked with the new technology: ‘Now, in this hour, broadcasting is called upon to fulfil its greatest and most sacred mission: to plant the image of the Führer indelibly in all German hearts’.²⁹ As Monika Elsner and Thomas Müller have shown, the inauguration of a regular television service in Germany was part of the National Socialist eagerness to claim the superiority of German technology.³⁰ Nazi officials and technicians were driven by their ambitions to ‘beat’ the British and to be the first nation on earth to start with a regular television service. It is worth noting that the real television service in the mid- and end of the 1930s remained an experimental playground for a handful ambitious television engineers and writers, and—most important—a medium without a public.

But it is exactly the rhetorical stylization of television as a National Socialist technological myth and its political staging as a technology in the service of the nation that is of cultural importance for the analysis of the presentation of German television at the Paris World’s Fair in 1937. What matters is the political vision of all three of the responsible institutions in the development of television, which were the Post Office, the Ministry of Propaganda and the German radio industry, to stage television as another force for the building or stabilization of the German ‘Volksgemeinschaft’. In the concept of the National Socialist propaganda theory, the group reception of television in the television halls ensured a consistent interpretation and minimized aberrant negotiations of meaning. The collective act of viewing was an activity *shared* with others and therefore predestined to reinforce the cohesion of the German people.³¹ It’s within this double symbolic connotation that one has to interpret the promotion of German television in Paris: first to read television as nationally charged

technology, and second to interpret it as a medium for the construction of the imagined German 'Volkskörper' (body of nation).

In his unpublished memories, Walter Bruch, a German television pioneer of the first hour and responsible for the Fair's television technology staged by Telefunken, writes about the motivation of the German Reichspost to exhibit television at the Paris World's Fair:

After the live-transmissions of the Olympic Games in 1936 had founded the worldwide prestige of German television, the Post Office decided to forge the iron as long as it was hot and to produce and transmit the most modern German television with film transmissions and live-programmes from the top of the German pavilion in Paris 1937. [. . .] At no other place of the world television has been performed in such a powerful way—half a year long and without any distortion. A great German and a wonderful personal success too!³²

After having passed several years as a technical assistant in the Berlin laboratories of the Hungarian television pioneer Denis Milhály, Walter Bruch entered the Telefunken Company in the early 1930s where he was charged with research and development in all fields of the young discipline of television technology. In doing so, he had been involved in the development of the television installation for the Olympic Games, where he himself became the main cameraman of the Games, because no other experts were able to handle the new and delicate technology.³³ As Bruch ironically notes in his memories, the camera mutated within nine months from a high-tech product into a museum artefact: the camera was to be exhibited in the special exhibition dedicated to television technology at the Deutsches Museum in Munich, the famous 'temple' for the masterpieces of science and technology founded in 1903.³⁴ Counting on his experience as skilful thinker, his company entrusted Bruch to realize Telefunken's part at the special television exhibition at the 'Deutsches



FIGURE 4 The 'Visiotelephonie'-system of the German Post Office in Paris. Source: AEG-Telefunken Archiv, Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, signature AEG FS 128-1-57.

Museum', just three weeks before the opening of the World's Fair in Paris. Right after the ceremonial opening of the 'Fernsehsonderschau' at the Deutsches Museum by the representative of the German Chancellor, Rudolf Hess, Bruch took the train to Paris. Here he met his superior from Telefunken, Wolfgang Federmann, who had been in Paris for one year in order to coordinate and organize Telefunken's performance at the Fair.

Financed by the Reichspost, Telefunken performed two television attractions: the already mentioned 'Visiotelephonie', and a television programme consisting of live transmissions from a camera placed at the roof-terrace of the German pavilion and of a variety of 15-minute short films, deliberately produced French short versions of well known German movies like 'Der Kongreß tanzt' or 'Königswalzer' from Paul Hörbiger. While the television–telephone-service attracted people as a futuristic communication device³⁵, the television programme became one of the real crowd magnets. The high quality of the television picture—375-lines at 50 frames per second with the new interlaced scanning principle that nearly eliminated the jittering of the picture—convinced the fairgoers of the readiness for marketing of television. But an interesting remark in the memoirs of Walter Bruch reveals that the exhibited technology was not 'apolitical'—as Bruch tries to make us believe—but that some critical contemporaries were aware of the potential political power of this new medium. As previously mentioned, the camera at the roof garden of the German pavilion captured impressive pictures from the whole fairground, which were accompanied by live commentary from 'young, beautiful and eloquent' employees of the Post Office. These women sometimes conducted short interviews with visitors at the roof-terrace too. As Bruch reports, these interviews had been very popular, but they often tended to be too political. When people were asked what they liked most of all at the Fair, a common answer has been: 'The German pavilion is very interesting, but the Russian pavilion is even more beautiful—Heil Moscow!'. At the same time, they raised their clenched fist—the symbol for the Communist salute.



FIGURE 5 The Telefunken television studio at the Fair with the mixer for the cross-fading between film and live-pictures. Source: AEG-Telefunken Archiv, Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, signature AEG HA 414.

'Because of these incidents', said Bruch, 'we had to move the camera and the microphone on a little podium, where the possible candidates for the interviews have been checked during a little previous talk.'³⁶



FIGURE 6 Walter Bruch at the Telefunken camera in Paris 1937. Source: AEG-Telefunken Archiv, Deutsches Technikmuseum Berlin, signature AEG FS 128-1-15.

The television programmes were shown at intervals of 30 minutes, combining the play-back of the films with the live transmissions. The television show was staged in a movie theatre at the edge of the exhibition hall and could accommodate around 200 people per session. On a single exhibition day, about 2000 fairgoers could attend the show.

In the eyes of all persons in charge, the German presentation of television at the World's Fair in Paris was a great success. The Reichspost was rewarded with three Gold Medals for television by the Jury of the Fair, and Bruch and his superior Federmann received a telegram from Hitler's secretary of state Meißner with the following wording: 'The Führer and Chancellor Adolf Hitler wishes to thank you for your merits at the Paris World's Fair and offers you a cruise to the Nordic seas with the Wilhelm Gustloff'.³⁷

Television at the 'World of Tomorrow'

'No greater inspiration could move scientific thought. No vaster array of scientific forces has ever been focused upon a single problem. Nearly every fundamental development in the science of electrical communications bears directly or indirectly upon the problem of sight broadcasting.'³⁸ In this article from 1928 headed 'Forging an electrical eye', David Sarnoff, then Vice President of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), presented 'sight broadcasting' to the readers of the New York Times as the ultimate challenge for the scientific and technical community of his time.

Ten years and ten million dollars spent on television research later, RCA began with the construction of a 60,000 square foot exhibition hall at the New York fairgrounds, designed to resemble a giant radio tube. With Sarnoff's televised speech at the RCA Building's dedication ceremony on 21 April 1939, his dream of 'seeing and hearing radio' had become true. But if one compares the rhetoric between his 1928 article and his 1939 inauguration speech (see the citation at the beginning of the article), a minor but significant shape of meaning strikes: television mutated from scientific to cultural 'artefact', from technological problem to 'miracle of engineering', from intellectual challenge to industrial consumer good.

This semantic shift in the presentation of television—from a scientific and technological 'artefact' to 'the birth of an industry' (such was the title of the RCA film that introduced television to the visitors of the RCA Building)—can be read as a typical sign of the commercialized American broadcast landscape, where television wasn't first of all a 'state affair', but a commercial consumer good. But, and this is quite remarkable, the staging of this new consumer good was embedded in the utopian rhetoric of the Fair, presenting television as electronic hearth of the 'Living Room of Tomorrow'.³⁹ In contrast to the utopian scenarios of General Motor's 'Futurama' or General Electric's 'House of Magic' which addressed the visitors as spectators of an illusionary world of tomorrow, RCA offered people the opportunity to turn today into tomorrow: as consumers, visitors of the RCA exhibit could leave the Fair without leaving the 'World of Tomorrow'—they just had to buy a television set from Bloomingdale's or Macy's in downtown New York!

RCA's presentation of television at the Fair was a perfectly orchestrated performance. Sarnoff appointed NBC President Lenox Lohr to manage the corporation's performance at the fair, capitalizing on Lohr's experience as a member of the organizing board of the Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition in 1933. In line with the New York Fair committee, Lohr developed an exposition strategy that focused on the execution of an industrial sales job, trying to address fairgoers as average consumers and not as specialized experts. With 'an accent on showmanship', the RCA exhibit was designed 'to present to the ultimate consumer, in the most entertaining visual manner, company products, aims, and purposes'.⁴⁰ A material translation of this exhibition philosophy was the glass-encased receiver at the entrance of the exhibition, opening the 'black box' and showing the inner-life of a television set.

A large television hall was the centrepiece of the exhibition, able to accommodate more than 50,000 fairgoers a week for the 10-minute TV show on twelve 9 × 12-inch receivers. Every day between 11 a.m. and 9 p.m., visitors could follow a television programme relying on three programming sources: filmed newsreels that were transmitted from the outbuilding, pre-produced variety programmes from the Radio City studios and live programming from NBC's roving telemobile. The live programme was a compilation of on-the-streets interviews with fairgoers, reports from special events at the Fair, and visual impressions from other exhibits.⁴¹ During the first month of the Fair, RCA transmitted 311 hours of television programme—quite a remarkable start of NBC's regular television service in the New York area. But the visitors could also see the story of television's technological development in various displays such as a television laboratory, a camera set-up with a model

transmitter, and a laboratory type television receiver. A full-scale model of the 'radio living room of tomorrow' finally demonstrated the most efficient use of television in the home of tomorrow.

But RCA was not the only corporation to demonstrate television. It was followed by General Electric and Westinghouse and occupied a prominent place in the Communications focal exhibit. Even visitors in the Hall of Pharmacy could gaze at a television–telephone in the futuristic 'Drug Store of Tomorrow'. General Electric built a television studio into their 'House of Magic' where fairgoers were interviewed in front of a camera, while the pictures were immediately transmitted across the lobby to a row of monitors. As David Nye has noted, the television studio served as an excellent conclusion to the exhibit as a whole: 'The visitor moved from passive observation of a frightening demonstration to intriguing exhibits, to new appliances that could be owned, and finally merged into the technology of the future, by broadcasting his or her image.'⁴²

From the perspective of the big corporations, this future was first of all imagined as an economic promise. RCA, in particular, tried to exploit its image at the World's Fair in order to promote its position as the leading company in radio and television matters and to obtain an advantageous position vis-à-vis both its competitors and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The FCC's policy in television matters during the 1930s was characterized by the guideline that industry and government engineers had to agree on technical standards for all transmitters and receivers before an authorization of any commercial activity on television broadcasting would be given. Thanks to the genius research activities of Vladimir Zworykin, RCA had become the dominant industrial player in the field of all-electronic television activities.⁴³ But at the end of the 1930s, two companies in particular, Fransworth Television, Inc., and the Philco Radio and Television Company, became increasingly successful in competing with RCA in the development of all-electronic television. RCA even used design elements of the Fransworth camera pickup tube (the so-called 'image dissector') for the refinement of the Zworykin Iconoscope, what made them dependent on Fransworth's patent. For the first time in RCA history, the company agreed to pay a license fee to Fransworth rather than purchasing patent rights.⁴⁴ Because these relatively small enterprises couldn't afford to finance the construction of a representative building at the World's Fair, RCA tried to profit from the favour of the hour and to take the lead in the promotion of commercial television in the United States. As Ron Becker has brilliantly analysed, the RCA management was keenly aware of the great public relations opportunity. Lenox Lohr, NBC president and head of the RCA World's Fair Committee, told Sarnoff that:

RCA's exhibit offered them the perfect chance to educate important leaders from all parts of the country and from all walks of life to think about television as an RCA-NBC product and to cement in their minds the thought that we are the pioneers in this new field of endeavour. In other words, to make television practically a trade name for RCA-NBC.⁴⁵

Even though it took the FCC exactly two more years before declaring on 30 April 1941 that commercial television was allowed from 30 July 1941 on, RCA/NBC

television made its official debut on the 30 April 1939 with a three-hour coverage of the opening ceremonies for the Fair. An estimated thousand people could watch the inaugural speech of President Franklin Roosevelt as far as 50 miles away on the hundred or so sets in New York area homes, and 'Act 1, Scene 1' of commercial television in the United States had successfully been telecast.⁴⁶

Competing narratives of television in Paris and New York

If one tries to interpret the competing narratives of television at the World's Fairs in Paris and New York, three different frames of contextualization seem to be important for an historical understanding: firstly, the different political and geographical contexts in which the two Fairs were embedded; secondly, the changing patterns of exhibition design, and finally the different structural conditions and medial expectations in which television broadcasting was rooted.

Whatever an appropriate definition of a 'World's Fair' might be—'laboratories of modernization'⁴⁷, 'international potlatch ceremonies'⁴⁸ or 'sites of pilgrimages to the commodity fetish'⁴⁹—they all must be read as expressions of specific norms and values at a certain time and space. They all breathe the anxieties and hopes of their contemporaries, the visions and traditions of their planners and exhibitors. In this respect, the Paris and the New York Fair have been re/presentations of the same world in motion. But despite their relative temporal closeness, two completely different discourses of modernity were performed. While the Paris World Fair can be read as a discourse imagining the world from a European, more specific from a French perspective, eager to create a symbolic harmony between cultural traditions and the industrialized present ('arts et techniques dans la vie moderne'), the New York Fair created a discourse of a modernity in the making, transcending past and present, offering the fairgoers a simulation rather than a representation of the 'world of tomorrow'. In both cases, planners and designers have been moved by the economic and political rumours and problems of their time, but their creative translations of these problems into visionary concepts of a modernist world have been very different. In an exaggerated statement, one could say that the Paris Fair was driven by the 'invention of tradition'⁵⁰, while the New York Fair was inspired by the will to invent the future.

The chosen Fair mottos—'Arts et techniques dans la vie moderne' and 'The world of tomorrow', respectively—and their material manifestations in architecture and industrial design are evidence of the different geographical, political, economic and cultural environments of the fairs. While the Paris Fair marked probably the end of the great European World's Fairs in the legacy of imperialism and national self-portrayal, the New York Fair reflected the spirit of industrial 'global players' with a clear international profile. The general design of the Paris fairground was characterized by a symbolic architecture culminating in the confrontation between the fascist and the communist ideologies, whereas corporate exhibits in scale as well as in position dominated the New York venue. It was exactly within these two 'discrete historical moments' and their museum-like staging that the competing visions about the future identity of television as a mass medium became manifest.⁵¹ Whereas 'nation' and 'education' can be identified as

keywords of the television discourse in Paris, 'commercialization' and 'entertainment' most adequately represent the popular television rhetoric during World's Fair in New York.

When embedded into the general patterns of the development of broadcasting in Europe and in America, this Atlantic divide of the television discourse is no real surprise. The imagination of the future identity of television as a broadcast technology was of course shaped by the institutional paths of radio, reflecting the different economic, political and cultural realities of broadcasting in Europe and the United States.⁵² In other words, the legacy of radio as the 'older brother' of television informed the 'cadre structurant' in which both the professional and popular imagination of television as the new 'window to the world' took place.⁵³ But despite clear patterns of remediation, the advent of a new technology is always characterized by moments of uncertainty and opportunities of innovation. As Raymond Williams has argued, 'the moment of any new technology is a moment of choice'.⁵⁴ A broader look at the television discourse in the late 1930s shows that there was no such thing as a definite vision about the 'true nature' of television as a mass medium. In the United States, large-screen theatre television clearly was a chief alternative to the idea of television as a domestic, advertiser-supported and network-distributed entertainment medium⁵⁵, and the 'one radio in every household'-philosophy of the Nazis as model for the future development of television surely represented a serious alternative vision to the public viewing strategy.⁵⁶

But from a media historical perspective, the comparison of the competing narratives of television in Paris and New York offers another interesting insight. While the presentation of television as a new medium in Paris and New York was embedded in divergent economic, political and cultural environments that shaped the different narratives of television, the televised content was nearly identical. What people could actually see—the experience of television as a programme medium—was more or less identical. The same programme philosophy drove both the performance of television in Paris and New York. The central aim was to demonstrate television as a multi-functional medium, able to integrate competing media dispositifs. Both the trans- and intermedial qualities of television as a convergence technology were performed: the combination of live transmissions as known from radio with pre-produced filmed material and its cinema-like screening presented television as the new super medium, incorporating the dispositif features of radio and film. In addition to that, the adaptation of theatre plays and the inclusion of life interviews underlined the transmedial quality of television, the ability to build on proven formats and genres from other media. In Paris as well as in New York, both the programming and the programmes were identical. Or, in other words: the staged 'televisual reality' was the same, while the televisual discourse was sensibly different.

It was only in the phase of the domestic implementation and appropriation of television in the post-war period that the varying discourses seem to have had a real impact on television programming and that the 'form' of television followed its 'function'. In Paris and New York, however, the competing performances of television expressed different visions about television as a future mass medium. The dominance of the public-service concept of broadcasting in the European context and the commercial patterns in the United States shaped hegemonic narrations of

television on both sides of the Atlantic. The World's Fairs in Paris and New York both created and represented alternative symbolic frames for the staging of television as a revolutionary technology and a new mass medium. While using the same ingredients, the packaging promised different sensations: the 'window' was the same, but the view it offered on the world sensibly differed depending of the horizons of expectation.

Notes

- 1 Quoted in the booklet *Television show by the Deutsche Reichspost at the international exhibition Paris 1937*, edited by the German Post Office (Berlin, Deutsche Reichspost, 1937), 19.
- 2 David Sarnoff's opening speech of the regular television transmission of RCA/NBC at the New York World Fair, 21 April 1939. See Dedication of RCA seen on television, *New York Times*, 21 April 1939, p. 16.
- 3 Eduard Rhein, a German radio and television critic of the first hour wrote in the journal *Fernsehen*: 'There we are standing, we, who looked up to the new coming miracle with wide eyes, quite disappointed, perhaps angry. What the daily press shouted as us—phrases! It is nothing! Whether progress is recorded, proved with differentials, integrals, slide-rules, curves—we can't see it!' The German audience, who first saw television at the Berlin broadcasting fairs in 1927 and 1928, finally wanted to see visible results and achievements. See Monika Elsner and Thomas Müller, The early history of German television: the slow development of a fast medium, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 10(3) (1990), 193–220. The same is true for the American context too. Even in the enthusiastic context of the start of the first regular television service during the New York World's Fair on 30 April 1939, Alva Johnston wrote an article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, who deftly summarized the history of television's introduction:

Television has suffered from its own prophets. Broadcasting and the talking pictures had taken people by surprise; they resolved that television would not catch them off their guard. Back in the 20's it was taken for granted that television was only a year or two away. Warnings or difficulties had no effect; scientists were regarded as gods who could solve all problems with a turn of the wrist. The public was saturated with the wonders of science; miracles were commonplace. Today, the age of miracles is just beginning to flourish, but the age of appreciation of miracles is past . . . Too much prophecy has made the magic box something of an anticlimax.

See Alva Johnston, Television's Here, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 6 May 1939, p. 8, quoted from Jowett Garth, Dangling the dream? The presentation of television to the American public, 1928–1952, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 14(2) (1994), 137.

- 4 The construction work had been seriously troubled by demonstrations and work stoppages of French unionists. See the unpublished memories of Walter Bruch, Vol. III, chapter 21: 'Paris, 24. Mai 1937—Ein Theatercoup', private estate of Walter Bruch at the archive of the Hochschule Mittweida/Germany.
- 5 Opening speech of Fernand Chapsal, in: *Exposition Internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne. Official general catalogue*, Vol. 1 (Paris, R. Stenger, 1937), 3.

- 6 Inaugural speech of Dr Hjalmar Schacht at the German house, in: *Deutschland in Paris. Ein Bild-Buch von Heinrich Hoffmann* (Berlin, Selbstverlag, 1938), 11.
- 7 Paul Sigel, *Exponiert: deutsche Pavillons auf Weltausstellungen* (Berlin, Verlag Bauwesen, 2000), 137.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 9 See David Nye, *Synthesis: the New York World Fair of 1939*, in: David Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge/London, MIT Press, 1994), 205.
- 10 See Joseph P. Cusker, *The World of Tomorrow: science, culture, and community at the New York World's Fair*, in: Sara Blackburn (ed.) *Dawn of a new day. The New York World's Fair 1939/40* (New York, New York University Press, 1980), 11.
- 11 See Wolfgang Kretschmer, *Geschichte der Weltausstellungen* (Frankfurt am Main/New York, Campus Verlag, 1999), 205.
- 12 See James Gilbert, *World's fairs as historical events*, in: Robert W. Rydell and Nancy E. Gwinn (eds) *Fair Representations. World's Fairs and the Modern World* (Amsterdam, Free University Press, 1994), 13–27.
- 13 Several audiovisual sources of the Prelinger Archives offer a visual impression of the New York World's Fair. See for example *The Middleton Family at the New York World's Fair*: http://www.archive.org/details/middleton_family_worlds_fair_1939 or the 1940 General Motors advertising film *To New Horizons*: <http://www.archive.org/details/ToNewHor1940>.
- 14 Nye, *Synthesis*, 214.
- 15 As Peter J. Kuznick has shown, the way science or scientific knowledge and know-how was popularized ('in terms of gadgets, commodities, and magic') was not really appreciated by a lot of well known American scholars. See Peter J. Kuznick, *Losing the world of tomorrow: the battle over the presentation of science at the 1939 New York World's Fair*, *American Quarterly*, 46(3) (1994), 341–373.
- 16 Ron Becker, 'Hear and see radio' in the world of tomorrow: RCA and the Presentation of Television at the World's Fair 1939/40, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 21(4) (2001), 365.
- 17 Lisa Rubens, *Re-presenting the nation: the Golden Gate International Exhibition*, in: Robert W. Rydell and Nancy Gwinn (eds) *Fair Representations. World's Fairs and the Modern World* (Amsterdam, Free University Press, 1994), 138.
- 18 Nye, *Synthesis*, 223.
- 19 Théodor du Moncel, *Le microphone, le radiophone et le grammophone* (Hachette, Paris, Bibliothèque des Merveilles, 1882), 289–319, quote from 289.
- 20 Experimental television transmissions had of course been realized in France before the World's Fair. The first 'public' transmission of a 30-line picture had been realized by the engineer of the Compagnie des Compteurs (CdC), René Barthélémy, on 14 April 1931. See Thierry Kubler and Emmanuel Lemieux, *Cognac Jay 1940. La télévision française sous l'occupation* (Paris, Editions Plume, 1990), 24.
- 21 Kubler and Lemieux, *Cognac Jay*, 74–77.
- 22 Colette Chambelland and Danielle Tartakowsky: *Le mouvement syndical à l'Exposition internationale de 1937, Le mouvement social*, 186 (1999), 69–83.
- 23 See the unpublished memories of Walter Bruch, Vol. III, chapter 21: 'Paris, 24. Mai 1937—Ein Theatercoup', 2.
- 24 Kubler and Lemieux, *Cognac Jay*, 75f.

- 25 Cécile Méadel, *Histoire de la radio des années trente* (Paris, 1994), 146–148.
- 26 Claude Ritter, *Évocations. Mozart enfant, comédie d'un acte*, *Bibliothèque de la Comédie radiophonique* (Paris, 1938).
- 27 On the definition of 'media events' see Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events. The live broadcasting of history* (Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 1992); On the Olympic Games as an utopian vision of modernity see Gunter Gebauer (ed.) *Die Olympischen Spiele—die andere Utopie der Moderne. Olympia zwischen Kult und Droge* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996).
- 28 On television at the Olympic Games in Berlin, see Gerhard Goebel, *Vor vierzig Jahren. Fernsehen während der XI. Olympischen Spiele in Berlin*, *Fernsehinformationen*, Vols 12, 13, 14 (1976), 264–67; 294–296; 313–314.
- 29 Quoted from William Uricchio, *Envisioning the audience: perceptions of early German television's audiences, 1935–1945*, *Aura Filmvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, 2 (1996), 4. For an online version see <http://www.let.uu.nl/~william.uricchio/personal/SWEDEN1.html>. Because of the initiative of William Uricchio, a special issue of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* [Vol. 10(3) (1990)] has been dedicated on early German television history. A German compendium with these texts was published one year later. See William Uricchio (ed.) *Die Anfänge des deutschen Fernsehens. Kritische Annäherungen an die Entwicklung bis 1945* (Tübingen, 1991). For a deep-going historical overview see the dissertation by Klaus Winker, *Fernsehen unterm Hakenkreuz. Organisation, Programm, Personal* (Köln, 1994).
- 30 Monika Elsner and Thomas Müller, *The early history of German television: the slow development of a fast medium*, in: *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*, 10(3) (1990).
- 31 William Uricchio, *Television as history: representations of German television broadcasting 1935–1944*, in: Bruce A. Murray and Christopher J. Wickham (eds) *Framing the Past. The Historiography of German Cinema and Television* (Carbondale/Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 167–196, here 171; *Ibid.*, *Envisioning the audience*, 6.
- 32 Unpublished memories of Walter Bruch, chapter III, 19/1 and 20/5.
- 33 Walter Bruch: *Die Fernsehstory* (Stuttgart, Telekosmos-Verlag, 1969).
- 34 Wilhelm Füßl and Helmuth Trischler (eds) *Geschichte des Deutschen Museums* (München, 2003); Ulf Hashagen, Oskar Blumtritt and Helmuth Trischler (eds) *CIRCA 1903. Artefakte in der Gründungszeit des Deutschen Museums* (München, 2003).
- 35 The Visiotelephonie-device consisted of two television–telephone boxes, set up at the two ends of the long exposition hall of the German pavilion. By this way, two visitors were able to make a television–telephone conversation, which was shown on parallel receivers at both boxes in order to enable the participation of a larger public on this event. The television images were transmitted in 180 lines and 25 frames per second. The system shown in Paris was already in use since one year in an experimental television–telephone-service between Leipzig and Berlin. See: *Telefunken auf der Weltausstellung in Paris*, *Telefunken-Zeitung*, 76 (1937), 85–87. An interesting analysis of the failure of the picture phone in the history of communications is presented by Kenneth Lipartito, *Picturephone and the information age*, *Technology & Culture*, 44(1) (2003), 50–82.
- 36 Unpublished memories of Walter Bruch, chapter III, 20/2.
- 37 Unpublished memories of Walter Bruch, chapter III, 24/4.

- 38 David Sarnoff, Forging an electrical eye, *The New York Times*, 18 November 1928, p. XX:3.
- 39 Ron Becker, 'Hear and see radio', 372.
- 40 Ibid., 365f.
- 41 Ibid., 369.
- 42 David Nye, Ritual tomorrows: the New York World's Fair of 1939, *History and Anthropology*, 6(1) (1992), 16.
- 43 Albert Abramson, *Zworykin, Pioneer of Television* (Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, 1995).
- 44 As William Boddy has put it, 'the history of the commercial exploitation of television is a story of patent battles, corporate strategies, and regulatory decisions rather than of technological breakthroughs, or the general public by surprise.' See William Boddy, *Fifties Television. The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1993), 16. On the early battle for standardization in American television broadcasting, see Hugh R. Slotten, *Radio and Television Regulation. Broadcast Technology in the United States, 1920–1960* (Baltimore, MD, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). See especially chapter 3: Competition for standards: television broadcasting, commercialization, and technical expertise 1928–1941, 68–112.
- 45 Becker, See-and-hear radio, 368.
- 46 See Orrin E. Dunlap, Act I Scene I, *The New York Times*, 19 March 1939, pp. XI 12. Quoted from Becker, Hear-and-see radio, 373.
- 47 Robert W. Rydell and Nancy E. Gwinn, Introduction, in: *Fair Representations*, 1.
- 48 Burton Benedict, *The Anthropology of World's Fairs: San Francisco's Panama-Pacific International Exposition* (Berkeley, 1983), 10.
- 49 Walter Benjamin, Paris, capital of the nineteenth century, in: Walter Benjamin, *Reflections, Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (ed. Peter Demetz) (New York, Harvest/HBJ, 1978), 151.
- 50 Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 51 In his book, William Boddy analyses so-called 'discrete historical moments' in which communication technologies like film, radio and television had emerged. 'At such moments, the consequences of technological innovation, real and imagined, provoked both euphoria and unease within and without the communication industries'. William Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination. Launching Radio, Television and New Media in the United States* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.
- 52 See the excellent study of Michel Hilmes, *Only Connect. A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Belmont, CA, Wadsworth Press, 2002).
- 53 The notion of 'cadre structurant' (structuring patterns) is taken from the French historian and political scientist Stéphane Olivesi. Stéphane Olivesi, *Histoire politique de la télévision* (Paris, 1998).
- 54 Raymond Williams, *Communications* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1962), 11. Quoted from Boddy, *New Media and Popular Imagination*, 3.
- 55 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV. Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago/London, University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 56 One of the highlights of the Berlin Broadcast Exhibition in July 1939 was the presentation of the 'deutsche Einheits-Fernseh-Empfänger für das Heim'—the 'German Unity Television Receiver for the home' at the price of 650,- Reichsmark. See Riedel, *70 Jahre Funkausstellung*, 106.

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