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Introducing open montage: Material performativity in urban media configurations in space



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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of 'open montage', a framework developed to explore the media configurations between art, cinema, and urban space and the entangled relations this interplay presents in terms of publics and publicness. The unique perspective of our open montage concept enables us to put forth a framework for artistic arrangements in space, which liberates them from the confines of representation and human interpretation. Our argument for the notion of open montage also lies in its ability to challenge conventional theories about spectators, presenting them as active participants in a process of material embodiment bound by spatial and temporal constraints. The structure of our article revolves around the theme of openness. We draw on art, critical theory, and media studies literature to demonstrate the concept of open montage and its application in spatial coordinates. Subsequently, we explore the lens of posthumanism, aiming to challenge the linguistic account characterising the public dimension evident in the montage of our media configurations in space.

Keywords

open montage, posthumanism, media configurations, passer-by, publicness

Open-minded: Going against the tide of the linguistic turn

On 23 April 2022, some spatial transformations unfolded within the urban area of Whitefriars, Coventry, affecting both its physical layout and social relations. The nearby ring road, encircling the city centre, was used as a screen for moving images,[1] altering in this way the façade's morphology. Amidst the ambient traffic noise, dialogue, and sounds from the diegetic world, there was chatter and footstep noises of the city. Some pedestrians, disrupted by the projection beam, changed their usual routes, while others

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stopped by and gathered around the projection site. Screening Coventry: Past is Now, an experimental cinematic projection, was happening (Fig. 1).[2] For thirty minutes, the performativity of the cinematic dispositive transformed the Whitefriars area into a mediated space, where different bodies, actors, actions, and imaginaries converged into a unique spatial and material configuration.



Fig. 1: Screening Coventry: Past is Now projection. Photo: Mel Jordan.

However, while the situatedness of these elements caused a shift in the physical and spatial aspects of the site, it also sparked a broader reconfiguration that influenced processes of identity formation, subjectivation, and objectivation. The ephemeral nature of the projection, the contingent spatial and material relationality of each element prompted the question as to which subjectivities and agencies were operating in that specific spatio-temporal situation. The cinematic medium, typically seen as passive, became the catalyst of a profound reconfiguration with its performativity ultimately leading to a new more-than-

human montage. In this montage, each element was transformed in its morphological and ontological attributes: the conventional 'wall' morphed into a 'screen', while a 'tree' took on qualities resembling a static spectator. The brick that made up the ring road façade, integrated into the filmic structure, became part of that narrative, a pixel of the digital film. Passers-by became part of this ongoing transformation. Due to their physical situatedness and performativity in the projection site, their forms were embodied in this material and spatial relationality.

As researchers based in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures and active contributors to the ArtSpaceCity research strand at Coventry University, we have been actively exploring ways to describe the effects media artefacts create in and on urban space and their relationship to spectators and passersby.[3] In advocating for 'ongoingness' rather than 'fixity', for 'open-endedness' instead of 'rigidity', and 'configuration' over 'fixation', we adopt the term 'media configuration' from Miriam De Rosa's work, for contextualising the blurred boundaries of situated artefacts in today's media ecology.[4] Following De Rosa, who envisages the interplay between artistic and cinematic interventions in spaces as fluid and open, we resist the determinism of incapsulating media artefacts either as cinematic or artistic. Our theoretical and methodological framework, therefore, is moved by a cross-disciplinary approach that invites a reconsideration of media configurations as assembled in urban space through a variegated set of languages, theories, and enquiries – all in the guise of a reconsideration of medium specificity and instead a propension towards a kinetic, dynamic, and non-linear reasoning.

In thinking outside the black box we envisage the cinematic discourse as embedded into a broader artistic, spatial, and above all expanded perspective. Our consideration on media configurations in urban space is rooted in the explorations of expanded cinema and site-specificity and the consequent spatial montage between media, site, and bodies. However, within the scope of this article, we are interested in the ways discussions around media configuration in urban space and publicness unfold. We agree with Maeve Connolly who recognises expanded versions of cinema (open air, drive-in cinemas, public projections, and urban screens) as forms of public art and therefore a chance to create a 'localisable form of publicness'.[5] Nevertheless, we problematise the publicness and spectatorship as solely questions and forms of 'lookingness', specifically considering the open relationship between public art and its publics. In fact, in recalling Jeroen Boomgaard words, we believe that 'public in public space is by definition indeterminate'.[6] Therefore, outside the black box and the white cube, these media configurations have no specific public nor a clear framework of spectatorship. However, while there is an expectation for greater attentiveness towards site-specific and media technological adjustments when discussing spectatorship and publicness, we believe that the unpredictable nature of publics within public spaces has not been fully understood. In instances of media configurations such as Screening Coventry: Past is Now – where the experimental nature of the event is coupled

with its un-ticketed entrance in the public domain – the relationship between spectatorship, publicness, and media configuration still tends to be governed by a visual regime.[7]

Therefore, by situating this article within the overarching theme of #Open in this special section,[8] we present ideas to explore contemporary propositions related to media configurations, framed within the context of post-cinema and post-art inquiry, as described by Dominique Chateau and Josè Moure.[9] The media configuration of Screening Coventry: Past is Now serves as a catalyst for our reflection, allowing us to articulate our interdisciplinary theories within the conceptual framework we refer to as open montage. Through opening up current literature on the topic we see two interlaced opportunities: first, the prospect of expanding our perspectives on publics, public space, and publicness – embracing the acknowledgment of objects and things as active participants; and second, the potential extension of theories grounded in linguistic interpretations to describe the dynamics of media configurations in public spaces. These two realms are inherently linked.

While media artifacts and the aesthetic experience they bring to light have led scholars to speak about processes of dis-identification,[10] our approach is more concerned with the entanglement between media configurations in urban space and the establishment of processes of re-identification. In following Jaroen Boombaard, who claims that ‘the theory of art in the public domain advocates a necessary re-identification’, we claim that this re-identification unfolds through a material and performative dimension, rather than a linguistic one.[11]

Therefore, we utilise posthumanist theories as a methodological tool to highlight the material relationships of media configurations in urban spaces and the resulting processes of subjectivation and objectivation. This renewed interest in materialism consequently prompts a reevaluation of the humanist subject-viewer as an expansive dimension. We also question the expectation of the ‘viewer as a meaning-maker’ in the theories of site-specificity and expanded cinema. This perspective advocates a shift away from viewing the observer merely as an intentional visitor to an art gallery or audience member in a cinema. Instead, it urges a transformation into an active and unpredictable passer-by who traverses various locations and becomes an integral part of emerging material montages.[12] This situatedness within these new positional arrangements transforms the viewer into a contingent entity navigating a defined spatiality. Consequently, their presence seamlessly integrates into what we call open montage, shifting from cognitive and linguistic attributes to sculptural dimensions, and their ontologies evolve from subject to object, resulting in a transformation into a material element. However, our exploration does not end there – as we unravel these associated thoughts, it initiates a cascade of effects on a broader network of interconnected concepts. We find ourselves entwined with notions such as

spectatorship, site specificity, expanded cinema, along with the non-human contributions that shape these interactions.

For us, at this juncture in our thinking, montage emerges as a useful way of understanding and describing the arrangement of space, via the contingent nature of artefacts, bodies, and projection. By embracing the idea of montage, we acknowledge the influential role played by architecture and other objects in shaping spatial arrangements. The choice of montage stems from its significance in filmmaking, particularly in its ability to cut between spaces and viewpoints and to highlight the processuality of spatio-temporal sequences rather than fixed frames. In this way, it allows us to think about a layered and kinetic process for media artifacts, bodies, and objects in space, enabling one aspect of these factors to come to the fore without denying the significance of the two parts.

Furthermore, by adopting 'montage' as a central pivotal concept, we conceive of it as not only an epistemic foundation but also as a methodological framework. Widely explored in the realms of media and the arts, montage takes on a broader significance as an operational approach that involves the juxtaposition of diverse fields, practices, and methods. As a result, it facilitates the opening up of our understanding, providing a lens through which we can better outline the dynamic processes of media configuration as spatial practices that unfold and reoccur in space. This comprehensive perspective invites a nuanced exploration of the interactions and transformations that create spaces.

Open explorations: Challenges and affirmations of expanded cinema and site-specificity in spatial montage

In his extraordinary and prophetic book *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood contemplates the potential of the cinematic medium – perceived in its temporal and dynamic dimensions – to expand itself and create a work of syncretic superimpositions. He takes the discourse on synaesthetic to suggest an alternative, expanded version of cinema. Interestingly, Youngblood titles this chapter 'Syncretism and Metamorphosis: Montage as Collage'.^[13] Here, Youngblood's critique is clearly aimed at the classic narrative montage, which cuts reality into small fragments and arranges them in a linear manner; this approach wants the viewer immersed in grasping the meaning of each shot, ending up missing the overall experience. Youngblood contrasts this model of 'in-parallel' editing with a cinema that uses montage (and here Youngblood uses the term collage) to present a reality that almost merges with the structure of the medium. He says:

when the content of the message is the relationship between its parts, and when the structure and content are synonymous, all elements are equally significant.^[14]

Youngblood makes the montage the real 'content' of the message. He does this by emphasising the superimposition of autonomous shots; by tracing in the act of connection,

in the process of superimposing the real hidden 'meaning'. At this point, the viewer is asked not to extrapolate a certain significance, but to be there, experiencing the 'psychic' moment.[15] Fundamentally, what is produced is a type of democratic (equal) relevance in all the components of what we refer to as configuration; here montage, instead of being an action devoted to distributing meaning, becomes itself the real significance.

Since Youngblood's seminal book, expanded cinema has evolved, making its appearance and significance tricky to pin down.[16] To varying extents, expanded cinema has been associated both practically and theoretically with the concept of montage, leading to an immersive experience that transcends traditional cinema. Significant in this context is the pioneering work of Stan Van Der Beek, particularly his *Movie Drome* (1965), where the superimposition of multiple projections, moving images, technical setups, and bodies transforms the site into an immersive environment, activating a synaesthetic experience.

Since then, the experimentation through and with this idea of montage has been a leitmotif of cinema's wandering through places. Montage has been used to destabilise the viewer's relationship both as an internal strategy within the film and as an external approach to the viewing experience. Through looping, cutting, and circling strategies, expanded cinema uses superimposition to create a multidimensional reality that engages the viewer. Moreover, by expanding into different sites and practices, expanded cinema emphasises unconventional engagement with spectators' bodies and movements. Indeed, challenging the conventional spectatorship and aesthetics modality was one of the experimental approaches that drove expanded cinema in gallery and museum spaces.[17] Here cinematic projection was exposed in its mechanism and the viewer was asked to take part in this 'revelation'. Especially in the UK, expanded cinema was categorised within the 'experimental cinema' originating from the experimental realm of artists' films. This form comprises short experimental films and video installations produced by artists influenced by avant-garde movements and coming from the sculpture departments. The installation of screens and projections as 'visual apparatus' was integrated into gallery and museum spaces to resonate with the sculptural and structural elements of the installation.[18] Freed from the conventional static position, the viewer became able to move, interfere, perceive the projection with their own time, through their own spatial movements. The cinematic, kinetic, operational element of the projection was exposed beyond the fixed, immutable, and immovable signifiers of representativeness – and instead acknowledged for its sculptural and spatial features.

Thus, increasingly, expanded cinema has begun to acquire an architectural dimension through the concept of montage. By structuring sight through both internal and spatial juxtapositions, montage creates a constructed visual and physical itinerary through the diegetic and extradiegetic worlds. Specifically in relation to its superimposition in spatial contexts, Dave Colangelo discusses a 'spatial montage' of expanded cinema within the city.

Using the Quartier Des Spectacles in Montreal as a case study, Colangelo examines the presence of expanded cinema in large-scale projections and media façades. He posits that the layering process, which involves the rigid architectural structure and the fleeting temporality of moving images, 'creates new contingent semiotic reference points in what equates to a massively expanded building and city-scale cinema'.^[19] In these instances of spatial montage, he continues, 'the logic of the monument and the logic of the cinema are combined to expand the dimensions of a site, fostering greater narrative and associative flexibility between moving images, architecture, and people'.^[20]

By expanding the 'dimension of the site' to superimpose diegetic meanings with extra-diegetic ones, Colangelo's concept of 'spatial montage' resonates with site-specific theories, highlighting several critical issues. In common parlance, 'site-specific' refers to an artwork whose conception, exhibition, and perception is reliant with a specific site.^[21] The link between land art and site-specificity is evident in their mutual emphasis on the site. Nevertheless, these artists have shaped the characteristics of site specificity by presenting a transient, time-bound, and context-dependent perspective of the artwork and its presentation.

Miwon Kwon, in her book *One Place After Another*,^[22] broadens the scope of site-specificity to encompass an acknowledgment of the contextual narratives at play when audiences encounter artworks in the public realm. For Kwon, this goes beyond the stories and histories associated with places; more crucially, it involves the political impetus for artists to grapple with contested issues emerging from specific locations. Kwon's narrative is grounded in the production of artworks and the capacity to generate intricate new meanings by drawing from experiences tied to existing places and sites. While the application of the concept of site-specificity as expressed by Kwon acknowledges that meaning is transient and possesses the potential for redefinition and redistribution between artwork site and viewer, we contend that the nature of the spectator engaging media configurations in urban space is yet to be thoroughly examined. Consequently, the viewer is often envisioned as the contemplative subject, typical of the art gallery attendee.

For example, in drawing on the idea of 'composite dispositive' proposed by Nanna Veroeff^[23] – who envisages the presences of expanded cinema in public spaces as a superimposition of off-screens and on-screen spaces – the 'spatial montage' fosters the monumentalisation of memory, sensory, and mobility of the viewer. Giuliana Bruno refers to this as 'site-seeing'^[24] and in later work examines the relationship between expanded cinema, architecture, and the body through wandering, casting the spectator as a voyager engaging in synesthetic experiences.^[25] Drawing on Sergei Eisenstein's pioneering work *Montage and Architecture*, Bruno defines the relationship between moving images, body, and places as a 'haptic dynamics', forming a lived space with narrative potential.^[26] In this narrative, the architectural-filmic ensemble maps bodily experiences. Cinema

superimposed in the cityscape reconfigures the narratological dimension of the viewer's spatial and affective experience. The act of viewing becomes a process of unraveling sequences, creating 'body maps' through a tangible exploration of sites.[27] Therefore, Bruno suggests that the connection between film and architectural structures is an embodiment, a journey. Yet, in this journey, the viewer is not a static observer but a physical entity, a moving spectator. Through the Italian concept of 'vissuto', or lived experience, Bruno recognises the viewer's body (occupying both narrativised off-screen and on-screen spaces) as a subject dynamically engaging with affective and emotional dimensions during encounters with film and space, a 'montage of spectatorial movements'.[28]

Another instance, more aligned with a linguistic interpretation of expanded cinema, is provided by Kate Mondloch. In describing the entanglement between screen and body in expanded cinema presences in museum and gallery spaces, she refers to a 'viewing subject' situated into an architectural 'visual regime'.[29] According to Mondloch, spectatorship is shaped by the spatial layout and relationships involving the screen, the body, and the site – in this sense she speaks about the 'architecture of spectatorship'. Her analysis is grounded in a framework of visual engagement, where the viewer is situated within a particular architectural arrangement. Consequently, their positioning and movement in space are influenced by the technological setup and, in turns, the impacts of this visual system are tied to spatial design, resulting in kinesthetic and phenomenological effects.

Consequently, by extending semiology to encompass the site, expanded cinema's significance expands through its architectural and site-specific substrate. It emerges as a superimposition of two distinct meanings, layered atop one another, resulting in a new semiotic narrative woven through a linear montage comprising both the site's narrative and the moving images. In such instances, it is still the viewer who, engaging in this spatial montage through their exploration, assumes the responsibility to decode, interpret, and derive meaning.

As a result, the collective actions of relocation, remediation, and convergence not only transfer media onto new platforms or into new spaces but also insist on observing them with the same modalities as their original forms. We argue that the obsession of one 'viewing subject' limits the operativity of expanded cinema in urban space and its integration with other elements to a decoding process. Indeed, by regarding media configurations as if they were in their original states (whether it be the black box or the white cube), we participate in an act of transposition that perpetuates conventional expectations rooted in representativeness. The resulting 'spatial montage', in this regard, remains confined within a viewing dynamic centered around the spectator's perspective. Whether one navigates space like a *flâneur*, thus engaging spatially and interacting with screens and sites beyond traditional theater settings, what emerges is a regime of (mobile)

vision where the spectator is the constructing and constitutive subject. It appears to us that an open, expanded framework that fully acknowledges its presence as a material yet dynamic 'superimposition' in our built environment remains largely unexplored.

Open montage: Integrating a spatio-material dimension into the practice of montage

One could argue that Colangelo's concept of 'spatial montage' envisions media configurations within urban spaces as a form of montage, yet it notably emphasises what the art historian Gregory L. Ulmer defines as 'collage' instead. In his essay 'The Object of Post-Criticism',^[30] Ulmer underlines the 20th-century significance of both collage and montage, drawing a crucial distinction between the two. According to Ulmer, collage involves the transfer of materials from one context to another, whereas montage entails the dissemination of these borrowings into new settings.^[31] When investigating media configuration in space in light of montage we uphold Ulmer's distinction. The spatial montage proposes objectives of collage, leaning more towards achieving pictorial closure – a convergence of disparate elements gathered from various sources to formally create a new whole image. On the contrary, our idea of montage unfolds the spatial arrangement on a material dimension.

Revisiting the Screening Coventry: Past is Now projection, for instance, and scrutinising its montage with the city through the framework of Ulmer's montage entails acknowledging the tangible and physical situatedness of each element and the dynamic physical relationality it establishes beyond the semiotic and linguistic interpretation of the ensemble. Simply put, what we observe is not the creation of a 'new image' or 'new representation' as it were in spatial montage; rather, it is a new physical configuration that ultimately alerts us to the complexity of engaging with a multitude of spatial and – above all – material elements. In claiming that media configuration, site and bodies are fundamentally assembled, rather than merely juxtaposed, to create a new semiotic meaning, we move beyond spatial montage and towards open montage. In proposing open montage, we aim to gain insights on the complex and interwoven more-than-human and material relations composing our spatiality; therefore, open montage is a framework that encourages us to rethink our own role and relationship within the evolving encounter with media configurations in space, leading us to open-up to new perspectives on agency, subjectivity, and identity.

Although an exploration of action, realism, and the inclusion of other actors is our aim which differs from the goal of Ulmer's essay, it is significant for our argument that he refers to Benjamin's and Brecht's articulation of 'photomontage' as the productive potential of collage. In describing Brecht's plays, Benjamin says 'I am speaking of the procedure of montage: the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted'.^[32]

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Benjamin contemplates Brecht's characterisation of his theatre as epic, highlighting how the deliberate interruption of action constantly undermines any illusions held by the audience. Brecht believes that illusion poses a hindrance to a theatre, consequently his objective is to utilise elements of reality for experimental rearrangements. Benjamin asserts

[The spectator] recognizes it as the real situation, not with satisfaction, as in the theatre of naturalism, but with astonishment. Epic theatre, therefore, does not reproduce situations, rather it discovers them.[33]

It is exactly the potential of montage – to reach beyond pictorial allegory and representation – as described by Benjamin and enacted by Brecht, that we are keen to build on here.

While Benjamin and Brecht reference 'real situations', their aim is not social realism. Instead, they emphasise action and participation over passive reading and interpretation. Their conception of time is not future-oriented for contemplation; rather, it is fully immersed in the present moment, emphasising engagement and active involvement resulting in embodied responses. Moreover, following Brecht's influence, montage is a format for active intervention in the world, not merely a tool for reflection but a means to alter reality. For Benjamin and Brecht montage is not a reproduction of reality; instead, it serves as a method to both construct and disrupt arrangements involving materials, situations, and infrastructures. Rather than merely criticising the existing cultural apparatus, the new configuration actively proposes alternatives. This stands in contrast to Adorno's perspective on culture's agency where he places emphasis on the act of revelation and communication inherent in the contributions of art and culture to society.[34]

The elements in Benjamin and Brecht's account of montage are objects, and while others are human all are material. In open-montage, we perceive all aspects of montage as equal actants, drawing inspiration from Latour's concept.[35] Montage goes beyond the juxtaposition of textual and visual matter and enters in dialogue with a material connection to other elements. In open montage we propose that content is no longer an external entity in relation to form; instead, the two are intricately linked and cannot function independently; they are no longer binary nor static, but interdependent as are all aspects of the arrangements in montage. In a sense the media configurations we discuss transform into a montage, intricately woven into spatial settings and practices. Through slashing, cutting, and reassembling, these configurations manifest with material and sculptural properties, capable of rearranging and impacting the construction as it develops. In his iteration of montage, Ulmer incorporates a vocabulary of terms such as assemble, build, join, unite, add, organise, combine, and link. To expand on this framework, we introduce terms like 'cut-open', 'remove', 'edit', 'slash', 'chop', encompassing arrangements, spaces,

material, open, now, and everything. Thus, the perspective from which we advocate for open montage focuses on the interconnected relationships among sites, materials, and objects in space. In this way, we think that our passerby not only ‘discovers’ media configurations but encounters a multitude of spaces, texts, agents, and objects through open montage.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh’s account of Michael Asher’s work is especially pertinent for explaining our point here. In his essay ‘Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art’,^[36] Buchloh makes a compelling case for the importance of montage in the production of twentieth century art. Interestingly for us, and maybe inadvertently for Buchloh, he connects montage to site-specificity through his account of Michael Asher’s work. Examining Asher’s contribution to the exhibition *The Museum as Site* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, he explains how the work (titled ‘untitled’) spanned three independent places of display. Asher’s work comprised three elements: 1) A wooden sign with the inscription ‘Dogs Must Be Kept On Leash Ord. 10309’ was reinstated in the park, matching the rustic aesthetic of other signs; 2) A poster featuring a colour reproduction and a black and white still from the movie *The Kentuckian*, placed in the museum’s main entrance court on a brass placard. The images depicted Burt Lancaster in a scene with a child, a woman, and a dog. A map indicated the sign’s location and identified it as Asher’s contribution; 3) Visitors were informed that the museum’s permanent collection included Thomas Hart Benton’s painting, *The Kentuckian*, commissioned during the film’s release, depicting Lancaster, a child, a dog, and a blossoming plant atop a mountain, donated by Lancaster himself.^[37]

Asher’s three-part installation adeptly conveys the transient nature of montage, and Buchloh, utilising an allegorical lens, not only acknowledges but articulates its temporal dimension as well as its decentralising effect. Specifically, Michael Asher’s work not only interconnects diverse spaces with materials, objects, and texts across three different sites but also disrupts the traditional way viewers engage with an artwork. This deliberate destabilisation of the spectator’s role emphasises the contingency of meaning. Meaning in this case it is not only present in one relationship between the object and the viewer, but includes a number of signs to collect through the overall encounter of viewing the multi-site installation. He says:

To the degree that their historical authenticity and function are maintained, and a decentralized reading and viewing are necessitated by the absence of a unified, authorial presence, the work avoids the status of the fetish and resists commodification.^[38]

While acknowledging the contingency of meaning it imagines a linear relationship to space, requiring the onlooker to interpret interventions as narrative components to be read. This extended montage, while challenging the perspective of conventional viewer-artwork relationship continues to rely on a linear version of space. In line with Kwon’s expanded

theory of site-specificity, Asher's artwork and Buchloh's analysis envisions the viewer as an entity that is tuned into artworks. In this way, 'space' is a realm where viewers meticulously attend to each part of the installation in the correct sequence, like solving a puzzle, and completing their interaction with a collection of distinct elements in a spatial montage. We note that these assumptions not only underestimate the material aspect of montage but also overlook the potential role of the audience as bystanders rather than attentive perceivers of the artwork. We challenge the linear nature of spatial montage and question the assumption that viewers inherently know where to begin and end the decoding process. We, therefore, wonder how can viewers a priori determine which 'narrative' to engage with, follow, read, and interpret within the open-ended and open-dimensional urban space framework? The rush to 'read', 'interpret', and 'see' obscures the intricate nature of bodily and material arrangements. In open-montage, we propose that the entanglement between media configuration, site, and bodies is multi-dimensional not linear, therefore its understanding cannot be reduced to the linguistic reading of the phenomenon. Rather it should embrace an attentiveness towards a spatio-material performativity.

We introduce a material and post-human paradigm to the act of montaging, exploring how this material montage operates and the effects it generates in relation to space and publicness. We conceptualise the viewer as a body rather than a subject capable of interpreting meanings. Their body in space wanders, establishing material connections and re-articulating within the spatial montage. Hence, in our version of open montage, we propose the 'passerby' as a transient participant in the spatial arrangements. The interaction of a mobile human viewer and the potential involvement of various other elements in the space present us with a fresh paradigm for exploring and experiencing novel configurations in space. Acknowledging the material agency of all entities in space and recognising the contingent nature of the observer allows us to transcend the reliance on semiological encounters to comprehend the engagement with media configurations in urban spaces, moving toward a perspective that is more-than-human.

Open-human: From the humanist viewer to the posthuman passerby

As British art historian Robert Garnett wrote in the 1990s, 'Public art is the only art that doesn't have a public.'^[39] While the exact interpretation of Garnett's statement remains uncertain, we resonate with the underlying sentiment. When contemplating the role of the human subject in the arrangement we propose, the public is not necessarily actively seeking to engage with an artwork; rather, they encounter it incidentally. Whether en route to meet a friend, a lover, commuting to work, returning home, or going shopping, individuals traverse the city, transitioning between different facets of themselves – worker, friend, mother, commuter, and more. Therefore, in alignment with our assertion that

elements of spatial arrangements are in a constant state of flux, we similarly maintain this fluidity for the public, envisioning them as passersby rather than contemplative connoisseurs of media configuration or confined to being authoritative interpreters of meanings. Therefore, while the encounter between media configurations and viewers in urban space relies on volatile and unpredicted trajectories, based on the various spatial and temporal positions of the bodies' travelling, we claim that this sort of embodiment is based on a material performativity. This latter sees the entanglement of bodies, screens, moving images composing the montage on a material and physical level. As a result, the spectator, instead of being a 'viewing subject' embodied in a visual or coercive system governed by the media presence, is considered as a physical and material entity gravitating in that space that generally governs them. Their positionality is influenced by a material performativity in a physical space.

In open montage we recognise the concept of human as an open term, prone to be redefined, decentred and deconstructed of the conventional ideologism of being the 'subject'. In asserting a passage from 'subject' to 'object' and therefore in proposing a more-than-human reading of publicness in media configuration, we align with the post-human paradigm proposed by philosophical posthumanism and new materialism.[40] In the literature, posthumanism and new materialism encompass a range of interconnected developments in ontology, epistemology, and methodology that revolve around the deconstruction of the notion of the human alongside a renewed interest towards 'matter' as an active element. Feminist theories, post-colonial studies, critical studies, gender studies, and anti-race stances, as well as anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements, have contributed to the multifaceted nature of posthumanism and new materialism.[41] To different measures, these experiences facilitated a shift of focus away from the self and towards the 'other'. [42] Specifically new materialism rejects representationalism and dethrones humans from being the only agents capable of knowledge production.[43]

In media studies, the notion of posthumanism is still underexplored, even if a posthuman media field is emerging.[44] To the scope of our discourse on montage, we employ posthumanist and new materialist perspectives for scrutinising the unfolding of media configurations in space and specifically for challenging the established ways of considering their publics. Indeed, our account of posthumanism and new materialism is addressed to provide a further de-empowerment towards 'representation' in favour instead of an emphasis on 'performativity'. This consents us to resetting the conventional thought that sees montage as epiphanic event, and instead to consider it as intricate manifestations based on material and more-than-human relations. A renewed interest in materialism, therefore, enables us to challenge the traditional definition and role of the viewer, opening it towards an altered dimension of the 'human'.

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Specifically, Francesca Ferrando exemplifies the philosophical posthumanism by illustrating three different 'post-isms'. Although being post-dualist and post-anthropocentric, meaning that posthumanism does not recognise dualisms such as 'subject-object', 'human-nonhuman', 'matter-mind' as separated, it envisages human as not at the centre of discourses and practices. Philosophical posthumanism is essentially post-humanist, as it conceptualises the term 'human' as an open dimension, recognising the multiple meanings, considerations, assumptions we can build on this concept. Ferrando identifies the open dimension of 'human' as an atavistic thought in human history. She addresses the question on the distinction made by slave and master, woman and man, conqueror and native. This has shown as throughout history some people have been considered being less 'human' than others, and this has led to considering human as a plural term. Ferrando's discourse is inherently connected with our idea of the public, and specifically the critique Buchloch raised on the unified, authorial presence of the audience. Therefore, instead of considering the viewer as a singular, linguistic, and humanist entity, we consider the observer as an open, physical, and post-humanist entity. Their agency and situatedness in the media configuration relies on performativity, rather than representation. Their entity is connected to other elements forming the montage and therefore is emerging from it, rather than being positioned outside and detached in a viewing regime.

Following the new materialist claim by Karen Barad, we believe that 'language has been granted too much power'.^[45] The linguistic and semiotic turn have been the predominant method through which to approach and comprehend the manifestations in front of us. These perspectives have ultimately transformed even materiality into a 'matter of language or some other forms of cultural representation'.^[46] In a sum, the 'vibrant matter'^[47] seems to not 'matter' anymore. Indeed, in a world always more filled by immaterial connections, material relations seem to occupy a less relevant role.

Through the emphasis on performativity and on posthumanism, Barad proposes an alternative stance of the representationalism practice typifying our understanding of knowledge and material relations. The critique is based on the idea that representationalism acts as a mediator between the knower and the known. This practice implies a lack of trust in matter, portraying it as a 'passive, immutable', and mute entity that requires an external (human) force to give it meaning.^[48] In providing an alternative in performativity, she clarifies, that:

a performative understanding of discursive practices challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things. Performativity, properly construed, is not an invitation to turn everything (including material bodies) into words; on the contrary, performativity is precisely a contestation of the excessive power granted to language to determine what is real.^[49]

This account, which Barad frames as 'agential realism', highlights the problematic of discursive (and we would expand saying spatial) practices based on 'words' and 'things'

and instead recognises the ‘matter’s dynamism’. As she explains, the shift toward performative alternatives to representationalism moves the attention from a question of correspondence between descriptions and reality to matters of practices, doings, and actions.[50] It therefore advances:

a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world (i.e., discursive practices/ (con)figurations rather than ‘words’) and specific material phenomena (i.e., relations rather than ‘things’). This causal relationship between the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced is one of ‘agential intra-action’.[51]

In pursuing Barad’s ‘posthumanist performativity’, we claim that besides underling the anti-semiological perspective in montage its epistemic framework also discloses the operativity of this montage, especially regarding the presence of the viewer. To put it clearly, in taking Barad’s intra-action we scrutinise media configuration in urban space as montages rooted in performativity instead of representationalism. We claim that this performativity challenges the conventional role given to the viewer.

Our montage is, therefore, established between ‘exclusionary practices’ which are ‘embodied in specific material configurations’. In other words, its continuous formation is emergent in material compositions. As a part of this, the viewer is embodied in this system of practices and not detached in its role of observer. Freed from their static bonds of decoding and interpretation, they engage in material embodiment within the montage.



Fig. 2: Screening Coventry: Past is Now viewers’ bodies in space. Photo: Giorgia Rizzoli.

In Screening Coventry: Past is Now, the physical embodiment and performative aspects challenge traditional spectatorship, shifting from a phenomenological and affective

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experience to a more material dimension. Within this setting (Fig. 2), viewers' bodies are situated throughout the projection area, becoming acutely aware of their physical relationship to the projection beam and screen. They become part of an open montage, where the contingent and ephemeral nature of the media configuration allows for diverse elements, agencies, and bodies to interact in space.

These bodies engage in spatial and sculptural positions (Fig. 3) that are influenced by the cinematic components (such as projectors, screens, moving images, and sounds). Simultaneously, their role as spectators remains fluid, constantly evolving based on their ongoing spatial positioning. At the same time, the bodies of passers-by entering this performative dimension complicate their ontological identity as mere 'viewers' or 'observers'. Their sculptural presence merges with that of nonhuman elements – trees, bushes, and other elements of the built environment – to collaboratively shape the spatial and material configurations. This collaboration, as Barad describes, exemplifies the 'agential intra-activity', highlighting the dynamic interaction and formation of the spatial environment. In this way, the presence of the passers-by and the humans' bodies attending the event became integral for the overall phenomenon; reflecting on a material performativity means not to consider the spectators as detached entities who read and interpret a certain phenomenon in space; rather it means to consider their material performativity as a constitutive and physical component, integral for the emergence of the phenomenon. The relationship between spectators and media configuration in space, therefore, cannot be reduced to a spatial embodiment that ultimately is interpreted by the viewers taking part in it as it was in the spatial montage. The linguistic perspective advanced by the spatial montage and other theories of spectatorship in urban media configuration limits the understanding of the contingent nature of media configuration in urban space and the entanglement with bodies or agencies siting in that space.[52] Conversely, as we try to introduce, the posthumanist performativity, being reliant of a material dimension, predisposes the relationship between spectatorship and media configuration as an intricate, contingent, and post-humanist entanglement, where morphologies and ontologies are constantly in flux in an open montage.



Fig. 3: Screening Coventry: Past is Now viewers' bodies in space. Photo: Ryan Hughes.

As a further consequence, we claim that this passage implies and requires a multifaceted interpretation of the notion of the 'public', extending it beyond the human exceptionalism impersonified by the humanist viewer. Dismissed by their role as contemplative subject, the viewer is conceptualised as a fleeting, contingent, and dynamic element gravitating in space; an actant who, detached from cognitive exercise, is instead kinetically included in a material more-than-human network. On an epistemic level, the shift from the humanist subject to the post-human passer-by has repercussions on the ontological level of what an audience is, leading us to extend this ontological dimension to other natures. Ultimately this has a cascading effect on the concept of publicness, influencing our understanding of what it means to be public and how things become rendered as public.

Open-publicness: Some conclusions on open montage

Within the scope of this special section, we elaborate on the open-structured and open-dimensional qualities inherent in media configurations within space, employing the concept of montage as our analytical lens. Posthumanist and new materialist theories, complementing the role of montage, enable us to explore alternative paradigms, disrupting dualisms such as object and subject, human and nonhuman, nature and culture, action and representation, and matter and mind. The concept of media configurations, previously advanced by scholars like De Rosa, becomes an integral part of our formulation of open

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montage. Integrating montage procedures into media configurations empowers us to consider 'sequences' unfolding across both temporal and spatial coordinates.

Adopting an open perspective to unravel the implications of media configurations in urban spaces, we challenge deep-rooted assumptions that have raised concerns. Specifically, we question the notion that the montages of media configurations within space are confined by rigid and static frameworks of representation and interpretation. Moreover, a significant challenge emerges for us in the treatment of observers of media configurations, often perceived as a means to enhance accessibility to the arts. This treatment oscillates between likening them to viewers of artworks in a gallery and spectators in a movie theatre. This duality prompts us to reconsider the roles and experiences of observers within the contingent context of urban space. Within the realm of posthumanist theories, montage transforms into open montage.

Open montage allows us to move beyond the concept of 'spatial montage' and the semiotic and linguistic approaches that characterise it. A renewed emphasis on materialism and performativity, within the posthuman paradigm, directs our exploration of encountering media configurations in urban space through a material and bodily lens. In this context, a network of agencies collaborates in the dynamic and contingent formation and reception of media configurations, ultimately problematising a linear and single viewing regime. The same openness – provided to us by the posthuman paradigm – allows us to conceptualise the 'human' in an open dimension, challenging the traditional role of the viewer. Instead of adhering to the humanist perspective, we shift towards the notion of the posthuman passer-by. This individual, viewed as a material and contingent presence in space, exists within a network of relations and actions, ultimately contributing to the contingent re-arrangements of the configuration. Consequently, we envision media configurations in urban space as engaged in an open-ended montage, characterised by an evolving structure shaped by a multifactorial and contingent nature, which cannot fully be grasped through a linear, unidirectional viewing regime.

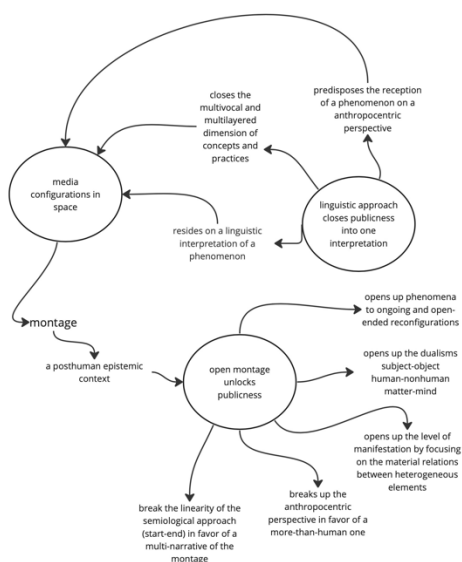


Fig. 4: The Posthuman Passer-by. Diagram illustrating the open montage framework.

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projection is titled *Moving Images and Placemaking: For an Environmental Semiology*, curated and presented on occasion of the PGR ICC Conference (June 2023).

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Notes

- [1] The moving images we are discussing here come from the short film *A City Reborn* (1945), scripted by the poet Dylan Thomas and directed by John Eldridge. The film recalls the devastating bombing of Coventry on 14 November 1940 by the Nazi blitz and proposes a concrete architectural as well as morale plan for the reconstruction of the city. It is a government film and a public record, preserved and presented by the BFI National Archive on behalf of The National Archives. We deliberately chose not to reference the film's title to further 'going against the tide of the linguistic turn' we are questioning, instead emphasising the material and affective dimension of expanded cinema projections in urban space.
- [2] Screening Coventry: Past is Now is an experimental cinematic projection curated by Giorgia Rizzioli as part of her doctoral programme at Coventry University. The projection was included as a satellite event of the Coventry Biennial of Contemporary Art cultural programming and included in the Coventry UK City of Culture 2021 events.
- [3] This article has been conceived jointly by both authors within the Spatial Practices in Art and Architecture for Empathetic EXchange (SPACEEX) project (project number 87256), funded by Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange (RISE), H2020-MSCA-RISE-2019. The project is developed by University of Northampton and Coventry University. Jordan and Rizzioli are members of the ArtSpaceCity research strand at the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University. The concept emerged from discussions about the absence of the more-than-human perspective in the articulation of placemaking and the way in which the publics of public art interventions and cinema spatialisation were considered similarly to those of gallery and movie theatre audiences. In particular Jordan addressed Section 1 'Open-minded: Going against the tide of the linguistic turn' and Section 3 'Open montage: Integrating a spatio-material dimension into the practice of montage'. Rizzioli tackled Section 2 'Open explorations: Challenges and affirmations of expanded cinema and site-specificity in spatial montage' and Section 4 'Open-human: From the humanist viewer to the posthuman passer-by'. The conclusion 'Open-publicness: Some conclusions on open montage' was a fully collaborative effort bringing together the ideas from each section to present an introduction to the framework of 'open montage'.
- [4] Miriam De Rosa in her contribution 'From Ontology to Topology: a two-leg methodological journey to look at contemporary media arts' (*Visual Cultures Studies*, 3-4, 2022) reflects on the term 'media configuration' for delving into the merging of different practices, formats, and languages that the post-digital and post-medium condition have been presenting in today's media landscape.
- [5] Connolly 2012, p. 15.
- [6] Boomgaard 2017, p. 28.

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- [7] See Kraijna 2014 and Dell'Aria 2016, 2021 for the examination of the semiotic and phenomenological accounts regarding the encounter between viewers and public media configurations in urban space.
- [8] We are sincerely grateful to the editors of this special section in NECSUS for this valuable opportunity to contribute to the latest issue.
- [9] We refer to the book *Post-Cinema: Cinema in the Post-Art Era*, edited by Dominique Chateau and Josè Moure (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020). Through a different number of contributions, the book explores the relocation of cinema and its migration into the contemporary art landscape. It scrutinises cinema's entire ecology, encompassing production, consumption, exhibition, and interpretation within an interdisciplinary framework that engages with theories, formats, and practices relevant to contemporary art.
- [10] We refer to Jacques Rancière in *The Emancipated Spectator: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford University Press, 1990). Rancière posits that aesthetic experience has a political effect on spectators, an effect that disrupts the 'way in which bodies fit their functions and destinations'. He continues, saying that the aesthetic experience produces 'a multiplication of connections and disconnections that reframe the relation between bodies, the world they live in and in the way in which they are equipped to adapt it'. He concludes by saying: 'the aesthetic effect is initially an effect of dis-identification' (Rancière 1990, pp. 72-73).
- [11] Broomgaard, 2011.
- [12] Latour 2007.
- [13] Youngblood 1970.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 87.
- [16] See Rees et al, 2011; Walley 2020.
- [17] Le Grice 2011.
- [18] For an extensive examination of expanded cinema and its multifaceted trajectory into the cinematic and artistic world, see Curtis 1971; Rees & White & Ball & Curtis 2011; Walley 2020.
- [19] Walley 2020.
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- [21] Kaye 2000.
- [22] Kwon 2002.
- [23] Veroeff 2012.
- [24] Bruno 1997.
- [25] Bruno 2007.
- [26] Bruno 1997, p. 20.
- [27] *Ibid.*
- [28] *Ibid.*
- [29] Mondloch 2010, p. 23. Precisely, when examining Bruce Neuman's *Live-Taped Video Corridors* (1970), Mondloch speaks about a 'coercive art environment' in where the physical and bodily experience of the viewer relies on a visual control dependent on the screen-based technology (pp. 25-35).
- [30] Ulmer 1983.
- [31] *Ibid.*
- [32] *Ibid.*
- [33] *Ibid.*
- [34] Ross 2015.
- [35] Latour 2007.

- [36] Buchloh 1982.
- [37] Ibid.
- [38] Ibid., p. 44.
- [39] Beech 2005.
- [40] Ferrando 2019.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] Posthumanism by referring to the notion of the post-human is connected to other philosophical perspectives such as new materialism, the nonhuman, cyborg theory, and assemblage theory.
- [43] Nimmo 2019.
- [44] Sylvia IV 2021.
- [45] Barad 2007, p. 187.
- [46] Ibid.
- [47] Bennet 2010.
- [48] Barad 2007, p. 132.
- [49] Barad 2003, p. 188.
- [50] Barad 2007, p. 135.
- [51] Barad 2003, p. 199.
- [52] Krajina 2014; Dell'Aria 2016, 2021.