From Isolated Criticisms to Militant Associations: How Brands in Urban Landscape Became a Matter of Concern

Stéphanie Le Gallic
Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, France

We will call here “illuminated advertising” an advertising device in the realisation of which participates a light source. So it does not include enlightened billboard or electric signs above the shops. Comparing the history of illuminated advertising in Paris and New York at the same time may look as an obvious exercise. Electric advertising was born in New York City in the latest decade of the nineteenth century and today Times Square is still a symbol of advertising in the United States.

As for Paris, the city embodies a different case since no area is dedicated to this media. Illuminated advertising has been well developed, particularly during the inter war years. Its development was better distributed in the urban fabric: it adapted itself to the evolution of mobility and circulation flow, drawing a moving urban geography.

Marc Martin’s researches about history of advertising are well known. They focused their studies on institutional, social even politics aspects, but they paid less attention to the appliances. There are a few reasons to this weakness: archives are little numerous and scattered, electric signs are little representative and geographically space limited, on the contrary to a general history of advertising. Only Times Square was studied by academics like Marguerite Weigel. That is the reason why studying illuminated advertising contributes to the knowledge of a little known domain while becoming integrated into a wider approach of development of the communication and innovation history.

I shall attempt to describe in particularly the Parisian case which is well-documented for the recent period and which embodies an original viewpoint. Indeed, the illuminated advertising development was real in France. The first electric signs got a warm welcome because they represented symbols of feast and progress. Electricity had not penetrated into all homes yet. However it already showed the brands and firms names on the balconies or on the top of the buildings. It was different in the United States because the concentration of the advertising devices in Times Square favoured the development of critical consciousness. The latter was quickly built around associations, in particular the Municipal Art Society whose members loved the ideal Haussmannian city.

However, isolated criticisms gradually rose in Paris against this new media. Then the first civil society organisations succeeded. Today resistance to the illuminated advertising is really a classic rule. That is why my real issue is to explain how the resistance toward electric advertising developed in the XXth century.

An old but isolated resistance toward illuminated advertising (1900-1945)
From the end of the nineteenth century, hostility against advertising was became a common place. Marc Martin studied the hostility of certain socio-professional groups as doctors or the sales representatives. Billboards were in the heart of this battlefield because of its anarchy development on every wall of the cities. However, illuminated advertising seemed to be protected from this wave of protest. Less numerous, less spread, it was not an important matter of concern. Since each device was unique and craft-made, admen used illuminated advertising only in specific and crowded places of metropoles. That is why it escaped the vigilance of the association of protection of the rural landscape or those which pretend to protect architecture of old towns.

Obviously, witnesses noticed the new cityscape which modified the aspect of the streets at the end of the day. Globally, the crowd was very fond of these brands even if these were far from making the unanimity. So, to the New York elite, the opinion went from the horror of these bright displays to the sceptical amusement. In Paris, the situation was more or less the same, except that no place or
crossroad dedicated to illuminated sign emerged. The “Grands Boulevards”, Montparnasse and even the Champs-Elysées began welcoming such devices. Where some people could see only enchantments and illuminations, others rebelled against what they called an abomination.

Resisting to the illuminated advertising was something new in Paris. The first criticisms appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century and were based on two main ideas: defending the urban aesthetic and protecting it against American influence. It is necessary here to notice that these critics against illuminated advertising appeared in the same time than the first regulation text about billboard. These texts arose from the activism of pressure groups which defended the landscape. The illuminated advertising was included in these texts because likened to the traditional displays. But it was never quoted explicitly. That is why until the interwar years, illuminated advertising had developed without limitation. Voices which could rise were little listened. They seemed weak and seldom.

Criticisms as evidenced by the archives blame the advertising for its lack of aestheticism. But there was no real argumentation, in particular against consumerism. These attacks did not target brands themselves but their visual aspect. There was also a disproportion between the numerous demonstrations pro advertising and the weakness of attacks against it. But it was not necessarily the reflection of reality.

**A renewed criticism and a greater pressure after Second World War**
The advertising resistance set up again after Second World War and hold a new appearance. Now, it was citizens who expressed their voices: they started calling upon their elected representative in town councils. The illuminated advertising became a public debate. The aestheticism question, in particular during the day, was put forward, as well as the aggressive aspect of advertisement.

But this situation was paradoxical. Indeed, reproaches and resistance were stronger than ever whereas the medium got through its first deep crisis. So, in France, in 1943, during the German occupation, a law was enacted which prohibiting illuminated advertising. It only survived in Paris after Second World War thanks to numerous dispensations. It was not a simple balance of power twist in favour of the distractors. It represented a deeper movement. The vocabulary hardening was perhaps more than a rhetorical evolution: it embodied a malaise. The advertising violence and the inscription of brands in the cityscape showed through all the lexical field used to denigrate this advertising shape.

But traditional criticisms towards aestheticism did not give up: the fear of falling again into all the interwar period abuses motivated those who would have liked to preserve Paris from all kind of advertising. In the same time, lively tints of neon tubes in Times Square were strongly depreciated. The public opinion described them as shrill and noisy. They were often associated with prostitution places which were called “red districts”.

So criticisms toward illuminated advertising multiplied and were more and more padded in order to make advertising disappear. These Parisian City Council debates sessions let glimpse the emergence of pressure groups. These groups preceded the appearance of landscape defence environment. When, at the end of the 1970s, French administration wished to reform advertising regulation, it had to deal both with the billposters who represented an important lobby and with the citizens. Finally, in 1979 a new law regulated in details the illuminated advertising: letter size, devices height, colours were taken into account by statutory texts. In spite of this regulation, local residents of these advertisings bore them less and less. Cohabitation was not obvious any longer.

**Since 1990’s, active and effective associations against illuminated advertising**
The idea to create citizens’ association to protect an area or a city against brands was not a new event. The *Amis des Champs-Elysées* already fought in the 1920s and 1930s to banish advertising outside their famous avenue.

From 1970s, associations more widely bound to ecology and sustainable development took over. The link between landscape and illuminated advertising embodied in France by *Paysages de France* which was created in 1998. According to its statutes, it fought against all attacks on landscape and live environment, and against all pollution whatever their forms, in particular visual, in urban and not urban landscapes. It participated in working groups on the advertising local plans revision and played on the national scale. Illuminated advertising was then associated with a visual “pollution” which had to be removed. This was nevertheless about a rather recent theme. Indeed, this word was previously used to designate the contamination of air, water or ground by substances which altered the man's health and natural ecosystem functioning. This concept thus contained the idea that illuminated advertising was unnatural and that it could damage the human life quality. So, it would be necessary to purge the
Parisian cityscape from these monstrosities which decorated the Parisian ring to come back to one claimed golden age when advertising and brands were banished.

This kind of association had a more effective organisation compared to those existing before Second World War. They did not hesitate to use modern means of communication. We thus witness a turnaround compared to what happened in the beginning of the illuminated advertising history, when its detractors could not be heard. From then, it was the brands which had difficulties to promote. That was why in the media, anti-advertising people were more usually heard than pro-advertising.