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### Article

**Citation** (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

**Priem, K and Thyssen, G (2013) Puppets on a String in a Theatre of Display? Interactions of Image, Text, Material, Space and Motion in The Family of Man (ca.1950s-1960s). Paedagogica Historica: international journal of the history of education. 49 (6). pp. 828-845. ISSN 1477-674X**

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## **Puppets on a string in a theatre of display? Interactions of image, text, material, space and motion in *The Family of Man* (ca. 1950s-1960s)**

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## **Puppets on a string in a theatre of display? Interactions of image, text, material, space and motion in The Family of Man (ca. 1950s-1960s)**

In the last few decades, increasing attention has been devoted within various disciplines to aspects previously considered trivial, among which are images, material objects and spaces. While the visual, the material and the spatial are receiving ever more consideration and the myriad issues surrounding them are being tackled, their convergence in educational settings across time and space has thus far remained underexplored. A travelling photo exhibition, *The Family of Man*, will serve as a starting point in this paper for addressing some of the complexities inherent in this convergence and thus highlight an essential yet neglected feature of education: its reliance on, and creative use of, multiple “modes” of communication and representation when attempting to produce learning effects. As a particular educational constellation that went on to travel throughout the world and interact with the contexts in which it moved, *The Family of Man* was all but neutral in design. The paper will show just how carefully it was composed to promote meaning-, power-, and knowledge-making in accordance with its mission. This border-crossing installation thus constituted a spectacle of different interacting views, forms, surfaces, lighting effects, panoramas, movements, captions, and other factors that aimed to create order among things and people. Nevertheless, the paper argues, “theatres of display” in education like this do not imply determination and causality of effects but rather provide “uncertain conditions” within a spectrum of “actors” and “actants”. The paper relates this to the manifold affordances of objects, images, places, etc., to disruptions of meaning in their convergence across time and space as well as to “emancipation” on the part of learners.

Keywords: exhibition, images, material, space, circulation, emotion

### **Introduction**

A particular exhibition – *The Family of Man* – will serve as the starting point in this paper to highlight an essential yet hitherto underexplored aspect of education, namely its use of multiple modes of communication and representation with the aim of producing learning effects. Indeed, *The Family of Man*, which was devised by Edward Steichen (1879-1973) in 1955 and is still deemed today to be the most successful photographic exhibition of all time,<sup>1</sup> represents a constellation in which textual, visual, material, spatial and other layers of representation are combined and staged in a “theatre of display”. This specific constellation, moreover, went on to travel around the world and intentionally interacted with the contexts in which it moved, thus increasing its complexity. This paper, then, aims to explore what such a border-crossing hybrid of word, vision, form, movement, space, and time, among other things, may have offered other than what could be revealed by a mere analysis of the individual elements used for it. While *the visual*,<sup>2</sup> *the material*,<sup>3</sup> *the spatial*,<sup>4</sup> etc. are, indeed,

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<sup>1</sup> The back cover of the exhibition’s catalogue (Edward Steichen, *The Family of Man*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1955), still reproduced today, proclaims this.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Michael Emmison and Philip Smith, *Researching the Visual: Images, Objects, Contexts and Interactions in Social and Cultural Inquiry*. London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Martin Lawn, and Ian Grosvenor, *Materialities of Schooling. Design, Technology, Objects, Routines*. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2005; “Die Materialität der Erziehung: Kulturelle und soziale Aspekte pädagogischer Objekte”, special issue, eds. Karin Priem, Gudrun M. König and Rita Casale, *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, no. 58, August 2012.

receiving ever more attention in disciplines like the history of education and while the myriad issues surrounding them are being increasingly addressed, the full complexity of education and its use of, and dependence on, such matters as converging textuality, visuality, materiality, spatiality, and temporality, have thus far remained underexplored. Historically, exhibitions represent sites of meaning-making that have critically influenced educational systems, policies and practices.<sup>5</sup> Their explicit staging of different representation modes is particularly suited to generating insight into the multidimensional nature of education in general. Analysing them may help develop new methodologies for research on similar “wonders of *mise-en-scène*” that have only begun to be unearthed, such as educational films.<sup>6</sup>

Starting from photographs “documenting” the exhibition and its chief director, whose “view of the world, of humankind, and of the function of photography”<sup>7</sup> played a central role in its assembly process, the paper will attempt to reconstruct this “theatre of display” and investigate some hitherto neglected dimensions. The questions addressed are, first, to what extent and in what ways did the spatial design of *The Family of Man*, its arrangement of the photos in various temporal-spatial contexts, its creation of depth of vision, flow, and the like provoke an educational experience that transcended the effects produced by the individual elements of the show?<sup>8</sup> In other words, to what degree did the whole, rather than the parts, of this constellation act as an educative force? Second, could the exhibition’s textual and visual representations, materialities, spatial configurations, and the like be understood as actors in a network of meaning-making, as an assembly that mobilises multi-modal resources on the part of visitors as much as on that of the designers and as a drama or spectacle enabling emancipated spectatorship?<sup>9</sup> Third, to what extent did viewers’ envelopment in a tour of montages result in the montages of meaning the exhibition’s designers intended to bring about? Can evidence be found of an effective symbolic domination through *The Family of Man*<sup>10</sup> in that specific cultural views on mankind were effectively represented as universal human experiences? Fourth, in what ways may a multi-dimensional constellation like this

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, “‘Putting Education in its Place’: Space, Place and Materialities in the History of Education”, special issue, eds. Catherine Burke, Peter Cunningham and Ian Grosvenor, *History of Education* 39, no. 6, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Martin Lawn (ed.), *Modelling the Future: Exhibitions and the Materiality of Education*. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2009; Siân Roberts, “Exhibiting Children at Risk: Child Art, International Exhibitions and Save the Children Fund in Vienna, 1919-1923.” *Paedagogica Historica*, 45 (1-2), 2009, pp. 171-190; David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place. Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 89.

<sup>6</sup> See *Paedagogica Historica*, 47 (4), 2011. Special Issue on “Education in Motion: Producing Methodologies for Researching Documentary Film on Education”, eds. Angelo Van Gorp and Paul Warmington.

<sup>7</sup> Eric J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, p. 1. For the importance of the biographical element in educational matters, see also Geert Thyssen, “Mapping a Space of Biography: Open-Air School Figurehead Karl Triebold and the Waldschule of Senne I-Bielefeld (ca. 1923-1939)”, *History of Education*, 2011, pp. 1-20 [iFirst article].

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the assessments of the exhibit’s emotional impact in Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, pp. 3, 4 and 9.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005; Ingrid de Saint-Georges & Jean-Jacques Weber (eds.), *Multilingualism and Multimodality: Current Challenges for Educational Studies*. Rotterdam et al.: Sense, 2012; Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur Emancipé*. Paris: La Fabrique, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001 [Translated from French by Richard Nice.]

exhibition thus have acted as a powerful didactic-political tool and, more particularly, as an instrument of imperialist or national internationalism?<sup>11</sup>

### **The Family of Man: a particular constellation designed to steer and direct**

In order to answer these questions, some information about the development of The Family of Man and the make-up of the exhibit in all its dimensions is needed. The show premiered at the New York Museum of Modern Art and was featured there from 24 January until 8 May 1955. It is still seen as the most successful photo exhibition of all time.<sup>12</sup> Within a Cold War context, in which the fear of atomic destruction and the hope for a peaceful future reigned, it centred on the presumed universal elements of humanity. The Family of Man offered a window onto the world – past, present and future – through a customised experience of internationalism, which managed both to attract audiences from different layers of society and to unite everything from avant-garde style to popular advertising. Significantly, after having been shown in New York, the exhibit toured the world as an instrument of American ‘cultural diplomacy’, the intention being to convince people across the globe of the legitimacy of US world leadership. Thus, it purposely interacted with the local contexts in which it was transposed. The exhibition attracted millions of visitors, many of whom were visibly moved by their often first acquaintance with such a medium.<sup>13</sup> It received enormous attention in the US as much as elsewhere and provoked both international acclaim and criticism. For this exhibition, the end justified the means, as much in terms of installation as in the choice of photographs, texts (including the captions), material format, lighting, etc. To achieve this, Steichen employed multiple, even contradictory, design forms.

The show displayed some 500 photographs grouped thematically around subjects like love, marriage, birth, childhood, play, family life, work, religiosity, old age, human interrelations, basic needs, studying and learning, hunger, aggression, and war. The photographs were said to have been selected from a collection of about six million images sent to New York by professional and amateur photographers from all over the world.<sup>14</sup> Be that as it may, various historical sources allow one to conclude that the photos represented a distinctly western view of the world. Thus, for instance, about two thirds of the images selected for the exhibition were by American photographers. Many of them had already been published in increasingly popular “glossy” US magazines and may be seen as a frame of reference for how America saw the world and itself in it.

The installation design of The Family of Man was not neutral in terms of meaning- and power-creation and was composed in function of the show’s mission. Not only a whole tradition of display but also an entire team of people were behind the ways in which that mission was served by the exhibit, even if Steichen is commonly represented as its main architect, albeit aided by his primary assistant Wayne Miller. Albeit incomplete, as shall be seen, this view points to an important dimension of the exhibition: its design by Steichen as the puppet master, preparing the theatre, imagining the puppets in it, and anticipating some of the strings to which they would be – knowingly and unknowingly – attached. For the concrete

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<sup>11</sup> See Serge Guibault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom and the Cold War*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983; Eric J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America*. New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> A recently published book pointing to *The Family of Man* as one of the most remarkable historical examples in exhibition history is Ludmilla Jordanova, *The Look of the Past. Visual and Material Evidence in Historical Practice*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge et al., 2012, pp. 109-150.

<sup>13</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*.

<sup>14</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, p. 41.

make-up of the exhibit, he consulted the designer Herbert Bauer, a former Bauhaus scholar who could make use of his rich experience with the aesthetic practice of European avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1930s and the related designing of exhibitions and propaganda. Steichen and Bauer exchanged views about how installations and display modes could most effectively create an experience that drew people in and affected their meaning-making rather than keeping them on a reflexive distance.<sup>15</sup> In view of this mutual concern, the images for the exhibition, for instance, were not chosen for their individual artistic quality in their original formats but for the contribution they could make to the exhibition's overall theme and mission. The pictures had to fit into the general visual assemblage of *The Family of Man* and, above all, had "to contribute pace and drama to the story";<sup>16</sup> "the criterion was to portray a message through the assembled whole".<sup>17</sup>

The design, inspired by commercial spaces like department stores,<sup>18</sup> may be described as an interacting play of different forms, surfaces, theatrical lighting effects, panoramas, movements and captions. The captions, for instance, remained conspicuously silent about the classification and selection of photographs and inscribed pictures used in the show's universalizing plot and "grand tapestry", which also included "brief quotations from the Bible [,] the Bhagavad Gita and legends of the Sioux nation, [from ancient Greek philosophers,] and from Shakespeare and James Joyce and others."<sup>19</sup> An important feature of the show consisted in its independence, as an exhibit, from a traditional museum and a fixed space. Tony Bennett has argued that mobile museum installations, like the one developed by Steichen and his team, were able to "respond to shorter-term ideological requirements"<sup>20</sup> and created constant resonance in the media by moving around and being opened and closed in continuation. For this purpose, *The Family of Man* exhibit, reproduced in several versions for its travels to all of the continents, was composed as a mobile set of elements that could easily be installed at any venue in a similar way. The exhibit's display sites were often spaces temporarily destined for mass audiences where "official culture" was integrated into the "popular culture".<sup>21</sup> This, for instance, was the case in Moscow, which was perceived as one of *The Family of Man*'s more important stops.<sup>22</sup>

Exhibition spaces, like the museum sites to which they are historically connected, always carry with them inherent contradictions.<sup>23</sup> Inscribed, as they are, in the tradition of World Fairs that spawned national museums and school systems, they juxtapose and order (e.g., nations and cultures), normatively compare (e.g., views and technologies), and function as instruments of governance and regulation in terms of socially standardised rules of conduct, knowledge-production, public instruction, and so on.<sup>24</sup> They are also venues of potential open access, participation, discussion, criticism, mixing, etc. of people from different layers of society. Related to such contradictory aspects of exhibitions, two key

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<sup>15</sup> See Marry Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. Cambridge, London: MIT, 1998, pp. 1-57.

<sup>16</sup> John Szarkowski, "The Family of Man". In: J. Elderfield (Ed.), *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid-Century: At Home and Abroad* (Series: Studies in Modern Art, No. 4), New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> Szarkowski, "The Family of Man", p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 80 (and pp. 81-86).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, pp. 95-155.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, pp. 95-102.

<sup>24</sup> See Martin Lawn, "Sites of the Future: Comparing and Ordering New Educational Actualities". In: Lawn (ed.), *Modelling the Future*, pp. 15-29, and other contributions in the book.

dimensions emerge: a largely human-authorial one that shows clear evidence of hidden and apparent control and one that escapes this authorial stance and points to unforeseen shifts in meaning-making in which human and non-human agents or ‘actants’ may play a role.<sup>25</sup> In congruence with the spectrum of governance, Bennett connects the “birth of the museum” to a “position of power and knowledge in relation to a microcosmic reconstruction of a totalized order of things and people.”<sup>26</sup> This connection also clearly applies to exhibits like *The Family of Man*, even from an authorial perspective: Steichen and his team purposely selected, sorted, arranged and subordinated “material” for the show, thereby homogenizing and blurring differences in their presentation (*e.g.*, in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, region, and culture). In this assembling process, which would influence audiences’ gaze and pace, they more or less invisibly hid all contradictions, particularities, diversities<sup>27</sup> and mediating interventions.<sup>28</sup>



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<sup>25</sup> Bruno Latour, “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy”. *Common Knowledge*, 3 (2), 1994, pp. 33-34.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 97.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythen des Alltags*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964.

<sup>28</sup> Bruno Latour, “From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public” In: Bruno Latour & Peter Weibel, *Making Things Public : Atmospheres of Democracy*, Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2005.

Figure 1. “Edward Steichen working on the model for *The Family of Man* exhibition, 1955” (Source: Public Photographic Spaces. Exhibitions of Propaganda, from *Prensa* to the Family of Man, 1928-55, *Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona*: Barcelona 2008, p. 456).

### A “theatre of display”: multimodal interaction among actors with uncertain effects

Going back to the metaphor of the puppet master, purposely staging the theatre and preparing the strings by which the puppets would then be manipulated, it could be argued with Bruno Latour that an assumption of maximum causality between the movements of the puppets and the pulling of their strings does not hold. No form of manipulation necessarily implies determination: according to Latour, sources of action and meaning-making cannot be reduced unilaterally to causal origins. What stimulates actions should be thought of as “uncertain conditions” within an extended spectrum of actors.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, the latter can be both human and non-human. From this perspective, objects (including images) have “scripts” or “affordances” that invite people to take on “roles” in their “story”. They are part of culturally and historically shaped “mediation” processes that “translate” both artefacts (“actants”) and people (“agents”) within plots that allow for multiple “associations”, unexpected “redefinitions”, “displacements” or “shifts” of meaning.<sup>30</sup> What Latour writes about artefacts could, of course, also apply to spaces such as those of exhibitions.

Other approaches have been put forward that emphasise the high meaning-making potential and manifold affordances of objects, images, places, etc. as well as “emancipated” activity on the part of learners (readers, viewers, etc.), for instance, by philosophers or by scholars in social semiotics with a multimodal perspective.<sup>31</sup> One such scholar who early on developed a theory on multimodality in the context of education is Gunther Kress. In reference to didactics, he has argued that the “canon” of any curriculum and the “power of teaching” imply only one side of knowledge transfer.<sup>32</sup> The second, as yet under-appreciated, side of how knowledge is conceptualised, designed and achieved relates to power on the part of the learner. Relevant for the analysis of *The Family of Man*, is Kress’s contention that “an exhibition presents a ‘curriculum’ for visitors seen as learners”.<sup>33</sup> Exhibitions, from this point of view, may be perceived as learning or knowledge spaces that are individually remarked, framed, selected, transformed and interpreted on the visitor’s/learner’s side.<sup>34</sup> Even coherent messages transmitted by exhibitions are, therefore, inevitably subject to different interests, backgrounds, principles and conceptions on the part of the viewers, which need not be “acceptable to the curator (as shaper of the exhibition-as-curriculum to be assessed)”.<sup>35</sup> Kress

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<sup>29</sup> Bruno Latour, *Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft : Einführung in die Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2010, pp. 104-111.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, “On Technical Mediation – Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy”. *Common Knowledge*, 3 (2), 1994, pp. 29-64.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., Rancière, *Spectateur Emancipé*; Ingrid de Saint-Georges, “La multimodalité et ses ressources pour l’enseignement – apprentissage.” In: L. Filliettaz, I. de Saint-Georges & B. Duc, “*Vos mains sont intelligentes!*”: interactions en formation professionnelle initiale. Université de Genève: Cahiers de la section des sciences de l’éducation, 117, 2008, pp. 117-158; Jeff Bezemer and Carey Jewitt, “Multimodal Analysis: Key issues.” In: L. Litosseliti (ed), *Research Methods in Linguistics*. London: Continuum 2010, pp. 180-197; Jewitt, C. “The Changing Pedagogic Landscape of Subject English in UK classrooms.” In O’Halloran, K. L. (ed.), *Multimodal Studies*. New York: Routledge 2011; Gunther Kress, “Recognizing Learning: A Perspective from a Social Semiotic Theory of Multimodality.” In: I. de Saint-Georges & J.-J. Weber (eds.), *Multilingualism and Multimodality*, pp. 119-140.

<sup>32</sup> Kress, “Recognizing Learning,” p. 124

<sup>33</sup> Idem, p. 128.

<sup>34</sup> Compare with Rancière, p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Kress, “Recognizing Learning,” p. 131.

relates these activities and potential epistemological differences to viewers'/learners' individual use of modes representing agency and authority in meaning-making.<sup>36</sup> Modes, for him, are “socially made and culturally available material-semiotic resources for representation”. Multimodality, then, “attends to the distinctive affordances of different modes”.<sup>37</sup> In educational contexts like those of exhibitions, material-semiotic resources for representation used by curators, exhibition designers, etc., such as speech, writing, sound, image, gaze, body posture, gesture, movement, objects and spaces in a certain sequence, order, interrelation, placement or selection, are confronted by those of learners/viewers. Thus is formed a complex knowledge space not defined by a single power of meaning-making but inevitably involving “epistemological commitment” on the part of all of the parties involved.<sup>38</sup> One philosopher who shares the multimodalists' affinity with early semioticians like Roland Barthes and fashionable anthropologists of science like Latour is Jacques Rancière, who has highlighted an important factor not to be neglected, namely: the “spectacle” or “drama” itself of teaching, exhibition-creation and -viewing, play, etc. He acknowledges a distance not only between the creator and the spectator of a certain “drama” but also within the “performance” as something autonomous between the idea of the artist and the perception or understanding of the viewer.<sup>39</sup> The performance, in his opinion, “is not the transmission of the artist's knowledge or inspiration to the spectator; it is the third thing that is owned by no one, the meaning of which is owned by no one but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission, any identity of cause and effect”.<sup>40</sup> It is the spectator's power or capacity, across irreducible distances, to make her/his own associations and dissociations.<sup>41</sup>

Relating this to *The Family of Man*, it must be stressed that Steichen and his team were very much aware that carefully devised visual, material and spatial configurations could exert a powerful influence on the people who experience them. However, they did not expect this influence to be uncertain or susceptible to symmetrical interrelations between human and non-human conditions. What they intended to produce in visitors was a deeply felt experience that all people – they themselves included – were part of one large family. The exhibition techniques used were meant to create a multi-layered, dynamic space that did not bow to the evident limitations posed, for instance, by fixed walls but instead produced a theatrical show. This was realised in multiple ways; circular, multidimensional and even freestanding installations were devised. Images were shown without frames, and attached not to walls but mounted on panels, suspended back to back, or hung on strings floating in mid-air and evoking transparency. They were enlarged, downsized and cropped to create either a dramatic or an intimate framework of seeing. The people depicted on the photos were also adjusted in size to sharpen the exhibition's message from one section to another, so families were displayed slightly larger than individuals. Steichen and his team occasionally also created three-dimensional views by brushing pictures against each other at a 90° angle. Every device was used to avoid “the aura of high art that enforced respectful distance” and the impression of a “high-gloss sacralisation of the artistic photographic print”.<sup>42</sup>

By means of photo assemblies, enabling both depth and flow of vision and a perception of images behind images, the objective was to activate and shape and reshape cultural formulae. From whatever angle visitors viewed the photographs, they were thus

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<sup>36</sup> Idem, p. 129.

<sup>37</sup> Idem, p.132.

<sup>38</sup> Idem, p. 134.

<sup>39</sup> Rancière, *Spectateur Emancipé*, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. London/New-York: Verso, 2011, p. 15. See, for the original cited in French: Rancière, *Spectateur Emancipé*, p. 21.

<sup>41</sup> Rancière, *Spectateur Emancipé*, p. 23.

<sup>42</sup> Latour, “On Technical Mediation”. p. 61.

expected to see a certain picture behind all of the pictures: the family that mankind was imagined to be.



Figure 2. Source: The Museum of Modern Art Archives New York – VII.SP-ICG-10-55

The flow and circulation of the visitors were also purposely channelled within the show's *mise-en-scene*. At specific points in the exhibition, this channelling was less or precisely more directive.<sup>43</sup> As the visitors entered, they could not avoid being exposed – as in a prologue – to a caption Carl Sandburg had composed specifically for *The Family of Man*: only one man, one woman and one child existed in the world, namely: “All Men”, “All Women”, and “All Children”.<sup>44</sup> Viewers were then steered to the right, alongside a collage of photographs that formed a transparent barrier and then onto a platform built around a rotunda made of hospital-like curtains, called “the pregnancy temple”. From there, they entered the squared centre of the exhibition, showing family portraits from various cultural backgrounds.

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<sup>43</sup> Compare: Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, pp. 46-48; Kristen Gresch, “The Family of Man. Histoire Critique d’une Exposition Américaine”. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Paris, 2010, pp. 357-376.

<sup>44</sup> Steichen, *Family of Man*, p. 5.

In this relatively open space they were allowed to circulate freely around the arranged pictures and approach them to inspect details. Subsequently, they were supposed to enter a space in which they were greeted first by a carousel of images of playing children, accompanied by a John Masefield caption: “Clasp hands and know the thoughts of men in other lands.” Juxtaposed to this ring-around the rosie-like installation, further away two curved panels were mounted with pictures of death and mourning, which narrowed viewers’ vision down to a single, oversized image covering the whole opposite wall. Showing New York’s Fifth Avenue at midday, it brought life back into the picture, aided in this to no little extent by a caption that went: “Flow, flow, flow, the current of life is ever onward”.

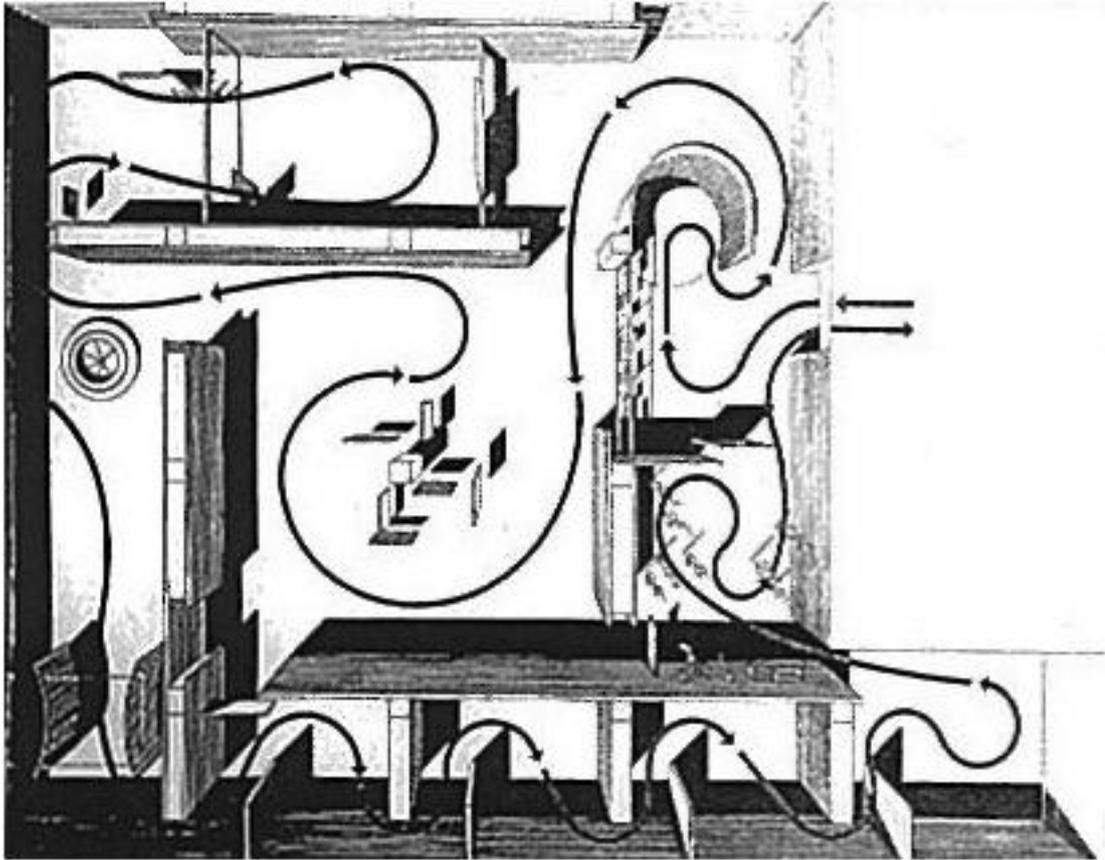


Figure 3. “The floor plan for the exhibition in the Museum of Modern art, 1955. Viewers were led through symbolic moments in the life of the family and then introduced to themes in private and civic experience. The exhibit broke all attendance marks at the museum” (Source: Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, p. 198).

Eventually, all the visitors were funnelled between the panels into the narrowest space of the exhibit but, before that, they were still given the choice to pass the carousel from the right and enter a dead-end room that displayed pictures of families gathering and celebrating. Once past the curved panels, which can be said to have announced the vices of mankind, the visitors in each case were forced into an enclosing structure that may have been intended to convey *angst* before giving access to relief. In this compartmentalised tunnel, Steichen and his co-operators confronted them with displays of aggression, injustice, abandonment, etc. – wrongs carefully balanced by harmonizing elements that reminded the viewers of the options open to humanity. The trail culminated in an impressively illuminated Kodak transparency of an exploded hydrogen bomb in a black room: the show’s only colour-print. Its last section was a masterpiece of sentimentalised visions and captions representing hope and redemption

by combining an oversized photo of a UN assembly with smaller ones of old couples, a larger picture of a woman's legs richly decorated with flowers, photo stands with children's portraits, and finally Eugene Smith's "Walk to paradise garden" countered by a quintessential image of life: forcefully splashing water. The latter at once symbolised rebirth through the caption that became one with it, saying: "A world to be born under your footsteps".

In general, the show was successful both in attracting huge audiences and in conveying its message, thereby enforcing a distinctively American view of mankind precisely because of its ingenious didactical use of various modes of representation. The Family of Man, in other words, was quite effective in both hiding and conveying its internal contradictions precisely because the different modes, which were intended to communicate its dubious message both separately and together, were employed in such a way that all potentially contradictory elements merged to form an homogenising vision. Nevertheless, art critics like Barthes at the time already refuted the message of the show by pointing out that, while images always descend from particular historical-cultural contexts, these particular backgrounds were obfuscated by the exhibition.<sup>45</sup> At the same time it is important to note that not just art critics exposed the fallibility of the exhibit's multi-dimensionally composed framing. The general public also responded to the show in ways that "displaced" part of its intended meaning-construction. Thus, for instance, a particular picture showing the lynching of a black man in 1930s Mississippi drew a disproportionate amount of attention, disrupting the exhibit's flow and its functioning as a whole as a "constellation". Steichen and his collaborators, therefore, had it removed from the show less than two weeks after its opening.

After its closure at the New York Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), different versions of the exhibition went on tour both nationally and internationally. Edward Steichen and/or the United States Information Agency carefully monitored it, which does not exclude the possibility that audiences responded in different and, at times, equally unintended ways to its multidimensional format as they did in the MoMA. To grasp the rich spectrum of these responses, in each case, it is necessary to analyse a broad variety of archival sources, including press clippings and correspondence, which are available at the Steichen Archive of the MoMA and elsewhere. Biographical interviews of visitors of the show may further have to be conducted as well as an investigation of what effects resulted from the circulation of the exhibition catalogue – one of the most successful coffee table books in private households at the time. While, as other scholars have stressed,<sup>46</sup> this catalogue may not do full justice to the exhibit's three-dimensional constellation, it became part of a complex plot of its own, in which – depending on its proprietors' or borrowers' means – also could have featured television reports of The Family of Man, popular press reviews, commercials at movie theatres, etc.

Be that as it may, it may be stated, as a preliminary thesis, that multi-dimensional plots of an educative nature like these require due attention. Latour-inspired "symmetrical anthropologies" as well as "multimodal" approaches from the field of "socio-semiotics" could be helpful. They appear to make understandable, for instance, manifold examples of how objects, texts, images, etc. are used variably across time and space in "theatres of display" that guide teaching, training and learning processes within well-engineered epistemological frameworks.<sup>47</sup> That is, in classrooms as much as in other educational "sites of display",

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<sup>45</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythen des Alltags*.

<sup>46</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>47</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*; Latour, "On Technical Mediation"; Latour "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik", Latour, *Eine neue Soziologie für eine neue Gesellschaft*; Ingrid de Saint-Georges, "La multimodalité et ses ressources pour l'enseignement – apprentissage." In: L. Filliettaz, I. de Saint-

learning outcomes are not left to chance but carefully mediated by didactic strategies. These are expected to guide or even dominate learners and what they are intended to learn, know and see. Yet, such “symbolic domination”<sup>48</sup> always seems to be susceptible to disruption and displacement in view of the uncertain symmetrical interactions between objects, images, texts, instructors and learners in time and space.

Recapitulating, then, what has passed in review so far, it can be said that interactions between image, text, material and motion were channelled in *The Family of Man* to avoid deviations from the show’s intended script. The latter, nevertheless, could be translated according to shifts in meaning created by the ambiguity of human and non-human interactions.

### **A particular national constellation goes international**

As mentioned, *The Family of Man* also toured around the world as an instrument of American “cultural diplomacy” intentionally interacting with the local-national contexts in which it was transposed. Thus, it fitted into a propaganda machine that aimed to promote the USA across the world during the Cold War. The United States Information Service (UISIS), a government agency founded in 1953 to improve the political and cultural position of the USA by means of international cultural exchanges, commissioned several copies of the show, including small- and large-sized versions. Both in writings of the time and in recent scholarly work, superlative numbers with regard to visitors, venues and catalogue editions have been used to illustrate the impact of the show’s international circulation.<sup>49</sup> Albeit a strategy used commonly to various purposes,<sup>50</sup> it actually says little about this impact and moreover conceals the difficulties in verifying such numbers through archival research. Indeed, a huge diversity of numerical eye catchers emerged in publications underlining the exhibition’s significance and public outreach inside and outside the USA. That said, it is generally assumed that, after its initial display at the MoMA in 1955, the exhibit toured the world for eight years, making stops on all continents and in three to four dozen countries. This numerical impact of research can be

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Georges & B. Duc, “*Vos mains sont intelligentes!*”: *interactions en formation professionnelle initiale*. Université de Genève: Cahiers de la section des sciences de l’éducation, 117, 2008, pp. 117-158; Jeff Bezemer and Carey Jewitt, “Multimodal Analysis: Key issues.” In: L. Litosseliti (ed), *Research Methods in Linguistics*. London: Continuum 2010, pp. 180-197; Jewitt, C. “The Changing Pedagogic Landscape of Subject English in UK classrooms.” In O’Halloran, K. L. (ed.), *Multimodal Studies*. New York: Routledge 2011; Gunther Kress, “Recognizing Learning: A Perspective from a Social Semiotic Theory of Multimodality.” In: I. de Saint-Georges & J.-J. Weber (Eds), *Multilingualism and Multimodality. Current Challenges for Educational Studies*. Rotterdam et al.: Sense, 2012, pp. 119-140.

<sup>48</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the numbers cited in: Szarkowski, “The Family of Man”; Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*; Staniszewski, *The Power of Display*; L. Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: from the New Deal into the Cold War*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999; Jean Back & Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *The Family of Man 1955-2001. Humanismus und Postmoderne: Eine Revision von Edward Steichens Fotoausstellung – Humanism and Postmodernism: a Reappraisal of the Photo Exhibition by Edward Steichen* Marburg: Jonas, 2004; *Public Photographic Spaces: Exhibitions of Propaganda, from Press to the Family of Man, 1928-55. Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona*: Barcelona, 2008; Kristen Gresch, “The Family of Man”.

<sup>50</sup> Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995; Silvana Patriarca, *Numbers and Nationhood. Writing Statistics in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Series: Cambridge Studies in Italian History and Culture). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

traced back to the exhibition itself, which cleverly incorporated the numerical in its textual and visual representations. Thus, for instance, the “multitude” of pictures distilled from another “multitude” of pictures enhanced the message conveyed by such slogans as “We, two, form a multitude”, “We shall be one person”, “Before me peaceful, Behind me peaceful, Under me peaceful, Over me peaceful, All around me peaceful...” which shifted attention from the individual to the collective and back, while hinting at infinity.

While circulating, the show had to adapt to local styles of architecture, ornamentation and installation: it was housed in history and art museums, festival halls, palaces of historical value, universities and exhibition halls and also in department stores and mobile constructions, invented solely for the exhibit. Within historical buildings the exhibit’s installation would incorporate antique-style pillars and ornamental decorations; mobile constructions would in turn consist of modern fiberglass or plastic, as in the case of Moscow in 1959. The exhibition adapted itself flexibly to these varying spatial and architectural circumstances – a malleability mirrored in the show’s general ability to meet short-term political requirements. This demonstrates its ability to bring about shifts in meaning-making over which, however, it had no absolute control. In each case, the changing material shapes of *The Family of Man* added new meanings to it, if only by keeping it up to date and functional as a promising symbol of the future of mankind.

In 1959, though only four years old, the exhibit already found itself moving in a reshaped political atmosphere in which displays of colonialism in all forms were meeting increasing resistance.<sup>51</sup> In addition, the show now featured in settings that returned the American gaze with a reflection on the gaze itself. This implied shifts of meaning that Steichen and his team had not and could not have anticipated. It is in that context that a young Nigerian man (Theophilus Neokonkwo) damaged a number of images from the most popular section of the Moscow *Family of Man* edition.<sup>52</sup> He justified his assault on the photos torn down by pointing to a perceived pattern of display: throughout the show photographs depicted what he called ‘white Americans’ and “other Europeans” clothed and thus “in dignified cultural states”, while American and West-Indian blacks and Asians were more often “portrayed either half clothed or naked”.<sup>53</sup> Soviet authorities in turn insisted on the removal of a photograph representing a hungry Chinese child asking for food while holding a rice bowl.<sup>54</sup>

Another unforeseen interruption occurred when the show started circulating in Japan. For its opening there in 1956, the image of the hydrogen bomb had been replaced by photos showing victims of the Nagasaki and Hiroshima bombs. This represented an enormous disruption of meaning in that it shifted attention from a more general threat of nuclear power to the gruesome effects of America’s deployment of this power upon human beings of another nation. This way the show’s message of universality became untenable. Inevitably, therefore, these new photos were almost immediately removed through the intervention of the UISIS. This is somewhat surprising, considering the special contract that was established between the MoMA and the Japanese publishing company responsible for the organization of the show.

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<sup>51</sup> In 1955, for instance, a conference was organized in Bandung at which both representatives of previously colonized countries and newly-independent ones met and pleaded for more justly distributed political and economic power.

<sup>52</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, p. 155.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*



Figure 4. “Steichen documented one of the most important moments in the life of his exhibition by contextualizing these representatives of The Other Side into his world family. Photo: Elliot Erwitt, courtesy Magnum Photos” (Source: Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, p. 198.)



Figure 5. “The photographs were large enough to envelop their audience, as in Paris, where viewers were inserted into a European street scene. Photo: National Archives” (Source: Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, p. 185.)

Meanwhile different copies of the exhibition, with all their material and visual constituents, continued their journey, taking on a life of their own along the way. The UISIS and Steichen himself attempted to control the experiences they induced, for instance, by enveloping viewers in the show’s picture of mankind, a process facilitated partly by the arrangement of photographs (some of them offering a view onto a life-sized street, inviting them, as it were, to step in and extend the actual exhibition space) and partly by them being photographed in the process, thus becoming included in the show’s ever more contested reference frame. A few versions of the show survived until the beginning of the 1960s. In 1964 the American government, through Steichen, donated the last travelling exhibit copy to

Luxembourg, where it was first opened to the public in the National History and Art Museum (*Musée Nationale d'Histoire et d'Art*). In 1994 the show, after having been deposited in an inadequate storage room, ended up at the castle of Clervaux, where it was later thoroughly restored under the auspices of the *Centre National de l'Audiovisuel* (CNA) (founded in 1989), thus becoming part of the Grand Duchy's national heritage.<sup>55</sup> The inclusion of The Family of Man into Luxembourg's national patrimony had earlier been refused when Steichen in 1952 offered to have Luxembourg be one of the show's first venues.<sup>56</sup> The country at that time had only a meagre photographic tradition, let alone close relations with such museums as the MoMA in New York. Steichen started to receive attention only in the 1960s, when he was discovered by the Luxembourg journalist Rosch Krieps.<sup>57</sup> From then on, his work gradually became integrated into national collections.

In Luxembourg and other countries, exhibitions later emerged that at once appear to have reinterpreted and revived the traditions in which The Family of Man inscribed itself.<sup>58</sup> That The Family of Man lost much of its original reference frame but at the same time is preserved, not least in the frame of the UNESCO world heritage programme, gives it a historicity and timelessness for some.<sup>59</sup> Western-oriented programmes like these,<sup>60</sup> with their stress on restoration and preservation, change the materiality and modality of the show and thus affect its meaning. On the one hand, the exhibit, originally meant to circulate, is now fixed in space, so the installation lost its flexibility and moved from the popular culture to the sphere of art, which could be seen as a move from the public to the archival domain. On the other hand, the exhibit still circulates but as digital material instead of in physical form. Thus the new technologies, which to some extent increase "emancipated spectatorship",<sup>61</sup> undo any fixation by heritage programmes, Steichen family representatives, and others.

## Discussion

Among other things, this paper has shown that configurations in which texts, images, material objects and spatial arrangements are staged as a "whole", and the contexts in which this

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<sup>55</sup> Back & Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *The Family of Man*. Françoise Poos, "Edward Steichen und *The Family of Man*." In: S. Kmec & P. Péporté (Eds.), *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg II/Erinnerungsorte in Luxemburg II*. Luxembourg: Editions Saint-Paul, 2012, pp. 126-130.

<sup>56</sup> Poos, "Edward Steichen," p. 129.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> For Luxembourg, see, for example, *Images de l'homme dans l'art contemporain/Images of mankind in contemporary Art. The 90s: A Family of Man?* Ed. by Paul di Felice & Pierre Stiwer. Casino Luxembourg, Galerie Nei Liicht: Luxembourg. Dudelange, 1997. A recent example, for instance, in the Belgian context can be found in the photo exhibition, "7 billion Others / 7 milliards d'Autres / 7 miljard Mensen". See: <http://www.7billionothers.org/> (last accessed on 24 June 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*. Other products of Cold War, although perhaps less multi-modally crafted, also conceal the particular origins and inherent contradictions of their design. Consider, for instance, the OECD and its instruments of 'transnational' comparison, like PISA. Cf. Daniel Tröhler, "The OECD and Cold War Culture: Thinking Historically about PISA" In: Heinz-Dieter Meyer & Aaron Benavot (Eds.), *Education PISA, Power, and Policy: The Emergence of Global Educational Governance* (Series: Oxford Studies in Comparative Education). Oxford: Symposium, 2013, pp. 141-161.

<sup>60</sup> Compare: Laurajane Smith, *All Heritage is Intangible: Critical Studies and Museums*. Kelpen-Oler: Reinwardt Academy, 2011; Marilena Alivizatou (2011). "Intangible Heritage and the Performance of Identity." In: A. Jackson & J. Kidd (Eds.), *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*. Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, pp. 82-93.

<sup>61</sup> Rancière, *Spectateur Emancipé*.

“whole” becomes transposed greatly matter for the meanings attached to them and thus for the reception of the didactic-pedagogic messages they intend to convey. This paper has also demonstrated that neither the human nor the non-human “actors” in such networks of meaning-making simply let themselves be manipulated as passive puppets on a string. From this perspective, the analysis of photographic exhibitions like *The Family of Man* as specific “theatres of display” is relevant for educational research more generally. It calls upon researchers to take into account all of the actors (both human and non-human) and modes of communication and representation involved in teaching, training and learning as well as their plural and changing uses. Multimodal socio-semiotic, Latourian, and Rancièrian approaches are thereby viewed merely as possible ways to interpret the complexities inherent in exhibits in particular and education in general. Essential aspects of these complexities appear to be the following; first, an invisibility and unawareness of various modes and their different value-loaded uses that make up educational constellations, second, an inevitable hierarchy or inequality in terms of power, if only in terms of “mastery” or available resources to guide learners into a “forest of things and signs”,<sup>62</sup> and, third, a certain enduring uncertainty in terms of educational processes and outcomes due to the multiple potential associations and dissociations on the part of all of the parties involved (including the spectacle or drama itself of a school lesson, exhibition visit, etc.). These three aspects, and perhaps especially the last one, account for a persistent trait in education, namely the pursuit of control over the incontrollable through basic forms or formal rules of teaching, training, child-rearing, etc., which present well-established and instinctively relied-upon routines. Both the cultural-historical sedimentation and the uncertainty inherent in the convergence of meaning-making modes can be related to the persistence and change – in other words “order” in “progress” – that Depaepe and others have ascribed to educational processes across time and space.<sup>63</sup>

“Internationalism” adds to the complexities described above and, among other things, situates itself in the communication and representation modes education uses in different temporal and spatial contexts since their convergence has particular historical-cultural features. The paper has shown the relevance of travel in the context of a specific multi-dimensional constellation, among other things, by highlighting its crossing of national borders and its blurring of boundaries between the international, the national and the local. Indeed, education constellations like *The Family of Man*, as seemingly ever more “globalised” didactic assemblies, generally appear to be well crafted and offer a fluid economy of meaning and knowledge. Yet, at the same time it seems that they can become unbalanced by slight disturbances generated in and across local settings. This is related to various and contradictory associations that can occur in webs or networks of meaning-making within and across borders. Be that as it may, it seems necessary for scholars, who are prone to apply “globalization” theories to school systems, the cultural make-up of schools, classroom practices and even the standardization of outcomes to consider such possibilities. In addition it seems important to point to mutual didactic influences between museums, exhibits, design and architectural projects, commercial enterprises, etc., and more obviously educational environments like schools, as these influences are of vital importance for whoever wishes to understand the “hard core” of education. In all these to some extent educational environments aspects like travel and cultural negotiation are involved. This makes the analysis presented here particularly significant for a broader audience dealing with such issues (and debatable concepts) as “internationalisation” or “globalisation” or, one might say, “glocalisation”.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 16-17.

<sup>63</sup> Marc Depaepe et al., *Order in Progress. Everyday Educational Practice in Primary Schools: Belgium, 1880-1970* (Series : Studia Paedagogica, Vol. 29). Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000.

## Acknowledgments

This paper at its conception benefitted from the input of Kerstin te Heesen, to whom sincere gratitude is due. Further acknowledgments for this paper, which is the result of collaboration in the strongest sense of the word, extend to Robert Hariman, Eric Sandeen, and Jean Back, Françoise Poos and Anke Reitz of the Centre National de l'Audiovisuel.