

The 1900 World's Fair or the Attraction of the Senses

The Case of the *Maréorama*

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ABSTRACT The 1900 World's Fair was the beginning of a new phase in the organization of international exhibitions. The Paris fair saw the culmination of a process that progressively transformed exhibitions from specialist fairs for the presentation of industrial innovations before a professional audience into recreational spaces for the amusement of much wider sectors of the population. This metamorphosis crystallized in the proliferation of technologically sophisticated attractions, such as the *Théâtroscope*, the *Cinématophone*, or the *Panorama du Tour du Monde*, aimed at seducing the spectator through the stimulation of the senses. These attractions included the ship-shaped *Maréorama*, which simulated a half an hour long trip along the Mediterranean with different illusions directed at all five senses simultaneously.

In this article I shall make use of abundant documentary evidence to propose a reading of the *Maréorama* and its significant sensorial component. To this end, I shall reconstruct the functional operation of the attraction in detail, pointing out how it differs from similar devices built in the same period in the tradition of panoramatic objects. I shall also incorporate the perspective of its creator, the painter Hugo d'Alési, through the expectations he had of the attraction and its reception by the media. In a wider context, the article aims to clarify the role of the *Maréorama* in our understanding of the part played by the senses in the experience of modernity.

KEYWORDS: *Maréorama*, Hugo d'Alési, 1900 World's Fair, multisensory attractions, history of the senses



The 1900 World's Fair was the beginning of a new phase in the organization of international exhibitions.¹ The Paris exhibition saw the culmination of a process that progressively transformed exhibitions from specialist fairs, where industrial innovations were presented before a professional audience, into recreational spaces for the amusement of much wider sectors of the population. This transformation was embodied by the emergence of the concept of "clou," that is, of attractive-looking objects designed to capture the imagination of the general public. As pointed out in Brigitte Schroeder-Gudehus's and Anne Rasmussen's *Les Fastes du progrès: Le guide des Expositions Universelles*: "the clou was born with the explicit vocation of appealing to the soul and attracting the public, who attended the exhibition with the specific intention of not missing the main attraction – in the widest sense of the word" (Schroeder-Gudehus and Rasmussen 1992: 10). This "clou" fever resulted in the proliferation of technologically advanced attractions aimed at the general public. The "clous" presented during the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* included the *Panorama du Tour du Monde*, the *Globe Céleste*, the *Cinématophone*, the *Panorama Transatlantique*, the *Théâtrescope*, the *Cinéorama*, and the *Panorama de Madagascar*; all of them tried to capture the attention of the audience by stimulating different sensorial fields, in what Vanessa R. Schwartz (1998: 157) has defined as a true fin-de-siècle "panoromania." These attractions also included the *Maréorama*, which is of particular interest to us because it was aimed at stimulating all five senses – touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste – simultaneously with different illusions.

In this article I shall make use of the abundant documentary evidence to propose a reading of the *Maréorama* and its significant sensorial component. To this end, I shall reconstruct the operation

of the attraction in detail, pointing out how it differed from similar panoramic devices built in the same period. I shall also incorporate the perspective of its creator, the painter Hugo d'Alési, by discussing the expectations he had for the attraction and its reception by the media. Finally, the article aims to examine the *Maréorama* against a wider background, that of the part played by the senses in the experience of modernity.

The *Maréorama*'s Proposal

The *Maréorama* was conceived by Hugo d'Alési, an engineer and a painter famous for his poster production, especially for the French railroad company. The *Maréorama* aimed to simulate a half-hour-long sea voyage through the Mediterranean Sea; it was located in the Avenue des Grandes Attractions, between the quai d'Orsay and l'Avenue de Suffren, in the Champ de Mars – a location beside the Seine pier which was ideal for the proposed activity. Following the trend set by similar attractions, d'Alési defined his device as a “motion panorama” (“panorama mobile” or “panorama à tableaux mobiles”).

The general design of the panorama consisted of a large roundabout illuminated from above, with a canvas screen set around the perimeter. This design had undergone no changes from its original inception, which was patented by the Edinburgh painter Robert Barker in 1787. In his patent, Barker prescribed that the distance between spectators and canvas must be carefully determined, so the former cannot see above the latter. The idea was to create a perception-altering environment “making the spectators feel the same sensations that they would feel in the real place.” From the outset, therefore, the inventor was interested in perception, identifying the canvas with an embracing whole.² Five years after Barker's patent, British newspaper *The Times* used the word “panorama” in a literal sense (meaning “total view”) for the first time. From 1800 and throughout the nineteenth century, panoramas were installed in all major European cities, including Paris.

A decisive step in the typological evolution of the panorama took place in the 1880s, with the development of the technique of the mobile panorama. In the beginning, this involved adding motion to the canvas, but was thereafter also applied to the area where the spectator was situated. In this way, the audience was no longer a passive element, but an actor with a part in the performance. Following this system, Théophile Poilpot installed a circular panorama called the *Vengeur* in the roundabout of the Champs-Élysées in 1891–2. The theme was a naval battle between the French and the British navies that took place near Brest in 1794. In this case, the spectator was totally submerged into the action. A system of piston and hydraulic presses reproduced the motion of the waves.

Clearly, the *Maréorama* was inspired by the *Vengeur* and followed in its footsteps. The media pointed out the innovative nature of the

device, compared with traditional panoramas, and stressed the changed role of the audience: “For the exhibition, the ingenuous and brilliant artist [Hugo d’Alési] has transformed the somewhat discredited art of the panorama by inventing, by means of a set of panoramic canvases, an action in which the spectator is submerged and participates actively. The *Maréorama* is not a panorama of the Mediterranean coast: it is a sea voyage along its shores” (Malet 1899: 19). According to this interpretation, the spectators abandoned their passive role to become actors on the stage created by the device. In addition, the audience moved from a setting with no fixed timeframe, the panorama, to an experience with well-defined time boundaries, which started from the moment the spectator entered the device.

In the *Maréorama*, the audience was accommodated on a steam boat equipped with powerful machinery to imitate the motion of the sea (as with the *Vengeur*) (Figures 1–3). This motion could even reproduce the violent swings of a storm, which was scheduled to surprise the visitor when the trip approached the city of Constantinople. The voyage was reproduced with the mechanical display of the canvas – 1 km long and 15 m high – on which d’Alési had represented the different landscapes visited by the ship, including stops in Villefranche (Côte d’Azur), Sousse (Tunisia), Naples, Venice, and Constantinople (Figures 4 and 5).

Figure 1

Advertising image of the *Maréorama*. Archive Historique de la Ville de Paris. Documents éphémères. Exposition universelle de 1900.



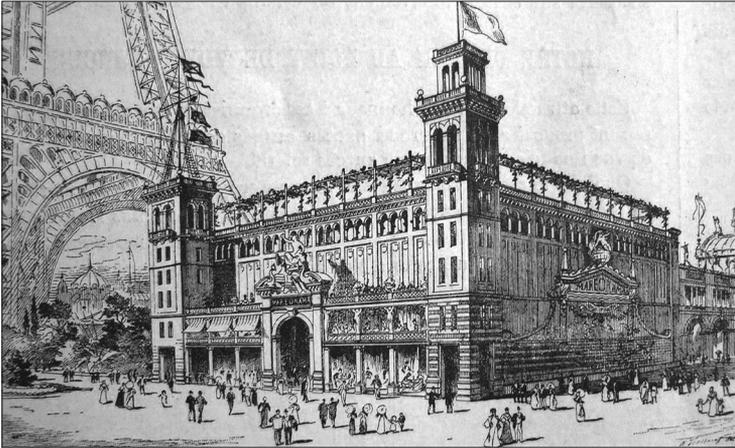


Figure 2
Building containing the *Maréorama*. Archive Historique de la Ville de Paris. Documents éphémères. Exposition universelle de 1900.

These illusions were complemented with other effects set in motion by the ship's crew, for example, light effects and sea smells. In addition to the storm, which included lightning and thunder, the spectator could also witness a sunrise and a sunset, an encounter with a fleet, and the boarding of the ship by a group of Neapolitan boatmen who captivated the spectators by dancing a tarantella.

The voyage was also accompanied by the music of a hidden orchestra, which played a specially made symphony composed by the Parisian pianist and composer Henri Kowalski (1841–1916) (Kowalski 1900–1) (Figure 6). Kowalski's style followed the tradition



Figure 3
Design of the *Maréorama*. Archive Historique de la Ville de Paris. Documents éphémères. Exposition universelle de 1900.

Figure 4

Design of the *Maréorama* from above. Archives Nationales. Catalog no. F/12/4355. Folder "Maréorama."

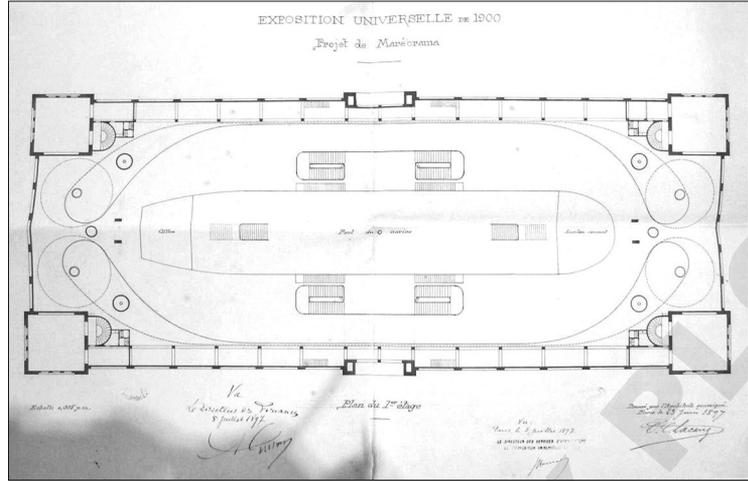


Figure 5

Draw of Constantinople by Hugo d'Alési for the *Maréorama*'s canvases. Archive Historique de la Ville de Paris. Documents éphémères. Exposition universelle de 1900.



Figure 6

Beginning of the last part of the score played during the *Maréorama*'s "voyage," "En vue de Constantinople." Archive Historique de la Ville de Paris. Documents éphémères. Exposition universelle de 1900.



of program music which emerged in the wake of Romanticism; in fact, most of his works were inspired by his own travels all around the world (Davison 1985: 19–21).³ The way music was used in the *Maréorama* had, in any case, already been outmoded by other attractions, where sound was recorded and could, therefore, consist not only of music but also of other effects. The remaining sense – taste – was attended to in the restaurant-brasserie situated on the rooftop terrace of the building where the *Maréorama* was installed.

Development of the Attraction and Hugo d'Alési's Expectations

Hugo d'Alési advertised himself as the intellectual father of the *Maréorama*, in terms of both technical and artistic design. However, this sort of project required a significant amount of initial capital to set sail. In order to raise the necessary funds, d'Alési set up a society to channel investments from third parties. According to d'Alési's calculations, the society could be divided into 10,000 shares, at 100 francs per share; this would cover most of the cost of the device (1,250,000 francs, although the initial budget was of 3,000,000). The forecasted returns were 5 percent interest on the investment, the cancellation of which would “have total priority over the distribution of profits” (d'Alési n. d.b: n. p.).⁴ According to d'Alési's calculations, the *Maréorama* would stage eight daily shows for the duration of the exhibition, which lasted of six months. Each show could accommodate 1,500 spectators. One-third of the seats were sold as first-class tickets (5 francs; 19 euros in 2014) and the remaining seats as second-class tickets (2 francs; 7 euros in 2014).

Obviously, these calculations banked on the attraction selling out every day. D'Alési was confident that this would be the case, and he even presented it to the fair's director and top authority, Alfred Picard, as the “most attractive clou in the Exposition [...] instructive and new” (d'Alési 1900). He argued that the project was viable, and pointed out that the *Maréorama* followed the trail left by the *Transatlantique* panorama, which simulated a naval squadron in the bay of Algiers and had been such a success in the previous World's Fair celebrated in Paris in 1889. He also stressed that the *Maréorama* did not need to be limited to the duration of the exhibition, but could remain open afterwards, like the Eiffel Tower. The size and technical characteristics of the *Maréorama*, which made it easy to transport, made this perfectly possible (d'Alési n. d.a: n. p.). Moreover, the press mentioned d'Alési's intention to undertake a “tour in Europe and America” with his invention (M. L. 1900: n. p.). Unfortunately, the documentation examined to date does not tell us what happened to the device after the exhibition.

The installation of the *Maréorama* encountered certain obstacles. D'Alési's first conflict with the exhibition's directorate followed the latter's refusal to cede the grounds that had initially been promised, probably because of the belated constitution of the society on which

the economic viability of the project depended (d'Alési 1898b). Later, d'Alési had a disagreement with the company that exploited the *Transatlantique* panorama, heir of the homonymous attraction presented in the 1889 exhibition. Once more, the problem was one of room; the parties disagreed on the space separating both attractions.

Despite all these difficulties, d'Alési was persuaded of the future success of the project. One of his arguments was that the *Maréorama* was the most advanced device in terms of the sensorial experience. In this regard, he referred to the concept of a “holistic work of art,” an idea with Wagnerian undertones that had already become commonplace in the culture of the fin-de-siècle:

[...] the fine arts are represented in this work as a colossal bet, as something of a truly new order [...] Why should we mention painting, music or even dancing, individually? This is, in fact, a *holistic work of art* [our emphasis] aimed at seducing through the three most subtle senses; we haven't forgotten the smells, which in our synthesis evoke the sea breeze of Eastern perfumes. We shall witness a sunset and the beginning of a new day, nocturnal effects, an electric and thunderous storm. Science will also be invited in the most diverse shapes: physics, chemistry, meteorology. And what can we say about the role of ethnography in this work [...] Regarding architecture, the mechanical arts and techniques, they will also find a place in the *Maréorama*. (d'Alési 1895: 5–6)

Multisensoriality as a New Form of Experience

In the previous excerpt, Hugo d'Alési pointed out that the novelty of the *Maréorama* rested in part on the integration of different disciplines and forms of knowledge. The design of these attraction reflects the search for new techniques which could offer some insight into hitherto unknown forms of perception, ways to give the public new experiences, in order to seduce it completely. We must not forget that the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* was visited by around 50,000,000 people. These were products designed for a mass society. In order to avoid obsolescence, these devices had to be constantly renewed. Years after the celebration of the exhibition, Walter Benjamin referred to this dynamic: “Untiringly, we strived to improve the panoramas by means of technical artifices, which enabled us to imitate nature to perfection” (Benjamin 1989: 37)

The primary way of achieving these new forms of experience was by appealing to the senses. The *Maréorama*, and other similar attractions that were also presented in the exhibition, tried to trick the audience by making it live through wondrous experiences, by putting them through an “épatante” adventure. This search for the phenomenal was implicit in the concept of “clou.” In some ways, the Eiffel Tower had inaugurated this interest for “épater la terre” which,

eleven years later, drove some journalists to claim that the 1900 exhibition had turned into a fair – not so much a presentation of materials and objects, which had traditionally been the aim of World's Fairs, but merely a funfair. One of the editors in *Journal des débats* referred to there being “Too many domes, [...] too many spheres [...],” and defined “clous” as “not art but publicity” (Spronck 1894: n. p.).

Indeed, the sensorial dimension of *Maréorama* depended on the multiplication of stimuli through the operation of different devices aimed to all five senses in combination. This introduced a novelty into the traditional approach to panoramas. Multisensoriality was the target of the experiences, realistic or illusionistic, that were proposed in the program. In the original panorama, this illusion of reality was essentially visual, but soon other sensorial dominions were also incorporated; and thus the *Maréorama*, which combined images, sounds, haptic signs (based on the motion of the body), smells, and even flavors, came into being. This multisensorial message was aimed at producing an illusion of reality, a reality constrained within its own time frame, with a beginning and an ending, a reality where the spectator became an actor; this, in some way, turned the device into a theater stage.

In general, these attractions presented in the fair aimed to augment reality temporally and spatially. The audience was taken to witness a wide variety of historical events, from prehistory to the storming of the Bastille, and places, from the rue du Caire to a Swiss village; the message was that the world was within their range. The written record often mentions things like “a trip around the world even faster than Philéas Fogg's.” In the *Maréorama*'s case, the focus was clearly on the spatial dimension: in barely half an hour, the audience was taken to several places along the Mediterranean coast.

Aside from its “épatante” nature, the *Maréorama* was also attributed educational value. Hugo d'Alési himself referred to his invention as “instructive as it is curious.” This drove the director of the newspaper *Le Temps* to demand free entry for schoolchildren, a proposal which was accepted by d'Alési.⁵ The desire to contribute to the dissemination of knowledge was implicit in many of the attractions presented in the fair. In fact, the scientific committee was one of the bodies in charge of selecting which of the 173 attractions submitted were to be accepted. The other body was the attraction committee, which selected sixteen, including the *Maréorama* (the scientific committee only selected five attractions) (Anon 1897: n. p.). In general, the press regarded the pedagogic element of the exhibition positively. A critic in the *Journal des débats* said:

We left the exhibition in a state of inexplicable bewilderment. It is only when one returns to the fresh air that one is capable of pulling himself together and admiring the inventors of “clous” as much as they deserve. Ah! What a beautiful thing science is! But not the austere and icy science of sages, but science

made warmer by a smile, the entertaining science of real life ["tableau vivant"]. (Hallays 1900: n. p.)

This created a link between the strong sensorial impact of the attractions and a thirst for knowledge, which a journalist of the period summarized as: "the stronger the impression is, the larger will be the wish to know and understand" (Tétard 1896: 13).

The new experience which these attractions offered had a strong aesthetic component too; in the case of the *Maréorama*, it was based on an illusion. Following the trend set down by precious panoramas, the painting had a realistic or naturalistic style and aimed to represent reality to the last detail. As a critic said at the time, these paintings could be examined "with a magnifying glass" (Anon 1900: n. p.). The realistic result was of paramount importance for d'Alési, as shown in the documentation submitted to request permission from the exhibition authorities (d'Alési 1900).

At any rate, the ultimate judgment as to the degree of "reality" achieved by the illusion rested with the subjectivity of the spectator. Some critics pointed out that the contrast between the painted canvas and the three-dimensional figures (either real or made of wax) made the differences between what was real and what was not even more acute, which limited the effect of devices such as the *Maréorama*. Along these same lines, others claimed that d'Alési's paintings were far from realistic:

The painting, which should go unnoticed, does not do justice to the stage, which should assume the most prominent role. And this is a pity. An artist such as d'Alési should not have forgotten that illusion can only be produced with the subtlest of strokes. (M. L. 1900: n. p.)

For other critics, however, the multisensorial effects proposed by the *Maréorama* pushed the boundaries of illusionism like never before (Anon. 1900: n. p.).

Along with this controversy regarding the degree of realism achieved, another debate revolved around the *Maréorama*'s canvases: this was the dispute between cultivated and popular art as represented by the panorama tradition, even if in principle, at least according to Baker, panoramas were a form of high art (Mair 2012: 59). In this sense, a critic in the *Journal de Genève* supported the art of panoramamic [panoramatic] objects, in implicit opposition to Monet's practice of insisting on the repeated representation of the same subjects:

It is a different approach, but still has to be considered from the artistic perspective: the discovery of our planet by the general public; if the public is abandoning museums, could this not be because painters, bored of Romantic exoticism, have

forgotten their main duty, which is to show us the wonders of the earth? This is shown, for example, by the practice of starting the same painting over and over again, of painting the same landscape, and, in short, of turning a single point of the universe into the whole universe. Perhaps, the art of the panorama, infinite as popular art can be, can teach pure art a couple of lessons in this regard. In fact, most of these panoramas respond to the individual need “to see everything”. They make us travel around the earth. (M. L. 1900: n. p.)

When this critic's opinion was published, realism was no longer *en vogue* among studio painters, which created a split between painters working with this sort of attraction (Louis Dumoulin, Hugo d'Alési) and avant-garde painters of the time. Despite the stylistic differences, it seems that both tried to express a transforming perception, that is, to capture the swift moment of a present which is already gone. This was, however, carried out by different means: Impressionist and post-Impressionist painters tried to achieve this effect through their own painting technique; d'Alési and other artists dedicated to the art of panorama regarded their canvases as one among the many illusions of an ever-changing reality. For this reason, both proposals fall fully within the limits of what has been termed “the experience of modernity.”

Notes

1. This article has been carried out within the framework of the research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness: “Subjective and Objective Elements in the Cultural History of Wellbeing: 1750–1950” (FFI2013-46361). The text has been translated by David Govantes Edwards.
2. Barker, Robert. *Patente accordée à Mr Robert Barker d'Edimbourg pour l'invention de son panorama le 19 juin 1787* (London: Repertory of Arts and Manufactures, t. IV, 1787), 165, in Michaux (1999: 15). The information regarding the typological evolution of panorama is based in this work.
3. Although for Romantic composers – and even for Impressionist ones, such as Debussy – the term “descriptive” was considered strongly derogatory, Kowalski broke with this trend by labeling his score “descriptive.”
4. According to the INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Economiques), in 1900, 1,250,000 francs would amount to approximately 5,000,000 euros in 2014.
5. In response to the idea set forth by *Le Temps* around January 19, 1898, in a letter dated January 27, 1898 and published in the newspaper, d'Alési committed to reserve two free shows per week for schoolchildren (d'Alési 1898a: n. p.).

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