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## New Furniture for the Box Office: Computer, Ticket, Window

Scott Kushner

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**Keywords:** tickets, interiors, cultural techniques, interactions, box office, computing

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**Word count (including text and notes):** 7,241

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## Introduction

As the 20th century waned, Roger Tomlinson sought to move the box office to center stage. Tomlinson, a British ticketing guru, understood something that, while not new, had not before been made explicit: the box office not only sells tickets, but also structures the relationship between the public and cultural events. Tomlinson reimagined the ticket counter around the digital computer in order to foreground this relationship. The ticket counter “provides the major *intimate* opportunity to capture information about actual customers,” which can lead to “better understanding of potential attenders” (Tomlinson, 1993, pp. 16, 18, emphasis in original). Tomlinson’s vision marked a rupture in thinking about box offices that transformed the space from a necessary but unglamorous compartment in the lobby to the heart of a cultural organization’s marketing and outreach efforts. At its heart, Tomlinson’s counter represents an effort not only to integrate a new technology, but to reimagine an interaction by transforming the “scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out” at the box office (Goffman, 1956, p. 13).

This rupture is not only an adjustment of architecture and gadgetry, but also a recalibration of the work ticketing does to make spatial and cultural distinctions. Bernhard Siegert (2015) would recognize the ticket and the box office as cultural techniques, because they “operationaliz[e] distinctions in the real” (p. 14): they mark off insides from outsides, audiences from performers, and culture from banality. In this essay, I excavate the distinctions the box office makes and the ways those distinctions change over time. The reward of this excavation is not only an unexpected new lens with which to analyze performance spaces, but also a more nuanced understanding of how the relationship between culture and public was reconfigured in the post-industrial era as digital computing became commonplace. I dig into 19th- and 20th-

century treatises by writers such as Charles Garnier and Edward Burris-Mayer to show that, while the box office once held the public at bay by strictly delimiting the space of culture from the spaces of everyday life, the new box office invited the buyer inside the transaction, in order to develop a cool, comfortable relationship.

By limiting the analysis here to tickets that grant access to cultural events, it is possible to foreground questions about how a transformed ticketing interaction intersects with changing relations between the ancillary operations that surround performance and performance itself. Event tickets have much in common with tickets for transport, which authorize entry, store information about journeys, guide passengers to destinations, and are subject to surgical interventions by staff members who tear, incise, and mutilate them (Symes, 2018, esp. pp. 469, 470, 472, 477). Event, transport, and other tickets are all “multimodal texts,” offering differential levels and layers of legibility to the different populations who handle them: agents and laypersons (Bowcher and Liang, 2013, pp. 386, 392). But while transport tickets grant access to the ordinary—if sometimes disconcerting—experiences of everyday travel, event tickets separate the banal from the spectacular. To study the event ticketing transaction is thus to expand the study of performance beyond what happens during the performance, in order to make sense of its cultural wrappings (cf. Puwar, 2007, p. 255; Acland, 2003, p. 46).

The box office is a particularly useful space to think with, in part because of where it has historically sat in the built environment of performance. As Gay McAuley (1999) observes, the box office, positioned near the doors or “sometimes in interstitial space between inside and outside” (p. 62), reinforces the divide between audience spaces and performers’ spaces. The window through which cash and tickets pass is one of a series of thresholds dividing interior from exterior, performance from non-performance, and culture from everyday life. Before

crossing subsequent thresholds and taking a seat, the spectator must first approach this one and settle the bill: “it is frequently the first space to be negotiated by the spectator” (McAuley, 1999, p. 62).

The dimensions of these distinctions are not stable, and their shifts often go unremarked. When Tomlinson published *Boxing Clever*, his 1993 manifesto for the box office, he noted that “the function of the Box Office has changed tremendously” since the early 1960s, “yet in many venues [...] the Box Office would hardly seem to have changed” (pp. 9, 10). Box offices had long been an afterthought. At best, they were “stepchildren” (Jewell, 1978, p. 130); at worst, when construction was finished, it would belatedly emerge that the box office was “inadequate or had been forgotten” (Mielziner, 1970, p. 112). In the built environments of performance—theaters, concert halls, arenas, and stadiums—attention centers on stages and fields. Spectators come to see others play games, music, and roles. Whether under-appreciated, unnoticed, or unplanned, the box office is the locus of interactions between performance and non-performance, buyer and seller, public and culture. If, as Tomlinson argued, the ticket counter had to change, the encounter with culture did, too.

Marvin Carlson (1989) divides theater buildings into spaces reserved for performers and spaces reserved for audiences, each supported by auxiliary spaces, backstage areas where performers “ready themselves [...] for their upcoming contact with the audience” and “lobbies and foyers” (p. 133) where audiences prepare for their upcoming contact with performance. These spaces’ integrity is reinforced when the inhabitants of one space disruptively wander into the other: “those rare occasions when spectators have been permitted to invade backstage areas or when actors have appeared in lobbies and foyers have usually had about them an aura of transgression” (pp. 133-34). But box offices are already a different sort of space: administrative

spaces where managers ensure that audiences attend in predictable and profitable ways. The ticket window opened into the audience's preparatory space, and it depended on clearly assigned roles and permissions: audiences over here, agents over there, with objects, words, and knowledge crossing the threshold only under proscribed conditions. Tomlinson insisted this bifurcated architecture needed rethinking.

By structuring the encounter with culture around an economic transaction where a thing—a ticket—is procured in advance, the box office becomes the site where the economic and the performative meet. Performance genres such as theater, dance, music, and sport are styled as somehow separate from “the contaminating effect of the financial transaction, as though we need to get that over with elsewhere so that we can commune with art” (McAuley, 1999, p. 63). Indeed, Christopher Small (1998) describes the box office as “the only visible sign [...] of a link with the everyday world of commerce and money” (p. 22).

Such a link buttresses the financial stability of cultural performance. The ticket conspires with other technologies—walls, doors, turnstiles, ushers—to enclose and regulate access to performance.<sup>1</sup> At the heart of cultural events lies a paradox: performance is fleeting. In the classic formulations, “performance originals disappear as fast as they are made” (Schechner, 1985, p. 50), and they “cannot be saved, recorded, documented” (Phelan, 1993, p. 146). Since performance itself refuses capture, capital demands that it be somehow enclosed. By building spaces where performance can be staged, and then extracting payment from those seeking entry,

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that the furniture that corralled crowds in theaters, music halls, and sports arenas is also deployed in post offices, cinemas, and amusement parks. Stanchions, turnstiles, bleachers and other crowd control technologies were often wrapped in the language of protection and order. See, for example, Detroit Atlas Portable Bleacher Company, Trade Literature Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Libraries, Washington, D.C., consulted June 4, 2019; Caille Bros., Trade Literature Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Libraries, Washington, D.C., consulted June 4, 2019; Perey Turnstile Company, Trade Literature Collection, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Libraries, Washington, D.C., consulted June 4, 2019.

it is possible to harvest revenues.<sup>2</sup> The enclosure of performance is a spatial and a media problem. From whence will the program be emitted: from which stage? on which pitch? How will that emission be constrained: by walls? by distance? Theaters, music halls, and arenas are “vessels and environments, containers of possibility” (Peters, 2015, p. 2), the spatial media of cultural performance.

What was new here? The traditional box office, institutionalized in 19th-century European public theaters, was premised on quick, efficient encounters. Tomlinson encouraged box offices to slow the encounter down to foster long-term relationships. Central to this deceleration is a machine usually associated with speed: the digital computer. Beginning in the 1960s, major computing services companies built computerized ticketing systems. By the 1980s, boutique developers had brought software to market intended to fit smaller organizations’ budgets. As Tomlinson reimagined ticketing around computing in the 1990s, he also looked to correct lurking deficiencies in the traditional box office.

In what follows, I’ll first show how tickets and box offices fit into a broader history of enclosing performance and creating spatial distinctions in Western Europe and North America. Then, I’ll integrate this logic of enclosure into the history of the box office. With these histories outlined, I’ll unpack the new interaction that Tomlinson’s counter sought to create, focusing on a diagram in his book. Finally, I’ll argue that this new interaction inaugurated a new relationship between the public and culture.

## **Enclosing Performance**

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<sup>2</sup> Note Jacques Attali’s (1985) observation that the concert hall is “the invention of the bourgeoisie” and that the “confinement” of music in halls is “made necessary by the collection of entrance fees” (pp. 55, 32)



To speak of ticketing is to speak of enclosure. Enclosure might be understood in the Foucauldian sense, as “the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself” (Foucault, 1977, p. 141), where it is a matter of defining and sealing off a territory. Alternately, enclosure might be understood as similar to Erving Goffman’s (1956) notion of “any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception” (p. 152), where the stakes are to do with what sensations can escape and stimulate the sensoria of those positioned outside. It is not always the case that performances are enclosed (think of street performances), nor that they always have been enclosed (think of pre-modern ambulatory theater). But enclosure is a particularly effective way to control and extract money from culture, because it constrains the locus of points from which a spectator or listener can access culture. Enclosure is therefore a matter of regulating who may partake, enjoy, bear witness, gain access, and subsequently claim to have gained access: it is a way of drawing social boundaries.

The enclosure of performance has not always been accomplished in the same way: early modern playhouses, often converted inn-yards or tennis courts, typically positioned pay boxes at strategic bottlenecks along the way to the performance space, while the passing of hats has a logic and history of its own (cf. Kushner and Brooks, 2000; Harrison-Pepper, 1990, esp. ch. 2). But the ticket affords more insidious possibilities of control, and it has been deployed for three millennia. From Greek antiquity, where ticketing shored up finances (Wilson, 2008; Wilson, 2011; Csapo, 2007), to early modernity, where it reinforced social hierarchies (Cohen, 1985; Ravel, 1999), the ticket has been an instrument of social and political power, managing flows of money and bodies around cultural events. Ticketing does more than compel payment. Writing of the explosion of all kinds of tickets in 18th-century London, Sarah Lloyd foregrounds the cultural work that tickets performed: “they gave shape to events and actions; [...] they patterned

behavior and convention” (Lloyd, 2013, p. 844). Perhaps the most concrete way that ticketing shapes events is by separating, spatially and temporally, the act of payment from the act of entering.

Space and time lie at the heart of ticket logic. Among the most elaborate attempts to define the ticket comes from a 1960s Ohio State University theater manager. J. C. Pheneger characterizes a ticket as “both a legal agreement and/or a contract.” The terms of the agreement “guarantee[] a patron a piece of real estate for a specified time.” In addition to documenting the rental agreement, “[a] ticket is also a contract guaranteeing that the promoter will provide at the specified time in the room where the patron has leased the real estate a certain program” (Pheneger, n.d., p. 1).

If the ticket marks off the space and time of performance, it does not work alone. Richard Preiss (2013) identifies the 1576 opening of the Theatre in Shoreditch as a turning point, because the “360-degree outer walls” made it possible “to charge admission, at standardized prices, ensuring a predictable revenue from each performance” (p. 49). Pheneger (n.d.) notes that “ticket takers or doormen are very important in the correct handling of tickets and more importantly correct handling of crowds” (p. 18). The choreography of this crowd management is precise: Pheneger details where ticket takers should stand relative to doors and one another in order to stop “anyone who might try to ‘sneak in’” (p. 18). The doorman thus appears as a companion technology to the ticket, the humanoid enforcement mechanism securing the performance space. A generation later, Don Jewell (1978) was concise and explicit: “Inherent to nearly all admission-type events is the need for efficient control of patrons.” The object of control is telling: not patrons’ movements, but patrons themselves must be controlled.

Why must patrons be controlled? Why must “adequate protection be provided against gate crashers,” and what necessitates oversight of ticket takers “to make sure they are doing a good job policing the tickets” (Jewell, 1978, p. 18)? These layers of security are symptomatic of a technological system that marks and enforces distinctions. Siegart’s (2015) key exemplar of a cultural technique is the door, which demarcates interiors from exteriors. Siegart’s door not only sets insides apart from outsides, it also inaugurates the possibility of imagining insides and outsides in the first place. The ticket similarly contributes to the demarcation of performance spaces, and it also underwrites the possibility of this distinction taking root in the first place: the ticket allows us to think of performance as something that occurs in a particular place and time. In this sense, the ticket works as much on performance as it does on “the human subject itself” (Geoghegan, 2013, p. 76). Jewell seeks to control the patrons themselves because the work that tickets, ticket takers, and turnstiles perform is to operationalize the distinction between inside and outside, between the space of performance and the space of non-performance. These distinctions make possible the notions that a performance ought to be enclosed, that entry should be regulated, and that certain people should be allowed in, while others should remain outside. But these distinctions also change over time. In recent history, ticketing’s role has expanded: not only a tool to distinguish public from culture, it is now a relationship-building mechanism that strategically creates the perception of a soft border between them.

Ticketing accomplishes this work by imposing a spatiotemporal distinction between a transaction authorizing entry and entry itself. This separation is operationalized by a token—a ticket—that documents previous payment. Over several millennia, the conferral of legitimacy upon those seeking entry has assumed several material forms: stone, metal, paper, or digital tokens. Tomlinson’s counter marks a shift in the interaction where fees are collected and

evidence of payment is provided. It also reshapes the distinctions between inside and outside that had characterized the ticketing transaction since its formalization in 19th-century European performance spaces.

### **Black Box Office**

Charles Garnier, who designed Paris's palatial opera house, was ambitious in both his architectural vision and his detailed accounts of how bodies should move through performance venues. The flow of bodies and money was controlled by a series of meticulously arranged vestibules and doors described methodically in Garnier's 1871 treatise on theater architecture. Over the course of twenty pages, Garnier tracks theatergoers as they arrive on foot or by carriage, enter the theater building, sort themselves according to whether they have tickets or not, and, if they have them, further sort themselves according to the type of ticket they hold, a testimony to the work that ticketing does to partition space and classify bodies that move through the spaces of cultural performance (cf. Foucault, 1977, p. 143). Moving through the theater building, theatergoers cross a series of thresholds:

The line forms in the enclosed, covered, and heated galleries. At opening time, the main theater doors open, and the line immediately moves into the room with the ticket windows; tickets in hand, they arrive several steps later in the ticket vestibule, where tickets bought in advance or bought at the window when the theater opened are inspected. (Garnier, 1871, p. 47, my translation)

Garnier describes a procedure where bodies are sorted, processed, and transformed into spectators. The moment of transformation arrives when those bodies present their tickets. This is an exercise in control ("ticket vestibule" in Garnier's French is *vestibule du contrôle*). The

ticketing mechanism, together with architecture and strategically placed personnel, regulates access and structures the experience of going to the theater.

But there is a hole in Garnier's account. As theatergoers file through his crowd management machine, the tickets magically appear. Garnier's ticket window is a black box: we see what goes in and what comes out, but not what happens behind the grille. At first, this magic is barely noticeable. The absence takes shape as Garnier describes how those without tickets queue up, wait patiently, and, at the appointed hour, enter a room with counters. Then, in the punctual flash of Garnier's semicolon, they have "tickets in hand." What happens behind those windows?

Some 25 years earlier, in St. Petersburg, Albert Cavos, a Russian-born Italian architect to the czars, offered a bit more detail: a 111-word chapter on the box office. "Each office must have two rooms: the first for sales; the second to keep the books" (Cavos, 1847, p. 62). Cavos offers little more, except to dodge the question of size ("it depends on the composition of the project"), but his description sheds some light on the void in the middle of Garnier's theaters. The box office has a public-facing space and a "backstage" space that ensures the numbers add up. But the most important word in Cavos's account is "rooms." The box office must be composed of spaces with structural integrity, with walls and doors: a secure space to verify the accounts. Tickets must be sold over a threshold: Garnier's windows. The box office, even in this threadbare description, appears as a fortress.

Harold Burris-Meyer and Edward C. Cole, two American theater designers, eventually describe the fortress box office. By 1949, some technological advances ("automatic change dispensers") have arrived, but Burris-Meyer and Cole's box office is structurally similar to Garnier's and Cavos's: windows ("at least one window for current sale per approximately 1250

seats”) and racks to hold tickets. “Telephones, a desk and a safe complete the useful box office equipment. The safe must be large enough to contain all the racks without removing tickets from them, in addition to the usual cash box and ledger” (Burriss-Meyer and Cole, 1949, p. 55). The racks and cash box beget the safe; the fortress box office exists to protect inventory. In most box offices, the windows are the only point of interface, designed to channel words and objects. Accordingly, “access to the box office is by a single door inside the theatre, often from an adjacent business office” (Burriss-Meyer and Cole, 1949, p. 55). Cash and inventory are held inside, and the walls protect that stash.<sup>3</sup>

By 1993, Tomlinson, the British box office guru, had begun undermining these walls’ foundations. While the Garnier and Cuvos box offices were fortresses—guarded by grilles, glass, and shadow—Tomlinson’s redrawn ticket counter was airy and unobstructed. Abetted by new technologies and changing political conditions, it was to be placed in the open. Its most conspicuous feature was the thing that had gone missing: a window.

### **The Disappearing Window**

The window, once described as a “weapon slit,” had long been understood as a design flaw in the box office because it put customers on edge: “The pigeon holes for the book of tickets are ranged on either side of the opening through which the ticket buyers may stoop and peer. This may be convenient for the staff in the box office, but it makes most members of the public feel at a disadvantage. It seems too easy for the clerk to hide, to be evasive, to adopt a defensive position” (Ham, 1972, p. 232). Developing a friendlier ticketing transaction was a recurring preoccupation for theater designers.

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<sup>3</sup> An expanded edition of Burriss-Meyer and Cole’s book appeared in 1964. The relevant text was unchanged, while photographs were updated.

*[[[[[Please place FIGURE 1 here]]]]]*

In the 1990s, Tomlinson's counter arrives in diagram form (Figure 1): simple strokes, rectangles and circles. The diagram depicted new furniture, new spaces, and a new interaction, all organized around a new technology. No window is needed because there are no racks of tickets to protect. Purchases were increasingly made with credit, and the tickets themselves were created just in time to be handed to the buyer.

Computerized ticketing was not entirely new when Tomlinson's book appeared, but he labors to articulate the computer's implications for the public's interaction with culture. By representing the counter graphically, Tomlinson sketches a vision of how the introduction of the computer would transform the entire ticketing space. The goal of this transformation was to catalyze a specific affective reaction in the ticket buyer: a feeling of comfort, which might allow the agent to "control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him [sic]" (Goffman, 1956, p. 2). Tomlinson's (1993) charge to box office managers was to transform their mission from a simple sale to the collection of data as part of what was then the emerging practice of customer relationship management: "Whether they telephone, turn up in person, write a letter, fill in a booking form or contact a ticket agent, there is an opportunity to collect some information about the customer" (p. 16).

Tomlinson (1993) complains that the traditional box office arrangement, where "staff... look at customers face to face," creates what he says experts call "built in situational conflict" (p. 39). The window, like most interfaces, connects and separates, and it does so in a way that inhibits a pleasant rapport. "It is better," Tomlinson (1993) continues, "for staff to be at right

angles to the customer, and customers feel more confident if they can look down at staff” (p. 39). The “‘saw-tooth’ style counter” in the diagram produces this arrangement of bodies, and the digital computer makes possible the elimination of bars and windows (“Glass barriers are inappropriate and major barriers to customer care” (p. 39)).

A generation earlier, massive computing services corporations launched the project of rebuilding events ticketing around the computer. From the late 1960s through the early 1980s, Minneapolis’s Control Data Corporation and Southern California’s Computer Science Corporation marketed competing systems. CDC bought the New York-based Ticket Reservation Systems (TRS) and rebranded it Ticketron, while CSC built Computicket from the ground up. Computicket eventually failed, and Ticketron was ultimately merged into today’s Ticketmaster. But in the late 1960s, the idea of computerized ticketing was just coming into focus. The marriage of computing and ticketing would leverage the logic of decentralized networks to “bring the box office to you.”<sup>4</sup>

This displacement of the box office was made possible by storing tickets as data in centralized mainframes. Ticket purchases could then be made at any node on a network of distributed terminals across a city or a continent. The distribution of tickets through multiple points of sale dates at least to the 19th century, when theaters in London allocated portions of their stock to libraries, wine shops, and coffeehouses in upscale neighborhoods (Davis & Emeljanow, 2001, p. 4), but mainframe-based ticketing introduced something new. Those 19th-century schemes required that hard tickets be removed from box offices and committed to different points of sale. The appeal was the possibility of sculpting wealthier audiences by

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<sup>4</sup> This text from an undated Ticket Reservation Systems brochure held at the Charles Babbage Institute (CBI 80, Series 17, Box 4, Folder 45). The brochure was likely printed in late 1969 or early 1970, because it was produced by Control Data Corporation, but carried the TRS logo. CDC acquired TRS in 1969, but changed the company’s name to Ticketron shortly thereafter. See Budnick & Barron, 2012: 24.



bringing tickets into places frequented by the well-to-do. In the mainframe era, networked terminals allowed for wider distribution without committing stock to any specific geographic location, as tickets were printed on demand. In a late-1960s brochure, a TRS vice president says, “One of the disadvantages of the old-style pre-printed tickets was that they constituted, en masse, a very appreciable sum of money which had to be stored, handled, transported and accounted for just like cash. Ticket-data stored in a computer has freed everyone from these old limitations, because negotiable value is not created until the ticket is printed [...]”<sup>5</sup>

The pitch to venue owners was simple: improved distribution and improved auditing capacities that could “spark vital management decisions... like allocating advertising funds.” This arrangement also created promotional opportunities, such as the NBA team that sent players to a department store with a Ticketron terminal. Players “shot baskets for a few hours” and “[t]he store offered \$1 off on basketball shoes with each purchase of a ticket.”<sup>6</sup>

The public was sold convenience: “It’s the ultimate in one-stop shopping.” The traditional box office constrained the public by demanding separate visits or calls to each venue in order to program one’s entertainment calendar. Computerized ticketing consolidated “every area of the leisure market—theatre, dance, symphonic music, hard rock, football, baseball, hockey, skiing, campsite reservations, and more.” Beyond this convenience, promotional materials for computerized ticketing systems emphasized that people could now procure tickets in “department stores, shopping centers and banks” as they tended to their daily business.<sup>7</sup>

These stores and banks were the third party to the computerized ticket systems of the 1960s and 1970s. Outlets were promised “increased customer traffic” and “an improved public

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<sup>5</sup> CBI 80, Series 17, Box 4, Folder 45.

<sup>6</sup> This text from an undated Ticketron brochure held at the Charles Babbage Institute (CBI 80, Series 17, Box 4, Folder 42). The brochure likely dates from the 1970s, as it makes mention of Amtrak, which was established in May 1971.

<sup>7</sup> CBI 80, Series 17, Box 4, Folder 42.

image.”<sup>8</sup> The suggestion is that outlets would benefit from association with cultural events. Promotional literature for the systems emphasized outlets’ bottom line, in one case citing a study that showed 80% of ticket-buyers “also purchased merchandise or intended to do so.” The gambit was that stores and banks should not only host and staff the terminals, but do so visibly: “It pays the store to create incentives to visit the terminal.”<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis is firmly placed on distribution and accounting: mainframe-based computerized ticketing expanded the catchment of ticket-selling and improved venues’ ability to track sales. Deadwood, or unsold tickets, represented lost revenue, because it is impossible to sell a ticket to yesterday’s concert (Courty, 2000, p. 173). By expanding the box office’s footprint, computerized ticketing promised to reduce unsold seats. Meanwhile, the task of accounting for sales in a timely fashion had long dogged venues. As one accountant wrote shortly before computerized ticketing’s emergence, “Dishonest treasurers and ticket managers can find easy pickings in box offices” (Carr, 1957, p. 331). A dependable audit trail was a highly salient feature for mid-century venue managers.

*[[[[[Please place FIGURE 2 here]]]]]]*

Beyond economic and business process advantages, computerized ticketing also foreshadowed a refurbished affective experience for buyer and seller. A late-1960s TRS brochure (Figure 2), printed in blue and black duotone, shows a middle-aged businessman buying tickets from a younger woman at a ticketing terminal in a nondescript interior space.

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<sup>8</sup> This text from an undated Computicket presentation held at the Charles Babbage Institute (CBI 170, Box 10, Folder 17). The presentation was likely produced in 1967, as it makes mention of a demo that would be available in the fourth quarter of 1967 and a public launch in early 1968.

<sup>9</sup> CBI 80, Series 17, Box 4, Folder 42.

Behind them is a sign proclaiming that TRS offers itself “for your enjoyment and convenience.” The terminal itself is a wooden structure not unlike an airline ticket counter.<sup>10</sup> The computer terminal equipment is visible on the woman’s work surface. It sits between the man and woman, but it does not block their interaction, and the tickets bridge their hands.

The woman smiles, but the man’s expression is obscured by the frame of his eyeglasses and the angle of his head. The text beneath suggests that the enjoyment and convenience promised in the sign are as deep as the image’s cool, blue sheen. “He steps up to the counter, tells the girl what he wants to attend, when he wants to go, in what section he’d like to sit and how many seats he wants. She pushes some buttons on a terminal box.” As the mainframe returns a response, the man reaches a decision. “She touches one more button, and his tickets are automatically printed then and there, delivered to him in a matter of seconds.”

The affective experience that the first wave of computerized ticketing sought to produce was the pleasant efficiency of a computerized future. This future promised the public—especially, the professional, male public—control and comfort. The labor of the “girl” behind the counter, trained to operate this new machine, stands at this businessman’s disposal. “He’s never had it so near, so easy,” the text concludes, underlining both the benefits of computerized ticketing and the gender politics of the emergent service industries in the late 1960s.<sup>11</sup>

By the time Tomlinson’s ticket counter appears, the shape of the proposition and the motivations that drove computerized ticketing has shifted. If the first-generation systems created the impersonal relationships of friction-free commerce, the next generation produced a different kind of interaction focused on leveraging data to manage relationships.

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<sup>10</sup> A decade later, a seemingly unaware Don Jewell (1978) would predict that “ticket windows of the future may resemble today’s airline ticket counter” (p. 133).

<sup>11</sup> All the quoted passages in these paragraphs are drawn from CBI 80, Series 17, Box 4, Folder 45.

The object that best shows how this relationship was restructured was the computer monitor. Though TRS, and later Ticketron, relied on teletype machines, Computicket included a CRT monitor (Budnick & Barron, 2012, p. 12). Computicket's monitor was there for the agent, who is charged with relaying information to customers.<sup>12</sup> Tomlinson developed a more nuanced understanding of the monitor's placement and function. The placement of the screen was the key to conditioning an interaction between buyer and seller that would gather data and cultivate a long-term, personal relationship.

When computers landed in the fortress box office, the monitor was typically placed inside the window, with the display surface beyond customers' line of sight. In part, this was a matter of squeezing a new media technology (the computer) into a space designed around an older media technology (paper). But this arrangement also underscored the "built-in situational conflict" that Tomlinson sought to eradicate. The screen was available only to the agent, offering a source of privileged information.

Decisions about what ought to be visible had been negotiated before at the box office. With the widespread adoption of reserved seating in the latter half of the 19th century, box offices began to display seating plans (Davis, 2000, p. 85; Pick, 1983, p. 81). The posting of the plan testified to the various prices demanded and pleasures afforded by different seats: if customers were to decide questions of cost and quality at the box office window, the seating chart offers a visual aid that plots out the options. In the 1960s, Pheneger (n.d.) suggested that box office workers should always discuss seating choices: "When showing a seating diagram, it is always best to turn it so the patron sees it in the same manner that he will see the stage during

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<sup>12</sup> See two Computicket pamphlets prepared to explain the system and its operations to potential subscribers, both held at the University of Minnesota Libraries' Archives and Special Collections (two folders in PA003, Series 6, Box 209, 1967-Computicket Corporation Services).

the program.” But the display of the plan is itself a performance, predicated on the calculated provision and withholding of information, and intended to generate a certain outcome: “a ticket seller should attempt to interest patrons in seat locations which are most advantageous to the general sale” (p. 13).

The seating plan hides the competent ticket seller’s manipulations: by showing the general layout of the room, the seller can conceal motives that determine which tickets are offered. For example, Pheneger (n.d.) writes that this strategy discourages buyers from leaving the venue holding a single seat in a row, which is subsequently harder to sell, as spectators generally purchase two or more seats together (p. 13). Displaying the map is a strategem that encourages a sales pattern that is best for the theater, without handing any given customer the best available seats.

When the computer arrives, the monitor replicates this strategy, but it adds another one. Theater designers were urged to allow for “computer screens that can be turned to face the customer,” so that people can see where they will be seated (Strong, 2010, p 49). But Tomlinson’s diagram exploits a different sort of knowledge differential: the goal is not optimizing the immediate transaction, but rather reconfiguring the relationships of buyer to seller, spectator to culture, and public to institution. In Tomlinson’s transformed box office, the screen is positioned to make the most of the comfort that the sawtooth counter arrangement has produced.

*[[[[[Please place FIGURE 3 here]]]]]*

Figure 3, a promotional photograph documenting a 1986 installation of the Box Office Computer System (BOCS), shows a counter that resembles Tomlinson's diagram. Here, two models rehearse the affective performance that the counter is meant to instantiate. Rather than two belligerents facing off through a weapon slit, this scene evokes nothing so much as one postindustrial worker leaning over into another postindustrial worker's cubicle. The buyer, checkbook at the ready, fixes her eyes on the display, while the agent works the equipment. Unlike the scene at the 1960s TRS counter, both of the BOCS models bear smiles, not as radiant perhaps as the one offered by the TRS agent to the businessman, but a contentedness befitting a mutually comfortable encounter. That both parties in this photograph are women marks a shift in the transaction's valence. The businessman in the TRS photo may never have "had it so near, so easy," but the two women here instead share an anesthetized, professional interaction. The counter and screen produce a comfortable transaction, rather than built in situational conflict.

The fortress is dismantled: instead of protecting inventory, this counter accommodates a printer, seen to the agent's left with a stack of blank stock that can be transformed, on command, into usable tickets with negotiable value. The stack of blanks is an afterthought; it is placed in plain sight and within easy reach of the customer. The fortress box office enforced a rule of possession, but with the open counter, it is less a question of having the thing than of knowing the pattern of commands to enter (cf. Hayles, 1993, p. 71), and the counter, for all its openness, conceals a ruse. The agent knows how to operate the machine, while the customer only knows the vague feeling of comfort: "[C]ustomers feel better if they can see the screen, find that they cannot interpret it, and are therefore encouraged to feel confident in the ability of staff to serve them" (Tomlinson, 1993, p. 39).

The screen that Tomlinson’s ticket buyers saw was only semi-legible to the untrained eye. Beginning in the early 1980s, a wave of ticketing software was developed for and marketed to cultural institutions. BOCS, the system demonstrated in Figure 3, was similar to PACS (Performing Arts Center System), AIMS (Arts Income Management System), and ARTS (Arts Research Technology System). Unlike Ticketron and Computicket, these packages were not only intended to expand the box office beyond the lobby, but also to expand its role. These systems shared a common feature set: ticketing, seating maps, reports, and a robust set of tools designed to foster relationships with customers and donors. Not only designed to push tickets out, these systems were also meant to pull data in. An American who sold BOCS in the 1980s proclaimed that it was “not just a ticketing system, but a comprehensive box office management system” (Chapin et al., 1984, p. 54).

Tomlinson’s analysis of the screen—visible, but unintelligible, sequentially producing feelings of mastery, confusion, and then trust—comports with this data-gathering mission. The production of trust catalyzes the flow of data. Tomlinson (1993) urged readers to think expansively about the data they would gather: name and address; payment details; events attended; information about how they learned of a certain event; agent observations about age, socioeconomic status, disability, habits, or preferences; or supplementary data drawn from databases or questionnaire responses (pp. 85-86). All of this can be used to model market segments by neighborhood, age, gender, or likes and dislikes (pp. 86-105). Today, these practices are entirely familiar, the standard operating procedures of data-driven marketing. In 1993, Roger Tomlinson felt compelled to write a book about them. A decade earlier, an industry magazine called this data “probably the most valuable and yet wasted marketing information available” (N.a., 1980, p. 19).

[[[[[Please place FIGURE 4 here]]]]]

The monitor that the agent and the customer shared displays a seating chart, but this was likely only one of many screens that flashed by during the transaction. In addition to the seat selection screen, the agent likely also worked through screens that resembled Figure 4, a screenshot from a 1983 user's manual for the Guthrie Management System, the immediate forerunner of ARTS.

It was not yet the case that “to live [...] is to know how to use menus” (Galloway, 2006, p. 17), as computer use was far from normalized at home or in the workplace. The menus that the agent navigated would not have the currency that can be taken for granted in today's global North. Tomlinson's wager was that, in peering at the screen, the customer would recognize some pieces of data (name, phone number, notes about nicknames<sup>13</sup> and needs) and would perceive but be unable to decipher the ASCII seating plan (with symbols indicating price categories, paid and unpaid reservations, available and unavailable seats), but would find the other elements impenetrable (the commands, codes, and characters scattered about).

In effect, Tomlinson's counter doesn't so much instantiate the relationship between two co-workers as present a variation on the relationship between supervisor and supervisee. The twist is that the buyer is meant to inhabit the role of the supervisor, and the easy comfort of the relationship is a duet performance along intertwining axes of surveillance. The customer occupies, *avant la lettre*, the role of “the surveillant consumer” who is “tasked with overseeing the labor of workers rendering services to her” (Stark & Levy, 2018, p. 1210). The counter, the

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<sup>13</sup> On the politics of customers' preferred names in service sector contexts, see Goffman (1956, p. 110).



screen, and the software are together designed to produce in the customer a deceptive sense of control, which engenders a comfortable and trusting interaction. Where the buyer thinks she is “managing up,” the agent’s task is to sell the ticket while leveraging these feelings of control and trust to foster a relationship, so the customer becomes a long-term client and a source of marketing data. The semi-legible screen strives to gather and leverage data; visible on Tomlinson’s counter, it performs double duty by helping to catalyze a comfortable relationship between agent and customer.

### **Performance and Para-Performative Spaces**

For George Spalding, who developed Guthrie Management System in the 1980s, the introduction of computing to the ticketing transaction was part of a necessary response to changing economic and political conditions. “Arts institutions are operating on [...] a pre-Reagan mentality,” he said during a roundtable discussion on ticketing packages. This was Spalding’s way of signaling that arts institutions needed to adjust to an emerging political reality where they would be expected to balance their books and operate efficiently. Spalding continued: “my belief is that with the current national arts funding climate [...], the only way to make up the gap which is not going to be forthcoming from the government is by more sophisticated marketing techniques and more ‘rifle-shot’ development techniques” (Chapin et al., 1984, p. 52). His GMS software package was an attempt to move arts institutions into the age of neoliberal managerialism.

In order to move the institutions, Spalding and his contemporaries counted on customers moving in lockstep. The para-performative space of the box office, long forgotten and long resistant to change had to become a space for a new kind of cultural performance. McAuley

(1999) imagined the public's visit to a performance venue as a series of crossed thresholds that transitioned the audience member from the spaces of everyday life to the space of performance: "the spectator has been progressively further and further removed from the world outside, permitted to move further and further into the world within" (p. 43). This logic computes in the age of the fortress box office. The built-in situational conflict that attends the exchange of money against cardstock through the weapon slit enforces the distinction between inside and outside, between performance and non-performance. Tomlinson's counter confuses this logic, as the new, smooth transaction is part of the emotional manipulation that cultural performance provokes: the new box office blurs the distinction between inside and outside, drawing the audience member in, lowering her defenses, and enlisting her in the neoliberal arts institution's effort to overcome a "pre-Reagan mentality."

Tomlinson's counter, Spalding's software, and the lobbies in which they sat inaugurated a different sort of cultural technique. The fortress box office enforced a distinction between inside and outside that naturalized the idea that performance spaces could and should be separate from the spaces of everyday life. The open, sawtooth counter blurs—but does not fully erase—that distinction: it invites the buyer to lean over the desk and imagine herself on the inside, while the software holds her at bay, sedated by the architecture and furniture of the new box office.

The very fact of this changing architecture and changing interaction suggests its own impermanence. Tomlinson's counter was proposed as a solution to problems posed by technological, cultural, political, and economic shifts in the 1970s and '80s. In the decades since, ticketing transactions have been further transformed, and the open box office has itself become ill-suited to a world where commerce is increasingly conducted online, with audience members selecting precise seats by directly manipulating a computer interface. Indeed, in many

contemporary para-performative spaces, the box office has all but disappeared, having been shifted back to the margins, or even removed entirely to a backstage location. The comfortable interaction that Tomlinson sought as his drawing scratched out the fortress box office was itself temporary, replaced by the self-service ethos of internet-era apps and the conviction that the only thing better than reshaping an interaction between agent and customer around a computer was cutting out the agent altogether, in order to let the computer do the talking.

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