An Argument for Seeing in Urban Social Science

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Ethnographic and other qualitative researches are often relegated to a lesser status despite significant contributions to social science. However, ethnography as a research best practice is firmly anchored in theory, method, and subject matter. This essay synthesizes ways of looking at immigrant and gentrified urban neighborhoods in global cities as visible expressions of cultural and class changes that are expressed in vernacular landscapes.
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Introduction

'When we first pass through local spaces in global cities we are like tourists using our eyes to decipher the clues and cues to which we are exposed. Is this a safe or a dangerous place? Am I welcome here or should I leave before it is too late? What kind of neighborhood is it? Are the local residents rich or poor? What is their race, ethnicity, or religion and how (or why) does it matter? Some things are easy to tell on a street, such as are there things for sale here? Legitimate merchants make it obvious that they are seeking customers with signs that compete for attention, but for the sale of illicit goods, the signs are subtler. Yet it seems that for the knowledgeable purchaser they are still there in plain view. This reading the "street signs" so to speak is not merely an aesthetic exercise. What we see makes a difference in how we respond to the places and the people we find in our increasingly complex and changing urban surroundings.' (Krase 2012: 1)

Ethnographers are the griots of social science; the commentators on urban life that the quantitative 'big boys' analyze. However, statements like that above are more than merely journalistic utterances. Michel de Certeau might have written the same statement while creating the city in the act of walking (1985: 129). Ethnographers weave critical ideas into narratives of the places through which they pass. Mundane spatial practices make social agency visible as ordinary people change meaning by changing appearances. Similar city scenes crafted by the likes of Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin, or Edward Hopper contribute a different kind of urban knowledge that social scientists can also translate into data. Ethnography provides what George Psathas might call a phenomenological bridge between what ordinary people do and social scientists say about it (1973: 16). Through a syncretistic approach the visual in urban

theory can be discovered in semiotics, phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. What follows is a brief synthesis of theories, methods and subject matter that makes ethnographic visual studies of urban neighborhoods possible as social science.

As a fragmentary example of subject matter for this synthesis five photographs from my own 'Paris Arcades Project' are included (Figures 1-5). They were taken in the Passages Panoramas, Douffroy, and Verdeau, which loosely tie the Bourse de Paris, France's financial center, to lesser markets in areas with growing migrant populations that are also contested by gentrification. Using a variety of theoretical rubrics we can seek contemporary explanations of the commodities, buyers and sellers we see along these routes, or simply compare them with those of Walter Benjamin (1999).

Fig. 1 - *Passage des Panoramas, Paris* - by Jerry Krase, 2011.

The Passage des Panoramas is the closest to the Bourse and has the highest concentration of restaurants, ethnic and otherwise, mostly serving business people during the day, as well as tourists. It is one of the least visually elegant arcades. In 2011, there was still a few leftover bric-a-brac, philatelic, and secondhand postcard shops.

Visual Theories and Methods

If we concede primary group face-to-face (eye-to-eye) interactions as the basis of social life, then we can argue that society, and therefore its study, relies on sight. In this regard, think of what a more primal scent-based society would look like. Seeing and spatial memory are also conjoined. Simonides of Ceos invented the 'art of memory' 2500 years ago. In his mindscape he attached images to things, put them in a familiar place and recalled them by mentally moving through it (Foer 2011: 9). In Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* (1960), the same logic produced mental maps enabling navigation of cities by, as Anthony D. King might suggest, reading them as 'text' (1996). Similarly, Sharon Zukin noted that 'Visual artifacts of material culture and political economy' represent the city by making social rules legible (1996: 44). For Pierre Bourdieu this symbolic capital helps reproduce the established, hidden order that, for ethnographers, is in plain view (1977: 188). Henri Lefebvre wrote of this visual conundrum 'People look, and take sight, take seeing, for life itself. We build on the basis of papers and plans. We buy on the basis of images. Sight and seeing which the Western tradition once epitomized intelligibility, have turned into a trap: the means whereby, in social spaces, diversity may be simulated and a travesty of enlightenment and intelligibility ensconced under the sign of transparency.' (1991: 75-76).

For continuity, I mimic Max Weber's *Verstehen* method (1947). Society is made possible when social actors imagine themselves as the others with whom they interact and thereby correctly anticipate the mirrored behavior. Social construction depends on shared text, and in my case the texts are visual signs not unlike props creating Erving Goffman's 'settings' for the 'front region' (1959: 22). Georg Simmel visualized urban theory by writing. 'Modern social life increases in ever growing degree the role of mere visual impression which always characterizes the preponderant part of all sense relationships between man and man, and must place social attitudes and feelings upon an entirely changed basis' ([1908] 1924: 360). Symbolic interactionists Anselm Strauss and Lyn H. Lofland enhanced his work by showing how people communicate through the built environment (Lofland 1998, 2003; Strauss 1961). For Lofland, 'city life was made possible by an "ordering" of the urban populace in terms of appearance and spatial location such that those within the city could know a great deal about one another by simply looking' (1985: 22).

Visual methods are important tools for all qualitative researchers according to Howard S. Becker (1995), as well as Carol A.B. Warner and Tracy X. Karner (2005). For Douglas Harper

(1998: 34-35) and Marcus Banks (1998: 11) visual work should also be firmly anchored to a discipline. Harper divided Visual Sociology into 'Visual Methods' in which researchers themselves create images and 'Visual Studies' in which researchers analyze images as cultural products. He also identified four modes of research; the 'scientific' - where one categorizes the world and creates data; the 'narrative' - where the data is structured into accounts; the 'reflexive' - where data is built from the point of view of their subjects; and the 'phenomenological' - in which researchers use their own subjective experience as a source of data (1988, see also 1989). Although discrete, these modes are not mutually exclusive and, in my opinion, scientifically useful ethnography requires more than one.

Jon Prosser saw images cumulatively as signifiers of a culture and individually as artifacts that give specific information about existence. For him images are '… a different order of data, and, more importantly, an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past' (1998: 29, see also 2008). Luc Pauwels warned that the applied research focus of many scholars comes as the expense of improved theoretical and methodological frameworks that '… are essential in furthering the project of building a more visual science' (2000: 10-11). Mario Small (2009), however, strongly cautioned ethnographers against 'retreat' toward models designed for statistical descriptive research and enjoined them to enhance their own. Sarah Pink also criticizes the 'scientific-realist' paradigm of sociology and anthropology because it 'does not allow the potential of the visual in ethnography to be realized', by trying to prove its value in disciplines 'dominated by the written word' (2006: 5-6).

Vernacular Landscapes in Global Cities

For Saskia Sassen (2001) global cities are paradigmatic sites for symbolic competition wherein the advantaged and disadvantaged contest terrains. Two outcomes are gentrified areas and ethnic enclaves that are visually expressed in vernacular landscapes. These are part of the Cultural Landscape – human-made expressions of spatial relationships that John B. Jackson defined as 'a portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance' (1984: 1). Jackson pointed scholars to the quotidian worlds of ordinary people, especially 'commercial vernaculars'. Energized by his sensitivity and wider scope, the global study of cultural landscapes continues to evolve (Hayden 1990).

Visual attention to urban vernacular landscapes shows conflict, competition and dominance at a level not usually noticed. How better to introduce ethnic and gentrified neighborhoods than David Harvey speaking of spatial dominance: 'Successful control presumes a power to exclude unwanted elements. Fine-tuned ethnic, religious, racial, and status discriminations are frequently called into play within such a process of community construction' (1989: 266). In contrast, Wilbur Zelinsky (1991) doubts the authenticity of ethnic American vernaculars and would caution against over-estimating the power of marginalized groups. Until recently, ethnic vernacular landscapes in Europe were viewed as regional, micro-national, or products of immigrants returning from ex-colonies. More recent research looks especially at Islamic impacts on cityscapes (Metcalf 1996). Ethnic vernacular landscapes can also be found in rural areas as well as in multicultural 'ethno-burbs' and ethnically marked strip malls. Other distinctive variants can be found in Brescia's 'Little Senegal' market, Dubai and Riyadh's migrant worker residences, ubiquitous European Roma settlements, as well as Zimbabwean refugee camps in South African townships.

Visual Spatial Semiotics

Social spatial semiotics ties social science to vernacular landscapes. For Lemke, 'Social semiotics examines semiotic practices, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in various situational contexts and contexts of culturally meaningful activity. Social semiotics therefore makes no radical separation between theoretical and applied semiotics and is more closely associated with discourse analysis, multimedia analysis, educational research, cultural anthropology, political sociology, etc.' (2011). Spatial semiotics is defined by Mark Gottdiener as 'the study of culture which links symbols to objects' (1994: 15-16). For urban studies the most basic concept is the settlement space '… built by people who have followed some meaningful plan for the purposes of containing economic, political, and cultural activities. Within it people organize their daily actions according to meaningful aspects of the constructed space' (Gottdiener 1994: 16). Krase and Shortell (2011) applied Roman Jakobson's expressive, conative and phatic sign functions (1960, 1972) to visual representations of identity in urban neighborhoods. They argue that phatic signs, which facilitate social relations, are the most common signifier of the ethnic vernacular. These artifacts of ordinary social interaction mark settlement space as a 'home'. Simultaneously, they can be extracted from this

context and rendered as representations of ethnic spaces such as in local tourism efforts (Krase 1997, Rath 2007). Such semiotic analysis can also be applied to class vernaculars such as in gentrification.

Fig. 2 - *Ethnic Restaurants on rue Faubourg de Montmartre*, *Paris* - by Jerry Krase, 2011.

A wide variety of mid to low-cost ethnic restaurants and shops can be found where the Passage Verdeau empties onto rue de Faubourg Montmartre. This is one of the most diverse parts of Paris and businesses cater to both co-ethnics and tourists seeking less expensive fare. The section is also beginning to show signs of gentrification.

Furthermore, Anthony Giddens 'structuration theory' suggests that in order to understand urban life one needs not only an understanding of theory but of local history, resources, and the ideas of local leadership (1984). Shop signs written in a foreign language are easily noticed, but 'seeing' the uses and/or meanings of space requires sensitivity and understanding of the particular culture that creates, maintains and uses the re-signified space. A visual survey of even the most deteriorated central city area would vividly demonstrate the 'human agency' of even the least empowered. One example is low-income gangs 'tagging' the vernacular landscapes with cryptically symbolic graffiti. On the other end of the spectrum, the same visual attention helps us recognize 'trendy' areas by the marks of upscale shops such as Fendi and Gucci.

Ernest W. Burgess' Concentric Zone diagram is an urban icon. Most ethnographers have focused on the domains and denizens of the 'Inner City' or other euphemisms for the 'Zone of Transition'. There, one found roomers, hobos, addicts, poor folks, nonwhite minorities and lower class immigrants who lived in the Ghetto, Slum, Black Belt, Chinatown, Underworld, Vice and Little Sicily. The purely descriptive models of classical urban ecology derive from a biological analogy. In the city, equilibrium is expressed through the interaction of human nature with geographical and spatial factors producing 'natural' areas. Political economists, on the contrary, see these same natural areas and ecological zones as the result of 'uneven development', and

perhaps even cleverly planned cycles of decay and renewal. The question remains as to whether these disparate causes produce disparate visual effects. In this regard it is the brilliant documentary photographic work of Camilo Jose Vegara such as *The New American Ghetto* (1995) that is most visibly instructive.

Fig. 3 - *Upscale Passage Douffroy* – by Jerry Krase, 2011

Passage Douffroy is between Verdeau and Panoramas and has a split personality. At one end are high-end shops and at this end, nearer to Passage Verdeau, are remnants of one of its former lives as a collection of inexpensive book and bric-a-brac shops.

The flip side of urban decline is 'gentrification', the conversion of socially marginal and working class areas of the central city to middle-class residential use that began in the 1960s. Gentrification is generally described as the process by which higher status residents displace those of lower status in neighborhoods which, by definition, are contested. Originally considered as a uniquely English and then a related urban American phenomenon of the middle class moving into poor and working class neighborhoods, today gentrification is recognized in virtually every corner of the globe. Although some of the causes of gentrification in these newer locations are historically different, it is argued that there is something about (*je ne sais quoi*) gentrification as a symbolic semiotic activity, or aesthetic practice, that can be grasped via the use of image-based research. For David Harvey it might be that 'Different classes construct their sense of territory and community in radically different ways' (1989: 265; see also Castells 1989). For example, Zukin provided a synthesis of economic and cultural analysis to show how the promotion of historical and arts infrastructures 'changes the nature of the urban space.' (1982: 190). Affluent

and humble streetscapes can also be contrasted as spatial semiotic examples of Pierre Bourdieu's tastes of 'necessity' and 'luxury' respectively (1984). Other productions of 'Symbolic Capital', defined by him as 'The collection of luxury goods attesting to the taste and distinction of the owner' (Bourdieu 1977: 188), might help us to understand the visible residential and commercial up-scaling of working-class areas. The Paris arcades offer many visible examples of these class and cultural transformations.

Fig. 4 - *Upscale Passage Douffroy* – by Jerry Krase, 2011
This, the most upscale section of Passage Douffroy, is nearest to the exit
unto the Grands Boulevards. Tourist guidebooks tout it as a small shopping paradise
that offers upscale cafes, jewelry, clothing, and toys mixed with lesser tourist offering.

Concluding remarks

This essay attempted to knit together an argument for ethnographic seeing in social science. Although I could accurately be accused of 'cherry-picking' the visual in social theory, it was not difficult to find many visual threads. I hoped to demonstrate the utility of a visual approach and the study of vernacular landscapes to show how the built environment reflects cultural and class identities. Thus we can hypothesize visual change as a consequence of economic, social and cultural forces as well as be able to work backwards from historical images to speculate on causes. In addition, with or without explicit theoretical grounding, ethnography and other visual studies would continue to generate new hypotheses despite being interesting reading.

Much visual studies work today demonstrates affinity toward post-modernism; defined in brief by the rejection of scientific objectivity. Obviously, this essay falls on the pre-post modern

side. For me science is a method and a point of view that has at least as much validity as any other. And, as a pragmatist, I see the value of the scientific method is its utility. When neighborhoods change visually there are social effects from changing property values to intergroup competition and conflict. Therefore in order for any visual approach to be of practical value it must be securely embedded in the theories and methods of the disciplines themselves and not be employed as mere decorations for words.

Fig. 5 - *Passage Verdeau, Paris* - by Jerry Krase, 2011.

The restored Passage Verdeau is furthest away from the Grand Boulevards and nearest the working class and immigrant areas. However, gentrification and Parisian *embourgeoisement* has spilled over to nearby sections. As a consequence, the Passage Verdeau has become a chic arcade where more affluent shoppers can find a few remaining postcard and camera dealers alongside smart new art galleries and antique shops as well as upscale dining.

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