

## **The Body, The Gaze and the Strategic-Aesthetic Colonizing of Spaces in Large Cities: the case of Santiago\***

For almost two decades now, the city of Santiago has and is being referred to as a fractured city (González, 1979; Dockendorf, 1991). Today, one could even speak of several cities within Greater Santiago. I would like to speak to you of one of those cities or worlds whose profile seems to emerge in everyday Santiago. It is the Santiago that begins to enter (post) modernity, vertiginous, of movement, consumption and communicational and technological mediation.

I am interested then, in sharing with you a description of the great contemporary cities, Santiago in particular, in light of the problems that have brought us together now. That is, the problems of aesthetics and identity in our societies. Aesthetics and Identity are major concepts and at the same time serious problems that interest other cultural critics, artists, social scientists, philosophers, theoreticians and art historians. My approach to the problems of Aesthetics and Identity in our societies will be in function of the (audio) visual paradigm of social experience, leaving in the dark other contents and dimensions of the relationship in question. Consequently, I invite you to take the position of *spectators* of social life—I am aware that we are also actors, but let us suspend that role for a while—pausing on the movements, images and bodies observable in a city like Santiago.

The process I intend to describe could be called—to borrow a Habermasian concept—the *strategic-aesthetic colonizing* of some of the more visible and busy spaces of Greater Santiago, for example, of a good part of the avenues, centers of consumption and entertainment and, in general, of the services offered to pedestrians, drivers, clients and consumers<sup>1</sup>.

---

\* This chapter is structured in function of a Paper submitted in the Cycle of Round Tables “Aesthetics and Identity in Latin America and Chile” organized by the Institute of Aesthetics of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile in October-November (2000)

<sup>1</sup> Let us remember that Daniel Bell describes post-industrial society as that characterized by the sustained growth of the tertiary sector of services in participation, volume and employment generation figures in



The procedure to observe the strategic-aesthetic colonizing, -also known as aestheticizing of experience or aesthetic totaling of the real- shall be to construct a certain *ideal type* of such a colonizing process, occupying evidence and description drawn, for the most part, from the globalized post-industrial world where, certainly, the description I propose here has even more of a chance, but this does not mean that its influxes are not felt or observed in our large cities. Precisely the objective of the *ideal type* is that: observe the degree of closeness or similitude that our Santiago has with the experiences of the *body, place, gaze, communicative mediation and the population of images* that is characteristic of the *audiovisual ordering* of post-industrial societies.

It seems to me—and this is the hypothesis that I want to suggest here—that this ideal type drawn from the experiences of the post-industrial world have been observed and perceived in our city for a long time now.

Many of those present here today have observed the different signs that appear in the large avenues, the different communications that offer a wide range of products and services, the megastructures of the cinemas, the café's with legs, the proliferation of neon signs, the corporate buildings, the architectonic-visual identities of gasoline service stations, restaurants, supermarkets, discotheques or what might be termed the “macdonaldization of the avenues”, in sum, the *different objects* of the gaze.

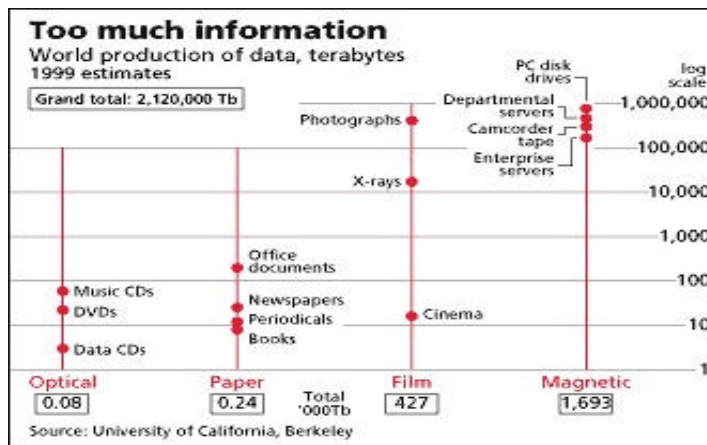
---

national economies. For more about this matter see Bell, D. *The Advent of Post Industrial Society*, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1976.

I understand strategic-aesthetic colonizing as the process of population by images and visual identities that becomes present in a good part of the public spaces of large cities.



This strategic-aesthetic colonizing can be understood; it seems to me, in relation to the society of knowledge and communications, that is, with the flows of information available and circulating through contemporary societies. These flows, as you know, are affecting not only the public spaces of large cities, but also the growth and availability of information. The research project “How Much Information” conducted by the SIMS at Berkeley is a huge attempt to measure the world’s production of data, as we can see at the following chart. Society is populated —saturated, as Baudrillard would say— by knowledge of different sorts, by information, data and stimuli.



In face of the ever-growing volume of information and stimuli it is necessary for the transmitters to have *persuasion strategies* and the receivers to have *selection strategies*. Also, the aesthetic format (agreeable, beautiful, creative, rhetoric or persuasive, as the Greek would say) is a way to capture attention in that framework of competition, velocity, large volumes and low transference costs.



When speaking of this colonizing, we allude at the same time to the strategic and aesthetic, but someone here might reasonably object to the *why* of this fusion of terms and contents. It is true that the *properly strategic content* can be observed in the facades of countless buildings, spaces and services that try to attract the attention of urban spectators on the basis of a more or less specific objective. Let us think here of the covering of the Loreto, Arzobispo and Purísima bridges, the Revlon coverage, the OMO cover of the Education Ministry (Christo), the abundance of giant photographs and, more recently, the persuasive communications of political candidates, etc.

The *register* or *aesthetic content proper* might be observed then in certain spaces that contain “works of art” or man-made objects. Let us think in the sculptures within the open-interior of the Moneda, the Ciudad Empresarial (Enterprise City), the graffiti (Ramona Parra and Chacón brigades), the “beautifying” of gardens and parks, in the works of art exhibited in the Subway (Metro-Arte), the famous Glass-House in the old historic centre, the Sculpture Park, among others.

Yet, it seems to me that it is becoming increasingly difficult to make a difference between the properly aesthetic and the strategic register of the current colonizing process.

Most communications offered us, as spectators possess, even if in a minimal degree, strategic content, as it is precisely these elements of communications that use an aesthetic-persuasive format to achieve acceptance—occasionally failing to do so—by observers and spectators. People circulating in Santiago perceive images that please, images that shock; images that generate confidence and convey a sense of status; images that are unpleasant and which pollute the visual space of our city. Finally, also, images that go unnoticed, but which are very difficult to classify according to some aesthetic canon.

I propose that we understand here the “aesthetic” in a wider sense than that which is traditionally attributed to “art” and “beauty”. We now reach an undoubtedly complex area. The relations between art and non-art; between theory and technique; between art and design; between art and virtual reality; in sum, between art and the environment have become over the years, complex and confusing. The analysis of these matters would take us far. We merely want to outline the questions that arise: the theoretical problems derived of the (im)possibility of founding that which is traditionally called art (or more specifically, visual arts). As you know, since Hegel, there is the question of the “death of art.” Also, there is the problem—coming from language analysis currents—of whether it is even possible to talk of the beautiful in a categorical sense and even less so of the sublime, about which Wittgenstein has said that nothing can be said *in a correct sense*.

Yet, we would like to leave these matters in the dark for now. The population by images, symbols and visual identities that has occurred of late in Santiago demands that we question ourselves and also that we try to talk with sense about the *aesthetic and visual environment* of this city.

Then, we understand this urban space as the cumulus of optical-acoustic particles (atomic level of the visual) offered to the spectator, passenger, pedestrian and driver in Santiago in the everyday displacements from one place to another, precisely in journeying through the spaces of transit and speed of the city, that is, through what has

been called, particularly in the field of urban anthropology “non-places” which I will return to later.

Having established the coordinates of this urban colonizing process, we can now establish the experiences that seem to determine and guide this strategic-aesthetic colonizing process. I will refer to some movements in contemporary architecture and to R. Sennet’s thesis about the contemporary body, which more than a mere thesis is more like an experience that has taken roots in the everyday experience of the inhabitants of the large cities.

### **Architecture, Symbolization and Strip**

Admittedly, my approach to architecture is strictly from the point of view of an *amateur* and is derived of the reading of the works of architects/critics such as Jencks, Venturi, Klotz, October Magazine and some observation experiences in cities of the post-industrial world and also, certainly, Santiago.

Modern architecture (Bauhaus, Gropius, Le Corbusier, Van der Rohe, International Style) grossly speaking, sought for an essential principle of identity, where line, space and form were reduced to buildings’ self-sufficient essentialism and functionality. Beauty would no longer be incidental or a supplement for function. “Beauty will now be function.”<sup>2</sup> Modern functionality and austerity enter the city, which becomes populated by “self-sufficient organic entities” (Lloyd Wright), and which, generally speaking, refer only to themselves, placing themselves in the “zero degree” of symbolization. This was a spatial architecture that communicated the minimum in terms of the search of essential forms. Grossly speaking, ornaments or the superficial should be eliminated (adornment was a crime to A. Loos).

---

<sup>2</sup> Connor, S. CULTURA POSTMODERNA Introducción a las teorías de la contemporaneidad, AKAL, Madrid, 1996, p.52

The reaction of post-modern theory and practice in face of the essentialism and functionalism of modern architecture is characterized, precisely by giving back to architecture its meaning making, symbolic and ornamental potential to the buildings with respect to their surroundings.

Post-modern architecture is characterized by the various ways of denying austerity, functionality and order (the famous total design of the megastructure) of modern architecture conducted by experts according to a rational plan. New ways of symbolization and deployment in public space are acknowledged and justified. In the particular case of Santiago, the new movements in architecture<sup>3</sup> have been characterized by disrupting historically pre-existing orders (or ratios); establishing new spatial relations and rendering visual order more complex.



These new ways of symbolizing and communicating become even more evident, in the so-called urban *Strips* that allow us to connect, under the logic of capitalism or the post-industrial society, with the process of strategic-aesthetic colonizing of public spaces in the city.

---

<sup>3</sup> The discussion between modernity and post-modernity in architecture is not lacking in contradictions and classification problems, as is revealed by the derivations of “direct rehabilitation” and “radical eclecticism” in the post-modern movement itself or, also, the label of “Late Modernity” that Jencks assigns to Paris’ Pompidou Center (Piano & Rogers) or Hong Kong’s Shanghai Bank (Foster).

The notion of Strip is drawn from the text “Learning from Las Vegas” (1977)<sup>4</sup> which describes the new forms of symbolization and communication that appear in the large urban centers and their derivations, where the automobile becomes the most widely used means of transportation and *the subtleties of architectural space in a pure form can no longer be tasted*. According to Venturi, this is architecture of communications rather than of space, which tries to attract the attention of urban spectators—particularly car drivers—in a complex, high-speed environment and juxtaposed programs.

The order of the ‘Strip’ says Ventury & Co. is complex: “It is not the easy and rigid order of the modern urban project. The order of the Strip includes all levels... it is not an order dominated by the expert and easy to contemplate. The mobile gaze resting on a mobile body must strive to select and interpret a great variety of changes, of juxtaposed orders...”<sup>5</sup>



---

<sup>4</sup> Venturi, R and Izenour, S and Scott Brown, D. APRENDIENDO DE LAS VEGAS El Simbolismo olvidado de la forma arquitectónica, GG Reprints, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Venturi, ...Ibíd. , p.52-3



## The contemporary body, technological mediation and the use of resistance

The strategic-aesthetic colonizing process, added to the post-industrial process of accumulation and the movements expressed in contemporary architecture has in the experiencing and living of the *body* another of the reasons that explain the process that we are analyzing. The history of the body in relation to spaces also explains the cumulus of visual resistance that proliferates in the *Strip*. The contemporary body is characterized, according to Sennet by the “apathy of feelings and the sensory deprivation of the body” (Sennet, 1996).

We cannot go into details here as to the genealogy of the relationship between the body and the spaces, perhaps we should just say that the *disconnection of the bodies* begins to manifest itself with the technologies of bodily comfort and pleasure of the XVIII and XIX centuries (chairs, carriages, furniture) and, today, with the modern technologies of transport (automobile, elevators, individualized seating) and of communications (telephones, mobile phones, walkmans, laptops). As Sennet says: “Individualism combined with speed have a lethal effect over the modern body. It lacks any connections.”<sup>6</sup>

The history of large cities acknowledges urban operations that limited the field of the living of the body, reducing it to mere visual perception as Sennet himself shows us, in the restructuring of London (Regent Street) and Paris (Sevastopol Boulevard) in the times of Nash and Haussman respectively. “The traffic was divorced from the design of the buildings standing alongside the street, *only the façade mattered* and the urban vein turned the street into a means to escape the urban center rather than inhabit it.”<sup>7</sup> This is why a good part of urban space has become a medium for the end of pure movement where the body moves passively, with a very low sensitivity to space, towards destinations situated in a fragmented and discontinuous urban geography. Thus, the notion and experiences of non-places arises, that is, of places that are only paces of

---

<sup>6</sup> Sennet, R. Carne y Piedra, Alianza Editorial, 1996, p.345

<sup>7</sup> Sennet, R. Ibid, p. 354. The italics are mine.

transit, to be crossed, which allow for flow from the home to the workplace and vice versa, generally at high speeds. It is precisely these non-places, which allow for strategic-aesthetic colonizing. Paradoxically, they assume the form of strategic places.

Bodies seem to “connect” with the city through visual impressions. This is manifest in the street, the café, the train, the bus, the mall, the subway and, certainly, in the car, where “the gaze prevails over the discourse” and where, at times, what is seen and observed assumes the form of a spectacle (Debord,1967).<sup>8</sup>

Cities (societies) of consumption, then, need visual references to attract the attention of the *disconnected bodies*. New figures and new symbolism are used to, first of all, appear or give themselves existence in the “visual density” of the city and, then, to communicate opportunities, status, good taste, confidence and corporate images. Some spaces certainly tend to become saturated with optic particles, giving rise to what architects and city planners call “visual pollution.”

## Epilogue

All things considered, it seems to me that it is reasonable to think of the application of the *ideal type* we have outlined to the city of Santiago, that is, that the Strips, the eclecticism presented by the new architecture and the disconnected body as a result of technologies of comfort, transport and communications are *facts* and *experiences* that become present in metropolises such as Santiago, configuring the process of strategic-aesthetic colonizing of some of their urban spaces.

Nevertheless, this colonizing process is not homogenous or uniform, but to be precise, a process of *visual differentiation* of the buildings, of the brands of various services, of the originality of certain products, of the authenticity of the political candidates.

---

<sup>8</sup> Besides the visual contact with the outside auditive perception experiences are acknowledged. These include listening to the radio, walk-man or mobile phone whether inside the car, the bus or the meter. The body is once again disconnected from the environment and the subject closes in on himself.

This process of visual differentiation can be observed in the urban Strips, in the urban megastructures, in the various urban sub-centers. Nevertheless, the identities configured do not possess the same intensity, as there are micro and macro identities. The space of the brand and the corporate identity—let us think for example of the Banmedica building, the CTC building, the Consorcio, the Shell and IBM buildings, etc.—are in a high level of symbolism and visibility. The building of a company or government configures relationships of status, of hierarchy, in sum, of power. This identity will compete with the identities of gasoline service stations, restaurants, pharmacies, small businesses and kiosks (the services that compete in the Strip).

Likewise, there are endless other elements of visual resistance that vie for observation by the *Santiago bodies* and which, moreover, forms part of the audio visual order of contemporary societies. These include the front pages of newspapers and covers of magazines, the on-line spaces and various links that populate the electronic networks, the big offers by the political candidates, supermarket offers, the various publicity ads, the image of the various services and opportunities.

Thus, a hybrid of visual identities is configured in different sectors of Santiago, which is added to the historical deficit that Santiago and its inhabitants have in maintaining the *historical ratios* of each borough. According to M. Jay, the characteristics of this hybrid are manifested in the contemporary visual space which, rather than as a harmonious total, must be understood in function of its differentiation: “as a contested terrain, rather than a harmoniously integrated complex of visual theories and practices. It may, in fact, be characterized by a differentiation and a radical reversal in the hierarchy of visual subcultures (models) in the modern scopic regime.” (Jay, 1988, p.4)

Finally, a question arises: What to do and say in face of this massive colonizing process and, at times, visual saturation (pollution) of our public spaces? This question becomes a political and urbanistic question, i.e., about the planning of orders, the regulation, the visual uses of spaces and the possibility of an agreement over an aesthetic

isomorphism, over a city that is more agreeable to sight but, Whose city? The city of the Experts, of the Municipal Council? The city of the College of Architects? Of the Experts in Aesthetics? Of the Community?

As you know, there is never a shortage of apocalyptic viewpoints with respect to the visual order (Wenders, Herzog, in *Tokyo Ga*, Virilio, Debray, and Baudrillard). For cities such as ours, which lack a great architectural patrimony, some of the new visual identities in these spaces can be an aesthetic contribution (Apoquindo Neighborhood, Ciudad Empresarial, Gasoline Service Stations, Pharmacies, and Banks).



But, at the same time, we will remain closely accompanied by the effects of an invasive colonizing process (visual pollution, as well as the difficulties of the criteria and canon) of the spaces of transit of our city (some giant photo-prints and, certainly, political advertising). Probably, in these cases, perhaps the only thing left is the silent gaze of the disconnected observer. Not by chance silence already has its place in the language and theories that attempt to describe the audiovisual order of contemporary societies (Virilio, Déotte).

Yet I tend to distance myself from this pessimistic diagnose. The population of a city by images can also increase the delights of the gaze and contribute to the aesthetic development color and activation of a city that, at times, comes across as opaque, gray, neglected and remote. Also, my dear spectators, because it allows for an inrush of the new and for the settling of our gaze in this new and complex order.

## REFERENCES

- Bell, D. El Advenimiento de la Sociedad Post-Industrial, Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1976.
- Baudrillard, J. Paroxysm: Interviews with Philippe Petit, VERSO, NY, London, 1998.
- Brunner, J.J. Comunicación y Democracia, Discursos del Sr. Ministro Secretario General de Gobierno, SECC, Santiago, 1994.
- Educación Superior: Desafíos y Tareas, Discurso de incorporación a la Academia Chilena de Ciencias Sociales, Políticas y Morales, Santiago, 2000.
- Connor, S. CULTURA POSTMODERNA Introducción a las teorías de la contemporaneidad, AKAL, Madrid, 1996, p. 52.
- Debord, G. The Spectacle Society (1967), Verso, NY, London, 1995.
- Debray, R. Life and Death of the Image History of the Gaze in the West, Paidós Comunicación, Barcelona, 1998.
- Déotte, J.L El Arte en la Época de la Desaparición en Revista de Crítica Cultural, Noviembre 1999, Santiago, Chile.
- Dockendorf, E. Santiago Dos Ciudades, CED, 1991.
- Foster, H. The Anti-Aesthetic essays on postmodern culture, The New Press, NY, 1998.
- Giddens, A. Consecuencias de la Modernidad, Alianza, Madrid, 1997.
- Jay, M. Scopic Regimes of Modernity in VISION AND VISUALITY Discussions in Contemporary Culture Edited by Hal Foster, Dia Art Foundation, Seattle, 1988.
- Jencks, Ch. The Post-Modern Agenda in The Post-Modern Reader, Academy Editions, London, 1992.
- Le Corbusier, H. Towards a New Architecture (1920), John Rodker, London, p.15.
- Sennet, R. Carne y Piedra, Alianza Editorial, 1996.
- SIMS. Research Projects: How Much Information, 2000/01 at [www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info/](http://www.sims.berkeley.edu/research/projects/how-much-info/)
- Venturi, R.& Izenour, S.& Scott Brown, D. APRENDIENDO DE LAS VEGAS El simbolismo olvidado de la forma arquitectónica, GG Reprints, 1998.
- Virilio, P. El Procedimiento Silencio en Le Monde Diplomatique, Septiembre, 2000.