The Material and Visual Cultures of Cities

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The author adapts Lefebvre's (1991) triadic theorisation of the production of space to the study of objects and ways of seeing in cities. Governmental power is condensed in monuments, planning, mapping, and film; capital organises the spaces and events of the city through the circulation of commodities and the destruction and reconstruction of urban space. Local cultures of consumption on one hand and spectacular events on the other shape the lived experience of the urban. In tracing the history and networks of things and images, the article unravels the reification and fetishisation of urban life that would hide the power relations that structure everyday life within the glittering spectacle of the commodity or the smooth veneer of the monument.

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We do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived.


The study of material culture, with its origins in archaeology and anthropology, is already a study of everyday life. In contrast, visual culture has its origins in art history. Looking at the visual culture of the city signals a move away from art history to “the ethics and politics, aesthetics and epistemology of seeing and being seen,” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 87) paralleling the move in cultural studies away from culture as elite practices to understanding culture as a way of life. It is this quality of visual and material culture to condense at once the everyday, the monumental, and the spectacular that makes its such a powerful tool for analysing the power relations that structure city living.

Despite the potential for the interrogation of material and visual culture to release the secrets of social life, the study of the city in the social sciences has mostly been the study of the social relations of people in the city. Attempts to define the city as a generic
space usually refer, following Wirth’s seminal essay, “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1938/1996), to the population size, heterogeneity, and density of urban life—all characteristics of urban populations rather than of material spaces. The canon of urban sociology is dominated by narratives that describe how people who are strangers relate to one another. These may be ethnographies drawn from observation of people’s relations in public or from other qualitative methods, such as interviews. In either case, they tend to be dominated by accounts of how people talk about one another and how they feel about life in the city or how bodies are defined by and occupy the city. This emphasis on people in the city is, perhaps, unsurprising given that the analysis of the actions of people is the foundation stone of the social sciences. Nonetheless, this focus on people can have the effect of making the materiality of the city disappear from view, evoking “a world of social interactions where things are either absent, or simply provide a kind of backdrop to relations between persons” (Tilley, 2006, p. 2). This intention to the materiality of the city is surprising given the work of material production and the abundance of objects and images that make urban space; indeed cities themselves might be characterised as cultural artifacts.

Notwithstanding this neglect of city things, some of the most significant contributions to material culture studies outside of archaeology and anthropology have appeared in scholarly meditations on cities (Benjamin, 1999; de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1991) and urban sociology has long recognised the impact of the city on the visual. The city presses on the senses and the defining sensory experience of the city is its impact on sight (Simmel, 1950). In the absence of more personal contact (e.g., talking or touching), it is by looking at people and places that people categorise them and thereby organise their perceptions of the city, its internal and external boundaries and flows. One thinks, for example, of the depiction of 19th-century Paris through the description of its objects in Walter Benjamin’s The Arcades Project (1999), or the rich detail of urban life in Lyons described so vividly in Volume 2 of de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life (de Certeau, Giard, & Mayol, 1998). In these volumes, material and visual culture might be understood as encompassing all the objects of the city, their arrangement in space, their interaction with bodies, and the vantage points from which bodies see objects and are seen by objects. (How else to describe being looked down upon by the towering monuments of urban space or the more literal overseeing of the closed-circuit television camera?) The materiality of the city also informs both de Certeau’s spatial practices and Lefebvre’s theory of the production of space.

If it can plausibly be claimed that the material and visual cultures of cities encompass all those objects and images in urban space and their apprehension by bodies, there remains the problem of how to interpret this broad field of inquiry. Objects and images may be considered as another kind of text, comparable to linguistic texts that can be read. This approach has been very influential since the linguistic turn in the social sciences despite repeated objections to the way it ignores the irreducibility and specificity of objects and images. Alternatively, they may be used as elicitation tools in interviews, generating a metanarrative about objects and images, the analysis of which can be substituted for the direct analysis of objects and images. If the first approach evades questions about the specificity of the material and visual dimensions of urban culture by reducing them to text, the second approach reduces the apprehension of material and visual culture to texts about things. The (often, hidden) presumption behind this method is that asking research subjects to talk about objects or images reveals the authentic interpretation or truth of the meaning of the object or image. Of course, to interpret objects and
images in the city, as in any context, requires mediation in language. The thing may have
to be described, the quality of its materiality evoked in words. The thing does not speak,
so how can one call forth meaning from it? These admittedly difficult problems of inter-
pretation are not, however, rendered any easier by asking city dwellers to talk about the
material and visual culture of their city. It is a paradox that the material culture of urban
life, although constantly engaged with, is little noticed by its practitioners: After all, liv-
ing in the city is, as de Certeau observed, about the practice of everyday life.

This, then, is both the limitation and the possibility that inheres in attending to
material and visual culture to interpret the city: One focuses on the unnoticed, the
unrecalled, the invisible presence that would otherwise not be available to them, but
their interpretations can only claim plausibility and internal coherence. The sense of
apprehending the real that continues in the social sciences to be attached to speech and
writing (notwithstanding an ambivalent conviction that photographic images capture
the real) will not be so readily accepted in the case of the interpretation of objects and
practices of seeing and being seen.

Given the centrality of the human subject to the history of the social sciences, why
focus on objects and icons? My contention is that the academic analysis of things and
images can be as revealing, if not more so, of the power relations that structure urban
life than asking people to recount how they feel or think about life in cities. In this arti-
cle I offer a framework for analysing things in the city, loosely following Lefebvre’s tri-
adlic theorisation of space, that I hope will demonstrate how the study of objects and
images can contribute to unravelling the reification and fetishisation (in the Marxist
sense) of urban life.

Lefebvre’s representations of space, or what Bender (2006) referred to as “rhetorics of
spatial practice” (p. 305), is discussed in this article first in terms of how governments
materialise their rule in the organisation and surveillance of urban space and the erection
of monuments and memorials. I then go on to consider the role of capital in shaping the
material culture of the city in relation to its most obvious manifestations: the demolition
and reconstruction of urban neighbourhoods and spaces of consumption. This loosely
maps onto Lefebvre’s concept of spatial practices. (Lefebvre’s use of the term spatial prac-
tices, despite de Certeau’s (1984) use of the same term in “Walking the City,” is not a ref-
ence to practices of resistance. Lefebvre used the term representational space to refer to
practices of resistance although, as I will show, this equation is problematic). Lefebvre uses
spatial practices to mean how specific spaces are used and how the interrelationships
between spaces are ordered: “the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each
social formation” (1991, p. 33). Thus Lefebvrian spatial practice embraces both the factory
and the shop and both the shopkeeper (whether of the supermarket or the corner shop)
and the shopper as well as the routes that connect, inter alia, home to work to shopping.
I take up Lefebvre’s third typology, representational spaces, to discuss how people’s need
for material goods and the material culture of quotidian practices produces the symbolic
differentiation of urban space.

Representation of Space: The Rhetoric of Spatial Practice

Monumental buildings mask the will to power and the arbitrariness of power beneath
signs and surfaces which claim to expose the collective will and collective thought.
(Lefebvre, 1991, p. 143)
MONUMENTS

One way to think of the material culture of the city is to say that it resides in those things that make the city distinct from other human settlements. These are, of course, historically constituted and change over time: It is no longer the case that electric lighting distinguishes the city from the countryside as it was in 19th century Europe. Nonetheless, there are things in cities that, in general, it is difficult to imagine having in a place outside of the city, and this is in large part because of the close relationship between urban space and political power. The widespread acceptance in social theory of a Foucauldian concept of power as a kind of force that flows between people rather than a thing that some people have and others lack has sometimes obscured the extent to which government makes the urban landscape. One particularly clear manifestation in material culture of both the desire of government to mark the urban landscape with symbols of its rule and its frequent failure to impress the significance of these symbols on the urban population is the construction of monuments and memorials in the public spaces of the city and at its borders (see Mookherjee, 2007; Wells, 2007 [this issue]). Although the monument mania of 19th-century Europe is generally understood as an attempt to make concrete the rule of the “postrevolutionary bourgeois nation-state in the grip of accelerating modernization” (Huysen, 2003, p. 41), monumentalising power is no modernist impulse. The tendency to literally make concrete the rule of power (whether religious, financial, or administrative) is one that has afflicted government seemingly from the inception of state power. Because the purpose of monuments is often to commemorate a particular moment in a government’s ascendancy and at the same time to insist on the permanence or atemporality of its rule, they are, of course, difficult to dispose of. Mostly, they are simply left in place, ignored and disregarded like some latter-day Ozymandias, waiting a moment, an anniversary perhaps, when they may be brought back into a line of vision.

Paradoxically, the recognition that monuments are often invisible has led to the production of the countermonument or antimonument. These structures embrace the invisibility of the monument by literally disappearing. Mostly an attempt in Germany to find an appropriate way to commemorate the Holocaust without creating sites for Nazi graffiti or desecration, these countermonuments are designed to disappear over time or to insist on a dialogic encounter between the countermonument and the spectator (You, 1993). Whereas the countermonument is partly a response to the conviction that some events cannot be adequately memorialized, it is also a hope that something that is absent may be more present to the imagination than something that is present.

SURVEILLANCE

The purpose of monuments is to impress on the visual senses of the subject, although they apparently fail to do so, notwithstanding animating moments. In this respect, technological extensions of sight, what Jay (1994) referred to as visual prosthetics, particularly the ubiquitous presence of the closed-circuit television camera in the modern city, may be thought of as a kind of modern monumentality. Conversely, the monument may be considered as a concrete panoptician. Of course the monument cannot see the subject but nonetheless it reminds the subject that he or she can be seen and of the consequences of being seen. In the monument’s memorialising of people and events, people are reminded that their selves and their actions can be
captured and inscribed in stone. Ironically, this is even the case when a monument is ostensibly memorialising resistance to power because the commemoration is more often of the murder by the state of resistant subjects than it is of the successful overcoming of state power (see Mookerjee, 2007; Wells, 2007). In any event, the city combines a feeling of anonymity, of not being seen, with an almost constant being seen, whether through surveillance or the simple fact of the constant presence of other people in public space.

TOWN PLANNING

The material and the visual are combined in town planning. The plan begins through its envisioning of the city or the neighbourhood and translates that vision into the layout of streets, the naming of streets, the extent of housing and shops, the erection of buildings, and the demolition of other buildings. The plan has been closely connected with modernism in architecture and urbanism (Gold, 1997). The capacity to lay the plan over the space of the city, to render its vision concrete in the built environment, is taken, inter alia, as a sign of the capacity of the modern state to penetrate and organise life in public. Conversely, the failure to retain the clarity of the plan in the real-world of the street is a marker of a city government’s incapacity and fragility. The suburbanisation of favelas, parachute settlements, townships, and other unauthorised urban expansions are material expressions of the constant urban dialectic between settlement and movement.

The map can be considered as a kind of negative image of the plan, the plan after it has been rendered concrete, a “mimetic representation of transparent space” (Blunt & Rose, 1994, p. 8). In its attempt to record what exists, the map aspires to capture the real more closely than the plan can be realised in the real. In practice, and as an indicator of what might be called the secret life of the city, government constantly fails to capture on paper what exists in the world because of its inability to penetrate the world (see Rooke, 2007 [this issue]). Hence mapping and the accuracy of maps is a marker of the capacity of governments to govern and the extent of those urban areas that governments cannot map are indicators of the size of the urban population who escape or are neglected by government.

CINEMA

The depiction of cities on film might also be included within Lefebvre’s representation of space. If the various ways film is interpreted by audience and critic as well as the social space it is viewed in might have more to do with representational spaces (see Puwar, 2007 [this issue]) than representations of space, the visualising of the city on film can easily be accommodated within the rubric of a rhetorics of spatial practice. James Donald (1995) said that film imagines the city as “the juxtaposition between panorama and myth” (p. 77) but also that the multiple perspectives and accelerated rhythm of film echoed the speed and intensity of urban life. The city, he said, “is not a place . . . ‘The city’ is better understood as a historically specific mode of seeing, a structure of visibility that incorporates not only the analytic epistemology theorised by Benjamin and achieved by Vertov [in Man With a Movie Camera], but also the primitive fantasies hypothesised by de Certeau and realised in the fantastic cities of Ufa, Hollywood, and Manga.” (p. 92)
Spatial Practice: Capital and the Material and Visual Culture of the City

[For Marx,] a commodity is a figurative, allegorical entity, possessed of a mysterious life and aura, an object which, if properly interpreted, would reveal the secret of human history. (Mitchell, 1987, p. 188)

The gaze of the flaneur is the abiding, if rather mythical and certainly masculine, figure of urban visual theory. Less romantically, one might speak of the shopper or even “the badaud, the mere gaper entirely taken in by what he sees” (Jay, 1994, p. 119). Jay (1994) spoke of the “weakening of the defenses of the urban viewer” (p. 119) in response not only to the disruption to daily life wrought by Haussmann’s rebuilding of 19th-century Paris but the appearance of les grand magasins. The spectacle of desire, although undoubtedly falling short of many people’s experiences of shopping, continues to be evoked in advertising and film and in the window displays of up-market department stores. The disenchantment of the world that Weber (1992) anticipated is belied in these cathedrals of commodities where the exploitative character of production is veiled by the prospects of looking at, if not owning, all kinds of glittering and expensive things (Campbell, 1989; Tester, 1995). The possibility (or danger) of “seduction by the spectacle of modern life” was for the situationists “far more politically nefarious than Big Brother’s omnipresent watchfulness” (Jay, 1994, p. 411). For the situationists, the spectacle “arrives in its mature form at the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life” (Jay, 1994, p. 477, citing Debord). Whether such a moment has arrived, the significance of cities as concentrated sites of consumption, both spectacular and prosaic, can hardly be overstated. If monuments and memorials are testimony to the close connection between state power and urbanisation, the proliferation of shops in urban centres, whether as high street, arcade, mall, or market, speak to the connections between cities and capitalism.

But there is another kind of visibility of capital in the city that constantly threatens (or promises) to tarnish the glitter of the spectacle: the visibility of class and social inequality. If expensive department stores succeed in fetishising commodities, the work that has to be done to produce goods, sell goods, build shops and offices, clean the city, and transport people around the city belies the neoliberal insistence on the declining significance of class. Attending to objects means also attending to the relationships between objects and people. In asking how objects are produced, arranged, and circulated and how their production, arrangement, and circulation shapes the practices of people, one can begin to undo the fetishisation, in the Marxist sense, of objects. This need not involve psychoanalysis of the object (or indeed of workers). The materiality of material culture encourages an attention to surfaces: What do things and bodies look like, how much space do they occupy, where have they travelled from, how settled are they, are they smooth or rough, neglected or nurtured, shiny or dull? Nonetheless, unravelling the object as fetish does require an attention if not to depth (which implies precisely a kind of psychoanalytics) then to elsewhere, to questions about how this thing came to be in this place and why it remains here.

Finally, the constant demolition and reconstruction of urban space must figure prominently in any consideration of how capital shapes the materiality of the city. It is a trope of modernity that “everything that is solid melts into air” but if capitalism has this dissolving quality it is also the case that, phoenix-like, new structures are built on the ashes of the old. It is this process of demolition and construction, destruction and creation, that
makes material culture such a fruitful method for interpreting the space and time of the city. The “past leaves its traces” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 37; see Weszkalnys, 2007 [this issue]). Lefebvre's (1991) distinction between abstract and concrete is complicated by an attention to the material and visual cultures of the city, suggesting that such erasure is difficult if not impossible to achieve. Indeed, Lefebvre’s concept of abstract space may be thought of as the attempt to grasp the ways that capitalism seeks to erase not only the history of space but also the ontology of the present through the covering over of the concrete relations that produce space. In this case, the analysis of the concrete history of space (both literally—its buildings, walkways, and statues—and metaphorically—the social relations that produced it) parallels Marx’s analysis of the concrete exploitative relations of production underlying the abstract concept of the market.

Representational Spaces

Representational space is alive: it speaks (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42)

Government and capital are powerful determinants of the materiality of cities. Nonetheless, the materiality of the city is also made from below. The forces that combine to organise people into neighbourhoods are multifarious. Some, of course, are those of government. When the Windrush docked in 1948, it was government agencies that organised the transportation of its West Indian, mostly Jamaican, passengers from the Tilbury Docks to a disused air raid shelter in Clapham, near Brixton. Private capital also played its part. Black landlords already resident in Brixton provided rented accommodation for Jamaican settlers that many White landlords refused them. Both these actions, by government and private capital, are in Lefebvre’s terms spatial practices: the city (or neighbourhood) as it is there to be perceived by those who will live in it. Today Brixton maintains its identity as a Jamaican neighbourhood, despite the constant flow of a tide of White gentrification that washes over it and the intermittent currents of new immigration from the Horn of Africa and, latterly, Brazil and Portugal. The robustness of its identity is in part due to the concentration of Jamaican and British-Caribbean people but, I would suggest, the material culture of the neighbourhood is as important in signifying its identity. As with the bourgeois department stores of 19th-century Paris and its signification of the emerging cultural presence of a new class, in Brixton, as in other socially marked (whether by class, nationality, ethnicity, or sexuality) urban neighbourhoods, it is primarily though the material cultures of consumption that this identity is produced, performed, and recognised (see Lou, 2007; Rooke, 2007; Puwar, 2007 [all this issue]), or, as Lefebvre might say, lived.

THE SPECTACLES OF PERFORMANCE, PROTEST, AND POWER

Less everyday, and perhaps more closely related to Lefebvre’s original concept of representational spaces, is the way that the spaces of the city lend themselves, precisely because of their close connection to governmental and financial power, and the density of their populations and the spatialisation of inequality to spectacular moments and events. I use spectacular here in the sense of a spectacle, a performance, a central aspect of which is that it is seen. Despite Lefebvre’s intent to have these as spaces of resistance from below, spectacularity can never be classified in the abstract as radical or reactionary, from a leftist perspective, nor is it limited to acts of terrorists, insurgents,
revolutionaries, or carnivalistas. From the public execution of regicides to the shock and awe of the bombing of Baghdad, the state has always used the spectacle in its rhetoric and practice of power as much if not more than the urban crowd has used it as a rhetoric or practice of resistance (Stallybrass & White, 1986). In any event, whether the spectacle emanates from above or from below, the events and moments that have been burned into a global (historical) imaginary are, almost without exception, urban events.

**Conclusion**

Lefebvre’s triadic theory of the production of space is a useful conceptual tool for thinking about the material and visual cultures of cities in ways that do not simply reduce them to language. More than this, it shows how the study of the material and visual in urban space offers social scientists a way to represent the multilayered multiplicity of urban space, unravelling the tendency to represent cities, even in those accounts that celebrate the multicultural city, as ordered spaces organised into relatively discrete neighbourhoods forming a kind of mosaic of social space. Thinking about objects in the city, one can ask how they were produced, by whom, with what, and why in this form and in this place? An expanded notion of visual culture as ways of seeing and being seen likewise allows one to ask questions about the epistemology of images. In answering these kinds of questions, one can begin to undo the reification and fetishisation of the social-spatial relations of the city.

**Notes**

1. In her entry, “Place and Landscape,” in The Handbook of Material Culture, Bender (2006) rendered representation of space as “the rhetoric of spatial practice.” This formulation is very helpful for thinking about how monuments, planning, surveillance, and so forth are attempts to persuade the subject of the legitimacy or at least the unassailability of political rule.

2. The renaming of East Berlin’s city streets following reunification is an example town planning reflecting a new vision for an area.

3. Good examples of this might be the entirely schematic map of Addis Ababa available in 1991, when as much as four fifths of the city was unaccounted for on the map, or the “ invisibility” of the Kasbah on maps of contemporary Marrakesh.

4. Hanawalt and Reyerson’s (1994) City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe illustrates the close connection between urban space and the “urban ceremonial.”

**References**


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