Visualizing Glocalization: Semiotics of Ethnic and Class Differences in Global Cities

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Describing and explaining how urban spaces are occupied, used, contested, and transformed by different social groups is a crucial project. Ordinary people living ordinary lives create meaningful spaces; in urban environments, these spaces are ethnic vernacular landscapes. Urban spaces are also subject to the effects of social inequality. Class and racial/ethnic hierarchies mark urban territories with differential meanings. Spatial semiotics is essential for deciphering the complex metropolis. Semiotic and socio-spatial analysis makes it possible to see even the most powerless of urban dwellers as social agents in the local reproduction of regional, national, and global societal relations. We argue that sociological analysis of visual data is necessary to understand how and why urban vernacular neighborhoods are changing as a result of globalization and its by-product, glocalization. We present visual data on ethnic vernacular neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Paris, Philadelphia, Sydney, and Urbino. These urban spaces are filled with signs of collective identity and, often, group conflict. In the physical environment, architectural details, commercial signs, graffiti, among other things, signify the flows of people and culture. So too do social practices, such as commercial transactions, socializing, and commuting, in the public spaces of vernacular ethnic neighborhoods. Our analysis reveals distinctive visual representations of both gentrification and ethnic spectacles.
Globalization and Glocalization

• Glocalization is the result of globalizing forces meeting local culture.

• Ritzer (2003):
  – ‘nothing’ “a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content” (p. 195)
  – ‘something’ “a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content.” (p. 195)

• Visual signs in urban neighborhoods are a complex combination of ‘nothing’ and ‘something.’

Spatial Semiotics

- People give meaning to the spaces they inhabit by living in them.
- Ascribed characteristics, and the meanings they embed, generate visual signs in public spaces.
- Ethnic and class identity manifests in expressive, conative, and phatic signs (Jakobson, 1960).
- Social inequalities render public places into “contested spaces.”


Long Island
Contested Spaces

• Both economic and social capital create hierarchies which communicate social meanings.

• People assert their agency by marking – directly, in the case of graffiti, for example, or indirectly, by their presence – public spaces.
Gentrification

Brooklyn
Contested Gentrification
Ethnic Theme Parks

The Bronx
Ethnic Theme Parks

Brooklyn

Boston
Ethnic Theme Parks

Sydney

Philadelphia
Ethnic Vernacular

Berlin
Ethnic Vernacular

London
Ethnic Vernacular

Paris
Ethnic Vernacular

Paris
Ethnic Vernacular

Paris
Ethnic Vernacular

Philadelphia
Ethnic Vernacular

Philadelphia
Ethnic Vernacular

Philadelphia
Ethnic Vernacular

Brooklyn
Ethnic Vernacular

Brooklyn
Ethnic Vernacular

Rome
Ethnic Vernacular

Rome
Ethnic Vernacular

Frankfurt am Main
Ethnic Vernacular

Frankfurt am Main
Ethnic Vernacular

Frankfurt am Main
Ethnic Vernacular

Urbino
Ethnic Vernacular

Rincon, Puerto Rico
Ethnic Vernacular

Istanbul
Ethnic Vernacular

Beijing
Middle Class Vernacular

Paris
Middle Class Vernacular

Paris
Middle Class Vernacular

DUMBO, Brooklyn
Middle Class Vernacular

DUMBO, Brooklyn
Middle Class Vernacular

Berlin