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A VISUAL-MATERIAL APPROACH TO THE CITY

[Ed. note: this post is part of a roundtable discussion on "The Urban as

Emergent Key Concept for Media Theory." For more background on the discussion and to view other posts in the series, see here(http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/roundtables/urban-emergent-key-concept-media-theory/).]

A s a growing number of cities compete for global attention, the visual-material spectacle of the city is more than ever a significant medium of communication in its own right. In my work I have looked at how "second-tier" European cities materially enact visually compelling renovation and regeneration plans to achieve a "world-class" aesthetic. I have also looked at how imagery found in cities' planning and promotional media both reflects and shapes globalist aesthetic agendas that may de facto exclude other, less becoming or profitable, versions/visions of urban form and urban life.

For example, in researching the European Capital of Culture, I examined the bid books, websites and other promotional materials of 50 candidate cities to understand how both aspiring and current titleholders communicated their symbolic status as "European" rather than "just" specifically local or national: as "capitals" or destinations able to attract international visitors; and as centres of creativity and cultural production. I also conducted fieldwork in several capitals of culture to see whether and how their physical landscape had been transformed in the wake of such promotion.[1](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_1) [2](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_2)

In 2007, both Sibiu in Romania and Luxembourg were European capitals of culture. This was also the year that Romania entered the EU, as one of its then poorest countries. In Sibiu, the relatively small pre-Communist historic center had just been repaired and repainted, and was perfectly manicured, while the rest of the city was a construction site with skeletal structures of new buildings and decaying façades of old ones. The renovation and brand-new construction of key infrastructure such as the train station square and the airport had been subordinated to the restyling of Sibiu's "face" for the acquisition of photogenic symbolic capital in sight of titles like European Capital of Culture and UNESCO World Heritage Site.

At the same time, in an interview I conducted with the communications manager for Luxembourg 2007, she told me that "rebuilding the image of Luxembourg is at the very core of Luxembourg 2007: from outside, Luxembourg is mostly seen as "banks", so we want to make something new and reactivate creativity". With a budget of 7 million Euro for communication alone, Luxembourg focused on spreading its brand image across the city with a plethora of steel cutouts of the somewhat whimsical Luxembourg 2007 blue deer logo, which were strategically placed by major city buildings.

These are just two examples that highlight the importance of image in relation to these cities' socio-economic backgrounds and changing materialities. It is precisely this dialectical relationship between cities' perceived necessity to "appear" proper or competitive in a particular marketplace and intervene on

> **Cities must "appear" competitive, and intervene on their material landscape to fulfill this image**

their material landscape to fulfill this image that makes a visual-material rather than more broadly discursive or, on the other hand, infrastructural approach to researching the city as communication particularly productive.

This kind of text- and field-based empirical observation has led me to argue that the urban built environment is a key form/force of mediation and mediatization. On the one hand, the urban built environment mediates the performances of our everyday life. This is a statement that resonates greatly with rhetorical approaches to the study of space,[3](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_3) but here I use the term "mediation" purposefully to highlight that bricks and mortar can be seen, to quote Mazzarella, as a "set of media" through which "a given social dispensation produces and reproduces itself".[4](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_4) Increasingly, the urban built environment is what social semioticians like Theo Van Leeuwen would define as a "resource for structuring the interaction through which...content is communicated"[5](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_5) both transculturally and translocally.

The urban built environment should therefore be seen as an integral part of processes of mediation. Mediated communication has become both less mass-mediated and more hybridized, to the extent that, as Couldry has argued, "the media" as such should no longer be seen "as a privileged site for accessing a common world".[6](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_6) Extending Silverstone's foundational approach to this concept,[7](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_7) Couldry defines mediation as a non–linear "process of environmental transformation which, in turn, transforms the conditions under which any future media can be produced and understood".[8](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_8) Based on a broader and, so to speak, "media-less" definition of this key concept,[9](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_9) we can state that the urban built environment is a key form/force of mediation, because it contributes to transforming and reproducing major discursive and structural conditions that shape and constrain or, quite literally, mediate the everyday lives of individuals and communities.

> **The urban built**

On the other hand, the urban built environment is mobilized as symbolic currency for marketplaces like tourism, public communication, real estate, and

environment is mobilized as symbolic currency within various marketplaces

commerce. It is in this sense that it performs for mediatized communication, as it is imagined *and* imaged for key lifestyle publics through multimodal narratives spread across media. Myria Georgiou's work teaches us not only to tackle the urban at "street-level" but also to link the local materiality of the street to global popular media, for example.[10](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_10) And it is not only the social but also the physical dimensions of our cities that are increasingly mediatized.

In some of my own work, I note how specific "textures" of envisioned lived space are mobilized in promotional and planning media to achieve distinction within major genres and formats of urban regeneration such as "urban villages" and "citadels of culture". For example, both in Leeds (UK)[11](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_11) and Bologna (Italy)[12](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_12) iconic projects such as Holbeck Urban Village and Manifattura delle Arti rely heavily on photogenic combinations of materials (e.g. red bricks and wood panelling, cobblestone and stucco) and vistas (e.g. outdoor café and market spaces, urban parks, pedestrian areas) that are fit for the planning reports, promotional websites, computer-generated architectural images, and the many other "media" that are regularly exchanged among professionals and institutions involved in the regeneration of particular "brownfield" or "post-industrial" areas. Needless to say, these are also carriers of top-down visions of "place" developed for the global stage of urban planning and promotion. Such visions of place, however, foster what David Harvey has defined as "a utopianism of spatial form"[13](#footnote_plugin_reference_2166_13) premised upon sanitized if not downright exclusionary versions of both identity and community.

By thinking of the urban built environment as a key form/force of mediatization, we may also be able to free this term from some of its current theoretical cages, as the "media logics" that are at work here transcend the genres and formats that are typical of news media, televised entertainment or social networking.

Ultimately, a visual-material approach to urban communication research may contribute to conceptualizing and linking key concepts of media theory like mediation and mediatization in a more holistic, less media-centric manner. While the aesthetic form of cities may increasingly be transformed and fashioned in ways that fufill spectacular logics rooted in the perceived exigencies and anticipated rewards of global capitalism,

A visual-material approach to urban communication links mediation and mediatization in a less media-centric

their changing substance will continue to shape and constrain the everyday lives and identities of urban communities for many years to come.

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Notes

1. (#footnote_plugin_too Giorgia Aiello and Crispin Thurlow, "Symbolic Capitals: Visual Discourse and Intercultural Exchange in the European Capital of Culture scheme." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 6:2 (2006), 148-162.

2. (#footnote_plugin_too Giorgia Aiello, "The Appearance of Diversity: Visual Design and the Public Communication of EU Identity," in *European Union Identity: Perceptions from Asia and Europe*, edited by Jessica Bain and Martin Holland, 147-181. (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007).

3. (#footnote_plugin_too See Greg Dickinson, "Memories for Sale: Nostalgia and the Construction of Identity in Old Pasadena." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 83:1 (1997), 1–27.

4. (#footnote_plugin_too William Mazzarella, "Culture, Globalization, Mediation." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004), 346.

5. (#footnote_plugin_too Theo Van Leeuwen, *Introducing Social Semiotics*. (London, Routledge, 2005).

6. (#footnote_plugin_too Nick Couldry, "Does 'the Media' Have a Future?" *European Journal of Communication*, 24:4 (2009), 441.

7. (#footnote_plugin_too Roger Silverstone, "Complicity and Collusion in the Mediation of Everyday Life." *New Literary History*, 33:4 (2002), 761–780.

8. (#footnote_plugin_too Nick Couldry, "Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling." *New Media & Society*, 10:3 (2008), 380.

9. (#footnote_plugin_too Sonia Livingstone, "On the Mediation of Everything: ICA Presidential Address 2008." *Journal of Communication*, 59:1 (2009), 3.

10. (#footnote_plugin_tc Myria Georgiou, *Media and the City: Cosmopolitanism and Difference*. London: Polity, 2013.

11. (#footnote_plugin_tc Giorgia Aiello, "From Wasteland to Wonderland: The Hypermedia(tiza)tion of Urban Regeneration in Leeds' Holbeck Urban Village." *First Monday*, 18:11 (2013).

12. (#footnote_plugin_tc Giorgia Aiello, "From Wound to Enclave: The Visual-material Performance of Urban Renewal in Bologna's Manifattura delle Arti." *Western Journal of Communication*, 75:4 (2011), 341-366.

13. (#footnote_plugin_tc David Harvey, "The New Urbanism and the Communitarian Trap." *Harvard Design Magazine* Winter/Spring (1997), 3.