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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture
ISSN 1481-4374
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Volume 13 (2011) Issue 3 Article 23

Intermediality, Architecture, and the Politics of Urbanity

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Recommended Citation

Tortosa Garrigós, Virgilio. "Intermediality, Architecture, and the Politics of Urbanity." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1809>

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CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>
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Volume 13 Issue 3 (September 2011) Article 23
Virgilio Tortosa Garrigós,
"Intermediality, Architecture, and the Politics of Urbanity"
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/23>

Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.3 (2011)
Thematic issue *New Perspectives on Material Culture and Intermedial Practice*.
Ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Asunción López-Varela,
Haun Saussy, and Jan Mieszkowski
<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss3/>

Abstract: In his article "Intermediality, Architecture, and the Politics of Urbanity" Virgilio Tortosa Garrigós discusses aspects of the exponential development of large cities, the neoliberal economy, and the "spectacle" of architecture in the context of intermediality. With the connivance between land speculators and politicians — which has led not only to the loss of spatial identity but to irreversible pollution and geographic degradation — urbanity is epitomized on the Mediterranean coast line. In reaction to this development, a series of anti-globalization organizations and social movements, rooted in urban neighbourhoods, resist the homogenization of taste with anti-billboards and anti-advertising against consumerism and urban development. Architects who view the said urban development critically are also involved with counter movements such as street theatres and documentaries. Tortosa discusses these attempts occurring in various intermedial actions in order to conceive the city as a humane living space against consumerism.

Virgilio TORTOSA GARRIGÓS

Intermediality, Architecture, and the Politics of Urbanity

Translated from the Spanish by Asunción López-Varela

Marc Augé's designation of "non-spaces" in his 1995 book *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* defines urban space characterized by the confluence of anonymous beings inhabiting the large cities of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. "Non-spaces" are not lived spaces but they generate daily reality. For more than a century New York City was the greatest stage of our contemporary representations: a symbol of modern human greatness drama and world showcase of its potential for development (Berman 302). But let us recall Federico García Lorca's transit through the city and how, in his *Poeta en Nueva York*, offers an unsettling portrait of life there. García Lorca focuses on the metropolitan crowd, the streets, and on spaces emerging from modernity where he sees human suffering and the danger for the survival of human values (on aspects of the modern European city, see, e.g., Jerram).

In recent decades and owing to extensive urban development, the rural world has also become urbanized. At present 1,200 million people live in towns of 100,000 inhabitants, which amounts to one third of the world's urban population, with 600 million people already living in places with half a million people (see, e.g., Zabalbeascoa). This offers a rotund figure: half of the world's urban population lives in concentrations of less than half a million inhabitants. This process of transformation affects even small cities, with around 3,500 million people in their urban centres, that is, 50% of the world's population, a figure expected to rise over the next four decades. Impressive transformations when compared with half-a-hundred cities on the planet reaching half-a-million inhabitants in the 1980s. There are 54 cities with more than 5 million people. China and the East are those who have experienced an unprecedented urbanizing boom and economic development, to the extent that in China there are currently a 134 new cities. Following current projections, in 2050 cities with more than 10 million people will pass from 21 to 29, and 10% of the urban population will inhabit them, while cities with a population between one million and five million will pass to 509 during the same period (120 more, which will gather 22% of the world's urban population). If in 1900 only 10% of the world population lived in large cities, in 2050, 70% of the people on Earth will do so, while only 14% is expected to live in the country within the developed world. The world's most populous cities are in this order: Tokyo, Mexico City, Mumbai, New York, São Paulo, Delhi, Kalkota, Jakarta, Buenos Aires, and Dhaka.

If in ancient times cities were the cradles of civilization, today's situation is one of pollution, the loss of identity, and the multiplication of suburbs. Economic and social inequalities form part of a landscape that promotes a minority that lives well at the expense of a large majority. In Europe, cities of the early twentieth century continue to grow with the pull of economic development and real estate speculation and this pattern is repeated in industrially less developed countries. An example is the region of Hong Kong and Guangzhou with 120 million inhabitants and twice as many are estimated to populate by 2015 the Nagoya-Osaka-Kyoto-Kobe region and triple that in the region stretching from Rio de Janeiro to Sao Paulo. Clearly, the expansion of cities is a reality but also a serious problem. Urban planners point out that despite the ecological benefit of the concentration of population in these regions, their social and economic sustainability remains difficult to justify, as well as organize (see, e.g., Jerram). In Spain, for example, social development occurred from a society that generated wealth with food as the primary source to an urbanized society in which it is the city that produces the country's wealth by concentrating 66% of its economic activity in cities, mainly Madrid (see Zabalbeascoa), with social and economic inequalities as a result. In my opinion, the solution is in economic, urban, and social politics and, I propose, in harnessing new media applied in pedagogy (see, e.g., López-Varela and Tötösy de Zepetnek; Tötösy de Zepetnek and López-Varela). However, in Mediterranean countries, for example, it is the opposite of what has been happening with funding for municipalities coming mainly from the sale of land for urban development and growth at any cost, including ecologic devastation and environmental pollution.

Large, ubiquitous advertisements of leading global brands (Coca-Cola, Ford, Nokia, McDonald's, Ikea, etc.), expensive stores on main streets proliferate in Western cities and this is duplicated from Bangkok to São Paulo to Mumbai. The gap between affluent and deprived urban areas has widened progressively through extreme versions, often clearly demarcated by physical barriers. In Europe, consider the privatization of urban development in the service of the wealthy classes who reside in exclusive residential areas and housing estates that have proliferated across the Mediterranean and the same is occurring in Mexico, gated communities in many states of the U.S. (see, e.g., "Seaheaven" in *The Truman's Show* [Weir] where spotless houses and urban lifestyles designed more for the television camera and thus destined to generate impulsive to buy). The downside, however, is the proliferation of shanty towns on the outskirts of cities — built with industrial waste — and this remains a reality in many regions of the world along with the development of wealthy areas in the same cities, and this is no different in Europe including Spain. This speaks more to the fact that homes have gone from being goods of use to goods of exchange with the development of consumer capitalism. The constant influx of (im)migrants in recent decades has also led to a pressing need for homes to house large economic (im)migrant masses driven by the quest of better living conditions. Similarly, this is also the reason for a dramatic phenomenon in industrially less developed parts of the world: illegal housing form part of society, albeit often invisible to public eyes. For example, in Latin America their variants are the Brazilian *favelas* on the outskirts of large urban agglomerations, stretching around affluent and orderly downtown buildings and rich apartment blocks. In Argentina slums are also the product of internal migration, attracted by better living conditions since the mid-twentieth century, a time of prosperity but also of successive economic crises that have shaken the region in recent decades resulting in the disappearance of housing and employment for thousands of working families. Of course, this situation results in urban unrest as seen for example in 2010 in Buenos Aires where angry masses occupied a public park in a middle class neighbourhood before the despairing eyes of the government. Such occurrences suggest the need of the rethinking of urban politics. Thus, we are witnesses to a kind of homogenization of urban globalization, both in opulent and excessive "residencialism," originating in U.S. capitalist consumer culture. Further, in this globalized urban landscape, cloning is a basic ingredient of "new tourism" and leisure entertainment: the replication of Western urban development aims at creating tourist attractions that generate income (see Trimm). The "war cry" of the new tourism is "it must be seen," referring equally, for instance, in Spain to the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the City of Arts in Valencia, or Terra Mitica in Alicante. The purpose of architecture, like that of other arts, no longer serves human activities aiming at the improvement of living conditions and of our planned communal futures: previous places have become the non-places in the contemporary world.

Symbols of the economic and financial power of our time, skyscrapers act like big cities. Identifying logos of their skyline, they break into the urban landscape to show their distinctiveness from buildings of concrete blocks. They also exhibit the grandeur of triumphant power of capitalism after the fall of Berlin Wall and the hegemony of consumer capitalism whose most prominent exponent is neo-liberalism. Cities compete for the height of their towers, trying to break the world record, even if for a short period of time. Urban policies are grounded on spectacle and dazzling architectural grandeur forcing art to become show business. Beyond order and measure, the city becomes pure scenery, more and more fantastic, a hybrid of science fiction and animated cartoons. Whatever is left of habitability is conquered by a space of pure forms: a new architectural order serves uncritically the basic rules of planning in order to let architects be used as accomplices in a time when finance is allied with politicians in order to acquire public space for consumer culture. Public space has been privatized to the point that their previous and necessary urban dialectic has disappeared. Architecture is now subject to the visual effect, aimed at pure visual pleasure, celebrating the narcissism of urban planners and the megalomania and complacency of politicians. The interruption in our lives in the city spectacle, the highest representation of artistic order within the individualist or even nihilist ideology takes over at a time when the chance of social consensus and dialogic structures for coexistence recedes into oblivion. Buildings generated by a handful of studios-brands and ubiquitous star architects in all the major cities in the world contribute only to increasing land speculation wherever they choose to install their designs. Their sculptural designs exclude rather than include, enhancing

the greatness of the city in the outside world, but placing suburbs and slums beyond the public view of rich citizens and tourists, anxious to appropriate the beautiful and neutralize the ugly, ignoring social empathy. A glaring example is the Emirate of Dubai. Only a decade ago Dubai was little more than desert sands. Today it stands one of the most prosperous cities in the world. Real estate, financial businesses (grown out of class inequality) and urban speculation have placed Dubai among the favourite tourist destinations in the world with its grand and luxurious architecture. Out of nowhere comes a place that breaks all sorts of Guinness records, with the world's tallest building (Burj Caliph) so far, the only seven-star hotel in the world, suspended on the sea, the largest mall in the world (Burj Al Arab), the world's largest port, the largest airport, and the largest theme park ever built, not to speak of a complex of 300 artificial islands that replicate the world map for exclusive buyers. Abu Dhabi, perhaps with benefiting from the claim of its neighbour, sells an "island of happiness."

In sum, this consumer oriented urban planning generates large architectural moles (containers without contents). The towers, vivid symbols of human greatness, also represent the danger of a civilization poised on the abyss, in which the threat of "perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish" (Berman 1) is part of our identity. Not in vain to be modern is to live life and accept this paradox. Marshall Berman writes that "we have lost or broken the connection between our culture and our lives" (10). It is part of the process of dehumanization that generates these mega-cities that inscribe our lives within the realm of their signs.

My question is whether the above outlined collusion of architecture, urban planning, and consumer capitalism and its negative impact can be counter-balanced and I take the example of theater, a prime intermedial expression of possible mediating action. There are a number of theater companies dedicated to perform in open spaces of cities in an attempt to appropriate space and to encourage the participation of the local population. This communion between art and citizenship and of the idea of culture as a motor of reality. In the U.S. there are such groups including the New York based *The Living Theatre* <http://www.livingtheatre.org/>, the *Bread and Puppet Theater* <http://breadandpuppet.org/> where large puppets are manipulated by actors integrated into urban landscape, or the *Teatro Campesino* <http://www.elteatrocampesino.com/>, founded by migrant farm workers in California. In Spain *Teatro Campesino* has its own version in the Catalan Comediants <http://www.comediants.com/> and *Xarxa Teatre Castellón* <http://www.xarxateatre.com/>, among others. The participatory work such theater groups enact represent a mode of resistance to consumer capitalism and its corollary, urban dissolution and act as intermedial spaces as a dialectical space capable of creating artistic representations linked to human appropriation of living spaces.

A further intermedial act to counter balance consumer culture and the dissolution of the city is photomontage such as by social architect Giacomo Costa's work <http://www.giacomocosta.com/> who produces overlapping buildings in the manner of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, thus reflecting on the identity and the loss of identity of the mega-cities of our time. Similarly, the graffiti artist Banksy with his prolific satirical pieces on politics, pop culture, and morality in contemporary Britain (see, e.g., *Bansky: Wall and Space*). His work combines urban interventions with anti-system messages in buildings, mixing writings and paint-strokes. His graffiti work is now considered authentic street art challenging the consumer capitalist imaginary with irony and he has published several printed books with photographs of his work in different cities, together with exhibitions of images and subversive writings. Other creations of opposition include *Adbusters* <http://www.adbusters.org/>, an organization with anti-consumerist practices through urban actions that demonstrate the pitfalls of the contemporary world. *Adbusters* considers media advertising as a negative power exuding absolute power over society where consumer culture rules. Counter-advertising by *Adbusters* tries to compensate for media manipulation and aim at creating a space for dialogue among writers, artists, activists, students, and all those committed to anti-consumerism. Close to "culture jamming" — an art movement of resistance to cultural hegemony, sometimes considered a communication guerrilla opposed to any kind of institutional powers of the consumer society), *Adbusters* react against corporate images and use them under a satirical light to unveil their manipulations (see, e.g., Dery; Sharpe). Or, there is *Rebelart* <http://www.rebelart.net/>, and international network against consumer culture.

Groups of similar characteristics in Spain include *La Fiambrera Obrera* (The Working Lunchbox) <http://www.sindominio.net/fiambrera/> a local network that aims at political intervention in the city, combining actions with reflection, workshops (even in museums), the publishing of anti-system material, etc. They also work in streets, allying themselves with organizations for the appropriation of public space such as squats. They have staged actions in large malls in order to assault them communally as a form of protest. Similarly, the Spanish movement *ConsumeHastaMorir* (Consume-to-Death) <http://www.letra.org/spip/> in Madrid works in association with *Ecologistas en Acción* (Ecologists in Action) <http://www.ecologistasenaccion.org/> of more than 300 groups of ecologists who produce graphic and audiovisual counter-advertising and present workshops in order to generate synergies and collaborate with other groups of similar interests. In partnership with the U.S. group *Billboard Liberation Front* <http://www.billboardliberation.com/>, they use their own advertising to strike back at the saturation of billboards and posters in cities. The social architect Santiago Cirugeda's *Recetas Urbanas / Urban Prescriptions* <http://www.recetasurbanas.net/> is an attempt to promote a critical stand against the "grand" architecture in cities. His interventions reinterpret urban legislation and appropriate urban spaces in order to generate new possibilities for the use of space by urban citizens. Thus, with his art he invites the occupation of unused space in order to convert them into social space, for instance expanding the scaffolding of houses to turn them into habitable homes. It is an architecture that wants to make the citizen the protagonist and the real urban motor. Cirugeda's intervention is based on the use of gaps in municipal legislation and his projects are developed on site with the community, with the poor, the deprived, and those with little resources. His projects are comparable to political acts of protest. He manipulates architecture with no other purpose than the re-appropriation and generation of social dynamics beyond where the law and practices ignore the citizen. He also plans workshops for community programs, opportunities for social gatherings, summer theaters, etc. His website offers "recipes" for strategic and legal developments in the city. He employs recycled materials in his buildings and gives great importance to ephemeral architecture and re-usable strategies for practical urban intervention. Some of his more emblematic projects are his "House-bug," which consists in taking over a tree as temporary shelter as a way to resist urban policy, in what he calls "reverse colonization" intended to destabilize daily public space including recycled homes, homes on rooftops, and homes reconfigured from trucks and containers. Overall, his work is against privatization of public space. Along the same lines, *Ecosistema Urbano* (Urban Ecosystem) <http://www.ecosistemaurbano.com/>, a project in architecture offers social intervention to break financial and real estate speculation by criticizing buildings with no criteria and lack of commitment to creating a well-knitted urban fabric. The project also rejects the privatization of space with the results of secluded malls and shopping arcades, that is, spaces of assimilated leisure and consumption. The philosophy behind these projects is that urban space should be primarily public and not privatized and subject to speculation, so that the social component of "new architecture" ought to focus on energy efficiency, the search for renewable energy, recycling, and sustainability.

Another intermedial form where the city as urban space is present is of course cinema and documentaries have been the privileged area for delving deeper into perceptions of urban space. Such is the case of experimental production of Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) with the haunting music of Philip Glass. This work is the first part of a trilogy of colorful landscapes of stunning natural beauty contrasted with urban agglomeration resulting from human manipulation, degradation, and the destruction of the ecosystem. In Hopi, the term *koyaanisqatsi* means messy, chaotic, out of balance, disintegrating. The documentary is a unique visual stream that does not seek anything but shows the viewer the tremendous contrast between the ancient natural world and the disruption of life in the city. There is a perpetual movement of images to show the viewer the madness of our time, inviting to an internal journey in search for equilibrium and that which should be most protected in human nature, namely the ecosystem. Various close-ups and effects interrupt in order to show the effects of industrialization and technological development upon nature, in a megacity such as New York, with skyscrapers, noise, crowded malls, and ghettos of poverty, violence, and marginality side by side with technological opulence. Reggio warns us that we belong to a biological order and not a technological one and suggests the relevance of the ecosystemic order the ancient Hopi achieved by maintaining harmony and balance with and within their landscape and environment. The film ends with a series of

Hopi prophesies warning that if we extract what is most valuable in the earth, we create a catastrophe. Reggio's work is a metaphor for the current crisis, a panorama of the architectural order of excess.

In conclusion, the contemporary city throughout the world is characterized by an evolution from space containing promises of development and creative vital tissue into a dense network within the already saturated megalopolis. The move from the industrial city, with its now dismantled Foucauldian control lingering within symbolic chimney shoots, to the technological city, seems to require the creation of living environments. If the industrialized city created an urban culture on the model of manufactoring and transport, the post-industrial city has created a culture derived from advanced technology, speed, and excessive consumer culture by the have-s to the detriment and exclusion of the have-nots. The urban fabric of the contemporary city — whether in skyscrapers or in the suburbs produces fragmented and networked patterns allied with political and economic power "discontinuous in space and time, sometimes superficial, sometimes dense" (Calvino 170). It would seem that our urban future is one of dispersion, of progressive urbanization of the country, where life in the city is almost a contradiction on its own terms, since the U.S. model that is being duplicated requires a dependency on the private automobile and on privacy which are not conducive for environmental equilibrium. The marathon for forever higher skyscrapers seems to have become the standard. What I propose is as I have briefly outlined with examples that we engage — at least in the industrialized world — the possibilities of intermedial action in order to counter balance the continuation of depersonalized and "residentialized" urbanity and stand against the excesses of consumer culture and consumer capitalism.

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