THE CITY AS A VEHICLE FOR VISUAL REPRESENTATION

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INTRODUCTION

There may be no better time and place to explore the topic of the city as a vehicle for visual representation than right now and right here in this powerhouse location, the site of the Tate Modern and its extraordinary in-sightings of contemporary London. There is so much that is being visually represented at this symbolic site and situation. There is, for example, the revival of the South Bank after two millennia of peripheralness, generated, in part, to serve as a playground for the burgeoning wealth being generated across the Thames by the fantastic expansion of the now intensely globalized City of London (whose financial shadow had previously generated a comparable epochal revival of the East End through the Docklands renewal). I can also see an ironic game of the centuries, a playful punning on the simultaneity of very different modernities, visually represented by the exhibition of the most postmodern and contemporary within the confines of a sooty monument to an older and outdated industrial age, one of many fabulous juxtapositionings rising on the South Bank (the London Eye seen from the front gate of Westminster Abbey is another), each purposefully rolling together the past, the present, and the future. What is happening here might also be seen as the latest addition to perhaps the world's largest version of the city as theme park, with the Thames forming the new humanly re-scaled Main Street for what might be called Cool Britannialand, welcoming more visitors and tourists and onlookers than practically any other place on earth.

But what I would like to do today is to go beyond such playful appreciation of this lofty and provocative site to explore more broadly the growing convergence that has begun to take place between critical thinking in the visual arts and critical thinking about cities and urbanity. At least until the past five years, remarkably little attention has been given to the dense web of relations that connect "art" and "city," the visual and the urban, in either the art historical or urban studies discourses. Yet, I believe an argument can be made that all of what we call art is and probably always has been quintessentially urban in the sense that it is produced in and of the city as a distinctive human habitat. The boldest part of this argument is not so much the "in"(for I am pretty sure we can say that the majority of the world's artists live in cities) but the "of," the assertion that the most expressive forms of visual representation, from vernacular to fine art, are the products–or better, the oeuvres– of the city, of the very nature of cityness. To a degree that has not been recognized widely enough, all the visual arts can be seen as essentially urban, arising in and from the interactive and generative milieu of the city. Indeed, the city itself may be humanity's greatest collective art work, and should be seen as such. In this sense, every visual representation, whatever form it takes, may be interpretively understood, to some significant extent, as a representation of the city and urban life.

In my recently published book, Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions

(Blackwell, 2000), I describe that intrinsic stimulus to creativity and innovation that comes from living together in dense and heterogeneous agglomerations with a term borrowed from Aristotle's Politics. I call it synekism and argue that this fundamentally spatial stimulus of urban agglomeration has been a hidden force in history, rarely studied in its own right yet possibly a key factor in explaining some of the most revolutionary moments in human history, from the earliest development of agriculture to the contemporary emergence of the Information Age. Again, the argument is not just that these developments arise in the city but also of the city, intrinsic to the very nature of urban life. In what follows, I will use two extraordinary wall paintings or murals, two brilliant visual representations of the city and city life, to illustrate the lasting power of synekism, the stimulus of urban agglomeration, and to explore further some of the evocative connections between city, art, and critical thinking.

THE SPATIAL TURN

As I mentioned earlier, it has only been in the last five years or so that the link between art and city has begun to attract substantial critical interpretive and theoretical attention. More than anything else, I think this recent convergence reflects what may, in retrospect, turn out to be one of the most important developments in all the human arts and sciences in the late twentieth century: the resurgence of critical attention in almost every discipline to the importance of space, or what I prefer to call the spatiality of human life. More than ever before in the past 150 years, spatial thinking has become transdisciplinary and increasingly central in nearly all contemporary forms of critical thought, ranging from dance theory (choreography) to art history and comparative literature to the new ethnography, even to the field of economics. No longer is spatial thinking the specialized preserve of the traditionally spatial disciplines of geography, architecture, and (significant for today's subject) urban studies. For the first time in 150 years, the critical spatial imagination is being recognized as equally insightful and revealing as the critical historical imagination that has so dominated critical thinking over the past century and a half.

Appropriately enough, the field of art history and criticism has played a particularly interesting and important role in these developments. To illustrate with a personal example, I remember the period just after the publication of my first book on critical spatial thinking, Postmodern Geographies in 1989. To my great surprise, I found that the group of scholars who seemed to react most positively and enthusiastically to the book were art historians. I had hoped to reach well beyond my own discipline of Geography, but this seemed quite a stretch. Perplexed, I began to ask what had attracted such a positive response. What I was told boiled down simply to this: that art historians, especially during the interwar years, had recognized the degree to which the extraordinary power and insight of the historical narrative was diverting attention away from the visual and spatial qualities of art. What I described a powerful historicism in critical social theory, and especially within Marxism, a historicism that worked to weaken and peripheralize the critical geographical or spatial imagination, thus struck a familiar chord among art historians, especially with regard to the power of the visual. What I had done was to theorize and attempt to explain the nineteenth century origins of this space-blinkering historicism in ways that had not been done within their own disciplinary tradition. That I did so by drawing upon the writings of such critical historians of art as Walter Benjamin and, especially, John Berger, seemed to make Postmodern Geographies even more appealing.

Because it relates so directly to my topic today as well as to the larger spatial turn, let me repeat the provocative words of John Berger, from The Look of Things (1974). In a wonderful chapter on, if I remember correctly, the decline of portrait painting in the twentieth century and the link between this decline and changing concepts of time and space, Berger leaps laterally to speak of the modern novel.

> We hear a lot about the crisis of the modern novel. What this involves, fundamentally, is a change in the mode of narration. It is scarcely any longer possible to tell a straight story sequentially unfolding in time. [the traditional narrative] And this is because we are too aware of what is continually traversing the story line laterally. That is to say, instead of being aware of a point as an infinitely small part of a straight line, we are aware of it as an infinitely small part of an infinite number of lines, as the centre of a star of lines. Such awareness is the result of our constantly having to take into account the simultaneity and extension of events and possibilities.
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> There are so many reasons why this should be so: the range of modern means of communications: the scale of modern power: the degree of personal political responsibility that must be accepted for events all over the world: the fact that the world has become indivisible. The unevenness of ecnomic development within that world; the scale of the exploitation. All these play a part. *Prophesy now involves a geographical rather than historical projection; it is space not time that hides consequences from us.* To prophesy today it is only necessary to know men [and women] as the are throughout the whole world in all their inequality. Any contemporary narrative which ignores the urgency of this dimension is incomplete and acquires the oversimplified character of a fable.

So wonderfully clear and spatially incisive were the words of Berger that I felt compelled to invent a term to describe him. I called him, rather than just a critical art historian, a critical art geographer. It is this "art geography" or, alternately, the "geohistory of art," that I wish to explore briefly here today. The geographer of art, as I see her or him, is sharply attuned to the power of visuality and visual representation, is capable of using the historical narrative in balanced conjunction with a critical and interpretive geography, is postmodern enough to be aware of the pitfalls and weakness of modernist critical theories and particularly the limitations of binary thinking and certain forms of historicism, and is acutely aware of the city as oeuvre as well as produit, and of space as simultaneously perceived, conceived, and lived. With these characteristics in mind, I turn next to the first of my two remarkable mural paintings, both in different ways extraordinary vehicles for the visual representation of the city as well as for seeing the city itself as a form of visual representation.

ORIGINS

The first wall painting takes us back more than 8,000 years to the very origins of the urbanization process, to what can be seen as the world's first known visual representation of a city and of what the old Chicago School called "urbanism as a way of life." I refer here to a remarkable panoramic mural found on the wall of a house shrine in a place called Çatal Höyük, in South-

Central Anatolia, and dated to around 6000BC. Nearly every good art history textbook includes this wall painting in its discussions of the origins of the visual arts. The Guinness Book of Records calls it the first "nature" painting, while the art historians recognize it as the first known *landscape* painting and note, with some puzzlement, that nothing quite like it would appear until the European Renaissance 7000 years later, with the development of perspective painting, the panoramic city paintings of the Italian vedute, and the later birds-eye city views of the Flemish artists and cartographers. But the Çatal Höyük wall painting is much more than a simple landscape or nature painting. Indeed, what it represents is not nature but the beginnings of a revolutionary transformation of nature, the creation of the world's first cities and the origins of urbanism as a way of life, a new "second" nature.

The textbooks call this first visual representation of the city "Landscape with volcanic eruption," but it is more accurately described as a **cityscape**, a term that has been rarely used until recently. In the foreground and across the length of the mural is a detailed mapping of the new town's compacted agglomeration of mudbrick and timber-reinforced houses, viewed from a distance that seems to combine both head-on and birds-eye perspectives. Hovering above the more than 75 geometric figures that almost surely represent residential footprints of some kind (although they also look like little TV sets) is a twin-peaked volcano, probably 10,600 foot Hasan Dag, painted in rich vermillion (cinnabar). The highest peak seems to be erupting in a spatter of fine lines and dots, while at the volcano's base additional lines appear to be connecting the mountain to the city, first to second nature, the raw to perhaps the very first example of the fully cooked.

Why the term landscape has been so preferred over the term cityscape (picked up as unacceptable on my computer's spellcheck!) is an interesting question. Part of the reason why the Catal Hoyuk mural has not been called a cityscape is because Catal Hoyuk is not conventionally recognized by prehistorians and archeologists as city. Along with the even earlier settlement of Jericho, Catal Hoyuk is seen my most archeologists as remarkably early but failed attempts at synekism or the stimulus of urban agglomeration, with its roots in the Ancient Greek concept of synoikismos, the coming together of people in one shared place or home (oikos). Yet, repeatedly over the past forty years, there has been an increasingly convincing argument that not only should Catal Hoyuk be seen as a city but as one of the most innovative or generative cities that has ever existed.

Catal Hoyuk was excavated by James Mellaart in early 1960s. In a widely read article in Scientific American, he called it a "neolithic city," at that time an impossible contradiction in terms. Jane Jacobs built on Mellaart's work in The Economy of Cities (1969) to present her counter arguments to Lewis Mumford's magisterial but distinctively anti-urban work, The City in History (1961). She called the original settlement site of Catal Hoyuk New Obsidian, pushed its origins back to more than 10,000 years ago, defined what developed as the first city, and assigned this first city extraordinary creative properties, including the (urban) invention of full-scale agriculture, what has been called the Agricultural Revolution, the first great transformation of human society from its primitive form of nomadic hunting and gathering. Today, Catal Hoyuk is being excavated again--in what I think deserves to be called the first "postmodern" archeological dig-- by Ian Hodder, formerly of Cambridge and now at Stanford, one of the world's leading archeological theorists and probably the most important instigator of the spatial turn in archeology.

It is now more widely accepted that Catal Hoyuk was probably the largest–perhaps containing as many as 12,000 people– of a whole series of substantial settlements initially established by hunters and gatherers engaged in long distance trade over a vast area of Southwest Asia. This trading network was vital to the formation of the first cities, and one of the most valuable items traded was obsidian, volcanic glass. Obsidian gave Jane Jacobs the name of her original city site and is visually represented in the wall painting by the scattered lines and dots emanating from the vermillion volcano. Chipped and sharpened, obsidian was the primary cutting tool and hunting weapon of the time. In Catal Hoyuk, it became much more powerful ideologically, for here was found the world's first known **hand-crafted mirror**, the first source of intentional human self-contemplation and visual reflection. Was this breakthrough invention of the mirror – intentional visual representation of self – the stimulus for the panoramic wall painting, the first visual representation of a city and urban life, the first city to be put into human perspective?

One can read much more into both the wall painting and the reconstructed picture of what the city might have looked like. There is some evidence to indicate, for example, that the urban dwellers were relatively **peaceful and egalitarian.** In marked contrast to Jericho, there are no rampart-like walls surrounding Catal Hoyuk and burials finds show few signs of physical violence. There is also little or no indication of a social class hierarchy or centralized authority, even in religious and ceremonial matters, in great contrast to the ziggurat-spiked centers of the Sumerian city-states that started what can now be called the Second Urban Revolution. Small shrines were numerous and integrated into household compounds, the interiors of which were richly decorated. As suggested by the compound footprints, there was both a fundamental uniformity and subtle variations in residential patterns. This reminded me of the thousands of canal houses in present-day Amsterdam, each remarkably similar in structure yet displaying almost infinite and highly creative variety, both without and within.

It has also been argued that the new **urban culture** developing in Catal Hoyuk was probably very close to being matriarchal or, at least, strongly shaped by women. Its now world renowned statues of female fertility figures captured the revolutionary changes taking place in the city, the transition from hunting and gathering to farming and animal husbandry. Both the so-called goddess figures and the cityscape wall painting signal this transformation. For example, nearly all the wall paintings in early Catal Huyuk and nearly everywhere else in the world portrayed hunting scenes, with vividly drawn animals and men. Later, much more "domesticated" urban and agricultural scenes appear, expressing in visual form the declining importance of hunting and the rise of caretaking, weaving, milling, and other more "urban" (and probably female dominated) occupations. What this also suggests is that we may be able to read into the visual representation of the Sumerian city-states formed 2000 years later the creation of both formal social classes and partriarchal power.

The adobe-like form of the city is also revealing. From everything that we now know, the actual city "plan" for Catal Hoyuk contained almost no streets or ground level paths and very few open spaces. The houses abutted one another, with movement between houses taking place over the roofs. Most houses had room for shrines and were highly decorated. Overall, the agglomerated settlement covered a relatively small area but was extremely dense, far more dense than any other previous human habitat. Such density played a key role in expanding the scale and scope

of human society and in stimulating major societal innovations. Far from being a failed synekism, as many texts argue, Catal Hoyuk may have been one of the most innovative urban centers in human history. Nowhere else can the urban origins of full scale agrarian society–the so-called Agricultural Revolution–be more clearly traced, especially so through visual representations. And not only do we find here the first known hand-crafted mirror and that extraordinary wall painting, but also the first textile and carpets, the first evidence of metal-working, some of the earliest forms of crude pottery, elaborate decorative arts, woodworking, and sculpture–a veritable explosion of creativity and innovation in the visual and practical arts.

Let us now fast forward 8000 years to the present, following a connected path of artistic urbanism that can be described in the word of Jane Jacobs.

> What I am saying is that every city has a direct economic ancestry, a literal economic parentage, in a still older city or cities. New cities do not arise by spontaneous generation. The spark of city economic life is passed on from older cities to younger. It lives on today in cities whose ancestors have long since gone to dust ... These links of life may extend – perilously tenuous at times but unbroken – backward through the cities of Crete, Phoenicia, Egypt, the Indus, Babylonia, Sumeria, Mesopotamia, back to Çatal Höyük itself and beyond, to the unknown ancestors of Çatal Höyük.

TROPICAL AMERICA IN LOS ANGELES

We make this forward leap between past and present through the medium of that quintessentially urban or public art-form, the wall-painting or mural, moving from its very first sighting in Catal Hoyuk to one of its most extraordinary contemporary culminations in the City of Los Angeles, a place where the mural as a vehicle for the visual representation of urban life has reached one of its highest levels of expression–as well as a city which has probably been visually represented more often and more widely that any other on earth–both as itself and as a visual substitute for nearly every other city.. To move us forward more quickly and directly, I quote Jose Clemente Orozco, one of the three great Mexican muralists who so influenced art and the city in the interwar years and continue to have an indelible effect on cityscapes everywhere.

> The highest, the most logical, the purest and strongest form of painting is the mural. In this form alone, it is one with the other arts–with all the others. It is, too, the most disinterested form, for it cannot be made a matter of private gain; it cannot be hidden away for the benefit of a certain privileged few. (Orozco, 1929)

The representational site I wish to turn our attention to is an exterior wall on the second floor of a building called Italian Hall, located on Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles. As a good art geographer, let me not only discuss the site itself but also situate it within a broader geohistorical context. Olvera Street is its own provocative visual representation of Los Angeles. It is usually described as the original site of El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles, the first permanent settlement in the area, dating back more than two hundred years. No matter that the original site of the first pueblo was actually a little further north, it is here where everyone believes the city of Los Angeles began. Adjacent to Olvera Street is La Placita, one of the oldest churches in the area, and the Plaza itself, one of the most heavily used public spaces in the entire

region, LA's version of Hyde Park Corner. Together with other buildings, the street is part of a State Historic Monument, a preserved place that represents the entire lifespan of Los Angeles and has, despite the dispersed nature of the city, remained at the geographical center, the focal point of the urban region for more than two centuries.

Olvera Street itself is an entirely simulated environment, one of America's earliest theme parks. It is the product (certainly not oeuvre) of an attempt by wealthy civic boosters in the early 1930s to create a picturesque Mexican market place and street scene in the heart of this historically Hispanic city, a kind of purified Latino version of today's famous urban simulacrum, CityWalk, in Universal Studios. It was supposed to be brilliantly colorful, a tranquil place to hear mariachi music, taste Mexican food, buy a pinata, experience an ancient culture. When it first opened, Humphrey Bogart was one of its first visitors. But something extraordinary happened in 1932 that gave this ersatz Mexican market place a very different visibility. The great Mexican artist, David Alfaro Siqueiros, assisted by a group of artists mainly from Chouinard School of Art (the forerunner of today's CalArts) and known as the Bloc of Mural Painters, completed a huge (18x80 foot) mural called América Tropical, or Tropical America. The first public viewing of the mural started a highly politicized chain of events that would continue to stir controversy right up to the present moment, a chain of events that begs to be re-interpreted from the vantage point of the new art geohistory and geocriticism.

Siqueiros had been expelled from Mexico in 1932 for his radical politics and had taken up a six-month position teaching fresco painting at Chouinard. He would produce his first LA mural within the walls of the Art Center, assisted by a collection of some of the best artists in America at the time, the core group of regionalist Scene Painters that included Paul Sample, Millard Sheets, Phil Paradise, Lee Blair, and Phil Dike. Many went with him to paint Tropical America, taking with them the new tools and techniques of the Mexican muralist, including the air brushes, cans of automotive spray paint, and bulbous shaded forms that would influence wall art and graffiti in almost every corner of the world over the next seven decades. Siqueiros reportedly insisted on completing the mural himself, painting through the night to produce the focal point of the mural, a Mexican peasant strapped tightly to a double crucifix. Sitting on the top of the double cross is the eagle of imperial America; at the bottom are the crumbled stones of a Mesoamerican pyramid, indicative perhaps of Siqueiros's double target, American and Mexican forms of oppression. On one side, dense jungle vines enter the picture, while on the other, atop a concrete box, two men, described by some as revolutionary snipers, point their guns at the eagle.

As many in this audience know, the unveiling of Tropical America, described as the first large mural in the United States that created a public space by being painted on an ordinary exterior wall, caused quite a stir in Los Angeles (and probably in Mexico too, although little is written about this). It political message carried great power in the deep depression year of 1932, when thousands of Mexicans in Los Angeles and elsewhere, including US citizens, were being rounded up and deported by the federal government, and the nearby Plaza was filled daily by radical demonstrators of every stripe. Reaction to the mural, and especially its public visibility, was quick. The portion that could be seen from the street was almost immediately whitewashed and within two years all of it was covered. The federal government denied Siqueiros's request for an extension of his six-month visa and he was forced to leave the country. For the next three

taxpayer money on a mural that is divisive and appeals to "race and class". I may be wrong, but I suspect that the role of Siqueiros as a progenitor of the abstract expressionist movement and an influence on all of contemporary art is still not fully appreciated by art historians and critics today.

Still another factor peripheralizing Siqueiros and limiting his recognized influence is a peculiar cultural and aesthetic bias against Los Angeles. Even today, there are those in art history and criticism as well as in urban studies and geography who continue to see Los Angeles as some bizarre Babylon on the Pacific, a garish and superficial Tinsel Town where serious art and culture are, well... not very serious, especially in comparison with New York City. [See the debates on NY vs. LA versions of rap music] The contrast between New York and Los Angeles is drawn even more starkly when questions of political substance and social realism are in question. To illustrate this, I will conclude my presentation with a brief look at another underestimated and peripheralized group of artists, the so-called Scene Painters of Southern California and especially those that worked most closely with Siqueiros as the Bloc of Mural Painters.

I will move quickly through a series of watercolor and oil paintings of Los Angeles to show first, that these "regionalist" scene painters were not only interested in bucolic rural life and raw nature; and second to suggest that this group of artists deserves to be recognized for their perceptive political criticism and (contextualized) social realism on a par with the vastly more well known Ash Can School of New York. In addition, I ask you to note the influence of Siqueiros on most of these works, on technique, form, color, and content (especially political).

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The cityscape represented in these paintings was by the 1930s undoubtedly urban yet somehow visually different from New York, Chicago, and even San Francisco. Los Angeles's urbanism was more horizontally rather than vertically displayed. In comparison to the brawny skyscrapers of Chicago, the deep and dark urban canyons of Manhattan, the densely populated hillscapes of San Francisco, there was a vast sprawling sea of low-rise single family detached houses or garden-like apartment complexes, a paradoxically suburbanized city in which poverty, homelessness, crime, unemployment, racism, sexism, violence, and dark despair were brightly lit by luminous sunshine (even through haze and smog) and startlingly juxtaposed against ocean, mountain, and desert vistas. Even the Black ghetto and the Mexican barrio looked this way, visually as far from Harlem as could be imagined yet not far at all in so many other ways. For those who painted here, the urban scene was brighter, more filled with light and color, more covered with golden tones and glittery surfaces, almost screaming to be illustrated or pictorialized because it looked so different from any other city on earth.

Often the cityscape took on the appearance of a facade, with sharp-edged outlines and flat bright surface, not quite finished in either form or function, very much like a Hollywood stage set or cartoon caricature of urban life. This produced a tangible atmosphere of fantasy and illusion in which Los Angeles became the <u>everywhere city</u>, in which every kind of urban dweller could find a place in the sun; and at the same time the <u>nowhere city</u>, a place unlike any other. So temporary-looking was the cityscape that many artists could realistically work right smack in the

center of one of the largest cities in the US, paint precisely what they saw, and produce what many outsiders "back East" would consider rugged Western landscapes. It is no surprise that many of the Scene Painters became deeply and innovatively involved with Hollywood film-making, and especially with the development of animated cartoons. One specialist on the Scene Painters described them as walking "a fine line between playful infatuation with popular culture and the American dream and a sense of a much darker reality." But rather than seeing the two sides of this "fine line" between utopia and dystopia as distinct and separate worlds, a kind of either-or choice, the best work of this group of urban artists was creatively synthetic, an attempt to find new ways of painting–visually representing–the peculiar cityscape. They did this by combining the extreme contrasts that were so visible – between light and dark, day and night, luminosity and haziness, wealth and poverty, optimism and despair, the dreams of edenic urbanism and the hellish effects of the Depression – not as opposing choices but as inextricably combined in situ.

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These remarks bring my presentation to a close, but also to an opening. In the past three decades, cities all over the world have been passing through a series of far-reaching transformations. I have described these changes as a transition between the Modern Metropolis and what I call, for want of a better term at this time, the Postmetropolis. How has this postmetropolitan transition affected the ways in which the city serves as a vehicle for the visual representation of local culture and society? To what extent has globalization processes erased this visual and symbolic attachment to the local and the regional? What are the positive and negative effects of the Internet and cyberspace on the visual representation of contemporary cities? A whole host of other questions are likely to be opened up by the intensifying encounter between critical art studies and critical studies of cities and regions. Let the encounter flourish.