

Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences (2009) Vol 1, No 2, 136-151

Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities: Urban Marks in *El Raval de Barcelona*, Spain

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Abstract: *Tensions between hegemonic conception of the cities versus everyday perspective motivated me to propose two metaphorical and conceptual level of approaching to the urban phenomena: a.) Zenithal View as a metaphor of power practices in contemporary cities that represent a dissociated reality of the subject who knows and lives, regardless of the geographical or corporal proximity of human beings, and b.) Impure view that metaphorically subverts the idea that inhabitants' look at the cities from the distant perspective of the observer because our life in the cities does perform, participate, incarnate and relational. Following the second approach, in this research I intent to recover the urban practice of derives as aesthetic interposition to public space and as a methodological resource to figure out the tensions between zenithal and impure view in the neighbourhood of El Raval of Barcelona through the language of its visual urban marks.*

1. Urban imaginaries: Zenithal vs. Impure views of the cities:

Some larges contemporary cities have gradually transformed into an ideal of materialization of economic welfare as they have become nodes of goods and consumption; as a matter of fact, cities are not anymore places to live, rather they have turned into products. City-planning development and architectural plans hardly aim at artistic approaches that represented the 20th century utopia, though, they prefer to take part in economic programs and ambitious policies.

As Michel Foucault (1980; 2000) indicates, geographical spaces are the condition of government practices that define power relations; then, modern disciplinary societies are constituted and consolidated by structures of surveillance and control that penetrate into subjectivities. From this perspective, contemporary cities becomes into technological devices that represent a

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

dissociated reality of the subject who knows and lives, regardless of the geographical or corporal proximity of human beings. This set of city-applied devices represents altogether what I have called the "*zenithal view*".

The Zenithal perspective, whereas in television, film or photographic viewpoint, is oriented as a vertical line from the floor, thus, portrays the view of an image from above toward the bottom. Metaphorically and supporting Michel de Certeau's proposal (2000), I intend to define a whole-space perspective of the city by the means of civic and urban regulation devices. In other words, this metaphor portrays a view of the city through the panoptic look that does not include the diversity of its events, but reduces urban phenomenology to a sole image conformed by specific and particular representations.

The *Zenithal view* of the city is indeed, activated by demographic statistics, urban development offices, tourist cartographies, marketing strategies and macro-projects that include technology, economy and politics. On its own, this look depicts an organized and rational representation of the space that discards inhabitants' practices and wanderings along their life routine.

The challenge in social research goes beyond the limits imposed by the *zenithal view* device, and instead, approaches the diversity of urban exchanges and especially, actions that inhabitants produce in *less controlled* spaces, because cities are not merely conformed by buildings, monuments, squares or avenues; instead, it is the people in their wanderings and movements that elude the hegemony of the *zenithal view*. Michel de Certeau comments on this issue:

"Language of power "is urbanized", though, the city relies on contradictory movements compensated and combined regardless of panoptic power. The City becomes a dominant issue of legendary politicians, but it is not anymore a field of planned and controlled operations. Speeches seem to idealize it, meanwhile, tricks and combinations of powers abundantly show no legible identity, with no backgrounds, no

Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities

rational transparency: somehow, impossible to handle."
(2000: 107)

Tensions between the hegemonic conception of the cities and everyday perspective motivated me to propose another conceptual level of approaching cities that I have called the "*impure view*" in contrast to "*zenithal view*". An *impure view*, as my own conception, implies subverting the idea that human beings look at the cities from the distant perspective of the *observer*, with a passive mood to contemplate pure and untouchable beauties that were already created.

I have borrowed the concept of "*contemplation of pure beauties*" from the debates on contemporary aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2006; Fernández Polanco, 2006) because a distant approach from observer to the work of art is analogous to the dichotomy of subject-object in social knowledge.

It is possible to trace cross-roads between questions about Contemporary Art and debates of Critical Social Psychology since Contemporary Art brings up the social role of art to include the audience experience in the work; in a similar way Critical Social Science claims for rupture dichotomies and assumes the subject into the object. In this sense, I would like to point out that our view of social and urban phenomena does perform, participate, incarnate and relational.

"*Impure view*" as a metaphor, suggests approaching the city not just from the subject implication in his/her urban environment, but in re-discovering value of images around the city. From this point of view, relational aesthetics provides some ideas in understanding cities as spaces enriched by aesthetic experiences involving subjects' empathy toward images, colours, smells and sounds.

Bourriaud understands that Contemporary Art approaches to a new aesthetic paradigm that is linked to our social, political and historical understanding of urban spaces and surpasses isolation and lack of communication in

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

societies with no exchange and relationships. *Relational aesthetics* deals with the communication and the encounter produced by the inter-subjective correspondence of the work and the spectator/observer. That is, the work of art is not fully done before our eyes; instead, it is a symbolic and open space to discuss social and political questions.

This notion emphasizes links between art experience and social experience toward image mediation as a non-rational, and yet, emotional language which is within the boundaries of social construction; thus, relational aesthetics redefines the value of “beauty” and “harmony” as part of political and social relations.

At the same time, I have complemented the approach of the *impure view* with Gadamer’s proposal on hermeneutics (1976/2006), in which he considers that aesthetics emerges from our vision of the world and it is reflected in the subject experience; so, the image in aesthetic experience is not a copy itself, it is an interpretation of the spectator. Reading a work of art, -which is not limited to the picture-, is itself, an artistic procedure, because when ‘reading’ the object, senses speak with vague words, and untouchable images and feelings.

“Aesthetic reading” of the social world involves images and their relations with the subject inside a special emotion. An *impure view* of the city opens up scenarios to think about the diversity of images (some persistent, other ephemeral) that inhabitants create in their wanderings around different places of the cities; for instance, images reflected in fashion, wall graffiti, performance arts or street theatre, just to mention a few. Thus, social aesthetics appreciates diversity of urban images as objects of knowledge in permanent exchange and dialogue. Thus cities are not merely studied by architectural monuments or urban sculptures; ornaments in squares, streets and gardens, nor for efficient zenithal urban projects.

2. Derives as aesthetic exploration of the city: Relational spaces and inhabitants' wanderings.

Impure view holds a perception of the city based on relational spaces and inhabitants' wanderings in the urban environment so that sight is placed on the ground level where itinerant paths take place constantly. It does rescue spaces of the city by the experience of the walker as a protagonist of knowledge.

In fact, reality is not fixed and made; it is done and undone as it occurs. Wandering does not write a full and complete cartography of public space, as the *zenithal view* does; however, it does produce different routes set by personal and subjective experiences and relations with the environment. As Careri (2005) indicates, walking is itself a human participation performed physically and symbolically affecting city-life space; indeed, it is itself an aesthetic exploration.

As an aesthetical practice, wandering was a leitmotiv of *avant garde* artistic movements of 20th century engaged in bringing art to the streets, breaking free from museums as "temples" of art. Therefore, this background contributes to a social and knowledge proposal of participation.

In 1921, *Dada*, a cultural movement, proposed urban aesthetics incursions in the most banal places of the city as a way of anti-art. They rejected standards of art portrayed in galleries; instead, they moved into a public and open space perspective of art which escaped from the traditional context and melted with life. *Dadaism* assumed a nomadic approach to art and proposed city as a life presence reflected in paintings and verses. The intention was to rescue everyday life against the aesthetic object, which practically depended on ornamental and public monuments. Thus, their participation in the city was not reflected in maps or cartography, yet in texts, communiqués, pamphlets, verses and manifests.

In 50's, French International Situationists proposed an intervention of cities, not only as aesthetic interposition to public space, but also as an action and political criticism.

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

They pursued new research on aesthetical performance in urban spaces taking up the playful-constructive behaviour as a tool to criticize “middle-class-bourgeoisie” society.

The situationist’s environment left the artist-intimate space for a public space in the city using *derives* (Debord, 1952/2003), inspired by the surrealist and *dadaist* movements from early 20th century. *Derive* is a way of wanderings like Walter Benjamin’s *flanèur*¹ that combined experimentation and constructive new behaviours with a conscious and political analysis of urban environments.

In Situationist *Derives*, art is performed everyday discarding previous public space representations and breaking free artistic performance in the streets. Besides its aesthetic component, *derives* emphasizes its political purpose to claim “*agitation of everyday life*” and bringing out routine as lethargy to transform it into different and novel experiences. Thus, *derives* allow displacement of the *zenithal view* as a representation of normalized city, just as I pointed out before, to inhabiting ordinary city.

“*Agitation of everyday life*” means leaving outstanding and well-known city landmarks to move on to hidden, marginal, forgotten and empty spaces; that is, to take a close look to what appears to be obvious and trivial in our surroundings; to what we look, but do not see and it is socially and politically meaningful.

Derives are held in a visual, imaginary and aesthetic ground; in this sense, images also becomes as objects of social knowledge since they show their pure appearance and their essence, as Michel Maffesoli (1997, 1993) points out; that is, images “shape” empathic societal relations. Although *derives* also be understood as ephemeral actions because they do not pretend permanence in time.

¹ Benjamin takes up the figure of the *flanèur* of 19th century, to draw a personage that wanders in the metropolis “in a vanished time” as citizen, reader and spectator (2005:422), rebelling against modernity and embodying new ways of perception, imaginary and aesthetical practices.

Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities

Derives aim aesthetics not as a finished work, rather, they pretend to open up possibilities of symbolic intervention and understanding urban space, not as data compilation but as an experience itself. Situationists represented *derives* by “*psychogeographical maps*” to illustrate flows of subjective experience. At a result, the cell of the city can be seen fragmented at points, knots or “*streams*” of experiences, which create new spaces to explore and to inhabit.

Metaphorically, as a *ship adrift*, urban *derives* involve the subject in an urban movement with no clear direction. Coordinates are defined by aesthetic-experience degrees and subject’s implication in the space he wanders around; nevertheless, *derives* do not occur by chance or depend on the *laissez-faire* of the cities, since they should introduce some fixed rules in advance. On the other hand, as a practice, *derives* should not be a lonely activity, instead, it should be carry out at least by two researchers to compare and share the experience.

Since researchers do not trusts *derives* as a method to compile data for its poor scientific severity, they are rarely used in current social research. However, critical social researchers recently have begun to gradually use *derives* as a procedure to get in touch with urban space so as to rescue routine activities by a less intrusive tool in common and ordinary context. In Spain this procedure has been taken up for social investigators as *Prekarias a la deriva*, (2004) and *Fractalitats en Investigació Crítica*, (2004) approach to urban and social networks in areas of Madrid and Barcelona. In their proposal, investigators have combined *derives*, research subjects narratives and interviews in a “walk-asking” approach to lately build up a cartography of situations and wanderings along with a situated comprehension of the events in the space. But none of these researches have assumed aesthetics and artistic original French Situationist proposals.

In a way linked to situationist’s aesthetics, David Pinder’s (2005) research aims at urban interventions through art as critical approximation to the spaces, developed between London and New York. Pinder prefers to

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

support psychogeographical exploration, -instead of *derives*-, as a tool of cartography of cultural and social phenomena. Even if both terms (*derives* and psychogeography) come from urban interventions of Situationist movement, selecting one or the other implies methodological and theoretical issues; although it is important to point out that Situationist perceive psychogeography as a process to assign meaning to space wandered by *derives* .

In the research that I am conducting in the neighbourhood of El Raval of Barcelona, I try to maintain the aesthetic purpose of *derives* in understanding urban images of the neighbourhood, approaching them as a methodological resource within the conceptual perspective of *the impure view*.

3. *Derives and Urban marks in Barrio El Raval:*

The purpose of this research in El Raval, Barcelona, Spain, is to study imaginaries created by their inhabitants as symbolic representations of the public space; and also, to respond to rules set by the *zenithal view*; . Thus, I have taken a close look to what I call *urban markings*: graffiti and stencil¹, as expressions of these imaginaries. I intend to go beyond observing and walking around El Raval and delve into *derives* as a sensorial and aesthetic engagement of the space.

Urban markings are not regarded as isolated or fortuitous iconographies on walls; rather, they become signs within a social meaningful framework. Following social imaginary perspective of Castoriadis (2006), these marks provide socially visible movement and a type of cultural geography in Raval, as they create networks of meaning (not objective, but symbolic) between inhabitants and space.

¹ Stencil is a variation of graffiti that is also printed in the walls and doors but the images are elaborate previously in a pattern and then reproduced. The art of the stencil is not just in the picture itself but in the elaboration of the pattern; thus control of the technique results in the quality of the image.

Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities

Layers of painting on a door. Carrer de Sant Pau. El Raval. Photograph by the author

3.1. A brief description of the context:

El Raval in Barcelona is an ancient and historic neighbourhood. Since the 19th century, industrialization and the growth of textile factories have affected the neighbourhood by a strong wave of immigration and the problems derived from it: epidemics, prostitution and delinquency. El Raval was also the root of workers and political movements in the beginning of 20th century that affected Barcelona and became known as *Rosa de Foc*. (Rose of Fire).

Nowadays, the process of El Raval needs to be framed in Barcelona, Spain as a whole. In 1990, as Spain had begun an integration process into the European Community, a great wave of immigration occurred. Barcelona, specifically El Raval, became centre of migratory mobilization, gathering different and diverse culture and language backgrounds merging in a traditionally socially conflictual space.

On the other hand, to grasp El Raval as a social process today, it is important to point out Barcelona's urban renewal prompted by the 1992 Olympic Games, reaffirmed by Universal Cultural Forum, 2004 edition, and then consolidated by the challenge of European globalization. The City Council is leading urban renewal together with private

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

capital initiatives through strategic plans to consolidate Barcelona "*as an enterprising European metropolis with a modern standard of life and that ensures social and economic growth within Globalization and European Community*". (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2006). The outcome results in city planning efforts and new technology implementation that will transform it completely.

In this context, currently El Raval displays a wide range of cohabitation settings, such as: traditional grocery stores next to design shops; recent immigrated population sharing with traditional neighbours, middle-class living in restored houses in front of low-income workers living in poor facilities; traditional Catalan pubs facing leisure night tourist spots. Finally, El Raval depicts an artistic-bohemian tourist environment as opposed to ostracized and in-conflict spaces.

Strong debates against urban transformation projects lead by the City Council and private stockholders, have taken place since they have "reinterpreted" neighbourhood dynamics according to the needs of the market to boost up coexistence of traditional vs. liberal spaces. Thus, it is rejecting community practices and the historically developed conception of life that has existed. In fact, groups and collectives have organized to confront urban changes arguing that the interventions are damaging traditional neighbourhood spaces, creating housing harassment – mobbing- and raising product prices sold at stores that are at risk to be replaced by franchises or fashionable shops.

Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities

Squatter house. Carrer de la reina Amalia. El Raval. Photograph by the author

3.2. Images of El Raval:

As I have pointed out, this research aims at determining how graffiti and stencil became urban representations that seized El Raval's spaces starting dialogues and relations with the citizens and, on the other hand, creating languages that resist the power of *zenithal view*.

Exploring neighbourhood's through *derives* happens as the observer becomes a free wanderer with an emphasis on the observation and appreciation of urban marks. Usually, 'going around' is done in pairs, not necessarily experts, to confront each other with your various aesthetic experiences; yet this is not done unconsciously, purposeless, as surrealists proposed. As a *psycho-geographical* practice, we take a route on a map in which, as we walk, we trace interesting areas or troubled nodes of activity so as to make up cartographies which portray the course of visual marks in El Raval.

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

El Raval is perhaps Barcelona's neighbourhood with a the largest and most vast representation of stencil and graffiti. Though within the neighbourhood cartography, we observe areas in which the marks have been wiped off: precisely, tourist and "in-fashion" areas, where there is also more control and surveillance. As we move ourselves inside the neighbourhood toward "hidden" areas -immigrant's living environments and/or in places where there has alleged mobbing, speculation, etc. - we find greater and richer visual quality reflected in urban marks.



Stencil on a door. *Carrer de Sant Rafael*. El Raval. Photograph by the author

Marks are registered in digital photography, producing graffiti and stencil bank of images. It is particularly outstanding for the ephemeral attribute of this visual display: marks are erased or put on top in a few days; therefore, it can disappear or change original appearance any time.

Urban marks temporality convey a unique social meaning. As ephemeral actions, urban marks can be mobile and contingent just to a space and precise time, disturbing stability and permanence of the public environment of El Raval. In contradiction to ornament and balance of public monuments, graffiti and stencil are born within the rhythm of everyday life and come back giving sense to space through urban language.

Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities

From an *impure view*, urban marks are not just icons that can be interpreted according to pure aesthetic criteria; rather, stencil and graffiti are *forms* that instigate to a *dialogue without words* in El Raval, where the author speaks to an anonymous subject. The *forms* of urban marks implies to the subject-observer inside the images from the beginning of the process, since social forms and individual forms are complemented and constituted mutually (to see George Simmel, 1919/2006; Michel Maffesoli, 1997, 1993 and Pablo Fernández Christlieb, 2004). So the *forms* allow a qualitative comprehension of El Raval's everyday life through the expressions of the social plot that are expressed from the appearance, that is to say, from the images of graffiti and stencil.

The public/observer takes part in an invisible dialogue - the moment he views the drawing-. In other words, urban marks are interpreted as a space of human relation to promote sharing and building up a sense of urban space. For Rosi Braidotti (2000), public spaces, as intervals and nomads, bring art into stage to question what is set up or is established; they are deeply anonymous and at the same time they explode freely into creativity.



Stencil on a door. Carrer de Sant Pacià. El Raval. Photograph by the author

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Spaces full of urban marks represent possible worlds which communicate with wanderers since anonymous authors "speak" through visual means with an anonymous public also. The author handles conceptions of fleeting, forbidden and breaking ideas.

As a nomad who creates ephemeral art, the author is definitely the figurative subject who has given up ideas or desires of establishment; furthermore, he does move within different spaces just like a game between what is settled down and what is not, merging both positions. Thus, ephemeral art in El Raval questions and goes beyond what is obvious, evident and inexorable in public areas. We understand urban marks as a language for political actions proposing settings of confrontation -and if possible, of negotiation- with the *zenithal view* and governmental devices application.

Urban art as a practice has gradually become more relevant worldwide as a criticism to the cities privatization and the inhabitants' passivity, has increased in order to raise a proposal of "democratization" of common and public space considering the social and physical structures of the environment (Pinder, 2005). Thus, public spaces result in places to talk and share about the city in freedom and with no institutional restrictions.

Urban marks in El Raval are the result of activated territorial experience with no control. Because of this, they survive in conflict-hidden spaces of the neighbourhood; that is, places regulated neither by the power nor by the consumer society; spaces of public experience which can prompt outspoken social criticism. Furthermore, with local actions they can confront the consumption purpose city, housing harassment, and *zenithal* urban development which threaten to turn El Raval into a solely private wealthy area.

*Derives and Social Aesthetics in the Cities***References**

Ajuntament de Barcelona (2006) Pla estratègic metropolità de Barcelona. Retrieved May 26, 2007, from http://www.bcn2000.es/ca-es/2_plan_estrategico/antecedentes.aspx

Benjamin, Walter (2005): *Libro de los Pasajes*. Madrid: Akal.

Bourriaud, Nicolás (2006); *Estética relacional*. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo

Careri, Francisco (2005): *Walkscapes. El andar como práctica estética*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili.

Castoriadis, Cornelius (2006): *Una sociedad a la deriva. Entrevistas y debates (1974-1997)*. Buenos Aires: Katz Editores.

Certeau, Michel de (2000). *La invención de lo cotidiano 1. Artes de Hacer*. México: Universidad Iberoamericana.

Debord, Guy (1957/2003): Informe sobre la construcción de situaciones y sobre las condiciones de la organización y la acción de la tendencia situacionista internacional: Documento Fundacional. *El Despertáculo situacionista*. Retrieved April 12, 2006, from <http://www.eldespertador.info/despierita/textdesper/textoN3/situax/informe.htm>

Escobar, María G. (2007): *De la mirada cenital a la mirada impura: La ciudad como experiencia estética*. Athenea Digital - núm. 11: 281-286 <http://psicologiasocial.uab.es/athenea/index.php/atheneaDigital/article/view/396/348>

Fractalitas en Investigació Crítica (2005): *Derivas y Trayectorias Identitarias en el Barrio del Raval*. Retrieved February 15, 2005, from <http://riereta.net/tiki/tiki-index.php?page=derives>.

Foucault, Michel (1980): Preguntas a Michel Foucault sobre la geografía. En M. Foucault. *Microfísica del Poder*, 111-124. Madrid: La Piqueta

Foucault, Michel (2000) La Gubernamentalidad. En M. Foucault: *Espacios de Poder*. Madrid: La Piqueta # 6. Reproducida en *Tareas. Revista del Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, (106), 5-25.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1976/2006): *Estética y Hermenéutica*. Madrid: Neometrópolis.

María Gisela Escobar, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Maffesoli, Michel (1997) *Elogio de la razón sensible: una visión intuitiva del mundo contemporáneo*, Barcelona: Paidós.

Maffesoli, Michel (1993) *El Conocimiento Ordinario. Compendio de Sociología*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Pinder, David (2007) Arts of urban exploration. *Cultural Geographies*, 12: 383-411. Retrieved September 6, 2007 from EBSCOhost database.

Precarias a la deriva (2004): *A la deriva por los circuitos de la precariedad femenina*. Madrid: Traficantes de sueños.

Simmel, Georg (1910/2006). How is Society Possible? *American Journal of Sociology*, 16. Retrieved May 09, 2006 from <http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/simmel/society>.