

Street Discourse: A Visual Essay on Urban Signification

By Luc Pauwels

The contemporary metropolis is the site where vast numbers of people live their lives in a forced or chosen context of collectivity, but one that allows for individuality and even loneliness (often stronger felt in a crowd). To many the metropolis is a site of limitless opportunity, of continual change and growth, a utopian place, a site of constant renewal. However in actual fact in often turns into a dystopia, a boulevard of broken dreams. For there is no place where everyone's desires can be met and there is no agreed upon state of completion of the utopian project. Cities constitute a constant "work in progress" of different actors with competing agenda's. Cities are the dynamic result of prior necessities and choices and present day re-articulations and revisions of those. Thus cities invariably testify of past dreams and options taken which amalgamate with present projects that reconstitute and reclaim a territory partially occupied by former social, cultural economic, political and religious forces. Some artifacts of the past are simply torn down and replaced but many remain and are re-imbued or re-infused with new meanings, or at the least reframed as a materialized memory of past events and ways of living.

Thus the present inscribes itself on the past, layer after layer, and in an asynchronous fashion. In this respect the city can be thought of as a palimpsest which is constantly being rewritten, repainted, and re-populated by hurried crowds with a purpose.

The day-to-day metabolism of the city may be observed through its artifacts which are as much materializations of norms and values and functions as objects that are constantly being uploaded with new meanings, or redefined or re-appropriated to fulfill new functions. But the social fabric also becomes apparent through routine behavior, incidents, major events and the various signs and symptoms of how the city is "used".

The city can be looked upon as a huge, out of control, syntagma, a combination of numerous paradigmatic choices made by many semi-independent actors, with different, often conflicting interests. Some signs have lost their meaning but remain to send their obsolete message (to buy a no longer existing product of an out of market manufacturer). These remnants of the past together with the uncontrolled combination of numerous signs that are competing for attention create a visual data overload and "noise" that may prove highly confusing, while at the same time they may become a source of entertainment for the attentive observer.

Cities are genuine hubs of cultural expression and unusually rich exponents of visual culture. The ongoing process of urbanisation goes hand in hand with a growing diversity of functions and people. Urban (visual) cultures emerge from human imagination, ambitions and desires, numerous intentional and unintentional choices, concerted and rival actions. Buildings, streets, squares, parks, monuments, shopping malls and other urban artefacts – the new, the long-established or those that barely survive – eloquently testify to past and present ways of thinking and doing, and together with the multi-formed activities of its inhabitants and visitors constitute the complex human and material fabric of the city.

Cities serve numerous practical, functional, symbolic, ritual and ideological ends. Many of which have an undeniable visual dimension. Therefore the city can be literally looked at from different angles that often refer to different orders of signification: the use of space, the types, means and degree of control, mobility, fashion, cultural diversity, entertainment, tourism, commerce, personal, interpersonal and group behaviour, the public and the private sphere. Much of this materializes in numerous artefacts and behaviours. Cities are both emanations, and reproducers, of power and control. They are sites of planning, control and conformism. Yet at the same time the urban context is a token and a breeding ground for resistance, for loss of control, for renewal, for deliverance. These multiple intermeshing discourses – the historic, the political, the social, the multicultural, the commercial, the religious etc. – provide the city its unpredictable, multilayered, never fully graspable, character. Therefore cities constitute at once a battle field for conflicting interests, a playground of ideas and a theatre for our senses, orchestrated by different agents with different temporal referents and audiences in mind.

Reframing the City

Sociology and photography represent distinct "ways of looking" at society. But they are both about "making the familiar strange", about questioning the seemingly obvious and "reframing" it (as social facts or processes or visual statements). Theories tend to work like looking glasses or lenses with their typical distortions and aberrations, and theory driven observations and recordings may ultimately embody a true merger of the photographic with the sociological.

In an effort to read the plethora of signs, or to document and understand the awkward melting pot of messages that bombard the city dweller, photographers and visual researchers often record, in a more or less systematic manner, the various aspects of urban visual culture. Alternatively, they may focus on what is strange or edifying in its own right, or they may try to metaphorically reinforce, clarify, amplify or even try to twist (in a Situationist-like "détournement") the possible meanings of the "ante-photographic" event through the expressive choice of a

particular vantage point or moment, or by skillfully employing one of the many but often unnoticed parameters or signifiers of the representational apparatus (framing, optical effects, tonality, texture). The latter approach may yield new ways of looking, which may help to reveal and explore the borderlines of that which is inexplicable or even hard to imagine.

Photographers and social scientists are often torn between being a detached (sometimes cynical) observer/reporter and a person truly engaged and involved with the field of observation. They are also pulled between some expression of realism (the default expectation of photography) and the expression of a unique view or one that transcends the purely physical nature of the depicted (the default urge of an artist or a theoretician). However both reveal the city as a structure and an experience, and these two aspects do not necessarily exclude one another.

These brief comments and the accompanying photographs which make up this *visual essay* reflect some expressions of the hybrid culture of big cities. They are not only a visual account of the struggle between the past and the present but also between different societal functions and centers of power: economic; social, cultural, political, aesthetic, ecological. They are more than an objective documentation of those visual artifacts and processes but also an effort to remould the urban reality without touching it. The present visual essay seeks to present metonyms and metaphors for those human interactions that have left their marks deliberately or inadvertently in the urban context.



THE URBAN PANOPTICON / Los Angeles, USA



HITCHCOCK MEETS MCDONALD'S / Los Angeles, USA



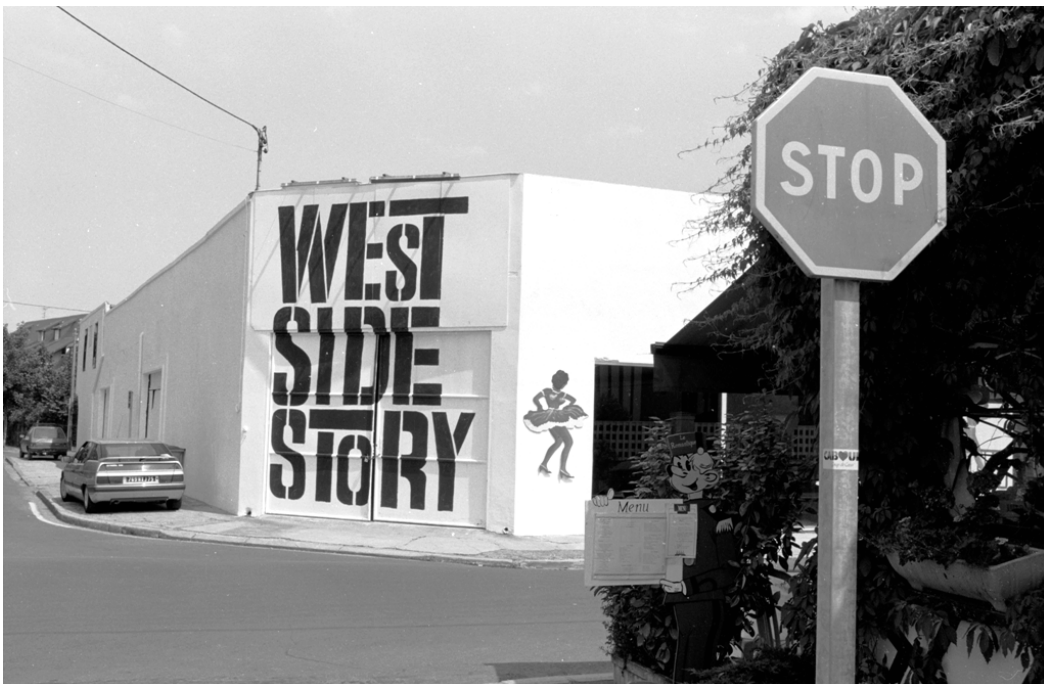
THE RIGHT WAY / Minneapolis, USA



CRACKED IDEALS / Antwerp, Belgium



FRAMING CLASS / Southampton, UK



CROSSROAD OF DISCOURSES / Cabourg, France



PAST INTO THE PRESENT / Holocaust Monument, Boston, USA



URBAN JUNGLE / Potsdam, Germany



MATTERS OF THE HEART / San Francisco, USA



REIMAGED – REVIEWED / San Francisco, USA



COMMUTING / New York, USA



UPTOWN – DOWNTOWN / San Francisco, USA



UPWARD MOBILITY / New Orleans, USA



SILENT METROPOLIS / New Orleans, USA

All photographs by Luc Pauwels.