

Visual Signs and Cultural Analysis

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Nonverbal manifestations by a person or a group of people towards elements in a city conveys a message. It is worth the effort to recognize the type of messages being communicated, their relevance, and whether they are related to a larger social movement – perhaps reflecting a behavioral shift or trend – because they may contain useful information to government agencies, companies, and the society at large.

In this article, I discuss how the visual signs present in a territory and cultural analyses are related. We may consider that “territory is a concept generated by people organizing space for their own aims” (GOTTMANN 1975:1). Visual signs are studied in the field of semiotics, which seeks to understand the “relationship between the sign and the object or signifier and signified” (SMITH 2011:229), using visual code (image, painting, etc.) to send a message that, importantly, may “be hidden or largely unnoticed, even by the people using the code” (SMITH 2011:236). Culture is all human being manifestations that occur through habits, values and attitudes – “the way of life of a particular people living together in one place” (EAGLETON 2000:112).

The same sign might have multiple meanings depending on the context in which it is embedded. As Maria Isabel Castro states, “A careful look at the signs in different parts of the world allows us to deduce that they are not always universally or directly interpretable and that, on many occasions, they require knowledge of the cultural context in which they are located” (CASTRO 2008:89). This in itself sets the close connection between signs

and context. Street art, for example, charged with visual signs, expresses the context in which is embedded, but also intervene in the territory and its culture.

An example is the Ana Botella Crew case, a movement that started in Spain in 2009: a template with the ABC signature was spread collaboratively and rhetorically through the internet, giving anyone access to download it. Spontaneously, people brought the template out into the streets (see Luis Menor for more on this case). In this case, the current increase of collaborative practices in Spain reflected in the artistic intervention.





Source: Flickr

Through this example we see that visual signs and the local or tribal culture feed one another, establishing the following cycle: the visual signs in a territory represent and broadcast (connotatively or denotatively) their cultural context, and at the same time are an important elements that set the culture itself, constituting an important source of analysis.



References

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