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Ways of seeing, ways of making seen

Visual representations in urban landscapes

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Introduction

Ways of seeing, ways of making seen

The visual has long established itself as part of social life – through literacy, art, cinema, photography, etc.. Over the history, visual communication has become “crucial in the domains of public communication” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 3), both as a means of representation and as a practice. Different groups and individual social actors use visual strategies to indicate their political and ideological positions rooted in discourses which, in their turn, seek to legitimize certain practices by providing preferred ways of seeing and making things (in)visible. Being situated in power relations, as well as based on inequalities, discourse and identities coexist and compete for representation. In this sense, each and every instance of visual communication – be it a piece of graffiti on a wall, a banner in an urban protest or political campaign, or even a shop or a street sign – performs ideologies as people and collectives who produce them make choices.

Over the years, ways of knowledge and visual meaning-making have been described and analysed by researchers from different areas of social sciences and humanities. Contributors to this volume took part in one of the panels within the 2nd International Symposium of the International Association of Discourse and Society Studies, jointly organised by the Centre for Social Studies and the School of Humanities of the University of Coimbra in June 2015 (EDiSo, June 18-20). As they focused on discourses in public space, the panel participants examined how visual choices pointed to particular interpretations of social experience, constructed specific views of the world, while the space itself was being construed and transformed within those visual discourses. The panel aimed to describe how *regimes of truth* (Foucault, 1979) about issues on the current political agenda (e.g., migration, multiculturalism, public policies, governmentality, etc.) are being formulated and negotiated through visuality in public spaces.

The articles in this volume have emerged in an interdisciplinary space in-between sociology, sociolinguistics, visual anthropology, political science and cultural studies. Despite coming from the different frameworks, the contributors share a common interest in viewing urban landscapes as public spaces that are socially produced, ideology-laden (Lefebvre 1974) and interlinked with history (Soja, 1996). As they adopt the method of linguistic landscape, Zas Varela and Prego Vázquez look at the multilingual ecology of the small town of Arteixo, in Galicia, shaped by the local and global scales of economic power and prestige. Torkington examines the semiotic regimes of visibility that shape up the “placeidentity” of the Vilamoura area in Portugal, whereas Solovova, Matos and Nolasco explore the makings of Coimbra as a site of World Heritage – yet simultaneously – a city of university tradition, and home to different social movements’ semiotic action. Being part and parcel of social inequalities, visual art is never created for art’s sake. While addressing the aesthetic dimension of graffiti, Moreira focuses on its political effect of democratizing access to art. In Canelo’s analysis, the resistant and critical action of Barbara Kruger’s visual art carves out an agentive place for women in the society of consumption. New meanings and symbols for M15 social movement grow out of the visual strategies of urban protest examined by Méndez Guerrero. Finally, Dagatti and Kratje look into the types of identities and social imagination created for political forces through visual discourses.

Across this volume, public space is viewed as a place of tension and political action through the visual communication. In this place, both the context and the visual are elements in the social landscape that collaborate in shaping up identities and (un)masking certain representations – ways of discursive creation, ways of seeing, ways of making seen.

Carlos Nolasco, Ana Raquel Matos and Olga Solovova

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