

Objects, Aesthetic, and Public Space Experience: An Exploration of the Informal Work in Bogotá's Metropolitan Area

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Abstract

Informal work is a common phenomenon in Latin America, due to social problems like unemployment, migration (Venezuelan diaspora), and poverty. It's frequent to find it in two municipalities located in Bogotá's metropolitan area: Funza and Mosquera. Some people use the public space to sell goods and services, to provide artistic shows, or to circulate with different selling artifacts across the street. This has an impact on the phenomenological and aesthetic experience of the city.

This article studies the role of informal work objects in the aesthetic experience and the public space meaning in those places. The theoretical foundation is based on a materialistic and pragmatic semiotic approach, it is grounded mainly on the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and Actor-network theory. Through that academic lens, public space is relational space, made of chains of interactions between humans and not humans. It also has a critical approach, based on the Walter Benjamin's perspectives of the city.

A descriptive methodology is applied here. It is located in the hermeneutical paradigm, close to the ethnographical method. Some of the instruments used are cartographies, participant observation, visual analysis procedures and in-depth interviews.

Keywords: *urban communication, aesthetics, informal working, Semeiotic, Actor Network Theory.*

Introduction

The informal economy in Colombia has been a very common social and economic phenomenon. High unemployment rates, social inequality, corruption, lack of access to work opportunities, and Venezuelan migration have challenged social resilience and stimulated people's creativity to achieve their subsistence. It is usual to find informal self-employment in public spaces with people selling goods and services, and people doing artistic presentations in the street.

This phenomenon has a great impact on the aesthetic perception of the street, for instance, in urban landscape, in pedestrian walking, and in the phenomenological feeling of the place (sounds and odors, among others). This research analyses the role of objects in this urban experience from a materialistic and pragmatic semiotic perspective. The foundational theory of the analysis comes from the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce, Actor-Network Theory and the Critical Theory of Walter Benjamin. In this way, this

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research doesn't study the policy or the economical aspect of this phenomenon, as it is usually studied (Martínez et. al, 2018). On the contrary, it focuses on how urban space is experienced through objects, and how urban assemblages are done in a specific street.

This study has been made in two municipalities of Bogotá's metropolitan area: Funza and Mosquera. The research is focused on the urban corridor that links those towns, where the street sales phenomenon mostly occurs. Some qualitative methodologies have been used for this research, such as in-depth interviews, cartographies, and participant observation. As well as, visual analysis procedures to understand the data.

This article has been divided in four sections. The first part covers a thick description of the public space studied. The second explains the theoretical foundations. In the third part, the information on mobility notes is covered. And, in the fourth section, you can find the conclusion.

Mosquera, Funza and the Third Avenue

Mosquera and Funza are two municipalities located in Bogotá's metropolitan area. Both are in conurbation between them, and both have rural, industrial and urban space in their territories. They have grown a lot for the last 10 years.

Third - Thirteenth Avenue

This avenue connects those two municipalities. According to the nomenclature, it is the third street in Mosquera and the same road is the thirteenth street in Funza. This was a path that was created many years ago by the transit of people from the Main Park of Funza to the Train Station in Mosquera. With the passing of the time, merchants saw the potential of the place street selling.

Despite the fact that Mosquera's Train Station has not been in operation for decades, this corridor became a place that has a continuous circulation of people and vehicles all day long. Nowadays, it has formal and informal commerce, and it is always occupied. The main analysis goes from Funza's main park to Ecoplaza's mall in Mosquera. It's around 1.1km in distance.

In the next section, you will find a thick description of the street as it is experienced in everyday life.

Thick description

The day begins at 5:30 a.m., thousands of people move along this corridor, walking over the sidewalks or riding their bicycles at a side of the road. Many of them are parents taking their children to school, adolescents going to middle and high school, or employers going to work.

Buses drive frantically through the road going to different destinations: from Funza to Mosquera and vice versa, to Bogotá, Madrid, and Soacha. At this time, there are no informal vendors occupying the space.

The road becomes congested by cyclists at 6:30 a.m. They ride parsimoniously in the middle of the route, drinking coffee and talking among them. Some car drivers whistle and others get desperate because of the slow traffic; motorcycles zigzag among other vehicles. While Informal vendors start arriving at the place. They walk with their little carts and products through the sidewalks, selling coffee or herbal tea.

This space settles a little after 8 a.m. At 9:00 a.m., ice cream vendors move to Funza's main park to wait there for clients. Their uniforms are cheap clothings with logos of Colombian companies such as Cream Helado or Bonice. Most of them are elder or people with disabilities.

This corridor has commercial premises on both sides. Coffee and herbal tea peddlers go from place to place selling warm drinks. Some use thermos and others work with made-

up stoves. This goes on all day, until 9 p.m., approximately. Around 11:30 a.m., people drive hybrid vehicles made of bikes and wheelbarrows, selling bottles of pure milk or yogurt. There are also avocado and banana trucks installed in the public space until noon.

The crowd returns from 12:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., so street hawkers organize themselves to catch as many clients as possible. Ice cream and candies vendors go to schools, they share out the most transited and best places to sell. From that time, you can find chunchullo (small intestine of the cow, it is a Colombian traditional food) in an important corner of the corridor. The smell fills the street and there is a large line of people queuing up to eat some of it.

In the afternoon, you can find different types of commodities in the place, ranging from clothes and accessories like t-shirts, socks, scarfs, gloves and shoelaces; food and snacks such as fruit, arequipe (sugar traditional candy), guava candies, hamburgers, arepas (typical corn preparation) among many other products; kitchen utensils; dressing and beauty accessories; and even flash drives with prerecorded music. This happens between 5:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., the street is full of sales. Peddlers start leaving the place at 8:00 p.m., merchants throw away the garbage on the sidewalks and waste collectors start to arrive.

Throughout the day, vendors from commercial premises exhibit their merchandise on the street, transforming the street into a commercial shop-window. For instance, the lady who sells arepas puts the roasting iron on the sidewalk and the guy who sells shoes places them on the wall outside of the building.

From time to time, the municipal mayor's office establishes some stands for informal vendors. They usually sell handicrafts, traditional desserts and candies, hippie clothes, and kitchen utensils.



Figure 1. Multitude on weekend

As you can see in the description above, the public space changes depending on public schedule. It is also modified depending on the hour, the day of the week, the month, and on social and commercial calendars. On weekends, streets are filled with colors, sounds, and smells. Walking there on Saturday or Sunday is a little more difficult than in the other days; because, in those days, you find thousands of people contemplating the urban landscape, having juice or ice cream and glancing at the products on sale. In addition to the items found on the week, during the weekend you can find more and more varied items like toys, more clothes, water floats, paraphernalia items, fast food, desserts, juices, and wheelbarrows full of different types of fruits like strawberries, banana, chontaduro (an exotic fruit of the Pacific), mango, and others, depending on the season. You can also encounter artistic shows such as dancing, singing or storytelling.

The street appearance fluctuates according to the time of the year. It has a specific appearance in mother's day, and a different one in Christmas, the same happens during the worldwide cup or in Easter.

The Public space is occupied in various ways, some peddlers move along the corridor announcing their products, and some vendors get established in a piece of the sidewalk. Those who are moving use bikes, motorcycles, wheelbarrows or just walk with wheel luggage. Those who stay at a certain place put blankets on the floor, or use tables, cars or trucks to carry their products.

Theoretical Foundations

Charles Sanders Peirce Philosophy

The semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce is intimately connected to his metaphysics and his phenomenology. This philosopher creates three categories of being in which everything exists: firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Although he never talked about urban semiotics and much less about communication, this work will analyze these three categories, his notion of sign and the process of semiosis in the phenomenon studied at the Mosquera-Funza corridor.

Peirce defines those categories as follows (Peirce, 1977):

Firstness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, positively and without reference to anything else.

Secondness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, with respect to a second but regardless of any third.

Thirdness is the mode of being of that which is such as it is, in bringing a second and third into relation to each other.

Although it is not easy to understand them in terms of Peirce words, we could say that firstness is the pure impression without it being analyzed, without reference to something else, for example, the quality of the red without being associated with any object of that color. In relation to the urban space, we could think about the sensations or feelings that we have there, but without being associated with anything. For example, the sensation of familiarity with space, or the feeling of discomfort at some footways.

Secondness is the bodily and material sensation that something else exists there, the awareness of brute action. Peirce mentions that in this category the effort is felt from the experience. For instance, when you hit your little toe with the corner of the bed. In the case that we are analyzing, we could think about the sensation of crashing into the crowd. Someone is glancing at the urban landscape and, suddenly, crashes with a multitude of people traveling in the place.

Finally, thirdness is the place where ideas and thinking are generated. While brute action is in secondness, any mental action implies thirdness (Peirce, 1904). Signs and thoughts are generated there. Extrapolating it to the case of the urban space, we could say that the entire Funza - Mosquera corridor is a third. It promotes relationships between signs and networks of relations; it has signs that generate thoughts, actions, habits, and behaviors; it allows mediation between signs, objects, spaces and times; and, it allows the appropriation of the unknown (strange or foreign) and the known to give rise to something new.

To clarify this is important to understand his conception of the sign. It is the condition of possibility of thought and it belongs to the category of thirdness. "By a sign, I mean anything which conveys any definite notion of an object in any way, as such conveyors of

thought are familiarly known to us" (CP, 1540). It is made up of three elements: ground, object, and interpretant.

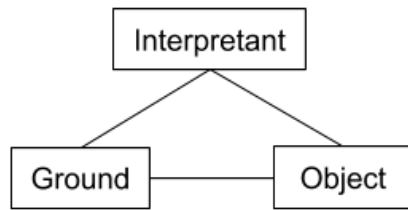


Figure 2. Peirce Sign

The ground is the quality or respect in which the object is represented. The object is the correlate; it can be material or mental. And, the Interpretant is the mind that links the ground and the object, in order to generate meaning. Every knowledge is partial because signs only represent objects in a particular aspect.

If we think about the phenomenon of informal sales in the public space, we can see, for example, the sign of cotton candy.

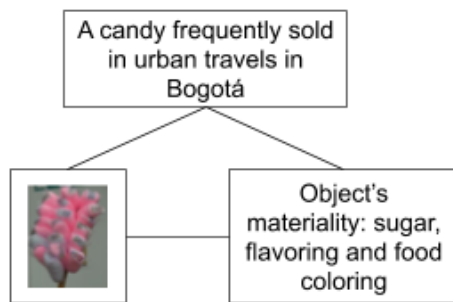


Figure 3. Cotton Candy as a sign

In order for something to count as a sign, it must have four formal conditions (Liska, 1996, p.18):

1. The sign must have a correlation; it has to represent an object or something different from itself. This is the representative condition.
2. The sign must represent that object in a specific way, its ground. This might be called the presentative condition.
3. The relationship between the object and the representation must be made by an interpretant, and the possibility must be opened to the creation of a new sign. A sign must be able to produce an interpretant, potentially or actually. This is the interpretant condition.
4. This is a triadic relationship and each one of the components has a sense in the interrelation with the others.

Semiosis is the process of generating the sign. It develops in three phases: representation, determination, and mediation. The first happens when the sign represents a correlate, the object. The second takes place because the sign is constrained by the object it represents. And, the third is the ability to generate new signs. Semiosis can occur infinitely

Even though all of these phases are necessary for sign formation, sometimes one of them is more notorious than the others. Going back to the street vending phenomenon, we can see the mediation of signs in Colombian traditional food, which reminds people of this country, their childhood or the cultural heritage materialized in gastronomy. The determination is seen in the pencil portraits that artists make in the street, in this case, the

person constrains the artwork. And, representations can be seen in the small souvenirs of churches or places of Colombia.

There are a lot of signs on the street. Many of them are related to Colombia's daily life because they show how people live in this country and what kind of utensils they use. For example, there are kitchen accessories, food, clothes, fashion accessories, and music flash drives. There are objects that represent religious beliefs like crosses, Jesus Pictures or prayer posters. There are objects that remind the past like Chocula, the handmade horses' carousel, wicker baskets, or the traditional candy fair in the middle of the urban corridor. To finish, you can also find famous singers or actors' portraits, table games, spinners, slimes, and other things related to influencers. These last things have reference to the global culture.

Actor-Network Theory

As Daston (2010) points out, objects are not inert, they constantly change and they have biographies. "They obtain their high ontological status by producing results, implications, surprises, connections, manipulations, explanations, and applications" (Daston in Jasanoff, 2014, p.21). Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Social Studies of Science could help us think about the street vending phenomenon by analyzing the ontological and epistemological problems when considering the object in Urban Space. We can think of the object in three ways: its role in the understanding of the street, or its impact on the aesthetic experience of citizens; the affirmation of multiple ontologies and networks between humans and non-humans; and topologies and movements in which they take form.

Bruno Latour's, from his ANT, studies the role of Non-Humans in the social world as actants that offer the possibility of holding society together (cf. Latour, 1998, p. 109). According to him, we face neither objects, nor social relations in themselves, but we face associations of human (H) and non-human (NH), where both have agency. There is an assembly between them in which there is a dislocation of the action, it "is taken, borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated" (Latour, 2005 p.46) by these agents. The social is the result of material and concrete interactions. And, "society and technology are not two ontologically distinct entities, but rather phases of the same essential action" (cf. Latour, 1998, p. 139).

In this ontology, human and non-human entities have no substantial or essential properties, beyond their role in networks (cf. Vaccari, A., 2008, p. 190). This is how unicorns, bold kings of France, chromosomes, technological utopias, children's drawings, molecules, and in general, all things have the degree of realism delineated by their networks. In order to define the truth, the reality, the coherence or the absurdity of a sentence, it is not necessary to abandon the networks (cf. Latour, 1998, p. 138). Therefore, the explanations given in this theory are internalist, in the sense that they arise from the topography of specific networks. The role of the ANT researcher is to describe and analyze them, and there is no fixed point to start.

If we study a statement or an innovation, we will see how actants form chains to determine associations and substitutions that set the course of it. This depends on whether actors mobilize or reject the proposal, accepting their program or generating anti-programs. For example, traffic rules and signs are designed for citizens to have the right driving behavior. But, as many people drive faster than the permitted limits, the urban policy created speed reducers. These are black rubber bodies across the road with yellow lines of reflective color. These objects are actants that make people drive slower, they force them to reduce their speed.

Thus, there is no longer a single passive object in the middle, waiting to be seen. Instead, objects come into being—and disappear—with the practices in which they are manipulated. And, since the object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to

another, reality multiplies. Ontologies are born, sustained, created, or died daily in common and everyday socio-material practices (Mol, A., 2002, p.5-6). Knowledge is not seen from the episteme (from the intellectual conditions by which we learn), nor it is related to the question about how we find the truth; it is rather a matter of manipulation.

Multiple realities coexist through the relationships between people and objects. In that sense, we can think about how multiple realities coexist in the same corridor. Although this street changes from time to time, and that generates different constellations (space configurations), and different chains of humans and non-humans; this coexistence occurs in the very same place.

We can understand space as overlapping layers of traces, objects, and material conditions, that are made from institutions, people, and mayor's office decisions. Architecture, the use of the land, the size of the roads and the footpaths are signs of past generations' determinations. All of them coexist and give a special configuration to the urban space. Thus, for example, in the same corridor houses with different architectural styles are located, a colonial-style house is next to a brick building. Or Indoor merchant's commodities and informal vending products share the same urban passage.

Something similar occurs to the constellation of objects. Such as it was explained In the thick description above, and how the street changes depending on the time. So groups, or constellations, of objects appear in specific hours of the day, days of the week or times in the year. For instance, products that appear on weekends are almost always the same and they are located in the same spots in the street. Besides, and as mentioned those are different than the goods that you can find from Monday to Friday.



Figure 4. Urban Assemblages

Vendors create object's assemblages to transport their products. For example, they create bike-stove devices to cook hamburgers, or they ride modified motorcycles with adapted space to sell coffee, cigarettes, and other groceries. In that sense, street vending practices are creating new ontologies. It is very interesting to watch people's creativity to survive. Most of their adaptations are easy to carry and quick to pack and take off, which is a strategy to elude the informal vending prohibition policy. When the police arrive, they take their things and run out of the place.

In fact, other ontologies are made in the hybrid man-machine objects, like man-bikes, man-motorcycle or man-wheelbarrows. It seems that the composition between the human and the equipment creates a special ontological status that is irreducible to its parts.



Figure 5. Man-machine assemblage

Topologies

John Law and Annemarie Mol figure out four spatial characteristics on the production of science and technology, those involve locality and movement (Law & Mol, 2001, p. 612). We can apply them to the study of street vendors in the public space.

Region. It works with the Euclidean movement, it has three-dimensional coordinates. In this case, the urban object is mobile. Street vendors bring their commodities from other places, from other municipalities, and from Bogotá. Besides, there is a displacement of objects in public space. For example, coffee and herbal tea peddlers have a displacement along the way all day long.

Networks. Objects are interconnected in a network. “Everything stays in place: the relations are sustained in a stable manner” (Law and Mol, 2001, p. 612). This is what is called the constellation of objects. In terms of the authors, the object is an immutable mobile. The street has special nodes for certain things. For example, you can find socks at one special point in the street.

Fluidity. Objects are interconnected in a network, but they change gradually depending on the context, or on the necessity. The object, in this case, is a mutable object. The public space changes from time to time, but it still maintains its main characteristics. With the man-machine categorization, you can see how the materiality changes depending on the necessity of the vendor.

Fire. This topology is made of discontinuity. There is a flickering relation between presence and absence. There is a link between a single present presence and some multiple absence others (Law and Mol, 2001, p. 616). Things make references to objects, spaces or times that are absent. For example, you can find “cholaos” in the street, which is a typical and well known drink from another department of Colombia, El Valle del Cauca.

Aesthetics from Walter Benjamin

In Walter Benjamin's philosophy, the object was a significant source of knowledge for history. This philosopher refused the concept of timeless truth, he said that the collective's truth resides in objects, in a dialectical way. Thus panoramas, passages, constructions, furniture, and mirrors, among others, can give important information about a time of history, about the socio-economic and cultural conditions of a collective, about its daily life, or about its shared dreams. As well as, objects have traces from the past and hints of the future.

No statement is more suited to evoke that state of unrest which constitutes the beginning of any contemplation of history that has the right to call itself dialectical. This state of unrest refers to the demand on the researcher to abandon the tranquil contemplative attitude toward the object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in

which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself in precisely this present (Benjamin & Tarnowski, 1975, p. 28)

In that way, urban objects contain meanings and practices from the past and hints of the future. Many of these objects are related to tradition, beliefs or memories; and some of them are related to collective desires and dreams. The history researcher must approach the object in a dialectical way, trying to understand its tensions and forces.

However, sometimes, there is not an object as a whole, instead of that, there is a remainder of it. It comes in the form of rags, footprints, ruins, corpses, ghosts, proverbs, or allegories. They are like the trace and remnant of the past.

Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them (N1a 8).

These remainders can be seen in four ways (Benjamin in Otálvaro, 2012, p. 21)

1. As something which occupies the place of the thing. This is the case of ghosts, fingerprints or proverbs.
2. As something which complements the experience. They are the memory of the experience that no longer exists.
3. As something that has emptied of its old meaning and acquired new subjective meanings
4. As a footprint of living.

Some mobility notes

In this section, there are some annotations about the mobility of people and objects on the street. It is not related to the number of pedestrians or vehicles in the public thoroughfare. But, it is about how urban space is constantly modified and mobilized.

There is a mobile inhabiting space, which occurs at different levels:

1. There are rhythms and routines of the urban corridor. They are related to people's habits. Crowds come at the same hour each week and vendors know it. They take advantage of that and have strategies to catch more clients. Some peddlers walk along the street all day long.
2. There are stationary and street vendors, but even they have mobility depending on the time.
3. This corridor is frequently modified. Even buildings seem to be mobilized, they dress up for the epoch: Christmas, Easter, Halloween, etc. But the modification is also carried out by the construction or the demolition of buildings. Colonial houses have been changed by new brick or glass buildings. Those are used to sell low price commodities, frequently exported from Asia.

Conclusions

Even though all of these thinkers offer us different perspectives on objects, each one of them gives us a different side to look at the phenomenon. Actor-Network theory from Annemarie Mol, Bruno Latour and Jhon Law let us think the practices related to objects; Charles Sanders Peirce let us know them as signs that create significations, beliefs and behaviors in the community; and, Benjamin explains us to take the object as a source of knowledge for history.

The processes of significance show us what the street is like in Colombian culture, some socio-economic difficulties, the resilience and the creativity of the people of this country. The street is established as a point of connection, of significance and as an example of what happens in many urban spaces in Colombia where informality is present. Practices show us how urban assemblages are made from humans and non-humans, and how objects are inserted in the socio-cultural structure of the place. And materialist thinking inspires us to observe different times contain in objects.

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