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THE VISUALITY OF SCENES: URBAN CULTURES AND VISUAL SCENESCAPES

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This issue of *Imaginations* stages a set of encounters between the notion of “scene” as employed in studies of the arrangements of cultural life and a variety of theoretical developments dealing centrally with the status of the visual. Few of the current writings on cultural scenes have engaged with work in visual studies or, indeed, addressed the visual properties of scenes. This lack of interest is surprising given the visual dimension at the heart of the etymology of scene. However, our aim here is not to assert the primacy of visuality in scenes, as if, having lost some of its original associations, the scene must re-establish its visuality in the name of an etymological fundamentalism. Nevertheless, an engagement of scene theory with visual studies is particularly pertinent given the ascendant attention to both scene and visuality in contemporary cultural studies.

The concept of scene has a complex history within treatments of urban culture. Used casually for decades to describe any loosely organized aggregate of cultural activities, the concept has received more formal development in recent years in such fields as popular music studies (Shank; Straw), contemporary art criticism (Gielen), and the sociology of urban amenities (Silver et al.). Indeed, we can identify the ascendancy, in recent years, of a concept called “scene thinking” (Woo, et al.). This development has been roughly synchronous with the movement of visuality toward the centre of cultural analysis. Beginning in the late 1980s, visuality was given

renewed conceptual treatment in art history (Foster), then adopted more widely within newly named fields such as visual studies (Mirzoeff, “Invisible Empire”) and cultural geography (Tolia-Kelly and Rose). From a set of interdisciplinary vantage points, visual studies have analyzed seeing and being seen as social facts, enmeshed in power relations and culturally specific visual orders.

The possible convergences of scene theory and visual studies may already be glimpsed in a great deal of recent scholarship on the culture of cities. Scenes are increasingly understood not merely as the organizational forms that gather around styles of cultural expression but also as bound up with the sensory textures of urban life. These textures are not only visual, of course, but, in the intersensorial economies of urban life, cultural forms such as music and food come to occupy the realm of the visual, taking their place within the *scenescapes* of contemporary cities. Exploring the visual dimensions of scenes also allows us to situate the analysis of music and other cultural forms in relation to what has been diagnosed as a “visual turn” (Dalle Vacche) within cultural analysis. These turns have brought with them a host of aesthetic, social, and political questions that can only benefit the analysis of cultural forms. By formulating new ways to articulate the notions of visuality and scene, this special issue aims to contribute to a broader analysis of culture and sociality in the urban public sphere.

1. Urban Visuality

1.1 Visuality and the Visual Turn

The term *visuality* has been the object of renewed development and systematization since the late 1980s. While its use extends as far back as the 19th century and beyond, it was brought to the fore by the collective book *Vision and Visuality* edited by Hal Foster in 1988. With backgrounds in history, art history, art criticism, and psychoanalysis, the contributors to this volume advanced the notion of *visuality* as central to an analysis of seeing and being seen as socio-cultural constructs. They proposed to examine “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein” (Foster ix). From this perspective, *visuality* is considered not as the sum of all images but as a broader set of visual forms and practices, contextualized in historical and cultural configurations, entangled in power relations, and co-constitutive of social orders. Indeed, Sumathi Ramaswamy conceives of the visual realm as “world-making and world-disclosing, rather than merely world-mirroring” (12). Transcending the notion of image as representation, the study of *visuality* moves past the aesthetic investigation of artworks to encompass a wider array of visual processes, forms, and dispositives, including perception, vision, the gaze, image-making technologies, and their impacts on visual environments—an interrelated set of dimensions combined into a complex “rendition of physical and psychic space” (Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look* 2-3).

The growing interest for the visual field was amplified in the early 1990s in the “iconic turn” proposed by the German art historian and philosopher Gottfried Boehm (*What is an image?*) and the “pictorial turn” promoted by his American counterpart W.J.T. Mitchell (*The Reconfigured Eye*). These two frameworks entered into a productive dialogue: Boehm developed a “science of images,” focusing both on visual perception and the hermeneutics of pictures (*Towards a Hermeneutics*), while Mitchell’s “image science” provided a critique of visual culture and media aesthetics through the analysis of “living images” (*What Do Pictures Want?*). This debate largely unfolded within the parameters of phenomenology (*visuality* as experiences of viewing), semiotics (visual signs), and hermeneutics (meaning-making processes). It strived to deconstruct logocentrism, challenging the classical critiques of sight as superficial and deceptive. However, rather than opposing the linguistic turn or imposing the visual realm as a dominant trope, the most fruitful contributions reconfigured the articulation between the discursive and the visible. Through the interconnected categories of visual surface and discursive depth, these two dimensions are considered in “a mutually constitutive (horizontal)” relationship (Bartmanski and Alexander 4).

As the landscape of cultural analysis was quickly transformed in the 1990s with the inflation of various turns and areas of studies, the field of visual studies

formed across disciplinary traditions (Bachmann-Medick). This renewed attention to visual phenomena was cross-fertilized with insights from cultural studies (notably the scrutiny of contemporary and popular culture), media studies (at a time when digital technologies were transforming media environments), performance and gender studies (with critical insights on staged action and the body), and postcolonial theories (opening up to anti-hegemonic and non-Western traditions). The intersection of the visual turn with a material turn¹ also inspired propositions from the field of cultural sociology to rethink iconology through the lens of materiality (Bartmanski and Alexander). In the field of cultural geography, the conjunction of the visual turn and the spatial turn prompted new visual explorations of space and bodies (Tolia-Kelly and Rose). Visual research methods have also grown in popularity since the 1990s, particularly in the fields of visual sociology and visual anthropology, providing new tools for data collection, processing, analysis, and communication (Margolis and Pauwels).² The notion of visibility, which has also attracted considerable attention in recent decades, exceeds the visual field to encompass the broad social phenomena of publicity.³ Embraced in sociology, communications, and political science, this interest in visibility fostered investigations into the dynamics of power and exclusion in the public sphere (Honneth), monitoring and surveillance by means of watching (Ericson and Haggerty), the formation of symbolic capital in celebrity culture

(Heinich), and the conditions of discoverability of content on the Web (Koed Madsen).

Overall, the surge of interest in the visual realm has raised new epistemological questions for cultural analysis, but rather than converging towards a homogeneous framework, it has resulted in multiple research programmes predominantly crystallized around the notions of visuality, pictoriality, and iconicity. Of the various notions that emerged from the visual turn, that of visuality likely offers the more comprehensive analytical scope, since its contours exceed the narrower categories of the icon and the picture. The extensive range of phenomena grasped under the scope of visuality opens a path along which to map out the formation of systems of power governing social imaginations and “vision-oriented subjectivities” (Ramaswamy 1). Despite their differences, all three frameworks of visuality, pictoriality, and iconicity contributed to carve out a historical and critical perspective on power dynamics and ideology.⁴ The formation of visual conditions has especially been analysed through the categories of visual regimes, “scopic regimes” (Metz; Jay, “Scopic Regimes”), and “visual orders” (Boehm, “Pictorial Versus Iconic Turn”). These categories aim to elucidate the co-constitution of visual facts, macro sociopolitical dynamics, and subjectivation processes. They also contextualize these formations in cultural settings, unveiling a cultural diversity of visual regimes. Enmeshed in the history of modernity, industrialisation, imperialism, and technological innovation, the historical and cultural formation of visual regimes contributed to shape contemporary urban cultures.

1.2. *Sight in the City*

The contributions in this issue address the dynamics of cultural city life from a perspective concerned with urban visuality. Their conceptual frameworks are rooted in various perspectives, described in this section along three main dimensions: cities as optical environments, the visual conditions of social interaction, and the dynamics of global popular culture.

1.2.1 *The Urban Space as Optical Environment: Perception and Modern Subjectivities*

A first perspective explores the optical features of urban environments in the historical context of modernisation and the transformation of structures of perception. Present-day digital technologies with their plethora of new instruments of vision—cameras, cell phones, online mapping services, and virtual reality experiments—highlight the ocularcentrism of modern societies, placing “vision as the master sense of the modern era” (Jay, “Scopic Regimes” 3) and adding yet another layer of complexity in the ocular perception of city life. The changing conditions in the visual experience of urban space are historically tied to the broader dynamics that shape the formation of modern epistemologies and subjectivities. Art historians have extensively documented these interlaced dynamics, insisting that “historical transformations in ideas about vision were inseparable from a larger reshaping of subjectivity that concerned not optical experiences but processes of modernization and rationalization” (Crary, “Suspension of Perception” 3).

Since the early-modern era, the pictorial representation of the city has been a privileged field for experimenting with new models of vision. During the Italian Renaissance, urban landscape painting engaged with perspective through the optical mechanism of the *camera obscura*, thematized by Leon Battista Alberti's metaphor of the window on the world. Following Erwin Panofsky, the literature generally describes a dominant Cartesian model of knowledge that positions a transcendental, incorporeal, and sovereign subject at the center of pictorial and scientific modes of observation. According to Jonathan Crary, the rational model of objective vision was challenged by investigations into the physiological and psychological conditions of visual experience in the 19th century, giving rise to new physiological and epistemological models based on "the corporeal subjectivity of the observer" ("Techniques of the Observer" 4). Rather than implying a historical succession of unified visual regimes, a nuanced analysis of this historical process supposes the coexistence of a plurality of contested regimes (Jay, "Downcast Eyes"; Brighenti).

As industrialisation and urban growth reshaped city life, visual perception became entangled in new logics of capitalism, mass culture, and sensory stimulations. These transformations inspired several works in the Frankfurt School circle, including analyses by Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin of the sensory experience of the metropolis with its crowds,

commodity displays, and architectural ornaments.⁵ The commodification of urban experience and the condition of "the subject-in-sight" (Foster xiii) quickly evolved in the last decades of the 21st century with the combined advancements of computer science, neurosciences, and cognitive psychology, leading to ground-breaking innovations in machine vision and artificial intelligence. The interweaving of urban and digital environments sets new conditions for seeing and governing the city, redefining the relationship between visual observation, knowledge, and governance. For instance, the increasing use of facial recognition technology in retail stores brings customer profiling to new intrusive levels. Digital technologies provide models of vision that reshuffle the lines of objective and subjective vision, significantly influencing power relations, cultural visual practices, and contemporary subjectivities in the urban space.

1.2.2 Visual Interaction, Urban Sociality, and Oversight

A second framework explores the role of visual interaction in urban sociality. It focuses on the social character of the visual sense, not only as a modality of individual and group interaction but also in relation to collective affects—what Christian Metz defines as "the desire to see (= scopic drive, scopophilia, voyeurism)" (15)—as well as power relations.

Social interaction in everyday city life largely relies on the visual perception of social belonging and cultural differentiation. As several contributors in this issue point out, clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, and tattoos function as visual signs that can indicate affiliation to a social class, religious group, or subcultural movement. They also project the visible features of symbolic status, contributing to social distinction and asserting hierarchies between groups and individuals. Cultural differentiation manifests itself not only in the choice of wearable visible signs, but also in different cultures of the gaze: David Frisby and Mike Featherstone note that "cultural variations in modes of seeing others, hearing others and smelling others have begun to receive more attention in recent decades" (9).

At the individual level, the gaze is a powerful modality of interaction that sets relations of distance and proximity. Georg Simmel's early sociology of the sense suggested that eye contact and reciprocal glances create moments of intimacy and mutual recognition. In Erving Goffman's work, the visual dimension of ordinary face-to-face interaction operates as an element of social staging. He characterised the relative position of actors and spectators (witnesses and bystanders on the street) through the figures of insiders and outsiders. These social types can be further extended to analyse the visual experiences of tourists vs. locals (Urry), or steady onlookers (posted at terraces, windows, balconies) vs. viewers in motion (flaneurs, car and bike riders).

Power relations between the viewer and the object of vision often shape visual interaction in the city. The experience of gendered and racialized gazes exemplifies the social stratification of visual experience in urban spaces. These experiences reveal the dissymmetry in practices of gazing between groups of different classes, genders, and races. Feminist studies and African American studies have exposed the ways in which the gaze in street interactions can instantiate practices of domination and surveillance. In this context, the right to look is not reciprocal: on the one hand, the dominant gaze objectifies subordinate bodies (female bodies in particular), while on the other hand, subordinate groups are refrained from looking back. In her work on “black looks,” bell hooks showed that in segregated America black people could be violently punished for observing white people, producing “an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze” (116).

Military, colonial, and disciplinary activities more generally propelled the development of visual techniques, including the visualisation of battlefields (from paper maps to satellite photography and drone video streams), the surveillance of slave ships (Browne) and colonial plantations (Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”), and the racist stop-and-frisk urban policing method targeting visible minorities in public spaces. Michel Foucault’s classical model of the panopticon inspired many works on urban CCTV networks,

although it has been challenged by a plethora of new models:⁶ for example, the synoptic gaze (the many watch the few; Mathiesen), post-panoptic visuality (global surveillance from multiple locations; Bogard), and the oligoptic (partial and fragmentary view on the city constructed by Google Earth; Latour).

1.2.3 Urban Popular Culture, Mediatisation, and Global Flows

A final framework articulates urban visuality with the transformations of popular culture, mediatisation, and cultural globalisation. It addresses the central position of cities in global visual economies. Indeed cities (particularly metropolises) are privileged sites for the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural experiences. Their iconic architecture, mass events, and media production facilities supply an influential imagery that shapes collective imaginations. Influenced by migration and touristic flows, urban cultures are particularly saturated with cosmopolitan values and cultural hybridisation. They operate as laboratories of experimentation in new forms of entertainment, artistic creation, and lifestyle, influenced by global trends and broadcasted on worldwide networks. Longstanding relationships between visuality and local identity are increasingly challenged by the transnational processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Sassen). These processes have had an impact on the structures

of feelings that define locality, what Arjun Appadurai has called “a phenomenological property of social life ... that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity and that yields particular sorts of material effects” (182). Given the accumulation of wealth and political power in metropolitan areas, along with rising inequalities and spatial segregation, several contributions in this issue read cities as the cradle of visual repertoires of countercultures (such as graffiti murals) and social contestation.

The visuality of popular culture oscillates between hypervisibility and invisibility. Forms of urban spectacle multiplied under the influence of industrialisation and technical innovation. Adding to the traditional activities of cultural leisure and entertainment (theatrical and musical performances, circuses, fairs), the mechanisation of optical systems and processes of techniques of image reproduction introduced a new variety of immersive spectacles in the city. Dioramas, stereoscopes, and, later, movie theaters developed throughout the 19th century, whereas the advancement of industrial printing allowed for a wide dissemination of photographs on postcards, leaflets, posters, and magazines. This booming image industry, bolstered in the middle of the 20th century by the arrival of television, generated new documentary accounts and fictional narratives of urban social life. In the post-industrial era of creative economies (Graeme), when fashion, interactive design, and video gaming gain an

increasing influence on visual creation, cities reassert their centrality as image-production sites. Competing with one another for tourism development, global metropolises invest on brand images promoting festive events, bustling nightlife, and fine dining.

This plethora of urban spectacles, including screens and video mapping, contribute to what French design scholar Alain Mons calls a “generalised aestheticization” of urban space (19). What characterises this postmodern aesthetics, according to Christine Buci-Glucksmann’s work in *The Madness of Vision* (2013), is an ocular madness reminiscent of baroque spectacle. This visual superabundance is reinforced by the synchronous mediatisation of urban experiences on image-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Flickr. Yet if the omnipresence of spectacle in city streets and the overabundance of mediatised images is a key feature of urban visibility, a whole set of cultural practices belong to the infravisible

realm. Out of sight, away from the central sites of public visibility, alternative or underrepresented cultures also contribute to the social fabric and visual creativity of urban life. Among these are cultural minorities who find in private house parties a collective space to express the cultural diversity that many performance venues and music clubs are lacking. One can also think of gay scenes that moral reprobation long ago pushed underground. Other cases concern rave cultures that keep parties locations secret until the last minute to delay police raids, or artistic and political movements seeking exclusive spaces of gathering, voluntarily restraining the visibility of their activities and limiting access to these spaces to a small network of initiated persons. The contributions in this issue engage with these complex dynamics by investigating how the notion of scene can encapsulate the visibility and (in)visibility of social worlds and urban cultural phenomena.

2. Scenes and the Visuality of Social Worlds

2.1 Scene as Theatre of Sociability

Throughout its history, the term *scene* has meandered in loose fashion across semantic and conceptual fields. The term’s mobility is helped by its flexibility in English and Latin languages, where it may designate both the fixity of a bordered space of vision (as in attempts by police to “secure a crime scene”) and the flux of urban life (as in references to Mexico City’s “thriving art scene”⁷). While the different equivalents for scene in non-English Latin languages (such as the French *scène*, the Spanish *escena* and the Portuguese *cena*) share a cluster of associations, the term may also lose particular meanings as it moves across linguistic boundaries. For example, the French use of *scène* to designate a theatrical stage has dropped away from the English meanings of the term. Nonetheless, in both languages, the term may designate a bounded sequence of actions in narrative or theatrical forms such as the novel or play (as in references to a “final scene”).

In the history of English language usages of scene, we find a divided history. Along one trajectory of usage, scene maintains its theatrical roots. From the 17th century onward, the Oxford English Dictionary notes, scene is used to describe various kinds of social appearance, as when people speak of authors or politicians entering the scene, or of their romantic or professional lives being changed by the entrance of a rival onto the scene. Part of this history involves seeing

the spaces of everyday social life in dramatic terms, as stages on which various phenomena (typically people) become visible. A theatrical sense of scene also persists in reference to someone “making a scene”—that is, expressing themselves in an excessively performative fashion.

A theatrical genealogy of scene winds its way through key works of English-language social theory and, in particular, the works of Erving Goffman and Kenneth Burke. Burke’s work is a central focus of Steven Schoen’s essay in this issue. Goffman’s use of scene usually follows conventional uses of the term; he is interested in those moments in which upset people “make a scene” in moments of infraction,⁸ as well as in scenes as simple units of action within films. However, one also finds, scattered throughout his work, a more distinctive sense of scene as an arrangement of elements (people, actions, things, places) in which a certain social or moral condition is expressed: in *Interaction Rituals*, for example, Goffman refers to a “judgmental scene” (21), a “scene of mutual considerateness” (24), “scenes of action” (192), a “scene of fatefulness” (200), and so on. If scene is not the key term in Goffman’s dramaturgy of social behaviour, he will nevertheless invoke it with some regularity as a way of granting coherent purpose to moments of social interaction.

What ties together the various theatrical senses of scene is the notion of social life entering and occupying a space of public visibility. When practices of consumption—such as eating in restaurants or listening to live music—participate in the broader spectacle of urban effervescence, we may say that they are contributing to a sense of scene. That scene is not simply visual, of course; in particular, it is marked by the aural buzz of conversation and the haptic bustle of mingling bodies. Nevertheless, following Alan Blum (“Scenes”), we might say that scenes enact the transformation of social intimacy into public spectacle, something to be observed, and that this transformation is a key operation of urbanity. A sense of scene takes shape when innumerable acts of sociable interaction resonate with each other to endow a particular space (a block, a street, a neighbourhood) with a surplus of affective energies. In the versions of scene described here, individual cultural objects (such as styles of food or genres of music) are little more than pretexts for the theatre of sociability from which a scene derives its energies.

2.2 Scene as Social Formation

In the second sense of scene to be discussed here, links to the theatrical roots of the term fade. The term scene becomes one more term in a social morphology, a way of naming particular units or organizational forms of social life. A scene, in this other sense, is the aggregate of places, people, things, and actions that sustain the life of particular social phenomena. These social phenomena (such as musical genres or recreational activities) become the very core of a scene, the foci of attention and devotion around which scenes assemble themselves and by which they are named and identified (as in references to “a Vicksburg, Mississippi chess scene,”⁹ or “global black metal music scenes”). The key questions are no longer those of how certain phenomena enter the space of collective vision, but of the ways in which a heterogeneous set of elements (people, sites, objects, styles, etc.) coheres around particular cultural “objects” (styles, practices, genres, etc.)

This sense of scene, as an assemblage of elements around a particular set of objects or practices, has become prominent in recent years in academic studies of musical culture.¹⁰ Journalists and scholars had recourse to the notion of scene when other labels for cultural unities—such as subculture, community, or world—came to be seen as presuming overly rigid boundaries or essentializing versions of group

identity.¹¹ The point of this turn to scene is not to dissolve the sturdy structural dimensions of these other terms within a loose sense of indefinite social flux, but rather to find ways of thinking about the organization of cultural worlds that acknowledge their looseness and the variety of involvements they permit.

We have suggested that the concept of scene serves to designate two sorts of cultural phenomena. In one usage, scene captures the spectacle of urban sociability that is produced (or expressed) as an effervescence or excess within the rituals of urban life. In another, scene is a network of phenomena grounding and structuring the social life of cultural phenomena. For the purposes of illustration, we might look at another term currently ascendant in cultural analysis, in which the theatrical and organizational dimensions of scene are interwoven: this term is “atmosphere.”

2.3 Scene as Atmosphere: Affective Resonance and Units of Containment

In Ben Anderson’s intriguing development of the concept, an “atmosphere” is that state that results when various affective intensities interact within a “space of resonance.” The quality of possessing a particular atmosphere has, of course, long been one of the attributes of those contexts of lively sociability named in our first definition of scene. However, as he moves to reflect more specifically on the concept of “sphere,” Anderson provides additional tools to think about the second definition of scene, the arrangement of elements around a particular cultural “object” (such as a style of music):

Atmospheres have, then, a characteristic spatial form—diffusion within a sphere. Returning to Deleuze and Guattari, we can say that atmospheres are generated by bodies—of multiple types—affecting one another as some form of “envelopment” is produced. Atmospheres do not float free from the bodies that come together and apart to compose situations. Affective qualities emanate from the assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all the other bodies that make up everyday situations. (80)

If atmosphere captures the sense of effervescence at the core of the first, theatrical sense of scene, the more

restricted notion of sphere leads us to a second way in which we might think about scenes: as *containers*. To conceive of a scene as container is to think of it as something that holds within its boundaries all the phenomena that structure the life of certain cultural styles or practices. The idea of atmosphere offers one way to reconcile different notions of scene, as both a site of affective resonance, generating a surplus of social intensities, and as a unit of containment, an organizational form that holds together the constituent parts of a cultural practice.

In fictional texts, both literary and cinematic, a scene may designate any unit of action that is relatively contained: we speak of the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Psycho* or the balcony scene in William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. In literary studies, the notion of scene has been developed in ways that retain this function of designating a textual unit while opening up onto the ways in which literary texts may enact the display of sociability. Renée de Smirnof, in an analysis of visuality in the fiction of the French writer Honoré de Balzac, notes how a logic of sequence and narrative will be interrupted in certain Balzacian texts at those moments in which they set, before the reader, the description of a social tableau. These tableaux are scenes in the sense of opening up a place of representation in which we are presented with the spectacle of social relations arranged within a bounded space, as if for the reader’s observation (de

Smirnoff 232). Sequences featuring banquets or parties describe people, décor, and a variety of objects in their simultaneous visibility. In the midst of narrative, then, a scene takes shape as a tableau of relationships distributed within space. These tableaux maintain the aforementioned sense of scene as container in the ways that their textual limits limit the display of such relationships and their constitutive parts.

Scenes of social worlds may strive to document and display a repertory of well-established social types in the panoramic form of the extended sequence. Alain Badiou has written of the *typologie populaire* that, in French cinema of the 1930s and 1940s, filled crowd scenes with social types who stood for the disappearing social variety of an earlier age. These scenes fulfill the function of social mapping, visualizing the social as a population of socio-historical types arranged within the space of the cinematic frame. At the same time, such scenes typically possess an excess of collective energies and descriptive details that goes beyond their strictly sociological function—indeed, the pleasure of an exuberant excess is one of the delights of this cinematic genre. Anthony Slide notes that a 19th-century term for the theatrical extra was “supernumerary,” a term that connoted a surplus of people extending beyond the dramatic function of any single one. The social scenes found within literary or cinematic texts thus work in several ways: inventorial, in the ways they move across varieties of social identity; atmospheric, in the energies

produced through the resonance of bodies and things; and visually spectacular in producing intervals in the flow of narrative so as to offer their own abundance for observation.

2.4 Scene as Figure of Knowledge

The recourse to scene as a distinctive figure of knowing is prominent in the work of several French theorists and philosophers. In her biography of Roland Barthes, Tiphaine Samoyault notes the extent to which the man’s life and career may be seen as the passage through a sequence of prominent Parisian scenes, from the theatrical circles of Barthes’ young adulthood through the literary-political avant-gardes of the 1960s. At the same time, Samoyault suggests, scene became a key term for Barthes in his efforts to give form to particular unities of cultural struggle. Samoyault traces the movement of Barthes’ notion of scene away from its origins in theatre (a central focus of his early work) to its use in naming the various battlegrounds in the “wars of languages” (*guerre des langages*) with which his later work was preoccupied. A scene, here, names both a particular relationship of forces and the concrete situations in which the conflict between them is made manifest.

“The ‘scene’ has always haunted Foucault,” wrote Gilles Deleuze (79). Indeed, the writings of both Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière are marked by the use of scenes in the conventional sense of descriptive tableaux employed in the illustration of ideas. One need only think of the spectacle of violence that opens Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*. Rancière’s most explicit definition of scene is offered in the introduction to *Aisthesis*:

The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable. The scene captures concepts at work, in their relation to the new objects they seek to appropriate, old objects that they try to reconsider, and the patterns they build or transform to this end. (xi)

As an optic machine, Rancière’s scene joins the broader history of visuality considered here. The theorist’s scene—one that weaves together social forces to heuristic ends—is different in kind from the loosely bounded music or food scenes encountered amidst the flux of contemporary urban life. The visuality of both sorts of scene, though, is shaped by the ways in which they are simultaneously integrative and distributive. Scenes gather together social forces and actors of multiple kinds and then offer an image of

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their interwoven proximity. At the same time, scenes distribute these forces and actors across particular arrangements that intermittently assume the visual form of the tableau.

In this section, we have traced four prominent ways in which the notion of scene has been conceived. We may group these in two pairs. In one pairing we find an experiential understanding of scene, as social action that congeals as theatrical spectacle, or as an atmosphere in which intensities of various sorts resonate. The visuality of scenes considered in this way is often taken to obscure the social logics that structure and ground them. In the other pairing, the scene is a form of ordering, gathering actors, forces, and materials around a particular cultural object (a musical style or cultural practice, for example), or arranging these elements through the operations of an “optical machine” that serves in the production of knowledge. In these conceptions, scenes become intelligible through their ordering in the realm of the visual.

The authors represented in this issue work, for the most part, in different versions of media or cultural studies (Casemajor, Straw, Rouleau, Reia, Halliday, Soldani, Rochow, Schoen). We are pleased also to have contributions from specialists in geography (Gwiazdzinski), art history (Yuen), philosophy (Silva), and the visual arts (Radwanski). This range confirms the extent to which the question of visuality runs through a variety of recent attempts to understand the aesthetic, social, and political scenes of contemporary urban life.

Luc Gwiazdzinski’s evocative essay on the *Nuit debout* movement in France sets the images of that movement in contrast to what he calls the standard visualities of political crisis: those of a president addressing the nation on television or a well-organized political march. In terms that might be applied to a variety of scenes—those of political movements, to be sure, but to music and other cultural scenes as well—Gwiazdzinski captures the ways in which the very form of *Nuit debout* is “multiscalar and fractal,” assuming dimensions and geometrical forms appropriate to the localities in which it has emerged and to the larger spatial unities of which such localities are a part.

Jonathan Rouleau’s essay on Barcelona, like Gwiazdzinski’s, examines the practices of the urban night, offering its own understanding of the forms and relationships through which cities produce scenes

as terrains of visibility. Indeed, Rouleau deploys Gwiazdzinski’s notion of nighttime archipelagos to give form to the compressed terrains of nighttime sociability that have focused political opposition to Barcelona’s recent transformation into a tourist playground. The visuality of Barcelona’s nighttime scenes is marked by a shifting set of relationships between foreground and background, between the spectacles of revelry—typically involving outsiders, that emerge to focus attention, challenge local values, and generate judgement—and the routine labours of a local population dedicated to continually producing the infrastructures within which these spectacles unfold.

In Maria Teresa Soldani’s detailed study of Richard Linklater’s 1991 film *Slacker*, the notion of scene works at several levels of isomorphic and interwoven visibilities. The much-heralded music scene of Austin Texas circa 1990 was, in a sense, the simple location of musical and other cultural practices, but it also served—through Linklater’s film and a broad network of other discourses—as a synecdoche for both a national culture of alternative music and the broader generational phenomena (“Generation X”) through which this culture was understood. We see here, as in Gwiazdzinski’s account of *Nuit debout*, the multi-scalar properties of scenes, their capacity to replicate themselves in patchworks extending across space and to cohere as social or political phenomena

at different levels of generality. At the lowest level of Soldani's analysis, we see the Austin scene as a set of ground-level gestural economies unfolding within what she calls a "space of flux and encounter" marked by the slow, indeterminate movements of people across urban space. At the highest level, we see a generation enact, through its performance of "slackness," its disengagement from political systems viewed as alienating. As Soldani suggests, with respect to *Slacker*, "[t]he drift of the film's camera through the spaces of the scenes reveals the varied humanity of a new generational phenomenon."

In Rebecca Halliday's article on the place of photography within a Fashion Week circuit involving several Western cities, the visual dimensions of scenes work again at several levels. The visual field, in her analysis, may be seen as one of ongoing transactions, as visual motifs and frames are transformed in the back-and-forth between the urban street and the fashion runway. Here the visual field of fashion photography may appear as a zone of unidirectional expropriation, with the ongoing absorption of informal street style into the commercial forms and institutions of fashion photography. Yet, as Halliday shows, cities seek representations of themselves that establish fashion tastemakers within their own streets so as to produce the signs of cosmopolitan fashionability by which they may market themselves as places of style and trendiness. Street and fashion runways are both scenes

in an ongoing relationship where authenticity and prestige are traded back and forth.

Jhessica Reia's text on the straight edge music scene in São Paulo, Brazil invites a view of scenes as containers, entities that hold, within their boundaries, all the phenomena that structure the life of certain cultural styles or practices: places, media forms, rituals, visual styles, and ideological positions. If music, within this structure, provides a relatively coherent, shared domain of expression, then the visual assists in dividing straight edge culture into its various supplementary objects and adornments. Food, design, signage, subcultural merchandise, and the built environment are among what might be called the distributed features of the São Paulo scene—the partial objects, functioning for the most part within the realm of the visual, through which the scene acquires infrastructural solidity.

In their comparison of the life of musicians in Copenhagen, Denmark and Wellington, New Zealand, Kate Rochow and Geoff Stahl propose what they call a photographic and cartographic analysis rather than the ethnographic approach common in analyses of music scenes. Mapping the itineraries of musicians and inviting them to draw "mental maps" of the spaces they inhabit and traverse, Rochow and Stahl show the contours and extensions of a scene, its anchoring in practices of movement and imagination. Building on ethnographic work on "musical pathways" through

cities, they extend the notion of pathways in two ways: first, by considering the movement of objects and other materialities (and not merely people); and second, by seeing a pathway as not as a line but rather a complex of overlapping rhythms. The visual, in this analysis, lies in the activity of map-mapping through which they capture "manifold spatial expressions."

One of the original features of Steven Schoen's article is the way in which it brings the work of Kenneth Burke into what might be called "scene studies." In Burke's analysis, scene is "a blanket term for the concept of background or setting *in general*, a name for *any* situation in which acts or agents are placed" (Burke, "Grammar of Motives" xvi, original emphasis). Following Burke, Schoen argues, scene is not merely a quality of citylife to identify or recognize; we render something a scene in an act of looking that renders it meaningful. His analysis of the reality television program *Taxicab Confessions*, *New York* produces a sense of scenic theatre at three dimensions: in the taxi cab itself, in which riders are filmed with supposedly hidden cameras; at the level of the larger city, which Schoen calls a "scene of experimentation, excess and transgression," and in the conventions of the reality television show, which produce scenes in which people are considered both ordinary and, in a variety of ways, grotesque.

The scene described in Katherine Yuen's article on Toronto's Nuit Blanche is mostly visual, with artistic works implicated within urban spaces whose accumulated meanings these works comment upon, supplement, or enhance. The artworks of Nuit Blanche take their place, for one night, within networks of works and spaces, as points in what she calls the "cross-disciplinary network of contemporary art movements." Judgements of *Nuit Blanche* often comment on two sorts of relationships: those of the works to the spaces in which they are installed, and those of Nuit Blanche scene-makers to the artistic character of the event. The disconnect of certain works to the contexts of their display is one basis for ongoing criticism that Nuit Blanche is losing its original purpose to engage with the community. The sense that the crowds wandering through Nuit Blanche see their own public sociability as the key feature of the event is another point of contention. Even as the key terms for describing and judging Nuit Blanche borrow from discussions of the visual, Yuen notes a counter-discourse that addresses sound and speech. In its early days, critics claim, works spoke to the place of their exhibition in a critical dialogue. Now, such dialogue has been lost in the buzz of crowds who see Nuit Blanche as just another occasion for wandering along city streets in a festive fashion.

Armanda Silva's work on urban visibility grows from a multiyear project on urban imaginaries involving key cities of Latin America and collaborators from several disciplines. Ranging across several books devoted to individual cities and a significant contribution to the art festival *Documenta 11*, the *Urban Imaginaries* examines images within contemporary urban culture. The imaginary, Silva suggests, shows itself through the eruption into a social setting

of images that cause astonishment. Scene, in this work, is less a category of collective being (as when we speak of "music scenes") but arrives through the production of an image as a "phantasmatic illusion" through which people participate in city life.

We are very pleased to include as the visual dossier in this issue a selection of images by the Brazilian photographer Livia Radwanski that document the transnational music scene known as Sonidero. Radwanski's engagement with the Sonidero scene has extended over several years, in interdisciplinary collaborations with scholars and artists and through a number of exhibitions and publications. In the interview accompanying her visual dossier, she draws attention to the rich material culture in which Sonidero is embedded—the intersecting technologies, multiple commodity forms, and visual accoutrements that render the visual field of Sonidero highly complex. As the musical forms of Sonidero circulate quickly and informally through multiple pathways of circulation, the objects and images of the movement also accumulate to produce clusters of visibility.

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Notes

¹ See, for example, Hans Belting on corporeality and visual anthropology.

² For an anthology of visual research methods, see Eric Margolis and Luc Pauwels.

³ Andre Mubi Brighenti prefers to investigate the notion of visibility, arguing that visuality is a narrow culturalist “counterpart of the sense of sight” (3). Distancing himself from the field of cultural studies, he adopts a social-epistemological approach that focuses on the notion of visibility “as a form of ‘visuality at large,’ making it clear that the visible entails more than the visual, more than the sensorially perceptible” (3).

⁴ See for example W.J.T. Mitchell on “visual order” (in Boehm and Mitchell, “Pictorial Versus Iconic”) and Dominik Bartmanski and Jeffrey Alexander on “iconic power.”

⁵ See also Susan Buck-Morss for a discussion of Benjamin’s Arcades Project and Henrik Reeh for an analysis of Kracauer and modern urban culture.

⁶ For a critical discussion of these models, see David Lyon.

⁷ See “Why art lovers are flocking to Mexico City,” *The Telegraph*, 27 October 2016 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/central-america/mexico/articles/mexico-city-culture-guide/> Accessed January 3 2016.

⁸ See Alan Blum (“Scenes”) for a discussion.

⁹ See “Johnny Guinn is king of Vicksburg chess scene,” *The Vicksburg Post*, 10 December 1966, <http://m.vicksburgpost.com/2016/12/10/johnny-guinn-is-king-of-vicksburg-chess-scene/> Accessed 20 January 2017.

¹⁰ See, for example, the various studies collected in Bennett and Peterson.

¹¹ See Shelemay for a useful discussion of these conceptual and terminological issues.