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➲ From the City to *lo Urbano*: Exploring Cultural Production of Public Space in Latin America

Abstract: Public space in heterogeneous and palimpsestic Latin American cities can be studied best by the anthropology-inspired understanding of the cultural sciences or *Kulturwissenschaften*. This article argues for the need to decenter the Eurocentric gaze on urban phenomena, and to take into account the conceptual contributions of Latin American urban anthropology, such as the *imaginario* approach, the concepts of cultural/multitemporal heterogeneity and the notion of *lo urbano*. On a methodological level, the author argues for the necessity of mixing research practices from different fields in order to explore the complex simultaneity of urban culture, especially in Latin America.
Keywords: Public space; *Imaginario*; Urban Anthropology; Transdisciplinarity; Latin America; 20th-21st Century.

Resumen: El espacio público de las heterogéneas y palimpsésticas ciudades de América Latina puede ser estudiado desde una perspectiva inspirada por la Antropología, la de las *Kulturwissenschaften*. El artículo plantea la necesidad de descentrar la mirada eurocéntrica de los fenómenos urbanos y tomar en cuenta los aportes conceptuales de la Antropología urbana de América Latina, tales como el concepto de *imaginario*, los de *heterogeneidad cultural /multitemporal* y la noción de *lo urbano*. En el plano metodológico, la autora sostiene la necesidad de cruzar prácticas de investigación provenientes de diferentes campos con el fin de explorar la compleja simultaneidad de la cultura urbana, especialmente de la de América Latina.
Palabras clave: Espacio público; Imaginario; Antropología urbana; Transdisciplinariedad; América Latina; Siglos XX-XXI.

Decentering the field

Megacities from the global South are, even in critical urban scholarship, often conceived and studied as the urban Other and "heart of darkness", as Ananya Roy (2009: 820) puts it in her furious call for "a recalibration of the geographies of authoritative knowledge". She refers to the kind of knowledge that draws on studies done from a

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North-to-South perspective, mostly based on what are perceived as urban anomalies. Roy states that there is an urgent need to dislocate theoretical production on urbanity, and I would like to take this as my frame and entry into the following reflection on how to explore and understand public space in Latin America. This framing is not necessarily motivated by a "softer" or more "culture-focused" perspective but is grounded in a basic epistemological assumption: that from urban experience in and reflection on the global South we may learn about urbanity in general and that we need to broaden our horizon in order to adequately comprehend and conceptualize urban complexity in the 21st century.

One example of this "learning from the global South" is the critical revision of the theoretical approach to the production of urban space that is based on critical analysis of Euro-American cities, and follows the Lefebvrian model of commodification and capitalist dynamics producing social space (Lefebvre 1991) as well as the idea of urban transformation driven by over-accumulation, looking for new, profitable investment (Harvey 1989). As Roy states, this materialist perspective on city production gains in complexity by taking into account a dimension often categorized as "informality", which mostly comes from somewhere other than the Euro-American urban experience. Informality must not be misunderstood as an unregulated domain in the shadow of formality, regulation and state power, but as a (capitalist) production mode in itself. Roy (2009: 826) prognosticates informal arrangements becoming the "primary mode of the production of 21st-century metropolitan space" in the global South, a relevant insight for the understanding of city development *in general,* yet it comprises topics such as the extralegality of state power, deregulation and social negotiation, as well as new forms of social agency and subjecthood of the subaltern.

The viewpoint of this article is that of a cultural scientist and urban researcher informed by and focused on specific Latin American urban experiences, in particular my current research in public memory cultures in megacities such as Buenos Aires and Mexico City. At the same time, and beyond this "regional" interest, it is motivated by a conceptual reflection on the possibilities of "decentered" inter- and transdisciplinary accounts of urban public life.[1] To this end, this article proposes to broaden and shift the analytical gaze: from built (and inhabited) city to urbanity and the notion of the urban (*lo urbano),* from social and physical structures to production of meaning and sense and *back again*. It is precisely this *back again* that I consider to be one of the most inspiring contributions made by Latin American anthropology, the focus on the unavoidable interconnectedness of material and immaterial dimensions, of the spatial and the semiotic in urban cultures, of the imaginary and the social in urban life.

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[1] My own biographical "dislocation" is of course not what I take as my main reference for the conceptual reflection here, but nor is it to be considered mere coincidence. From my first research stay in Mexico City, in 1986, as a fairly inexperienced student, I stayed connected to the Mexican capital, living there on a daily basis as a reporter and cultural producer before returning to academic research. Thus, I experienced the Mexican megacity as an urban "standard", so to say, and not as an exception or anomaly. This later turned into the "frame" of my general understanding of urban configurations: the profound polarization of city cultures and economic circuits *within* each city of a certain size, "North" and "South" coexisting within heterogeneous Southern and Northern urbanities.

Urban settings and studies in Latin America

It is commonplace to state that Latin America today is the most urbanized continent, with 75 percent or more of its people living in cities, and that there is a rich urbanizing tradition stemming from ancient, pre-colonial times. It might be less obvious, however, to ask for the specifics of actual Latin American urbanity: are there any distinctive, if not unique, features of Latin American cities? Though it might turn out to be impossible to claim specific properties in order to unify the urban diversity in the continent and distinguish it from any other region of the world, I will be taking a look at some of its most prominent features and theoretical conceptualizations.[2]

In the 1990s, the anthropologist Néstor García Canclini coined the terms "cultural heterogeneity" and "multitemporal heterogeneity", both key concepts in the debate on Latin American urbanity.[3] The latter refers to the precolonial origins and colonial refoundations of the Latin American city, the accelerated urban modernization of the last five decades (not centuries as in the European city) and the urban palimpsest of diverse architectural textures and memory layers (see also Huyssen 2003). For my own research interests – the exploration of public space in relation to urban and memory cultures – these palimpsestic configurations are highly relevant: the material and cultural *presence* of a whole range of *pasts* (pre-colonial, colonial, modern and postmodern ones, related to a long history of violence, from colonial to state terrorism), coexisting in the urban present, overwritten and over-imposed, highlighted or denied; we will come back to this later.

"Cultural heterogeneity" or "hybridization" refers to coexisting *cultures* in urban space. Processes of cultural hybridization are being caused by large, mostly indigeneous, migration flows into the city. Such an understanding of "cultural heterogeneity" transcends the essentialist subtext of *identity* and also the relativist notion of diversity, but focuses on the dimension of conflictive and competing cultural configurations. These are embedded in what scholars like García Canclini consider the structural outcome of fast-track urbanization beyond any centralized urban planning: disorder instead of controlled patterns of urban development, negotiation instead of regulation,[4] informal and deregulated housing strategies adopted by dwellers and by private investors, the deregulation and informalization of urban economies. These structural qualities come with increasing levels of socio-spatial segregation, with fragmentation and fortification of the urban landscape, as argued in Caldeira's pioneering study (2001) on the spatial discourses of security in dense urban situations of proximity in the Brazilian megacity São Paulo. At the same time, polarized urban territorialities and the growing inequalities within (post)modern urbanity never cease to produce their own margins and marginal(ized) spaces, modes of resistance and new models of insurgent citizenship or mobilization.

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[2]   It is striking to realize the almost non-existent circulation of Latin American anthropology and space-related theory production in the international arena. In our current project ("Lo urbano. Positionen aktueller Stadtforschung aus Lateinamerika"), urban anthropologist Kathrin Wildner and I aim to bring Latin American conceptual elaboration and methodological approaches to a German-speaking audience.

[3]   Though these concepts have been leitmotivs of García Canclini's publication since the late 1980s, the following refers to a conversation on these topics held with the author on 26 April 2011 in Mexico City.

[4]   See, for the orders and disorders of Mexico City, the extensive study by Duhau/Giglia (2008).

Thus, urban analysis in Latin America will have to deal with multi-temporal and cultural heterogeneity, the co-existence of a variety of urban cultures and forms of "governmentality". Disorder is to be considered not as an anomaly but as part of urban development, as fundamental as the complex relationship between formal and informal, planned and non-regulated city production, normativity and negotiation. García Canclini also argues that the fictitious dichotomy between *global* cosmopolitism and *local* authenticity should be transcended and highlights the interdependence of both dimensions; this implies a critical revision of the "global city" concept for Latin American megacities, where globalized economic patterns clearly interact and depend on local structures.[5]

What are the specific (inter)disciplinary accounts in Latin American urban studies? The field of urban research in Latin America is constituted by a constant crossover of core disciplines such as sociology and geography, architecture and social psychology, and of course anthropology.[6] Nevertheless, anthropological research in particular is considered immune to simplifying generalizations from a traditional political science, macro-sociological or demographic perspective and therefore capable of offering differentiated insights on relatively new urban phenomena such as ethnic or social segregation, economic polarization, urban fear and violence. At the same time, the disciplinary field itself has experienced a profound reconceptualization from the study of the city. According to García Canclini, urban anthropology is no longer limited to micro-structures such as sites or places and to specific groups or communities, but is becoming more and more involved in the study of macro-configurations such as urbanity or citizenship or institutional failure. Following the author, the main focus of urban anthropology today has shifted from difference to interculturality, considering not only categories like ethnicity or language, but gender, generation, aesthetics or social networks as well as the transcultural belongings of the so called urbanites ("the interculturality we carry within ourselves").[7]

The following section discusses two interconnected ideas crucial for my analysis and understanding of the cultural production of urban space: the *imaginario* concept*,* as a key contribution of Latin American anthropology to urban studies, and the notion of polyvalence and the uncertainty of public space.

The *imaginario* approach

Imagination is, of course, a vital part of human and also of urban experience:

We not only have the physical experience of the city, we not only walk or feel in our bodies the meaning of walking around for a long time, of traveling by bus, of standing up, of being out in the rain waiting for a cab; but we also imagine, while traveling, we construct suppositions about what we see, about the people crossing our way, the zones of the city that we do not know but have to pass through in order to get to another destination; in a word, about what is happening to us in relation to the *others* in the city (García Canclini 1999: 89).[8]

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[5]   Interview with Néstor García Canclini, México D. F., 2011.
[6]   See, for an overview of recent Mexican urban anthropology, the collection edited by García Canclini (2005).
[7]   Interview with Néstor García Canclini, México D. F., 2011.
[8]   All translations from Spanish into English are my own.

Imagination in urban contexts, at a socially shared level, articulates social desires, feelings, fantasies and explanations related to city life. The outcome of collective imagination was conceptualised by Armando Silva, García Canclini and others as urban *imaginario*.[9] It is in the *imaginario,* as a key dimension of the sociocultural and semiotic constitution of the city, where social meaning and memory, senses of community and belonging, inclusions and exclusions are produced and negotiated. The *imaginario* approach relativizes and complements – without replacing – the weight of material features (socio-economic condition, built environment, urban planning) by incorporating immaterial dimensions such as semiotics, subjectivity and aesthetics in order to recreate the symbolic territoriality and cultural power relations in and of the city. Nowadays, the virtualization and digitalization of the city, which leads to a certain degree of deterritorialization, might appear to be the most convincing justification for the "imaginary turn" in urban studies. Nevertheless, my argument here does not refer to this new digitalized territoriality, but to the production of sense related to the non-digital (physical, economic, political) social world that has always configured the meanings of urban space and territories.

Exploring *imaginarios* means focusing on how the city is perceived, conceived and lived[10] by the *citizen*, as the inhabitant and user of urban space; and incorporates into the analysis his or her subjective "spatial experience" (Lindón/Aguilar/Hiernaux 2006: 9). This spatial subjectivity does not emerge directly from the physical or visual experience of space, but is created by sense-making narratives: a sequence of imagining, experimenting and telling space. These narrations can be analyzed on the level of artistic practices (music, literature, visual arts) as well as – and that is the perspective adopted by the authors in this work as well as in my own – on the level of social or urban practices, inscribed in the routines and disruptions of urban life.

The notion of imagined, simultaneously practiced and signified urban space evokes the distinction between the city and "the urban" (*lo urbano*), as proposed by Manuel Delgado (1999, 2007), a Barcelona-based urban anthropologist widely known in Latin America. For Delgado, the central stage or setting of "the urban" is public space, as the backdrop for "generalized alterity" (1999: 14) and "diffuse sociability" (2007: 13), in conceptual contrast to the inhabited, built and privatized city. Though the author himself

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9   See García Canclini (1999); García Canclini/Lindón (2007); Silva (2003 and 2006); Vergara Figeroa (2001a) and Lindón/Aguilar/Hiernaux (2006). Among the theoretical sources, Vergara Figueroa (2001b) highlights the French school of history of mentalities (Jacques Le Goff), authors from historical anthropology and sociology (Goffman, Bourdieu, de Certeau) and cultural micro-history (Ginzburg), as well as theories of social representations (Durkheim, among others) and, as a major reference, Castoriadis (1975). Examples of extensive fieldwork on this issue are to be found in the Canclini group in Mexico City (García Canclini 1998a and 1998b) and in the study by Silva about Bogotá and São Paulo (Silva 2006); the latter studywas the starting point for wide-ranging research on the symbolic landscape of 14 Latin American cities, combining a variety of empirical methods employed by local research teams (Silva 2003).

10 At first glance, the *imaginario* might be associated with the "mental space" conceptualized by Lefebvre (1991) in his well-known triad; but by including perception, emotions and social appropriation it comprises the complete triad, at least in its subject-centered variant (the perceived, the conceived, the lived). This one must be distinguished, as Schmid (2005: 230) points out, from the social space-centered triad (spatial practice, representation of space, representational spaces).

does not explicitly refer to the *imaginario* concept, his postulation of an anthropology of *lo urbano*, conceived as an "anthropology of what is unstable, not-structured, and not because it has been de-structured, but because it is in the process of structuring" (Delga-do 1999: 12), is clearly linkable to the idea of urban imaginaries that focuses on social and semiotic *processes* instead of on fixed structures and locations.

As I stated previously, imagination or subjectivity here are not to be reduced to the level of individual cognition or psychology, but to be amplified as "socially shared" imagination, on the grounds of a socially shared culture seen as a "flexible and invisible cage in which one's own conditioned freedom might be exercised" (Carlo Ginzburg 2000 quoted by Vergara Figueroa 2001a: 73). Stating the *social* dimension of *imaginarios* is to acknowledge the intrinsic interrelation of the social and symbolic organization of urban life, the interconnectedness between material and immaterial dimensions, the impact of architecture and physical texture on perception and imagination. Within the "flexible and invisible cage" of culture, urban subjectivity is produced by and at the same time produces social experience in the city, including the exercise of cultural power such as community-building, identity politics or boundaries of exclusion. *Imaginarios* are to be seen as *products* of specific historical and cultural processes as well as the *producers* of the urban, such as for instance the proliferation of urban fear, the use of public transport or environmental behaviour, the perception of informal commerce or urban "otherness", disputes over cultural heritage and memory practices in general.

It is crucial to note that in the heterogeneous city we deal with contradictory and competing *imaginarios*, composed by a variety of sources, that "do not correspond mechanically to class conditions nor to the neighbourhood that someone lives in nor to objectifiable determinations" (García Canclini/Lindón 2007: 91). And though *imaginarios* are products of the historical sedimentation of cultural and semiotic processes, they are not to be confused with archetypes, but are exposed to social, political or natural irruptions. One example is the devastating earthquake of September 1985 in Mexico City, which led to radical changes in social perception and organization, dividing urban experience into 'before and after': the sudden loss of confidence in urban order or plan-ning as well as the awareness of extreme fragility and vulnerability, not only of architec-tural construction, but also of social and political regulation. "We all became suddenly aware of the fact that the city was dangerous" is how Garcia Canclini remembers the *imaginario* impact of the earthquake.[11] These changes, according to the author, came along with the loss of the "fatalistic *imaginario* that the PRI was to be the ruling party for eternity" and the emergence of civil self-consciousness and self-organization that gave birth to the imaginary construction of an collective actor known as civil society.[12]

In summary, by talking about *imaginarios* we are not talking about a fantasy world opposed to 'the real (or material) thing' or about 'false ideas'. Instead *imaginario* desig-nates a symbolic field with considerable social impact on how people think, act and behave in urban space. Conceiving of urban culture in terms of *imaginarios* does not mean juxtaposing two different orders but looking at their complex entanglement: "The *imaginario* cannot be conceived as the negation, but the incorporation of the rational. It

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[11]   Interview with Néstor García Canclini, México D. F., 2011.
[12]   Interview with Néstor García Canclini, México D. F., 2011.

does not oppose, but integrates the functional and the semantic; and it does not pit subjectivity *against* objectivity, the conscious *against* the unconscious, but situates them as complementary, though recognizing their contradictions and even antagonisms" (Vergara Figueroa 2001a: 74).

Uncertain spaces

As we saw above, *imaginarios* are spaces of co-existing, competing and also contested urban perceptions and meaning structures. They are, in short, unstable and uncertain. That is why they closely relate to the idea of "the urban" as conceptualized by Delgado, *lo urbano*, the idea of city life in open space, on streets, places, *plazas,* the space(s) between built and inhabited city infrastructure. Public space is the stage for public life and political representation, but also the city's display of the heterogeneous co-existence of the different, of encounter with others and otherness, strangers and strangeness, as Isaac Joseph (2002) pointed out in his famous essay on urban "dispersion".

The idea of a representational unity or unified *imaginario* is a fictitious vision of city designers. In reality, "public space and urbanity have always been connected to disorder, functional heterogeneity and diversity", as Kenny Cupers and Markus Miessen (2002: 151) argue in their outstanding study on the Berlin urban landscape. The authors, both architects, but clearly more interested in the non-built city, see post-wall Berlin as unique, but at the same time paradigmatic for contemporary urbanity, a city "with inner peripheries, sudden changes, breaks, voids and inconsistencies" (Cupers/Miessen 2002: 54). However, they do not naively present the German capital, with its configuration of vacant plots, residual spaces, leftovers, voids and dead zones, as a free and open playground, but as a contested space traversed by the representational aspirations of the builders of the new German capital, exposed to the interventions of urban planning authorities seeking to normalize urban landscape and erase irruptions (Cupers/Miessen 2002: 62). Still, they argue against pessimistic "rhetorics of loss" (2002: 43) that lament the supposed end of public space. Instead, the authors plead for an acceptance of the fragmentary nature of the public and a conceptual opening of the concept of public space, which is not necessarily institutionalised, but constituted by city users' everyday practices situated in the "interstitial places where public and private experiences overlap" (Cupers/Miessen 2002: 49). These spaces come into conflict with the centrifugal forces of planning and control, the constant "desire to fill up the in-between, to diminish its possibilities, to replace uncertainty with definition" (Cupers/Miessen 2002: 179); in short: to repress urbanity itself.

Manuel Delgado also references the uncertainty and instability of the non-built space, designating it "interstitial" as well (Delgado 1999: 37), though in a different sense than the Berlin architects. For him the in-between spaces are not dysfunctional leftovers appropriated by urban outsiders, but transitional spaces that may well be situated in the city centres, to be crossed and circulated, as opposed to fixed places. Delgado (1999: 45) sees them as a product of modern urbanization but also as producing urban subjectivities: "Some collectivities use public space for a staging of themselves, not because they exist but precisely in order to exist". The public stage provides a backdrop for the visibilization of political actors or of certain meanings, but at the same time the possibility of invisibi-

lization, of disappearance or dissolution into urban anonymity, liberated from fixed roles, social expectations and the power of hegemonic visual orders (Delgado 1999: 203).

Urbanity, according to Delgado (1999: 26), is to be understood as "dissolution and simultaneities, minimal negotiations, weak and precarious connections". Therefore, the author refuses to decide on the classical disjunction between anthropology *in* or *of* the city (as a whole) but pleads for an anthropology of "inconsistencies, inconsequences and oscillations", more focused on connections than on institutions and structures. These assumptions argue for a reformulation of anthropological practices into what he calls "street anthropology": the traditional participant observation becomes "radical participation", sharing public space as an invisible observer (Delgado 1999: 46-58), with a disposition for "radical observation", capturing, listening and recording the sounds, images and spatial interaction produced by urban mobility.

At some point, Delgados's (2007: 188) praise of the horizontality, openness, mobility and "right to anonymity" of the public urban, as opposed to the hierarchy and fixedness of the structured city, sounds like a mystification of public space as the realm of radical democracy, with no structural restrictions of any kind. But then the author seems to be perfectly aware of the restricting discourses and segregating power relations that configure public space experience, such as those where men and women are concerned, for instance. His chapter on "street woman" (Delgado 2007: 224-261) is one of the rare efforts in urban anthropology to conceptualize femininity and the *public city*, in contrast to the usual focus that relates women to the domestic sphere or to housing issues. Here, Delgado deconstructs the flâneur's gaze as a structurally masculine one that does not consider the woman as "being *in* the public sphere, but as being *a part of* that public space" (2007: 226). In urban *imaginarios*, even in those of critical researchers, women usually appear attached to fixed social roles such as those occupied by prostitutes, consumers, victims of sexual violence or defenders of the family; but they are non-existent (in theory) as urban social subjects.

Research practice: Readings of "memory" in urban space

The empirical grounding for the argument expounded in this paper is my own current research project on urban memory cultures in two emblematic and contrasting Latin American megacities, Buenos Aires and Mexico City. The investigation is based on a mid-length research project[13] in these two capital cities, which were explored as urban settings for memory practices related to state repression and political violence. From a classical cultural sciences' perspective, the most appropriate approach to the study of the meaning of traumatic memory in the urban present would be to analyse the existing artistic production on these topics in genres such as literary fiction, visual or performance arts, documentary, fictional or experimental film-making. Instead, from a perspective concerned with the cultural production of memory *imaginarios* and stagings in public space, the focus has to be centered on semiotic processes, spatial practices and meanings

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related to memory sites and politics. Before presenting a short selection of illustrative research excerpts, I outline some of the conceptual interconnections between memory and public spatiality, simultaneity and visuality.

Ghosts and palimpsests

Memories of past events have no place other than imagination. And imaginary work is situated in the present, a gaze reconstructing and signifying past experiences, as fragmentary, repressed and partial as they may be. This holds for individual as well as for social memory processes,[14] which do not reproduce "real facts", but construct a sense-making memory narrative, dependent on the interests and constellations of the present:

> Memory and social *imaginario* converge at this point: there is an invention of a past in order to draw a future in which we are able to recognize ourselves. [...] From that there might emerge authoritarian temptations with social legitimacy, as well as creative recreations of the past based on the valorization of the heterogeneous (Lindón/Aguilar/Hiernaux 2006: 20).

There is a key figure to the *imaginario*, and also to the socially shared memory: the ghost or phantasm, the shadow of what has been and is not there any longer, at least not at a physical or material level, "the obscure and dense figure of a social phantasm" (Silva 2006: 109). We may say that modern cities are inhabited by all kinds of social phantasms or collective traumas related to the invisible and invisibilized, the undesirable and disturbing: in the present, these might include poverty or illegal workers interfering in the urban image; where the past is concerned, the violence and destruction caused by war, political violence or state repression. These ghosts, the traces and shadows of traumatic and unsolved events inhabit the imaginary cellar of societies and circulate among the living, escaping strategies of rationalization and control. They are "phantasms of the subconscious", marking an absence, "that I do not see or know, but that still affects me" (Silva 2006: 110). The idea of ghosts as layers of a significant and disturbing (in)visibility is close to the concept of *imaginario*, yet it also proposes that we connect imagination to reality: "The phantasm will always be of the imaginary order, but living, as if it is real life" (Silva 2006: 118-119). Cultural research, then, aims to *visibilize* these social phantasms or ghosts as well as their semiotic materialisation in social and urban space.

In terms of spatiality, the idea of the urban ghost connects to the metaphor of the urban palimpsest, of overlapping and competing layers, boundaries and frontiers between past and present,[15] the profane and the sacred, everyday life and exception. The void or vacant space is a spatial marker of a former presence, sometimes appropriated

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14   Crucial references for the conceptualization of social memory in this study, besides the classical theorists like Halbwachs (1991), includeEchterhoff/Saar (2002) and Nora (1998). I will only briefly mention the inspiring approaches by Assmann (1999) and the constructivist memory researcher Welzer (2005), as well as the Latin American research group coordinated by the sociologist Jelin (Jelin 2002; Jelin/Langland 2003; Jelin/Longoni 2005; Jelin/Kaufman 2006).
15   See, for a conceptualization of urban memory palimpsests, Huyssen (2003).

and occupied, temporarily or permanently, by city users of the present.[16] Other more explicit spatial markers of the past are the so-called memory sites such as memorials and museums, monuments and historical sites; here, we may distinguish between those whose location is based on a notion of historical factuality (the scene of a massacre, for instance, or of a concentration camp) and the "artificial" sites, located in places of symbolic density. I propose to conceive of these different kinds of memory markers as *uncertain spaces* because of their polysemic and often disputed meanings – whose memory, exactly, is displayed here? –, and also because of their uncertain condition as a *public* space: who is entering these sites, what are the regulations and codes of access?

Finally, the most uncertain of all urban memory layers is the *plaza,* the public square, as the scene of urban indifference and of occasional densification, traversed by the flows of everyday life, only temporarily converted into a stage for memory practices and ritualized gatherings. The square is the (located) place and the (relational) space of urban simultaneity, the spatial co-existence of action, actors and meaning layers.

Crossing methodologies

The notion of simultaneity is crucial for my investigation. In general, I argue that we cannot understand semiotic processes in urban space without *simultaneously* considering their visual, spatial and discursive articulation. Separating these dimensions from each other, as practiced by strictly monodisciplinary approaches, will produce a limited understanding of urban semiosis. Though it has become commonplace to conceive of the urban as "text", the metaphorical concept of textuality leads to the conception of the urban as a two-dimensional, linearly ordered sphere. Furthermore, the urban certainly is not just an image, as literature on city images sometimes suggests: the urban as a primarily visual effect, a conjunction of mirrors and simulations, of visual culture taking over urban spatiality. And though the urban is of course structured in spatial terms, it is not to be reduced to the organization of space, as reductionist urbanistic or architectural perspectives may assume. Only the interconnection between these dimensions facilitates insights into the social and semiotic dynamics of memory, of space and bodies, all situated in history as a "narrative of simultaneity" (Schlögel 2009: 504).

So urbanity should be conceived and explored as a conjunction of visual, verbal and spatial configurations, practices and tensions. In my own research regarding urban memory staging, I combine qualitative research tools from ethnography (observation and experimentation of space *in situ*, interaction and interviews, photography) with analytical readings of text, of visual and verbal discourses, framed by the social and historical contexts, as well as with the construction of an analytical narration which combines texts and images. All of the three methodological fields involved (ethnography, discourse analysis and visual anthropology) are situated in the trans-disciplinary field of cultural sciences or *Kulturwissenschaften*, as this approach is known in German (see the "Concluding remarks" section).

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[16]   The urban void can be described as "an underlying stratum of ghostly present absences that recall the city's past" (Cupers/Miessen 2002: 78), so characteristic of the Berlin landscape in the nineties.

Where space is concerned, my ethnographic fieldwork provides a material (spatial, bodily) approach to the sites and places of "vibrating" memory, as well as the observation of significant constructions and transformations, performances, practices and conflicts in public space. With regard to discourse, the reading of public "talking" as well as the stimulated interview-discourse of actors (O'Rourke/Pitt 2007) facilitates the incorporation of language as social memory practice into semiotic analysis (semantic, syntactical and pragmatic constellations). Finally, visual anthropology offers crucial insights concerning the production and circulation of "meaningful" images as a key feature of memory culture, including the use of photography as research practice as well as the analytical reading of visual corpora.[17]

Notes from the empirical field: image, space, discourse

Reading images

Plaza de Mayo in the Argentine capital Buenos Aires is without doubt *the* epicenter of political movements and irruptions of all sizes and formats, from Argentine Independence two hundred years ago up to the present day (Lerman 2005; Sigal 2006). But of all the layers of meaning, the 'Mothers' movement', which challenged the last Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983), is probably the most widely known and acknowledged, inseparably connected to the location itself: *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. The mothers of disappeared activists, who first met here on the square in front of the Presidential Palace one day in April 1977 and from then on every single Thursday afternoon, have appropriated this place in semiotic terms, passing from temporary action to permanent inscription, not as monument or memorial but as a circle of pictograms of the *pañuelo* – the characteristic headscarf of the activists' mothers – painted by anonymous hands and refreshed from time to time.

In the everyday life of downtown Buenos Aires this inscription oscillates between visual presence and semiotic invisibility. The *pañuelos* are not to be overlooked, but at the same time they are visually neutralized, part of the plaza's usual landscape, covered by the same magic cape of invisibility like most monuments in public space. As a researcher, I would not have been able to *see* to which degree, and exactly how, the flows of urban life flood the plaza, if I had not taken pictures there over and over again,[18] from the viewpoint of a plaza user, a flâneur, thus recording subtle transformations and sudden appropriations of all kinds in the square, with a focus on the fixed meaning marker of the *pañuelos.*

This visual *flâneur* perspective also allowed me to record a most interesting transformation of the square into what might be called a semiotic 'battlefield'. Some years ago a

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17 For my theoretical framing as to this issue, see Belting (2001) and Berger/Mohr (1982); for photography, Barthes (1997) and Sontag (2003), of course, and the cultural theorist Geimer (2002). For visual anthropology, see Pink (2007) and Banks (2001); examples of the use of photography in the empirical research of urban *imaginarios* are to be found in García Canclini (1999) and Aguilar (2006).
18 My ethnographic research, which included image production, covered a period of six years, from 2004 to 2010.

series of signs that could be read as "counter-inscriptions", such as black signs of mourning and modified headscarf-pictograms, started to confront the *pañuelo* inscription. On a textual level, these were complemented by slogans that inverted the original sense of the icon's message: *víctimas del terrorismo*, "victims of terrorism", it says, mutilating the original formula (which was not verbalized on the square) of *víctimas del terrorismo de Estado*, "state terrorism". These semiotic counter-attacks, which were also created by anonymous hands but were clearly associated with family members of accused or sentenced perpetrators, are an evident symptom of the disputed, unstable nature of urban memory staging. In a further analytical step, these images are to be submitted to a closer "reading" in different keys: from the visual composition of the new inscriptions (as well as the composition of the ethnographic image), the relationship of these to the everyday life flow and impact on the "sense of place", to the broader legal and political context and the emergence of a new public (counter-)memory actor as a reaction to the institutionalizing of memory politics.[19]

Beyond the specific meaning constellations of this example, it is meant to show that for the understanding of memory in public space (appropriations, invisibilities, semiotic conflict), the recording and reading of visual material is highly relevant. It is the image, its materiality, composition and composing gaze that 'speaks' to us, and invites us to be 'listened to', though its 'meanings' are not always decipherable at first sight.

Talking spaces

The notion of talking public spaces has a deliberate double meaning, that of significant place and space that *talks* to us, and spaces that are constituted by public *talking* procedures *(*debates, discussion). The exploration of such talking spaces implies observing and reading spatial properties and extensions as well as knowledge of historical configurations of space.

The Square of the Three Cultures (Plaza de las Tres Culturas*)*, better known as Plaza de Tlatelolco, situated in the Northern part of Mexico City centre, is one of the most significant talking and talked-about spaces in the Mexican capital. It clearly corresponds to Huyssen's conceptualization of an urban palimpsest, made up of a dense combination of memory layers, all related to violent pasts. So trauma is to be read in space here:[20] the defeat of the last Aztec Emperor Cuauhtémoc trying to hold out against the Spanish invaders and their local allies, 1521, which is commemorated by the inscription near an archaeological site as the "birth of the mestizo nation". Many centuries later, in 1985, Tlatelolco became one of the principal settings for the most devastating tragedy in recent urban history, the earthquake of 19 September 1985. Above all, collective memory associates the word "Tlatelolco" with the shooting at a peaceful students' gathering on the plaza on an October afternoon in 1968; a state crime committed in an open space in the city's central district that has never been legally prosecuted.

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[19]   This political turn started in 2003 and became a legal reality with the abolition of amnesty laws in 2005; currently, more than a thousand former police and military servicemen are defendants or have already been sentenced in legal trials.

[20]   See, for a detailed semiotic reading of the square and its appropriations, Huffschmid (2010).

Today, the square itself is still an empty place, as it has been since its construction in the mid-sixties, surrounded by different architectural layers of pre-Hispanic ruins: the baroque church and what used to be "modern" architecture. The only spatial distinction is a memorial stele, installed in the middle of the plaza, to commemorate the "fallen" of 1968. In sharp contrast to the centrality of Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, Tlatelolco remains an urban void in everyday life, non-existent in the inhabitants' mental maps, with hardly anybody ever passing by. Only once a year is the Tlatelolco void revitalized through appropriation, as the meeting point for the annual memorial demonstration, when it becomes a meeting place for different generations, veterans and youngsters, and the stage for contrasting ways of appropriating and signifying the place (Huffschmid 2010).

Though the Tlatelolco trauma is certainly not *conserved* in the plaza's materiality, because there is no such a thing as petrified memory, my research led me to argue that the meanings of the march are entangled with the spatial configuration of the area. This becomes clear when we compare Tlatelolco with the huge Constitution Square in the historical centre, better known as Zócalo, considered the heart of the city, with an overwhelming co-existence of all kinds of actors and activities, protest and everyday practices, the center of political semiosis. Nevertheless, via ethnographic field observation of the commemoration march as spatial practice, I registered a revealing transformation: what had started as a specific density in the relative emptiness and invisibility of Tlatelolco turned into a diffuse gathering at the hyper-visible and over-charged Zócalo.

Discourse: reading, knowing, making sense

Discourse conceived as sense production in a social context[21] not only references to the third of the mentioned dimensions, that of text. It is to be understood as the key instance where it *all comes together*: the looking at spatial and visual configurations, the reading of verbal practices and strategies, the knowledge of – historical, legal, political, cultural – contexts. Nothing will make sense if we are not able to relate the things we *see* and observe to the things that are *said,* and to understand the interconnection of images, spaces and texts within the framework of history and social structure.

My final example is that of the profound division of the Argentine mothers' movement into two groups, more than 25 years ago. Nevertheless both factions share the same demonstration stage every Thursday afternoon on Plaza de Mayo. Their spatial performance is not decipherable for the uninformed observer: we see two groups marching in a circle, *la ronda,* around the statue in the middle of the plaza, strictly separated from each other, with no eye or verbal contact and no textual allusions to the other group. If we take a closer look we can see that they are performing contrasting stages of memory, with one group bearing individual photographs, still demanding "justice" for the "disappeared", and the other making unified political demands related to present-day issues, bearing no photographs at all. Visual and spatial information are not sufficient for analysis and

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[21]   As theoretical references for my conceptual approach to discourse, language, power and social semiosis (Huffschmid 2004, 2007), I will only mention here the linguists and discourse theorists Carbó (1995, 2001) and Link (1986), the semiologist Verón (Sigal/Verón 1986; Verón 1987, 1996) and the critical linguists Hodge/Kress (1979, 1988).

understanding of this division: one needs to obtain contextual knowledge of the different elements: of the historical framing, of course, but also of discourse strategies and self-location in the cultural field (the relationship between motherhood and politics, for instance), as well as in the political landscape (the Mothers' relationship to other political actors).

The urban, *lo urbano*, is simultaneity in public space: things do not just happen and exist *at the same time,* but also in the *same spaces,* competing, overlapping, generating tension, and not just co-existence, but conflict. Exploring the urban means more than observing, reading or experimenting: it implies the need to *connect* these dimensions of urban life and semiosis. Only the dialectical and flexible movement between proximity and closeness (the micro perspective of ethnography) and distance (by analytical procedures and by framing through context) allows us to decipher the range of meanings produced in urban space.

Concluding remarks: Cultural studies as urban studies

The images and narrations that constitute urban culture – urban memory stagings, as in the case of my own research – are recreated by artistic and aesthetic procedures and practices of representation – be they literature, the visual arts, photography, cinematography or music production –, and can of course be studied as cultural (re)creations. This cultural production and artistic imagination in and about the city is adequately explored and analysed by the different branches of the classical sciences of culture: namely literature, performance, film and music studies.

However, I have argued here for a different, broader and more "anthropological" understanding of cultural sciences as a sort of *meta-discipline* composed of diverse disciplinary fields such as cultural anthropology, language, media or architecture studies. This meta-discipline is able to analyze the cultural production *of* (not *in* or *about*) the city, namely experience, functioning and manifestations of the urban, *lo urbano.* From this perspective, the city is not primarily conceived of as a stage or as material for artistic recreations, but as produced and signified by urban and spatial (social, cultural, political) practices and by urban *imaginarios*, composed of competing perceptions, experiences and discourses.

This understanding of *Kulturwissenschaften* draws on theoretical reflections on discourse and politics, on history and power, as developed in British *Cultural Studies* from the late sixties onwards (Stauff 2007). In this theoretical environment, inspired by post-structural as well as by postcolonial cultural theory, the valorization of everyday culture comes with a reconceptualization of culture "as a dimension without which historical transformation, past and present, simply could not adequately be thought" (Stuart Hall 1981 quoted in Stauff 2007: 115). Thus, culture is conceived as the producer of specific social relations (e.g. youth cultures, gender relations, ethnic differentiation), which from a postcolonial point of view are characterized by a fundamental ambivalence towards empowerment and resistance *strategies*, and the reproduction of hegemonic and hierarchical *structures* of society.

From this perspective, the anthropological notion of "experience" must certainly be relativized by a (post)structuralist emphasis on discourse formations and meaning struc-

tures as postulated by authors like Saussure, Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Foucault. At the same time, diversity and the aesthetic insurgence of cultural practices, strategies and tactics (Gramsci, de Certeau) tend to subvert and open up semiotic systems, and to facilitate the exercise of "radical heterogeneity" (Stuart Hall 1981 quoted in Stauff 2007: 118). The empirical studies inscribed in this theoretical approach used to focus on the politics of representation, on processes of (de)colonisation and cultural translation, on structures and strategies of identity-building, on difference and social "othering" that are highly relevant for the analysis of heterogeneous and hybrid, fragmented and segregated Latin American cities.

As we saw, urban studies inspired by critical cultural theories and anthropology also challenge traditional methodology. They emphasise the necessity of a permanent reflection on methods, not as a discussion of techniques but as a conceptual, self-reflexive and epistemological debate about the possibilities of data collection and of knowledge production between different *disciplinary horizons*.[22] This consciousness of methodology and conceptualizations as an ongoing (de- and re-)construction of categories also applies to the variety of *cultural horizons* involved in transnational or transregional research projects. As implied in the "translational turn" postulated by Bassnett/Lefevere (1990) for cultural studies as a whole, the challenge of translation goes far beyond idiomatic translation and refers not only to the study of transnational phenomena, such as the so-called "global cities" or transnational memory cultures, but implies a general reflection on implicit cultural impositions and the need for conceptual translation in the research process itself. This contains the potential for amplification and decentering of the analytical gaze, as argued at the beginning of this article, though it also carries the risk of simplification, for example by stating and fixing cultural "specificities" of non-Euro-American cultures.[23]

Finally, this broader notion of cultural sciences can be distinguished from other social sciences by its focus on (the interconnections between) meaning and power, on the aesthetic and semiotic dimension of social and political phenomena, by its potentially self-reflective attitude, its interest in narrative modes, and, in general, by its constructivist "nature". Thus, for an adequate understanding of urban life conceived as an outcome of social and cultural practices, border-crossing methodologies as well as the decentering of the Euro-American gaze are not just fashionable options for a more "cosmopolitan" urban studies, but an absolute necessity if we are to overcome our partial blindness.

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22 See, for an exercise in transdisciplinary analytical practices concerning discourse and space, Huffschmid/Wildner (2009).

23 At the conference "The Transnational Study of Culture" (Conference Report 2009), Wolfgang Hallet and Ansgar Nünning ("Lost or Found in Translation? The Risks and Promises of Conceptual Transfer") and Doris Bachmann-Medick ("The Transnational Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective") argued that scientific cultures and disciplines are not to be seen as closed systems of knowledge (production) but as already translated, transferred and processed knowledges from other disciplinary and cultural contexts.

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