

Roemer van Toorn

Rethinking the City Spectacle

“Let’s have a Cosmopolitan!” The campaign image of a martini glass filled with flavored vodka, a drop of Roses lime, and just enough cranberry to make it oh so pretty in pink, promotes Linz as European Capital of Culture 2009. The number nine of the Linz campaign logo – perhaps also to be read as a comma – chooses to sit very close to the cocktail cherry. If the pin-up cherry stands for a zero or a point referring to a much needed standpoint for Linz as cultural capital, it is a tempting enigma. One thing is for sure: Cosmopolitans were the favorite cocktails of the New York City girls of the TV show *Sex and the City*, but why the city marketers of Linz want to bring out a toast with a Cosmopolitan, or promote a belly button in combination with the number nine, escapes me. While their naïve typographical brandscapes avoid traveling further than a subversive cliché, I want to dig deeper. Shouldn’t we start rethinking the city spectacle, now that cities have become places of “spectacle-ization”¹, increasingly made dependent on what city marketers make of our imaginations? Instead of disqualifying the spectacle all together – as the classical left used to practice in the safe haven of academia – we should investigate how ethical spectacles could be created that surpass the traveling circus of “cultural capitals” full of cultural and historical theme parks. To do so is not simple. Spectacular culture is most often designed to manipulate people and take their money, not to set the stage for democracy. But at the same time, we have to recognize that consumer culture – its crafted fantasies and stimulated desires – speaks to something deep and real within us. The challenge is – now that the people of Linz have filled their stomachs, live in a prosperous, green and healthy climate after an era of industrial hardship – what kind of spectacles could make them dance? This urgent question is by no means an easy one, but without a framework of understanding and alternative theory, any means of instrumentality will be futile.

Comma City

¹ Spectacle-ization is a term coined by John Urry, see: *The Power of Spectacle*, in: *Visionary Power, Producing the Contemporary City*, International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, Nai Publishers, Rotterdam, 2007, pp. 131-141

In our everyday life, we come across something which we could call the suburbanization of imagination. The experiential landscape we live in has become synthetic, fabricated nature. Actually, for us, the synthetic approximates the natural. Films, TV, the iPod, digital cameras, magazines, advertising, computers and music are now indivisible from our experience. Once upon a time, movies, TV, radio merely commented upon or reflected our experience. Now, however, our exposure to them is so constant – partly because their role in our economy is so integral – that, rather than merely commenting upon or reflecting our experience, these communication forms comprise much of our experience. The second, more invisible but just as consequent experience of landscape that has imprinted on us our notions of truth and falsity is also, in a way, synthetic; a blend, or what I have elsewhere called the “Society of the And”². This synthesis of the conjunction “And” is manifested in an actual, physical landscape, the suburb, neither city nor country but instead an amalgam of the two. Our perception – the way we look at and experience our world – has changed, not only through the way we produce more complex objects and surfaces through digital techniques, but by driving our cars: seeing how the world passes by with music on our iPods along jump cut suburbanization, or how our travels through the world as tourists transform our imagination. Imaginations informed by the suburban experience are also a very recent addition to cultural life for Linz. But the fact is that today, a large amount of the population worldwide is raised in suburban-like conditions, and that has started to have a significant impact on the direction of our culture at large. The planned naturalism, the managed, neurotic landscape, the awkward “in-between” condition of the suburbs – this feels “right” to many of us, things that are two or three things at once, that are resolutely, calmly, weirdly impure – to us, these places do feel like home. We are even drawn to them. And we also create them. The distinction between the city and the country is blurred. To such imaginations, the classical distinction between, say, the context of architecture and the context of entertainment feels less than accurate, because its purity fails to correspond with the hybrid landscape we experience. To make a long story short: in the place of the classical either/or, city versus country condition, a suburban imagination has emerged that

² Roemer van Toorn, *Society of the And*, in: *Archilab, The Naked City/La ville à nu*, ed. by Bart Lootsma, Editions HXX, Orleans, 2004. pp. 34-47

prefers the creation of cultural products, gestures and artifacts that are both/and, or that are “in-between”. Our looking for them, and our demands, create hybrids, blends and mongrels. Any context of itself is not enough. We have conquered the world. The walled city of the early Middle Ages, the enclosed and comprehensive spheres, could be replaced by the metaphor of foam according to Peter Sloterdijk³. Depending on how the cocoons and bubbles of life stick together, humanity spreads itself over the globe. It all depends on how the different spheres are linked together in a continuous field of urbanization. Within this development, Linz has taken a unique position. Located between the cultural city Vienna and the tourist city Salzburg, the formation of the city of Linz has changed drastically in the last twenty years, turning it into the European equivalent of Silicon Valley. Linz is no longer a point city, nor a linear city, but – just as the city marketers have propagated in their campaign with the number nine – a comma city, or in other words a centerless city where each point is followed up by yet another addition, being either a listing, joining or isolating kind of comma⁴.

While the endless suburbanization of our imagination has taken command, the idea of the city, as a locale producing civilization, has lost ground. For centuries, the city has been a seat of fire for enlightenment and emancipation, but since the collapse of the Berlin wall, the acceptance of the logic of the existing capitalist order, market economy and so forth, the idea of city-ness has been vanishing rapidly. Centers of metropolitan cities have lost their centrifugal function. We have freed ourselves from a classical notion of place. Cultural ties, loyalties and identities have expanded beyond national borders and systems of control. Individuals and groups who surf transnational television or the internet simultaneously inhabit different worlds. Turkish and German speaking transmigrants live in Linz, though not only in Linz, because they also inhabit transnational networks, horizons of expectation, ambitions and contradictions. We live where we happen to be depending on the moment. As city hoppers, we arrange our own urban menu, choosing from Vienna, Munich, Berlin, London, Paris or Linz. Such a menu of multiple choices creates a distinction between

³ See: Peter Sloterdijk, Spheres trilogy, vol. 1-3, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2007

⁴ When a comma points to a list, it stands for “and” or sometimes “or”. The joining comma is there to combine different parts into a whole, and the isolating comma – also called bracketing comma – is there to mark a weak interruption that does not disturb the smooth flow. Several images of Linz can illustrate these different comma characteristics.

city dwellers within one city, even if they are neighbors. And many of us live in the periphery, where we work and shop without ever going to the historical center. When we go to the old city centre, it becomes just another attraction on the urban menu of furniture boulevards, do-it-yourself shops and attraction parks. This spatial freedom challenges our sense of community and public identity. Urban life is reduced to shopping, fashion, music and Hollywood entertainment. Public space is no longer what it once was; it has increasingly been contained. Less evident, as Rem Koolhaas correctly remarks, “is that we allow ourselves to be lulled into a false privacy, in which privacy is in fact traded for security, where we become willing participants in a regime of constant surveillance.”⁵ The new suburbs of Linz – such as SolarCity – may be designed as safe, clean, efficient, tidy and green places, but they lack all kinds of qualities attributable to a city. Different population groups, rich and poor, live isolated from each other. Economic activity and stimulating cultural endeavor are wanting, nor do these suburbs possess a city-ness and architecture able to cope with change. And there is nothing at all of a vibrant street life in these shopping centers. Sociologists term this condition a “closed city”⁶. The segregation of functions, a homogeneous population, techniques of zoning and regulations see to it that anything that does not fit in is shut out. A thicket of rules dictates what should or should not happen on the historical, economic, ecological and social fronts. Nothing may offend or provoke, everything must be arranged neatly in rows.

Singapore on the Danube

Mayor Franz Dobusch and his team have performed miracles. Everybody has work and lives a long and healthy life in a green and urban region with a prosperous future gleaming on the horizon. In that sense, Mr Dobusch reminds me of the philosopher-king Lee Kuan Yew, who governed the city state Singapore for more than 40 years, creating the tropical center of excellence many Asian cities have tried to copy. Without adhering to any precise political ideology, Lee minutely prescribed for his fellow citizens such details of life as the environment, living patterns, individual and

⁵ Rem Koolhaas, In Search of Authenticity, in: *The Endless City*, ed. by Ricky Burdett and Deyan Sudjic, London, Phaidon, 2008, p. 323

⁶ Richard Sennett, *The Open City*, in: *The Endless City*, see above or: http://www.urban-age.net/0_downloads/Berlin_Richard_Sennett_2006-The_Open_City.pdf

collective interests and aims, right down to the prohibition of such behavior as spitting in public and smoking. Mr Dobusch, just like Lee, has created the perfect welfare state, characterized as it is by the highest technological efficiency, extensive use of information instruments, widespread prosperity, excellent public services (schools, kindergartens and hospitals), high levels of employment, an efficient and enlightened bureaucracy, and social relations mediated by exclusive functional requirements. Mr Dobusch has gone even further; Linz is a Singapore without the death penalty. But the open cities Singapore and Linz seem to be are in fact closed and rigid cities within the “non-decisional” process of the consumerist and multimedia homogenization of the citizen-consumers I have described earlier. This process threatens individual autonomy at its deepest level, since it impinges on the cognitive and emotive formation of preferences and political will. These societies seem to achieve a maximum of social integration not by resorting to the imposition of totalitarian ideologies or direct repression, but through the de-structuring of the public sphere and the isolation and dispersion of political agents. This new, sophisticated form of “guardianship”, as Danilo Zolo⁷ prefers to call it, seems to dispel the very idea of the political city. In today’s world, no more perfect example could be found of the modern antipolis and a total lack of political ideologies or public discussion than Singapore. It is all about the sacralization of consensus we know from Third Way⁸ politics, the blurring of frontiers between left and right, embracing the pluralism of neo-liberal capitalism. The problem of the welfare state in Linz and many other democratic cities (as well as their countries) is that its universal ideals of the “free market” operate through the informal logic and spatial formation of the indistinct. Within that system, there are opportunities, but if any ideological awareness or political vision is absent, you fall victim to means of instrumentality while our civilization is in danger. Endless suburbanization takes command. Not so much globalization, terrorist threats, or Europe’s shrinking population, but the ongoing “soft revolution”⁹ of neo-liberal capitalism is to blame. Cities are confronted with transformations that threaten the very foundations of their civil existence. Instead of understanding the new realities emerging, more and more people cling to what is

⁷ Danilo Zolo, *Democracy and Complexity, A Realistic Approach*, Pennsylvania University Press, 1992

⁸ Anthony Giddens, *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*, Polity, London, 1999

⁹ Slavoj Zizek, *The Ongoing Soft Revolution*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2004, pp. 292-323

quasi-familiar. Even changes for the better, emerging in the new realms of our contemporary existence, provoke anxious resistance. It's time for Linz to choose a different punctuation, to mark points, and move beyond Linz as a comma city.

Banal Cosmopolitanism

The suburbanization of our existence – life in the antipolis of neoliberal centrality – gives our world a cosmopolitan outlook. With globalization, cosmopolitanism has arrived in our life worlds, something the elite in the 19th century could only dream of in their Parisian cafés. “The human condition has itself become cosmopolitan,” says Ulrich Beck. “A sense of boundarylessness, an everyday, historically alert, reflexive awareness of ambivalences in a milieu of blurring differentiations and cultural contradictions emerges. It reveals not just the “anguish” but also the possibility of shaping one’s own life and social relations under conditions of cultural mixture.”¹⁰ The result of this cosmopolitanism is a patchwork of urbanities, quasi-cosmopolitan, but simultaneously provincial, whose central characteristics is its rejection of traditional relations of responsibility. The experience of delimitation and interdependence we have found in comma cities such as Linz (see images) has in the mean time condensed and become normalized into what Ulrich Beck calls “banal cosmopolitanism”. Banal cosmopolitanism is manifested in concrete, everyday ways by the fact that differentiations between “them” and “us” are becoming confused, both at the national and international level. Go to the shopping world PlusCity, and you will catch another glimpse of cultural potpourri. “The modest, familiar, local, circumscribed and stable, our protective shell is becoming the playground of universal experiences; [the] place, whether it be Manhattan or East Prussia, Malmo or Munich, becomes the locus of encounters and interminglings or, alternatively, of anonymous coexistence and the overlapping of possible worlds and global dangers, all of which requires us to rethink the relation between [the] place and [the] world.”¹¹ What we need, according to Ulrich Beck, and I fully agree with him, is a new cosmopolitan outlook where the intermingling between us and them, the national and the international, the provincial and the global is developed through a new political vision. Instead of ignoring the provincial behind huge walls – by building yet again

¹⁰ Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2006, p. 10

¹¹ Ulrich Beck, see above, p. 10

more shopping malls and highways just like in America – Linz should improve the best regional architectural practices, which it has a wealth of as part of its authentic culture.

Standpoint City

Now that this is clear, that a lot needs to be done in our highly developed cities, I would like to propose – by way of a thought experiment – one unique project for the city of Linz. In this project, both the cosmopolitan outlook and the need to rethink the spectacle are decisive factors. For me, the creation of a museum as a spectacle, inviting a starchitect, and the possible museumification of the center, in one word: branding the city of Linz, are all fine tactics. The question is not, do we want a spectacular museum to land in Linz or not, but what kind of progressive politics could be installed through the museum – that is the relevant issue in our society of cultural spectacles. What kind of counter-public sphere could we create and program against the hyper-nostalgic celebration of history in a city like Linz? Cities are full of fabricated memories at the expense of the original. Often, hidden and controversial memories of a place disappear. Peter Eisenman's recent war memorial in Berlin not only dismantles, but also neutralizes much of the horror by its formal architectural gesture. What we need are "ethetical spectacles", says Stephen Duncombe¹² imaginations, sensual experiences and even dreams that are not created by media-savvy experts and then handed down to the rest of us to watch, consume, and believe, but instead spectacles that are participatory: dreams the public can mold and shape itself. They should be active spectacles that work only if people help create them. They need to be open-ended: setting stages to ask questions and leaving silence to formulate new answers. And instead of covering over or replace reality by an overscripted maze of infotainment, they should perform and amplify the truth and be recognizable. My proposal is that Linz open a museum about the true face of Fascism. The anti-Semitism of the young Adolf Hitler, possibly directed against Ludwig Wittgenstein at the "Realschule" in Linz (1903), could be one of the starting points. The idea of Shumon Basar¹³ to re-install the Nazis' "Entartete Kunst" exhibition (1937) would also help in the creation of a counter-public space for agonistic debate

¹² Stephen Duncombe, *Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy*, The New Press, New York, 2007

¹³ See: Shumon Basar, *The Problem is "What is the problem?"*, in this publication, p. xy

that would allow the mobilization of passions towards democratic objectives. Calling it the “Hitler Museum“ would be misleading. What the Nazis tried to do, making a “Führermuseum” in Linz with more art than ever in Vienna, would be the wrong kind of spectacle. It is not about authorship, or individuals per se. That the museum will raise controversy and debate is essential, as long as it makes history topical and operative. Researching today’s more advanced forms of Fascism, and all other kinds of racism re-emerging in the light of banal cosmopolitanism, would be a brave act of utmost educational importance and social engagement for a city such as Linz, where the majority of the middle class welcomed Fascist Germany at the time of the “Anschluss” (1938). With a museum “Against Fascism”, re-enacting democracy, Linz could unlock its own history and show the world its social commitment. Another Bilbao effect – “where architecture spectacle accumulates to the point of capital itself¹⁴”, should be surpassed. A radical different kind of image building – an ethical spectacle – could be developed against the architectural monumentality of Fascism. While making a point on the world map, city-ness would return in and around the museum “Against Fascism” in Linz. Such a political vision would challenge the suburban imagination of Linz on a cosmopolitan scale.

BILDCREDITS für alle Fotos:

Photo: Roemer van Toorn

¹⁴ Hal Foster, *Master Builder*, in: *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*, London, Verso 2002, p. 41