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# **Jorge Oteiza and *The City as Work of Art*:**

## **Aesthetic education against the spectacularization of the contemporary Bilbao city**

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*ABSTRACT. Following the process of de-industrialization of Bilbao in the late 80s, and in order to revitalize the city economically, it is subject to the requirement of certain transactions in relation to its image using management models, both cultural and urban, instituted after the introduction of the Guggenheim Museum in 1997.*

*Some of these processes have generated in recent years cityscapes with iconographic discourse as a consumable product that, at the same time, resulting in processes of gentrification, privatization and segregation of the social fabric; though, beyond that, there is a process of legitimation of the imaginary (Castoriadis) established aesthetically that collapses the possibility of a truly critical thought and action.*

*However, in 1988 was conceived in Bilbao a proposal from several Basque institutions to build a cultural center in the city. In this center, which preceded the Guggenheim as the first choice for economic and cultural revitalization of the city, the artist Jorge Oteiza had the last opportunity to implement his proposed Institute of Aesthetic Studies, where the art praxis (linked to an existential awareness of death) and an optimal collaboration with the architecture were intended to influence the development of an aesthetic education of the citizen that promoted the transformation of the current orders of representation. This center, however, would never take place.*

*KEYWORDS. Bilbao, city's image, spectacularization, integration art-architecture, aesthetic education, Alhóndiga Cultural Centre.*

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## 1. Urban landscape and the imaginary

The imaginary is the instance where images mediate between the human thinking processes and their approach to reality. In this regard, symbolic manifestations of a culture can be summarised as the permanent and continuous crystallisation of the imaginary. At the same time though, symbols encourage the configuration of the imaginary through a process of constant reciprocity.

It is precisely this imaginary with instituting function, understood as a single set of reality representation modes, which allows a society to be maintained ultimately in cohesion. In this context, what Castoriadis called 'symbolic significations' – i.e. the fabric of significations orienting the life of a given society and of its members, which will provide unity to the total institution of that society, become relevant.

'The institution is a socially sanctioned symbolic [institutionalised] network, in which a functional component and an imaginary component are combined in variable proportions and relation'<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, a specific and particularly relevant quality of this research both at social and individual level, is the link between the imaginary with desire. In psychoanalysis, desire is a constant flow and has no object as such. Desire is a social phenomenon, a desiring production organised through a set of repressions and permissions. In this sense, it is important to recognise how desire is channelled and coded into objects which give representation to a drive which lacks representation in itself. The concept of desire is required to explain the relationship between the images and the subject in society in order to create its imaginary as a representation of the environment and therefore, acting on the environment.

The ways of representing the world and the coding of desire (plus the fulfilment index) are some of the keys to understanding both the establishment and the maintenance of certain social representations, as well as their questioning and rupture. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari considered in their work *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1972), their understanding of social libidinal investment based on two poles: the first tends to standardise desire and therefore make it predictable; while the second, tends to escape from such massification. It is worth questioning now the ways in which the cultural logic of late capitalism (F. Jameson) boosts standardisation and allows escapism. In this sense, cultural productions increasingly comply to a greater extent with a social compensatory function which demonstrates the fusion between the economic and cultural spheres.

Therefore, we could infer that each culture is the result of two processes where the aesthetic dimension fulfils a major function: the institution and rupture of the imaginary. This rupture would be impossible without, not only manifestations favoured by changes in material conditions but also by a creative will, a 'reactive function' of the imaginary (C. Castoriadis). This function operates according to the non-material needs and objects of desire inherent in any culture. These are at times codified and instituted by culture, while other times are fundamentally questioned.

Nowadays, the city is subject to the demands of certain operations related to the city's image, understood as the main attraction for new economies. As a result, the city poses many contradictions in relation to its urban planning expression: historical centres are revalued, museumified or gentrified as new focus areas where turn-key urban planning operations are erected, such as shopping centres, etc., and coexisting with an apparent dissolution of the urban grid, accompanied by social tissue fragmentations and the privatisation of public space.

Urban planning processes therefore generate landscapes where the physical and the social local environment are manifested in the form of iconographic discourse as a product of easy consumption. The processes relate to a wider strategy which is the generation of the city's image as an object of symbolic consumption.

In his famous work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord adapts the fetish nature of commodities presenting life as a huge accumulation of spectacles. Debord's analysis is based on the daily experience of the impoverishment of life, and its fragmentation into more and more widely separated spheres and the loss of any bonding factor in society. However, the spectacle is defined as a 'social relationship between people that is mediated by images'<sup>2</sup> which generates imaginaries, forms of closeness and understanding of reality. The spectacle is the separation mediated by images which in its process of the replacement of the real and transmutation into commodity, segregates the social praxis and communication while manipulating conscious perception and its memory. ¿Could we then talk about the urban landscape turning into spectacle? For Debord, the spectacle takes over all social activity: from urban planning to political parties, from art to science, everyday life... reality is replaced by its image everywhere.

In *Design and Crime* (2004), Hal Foster extrapolated the confrontation between Art Nouveau's "integral design" and Loos's rational approach to reclaim an approximation to architectural practices which recovers critical functions. The entire architectural design in Art Nouveau represented perfection for the designer, understood as the consummation of a longed for completeness of the individual. But as Foster pointed out, Loos's suspicions in this regard led him to the concept of an individual as complete as finished, excluded from any future life, development and desire. Instead of illustrating a subject embedded with qualities, 'integral design' portrayed a subject lacking in qualities, such as distinction and differentiation skills, what Kraus<sup>3</sup> would call a lack of 'room to manoeuvre' in the building of free subjectivity.

The articulation between the functional and the symbolic within the capitalist market would place the individual in his function, inside a system which is nourished by the practice of immediate and constant consumerism; a society populated by 'a whole historically original consumer's appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and "spectacles"'.<sup>4</sup> Within this framework, the production relationship with the individual takes place through the management of desire, a new narcissism development where everything is image and nothing has interiority, an apotheosis of the subject which means also their own disappearance, excluded from future effort, development and desire, specifically due to the very link of desire to the present. In this way, the individual retains the certainty of everyday imaginary encouraged by a hyper-density of signs, but at the same time, being disenfranchised from a given space and time. In this regard, the world is presented to the individual as recognisable and inhospitable at the same time, and 'any practical meaning of the future and of collective projects is eliminated'<sup>5</sup>. In this way, Lacan described schizophrenia as the result of a breakdown in the signifying chain. This cultural schizophrenia would provoke the living of mere presents with great vivacity and intensity through the pure, literal, material signifier, with the possibility of leading to euphoria or angst states and the loss of reality.

According to Henri Lefebvre, the urban represents the perpetual work of its inhabitants, the city without its architecture; a flowing dimension which escapes attempts of control. In fact, social insubordination at an urban social scale is manifested unexpectedly in multiple instances; but, ¿do these actions imply any change in the personal sphere of the individual, both in their ways of representing reality and in their development as citizens? And beyond that: Is there any critical effectiveness in the cultural sphere or do we have to admit that any aesthetic manifestation reinforces the instituted representation order? Probably, as Walter Benjamin predicted, the self-alienation of mankind has reached a degree which allows it to live its own destruction as aesthetic enjoyment. However, the imaginary has yet another facet. The capacity of the imaginary to double on institutionalised

reality, opening blocked reality possibilities, is a fact which can ultimately mobilise social energy to drive the transformation of the instituted reality.

Many activist artists have searched for (which echoed increasingly in the 90s) decentralising in a public space which aims to ensuring more semantic clarity and uni-directional symbolic meaning in the interpretation order. These practices question the dominant and instituted representation mode of the real. In this sense, art as such, operates from and for the imaginary, both in the legitimization of the instituted as in its fall into crisis. ('The role of the imaginary is at the root of both alienation and the creation of history')<sup>6</sup>. Moving forward, we may wonder about the effectiveness of these so-called 'critical' or 'antagonistic' practices in an economic and cultural context like the one in hand. In this sense, the aesthetization of everyday life does not imply the dissolution of art into life, but the adaptation to an Institution-Art form, which needs to answer to market and entertainment dynamics. A logic which huge absorption potential deactivates any act of resistance, any critical tension, turning any anti-hegemonic practice or discourse into a part of the process of renovation of the institutionalised art market (B. Groys). Multiplicity of critical discourses are reabsorbed, the aesthetic qualities of a political aesthetic praxis, in as much as orienting its aim to transforming ways of life, can evolve into another strategy of legitimisation of the instituted.



Fig. 1

Bilbao is the paradigm of the process so far treated. Following the process of de-industrialization of the city of Bilbao in the late 1980s, a number of strategies aimed at the economic reactivation of the city began to take shape. These strategies were subject to the demands of certain operations related to the city's image through

cultural and urban planning management models instituted after the implementation of the Guggenheim Museum in 1997. Since then, the city is a matter for review by the institutions to develop the strategic competitive in the new economy and global markets.

Last year, the ancient wine warehouse rebuilt as the new Leisure and Culture Center Alhóndiga held an exhibition about the success of Bilbao's strategic plan in the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai. This celebration, to which only had been invited businessmen and politicians, occupied, ironically, an exhibition space dedicated to a course on Walter Benjamin and the city. The Mayor of Bilbao, Jose María Azkuna presented two lectures. In the first place, in his paper Pedro Luis Uriarte, (economist, from the Fundación Metropoli, the main driver of the transformation of Bilbao) presented the "Innovation" as the solution to the crisis. After the "industrial revolution" in the city it came the "urban revolution" (the "Miracle in Bilbao", in his own words) that got out of the crisis in the eighties and reached the "level of excellence". And now it's time to start the "knowledge revolution" and make Bilbao the "Basque Metropolis of Knowledge", in order to "generate" and "protect" the talent.

According to Alfonso Vegara, (urbanist) presented "Strategic Diagnostics and Future Options": the construction of city is a sector of future and raises a number of strategic axes for so-called "knowledge economy". He proposes the "Bilbao Digital and Design District": this would mean that "the core areas of excellence in the city were the engine of transformation towards a knowledge economy". In his own words, "make the heart of Bilbao, the great downtown of Bilbao, the most innovative technology park in Europe, trying to use all urban assets." One of the three innovation axes is called "Art and Technology: Design" in which highlights the museums, galleries and cultural centers like The Alhóndiga, where this conference was taking place.

## **2. "Alhóndiga Cultural Center" and *The city as work of art***

But in this building, in the Alhóndiga, built in 1904, which had been unused since 1975, there was another project before the Guggenheim Museum. Bilbao's economic situation at the end of the 1980s due to the process of de-industrialisation urgently demanded a change of strategy to reactivate the city. In 1988, the Mayor of Bilbao at the time, J. M. Gorordo, promoted this ambitious cultural project as an instrument for economic and cultural renovation. This project, which would never be built, was called the Alhóndiga Cultural Center of Bilbao - popularly known as *the cube*.

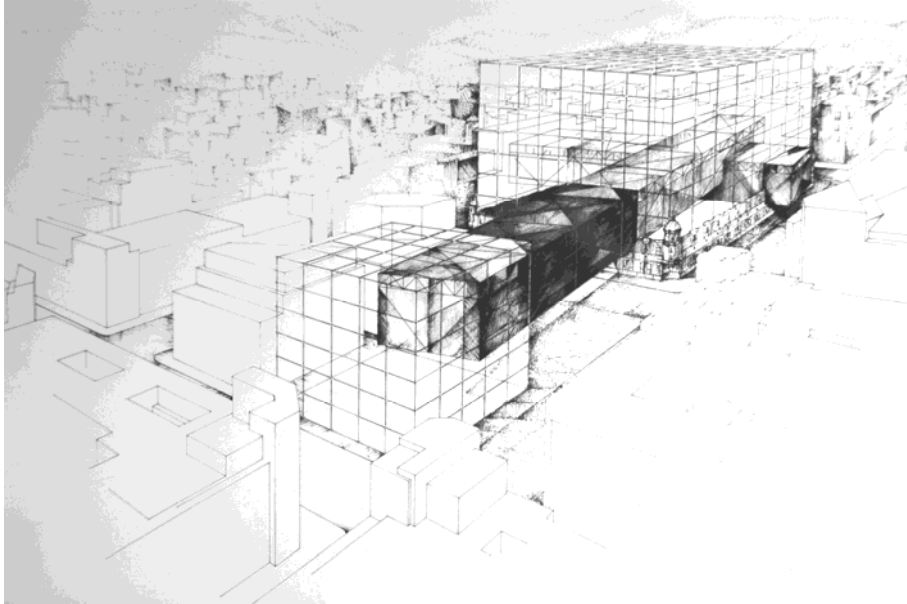


Fig. 2

Apart from its architecture, was a building of contents. It was the first major cultural project to reactivate the city. The Mayor Gorordo proposed to the sculptor Jorge Oteiza and the architects Fco. Javier Sáenz de Oiza and Juan Daniel Fullaondo to intervene in a pre-existing building, the old wine warehouse or Alhóndiga to adapt it to the new cultural needs. Jorge Oteiza (Orío, 1908 – Donostia/San Sebastian, 2003) was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, at the peak of his career as a sculptor when he was awarded at the Sao Paulo Biennial in 1957, he decided to abandon his artistic practice at the laboratory claiming his experimental purpose to be completed. The experimental purpose was the result of an investigation about sculpture in which Oteiza reduced the material expression, a “de-occupation”, to create “actives” and “receptives” spaces, the “spiritual residence of human being”. As is commonplace among many Modern artists, Oteiza considered it to be the time to project his experience as an artist in the framework of the city with the aim of achieving a cultural reactivation of the Basque Country.

‘The most important task in the artist’s creation is the knowledge of the issues which need to be spatially treated with the work. One of the symptoms of the spatial disease of mankind in the City is the feeling of inferiority and anxiety which provoked a lack of freedom and the impossibility of making decisions, of rejecting stimuli constantly targeted at him from the outside. Everything drives him, answers him and speaks for him. [...] What is important and will decide the nature of art are the spiritual needs of today’s mankind which need to be covered by its use<sup>7</sup>.

For decades, this aim materialised in several cooperation projects between artists and architects and his intent was stated in a theory paper which summarised the principles and results of his knowledge as an artist. Its practical projection for the city aimed at becoming a way to aesthetically solve the ambivalences of art and the paradoxes of the subject in the contemporary city. In *The city as work of art* (1958),

Oteiza analyses the different ways of cooperation between art and architecture, providing arguments to place us in front of a correct communion of knowledges when the formal result does not differentiate between work of art and architecture due to an intimate integration. However, we often find architecture and the work of art in juxtaposed positions, a fact which unveils a strategy of art as "embellishment".

For Oteiza, the concept of "beauty", characteristic of naturalisms, is an ideal which must not be pursued in the operation of the true work of art, unless beauty is identified with aesthetic truth. Oteiza prefers not to use the term, as he considered the concept to be inherited from beauty as a concept lacking on aesthetic prestige, born by Socratic modification which relocated the knowledge of salvation in Ethics, detaching therefore art from its essential purpose:

'no great artist has ever given up the central space corresponding to his existential knowledge of salvation, to the creative commitment of his political knowledge, nor in the restricted sense of illustrating or serving a social or political commitment, but in the whole dimension of curing our tragic feeling, any limit, insecurity and fear in our conscience. There is an unconcealable need of will for transcendence in mankind which is aesthetically achieved through art in life and which must not be mistaken with the nature of exclusively religious solutions'<sup>8</sup>.

Oteiza had already expressed his opposition to the 'spectacularization' of the city as a result of a 'formalist' and 'expression' art. This is, in his own words, a 'secondary function of art'. Instead, he vindicated an art based on 'de-occupation' of space, an artistic practice integrated and dissolved in architectural construction at the spiritual service of the subject. The evasion of the 'Being toward death' (in Heidegger's words) is for Oteiza 'religious', when he relies on an external solution; or 'aesthetic', when it is personal and associated to the artistic practice. The treatment of the tragic feeling (as in Miguel de Unamuno and at times, Martin Heidegger) through art is not truly addressed by the expression spectacle, but by an 'intimate' and 'receptive' art.

'Do we still need to believe as Gropius in the need to increase the receptive capacity of the citizen? It will be his understanding and selection capacity, critical, moral and political strength, his opposition to domination, outrage and continuous individuality disposition from the outside. [...] The city itself was born, before a material refuge of society, as a spiritual construction against nature, the world and death. The first city in pre-history is a religious refuge for the spiritual intimacy of mankind. The suffering projecting in every direction due to the lack of a basic aesthetic education; the lack of respect to the public which entails that lack of aesthetic education for the space; the criteria of forced occupation of the visual art area, of the aesthetic and public area of art. [...] The lack of spatial intelligence which opens up the unique and only frontier between the different occupations into which the city's residents are classified. This lack has made us think about the urgency of an Institute for Aesthetic Research'<sup>9</sup>.

This institute, also named by Oteiza as Laboratory on Comparatory Aesthetics, intended to be a research centre for different art practices, aimed at the aesthetic education of citizens, in an existential and political sense and for the cultural reactivation of the Basque Country. This project adopted many forms, potential locations and forms of cooperation throughout the years, but was never carried out.

Thus, Oteiza typified art as a “political school of awareness”, where the political capacity of in the city will not be the modification of the landscape as the ultimate aim, but the transformation of the subject. Oteiza condemned a state of culture where the subject had lost their political capacity as a possibility for self-realisation and where existential issues were resolved through mechanisms which are alien to the subject. Therefore, despite being a modern way of thinking, Oteiza’s project intends to aesthetically “re-enchant” the urban space and implement pedagogical projects based on the aesthetic education of the citizen, as a means of existential re-politization.

Bilbao’s Council offered Oteiza the opportunity of starting up the Institute for Aesthetic Research in the Alhóndiga Project in the 80’s. It will become an instrument for cultural renovation, not only for the city but also for the Basque Country. From the outset, Oteiza intended to prepare a cultural map of necessities, so that the four capitals of the Basque Country will share their equipment under the same action scheme. A project with an educational function for an aesthetic sensibility-political-existential of the citizen. Very different from the Guggenheim, or from the current Alhóndiga Leisure, Cultural and Sports Center.

The declarations by the Culture Councillor regarding the possibility of demolishing the old building of Alhóndiga provoked a backlash reaction in the city which led to a major media debate that, actually, concealed a political decision. The Basque government banned the project and the mayor Gorordo resigned.

And now, it could be argued whether the construction of this project could have changed the cultural destiny of the city of Bilbao. New economies which demanded promoting the image of the city were already attracting the interests of Bilbao at that time and demanding a flagship building for the new city. A city, where image strategies proliferation has aesthetized urban landscape to the point where the role of art and culture have been displaced. Whereas in Oteiza’s aesthetic project, this function had to be aimed to the training and emancipation of mankind, the aesthetic project of the city as image has fulfilled these aims in diametrically opposed way - by showing the banalization of culture and the impoverishment of the subject’s experience. In this regard, architectural productions and urban planning are a symbol of cultural standardisation which tends to standardise a type of opaque control, in providing an univocal nature to the ways of feeling, thinking and representing the world by its citizens. According to these parameters, we could maintain that the way in which the individual imaginarily solves this original lack follows the reverse route to that proposed by Oteiza. It is worth wondering if the ‘new maladies of the soul’<sup>10</sup> as referred to by Julia Kristeva, are related to the offsets caused by this type of virtual and insufficient solution to existence. The aesthetic pleasure of the contemporary individual, far from implying a critical, emancipating or educational purpose, seems to be an awareness reduction and the impossibility of paradigmatic rupture or social transformation.

Due to these reasons, we can appreciate the paradox represented by the Centro Cultural Alhondiga project, as it needed to fulfil two opposite roles: on the one hand, the generation of an image to drive Bilbao into the new economies with an impact which contribute to the de-politization of thought and to cultural standardisation; and on the other, the implementation of an aesthetic project, Oteiza’s project, for the development of the critical awareness of the citizen subject. Although this project was in its death throes, it must not be forgotten in the utopia horizon.

Unlike contemporary monuments, where art and knowledge are integrated as consumption practices, this research reclaims the pedagogical and aesthetic education nature of art as a driver for critical and creative skills to promote the re-politization of thought, the desire for change. Although events have a way of



demonstrating that this is not possible and that even this belief may represent a trick of the mind itself in its intentional critical nature, it will retain its intrinsic value if only as a suspicion safeguard.

## BIOGRAPHY

**Iskandar Rementeria**, graduated in Philosophy (Universidad de Deusto), has a PhD in Fine Arts (Sculpture Department, EHU), about Jorge Oteiza and the Alhóndiga Cultural Center, focusing on the “political” dimension of art and its function in the city.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> CASTORIADIS, Cornelius. *La institución imaginaria de la sociedad*. Vol. I y II. *Marxismo y teoría revolucionaria*. Barcelona : Tusquets, 1983; p. 228.

<sup>2</sup> DEBORD, Guy. *La sociedad del espectáculo* [1967] Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2002; p. 38.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see: JANIK A., and TOULMIN, S. *La Viena de Wittgenstein*. Madrid: Taurus, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> JAMESON, Fredric, *El posmodernismo o la lógica cultural del capitalismo avanzado* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1991) p. 46.

<sup>5</sup> JAMESON, Fredric. Op. cit. p. 103.

<sup>6</sup> CASTORIADIS, C. Op. cit. p. 231.

<sup>7</sup> OTEIZA, Jorge. *La ciudad como obra de arte* [no page], 1958. F.M.J.O. Archive (Iruña-Pamplona).

<sup>8</sup> OTEIZA, Jorge. *Ejercicios espirituales en un túnel* [1965]. Donostia-San Sebastián: Hordago, 1984; p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> OTEIZA, Jorge. *La ciudad como obra de arte (The city as work of arte)*, [no page], 1958.

<sup>10</sup> KRISTEVA, Julia. *El porvenir de una revuelta*. Barcelona: Seix Barral, 2000.

## Legends

Fig 1. Bilbao Guggenheim Museum

Fig. 2 Alhóndiga Cultural Center project.

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