

Varnishing Facades, Erasing Memory

Reading Urban Beautification with Critical Whiteness Studies

Laura Raccanelli

The paper addresses the contemporary features of aesthetic capitalism (Böhme, 2001; 2017) in the city, connecting beauty studies with established analyses of ‘territorial stigmatization’ (Wacquant, 2007) in the framework of critical whiteness studies. My argument is that *beautification* practices in marginal public spaces can be regarded as an attitude of aesthetic neocolonialism. The text investigates the role that art plays in establishing spaces of difference, focusing on the analysis of the idea of beauty exhibited and used in processes of urban transformation. This beautifying operation could mask the intent of domesticating the ‘urban exotic’, representing the aesthetics of the ‘urban other’, overlapping processes of hypervisibilization and invisibilization within the production of normative white visual domains. The resulting transformation is viewed as a new field of value extraction from the urban space while at the same time being a new arena for privilege and inequality production. | *Keywords: Urban Beautification, Aesthetic Capitalism, Territorial Stigmatization, Critical Whiteness Studies, Street Art, Camouflage*

1. Introduction

Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself (Benjamin, 2012, pp. 69–70).

As Lindner and Sandoval (2021 p. 9) have observed: “[...] aesthetics increasingly function as a battleground where these urban spatial power struggles are played out through displacement, exclusion, and division”. Leveraging critical whiteness studies, with its focus on the construction of

hegemonic subjects, the paper will stress the role of visibility in the spatial reordering of stigmatized neighbourhoods, with attention to the racist configuration of space in urban transformations. The canonization and naturalization of aesthetics models within the semantic sphere of white (Giuliani et al., 2018), portraying the embodiment of the beautiful city, often catalyses processes of public space ‘whitening’ for the creation of beautiful, clean, decorated spaces, involving both the appearance of the neighbourhood, aiming for so-called ‘urban decorum’, and its inhabitants. This implicitly contributes to the erasing of former urban space features and memories. In the next sections, I will discuss the normative aesthetic dimension of urban regeneration projects, particularly those of an artistic nature. Even if it is acknowledged that in cities inequality dynamics related to visibility are not always associated with normative white aesthetic dominance, I contend that beautification actions in stigmatized neighbourhood are often suspended between attempts to either remove or domesticate the disturbing aesthetics of ‘urban otherness’, sometimes resulting in its factual expulsion.

2. The canonization of beauty as a social fact: images, imageries, and desire in the new regime of visibility

A vast literature from both feminist studies and critical race studies, as well as in historical and postcolonial studies, has examined the concept of beauty concerning the imposition of standards, codes, and practices that culturally determine its canons. According to these scholars, it is useful to consider beauty, as well as race and gender, as a dynamic category socially constructed (also) on the visual. In agreement with beauty studies scholars, analyzing the historical and social production of aesthetic ideals of beauty requires reflecting on their construction through an intersectional perspective. As Monica G. Moreno Figueroa writes:

[...] feminist claims have urged us to explore beauty as an empirical and pragmatic question. ‘The question [of beauty] for feminist politics’, wrote Claire Colebrook in her 2006 introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Theory* on beauty, ‘is not so much moral – is beauty good or bad [...]? – but pragmatic: how is beauty defined, deployed, defended, subordinated, marketed or manipulated, and how do these tactics intersect with gender and value?’ (Moreno Figueroa, 2013, p. 137–138).

Beauty ideals are to be conceived as normative devices, capable of influencing the forms of regulation of life and perception of both the self and the community (Giuliani et al., 2018, p. 432); they have to do with everyday myths and abstractions and are subject to continuous ritualization through social practices that inscribe themselves and produce specific imaginaries (*Ibidem*). These are structured within canonization and naturalization processes capable of constructing standardized dominant patterns, usually taking the form of commodities, cultural products, symbols and desires whose circulation passes over different scales, imposing their imaginaries from the more local to the national and global ones (Giuliani et al., 2018, p. 433).

Beauty, as well as gender and race, are thus to be considered as discursive constructions (Hall, 2013; Mellino, 2015). What is important to grasp in its

processual aspect is their being functional for the reproduction of specific power relations or, at the same time, defining spaces of self-determination, and resistance, opening “spaces of agency and subjectification” (Giuliani et al., 2018, p. 433).

Sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti has long engaged in a theoretical reflection on the concepts of visibility and visuality, distinguishing them as “fully entitled sociological categor[ies]” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 324) and recongising their importance as a research field (Brighenti, 2007; 2008; 2017). The author especially elaborates on the “more complex phenomenon of visibility” (Brighenti, 2007, p. 324), which is not only relevant to the visual dimension *per se* but is to be understood as a category constituted at the intersection of two main domains: aesthetics, that is, relations of perception, and politics, that is, relations of power (*Ibidem*). Visibility, thus, not only produces and influences our everyday existence but has now become a primary means of knowledge (Mirzoeff, 2021). Nowadays, the visual realm has assumed a pivotal role since through the multiplication of screens and other image infrastructures we build our visual experience, which is now an integral part of our social experience. Understanding the cultural, social and political meanings of the norms shaping the dominant aesthetic codes and ideals implies questioning this new regime of visibility that has such a high impact on our society. Images now play a predominant function in our political life, they have a powerful influence on conceptions, desires and imaginaries (Giuliani et al., 2018, p. 233) almost assuming a ‘religious sense’, adopting the postulate of one of the best-known writings of the 20th century, Walter Benjamin’s *Capitalism as Religion* (1921). In a scenario radically changed by the new technologies that have made the action of images and imaginaries even more pervasive, we can witness sacred attention to the aesthetic sphere and a contemporary obsession with the seeking for beauty.

“Visibility is a metaphor of knowledge, but it is not simply an image: it is a real social process in itself” Brighenti (2007, p. 325) argues. As a social process, the relation of visibility, encompassing what is seen and what is not seen, is often asymmetrical, structured by - and structuring - specific hierarchies. In this sense, processes of visibilization, invisibilization or hypervisibilization act on particular bodies, spaces, and subjectivities (Giuliani et al., 2018). Assuming a Goffmanian posture, Brighenti describes how normalized behaviour in the public space can be invisibilized. In fact:

[they] are always subject to, and conducted through, practices for the reciprocal management of visibility among social actors. [...] The ‘normal appearance’ (Goffman, 1971) of a setting is its invisibility. In the absence of alarm signals, the setting is ‘transparent’ to the observer. In other words, the normal is neither noticed nor thematized owing to its invisibility. Conversely, it is the anomalous which is marked and transposed to a different register of visibility (Brighenti, 2008, p. 3).

But the opposite is also true: the codes of beauty produce bodies, practices and spaces that are desirable or deplorable, legitimate or illegitimate. Their hypervisibilization and *monstrification* are often accompanied by processes of

invisibilization of non-normative and/or eccentric practices, involving the exclusion from the visual frame of what disturbs it. Thus, hypervisibilization and invisibilization are processes that overlap, alternate and often affect the same deviant body and practice at the same moment and in the same (public) space.

3. Attractive and creative cities, aesthetic capitalism, symbolic economy

Cities deploy various strategies to invest in the creation of aesthetically attractive spaces, producing, imposing and globally selling their dominant, homogeneous and standardized images. Starting with the post-Fordist city in its neo-liberal turn, new models of urban economic development have emerged. Unlike in the past, not only the private but also the public sector today allocate significant resources not only for services but also for policies related to the so-called *place making*. This is at the core of one of the best-known and most criticized theories on urban development: Richard Florida's 'creative cities' model (2002). The author's idea is to theorize an urban policy-making meant to attract in the city what he calls 'the new class of creative workers' (Florida, 2002). According to Florida, urban governments should address the explicit demand for a precise aesthetic that could be capable of attracting this new productive class to their territory. His suggestion involves building a new interesting and vibrant urban atmosphere through both productive and symbolic processes to transform the *look* and thus influence the *feel* of the city (Zukin, 1995, p. 7). Culture and creativity, innovation, art, museums and festivals have now become mainstream cultural consumption patterns, serving as recurrent strategic policies for producing local development.

The '*attractiveness blackmail*' of the modern city is well explained by Gernot Böhme in his *Critique of aesthetic capitalism* (2017), along with the notion of '*Enrichment*' proposed by Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre (2019). Both contributions stress how the logic of capitalist accumulation has over time redefined the way wealth is generated nowadays, moving towards an aestheticization of the economy or an aesthetic economy. This plays a central role in the dynamics of aesthetic capitalism in his urban configuration. Böhme's perspective of 'aesthetic capitalism' (2017), recalling the Marxian dichotomy, highlights how beautification affects both the use and the exchange value of '*beautiful*' space as an object of consumption. The philosopher also emphasises the need to create value through what he calls the '*staging of everything*', which is manifested in the continuous effort to produce new urban images, imageries and representations, and their spectacularization. Sharon Zukin's notion of 'symbolic economy' (1995) explains how some cities specialize in the production of pictures, languages, and artistic and entertainment forms. These cities' model, becoming more hegemonic in the interrelation of image and product, aim to sell images of urbanity on both national and global scales, working on a globalized and cosmopolitan sense of urban identity and belonging to attract new populations (Zukin, 1995, p. 7).

Criticisms of Florida's creative city theory (Peck, 2005) highlight the risk of establishing hierarchies among attractive and less attractive cities and categorising people as more or less creative, creating divisions based on those who "just don't get it" (Peck, 2005 in Semi, 2015, p. 94).

4. Stigmatized spaces and beautification: street art as urban regeneration attitude

If in the past the aesthetic consumption of places was almost exclusively relegated to the central and productive areas of the city, over the last decade there has been a growing trend in promoting new regeneration projects devoted to the peripheries. These are often justified by systematically recurring narratives of 'territorial stigmatization' (Wacquant, 2007; 2008; Wacquant et al., 2014), involving the creation of a stigma (Goffman, 1963) linked to the living space and its residents, to which consequent 'effects of place' (Bourdieu, 1993) are related. Public discourses such as those conveyed by newspapers, politicians, or experts, play a crucial role in shaping the stigma, particularly by the widespread use of criminalizing narratives on the one hand and rhetoric of abandonment on the other. Such discourses are often justified by invoking a broader discussion on the relationship between aesthetics, public space, and politics. One notable example illustrating this connection is the well-known 'broken windows theory', initially formulated by social scientists James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in the 1980s and later becoming the cornerstone for the repressive policies of *Zero Tolerance* in Rudolph Giuliani's New York during the 1990s. The two authors' views involve a very easy and tempting idea: it is sufficient to act on the aesthetic perception of neighbourhoods to affect the quality of life and renovate public order and a more legal climate (Bukowski, 2019; De Giorgi, 2015). However, the main bias in this view is the tendency to equate decay with urban insecurity, linking aesthetic interventions with securitarian approaches. According to the Italian urbanist Cristina Bianchetti (2011), one of the main features of contemporary public space is its entire devotion to consumption and entertainment. In this sense, public space requires new attributes capable of building highly attractive and visually comfortable public spaces, designed to respond to a desire for security rather than a desire for interaction (Mitchell, 2003 in Semi, 2020, p. 219). In trying to mitigate the conflictual aspect implied in the twentieth-century idea of publicness, public space must be both socially and aesthetically controlled (Bianchetti, 2011). Often these measures reflect policies and decisions of administrations that can choose what and who should be visible and not (Zukin, 1995, p. 7). This is also related to a typical attitude of the neo-liberal and securitarian city to assume that there is a correlation between increasing the creative population (Florida, 2002) and producing a more livable city.

In this context, the use of art, particularly street art, has nowadays become a very common urban renewal practice in stigmatized public urban spaces, playing a central role in *beautification*. Traditionally viewed as a deviant artistic form, subject to ongoing lively controversies, conflicts and oppositions

(Dal Lago and Giordano, 2016), the institutionalization and re-functionalization of urban art in the framework of an aesthetic economy and its connection with urban redevelopment interventions in stigmatized neighbourhoods remain a recent and still very little investigated phenomenon. Street art today has entered into a productive machine of symbols and space, spreading a specific urban aesthetic and atmosphere, found from New York to Cape Town to Naples, yet potentially reflecting certain class expectations (Bourdieu, 1979). Murals, covering entire facades of public housing, are linked to the evidence and erasure of the recognizability of social classes, particularly the “visibility of poverty” (Bukowski, 2019, p. 15). But why should a street art mural improve the space and life of the residents? Isn’t it primarily a very simplistic way to create new economic value also from the popular areas of the city? Top-down street art interventions in urban peripheries, distanced from the urban subculture from which they were born (Dal Lago and Giordano, 2016), may contribute to the objectification and commodification of the associated urban space (Boltanski and Esquerre, 2019). Today’s urban governance prefers to replace the demolition model, seen in examples like Barcelona’s Olympics in the early 1990s, with a more progressive attitude devoted to urban regeneration, often reduced to aesthetic transformations. In this context, street art becomes an instrument of governance and a tool for urban transformation easily manipulated by urban planners: through interventions on surfaces and on external appearances of structures, quicker and less expensive than other deeper structural operations, the city can attract tourists and new inhabitants in brand new beautified redeveloped neighbourhoods. Such artworks may be enjoyed by adventurers who consume the associated public space. Consequently, the push for beautification techniques of public space becomes a new field of reproduction of inequalities, “placing individuals, territories and objects before the imperative of aesthetic performance as a guarantee of potential enrichment” (Semi, 2018, p. 90 [personal translation]).

In stigmatized areas of the city, such as peripheries, the idea of educating, domesticating, and civilizing plain areas is prominent in this transformation; artistic practices are presented as catalysts for the economic, social, and cultural development of the neighbourhood, promoting a greener, more sustainable and healthier environment. Thus, the aesthetic mechanism involved contributes to the social construction of beautiful and ugly, good and bad urban spaces, with the corresponding right and wrong citizens.

Niel Smith’s seminal work on gentrification (1996) equated gentrification processes with a form of urban colonization, in which gentrifiers acquire the characteristics of good, civil middle classes who comply with social norms, conquer spaces of decay, and improve uncivilized, deviant, and poor neighbourhoods.

As new frontier, the gentrifying city since the 1980s has been oozing with optimism. Hostile landscapes are regenerated, cleansed, reinfused with middle-class sensibility; real estate values soar; yuppies consume; elite gentility is democratized in mass-produced styles of distinction. So what’s not

to like? The contradictions of the actual frontier are not entirely eradicated in this imagery but they are smoothed into an acceptable groove (Smith, 1996, p. 12).

Therefore, certain beautification operations can be interpreted as forms of aesthetic neocolonialism, wherein images of an urbanity that are usually intended to be reproduced reflect the expectations of a seductive imaginary of a productive, successful and, particularly in Italy, white middle class, often representing the main (sometimes the only) target audience of these projects.

5. Producing beautiful white visual spaces: colonial expressions of urbanity

The association between canonical beauty and whiteness has long been eradicated in Western history. Nicholas Mirzoeff reflects on the different meanings of the white colour, tracing it back to classical European art and hellenic sculpture (2009). Although it is known that the ancient Greeks used to colour their statues with pigments, by the nineteenth century, the beauty of these statues was associated with pure clean white marble. Throughout art history, representations highlight how whiteness had come to represent the ideal type of race and thus the hegemonic canon of physical beauty *per se* (*Ibidem*). As it was stated:

Reflecting on race and beauty [...] means [...] coming to terms with the lines of color that have been scuttled in the past and that characterize Italian society in the present and, particularly, with the *visual construction of its imagined community*. A critical approach to beauty matters: a critical analysis of beauty may help us understand how *aesthetic codes participate in the articulation of everyday racism* in both the public and private spheres of the Italian imagined community (Giuliani et al., 2018, p. 433 [personal translation, italics added]).

In alignment with critical whiteness studies, a theoretical strand framed within postcolonial studies, whiteness is to be understood as a socially and historically constructed category through which a dominant group imposes itself as *neutral* towards others, keeping them in a condition of exploitation and/or subalternity (Giuliani, 2014). These studies are concerned with analyzing the social construction of white identity, understood as an *empty signifier* akin to beauty (Giuliani et al., 2018; Nayak, 2007; Levine-Rasky, 2013), its ontological binary structure and its hierarchization, hegemony, purity and privilege implication. Whiteness is not only about skin colour but is to be considered in its intersectionality with other variables such as class, nationality, sex, age, gender, religion, and ability (Levine-Rasky, 2013). The whiteness paradigm, moreover, defines by contrast (Giuliani, 2014): it infers whiteness by determining the characteristics of what is not white, thereby producing a racialized 'other'. Racialization is always situated in time and space, and the construction of 'race' is always linked to the historical and geographical background. Following Emily Walton's theoretical proposal, I consider whiteness as a habitus, a complex set of "socialized norms, orientations, and practices that operate routinely to consolidate power in the hands of those racialized as white" (Walton, 2018, p. 72), a form of enactment based on structural privilege (Nayak, 2007).

The different temporalities and spatialization of whiteness connect these processes with urban studies and the analysis of urban transformation. Indeed, the construction of whiteness has also visible spatial repercussions, which can be captured in cities and neighbourhoods. It is useful to consider racism in its productive sense, as part of an economic rationality (Palmi, 2020) leading to the reconfiguration of urban space based on a racialized structure. According to several urban scholars (Harvey, 2001; Sassen, 2015; Wacquant, 2008; Rossi and Vanolo, 2010), the significance of the last economic recession, coupled with changes in the international division of labour and production structures, along with new international migration flows, has generated new pockets of poverty and consequent strong transformations in the social stratification of cities (Petrillo, 2018; Paone and Petrillo, 2016). In major global urban centres, this has affected a specific dynamic of spatialization of difference, with specific areas now segmented by income differential (Sassen, 2015). While the North American cities' rate of racial segregation might not be observed in Italy, processes of marginalization and socio-spatial exclusion of Southern European cities have been studied in their peculiar form (Arbaci and Malehiros, 2010). Ideological discourses about the need to govern the population that has become marginalized by the expulsive forces of the neoliberal city (Sassen, 2015) are often used to advocate for regeneration interventions and investments to restore public order in marginalized neighbourhoods, contributing to the subsequent so-called 'displacement phenomena' (Semi, 2015; Portelli, 2017; Petrillo, 2018). Considering the spatialization of whiteness and its influences on processes of urban transformations, particularly in the context of beautification, scholars emphasize its materiality and observe the politics of race in action (Nayak, 2007, p. 738). Whiteness can acquire an exchange value if we assume that its privilege allows a specific group of people to have unequal access to a set of resources and opportunities based on the semantic association between white identity and honest, reliable respectable citizen, embodying white qualities such respect, decency, fairness, *beauty* (Nayak, 2007, pp. 739–740). At the same time, Steve Garner introduced the concept of 'moral economy of whiteness' (2012) to suggest a set of all-positive values that are associated with it, situated within the semantic field of cleanness and respect of the order (Garner, 2012, p. 454). On the other hand blackness, referring here to a continuum of moral characterizations ranging from undeserving ethnic minorities to non-integrating migrants and unproductive white people, is repeatedly associated with disorder, chaos, and dirt. It is possible to trace the origins of this prejudice to the colonial context, where more structurally black and white were produced as binary ontological categories reflecting power relations. To legitimize their domination, the colonisers fabricated a positive image of the white settler by contrasting it with a negative portrayal of the dominated, black, through oppositional categories such as master/slave, civilization/wilderness, superiority/inferiority (Fanon, 1961) that translate today into other moral dichotomies like safety/danger, respectability/deviance beauty/bruteness, and so on.

Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1996), focusing on purification rituals and symbols, associated ideas of dirt and disorder with elements perceived as out of place, which must therefore be culturally restored to order. The cultural emphasis around symbols of dirty and clean has been underlined by several urban scholars who analyze the production of stigmatizing narratives and related redevelopment policies (Tonnelat, 2008). These policies aim to reestablish an aesthetic of order but often take the form of securitarian and repressive interventions. In this context, public space often becomes a conflictual arena within which invisible practices of whiteness construction define the appropriate use of urban spaces and designate dividing lines between white and nonwhite, legitimate and illegitimate, in both material and discursive terms. While it is indeed in public spaces that beautification operations are concentrated, the conflicts produced by these transformations are not always totally visible. They have a strong influence in the making and unmaking of new frontier of the colour line in and out these spaces, revealing also racist and power practices that are inscribed and embedded in processes of unequal urban change. The naturalization and reproduction of the connection between aesthetic transformation and the frequent expulsions, evictions, and removals of subjects and objects representing the 'ugly urban' (such as poverty, crime, deviance, disorder, degradation) raise important questions on the non-neutrality of redevelopment projects in fragile spaces.

6. Camouflages, distortions and destructions: aesthetic frontiers and fractures of urban memories

It seems useful to mention the definition of aesthetics proposed by Jacques Rancière (2006): for the philosopher, the 'partition of the sensible' is ordered by a political system that establishes what can be legitimately seen and considered of value, and what must be placed in the background. This perspective on *The Politics of Aesthetics* (Rancière, 2006) helps to grasp the processes of visibilization and, more importantly, invisibilization that take different forms in public spaces. In some cases, invisibilization materializes through expulsions (Sassen, 2015) towards categories of practices and people considered unseemly, removed either from the order of the visual or as actual physical actions of removal. Stavros Stavrides, in his *Common Space* (2016), speaks of practices of 'defacement' (Stavrides, 2016, p. 286) to indicate actions aimed at destroying the *face*, distorting and partially hiding its features:

Space [...] is predominantly perceived in the form of stereotyped images which circulate through the dominant culture-shaping media and become actualized through in situ experiences. [...] These images identify space. Defacing the appearance of public space would thus mean targeting the perceivable characteristics of such space that create its identifiable image. Defacing acts create memory shocks because spaces familiar or recognizable through established images are suddenly rendered strange (Stavrides, 2016, p. 289–290).

Restoring the facades with brand-new street art murals and other similar interventions in the public space sphere are perfect examples of what Stavrides means with *defacement*.

In this sense, the notion of *camouflage* (Böhme, 2017, p. 91) is particularly relevant for analysing the mechanism of beautifying spaces commonly regarded as ugly: it could be understood as the technique of hiding public space imperfections; plaster renewal, storefront resurfacing, re-gardening and landscape decoration and so on could represent some striking examples of it. Stavrides reflects on how the gesture of ‘defacement’, in its similarity to *camouflage*, could be quite a violent act as it “ruptures in urban memory, since memory is essentially connected with the socially crafted images of public space” (Stavrides, 2016, p. 190). The aesthetic transformation of neighbourhoods, as implied in the title of this paper, involves actions *above* the history and memory of places. In stigmatized neighbourhoods, one can sometimes observe the simultaneous overlapping of two opposite processes. On the one hand, attempts at beautification are frequently addressed to cover and erase the ‘un-saleable’ appearances of poverty and classes (Bukowski, 2019). Simultaneously, we also witness operations of aestheticization and commodification of history (Herzfeld, 2010), aiming to produce and sell experiences of urban authenticity (Zukin, 1995). In his comparative study of two districts in Paris and Milan – *La Défense* and *Milano 2* – sociologist Bruno Cousin defines the so-called ‘refunded neighbourhood’ as “the result of large-scale real estate operations - of leveling, rebuild, and repopulate by the upper classes - totally erasing the working class and industrial memory of the previous places” (Cousin, 2016, p. 91 [personal translation]). In both areas, offices, shopping malls and luxury buildings were built, replacing factories, agricultural land, farms and barracks, as well as previous dwellers have been replaced by more affluent citizens who have managed to adapt on new neighbourhood’s expectations and its current luxury functions. Its opposite in terms of urban planning action (but not for its social consequences) is the process of museification of the neighbourhood history, well explained by what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2010) has called ‘the neoliberal hijacking of history’. The London Docklands serves as one prominent examples of the districts where the history stealing through its aestheticisation is best experienced. The Docks were formerly part of the Port of London. They have now been redeveloped while maintaining their dockland appearance, becoming one of the coolest areas of the cities, a cluster of offices, luxury residential buildings, shops and small business headquarters. During the 1980s, image promotion was very intense, focusing explicitly on aesthetic and landscape values: emphasis was placed on the attractiveness of waterfronts and residences facing the vast waterways of the old docks. Within this framework, explicitly aimed at social substitution, real estate acquisitions for young families of skilled workers, professionals, managers were encouraged. In the words of Sharon Zukin:

There are many different ‘cultural’ strategies of economic development. Some focus on museums and other large cultural institutions [...]. Others call attention to the work of artists, actors, dancers, and even chefs who give credence to the claim that an area is a center of cultural production. Some strategies emphasize the aesthetic or historical value of imprints on a landscape, pointing to old battlegrounds, natural wonders, and collective representation of social groups, including houses of worship, workplaces of

archaic technology, and even tenements and plantation housing. [...] The common element in all these strategies is that they reduce the multiple dimensions and conflicts of culture to a coherent visual representation (Zukin, 1995, p. 271).

Herzfeld (2010, p. 259) underlines that “all conservation involves some degree of selection and often also of actual physical modification”. By asking “who defines what matter in residents’ life” (*Ibidem*), he highlights the ambiguity of top-down actions of patrimonialisation and how the rhetoric of heritage frequently raises conflicts towards the collective representations of identity from below. Devra Waldman (2021), in her study of a golf-focused gated community in India, underlines how aesthetics serves as a vehicle to produce a specific imagination and desire for a specific urban experience and living. She examines the politics of designing the ‘sense of place’ as a marketing strategy, reflecting on how these projects in postcolonial India carry colonial legacies within their willingness to build green, purified gated environments and atmospheres. The manipulation of symbolic assets of the urban space is now a well-known and appreciated tool for city administrations, leading to the emergence of a trend toward an aestheticization of the policies. Creating and designing more or less attractive places means also producing symbolic competitions over new identities of neighbourhoods.

These examples underscore the importance of elucidating the relationship between aesthetics and politics. It is crucial to understand the correlation between aesthetics and semiotics of spaces in its strong influence on the symbolic reorganization of spaces. Sociologist Andrea Mubi Brighenti also addresses the relevance of the symbols in this relation:

What we are specifically interested in is not the visual dimension *per se*, but the more complex phenomenon of the field of visibility. [...] It makes sense to say that the medium between the two domains of aesthetics and politics is the *symbolic*. A symbol is aesthetically impressive and semiotically relevant in social relations. Just think of the powerful and ambivalent position of the *light* in western culture, its indelibly metaphysical *residuum*: light is the obsession of physics as well as of religion, it marks the field of the sacred and that of the secular. It is not simply visible. It constitutes a form of visibility (Brighenti, 2007, p. 324).

Many philosophers and sociologists¹ have highlighted the pervasive ability of capitalism to colonize even desires. If camouflage also acts toward erasing the memory of the neighbourhood, it can be argued that the specific imagination, through which the aesthetics of the new urban spaces are being produced, acts through a series of symbolic violent processes to adapt to the only normative urban appearances that today seems possible. In this paper, the focus was on discussing the necessity of observing the processes of symbolic production of the beautiful city. These processes, upon analysis, can de-invisibilize the power relations that constitute dominant visibility and marginal visibility.

¹ Among others: Mark Fisher with his *Capitalist Realism*, published by Zero Books in 2009 and Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s monumental *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Italian edition for Bompiani in 2014.

7. Conclusion:

In what has been called an increasingly ocularcentric society (Mirzoeff, 2021), one where much of social action is rooted in the visual realm, dominated by a visualization that is as pervasive as paralyzing (Grossi, 2021, p. 15), a crucial role is played by the debate on visual culture (Brighenti, 2007; 2008; 2017; Mirzoeff, 2020; 2021). The exploration began with an examination of the social construction of beauty and its connection with the colonial imagery of the idea of whiteness. Positioned within urban studies in the perspective of aesthetic capitalism, we have seen how beauty, through the mechanism of 'the staging of the self and the real' (Böhme, 2017), is now a field for value extraction in the neoliberal city. We analyzed how the focus on the production of the attractive and beautiful city has highlighted certain racist expressions of space and how they occur in specific politics of inclusion and exclusion. We emphasized why sometimes we can read beautification as an aesthetic neocolonialism operation. We followed the tension toward the search for clean, decorated, tidy and green urban space. Finally, we have analyzed art as a model of territorial governance in its most conflictual side. The paper focused on the understanding of how top-down beautification operations mitigate, or sometimes completely mask the symbolic and the structural violence embedded in aestheticization operations (Herzfeld, 2017), following the example of institutional street arts interventions considered as common urban regeneration practices. Investments in the aesthetic sphere with the aim of making a more productive and attractive city often end with the expulsion of the 'non-productive' and 'unattractive' citizen away from the sites of new urban interests (Harvey, 1989; Sassen, 2015; Spire, Choplin, 2018; Herzfeld, 2017; Harms, 2012; Bukowski, 2019; Pitch, 2014; Desmond, 2018). It is crucial to stress the multiplicity of the functions of aesthetic. If we follow the critics proposed by seminal works of the Frankfurt School and its successors, aesthetics could be understood as an instrument for economic value production; nevertheless, we would see how aesthetics can also *protect* - delimits and traces the inside and the outside of a community - *discipline* - mitigate and domesticate what exceeds the norm - and *govern* - decides who can or cannot cross the city (Waldman, 2021; Herzfeld, 2017; Ghertner, 2010). Aesthetic also serves within the logic of anticipating tastes in its correlation with investments at increasingly larger scales, as in art scene or real estate, what could be called the 'financialization of aesthetics' in the production and in the selling of global images of urbanity.

Returning to the title 'varnishing facades, erasing memory': aesthetic justification is often used in beautification operations, both destructive and conservative, to appropriate the discourse about the neighborhood's past and reinvent new narratives, revalorizing it through its transformation. Street art or art as a tool of beautification is just one of the ways in which the aesthetic transformation of places acts as an erasure of the neighbourhood identity to offer an oxymoronic idea of a new authentic identity. I, therefore, agree with Devra Waldman (2021) in stressing the importance of investigating

the aesthetic premises in the creation of dominant views and attractive spaces, recognising their role in producing a new sense of place but also in the governance of the city and its citizens.

References:

- Arbaci, S. and Malheiros, J. (2010) 'De-Segregation, Peripheralisation and the Social Exclusion of Immigrants: Southern European Cities in the 1990s', *Journal of Ethnic and Migrations Studies*, 36(2), pp. 227–255.
- Benjamin, W. (1921) 'Capitalism as Religion', in Bullock, M. and Jennings, M.W. (ed.) (1996) *Selected Writing. Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Harvard University Press, pp. 288–291.
- Benjamin, W. (2012) *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility*. New York: Prism Key Press.
- Bianchetti, C. (2011) 'Teatralità minori', in Bianchetti, C. (ed.) *Il Novecento è davvero finito. Considerazioni sull'urbanistica*. Roma: Donzelli editore, pp. 81–103.
- Böhme, G. (2001) *Asthetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.
- Böhme, G. (2017) *Critique of Aesthetic Capitalism*. Milano: Mimesis International.
- Boltanski, L. and Esquerre, A. (2018) *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Bourdieu, P. (1979) *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Minuit.
- Braudel, F. (1982) *Civiltà e imperi del Mediterraneo nell'età di Filippo II*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Brighenti, A. M. (2007) 'Visibility. A Category for the Social Sciences', *Current Sociology*, 55(3), pp. 323–342.
- Brighenti, A. M. (2008) 'Visual, Visible, Ethnographic', *Etnografia e ricerca qualitativa*, 1, pp. 91–113.
- Brighenti, A. M. (2017), 'The Visible: Element of the Social', *Frontiers in Sociology*, 2(17), pp. 1–17.
- Bukowski, W. (2019) *La buona educazione degli oppressi. Piccola storia del decoro*. Roma: Edizioni Alegre.
- Cousin, B. (2016) 'Les habitants des quartiers refondés face à l'injustice spatiale. Refuser, ménager et détourner la critique', *Communications*, 98, pp. 81–94.
- Cousin, B. (2013) 'Ségrégation résidentielle et quartiers refondés. Usages de la comparaison entre Paris et Milan', *Sociologie du travail*, 55(2), pp. 214–236.
- Dal Lago, A. and Giordano, S. (2016) *Graffiti. Arte e ordine pubblico*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- De Giorgi A. (2015) 'Dalla Tolleranza Zero al Decoro', *DinamoPress*, Available at: www.dinamopress.it/news/dalla-tolleranza-zero-al-decoro/ (Accessed: 15 June 2023)
- Douglas, M. (1966) *Purity and danger. An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Elias, N. and Scotson, J. L. (1965) *The Established and the Outsiders*. London: Sage.
- Fallon, K. F. (2020) Reproducing race in the gentrifying city: A critical analysis of race in gentrification scholarship, *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City*, 1, pp. 1–28.
- Fanon, F. (1961) *Les damnés de la terre*. Paris: Francois Maspéro éditeur.
- Florida, R. (2002) *The rise of the creative class*. New York: Basic books.
- Ghertner D. A. (2010) 'Calculating without numbers: aesthetic governmentality in Delhi's slums', *Economy and Society*, 39, pp. 185–217.
- Giuliani, G. (ed.) (2015) *Il colore della nazione*. Firenze: Le Monnier.
- Giuliani, G. (2014) 'L'Italiano Negro', *Interventions*, 16(4), pp. 572–587.
- Giuliani et al. (2018) 'Tavola Rotonda. Visualizzare la Razza e Costruire la Bellezza in Italia (1922–2018)', *Italian Studies*, 73(4), pp. 432–460.
- Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood: Prentice-Hall.

- Goalwin, G. (2013) 'The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland's Political Murals, 1979–1998', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 26(3), pp. 189–215.
- Grossi, G. (2021) 'Prefazione. Il fantasma della visual culture', in Mirzoeff, N. (ed.) *Introduzione alla cultura visuale*. Milano: Meltemi, pp. 9–19.
- Hall, S. (2013) 'The Spectacle of the Other', in Hall, S., Evans, J. and Nixon, S. (eds) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: SAGE, pp. 226–283.
- Harms, E. (2012) 'Beauty as control in the new Saigon: eviction, new urban zones, and atomized dissent in a Southeast Asian city', *American Ethnologist*, 39(4), pp. 735–750.
- Harvey, D. (1989) 'From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism', *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, 71(1), pp. 3–17.
- Harvey, D. (2001) *Spaces of Capital: Toward a Critical Geography*. London: Routledge.
- Herzfeld, M. (2017) 'The blight of beautification: Bangkok and the pursuit of class-based urban purity', *Journal of Urban Design*, 22(3), pp. 291–307.
- Levine-Rasky, C. (2013) *Whiteness fractured*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Lindner, C. and Sandoval G. F. (2021) 'Introduction: Aesthetics of Gentrification', in: Lindner, C. and Sandoval G. F. (eds) (2021) *Aesthetics of Gentrification. Seductive Spaces and Exclusive Communities in the Neoliberal City*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 9–24.
- Lombardi-Diop, C. and Giuliani, G. (2013) *Bianco e Nero. Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani*. Firenze: Le Monnier.
- Mellino, M. (2015) 'Introduzione. Per una teoria complessa del razzismo e delle società razzialmente strutturate: cultura, razza e potere secondo Stuart Hall', in Hall, S. (2015) *Cultura, razza, potere*. Verona: Ombre corte, pp. 7–24.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2009) *An Introduction to Visual Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Nayak, A. (2007) 'Critical Whiteness Studies', *Sociology Compass*, 1(2), pp. 737–755.
- Palmi, T. (ed.) (2020) *Decolonizzare l'antirazzismo. Per una critica della cattiva coscienza bianca*. Roma: Derive Approdi.
- Petrillo, A. (2018) *La periferia nuova. Disuguaglianza, spazi, città*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Pitch, T. (2013) *Contro il decoro. L'uso politico della pubblica decenza*. Bari: Laterza editori.
- Rancière, J. (2006) *The politics of aesthetics*. London: Continuum.
- Ribeiro Corossacz, V. (2015) *Bianchezza e mascolinità in Brasile. Etnografia di un soggetto dominante*. Milano: Mimesis.
- Rossi, U. and Vanolo, A. (2010) *Geografia politica urbana*. Bari: Laterza.
- Sassen, S. (2014) *Expulsion. Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Scacchi, A. (2017) 'Vedere la razza / fare la razza', in Bordin, E. and Bosco, S. (eds) (2017) *A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità*. Verona: Ombre Corte, pp. XX–ZZ.
- Semi, G. (2015) *Gentrification. Tutte le città come Disneyland?* Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Semi, G. (2018) 'Inventare il passato, estrarre bellezza. Per una critica all'estetica dell'urbano', in Laboratorio Crash (ed.) (2018) *Il campo di battaglia urbano. Trasformazioni e conflitti dentro, contro e oltre la metropoli*. Roma: Red Star Press, pp. 88–92.
- Semi, G. (2020) 'La città dello spazio pubblico è morta?', *Polis*, 2, Bologna: il Mulino, pp. 215–224.
- Smith, N. (1996) *The new urban frontier. Gentrification and the revanchist city*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Stavrides, S. (2016) *Common Space: the city as common*. London: Zed Book.
- Tonnelat, S. (2008) 'Out of Frame. The (in)visible life of urban interstices – A case study in Charenton-le-Pont, Paris, France', *SAGE Publication*, 9(3), pp. 291–324.
- Wacquant, L. (2007) 'Territorial Stigmatization in The Age of Advanced Marginality', *Thesis Eleven*, 91, pp. 66–77.

Wacquant, L. (2008) *Urban Outcasts. A comparative sociology of advanced marginality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Walton, E. (2018) 'Habits of Whiteness: How Racial Domination Persists in Multiethnic Neighborhoods', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 7(1), pp.1–15.

Zukin, S. (1995) *The Cultures of Cities*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Laura Raccanelli
University of Milan Bicocca
Department of Sociology and Social Research
Piazza dell'Ateneo Nuovo, 1
20126, Milano - Italy
l.raccanelli@campus.unimib.it

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.10498887