

Research Plan

Reading Marseille: Episodes of Absurdity

Borders and Territories Graduation Studio

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Introduction

Analysing Marseille through a heterotopic lens in our collective research has led me to the exploration of additional characteristics of the city as forms of 'other'. I do not consider heterotopias essentially as spaces of resistance¹ – as has been interpreted by many scholars – but as sites that colligate and connect different logics and norms. This research proposal looks at the 'Absurd' as a form of 'otherness' that emerges out of non-conventional that challenges common relationships and orders

The Oxford English Dictionary defines Absurd as "extremely silly; not logical and sensible."² In philosophical terms, the absurd refers to the constant conflict between the human tendency to find meaning and purpose in life and their inability to find these certain values.³ The absurd rise from the contradiction of the nature of the human's mind in searching for reasons and a system of justifications and the reality that exists within the universe. Thomas Nagel refers to absurd as a "conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality." He believes that there is an inevitable confrontation between aspiration and reality since there is always the possibility that what we consider as 'serious' in our life is arbitrary, or open to doubt. He continues that the irony is that our whole system of justification that controls our thoughts and actions rests on routines that we never question and even after they are called into question, we don't know to what extent we must obey.⁴ However, the aim of the absurd is not to put things into question nor to provide a definition or explanation for the way that things are. Absurd does not provide a resolution, even though it is not an anti-resolution. It essentially operates by consistently colliding and juxtaposing different orders, norms and conventions to dismantle customary

1. See Benjamin Genocchio, Discourse, Discontinuity, Difference: The Question of 'Other' Spaces, in Katherine Gibson & Sophie Watson (eds.), *Postmodern Cities and Spaces* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 35-47; and Peter Johnson, 'Unravelling Foucault's 'different spaces,' *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 19, no.4 (November 2006), 75-90.

2. *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "absurd," accessed October 20, 2021, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/absurd?q=absurd>

3. John Dotterweich, "An Argument for the Absurd," Southern Cross University, Accessed October 10,2021, <https://liveideasjournal.com/2019/03/11/an-argument-for-the-absurd/>

4. Thomas Nagel "The Absurd" *The Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 20 (1971), 718 -720

relationships. The absurd does not bring forward any point since it points at the pointlessness and senselessness.

Problems and Question

Marseille as a port city that is in constant flux carries out a vast array of qualities and experiences that creates a dynamic collection in which heterogeneous conventions, orders and routines interrelate and collide. It is a complex urban network of places and fragments that come together in this context of 'otherness'. The question that arises while reading Marseille as a heterotopia (or collection of heterotopias) and 'otherness' is, does the absurd have a place within it, and how can one identify the absurd in that context? Can one claim that anything that deviates from the norm is absurd when the norm is already 'other'? Is there a limit between them? Then, a bigger question may appear to challenge what is 'normal' as that which is accepted by the majority, so what if the absurd becomes the norm within the 'other'?

This research proposal aims to find the relationship between the site organization (as the place of the other), and the further manifestation of the absurd there. This could offer a sharper way to re-examine what the "alternate space of ordering"⁵ may possibly imply for future heterotopias within the contemporary city.

Methodology

In the process of investigating the absurd in the city of Marseille, my first approach was to inspect google earth images before travelling to the city. Initially, I was looking at the absurd merely as a thing/object to be found. But visiting Marseille made me realize that the complex urban setting of the city plays a significant role in shaping the qualities of 'otherness' that prepare for absurdity. Therefore, instead of

5. Robert J. Topinka refers to heterotopia as "alternate space of ordering" in "Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces," *Foucault Studies*, no. 9 (2010), 55

treating the absurd as a 'thing' I decided to explore the theatrical aspect of the absurd as well.

The old port of Marseille, therefore, has been chosen as the site of investigation to further develop the topic of the theatre of absurd and its happening.

As a site/stage, the old port of Marseille is such a distinct conglomeration of varied anomalies which paradoxically remain both separate from and connected to all other anomalies in the site.

The actors (or elements) of this absurd theatre consist of a Ferris Wheel, a circus, a carousel, a crowd of people who gather almost every day to watch some weird street performance, and the Civilization Museum, which is not an absurd thing in and of itself however spatially is creating an absurd condition by offering a continuous ramp unfold behind its translucent façade. Thus, what is apparent from the outside are just groups of people descending purposelessly through the ramp. The last actor is a tourist train that goes around the port all day (fig.1&2). There are some common characteristics in all of them which make them stand out as weird elements. First, it is the circular structure they all follow, and second is the juxtaposition of these actors against the commonly unrelated stage (port).

In this proposal, mapping will be utilized as a research methodology, tracing and reconstructing these events in the mapping process would help to further develop the understanding of spatial, sensory and intangible experiences. Maps provide multiple viewpoints for reading/ knowing the city and allow the construction of a new, advanced logic out of the situation. In addition, regarding the theatrical aspect of the investigation, mapping is the finest dynamic tool to studying a stage – which in this case is the looping urban setting of the port of Marseille.

This research project attempts to establish an active exchange between mapping and interpretation of the city in terms of space organization and events. Mapping enables us to capture a different sense of orders and places which is not merely realistic, nor is it fake. Maps, as Brian Harley mentions, are not perfectly representing reality, but they produce an alternative one that depends on the premises the mapmaker pursues.⁶ Therefore, we can claim that maps are multiplicities of realities/possibilities and not only a way of representation but also a means of discovery to re-create and transform reality.

Reflection

Reading a city or its fragments as a particular form of 'other' is challenging as one should leave preconceived opinions and known manners that relate to the daily ordinary urban experience. By digging deeper and beyond news headlines and google earth information one can reveal those layers of the city that are ready for the construction of new logic and intensified meaningful conditions. The 'absurd' within the 'other' is the framework for mapping out the distinct episodes of absurdity emerging within the context of 'otherness' while it challenges normative relationships and orders as the proper vehicle to project future scenarios and propel the necessary transformations for their potential realization.

6. Brian Harley, "Deconstructing the Map" *Cartographica*, no. 26 (2): 1