

Art and the Alternative Space/Time of London Underground.

Laurence North (Falmouth University)

A conference paper presentation

Session title – The Object of Urban Visual Culture

Organisation - Association of Art Historians annual conference 2017

Venue - Loughborough University

Abstract

Lynch describes the subway as a “disconnected nether world”, a description with which those involved in London’s early 20th century underground would have probably agreed. Throughout his career with London’s early Underground, Frank Pick developed the integration of art and design to promote its progressive advantages and dispel any sense of dread threatened by the disorienting dimly lit passages and absence of social segregation.

Transport For London’s use of art and design has continued to develop and refine Pick’s legacy.

This paper argues that TFL’s use of art supplements the functional space with a cultural dimension, facilitating the passenger’s willingness to enter an alternative internalised and reflective space/time, in compensation for dislocation from their personal and established image of the city.

The paper goes on to consider, with reference to Laura Jacobus and Janetta Rebold Benton, Giotto’s Arena Chapel (1306) as a catalyst in understanding and developing the potential of art on the Underground. The blending of alternative states of being through the use of threshold images, references to the urban socio-political dynamic, and pictorial representations of space and time are argued as being common to both Giotto’s frescos and TFL’s use of art.

Introduction

An unlikely place to begin when trying to better understand and potentially develop the graphic environment of Transport for London’s art projects is the late medieval frescos of Giotto.

This paper will argue that the visual strategies and the socio-political references, evident within Giotto’s Arena chapel offer models of practice, which may be usefully compared and applied to TFL’s art projects.

Lynch describes the subway as a “disconnected nether world” (Lynch 1964) a physical experience between points of departure and arrival, a non-place divorced from its urban context.

Frank Pick, throughout his long career with London’s early Underground, developed the integration of art and design to promote its progressive advantages and dispel any sense of dread threatened by the disorienting dimly lit passages and absence of social segregation. Pick’s ambitions for the use of Art and Design on the transport network went beyond the accountants bottom line and his modernist belief in the progressive benefits of art and design to create a better world can be evidenced in the pioneering use of illustrated posters, architecture and public exhibitions.

Transport For London’s use of art and design has continued to develop and refine Pick’s legacy.

This paper argues that TFL’s use of art supplements the functional and mechanistic transport processes with a cultural dimension, which not only assuages any reluctance on the part of the passenger to enter the underground, but goes further in the creation of a cultural space, which encourages a conceptual and emotional engagement within the transport system and the city above, developing a socio-political dialogue with the ambition of improving urban life.

Giotto's frescos, at Padua.

The research of Janetta Rebold Benton, Laura Jacobus and Andrew Ladis has evidenced the sophisticated use of visual strategies, which engage with audiences to communicate sacred narratives and engage with the broader socio-political concerns of the city.

The commission of the chapel by Enrico Scrovegni was bound to a socio-political narrative, which involved the source of the family's wealth and the context of a new urban economy.

On the one hand we have an ambitious family whose fortune was sourced through the sinful business of usury, and on the other a church that needs to realise and reconcile itself to a relationship with the new mercantile urban economy and the financial needs of business. In this context the chapel looks to rehabilitate the family name and also establish the new mercantile class as an important contributor to the infrastructure of the church. The chapel became something more than a place of worship and spiritual guidance, it was also a vehicle for personal ambition and socio-political persuasion.

The complex visual strategies used throughout the chapel can for the purposes of this paper be reduced to 4 themes;

- 1, The use of threshold images
- 2, The use of parallelism
- 3, The blending of real and pictorial space
- 4, The use of fresco's as a socio – political tool

I will compare the use of these visual strategies at Padua to three selected TFL art projects in an effort to better describe the function of the graphic object within the urban context.

A threshold image, rather like a threshold space serves to facilitate the transition from one physical space into another or one state of being to another. We commonly encounter threshold spaces, and they perform in a variety of ways, for example, the mediation between public and private space as we enter a home or as a security buffer as we move into spaces considered at risk, threshold spaces are invariably accompanied by threshold images which signal and govern our interaction with the threshold space. Laura Jacobus (2008) has made a very convincing case for the use of threshold images in the Arena chapel, which enable the shift between sacred and secular spaces and I will attempt to identify further evidence to support her position. Jacobus has described the congregations experience when entering through the south door, which while originally designed as part of the chapel was for uncertain reasons was blocked off.

On entering through this South door the congregation were intended to encounter directly ahead three images on a vertical axis, Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple, The Baptism of Christ, and the Crucifixion.

The uppermost image is dominated by an architectural structure, which Jacobus argues is very similar to the pulpit and screen, which was originally situated at the East end of the chapel.

As the members of the congregation entered through the South door and turn to the right they would have encountered this similar structure in the real space of the chapel, the angle at which the real and fictive structures are presented would have also correspond to each other. This blending of real and fictive space emphasises a continuity of secular and sacred space. As the threshold of the building is crossed the secular life merges with the sacred narrative.

A second example of a significant threshold within the chapel is located on the North wall, opposite another door which Jacobus has described as being reserved for the Scrovegni family and other privileged members of the congregation. As the chapel is entered at this point the main image encountered is that of Joachim's Expulsion from

the Temple. This image is set high on the wall opposite the entrance and refers once again to the same temple structure.

The acute viewing angle should render the image illegible but the manipulation of pictorial representations of space allow us to clearly read the image. The same can be said of the 'Presentation of the Virgin at the Temple'.

This image makes use of multiple schemes of illusionary space, which effectively manipulate the pictorial space of the image to accommodate the acute viewing angle whilst also developing the visual drama of the narrative. The function of the image is to specifically address those below it and to use pictorial space in a manner which preferences the psycho-physical perception of pictorial space over the 'correct realist' rendering of an image.

The image uses 4 differing schemes of pictorial space, each is rationally composed to allow the image to be legible at an extreme angle while accommodating the conflicting position of looking down into a pictorial architectural space while physically looking up at the image. The lowest black horizon line corresponds to the vanishing points of the pulpit, the mid black horizon corresponds to the canopy of the temple and the highest black horizon line corresponds to the left face of the temple enclosure while the right face uses parallel projection. In a less complex manner contemporary on-road signage solves similar problems of acute viewing angles disrupting legibility by employing corrective anamorphic distortion.

Joachim's Expulsion from the Temple initiates the fresco cycle and also conforms to Andrew Ladis' theory of parallelism in the chapel, where themes and images function as binary pairs. The base of the south wall for instance has a series of images, which depict virtues while the North wall depicts vices. The parallel themes, which I believe are initiated by Joachim's Expulsion are that both characters, Enrico Scrovegni and Joachim are bound by their wealth and their troubled relationship with the church. Joachim is expelled for his failure to produce children, and Enrico Scrovegni's relationship with the church is compromised by usury. Joachim's later salvation is achieved through divine intervention granting him and his wife Saint Anne a child. Voraigh's book the Golden Legend, commonly used during the period as a narrative source refers to Joachim's salvation, "God punishes sin, not nature", this sets up another element of the parallelism between the two characters in that it was Enrico Scrovegni's father Reginaldo who was the usurer not Enrico himself, if Joachim can achieve salvation, then the same must be possible for Enrico.

The uniquely complex spatial illusion, the position opposite the private family doorway, and the use of parallelism all point I believe to this fresco as an important threshold image, which not only prepares for the previously mentioned transition from secular to sacred space but which sets up a narrative tension, as Enrico Scrovegni enters the space, opposite him Joachim is being expelled. This threshold image is also one of many examples where the use of the chapel and its frescos operate within a broader socio-political context.

The function and form of these threshold images allow us to identify and better understand the use of threshold imagery on the London Underground, in particular the iconic map designed by Beck in 1933 and the more recent art installation 'Labyrinth' by Mark Wallinger .

Wallinger's Labyrinth project is an unusual TFL art project in that it is permanently installed in the ticket halls of all 270 London Underground Stations, a position that is shared by Henry Beck's 1933 iconic map. The works share similar reductive and abstracted visual characteristics and may be considered as form of parallelism. The Labyrinths are produced as enamel on metal sheet, in keeping with much of the transport systems signage. Each of the images also function within and support the ticket halls as thresholds, initiating the transition from one space to another. However, their intended engagement with the audience differs in subtle ways. Beck's map represents a problem, which needs to be solved, whereas Wallinger's Labyrinths

have only one path to be traced and present a calming and meditative process of tracing the labyrinth's path. Beck's maps are identical in each station, whereas Wallinger's Labyrinths differ, reinforcing notions of the 'sameness and difference' across the underground system.

Beck's map design responded to the interwar years context of reductive abstraction established by powerful agents of modernist aesthetics such as the Bauhaus School, De Stijl and Constructivism. Beck's starting points were the mathematically and geographically accurate rail maps, which were of little use in a subterranean context. His design reconceived the map as a diagrammatic abstracted form. This shift in visual language clarified and simplified the map, but also more importantly in terms of this paper, changed the conceptual relationship between the audience and the terrain. Beck's reductive approach to the redesign of the map abstracted the passengers relationship with the terrain, reducing the journey to an essential vocabulary of stations, interchanges and rail lines. The passenger no longer navigates their path through geographic space, but through a reductive conceptual space. In this regard the map is a threshold image between states of being, allowing the reader to forego any attempts to orient themselves in real space and surrender to a diagrammatic conceptual space, which effectively alleviates the sense of disorientation and dislocation in relation to the city above, supplying a vocabulary which in the 'Lynchian' sense allows for an 'image of the city' to be constructed. The threshold function of Wallinger's Labyrinths do not offer to solve the problem of navigation, as a labyrinth has only one path, but it does offer to alleviate the anxiety which may be associated with the journey. An historic use of labyrinths was to prepare pilgrims for the transition from secular to sacred space. The Labyrinth set into the floor at Chartres Cathedral is one such example. Wallinger's wall mounted labyrinth allows the viewer to stop and focus their attention, calming themselves as they trace the 'certain' and 'inevitable' route through the labyrinth, preparing themselves for the transition between conceptual and real spaces.

To consider the blending of real and fictive space, Laura Jacobus in her paper Giotto's Annunciation in the Arena Chapel, Padua, published in the Art Bulletin, March, 1999, makes a strong case that Giotto blended the reality of the real experienced space and time with historic biblical narrative.

We have already seen how threshold images can achieve this and another strategy involves using the picture plane as a temporal signifier. Things, which project into our space relate to the real experience, and things which recede into pictorial space belong to a historic biblical narrative.

Jacobus refers to the painting of the annunciation positioned at either side of the triumphal arch.

The rooms occupied by the angel on the left and Mary on the right seem to project both forward into real space and back into illusionary space. Jacobus argues this painting is a complex representation of time, presenting the real events of a performance of the Annunciation, enacted annually in Padua and the historical biblical narrative of the annunciation. This dual representation allows an audience to locate biblical narratives in their real experience of the world.

Other examples given by Jacobus include the fictive niches which work in parallel along North and South walls depicting Virtues and Vices as if they were carved stone figures in recesses, the wall itself which is a flat painted plaster surface also alludes to being marble with many three dimensional features. Jacobus also refers to the cloak of the cleric in the 'dedication' scene which projects into real space as he aids Enrico Scrovegni to present the chapel, allowing the scene to break into the real space time of the chapel. This blending of real and narrative space effectively breaks what is described by Brecht as the fourth wall. In his paper, The Itinerant Illustration: Creating Storyworlds in the Readers Space, published in The Journal of Illustration, Steve Braund has argued the relevance of this to contemporary illustrative practice,

which allows an audience to more readily embrace the 'storyworld' in their own temporal and spatial reality.

This blending of real and fictive space can also be found in Mitra Tabrizian's TFL commission.

'You Don't Know What Nights are Like' by Mitra Tabrizian takes the form of very large photographs displayed at Southwark Tube Station. These images depict the largely hidden lives of London's night workers and the part played by TFL in their transportation from the edge of the city into their central London workplaces. These images infer the whole transport system as a threshold space, which links social and economic spaces, the images also act as thresholds to other temporal spaces. The nature of the photographic image acts as a 'real' and believable moment, both images also make strong visual references to their surroundings, the path to the road and the block of flats to the surrounding architecture and the bike racks to the illusionary space beyond them. Similarly to Wallingers Labyrinths, the images discuss notions of sameness and difference, asking us to consider the network and the city it passes through and the connected and disconnected nature of the lives of the city's inhabitants. Tabrizian's images are accompanied by short passages of text taken from interviews with night workers. These image/text combinations function as floating signifiers allowing the audience to construct personalised narratives. Eleanor Pinfold Head of Art on the Underground writes in her essay published on the TFL website:

"Tabrizian ties these two works with a series of extracts from a collection of interviews made with people working at night. In doing so, Tabrizian more directly addresses the importance of the internal voice. Tabrizian carefully selected extracts, as she would describe them, fragments, that capture something of the interior. Sometimes surreal, often talking of lost moments with friends and family, the fragments come together to express the sense of being on the 'other side'."

The work invites the audience to consider their own inner voice, blending their real and immediate experience with the 'other' fictive space. Subtle visual signifiers such as the bus stop and the railway viaduct link the near and the far, and the sense of twilight as a liminal space signifies the transition from one state into another. The station as a site for this work is consequently identified not solely as a system which mechanistically transports us through geographic spaces characterised by social and economic boundaries but one, which also transports us poetically into a conceptual space where a reflective inner voice may construct narratives.

Tabrizian's work directs us to the poetic in the everyday, she also anchors the images within a very real socio-political context. Similarly the Scrovegni chapel combines a beguiling poetic narrative with the socio-political terrain of the period. Both sought to bring a sense of the sacred to their respective audiences and to transport them through the blending of real and fictive experience to an internally reflective space.

Enrico Scrovegni's The commission of the Arena chapel was inextricably linked to broader socio-political ambitions, the need to rehabilitate the family name and the establishment of the family as an important force in the new urban economy. This need describes the commissioning of the chapel as an important objective in the family's political ambitions. As a family chapel it also welcomed a public congregation and transmitted through its physical presence connotations of considerable power, wealth and patronage. This use of 'public art' as a means to shape and condition broader social and political landscapes may also be specifically discussed in terms of TFL's art project, London is Open

"LondonIsOpen" was an art project run as a collaboration between TFL and London's Mayor Sadiq Khan, following the EU referendum, the project was used to emphasise

the city's status as an international and multicultural site. The political nature of the work defines itself through its reaction to 'out' campaigners more extreme lines of argument. The project also by association defines a core political characteristic of the Mayor as being personally committed to positive multicultural attitudes. As Enrico Scrovengni used the commission of the chapel as a graphic tool for social and political ends so also Sadiq Kahn makes use of TFL as a graphic social and political tool. The use of TFL as a host for this project allows the project's socio-political intentions to become associated with a well established signifier of the city. Historic connotations of Pick's modernist belief in the Underground as a site which could do much to improve the quality the of life are invoked, and in a more contemporary context the transport system as a site which signifies the vast connected nature of the city comes into play.

To conclude, Henri Lefebvre describes in his chapter *The Specificity of the City* (Lefebvre.1996. p100) the dynamic nature of the urban through the analogy of a book. Lefebvre distinguishes the urban from the city by associating the city to the physical structures and the urban to the social and cultural energies. These energies leave traces throughout the city, as a writer leaves traces of thought in a book. We understand the urban by reading its presence in the city. Lefebvre also points out that in this analogy the form of the book and its content cannot be seen as separate as they depend upon and exist within each other. The art projects commissioned by TFL have sought to participate in this 'writing of the city'. The resulting cultural space may be seen as a reply to what Lynch described as a "disconnected nether world". The cultural space of the London Underground acknowledges the difficulty of orientation within its physical space and counters this with the production of a conceptual space, where socio-political narratives are played out, and the internalised and reflective world of the traveller are encouraged through the use of graphic forms which transport the imagination of the passenger to reflect on the urban experience of 'being' within the city. The 'disconnected nether world' effectively becomes a form of illustrated book, where passengers can 'read and write' their underground journeys, which collectively describe and connect with the mind of the city above.

Jacobus, Laura. 2008. *Giotto and the Arena Chapel, Architecture and Experience*. Brepols Publishers
Lefebvre, Henri. 1996. *Writings on Cites*. Blackwell Publishers
Lynch, Kevin. 1960. *Image of the City*. MIT Press