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## **Semantic Models of Urban Space in the Paintings of Jemal Kukhalashvili**

*Keywords: urban space, semantic, spatial model, painting, generation of the 1980s*

The aim of this study is to analyze the urban spatial models of the 1980s and 1990s, classify their significance in regard to their sociocultural function, and identify and study the possible semantic fields of spatial, iconic signs.

A study of this kind based on an example of art experience will contribute to the acquisition of a broad picture of sociocultural dynamics. Consequently, the results will enable us to determine the sociocultural value of culturally specific spatial models within the existing historical context.

As a relevant example for our study, we chose the paintings of Jemal Kukhalashvili, a famous representative of the generation of the 1980s and 1990s, with his noticeable sensibility and simultaneous artistic response to social fluctuations and his intense elaboration of urban problems.

The semiotic method applied to identify and evaluate latent cultural signs within a particular artwork in the same manner is a valid approach in order to study the problem within a more amplified social, historical, psychological, and political-economic scope.

Among the numerous social scenes represented in the art of Jemal Kukhalashvili, we chose a particular space type - transitional social spaces such as a yard, café, public baths, celebrations, and market places - for this study.

One of characteristic urban spaces for Tbilisi is a yard within a common neighborhood. Its architectural communication discloses the hierarchy system of sociocultural values and actively participates in the creation of the city image.

In Kukhalashvili's painting, the spatial model of a Tbilisi yard is well represented. The specifics of Tbilisi yard architecture with its light, wooden constructions, open, shared balconies, and a common yard is an architectural sign of social relationships and lifestyle.

In order to intensify the semantic of a typical city yard, the painter activates a modus of everyday life. Through his painting he gives us the image of the shared daily life of a poor neighborhood: a woman washing clothes at a shared water tap, a mother with her little baby sitting on an old chair, a child playing with a dog, and some neighbors looking down from the balcony, among others.

A shared space is a place where any kind of social differences are neglected and so the radical opposites of “self” and “other” are not so drastic. With his artistic decision of avoiding any direct communication between the neighbors, Kukhalashvili achieves a relaxed atmosphere of a natural coexistence and a tranquil harmony among people bound by profound personal ties. This sense of a deep unity shared between neighbors provides an additional spiritual dimension to the routine actions of everyday life (Lezhava 1994, 110). The upper point of view in the painting “Our Yard” emphasizes the definite belonging of the yard and gives us a picture of a small model of the universe. The yard is a fully self-sufficient, autonomous entity.

Another important tool for creating the traditional yard environment is the unusual representation of interior and exterior spaces: objects and furniture originally belonging to a home’s interior - a kettle, a pot, an iron bed - are scattered all around the yard. This tool of spatial organization could be considered as a signifier referring to the traditional culturological model of Tbilisi’s common yards where the shared space is a continuation of family life. It is the first secure social layer that ensures individual openness to the world and, at the same time, provides a security guarantee “vis-à-vis” for larger social groups. The same is true for the painting “Wife with Tea Set” where the yard and the domestic spaces are not separated and the interior and exterior are not depicted as opposing concepts. Therefore, it is difficult to identify the place where the wife stands - whether she is inside or outside of the house. The pot, the gas stove, and the tap are simultaneously perceived as being inside and outside of the house.

The semantic model of the café based on the example of Kukhalashvili’s paintings, is a complex vehicle of imagery signs. At the same time, it provides cultural information regarding interpersonal communication and social relationship prototypes: the café, as a space related to urban pleasure, gives us interesting socio-cultural material about the dialectics of traditionally established forms of relaxation and entertainment.

The paintings selected and examined in our study are grouped around two semantic aspects of the café: firstly, it is considered as a space of comfort and a familiar environment within the stressful life of a city while offering a re-

laxed atmosphere for citizens. Secondly, the café could be the possibility of an anonymous presence within the social dimension closely related to irrational and instinctive forms of city entertainment.

In the composition “In the Café”, we can observe an emotionally intense space created by the interaction of human beings and a physical space. The painting’s major color scheme based on the contrast of yellow, green, and red at the very first glance revives the emotionally charged atmosphere of a night club or café. A precise observation of paint trails and quick brushstrokes as well as a series of rapid decisions contribute to creating a spontaneous, irrational, and instinctive image of the space. The semantic chain is continued by iconic signs such as an accentuated image of a woman’s body, a female nude that emerges from the swaths of colorful fields, and it adds an important erotic connotation to the painting representing a sign of urban pleasure.

The same semantic is observed in the painting “The Two” where the extreme of passion is even more accentuated. With the aid of sharp color contrasts, the painter attempts to create an appropriate emotional background in opposition to the grotesquely demonic features of the main characters.

Different aspects of café semantics are emphasized in the paintings “Procuress in the Café” and “Drinking Tea after the Bath”. In these artworks, irrational aspects of pleasure are reduced but the erotic connotation is still an important component of the café image. The painter seeks to reproduce the main social function of the café: a lighthearted and careless atmosphere where pleasure is related to interpersonal communication. However, the function of the café is far from a deep intellectual or emotional impact but is labeled as a place of a superficial exchange of ideas or emotions. Ray Oldenburg considers the café a third place after home and work where the most important activity is conversation (Oldenburg 1989, 26).

Kukhalashvili goes further than a simple illustration of a semantic model of the café: he transforms the space into the complex semiotic system where the café’s interior is combined with public baths. Consequently, he creates a place where the physical joy of the bath ritual and the spiritual pleasure of communication are united in a single space. By overlaying these two different visual layers, Kukhalashvili restores the semantic of a city’s multilayer cultural substance. The pleasure discovered in traditional Tbilisi baths is mentioned in Alexander Duma’s impressions while travelling through the Caucasus. The author speaks about his unbelievable experience in Tbilisi baths and wonders why this kind of sensual pleasure is not common in Paris (Dumas 2006, 447-455).

Baths belong to the deepest layers of urban myth. The legend about the warm springs remains not only as a story but also as a part of the name of the city. According to Yuri Lotman, the name of a city is one of the two main signifiers eventually defining its image (Lotman and Uspenski 1982, 2).

Despite the conceptual similarity of the aforementioned artworks, their imagery considerably differs from one another. In the painting “Procuress in the Café”, we perceive a somewhat spontaneous distribution of colored fields creating a wavy and abstract texture. The bath connotation is created by female body shapes emerging from and disappearing within areas of color. Among the dynamic and slightly chaotic café environment, on the left side of the painting, we can clearly identify two women speaking at a round table. Their body contours, the table with dishes set upon it, and even the floor tiles are less ambiguous. The more clearly legible scene contributes to an accentuation of communication as a main social function of the café.

We come across the same scene of drinking tea at round tables in the painting “Drinking Tea after the Bath”. In this case, the painter offers us a different pictorial arrangement: the composition scheme is significantly simple and the figures are clearly legible. High columns and wide open arch constructions seen in the background form dominant structures in the painting. Its monumental appearance and large scale recall the typical inner space of church architecture and add an important connotation of a sacred space: the tea-drinking scene is converted into a rite reviving the cultural value of the rituals of the public baths in Georgian urban tradition and, as we have already mentioned, they are closely linked to Tbilisi’s spatial identity.

The architectural element of the arch is one of the characteristic pictorial tools applied while modelling the café image. Variations on the arch motif can be found in three of the four paintings we have mentioned above. With the aid of the arch element, Kukhalashvili attempts to remove boundaries, open and widen the interior, and extend the limited inner space. In such a way, the café image references the transitional character of the café interior and its attachment to another spatial dimension.

Among the wide range of public events represented in Kukhalashvili’s paintings, images of public and religious celebrations are especially interesting. His consideration of the sociocultural context of celebrations highlights a number of semantic aspects present in visual spatial models.

To reinforce the impact of Soviet ideology, the Soviet system eliminated historically established cultural models of public festivals and religious celebrations and substituted them with a new calendar of significant days. Soviet ceremonies were distant from the traditional cultural roots and inner personal

needs that constituted the basis of any historically established rite. Public celebrations and games that were still an important part of city life in the 19th century in Tbilisi were replaced with Soviet spectacle-type festivals consisting of only theatrical or consumer functions. As a result of restricted access to religious celebrations, the transcendental side of human existence disappeared and the living experience was limited to the scale of everyday life. Consequently, any kind of massive discharge or personal self-expression through traditional rites was made impossible. However, despite the well accommodated social life, the main channel to express the non-material needs of the individual remained blocked.

The elimination of public celebrations is common beyond Soviet boundaries as well. The same social tendency was observed in Western cultures in the 20th century. Despite the different historical dialectic of the process, the same picture is found in Western cultures: the public celebration was substituted with week-end culture and the wholeness of society was reduced to a family scale (Paz 1996, 27).

The central concept of celebration and its main social function is to give a chance to the individual to obtain oneness with the universe. It is a place where a person exhausted from a monotonous routine and social clichés can reach liberation through dissolving himself in an anonymous celebrating crowd. The celebration is an indispensable instrument granting the opportunity to a human being to destroy his individual self and join in the collective body of a higher existence.

In the carnival square, everything was ruled by a free and familiar relationship between people who were distanced from each other beyond the carnival space due to their social and economic barriers. The carnival was a temporary simplification of social hierarchy schemes. It was “real” in the carnival square but absolutely “impossible” in real life (Bakhtin 1990, 3).

A whole unbroken texture of a colorful fabric is the dominant sign of celebration in Kukhalashvili’s artworks. The integration of the crowd and an environment symptomatic of the celebration semantic model is an important expressive tool in his imagery. The human figure forms a part of the entire fabric. Actions are not clear. The crowd as a protagonist of the painting diminishes the role of the individual.

A good example of public celebration is the painting “Saint George’s Day”. The incessant flow of celebrating people is situated in an old city street. Extremely rich and vivid colors give an impression of a vibrant and shimmering fabric surface. Emotional and material substances equally participate in expressing this all-embracing festive atmosphere. Celebration unites everyone

and everything including people, objects, and architecture. Traces of the celebration semantic is reflected in the artistic expression of architectural forms: colorful facades with sketched lines of architectural details recall theatre decorations rather than plastic forms of architecture. The entire painting has succumbed to the enchanted carnival world where the magic of the event takes on that of a naive childhood. Here again, we come across an important function of the celebration; that is, to create a space where one can return to his presocial, immanent being and recover his authentic self.

We have grouped paintings dedicated to market places as a separate semantic group. Kirsten in his book *Markets, Places, Cities* (2016, 12) defines a market as the most adequate metaphor for a city. He states that in order to socially conceptualize an image of a city, there is no better metaphor than the market as it is based on the empirical, historic connection between a market and a city being morphological and conceptual at the same time. Firstly, we should mention the similarity between the cultural function of the public celebration and open-air markets. The social function of the market goes far beyond the simple action of buying and selling. It is a space where people try to satisfy their inner need for communication and social belonging. Traditionally, fairs and markets formed a part of a celebration. Additionally, the cyclic nature of celebrations related to special dates of the year is routine for fairs. We can consider the market as a transitional space that oscillates between celebration and routine as it implies not only the communication of buying and selling but a social function as well. The unity of a human being and the crowd that is a significant aspect of traditional fairs and markets discloses another important sign of the celebration semantic. The market is a ceremony of acquisition - an action that could be considered a social rite.

On the artistic level, the parallels between markets and celebrations can be seen in a panoramic view present in both cases. A long shot of the action and the natural environment is an effective artistic instrument to change the scale of routine actions and increase their semantic impact. Through this approach, the pragmatic action of trade gains the scale of an abstract transcendental phenomenon so customary for the transitional spaces in Kukhalashvili's art.

The binary opposition of the market space is transmitted by a visual image where existence and everyday life are overlapped. As Edmund Leach remarks, any rite consists of two poles: the profane and the sacred. The whole spectrum of actions is situated between these two far-reaching extremes; therefore, the sacred and the profane are not definitions, but two different aspects of any occurrence (Leach 1954, 12-13).

The binary model of the market place is reproduced in the painting “Late Market”, where the very moment of spatial transition is represented: a pragmatic space gently changes into a transcendental dimension. The connotation of the seashore and the evening sky given in vast and watery swathes of paint represent a sunset scene. Some figures also indicate features of a summertime beach: a big umbrella, wide sun hats, and a yellowish background take us to the seaside. The carelessly sketched figures and objects produce the effect of physical matter gradually dissolving into abstract space.

In the artwork “Khoni Fair”, the painter uses traditional clothes and hats as well as a traditional appearance to signify the past and the almost extinct tradition of fairs. The colors are evidently dull, having an association with something old and less vivid.

As a result of the study, several features characteristic of Georgian culture have been revealed that could be read at the connotation level of the models: we can distinguish layers of contemporary and past paradigms, a synthesis of eastern and western traditions, and the complex character of social spaces, among others.

The cultural model of the traditional yard unfolds to reveal important signs of social structure. It is the transitional space where the boundaries of intimate and familiar life are broadened and a chronotope between personal and social spaces is created. Placing interior utilitarian objects in the exterior space of the yard points to the subtle character of borders between yard and home – a sign of open, secured social relationships. At the same time, the yard is a self-sufficient, unique world ruled by traditionally formed social rules and a specific lifestyle.

The café model provides an artistic interpretation of urban pleasure types. Kukhalashvili offers spaces marked with erotic, irrational semantics as well as romantic, salon-like spatial models. In his art, the topos of the café is linked with public baths indicating an important cultural tradition of Tbilisi. The fusion of the eastern baths tradition and the entertainment model established in Western society during an epoch of enlightenment reveals the multilayered, cultural texture of the city.

The semantic of celebrations is based on the wholeness of material and non-material substances indicating the unity between a human being and the universe.

In frequent paintings representing fairs and market places, Kukhalashvili points out the traditional importance of markets and adds a transcendental dimension of the universal occurrence to the action of trade.

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