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Stephen Luis Vilaseca. *Barcelonan Okupas: Squatter Power!* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2013.

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Abstract

Review of Stephen Luis Vilaseca. *Barcelonan Okupas: Squatter Power!*. Madison/Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2013.

Keywords

Review, Stephen Luis Vilaseca, *Barcelonan Okupas: Squatter Power!*, Enric Bou

Stephen Luis Vilaseca. *Barcelonan Okupas: Squatter Power!* Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2013. ix–xxix + 170 pp.

This book deals with recent urban developments, namely the rise of a squatter movement in the city of Barcelona. In doing so, Stephen Luis Vilaseca offers welcome insights into the landscape of a variety of Spanish cities, while providing clues to recent changes in Spanish political and urban attitudes. Neither a sociologist nor a political historian, Vilaseca takes the right path when deciding to study the ways in which *okupas* (the Spanish neologism for squatters) are represented, by themselves and others, in a variety of media, ranging from blogs to film to poetry. Thus the main focus of the book is actually “reading.” Vilaseca reads representations of *okupas*, combining this with a study of the urban experience represented in the socialist Catalan imaginary in Barcelona by way of the squatter. He focuses on the reaction to this issue by the last two socialist mayors of the city, Joan Clos and Jordi Hereu, whose responses can be measured, paradoxically, in terms of simultaneous criticism and compassion. Vilaseca’s readings include powerful wall poems, such as the one discussed in the introduction (*Ya que tenemos que morir . . .* ‘Given that we have to die...’), along with the establishment (City Hall) reaction through censorship, which included tactics such as erasure or hiding (suppressing under a metal shelling). Vilaseca follows Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, paying attention to language that expresses non-formal knowledge embedded in poetry, music, dance, and theatre, ultimately turning to Lefebvre’s call for an uprising of the body that comes in the form of unmediated communication (xviii).

The book is divided into four chapters. In the first, Vilaseca provides a social, cultural, and political context to understand the so-called “Barcelona Model” (city planning during 1992–2011) and how this model clashes with independent social forces. He also relates Barcelona squatters to previous movements, such as the hippie communes of the 1960s and the tensions between *indignados*, ‘the indignant,’ of the 15M movement and squatters. Chapter 2 examines cases of political manipulation of the *okupas* movement by different political parties and explores the role of a major Catalan savings bank, *La Caixa*, in converting Barcelona into a major tourist destination and dramatically transforming the real estate market. It illuminates the Spanish case of state-assisted capitalism through the development of a real estate bubble that led the entire country to an unprecedented crisis, driving up unemployment and sending huge segments of the population into poverty. These are the murky waters where developers, politicians, and bankers alike swim. Chapter 3 focuses on idealized renditions of the *okupas* in a TV series, *El cor de la ciutat* (‘The Heart of the City’), in a film by Pau Martínez, *El Kaserón* (*The Big Old House*), and in a series of novels addressed to young and adult readers. The goal of this third chapter is to present how different the symbolic (textual representations) and the material (political treatment of *okupas*) are in order to highlight the many contradictions faced by so-called socialist politicians.

In Chapter 4 Vilaseca analyzes Jo Sol's film *El taxista ful* (*The Taxi Thief*) and a book of poetry by Vicente Escoler Bautista, *Libro de un 8/1...* ('Book of 8/1...'). The false taxi driver is a poetic-political figure who thus adds poetic power to the political questions surrounding work and money. The poetry book takes this contention a step further by linking word and body, given that Escoler Bautista lives his life poetically. In Vilaseca's opinion he "is at once poet and poem" (117) and his verses rehearse alternative practices to state order and capitalism. Vilaseca concludes that, through "the continual 'rehearsal' and 'performance' of the ideas expressed in his poetry, *okupas* learn to respond to Barcelona according to the pragmatics of prepositions, that is, *before*, the establishment of the self/other and subject/object binaries, *before* the construction of predetermined psychic laws in the form of consciousness, and *before* and *against* the fixed relations of capitalism" (118; emphasis in original). A remarkable aspect is the attention to a critique of alienation in everyday life, particularly as expressed in the repetition of mechanical labor time represented by daybreak and the sun. Some of the best lines in the poem *Libro de un 8/1...* imply a subtle play with word capitalization and a panoptic vision of the city, its tensions, and its subdued inhabitants, calling for a break from egotistical attitudes: "Masturbación Mundial y / Gigante, / que conduce a la Tierra / hacia el límite roto / de un Sol Corrido... / ...de una Corrida del Sol Amarillo que hoy inunda lo Gris aquí / en este desierto ensordecedor de azoteas" (123) 'Worldwide and Gigantic Masturbation, / that leads the Earth / toward the broken limit / of a Sun Set (an Ejaculating Sun, an Embarrassed Sun) . . . / . . . of a Running of the Yellow Sun (of an Orgasming of the Yellow Sun) / that today inundates that which is Grey here / in this deafening desert of flat roofs.' Vilaseca claims that this poetry aims to transform—through the power exerted by imagination—fearful bodies exposed to hazardous living conditions into political ones. Borrowing from neuroscience and psychology, one characteristic of the *Okupas* movement is the purpose of acting and using bodies differently, generating physical responses in their audience with words and images. After reading both the film and the poem, the author concludes that both celebrate the ambivalence of the zombie as a key asset "for the construction of new post-utopian, post-identitarian, and post-dogmatic mental categories" (138) that lead to new social practices. These two final chapters develop the core of Vilaseca's case by providing innovative close readings of a variety of media.

In terms of shortcomings, one could indicate the very superficial connections established with the anarchist movement in Barcelona and a few inexactitudes: anarchists were banned from Barcelona a year and a half before the end of the Civil War. Also, a more detailed explanation of how Barcelonan *okupas* relates to similar movements in Europe would be welcome. Finally, the conclusion ("Sharing Ideas: *Okupas* and the United States") reads rather hastily and seems more the (necessary) outline for further research linking social movements in Spain and the United States. Given the amount and quality of the author's information, combined with his knack for reading and analyzing media, he is in an excellent position to engage with even more recent

developments, such as the rise of *Podemos* 'We can' as a political force or the unexpected political leverage in Catalan politics. This is a very good study that opens up new ways of reading perceptions of urban space and how it is transformed by its most active inhabitants.

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