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Mapping Urban Narratives, the extremes of the everyday

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Introduction

The city landscape – its maps as the narratives that emerge from its everyday and its extremes – has inspired this ongoing open-ended research-paper-presentation which is the dialogue's outcome between two theoretical approaches of man's relation to space and practices of its representation. The first approach originates from an ongoing research on the narrative dimension of space (M.V.) and the second from an ongoing research (K.Z.) on the cinematic dimension of architectural representation. We would

argue though that *the extremes of the everyday* have revealed unexpected spatial qualities and conditions that may surprise the disparate disciplines that address the urban thematic issue. The objective of this research is not to talk directly about the map but to analyze the palimpsest of the narratives it inscribes. The material, the fragments, the layers, the conflicts, the negotiations of the signifiers and the signified, all leave their marks in urban space and landscape. The map is there to narrate stories in space and time.

Objectives

Decoding the signs of urban territory, as separate conjugates of urban phenomena with their meaning, has become an important field of theoretical analysis, which emerged almost simultaneously with the modern metropolis in the 19th century. Until today the map constantly narrated the city and the city constantly redraws the map. This unique urban narrative procedure produces both urban identity, and the identity of those who inhabit it, compiling relationships of meaning that are constantly updated in particular cultural and social contexts. So it is indeed a fact that the urban map does not describe the city itself, but man's relationship with space, the ways in which we perceive and live it.

This paper aims to investigate and test the relationship of these two practices - the look and the step - and the role it plays in decoding messages of the modern city. We wish to look closely at the intermediate region between the signifier and the signified, the symbolic territory triggered, updated or removed by the merging of the motion and vision before it is recognized as spatial narrative.

The Map's genealogy

Considering that the map is not preexistent, but is composed by the inhabitant – walking and/or viewing the urban space – then the story of how the map is being constructed should be also part of the map. Somehow the representation of urban territory should reflect the practices of its production. In the Western context however this is not the case: the map in its geographical concept is unable to perform this function, so it remains mute in its symbolic dimension, but objective in the material description. Exploring the relationship between the plot of history and its geography, outside the Western context, we will often find the narrative preceding the map. So the place of practices does not exist only as the background of stories that take place within it, but is written by the storyline. We can look at maps of the Aborigines that are both geography and narration, reflecting the contemporary establishment of the map with the practices that constitute it¹.

Even within the western culture if we consider the evolution of the map in recent centuries, we will find out that the map of the physical, literal dimension was not always strictly geographical. Michel de Certeau discussing maps and routes in his book “the Practice of Everyday Life” writes that “if one takes the “map” in its current geographical form, (...) the map has slowly disengaged itself from the itineraries that were the condition of its possibility. (...) Each of these maps is a memorandum prescribing actions.”² This medieval map concerning pilgrimages included the rectilinear marking out of itineraries, along with stops and temporal distances, which shares much in common with the symbolic map we are attempting to redefine in the contemporary urban condition: it reflects the practices or the steps³ that constitute the paths and does not simply direct one which route to follow in an indifferent landscape. It does not record existing routes of network traffic, but it captures the

active networks that generate the routes, the narrative sequences of operations that make up both the place of action and its cartographic representation.

Nomadic Geography, walking as an art form

In Western culture walking in the city has been considered several times as just another critical tool, one obvious way of viewing the urban landscape and of attaching meaning to space. But is it simply just that? Just steps, looks and there comes the story? For the culture of Aboriginal Australians wandering or walkabout does not produce simply meaning or signification, but it coincides with it, updating the mythological routes of the Ancestry herein. Between the two extreme points of thought, there are many intermediate manners of perceiving wandering through space, for which walking is clearly something more than one way of understanding and experiencing urban reality. In Francesco Careri's book "Walkscapes", Gilles Tiberghien in the "Introduction: Nomad city" argues that "the trajectory as a form of expression (...) accentuates a place by physically tracing a line through it. The act of traversal, an instrument of phenomenological knowledge and symbolic interpretation of the territory, is a form of psychogeographical reading of it comparable to the 'walkabout' of the Australian Aborigines."⁴

The trajectory of place through the act of walking transforms urban territories and turns the city into an archipelago where the built environments operates as islands, and wanderers as travelers and navigators in the intermediate space of flows and networks, "an urban archipelago in which to navigate by drifting."⁵ These routes or paths, the journeys and navigations are both objects and experiences. Crossing the urban territory includes the action-practice of the walking individual: his steps form the path-route that retains an architectural objectivity, but also gains a narrative

dimension, as the space traversed can be represented and thus become a part of the urban narrative.

The map of the city is finally written in the streets when marked and carved by steps.

Forbidden Visibility, the art of seeing

The look is the second important practice for formation of the urban map and narrative, one which has been exceedingly criticized for inefficiency, bias and superficiality, but simultaneously it has exercised the greatest influence on the signification of space. Juhani Pallasmaa in his book “The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses” argues that “in Western culture sight has historically been regarded as the noblest of the senses, and thinking itself thought of in terms of seeing. (...) the thought and culture of modernity have not only continued the historical privileging of sight, but furthered its negative tendencies.”⁶ This condition is intensified by technological developments to the extent that the image replaces reality itself, and converts it to an ephemeral and disposable optical product, attributing to sight a hegemonic status in shaping reality.

The function of sight in the urban landscape is inextricably linked to the perception of the city as a spectacle, a perception that emerged at the birth of the modern metropolis and was never really abandoned, despite the criticism it has received. The look may disassemble the spectacle, searching for what is hidden behind it, when no one is watching, what everyone avoids seeing. The role of the gaze over urban semiotics is not to transform the visible into representation, but rather to make visible what is invisible. Chris Jenks writes in his book on “Visual Culture” that “Space has to be conceptualized in order to be experienced and understood, our ‘sites’ are informed by

the predisposed character of our 'sight'."7 In other words space should reclaim its symbolic meaning in order to be lived and comprehended. So urban territories can only exist through the premeditated gaze upon them. In this game of the invisible and visible, the practice of look discovers even what the practice of the step often avoids and repels, which is forbidden to see and thus to control through its representation.

The step vs. the look

Considering all the above, a merged assumption is gradually shaped that the practice of the step creates urban geographies, which then the practice of the look is called to represent, fabricating and updating the emergent urban narrative. This process is constantly repeated, updating and rewriting the map, constantly transforming the relationship between residents and the urban realm as a whole of forms and actions.

But is this the only crossing of the practices of the step and look?

The flâneur of Charles Baudelaire (and eventually Benjamin) was born along with the modern metropolis while identifying with his look the urban realm as a spectacle, exactly because his step and his wandering in the city attributed this characteristic to urban space. His wandering steps triggered his look around the city and gave him the unique privilege of perception and representation of modernity. Richard Sennett writes that "as the flâneur parades down the street, people watch him; they do not feel free any longer to go up and speak to him."8 He is to be watched, not spoken to.

But if we consider how these two practices involve a conceptual nexus that defines urban identity depending on the extent and intensity of identifying with or defying its boundaries, then there appears to be a particularly interesting intermediate territory that comes from the distance or differentiation of the map that generates the look from the step that causes the map. The boundaries themselves form extreme conditions.

Narration as experience and Repetition as action

The concepts of narration and repetition may offer a new reading of the urban text and could be used as tools for setting up a new urban map, able to convey the experience of the city with the appropriate flow and mobility in interaction with different speeds and intensities. Within this territory voids and pauses are created, where the look cannot reach and where access is prohibited. Precisely in this intermediate symbolic space new theoretical tools can be introduced, with the ambition to capture the complexity of contemporary urban conditions, narratives as text, image and time sequences.

The concept of narration is the connecting link between the urban practice and its representation, as, according mainly to de Certeau, all narrative structures may acquire spatial status. For him “every story reflects a spatial practice, organized by local displacements (as a moving point describes a curve), capable of constructing urban plots that transform their experience as representation – replacing the map with text, the urban narrative.”⁹ The practice of walking collects, mainly with the assistance of vision but also with all senses, the icons of urban space and the subject composes the urban narrative and identity through the process of narration.

The concept of repetition introduces temporality under various conditions and with disparate impact on the practices of the step and the look. These repetition conditions produce spatial kinetic formations and thus form urban landscapes in space and time, affecting the perception of urban semiotics for the resident. Repetition is crucial for understanding the modern metropolis and past and current metropolitan functions, where constructions are aggregated as copies and variations of models of habitation. Repetitive procedures are sometimes already existent in urban signifiers, even before

they are signified. The association of space with repetition is neither innocent nor harmless, but implies manipulations, urban political techniques and thus produces strong effects of persuasion, sometimes even propaganda. The temporal dimension of repetition introduces a pace of reading and writing on the urban map. At the same time the practice of repetition constructs systems for spatial structures, which update the urban symbolic map in unpredictable ways, establishing territories of urban space normalization – if we go back to Foucault.¹⁰

The concepts of narration and repetition can be further analyzed when applied and activated on the urban practices of the step and look.

The extremes of the everyday

Consider those practices that lead to the step or the look to its edges, where one of the two weakens the other. Is there a step without a look or a look without a step? Is there a step or a look isolated from its representational mechanism? Is there a map without a man crossing it or looking at it? Is there a spatial/urban/landscape gaze (artistic, political, activist or gendered)?

Parkour and the traceurs

Parkour¹¹ is eventually an athletic activity, which involves techniques of movement that overcome normalized urban space, ignoring existing networks, obstacles and urban materiality – ultimately it ignores the urban map as everyday people live it. Traceurs' steps deny the obstacles that limit down the visual possibilities or potential of a trajectory, and create an alternative perception for movement in time and space - a concept founded solely on the practice of crossing and connecting urban signs (both literally and metaphorically). The trajectory of the traceurs is sewn like a patchwork

of basic movements, reconstituted with tremendous adaptation, depending on the terrain of the landscape to produce a three-dimensional alternative route.

For the traceurs the step produces literally the way, setting a new intangible path that will never be included in the existing network of urban movements. In order to implement this route the traceur uses urban materiality, mostly preferring sites that are either not important for the collective flow of the city, such as unused roofs. Thus space, the urban and natural landscape, participates in the execution of the route of the traceur providing his tools and stage. Most certainly space was never intended, designed, conceived or built, to be used as he traverses it. So this is a case of a total urban system displacement by a surprisingly spectacular hovering human being.

The time of Parkour is composed of the linear sequence of steps, but also of events and choices, which literally and metaphorically relate urban space with its narrative – as discussed above. The traceur rewrites the urban text, moving from point A to point B and simultaneously narrates a trajectory, creating an urban narrative which is performed exclusively by the practice of step.

But if Parkour deconstructs the urban map, and denies normalized space, the parade-like march of demonstrations attempt to achieve exactly the opposite: to validate the urban map, imposing a kind of semiotic stillness to the propaganda of the crowd.

Simultaneously, of course, it denies the individual as a regulator of urban habitation.

Demonstrations and the crowd

Architect Stan Allen in his paper “Object to Field” refers to composer Yannis Xenakis¹² who “conceived his early work *Metastasis* as the acoustical equivalent to the phenomenon of the crowd: Athens – an anti-Nazi demonstration – hundreds of thousands of people chanting a slogan which reproduces itself like a gigantic

rhythm.”¹³ Xenakis invented novel and intriguing procedures in order to choreograph and map the 'characteristic distribution of vast numbers of events' as the crowd marched, as individual routes in the city are fiercely clustered under conditions of social pressure. The steps of groups in vast numbers exert unpredictable powers in space. They defy the omnipotence of the eye, precisely because they no longer recognize urban space as the spectacle; the steps of the crowd itself are the spectacle, the Mass Ornament¹⁴ in Kracauer's term, a spectacle that absorbs both those that make it up, and also those who view it. Visibility thus weakens, fades, blurs into the crowd; the only thing that counts is the repetition of steps, the normalization of the urban map and the rhythm of their constant recurrence. This particular spectacle amounts to powerful propaganda.

The direction of the bodies and their parts as the minimum units of the total group form the monad to be repeated in demonstrations as urban narratives. The individual designates his own space through the range of his motion, and the time he possesses through the rhythm of his movement with the group. The spatial experience is organized by geometry and mathematics. The participating unit understands only part of the system in which he is a part of and never the overall structure of the crowd. He experiences fragments of space from below; the total view is offered as a whole only to audience of the spectacle that is propagated. The participant of the crowd can never grasp the image of the whole.

The time of repetition is rhythmic; it is characterized by a kind of temporal and spatial regularity, though it ignores urban reality. The crowd does not rewrite the city map; it accepts the map and writes its narrative on it; as a result it normalizes space while absorbing potentially new correlations. According to Antonio Negri “today, the crowd is the name of a crowd of bodies (...), we are obliged to interpret that name based on

the perspective of the body and consequently to clarify the mechanism of a crowd of bodies. When we look at the bodies, we sense that we are in front of a crowd of bodies, but we understand that every body is a crowd.”¹⁵

Conclusion

We conclude that in both cases the practice of the look is weakened while steps are performed: in the case of parkour an alternative way of visual signification is invented – the urban narrative of its representations – and in the case of the demonstration the resulting spectacle is consumed as an image of propaganda by its spectators. Though this exposes our society’s inability to signify without simultaneous representation, it does not necessarily exclude the exploration of alternative relationships between the practices that generate urban geographies that are then turned into maps and narratives. If we could modify the relationship of step to look, would this change urban narratives as well? This is a question that remains open. Is there finally an urban gaze, which dominates this game of urban signification, which incorporates the looks and steps of the inhabitants and their power to identify territories?

Roland Barthes writes in *Mythologies* that “*myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it is a second-order semiological system.*”¹⁶

Myth functions as a meta-language over a primary semiological system. When the signifier is identified with the signified to the extent that the sign can no longer be analyzed based on the system form-meaning, then the meta-language uses this sign as a signifier and attributes to it a new content, the myth. So the question arises: can we redefine our tools, the step and the look, in order to construct a corresponding spatial

metalanguage, establish urban mythologies and resignify urban space? Then the urban narrative maps might emerge as the new urban spaces to experience.

¹ Or even reflect on the abolishment of the map and the omnipotence of the practices of occupation and recognition of space in Japanese culture, according to the analysis of Roland Barthes in the *Territory of Signs*.

² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 120.

³ “viewing” and “viewed”

⁴ Gilles A. Tiberghien, “Introduction: Nomad city”, in Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes, Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2001), 11.

⁵ Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes, Walking as an Aesthetic Practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2001), 21.

⁶ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Sussex UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 21.

⁷ Chris Jenks, *Visual culture* (London NY: Routledge, 1995), 144.

⁸ Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge, London, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 125.

⁹ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.

¹⁰ For the use of the term “normalization” we refer to Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979)

¹¹ For the analysis of the Parkour see also Maria Pitsiladi, *Parkour _ a potential route in the city*, (Athens: 9th Semester Lecture, National Technical University Athens, 2008) online only.

¹² Xenakis interview to Nouritza Matossian, see also Nouritza Matossian, *Xenakis*, (London: Kahn & Averill, 1991).

¹³ Stan Allen, “Object to Field,” *AD, Architectural Design* 67 (1997): 23.

¹⁴ For the Mass Ornament see also Siegfried Kracauer “The Mass Ornament,” *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, Levin T. (editor, trans.), (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1995), 75-86.

¹⁵ Antonio Negri, *The Crowd and the Metropolis* (Salonica: Eleftheriaki Culture, 2003), 32.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Seuil: Paris, 1957), 113.