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EDITED BY ROBERTO ROCCO AND DANIELE VILLA

NEW URBAN LANGUAGES
Tales and images of spatial justice

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Tales and images of spatial justice

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Multiplicitous Representations of the Thirdspace: Visual thinking the spatial justice between the real and the ideal city

The modern proliferation of multiple tales of the city is increasingly being played through the pervasive language of images. Images and visual artifacts through which the different forms of power narrate themselves, creating seductive representations, building, literally, fictional realities where Lefebvre's spatial triad (Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation) is intentionally blended. If, quoting Foucault, 'Space is fundamental in any exercise of power', how can we re-discuss the role and functions of visual languages in the description of how spatial justice is played out in today's cities? What binds the growing demand for stakeholder inclusion, information and participation to 'drawing of the city', in its role of 'experiential knowledge'? This session aims to discuss the concept of Thirdspace (Soja) as a catalyst for images of the 'real city'. In Thirdspace, issues of spatial justice require innovative ways to be represented. On the other hand, Thirdspace requires/uses visions of imaginary and imaginable cities, images of ideal cities and utopias that are linked to a long Western cultural history. These images may be a virtual ground for experimentation and change.

Edward Soja's text *Thirdspace* (1996) still remains, even now, a useful tool for investigating the multiple components and manifestations of social and urban space; herein, reference is shortly going to be made, by way of an introduction, to the theoretical framework: the first of three interpretative categories formulated by Soja, perceived space, mainly refers to the concrete spatial forms, to objects that might be mapped; we are essentially dealing with a physical space, produced by society, empirically measurable, perceived directly and therefore describable in various ways.

Perceived space emerges clearly in the geographies of our living worlds, of the emotional and behavioural "bubbles" that surround our bodies invisibly, until they eventually enclose the complex spatial organisation of the social practices marking our "rooms for action", from familiar contexts to districts and all the way up to cities, regions, nations.

Instead, the second type of space, the "conceived" one, is structured in mental or cognitive forms (or, to borrow Lefebvre's terms, which Soja echoes, "the imagined"): it expresses itself through a system of "intellectually elaborated" systems of signs and symbols, first among them the written and spoken word. According to the French historian, it is the dominant space in every society, fed by representations of power and ideology. Lastly, the third category, the lived space, consists in real social and spatial practices, drawn from the material world of experiences and their realization. In that manner, the lived space is juxtaposed over the physical space, thereby generating the symbolical use of its objects, by tending, in other words, to manifest within systems of non-verbal symbols and signs.

In Lefebvre's view, lived space seemed to be distinguished both from physical and from mental space; in Soja's vision, instead, it seemingly represents an extension thereof: it is the space of "inhabitants" and "users" that simultaneously contains all the other real and imaginary spaces. Thus, *Thirdspace* manifests as the space that draws from the material and the mental spaces of perceived space and conceived space, while extending far beyond their reach, substance and meaning: it is at the same time real, imagined and a great deal more.

Images burst into such a magmatically composite space in an unbridled fashion. On their role in establishing a bridge between reality and imagination, on their generative power to confer sense and meanings upon social space, this contribution intends putting forward a few reflections, beginning with Carlo Ginzburg's recent book titled *Paura, reverenza, terrore. Cinque saggi di iconografia politica* (2015): this text is in fact devoted to the enduring nexus in Western history between power and images, the communicative force of which has been used and is still used by politics.

We are surrounded, flooded by images: this is, therefore, Ginzburg's actualizing assumption, enunciated at the very start of his work: «From computer monitors and TV sets, from street walls to newspaper pages, images of every kind entice us, impart to us instructions (buy!), frighten us, dazzle us.»

Through a refined analysis, the historian spreads out, in support of his thesis, some examples known to the larger public as well: *Guernica*, Lord Kitchener's manifesto Britons. Join your country's Army, David's Marat, the title page of Hobbes' *Leviathan*: all examples in which iconography links the use of images to messages of power.

Images come from TV, newspapers, advertising posters, digital screens, and in addition might even float around on the Web: each day we are subjected to thousands of images we risk growing accustomed to; whence the currency of a problem tackled by Ginzburg through a retrospective look, capable of moving to and fro in time, by resorting to the concept of *Pathosformeln*, elaborated last century by the German art critic Aby Warburg, and used in the text with regard to the recurrence of archetypal images surfacing in different contexts across history.

What are the possible reactions to images that intend subjugating us to power? According to Warburg's interpretation – shared by Ginzburg himself –, it is necessary to "create some distance", by instilling that principle of awareness, self-determination, which traverses the entire history of the West. It is within this "distance", which we might understand as a kind of space to be interposed "between the self and the rest of the world", that the subtle nuances separating a serene contemplation from a visceral involvement unfold themselves, as such already capable of explaining the term *Pathosformeln*, that accordingly comprises both a rational and replicable component, the result of which materializes in the form, and its opposite pole, the emotional dimension.

Ginzburg seems to suggest the need for an education to images and a necessary decodification, "in order to actively react to the siege", to exit passivity, ultimately, not to let oneself be overwhelmed by the messages conveyed through the images.

In which way, however, are the images described in *Paura, reverenza, terrore* linked to the topic of the *Thirdspace*? To that perceived and at the same time proactive and imaginary social space, where images may give rise to fully fledged decisional processes? The most direct link is to the exercise of power brought to bear by certain categories of images on the spectator and the consumer: the conscious access to the messages transmitted by them presupposes the capacity to grasp the more or less explicit or veiled codes; it is here that the degree of acculturation of the addressee of the message comes into play: there is in fact no uniform reception, it is not the same for everyone.

The ability to interlink information and elaborate it critically, to produce rational "distance", is quite different from the one possessed by those who are emotionally on the receiving end. From this viewpoint, Carlo Ginzburg's refined historical and iconographic research seemingly opens up a range of communicative and receptive possibilities.

As written in any event by Ernst Gombrich, another distinguished scholar from the Warburg School, images have always represented the most suitable communicative style of addressing the less cultured, when actually not illiterate, social classes; suffice to think of the thousand-year diffusion of visual representations the church doctrine has availed itself of (Gombrich 1999).

The problem, however, might disclose other, unexpected implications, in those instances where images are potentially produced by multiple subjects, not necessarily belonging to power establishments, if by power we chiefly mean the political one, with its top-down practices.

The issue we would like to raise here has to do with an epochal change in the production of images that, in contemporary society, boast new players, new channels, and renewed possibilities of dissemination introduced by "e-democracy". Electronic media – and those who operate them – may play a far from secondary role in the production of images and in the creation of an urban imagining as collective project involving the future of the city.

In particular, it is precisely the information and communications technologies (ICT) and their uses associated with the immaterial and symbolical aspects that might be the bearers of new images, of new social and urban demands. Social players, communities, societies might acquire and "orientate" the technological communication tools based on different political-cultural visions and different forms of spatial imaging.

On this issue, the book *The City as Interface* (de Waal 2014) highlights the limit of thinking about technologies mainly with regard to their practical application; even though they undoubtedly represent the effective solution to several real problems, making our lives easier or more pleasant and our cities "smart" or safer, and even though we cannot somehow escape their "magic" power to render urban society better.

If we look, however, at urban media especially, they might be vested with a different role; they might in other words prove to be fully fledged “writing tools”, as de Waal himself strongly emphasizes: «*Many urban media technologies allow their users to literally write their experiences into the city. Citizens can leave memories, reviews, and other remarks and tie those (geotag) to particular places. Visitors of those places can access this content. Similarly, citizens can use the status updates of social networks to describe where they are and what they are doing there. Both practices lead to what has been called a ‘doubling’ of the urban public sphere.*»

This novel social and urban space, the fruit of “writing tools”, may be additionally implemented if we take into account “imagining tools” as well, i.e. those media endowed with the dual value of communicating messages through images and simultaneously conveying imagined visions, desires, and proposals.

Turning back more specifically to the interpretative keys suggested by Martijn de Waal, some other interesting questions arise: what may be the imagined visions mediated by communications technologies within an urban setting? What is the meaning of these tools as far as urban society is concerned?

According to the Dutch sociologist, the urban condition seems to revolve around two possible scenarios: the one foreshadowed by the “smart city”, pitted against the “social city”: if in Bill Gates’ vision, media devices personalise the urban experience, thereby appearing as a splendid vision of the future, this may simultaneously prove to be a threat to society, as it does not require any active participation in civic life, and may ultimately accrue to the detriment of democratic life.

The City as Interface accordingly describes three possible routes: the libertarian city, the republican city and the communal one; the first one is based on the idea of the city as a market, where inhabitants are consumers of various services; the political and cultural aspects of urban life take a back seat; many, though not all, of the imagined visions of smart cities appear to conform to this ideal.

The second one, instead, is the scenario of a republican city (from res-publica: public affair): the inhabitant is first and foremost a citizen and cannot opt out of the urban society.

The third one, the communal city, where a common identity is shared, is founded on a nostalgic retrospective that looks towards a sense of community resembling a village.

These three imagined cities are not marked by neat boundaries: the organisation, use and experience of public urban space may be seen as an indication of a city’s operation qua community: accordingly, the manner in which digital media intervene in this process also shapes up a direction for the development of urban communities.

Ultimately, in order to understand what the public sphere is in the current society, we have to look at the way in which its inhabitants live or have access to multiple “stages” – from Boulevard to Facebook – and the way in which these practices might lead or not to the development of new spaces.

It is likewise seemingly clear that past categories and terminology hardly help us understand the issue: the public urban sphere in the abovementioned examples was founded on a simultaneous use of the space. In any event, the result of using digital and mobile media is that the public sphere is no longer the exclusive domain of physical spaces.

When we use digital social media, in fact, we take part in a public space that partly belongs to the world of communication and is partly physical: the issue at stake is whether urban media are qualitatively altering the experience, and with it also the possibility of accessing the social and urban space.

Within this scenario, the issue of “writing tools” – or in the extended sense we have sought to envision, by paying regard to “imagining tools” as well – takes on a not indifferent role.

Going back to our initial question, namely, the power images are capable of conveying, we should now pay regard to the types of spaces in which they are disseminated, the multiple players that are able to produce them, and the entire gamut of pathosfor meln, which may currently include new forms of behaviour, thanks to technologies and to the circulation allowed by the Web: not only “passive” actions, rational distance or visceral involvement, but active and proactive actions that go through communicative tools – in the form of images as well –, as such capable of expressing multiple visions and forms of imagining.

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