Chapter 11
Sensitive Bodies in the Cityscape

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ABSTRACT

Cities evolve to just possible, always uncertain urban futures, achieving complexity so this complexity becomes itself the best tool to face uncertainty. The main operation in urban systems evolution is difference, the establishment of traces indicating differences, differences themselves consisting of increasingly more complex systems of rules, like a game board. Differences operate both in space and time, conforming to a cultural landscape, a cityscape. It is in this context where the authors present the concept of sensitive bodies. Urban spaces highly internalise processes due to a collective memory of past events, whose complexity can be read through both a hermeneutical approach to form and a sensitive approach to topology, the underlying system of rules that can be read just by playing the game, using techniques borrowed out of performing arts, making bodies interact with living bodies whose behaviour is just the main component of the cityscape.

INTRODUCTION: SENSITIVE BODIES IN CITYSCAPES

Chronotopes and Contemporary Cityscape

Complexity is the main characteristic of contemporary city. Highly rapid processes take place in space, a range of events ranging from the most devastating disaster to the most intimate decision, from the triumph of a group of people to the intense experience of an art masterwork (Žižek, 2014). And the nature of these events cannot be separated of the nature itself of the space where it is happening, as the concept of Mikhail Bakhtin’s chronotope, this is, the unity conformed by space, time and event, and its possibility of re-presentation and communication. For Bakhtin, a chronotope “(literally time-space) [is] the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in

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literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity” (Bakhtin, 2002, pp.15-ss.). Following German historian Karl Schlögel (2003), although it is undoubted that space and time runs inseparable, it is true that because of the obvious sometimes the spatial component is just taken for granted in history. Communication, even representation, of events tends to follow the order of time, the nature of a chronicle. Schlögel and Bakhtin both bring the concept of chronotope-event to the field of Narrativity, and consequently insert it in the frame of sense and meaning (García Selgas, 2007, p.112). The chronotope, according to Bakhtin, “lends meaning and dimensionality to narrative space” (Pleßke, 2014, p.173). Bakhtin initially identifies various possible chronotopes linked to a seminal urban narrative: “(i) road and encounter, (ii) castle and history, (iii) salon and politics or (iv) threshold and crisis. […] Chronotopes are vehicles of motion, progress and transition, return and regression, as well as turning points and moments of reversal […] In this sense, spatialisation of time or temporalisation of space and movement culminate in a form of chronotopic thinking which can be interpreted as highly instructive to mental structures” (id.).

This way, which is extremely interesting to us, every event, whatever its dimension or consequences, not only takes place in space but also changes space itself, if not initially its geometry, at least its relational structure. Space is not static at all, but it is precisely its dynamic condition that makes it uncomfortable. If to the intrinsic complexity of space we must also add a time component, then the understanding of space turns almost impossible, even more if we want to control, design or plan it. The main operation when facing spaces is to simplify them, avoiding, even ignoring its complexity. We will try to develop some kind of method to face complexity in urban spaces by linking the concepts of chronotope and urban landscape or cityscape, being cityscapes (like chronotopes) the field where meaning and social-spatiality gather and encounter, so that they can be represented by an original way of cartography.

Following Bakhtin again, we must assume that “forms are always historical” (Holquist, 1990, p.116). So contemporary urban landscapes, cityscapes, can only be read and eventually represented) as palimpsests, dynamic palimpsests. This characteristic leads us to disagree with the idea of understanding complex urban spaces (in fact any urban spaces) by mere quantitative methods, by increasing the number of indicators and formula, ignoring the relational, communicative dimension of the city; and of course ignoring the time dimension of the city, still pictures preferred to the attempt to catch the changing nature of space-events.

First of all we have to assume the complex nature of the city. Because of this nature, cities cannot be understood in their wholeness, we must consider an intrinsic lack of knowledge. But if we assume that this lack of knowledge is preferable to the only apparent understanding of another thing that looks like a city but it is not at all, that cannot be considered as a city, just a still life, a static representation, what we must try is to adapt our mind and methods to reality instead of the contrary, try to adapt reality to the simplicity and narrowness of most of our points of view. In fact, most of modern urbanism has not consisted but on an attempt to simplify the city to just a few of corbusian rules. But cities are stubborn, obstinate; they keep on being complex, indefinite, hard to pin down, but the only possible scenario of what is happening and going to happen. German philosopher Walter Benjamin stated that modern urban life was not that of peasants and landowners taken and put into a scene of large boulevards and commercial arcades. What modernity brought us is a deep anthropological transformation, so that knowledge should be linked not to a simple observation but to a complex experience (Barja et al., 2010, p.25). In On some motifs in Baudelaire, 1939, one of his many writings on the city after the author of Les fleurs du mal, Benjamin wrote: “Fear, revulsion and horror were the emotions where the big-city crowd aroused
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