CITYSCAPES – EXPLORING THE SPIRIT OF URBAN IDENTITY

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Turned into a mere relic of the modernization process, contemporary cities have stopped providing answers for the people they were meant to serve. Static, often imposing and inscrutable, the city is now a sphinx whose silence costs lives in terms of the psychic response to their complexity and size; most poignantly, to the isolation they engender.

INVISIBILE CITIES: TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF PRESENT TIMES

1.0 THE NARRATIVE

Turned into a mere relic of the modernization process, contemporary cities have stopped providing answers for the people they were meant to serve. Static, often imposing and inscrutable, the city is now a sphinx whose silence costs lives in terms of the psychic response to their complexity and size; most poignantly, to the isolation they engender.   In light of this, the research is framed to uncover how people extract meaning from the built environment and how, in an act of reciprocity, the latter underpins their identity. The goal is to develop an original analysis of the role of contemporary cities in shaping and supporting western lifestyles through the representation of architecture in cinema. A series of short films will constitute the final research output. Shot in significant metropolitan areas around the world, they will illustrate the theoretical background underpinning the whole endeavour in critical theory, visual culture, cultural studies & psychoanalysis.

The starting point of the whole project is Italian writer Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, a novel intended as a collection of descriptions of the cities that the Venetian explorer Marco Polo visits within Kublai Khan's vast empire. Based on the original The travels of Marco Polo – travel diaries recording Polo's journeys through the 13th–century Mongol Empire –Calvino's book is a reflection on contemporary cities as these become invisible to the eye: buried as they are under an interior, "represented" city, the real city disappears beneath a thick layer of fantasy. Such is the case for Venice, for instance, its Disneyfication rendering the true Venice virtually invisible. Hence,"[t]he only way to get at Venice is to use the water – its refractions, reflections, the play of light and shadow, and to re–create Venice where it has always been strongest – in the imagination" (Winterson : 2001).

It is thus clear that, to Calvino, stories, memories and signs always replace, cover and erase the real city, thus turning the latter into "the trace or track" of something "which is forever absent" (Spivak, in Welsh : 2007).

There are in fact:

the city of dreams;
the city of memory;
the city of desire;
the city of history;
the city of the future;
the city of destiny;
the city of simulacra

the city of spectacle;
the city of consumption, etc

In other words, everything but the city as such. Invisible cities are in this respect nothing but a catalogue of obstacles impeding an "unmediated" perception of the world – as Calvino would put it – each city existing as a metaphor for the "invisibility" of experience. As a result, not only is the experience of the real city impossible; but also dependent on a form of obliteration, of erasure, of 're–writing' of the 'real experience' that, at the end of the day, is all encoded in this very act of re–writing as such.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Bearing in mind that for French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan re–writing is a therapeutic mechanism meant to aid recovery from a trauma, it appears that the city has become a massive exemplar of automatic writing, its inability to provide answers being a symptom of that disconnection from reality now days affecting us all. The question thus arises of how to decode it; ie, of how the city is perceived by the observer, which is overall our ultimate aim. The answer is twofold: on the one hand, we have summoned up a model derived from psychoanalysis, ie Sigmund Freud's "interpretation of dreams"; on the other, the cinematic act as an irreplaceable means for doing this.

2.1 THE FREUDIAN MODEL

With regard to the dream–work, Freud used to distinguish between a dream's manifest and latent contents. That is, given a sequence of images as the apparent narrative of a dream (manifest content), it is possible to draw out of it a number of interpretations (latent content). Manifest and latent contents from a dream therefore overlap, although both are perceived as if part of a continuum; and indeed they are, if it was not for the fact that, according to the psychoanalytical model, a dream is subject to interpretation so as is a film. There is, in this regard, a parallel we can draw between a dream and movie, this parallel being based on the narrative (sequence of mages) both are based on. To interpret a dream means in fact to chance its structure exactly as to interpret movie means to change its montage. And it is starting from this assumption that a movie can represent the way our mind works.

On the other hand, the dream–work is never objective; to the degree that the meaning of an image is always affected/distorted by subjective drives and individual history. Hence, the very idea subtending out project: to employ a film to mirror the way in which a dream-work works, under condition that the stimuli aroused by a city are such as to put us in a dream–like state.

This position is particularly clear in Inception, a film in which not only the dream–work is represented as a kind of onion–layered nucleus (beyond the latent content of a dream, another follows, and another,

and another); but such layers – or "levels" (as they are called in the film) are always 'infested' by the dreamers' "projections", i.e. elements belonging to the dreamer's personal history that "colour" the dream-work with ever different meanings.

Once we have established that what we perceive of a city is never a mere sequence of images, but rather the multi–layered overlapping of personal projections, the problem arises of how to "decode" the manifest experiencing of a city. To us, cinema holds the key. Not only because a film is, by its very nature, the thing most similar to a dream; but also because its particular structure, based mostly on montage and film editing, allows for the simultaneous presence of different layers of images, thus resembling as closely as possible the interpretation the research proposes of the city as multilayered field of experience.

2.2 THE CINEMATIC TRANSCRIPTION (OR RE–WRITING)

Sergei Eisenstein, the Russian filmmaker famous for his pioneering film theory, wrote that film montage always represents a moment of "explosion" of the image; ie, the very moment where a film sequence (as a situation, or event), is decomposed into juxtaposed images to reveal the inner meaning of the sequence. It is easy here to draw a parallel with Freud's dream–work and, from the latter, with the model of perception we have indicated for the city: the cinematic montage can operate definitively as a metaphor to illustrate/articulate the multi-layered compression of meanings. However, what we are interested in is exactly this idea of the image's explosion; ie, the possibility of making the latent content of the dream–work available in the form of a hypertext. Hence the use of use of cinema as a means to accomplish this task.

3.0 HOW THE SUBJECT EXPERIENCES A CITY

The methodology rests on the subject–ification of the camera's eye. The short films, in other words, will make objective a condition of generalized unease that is difficult to grasp unless visualized. The films seek to act as an imaginary "screening" in the mind of the beholder, thus "visualizing" the mental and emotional associations that the experiencing of contemporary cities arouses. It is in this respect that the cinematic short will act as a hypertext able to make visible an invisible process: the overlapping between visual stimuli and the random/rational associations the former provoke in the mind of the observer. The final aim would be to provide an account of the impact that the contemporary city has on its user/consumer, thus highlighting the broadest range of experiences possible.

References and Notes:

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