

THE LOCUS OF ACTION – TINTED WINDOWS

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the ways artists and to a degree scientists deal with (and endure) new meaning and comprehend and construct the world. The research reflects on the intense connection between comprehension and construction and their place of creation – the ‘locus of action.’ It seeks to define a malleable form of understanding and analysis capable of approaching our complex liquid world as discussed by Zygmunt Bauman. The aim is to establish a multi-viewpoint theoretical approach based on the dynamic concept of the Flâneur as introduced by Baudelaire, replacing single viewpoint categorization. This is coupled with the concept of thickening as proposed by Clifford Geertz with its implication of interaction between multi-layers of meaning. Here walking and looking is introduced as a method or strategy, a model or map, providing a framework of understanding in conditions of hybridity and change.

In *The Barbarians*, Alessandro Baricco describes the decline of our old notion of culture. [1] Is there in our present time of internet, digitalization, globalization and migration still a place for profundity, contemplation and order or is the world dilapidated in a society of consumption and opportunism? According to Baricco this discrepancy might not exist, our modern culture has become liquid and is in a state of mutation and alteration. Today, this can be illustrated by the current discourse around the complex relation between art, technology and science or between artistic research and art production.

Today art production and the context and location of its creation and evaluation are in a constant debate, academic research as opposed to artistic mastery seems to be the new paradigm. This paper explores the place of action, the new third space, the ‘laboratory’ in its most experimental form, where art is realized next to the trusted atelier or the public space. In this project we explore the apparent newness of bringing research into the art context while simultaneously asking what it means to practice art and where that action takes place. As a result the research speaks to present concerns about the arts as much as to the field of academic research. What has changed exactly and how and when has this influenced our perspective of art and art production and consequently our being in this globalized, digitized world? In short, what has become culture today?

In his book *Liquid Times*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman remarks that our society recently has moved from a *solid* phase into a *liquid* phase, referring to the fact that our social forms (structures, institutions, [...]) are no longer able (or in a situation) to ‘keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them and once they are cast for them to set.’ [2] In other words society in itself and with it all possible

models or frameworks for interpretation have become *liquid*, in a constant state of change in a constant middle or in-between-ness.

In the classical (Western) interpretation of logics an articulation however can only be false or true, dismissing this middle (or ever-changing stage) beforehand. In other words, interpretation and understanding become an all or nothing evaluation leaving little ground for interpretation. Seen in this way it denies any possible re-positioning or a ‘transversal movement’ as avidly proclaimed by Deleuze and in doing so installs a static system of interpretation. For Deleuze: ‘The middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. Between things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one and the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.’ [3]

In an article entitled *The Flaw of the Excluded Middle* Paul G. Hiebert investigates why the Western worldview (in a theological sense) excluded this middle level. According to him, our belief in this middle area vanished during the 17th and 18th centuries as a result of the Platonic dualism and a science based on materialistic naturalism: ‘The result was the secularization of science and the mystification of religion. Science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies. Science was based on the certitudes of sense experience, experimentation and proof. Religion was left with faith in visions, dreams and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws.’ [4] Today, this notion seems to be in flux. Religion and science are on the move. Systems do not have the time to settle down and become established and therefore can no longer serve as frames of reference or long-term strategies. Adversely, although many of these views on the importance of a liquid and ever-evolving world space are verified by studies in art, architecture, geography and science, these studies appear not always to reveal the complete picture. On closer examination the *fluid* or *liquid* inherent in these studies seems to vanish. Stefano Boeri sharply remarks: ‘These are disciplines that should keep their finger on the pulse of living conditions in the urban context, but that often seem more interested in studying the flux and flow, rather than the locally felt friction that influences them.’ [5] In doing so, our awareness of this *global fluid* model of our world paradoxically has increased the specificity of the *local* and the *solid*.

We could argue that also Zygmunt Bauman is thinking in the same direction, for him *society* is increasingly becoming a network rather than a structure, meaning people perceive and

treat it as a set of random actions (connections and disconnections) and as an infinite volume of 'possible permutations' making long-term planning, predictions, models and actions collapse. As a result we move into a series of short finite projects which in a way can also form a new system of infinite series of finite sets but where it becomes impossible to apply enduring concepts such as development, maturation or progress. He concludes: 'A life so fragmented stimulates *lateral* rather than *vertical* orientations. Each next step needs to be a response to a different set of opportunities and a different distribution of odds and so it calls for a different set of skills and a different arrangement of assets.' [2] In other words, the risks of such a system is that in order to make the entire system work one will need to transcend the comprehension of the individual, local or finite projects. One of the lessons to be drawn from these contradictory forces is that the greater the exchange, the more aware we become of the subtle and sometimes deep differences. This type of *undertow* of thoughts and associations constitutes the building blocks for this paper. In drawing and mixing up maps, models and theories, this study will re-introduce the *flâneur* by Baudelaire as a methodology to unravel and disclose these (on first sight) paradoxical undertows and as an alternative framework of interpretation taking into account at once the local and the global, the solid and the liquid. This, it is argued, will be done by walking and *looking through* as many windows as possible. [6]

The concept of the *flâneur* is re-appropriated for its capacity to connect with the different formulations of change or liquidity, to indicate a common ground or effect of moving, as an area for creation or discovery of the new. In other words, as a creative potential or concept on a par with the Deleuzian *middle* or the concept of the *in-between-ness* from Homi Bhabha amongst others. Realizing that this research is by definition incomplete and to a certain extent ambiguous, it is our optimism and prospect that the defined goal remains evident and legible: that is about the ways artists and scientists deal with and endure new meaning, how they comprehend and construct this *liquid* world and where this locus of action is situated. In this respect this paper is not an experimental science trying to identify and construct a strict (or rigid) set of laws but rather an approach to interpretation in exploring and checking out explanation, significance and meaning. In this context a second concept is installed, *thickening*. Just as in cooking a thickener is used to thicken (or increase the viscosity) of fluids, the concept of *thickening* as described by Clifford Geertz will be used in an attempt to thicken our liquid knowledge society as discussed by Bauman. This act of *thickening* can be reformulated in the context of accumulating, becoming more intense or intensifying, deepening – a process made possible by the *flâneur*, who dwells the streets, visits, re-visits, looks, observes and looks again.

In his landmark book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz elaborates on this concept of *thick description*. For Geertz what a researcher is faced with (except

the automated routine of data collection) 'is a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render.' [7] In other words, Geertz is well aware that meaning is always changing, always in flux and rooted in a specific culture, therefore he suggests the thick description as a means to describe the phenomena together with their context through a multilayered approach. In order to access these (multiple) local realities embedded in and part of a (possible) larger or global worldview, the stroller or wanderer or *flâneur* is crucial as a device to unravel and present evidence for understanding the increasingly complex ways in which artists and scientists (people) develop, model and mirror our world.

In literature and philosophy many authors have addressed the character of the wanderer or walker as a tool (theoretical construct) for articulating local realities. The idea of the *flâneur* was inspired for Baudrillard by Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*, where a nameless man (the narrator) follows another person through London. The *flâneur* feels at home in the city and dwells the streets (anonymously) to look at and register local habits and facts within a multilayered, global entity. A good example for this shift from global or general observations to detailed descriptions can be found in Poe's work: "At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. [...] Soon, however, I descended to details and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of Fig, dress, air, gait, visage and expression of countenance." [8] Bit by bit, the *flâneur* is able to analyze, categorize and define the different entities that he is overlooking in an attempt to construct the whole, the initially unreadable: *It was well said of a certain German book that 'es lässt sich nicht lesen' it does not permit itself to be read.* There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told.' Both the characters of Baudelaire and Poe feel comfortable in a fluid, liquid surrounding and their trajectory is mainly guided by the interest in seeing, discovering new things, a search for novelty in an active way by walking. As such, the walking becomes an allegory for the intellectual endeavor or processes during the search and looking, observing becomes their prime and most important activity. For James V. Werner this active process differentiates the walker from the observer and creates a fluid and observational viewpoint rather than a static one, that *allows (indeed compels) him almost completely to 'read' his environment, nearly to transcend the boundary between interpretation and experience [...]* [9] Also for Burton, the *flâneur* 'strives to be both all-seeing and invisible' and unlike the observer he will do this in an active manner. Or, in a Deleuzian sense a nomadic travel generating a series of 'close-range' visions in a multiple, variegated environment. [10] One can choose to walk intuitively or one can choose to walk following a fixed route. However, one element proper to the *flâneur* proves to be relevant to the construction of meaning, it involves a viewing position. Are we in or outside a given system, do we take part or simply observe, do we look from within or above?

For the physicist Heisenberg: "When we speak of a picture of nature provided by contemporary exact science, we do not actually mean any longer a picture of nature, but rather a picture of our relation to nature [...] Science no longer is in the position of observer of nature, but rather recognizes itself as part of the interplay between man and nature. The scientific method of separating, explaining and arranging becomes conscious of its limits, set by the fact that the employment of this procedure changes and transforms its object; the procedure can no longer keep its distance from the object." [11] For the physicist Barbour: "It (the model, sic) is an imaginative tool for ordering experience, rather than a description of the world." [12] Meaning, therefore, we can argue is not homogeneous but heterogeneous, in shifting perspective, in changing our points of view we recognize the complexities surrounding concepts in our liquid world. For the philosopher Tariq Ramadan meaning is embedded in our pluralism society: "[...] we all observe the world through our own windows. A window is a viewpoint over a horizon, a framework, a piece of glass that is always tinted to some extent and it has its orientation and its limitations: all this together, imparts its colour and qualities to the surrounding landscape." [13] Therefore, if we want to consider the diversity (and the possible similarities) we have to walk like the *flâneur* and look through as many possible different windows. Enhanced meaning can only be discovered through these multiple points of view, each one limited, each one relative, but in combination revealing a more complete picture.

It is through these mechanisms of change and shifting viewing positions that walking and looking finds its final purpose and meaning. The *flâneur* in this context could be defined as a framework of understanding which extracts its functioning in the shifting of perspectives or better in its ability to shift perspective. In the acknowledgement of the existence of different sets of meaning (both historically as existing in different disciplines or knowledge domains). By taking into consideration other viewing positions and by transferring concepts into another, the *flâneur* acts as a bridge, revealing relationships between the different models or maps which can not be assessed from within those systems themselves.

Furthermore, it has become apparent that this notion of *thickening* through looking, defined as a hybrid position, plays an important role in the generation of novelty, that is, to generate new insights and meanings. It is this hybrid position, shifting between two or more viewing positions, between two and more windows, that should allow us to reveal a more complete picture. By rapidly moving from one window to another the boundaries between the two become blurred, they become permeable, transferring characteristics from one point of view into the other and vice versa. This feature of shifting perspective is one characteristic of *looking* and enables us to enhance meaning by transferring concepts and ideas from one system to another and additionally allows us to discover new connections and relations between them. The *flâneur*

displays the importance of this hybrid positioning, which is the added value of shifting perspective by reconfiguring, transferring into another historical context or repositioning concepts.

A second new feature refers to the location of action (or generation/ construction of novelty) itself. We have seen that this shifting position allows us to retrieve meaning not only within the different systems but also between these systems. In other words, a result of the change of perspective is that not only new relations are becoming visible, relations that from within the system are invisible (not perceived) but also that the location of this information is situated in-between the installed systems of knowledge (maps, models or theories). They become locations of meaning and action on their own or we can say, on their own terms they become new *liquid* systems. This we could argue is a result of what Zygmunt Bauman has called the liquid modern world. [2], [14] Social forms and systems are no longer able to settle down and become established. As a result overall structure makes way for an infinite network of short, small projects and structures that continuously tend to permute each other. In order to understand the entire system we need to understand the series of infinite smaller structures and their in-betweens.

For Homi Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture*, it is at the boundaries of cultures, at their interfaces that meanings and values are (mis)read. However, he notices that this interface or limit is seldom addressed and often even disavowed. By walking and looking not only are new locations discovered, but also locations that exist between installed systems of knowledge and that have become visible through a change of perspective. Here we can argue that these new discovered spaces are a space for negotiation. This space is a place that allows for the re-location and re-configuring of concepts that as a result of this process of shifting perspective no longer belong to any one system and it is also a place for the new insights and concepts that were made visible or that were generated in-between locations. This location of action, as made visible by the *flâneur* space bears some similarities with the sociological and anthropological concept of the *Third Space* as expressed by Homi Bhabha and which refers to a place of negotiation where cultural differences, as expressed through (mis) reading meanings and (mis)appropriations, can be negotiated. Accordingly, this new space or *Third Space* is "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space - that carries the burden of the meaning of culture." [15] With the re-introduction of the *flâneur* we could argue that this partiality of *truth* is to be found in the unstable nature of the generated content itself. The liquid nature of the systems and the shifting perspective by default install a limited and therefore unstable novelty. Each concept, through the shifting position, must be evaluated from the standpoint of all the systems, as these in-between places are in constant flux. Thus re-assessing information from different points of view by definition makes its lifespan short or temporary. The in-between space is a temporary space, a space in constant flux subsequently altering the content of the assessed concept.

This dilemma of constructing the concept of the *flâneur* over a liquid, decentered and multi-faceted object has been with the research from the outset. Nevertheless, by re-combining, re-evaluating and questioning existing concepts additional layers of meaning or an enhanced meaning can be generated, the process of *thickening*. This is possibly reflected by Bauman by saying: “*The best among the contemporary arts are ultimately so many steps in an unending process of reinterpreting shared experience and offer standing invitations to a dialogue - or, for that matter, a perpetually widening polylogue.*” [14] We might therefore conclude that the only thing that thickens or becomes more solid in this liquid world, is the interaction, an active encounter between people and ideas.

What needs (needed) to be mapped then is this space of negotiation, the real locus of action, a space signifying the concepts and ideas that are inherent to these in-betweens. Experience, walking, taking the journey and looking through as many different windows is the route we propose. A route that revisits ideas and concepts in different contexts and different locations. For the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus we can not step twice in the same river, things have been repeated or look similar, but are never the same.

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