ACTING IN THE CITIES

Potential City and Real Utopia. Figures of Thought for an Action Research

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Is it possible to rethink the phenomenon of city and the policies that concern it according to the guidelines that the Rock project has attempted without also questioning the conceptual frameworks, or rather the practices and forms of habitual thought that have focused on it? More specifically, how should we proceed, if we wanted, as Giovanni Leoni effectively summarises in this final report of the study, to reactivate the model of the historical European city without forcing it into a teleology of metropolisation, subtracting its cultural dimension from the imperatives of financial results and marketing to subvert the hierarchy of conception and realization entrusted to specialists, to open up to everyday strategies that lead the existing to new uses and to trigger a reciprocal relationship between universal principles and local forms of life and to develop a bottom-up cosmopolitanism that makes temporary citizenships an enrichment of the cities' identities? Similarly, what steps should be taken to reorient the vision of the city as an infrastructure of material and immaterial infrastructures, which Vando Borghi writes of here, from the economic to the social field and resolve its ambivalence in favour of opportunities for the growth of individuals and communities? The adequate answer, as far as the conceptual dimension and the reference framework of the theoretical-practical tools are concerned, seemed to be that of accompanying the research with a reflection and a redefinition of the categories through which it was interpreted, both in the sense of understanding and performing. In other words, it was necessary to shift the point of view, setting aside an ideational dimension placed before

acknowledging reality and making the findings of the research feedback on its own modalities of detection, thus activating a self-reflective and recursive procedure, as Tim Ingold recently recommended in his reflection on making.

Reflecting this methodology, here we chose to take up two notions that we have tried to formulate or redefine over the course of the research, those of "potential city" and "concrete utopia". In both cases we are dealing with a conception of effectuality that recalls what continues to act and to renew itself without exhausting itself because it exists only in the form of a process, only insofar as it is effective, it produces effects in time and in the world as opposed to the passive acceptance of empirical reality, the superficial level of events.

Potential City

Highlighting the "potential city" means adopting cognitive and experiential strategies aimed at depersonalising the automatisms, the obviousness and the self-evident forms of relationship with the urban landscape in order to bring out the plurality of possible looks at it and its many potential aspects and developments that thus become visible. Starting from the definition of the term "potential" in the context of the Ouvroir de littérature potentielle (OuLiPo) or workshop of potential literature, as a "search for new structures or schemes that can be used by writers" or "constraints" that allow for the creation of new forms of expression and the treatment of the usual subjects in new manners, we can identify some complementary ways of approaching the reality of the city. Some vectors of these and their corresponding strategies for possible exploration are suggested below, all in the aesthetic-philosophical sphere, both as a relationship with the artistic disciplines and with the forms of narration and as a reflection on the modalities of perceptive-sensitive relationship with the world.

The first is to investigate how the city effect is produced, the imaginary or mindscape that accompanies the experience of cities and urban culture. Thanks to this it becomes possible to retrace the different images of cities that have been provided by art, literature, philosophy and photography followed by comics and graphic novels, cinema and television over the last century and a half, abandoning static models of perception and taking on the shape of an extremely variegated matter, addressing to the so-called "megacities" and "post-metropolises", "global cities" and "world-cities", overcoming the urban dimension as a form of life even beyond the physical limits of the city, to the most remote corners of the planet. The second vector aims to focus on the cinema of the big city, starting in particular from the films that shaped the urban experience from the 1920s onwards and allowed large masses of people to metabolise the

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acceleration, the synchronisation of time and the contrast between subjective time (and culture) and objective time (and culture) that take place within it thanks to the specific film genre called "symphony of the big city" or City film. While, in short, we can attribute to Paul Strand (Manhatta, 1921) the first draft of the genre as a documentary reconstruction of the life of a city, to René Clair (Paris qui dort, 1925) the introduction of the narrative dimension and the vision of cinema as a time machine, to Walter Ruttmann (Berlin. Die Symphonie der Großstadt, 1927) the use of editing for the circular construction of the city's circadian rhythm and to Ďiga Vertov (The Man with the Camera, 1929) for the critical opening with the representation of the point of view that produces the sequence of images within the film itself and with the emphasis on the possibility of indicating different outcomes of the same reality, the film on Paris by the Brazilian director Alberto Cavalcanti (Rien que les heures, 1926) allows identifying a framework of choices in the gaze on the city that set apart in an exemplary manner both the medium to be privileged (while painting had already used many different eyes and produced very different images, cinema is more suitable because it is in mimetic harmony with the movement and life of the city) and the inclusion of an element of social criticism in the genre (the refusal to make "elegant life" its focus opting instead for a camera that sinks into the slums). This sort of "elementary grammar" shaped the rich array of possible images of the city throughout the course of film history all the way to the present day.

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A third vector concerns the great plurality of histories that are generated among the archipelagos of contemporary cities, such as New York, São Paulo, Mumbai and Shanghai, and cross them without limiting themselves to statistical surveys, to the diversity of impressions between residents and tourists and to the contrasts that arise, keeping in mind – according to the perspective of the different ethnoscapes linked to global migrations – that there are (at least) two different narratives for each city: the official history and the unofficial history. The first is mostly written with euphoric and jubilant tones, the second is transmitted orally, linked to the circulation of migrants, more sober but destined to last. While wars, inequalities and climate change will make mass migrations the most significant phenomenon of the early 21st century, making these secret histories of cities accessible will be crucial to understanding it.

The fourth vector results from the practice of "exercises of estrangement." Within the OuLiPo, Georges Perec was the author who most closely dealt with the relationship with urban space, the city, the home and the living dimension, as shown in his Species of Spaces (1974) but also in the unfinished project of Lieux and the various Attempts at Description from a precise observation point within Paris. Specifically, Perec invites us to reset our presumed knowledge, to "proceed slowly, almost stupidly", to force ourselves "to see more flatly", to observe the ordinary as if it were exotic. Through real exercises of estrangement that make the usual

foreign, he teaches us to "decipher a piece of the city" without "trying to find a definition of the city too quickly": "to continue until the place becomes improbable, until you feel, for a brief moment, the impression of being in a foreign city, or better yet, until you no longer understand what happens and what doesn't happen, until the whole place becomes foreign, and you no longer even notice that all this is called a city, a street, a sidewalk…".

Lastly, purely as an example of a starting point for further study, we can point to some already completed experiences of "looking at the other" (e.g. the point of view of "reverse ethnography" through the eyes of some foreigners from Africa who settled in Bologna for a certain period of time, in the early stages of the great migrations that are still underway) or the "gaze of the other" (another example, the maps of "urban ethnography" traced by following the paths of the marginal) and the contrasting images of the city that could be systematised in a possible parallel reading of TV detective series set in Bologna (on the one hand the nocturnal city, ironically styled along the lines of NYPD and crisscrossed by the great flows of the criminal economy, migration and global processes à la Lucarelli-Coliandro 2006-2018, and on the other hand the provincial one, still, all things considered, Pupi Avati's film like and reassuringly sad even in its most transgressive expressions, à la Macchiavelli-Sarti 1991-1994).

Real Utopia?

First established as an imaginary geographical space, an island or an ideal city, a perfect term of comparison for the inadequacies of the world, then as a place projected into the future as prospective compensation for present miseries – welfare instead of poverty, knowledge instead of ignorance, freedom instead of oppression – in the last century utopia went through the whole parabola that goes from aspiration to realisation on earth to its overthrow in total control over individuals and their potential and in the dystopia of nuclear or social and climatic-environmental catastrophe. For some time now, however, the closure of the horizon to the present of the lives of each of us that has resulted – as exclusive attention to the irredeemable time of the transience of our bodies and our biography – has shown many cracks, for example in the form of the "retrotopia" proposed by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, a nostalgia for the certainties of the past to which to entrust the hopes for improvement, but also of the "realisable utopias" which the architect Yona Friedman has written of, for small, self-sufficient critical groups, or the "utopias for realists" suggested by the historian Rutger Bregman, an agenda of practical goals to disrupt the lack of alternatives to the hegemony of neoliberal thinking, and the "everyday utopias" developed by legal scholar Davina Cooper, which seek to trigger transformative politics

by creating situations where conventional practices are implemented in non-conventional forms.

In this context, is it possible to rethink the oxymoronic tension between seemingly opposing terms contained in the non-place of utopia and the dense and resilient presence of concreteness? Is it possible to think of a "concrete utopia"? To this end, it is necessary first of all to oppose an unsalvageable conception of reality, an idea of the world we have in front of us as a granitic whole that moves in a direction already decided by the way it is made, in order to privilege its porosity, its openings, the interweaving of different layers and possibilities. In other words, it is a question of searching the present for all the unexpressed possibilities that it contains, the latencies, the possible developments that every place and every moment can reveal. A "being already of the not yet" to say it with the paradoxical expression of the spirit of utopia. Something in the urban dimension that can be translated into an exercise of estrangement with respect to the habitual vision that we have of single spaces of the city and of the architecture, as well as of the forms of relationship between people that take place in them and that they prescribe – a sort of gaze devoid of pre-judgements, that goes back to early childhood experience – to identify the scars of what they have not been and could have been, and together the traces of what they could be and express, altering the usual relationships. But also in an exercise of shifting the point of view, placing ourselves in the visual angle of the different actors involved, paying attention to the tacit forms of presence of people as well as things, transforming the background given for obviousness into the foreground of our focus. In the same way, it becomes possible to identify and carry out a series of circumscribed actions that interrupt the usual perceptions, disrupt the given order, release unforeseen energies and impose different and better perspectives. In short, the passion for the concrete utopia places us in relation with the attention to the potential city that is already around us.