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EDITORIAL

Imagined cities

Making the portrait of a city is the work of a life and no photo is enough, because the city is always changing. Everything in the city is part of its history: its physical body of brick, stone, steel, glass, wood, as its vital blood of men and women who live and breathe. The streets, landscapes, tragedy, comedy, poverty, wealth.

Berenice Abbott

To define is to clarify the meaning and to limit the limits of something material or immaterial. The definition of an image refers, on the other hand, to the sharpness with which a device captures an object. In this issue of *kult-ur*, the monographic section *Àgora* proposes a reflection on how the new urban definitions define what is or is not a city. One might ask whether in societies afflicted with more than obvious visual hypertrophy, both meanings - the one that refers to the argument and the one that refers to the optical perception - do not tend to be confused by reducing the sense of the city and what it is or is not, to his appearance. Today virtually no one in our environment travels to a city that has not previously seen. The selection of a destination requires to imagine it and for this the story of those who live there, and the narratives of how many have already been, nor the data contained in any report is no longer enough. In fact, it is likely that these contrasts are not even contemplated, at least, in the first instance. Companies like Google exploit the idea that desire connects from the visual and its image search engine is currently the main knowledge engine to start knowing about almost anything, including a place.

The obsession to see has been installed as a rule in the field of what has been called cyberculture and hence if we talk about imagining a city we can evoke at least two processes. One is the dream or fantasy that builds possible worlds in the line of the imagined cities of Italo Calvino. The other process refers to the representation from the objectified spaces, that is, to the definitions or visual delimitations of the city. It is here that the gaze, saturated with stimuli and reflections, can distract your attention and become entangled in mirages capable of converting urban spaces into a showcase, a performance table or a television set. The symptoms of tourism are very eloquent in this regard: centers that exemplify the non-places of Marc Augé through which a disengaged citizenship without anchors passes; neighborhoods that simulate theme parks and empty squares that have mutated in simple scenarios, buildings-decorated, homes-facade, streets-selfie background, cities-brand with props lives. It seems that the sense of the city is limited in aesthetics and that the latter be reduced to the limit of visual enjoyment.

However, as the American photographer Berenice Abbott intuited, the aesthetics of cities are not made of reflections and their images do not evoke mere framed objects. Not at least if as an aesthetic we understand what transcends the visual to be in the sensitive. At that time the images also evoke sounds, tactile sensations, flavors and aromas in a reading process in which the experience itself is compromised. Through this dynamic of interpretation we can extract from the images the traces of the human relations that cross the spaces, as well as the non-obvious narratives and stories that define social, economic, political and cultural processes and contexts. By way of palimpsest, the city retains impressions of another previous writing on the same surface that have been erased to give rise to what now exists. That is why the portrait of a city requires a lifetime and the look on the urban space does not necessarily define or limit its meaning but can open it to multiple senses.



It is this knowledge committed to one's own experience that led Walter Benjamin to affirm that it does not matter much not knowing how to orient oneself in a city but that getting lost in it requires learning.¹ Following the German writer, recovering the notion of unique and meaningful experience implies breaking the routine and the usual relationship we have with the spaces. The compulsive reproduction of vicarious, homogeneous and interchangeable experiences that capitalism promotes and multiplies the culture of the image impoverishes the awareness of discovery that, in short, should be the very meaning of learning. We could say then that getting lost in imagined cities requires learning to travel between its fantasized and represented boundaries to be part of everyday scenes that also visualize arguments. It involves opening the eyes with the aim of unveiling what the stereotyped representations and the pre-configured scenes in postcards and catalogs hide. It is disorienting to recover the lucidity of those who observe for the first time and the unstable position of those who feel not dazzled or anesthetized but questioned by an image.

Recall that the images captured by a device are a mark in time, a trapped look that allows us to present what was once real and that proposes a constant game of updating from new looks. This almost magical act of creation has its own language, its communicative rules, and is part of a complex discourse. In the same way, the city presents itself to us in many ways, many of which are arranged as a sort of trap that creates optical illusions and hides very contradictory realities. Thus, losing oneself in the chaos of the urban imaginary not only requires time but the will to be surprised by the encounter of one's own gaze with space and recognize oneself in it to understand it. In this sense, defining the city also means evoking from the felt memory what the city proposes and contrasting with other perspectives and other memories the porous limits of the city. In short, it is possible to review any definition of the urban if we are willing to take on the challenge of limiting its limits and optimizing the sharpness of its images from a continuous conversation.

Castelló, december, 2019

1 Walter Benjamin (1982): *Infancia en Berlín hacia 1900*. Madrid, Alfaguara.