New Tools for Theuth's Myth

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> *Places and trees don't*
> *teach me anything*
> *While men in the city do.*
>
> **Socrates**

1. Introduction

Socrates encourages knowledge that comes from oral communication between men who live in the city. And he evokes the Egyptian divinity, Theuth, to give more importance to his argument.

The myth recounts that Theuth, after inventing writing, gifted it to the Egyptians.

King Thamus admonishes him, underlining the fact that this new kind of communication will reduce the capacity of memory.

The complexity of the city has always been in balance between unity and multiplicity, order and chaos, memory and nemesis, stereotype and peculiarity.

Today we have many new tools for increasing the knowledge of cities: multimedia informatic systems; 3D reconstructions, and the so-called Web 3.0

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We can observe every point of the globe but the enormous quantity of data leaves us without the memory of places that are useful for the comprehension of the phenomena.

The virtual city, or the labyrinth of the perception, reveals itself only when observed from the sky, while we are wearing Daedalus' wings or potent lenses of a satellite?

The challenge of our days, maybe, is to design critical structures able to give an organic and well define vision of the city. Only in this way will it be possible to define a city as a specific "Place".

2. The elusive vision

The complexity of the contemporary city is confirmed by the multiplicity of forms of representation that describe it. We live in the "society of images". Our way of knowing and representing the world has changed radically in the last 50 years.

The introduction of pictures in the magazines of the 50s, the television revolution at the turn of the '60s, and finally, the explosion of the Web have enabled the use and knowledge, through images, characters, and works of art, architecture and faraway places.

The civilization of the image allowed representation and knowledge of remote sites, nevertheless, until the advent of Google Earth, the perception of the city was dichotomous. In fact, citizens had access to partial images , land and incorporeal , while the insiders could see the city from a zenithal point of view and through maps, measure, size, proportions, perceive the shape of the city and get an overview of the site. The advent of the Web has profoundly changed our habits. In fact the virtuality has involved other forms of representation carrying every kind of representations in digital images. Within a few years analogical cameras, cameras with film, have been completely abandoned and, with the progress of technology, sophisticated tools have come into common use. In 2001, the advent of Google Earth[1] has revolutionized the perception of the city and of the whole world suddenly making globes and maps obsolete. The zenithal view, leaving human and land perception

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1   Really the name of the software between 2001 and 2004 was Keyhole

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quickly becomes the public domain. The architect, or the urban planner , is no longer the only repository of knowledge that comes from having access to encoded data, difficult to perceive, now his tools are available to everyone , its information is generated by an algorithm, that self-powered, revises the data as an integral, which by successive approximations is getting closer to the analytical curve[2].

Google Earth is also considered as a tool that has an open structure, a characteristic common to all the new media. From the site, in fact, you can enjoy different data like private photos and videos; temporal data; technical analysis; paths. The vision can be customized, from time to time, by the user who builds a perceptive unique path.

Figure 1: *Some historic and famous views of Times Square*

Therefore, we must resign ourselves to the idea that the vision of the contemporary city is elusive or, making an extreme synthesis, we can point out some strongholds to try to define the components through a few objectives? Indeed, we can define the representation of the city as *incorporeal, multiple, automatic, plural, amateur and illusory.*

2   The map is (re) discovering a collective writing and transmedia: «mapping should proceed through multiple, competing visualizations which are not created by a cartographer and transmitted to the user but made on the spot by the user acting as their own cartographer […] emphasize the importance of multiple perspectives and multiple maps» Jeremy W. Crampton, Maps as social constructions. Power, communication and visualization

Also, just because it is virtually impossible to focus on the city as a whole, I tried to illustrate the process by identifying a single site that is, at the same time, the emblem of the city and the place overall: Times Square. The representation, limited to a single element, fixed around a theme, expanding its range, breaks down into an infinite multiplicity of images and representations which, read in sequence, may provide a new approach to the description of urban cities of the twenty-first century. This research aims at the development of a semantic device[3] capable of leading the perception of a site and of recreating, through the analysis of the social imaginary, a Place.

3. Adjectives for the representation

3.1 *Incorporeal*

The digital representations, almost always, do not have a material aspect. They flow on the surface of the monitor and the tablet, without ever being fixed on paper or otherwise. The absence of materiality and therefore of specific costs, allows a potentially infinite production for which reason the representation of the city is fluid and overflowing, and paper documents are disappearing. Also, for the most recent data, it has not yet created a system of cataloguing and selection.

On the Web the urban image is often linked to the contemporary, new images overlap with those of the recent past, creating a sort of eternal present. We might ask what images will still be visible in the next fifty years. How to select the images which will recount the transformation of our cities. What tools will still be able to reproduce the media supports that are in use now. By contrast, some abstract and incorporeal[4] elements, inhabiting

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3   Cf. Giorgio Agamben: «Generalizing the already very large class of devices foucaldiani, call device literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control and secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions and discourses of living beings» in Giorgio Agamben, Che cos'è un dispositivo?

4   "The multiplication of surface, formerly called information overload, is the new reality of design. Its unit of measurement is virtual. Surface is not territory. […] surface in the generic sense means flat space to display. Surface is anorexic, hyper-thin architecture. Surface, representing no particular meaning or message, is the precondition for virtual capital, projected revenue and speculative value. Advertising surface in public space initially is merely an add-on to the already existing historical structure of a city. Gradually, surface replaces the primacy of historical structure and its territoriality." Metahaven, White Night Before A Manifesto,

the web have made their appearance in the real world finding materiality and creating an added sense of disorientation. In fact the artist Aram Bartholl has made an installation, *Map*, which reproduces the red marker Map of Google Maps. This latter is placed in the exact place where Google Maps identify the city centre.

**Figure 2:** *Incorporeal. An installation of Aram Bartholl*

3.2 *Multiple*

The representation of the city, as we have already said, is currently the product of many visual approaches. The technical representations such as maps, real *cybercartography*[5] immaterial and multimodal, are flanked by other representations related to the direct use of the sites and the perception from the human point of view.

Recompositions of Street View, the panoramic images and the 3D navigable reconstructions are added to the static images. Also, many programs of representation of the Earth allow us to identify abstract data, statistics, and mark trails or sections. The multimedia navigation, through the representation of the city and the territory has become, as we said before, the common heritage of a large section of the western population. The perception of the

5   This is the definition that gives Taylor: "The organization, presentation, analysis and communication of spatially referenced information on a wide variety of topics of interest to the company in an interactive format, dynamic, multi-sensory chefs use of multimedia and multimodal interfaces." In D.R.F. Taylor, Maps and mapping in the information era

city, therefore, is increasingly linked to a representation at a distance that is less technical and more customizable. In addition, because each user chooses and builds its own representation of the city the image that one gets is extremely varied.
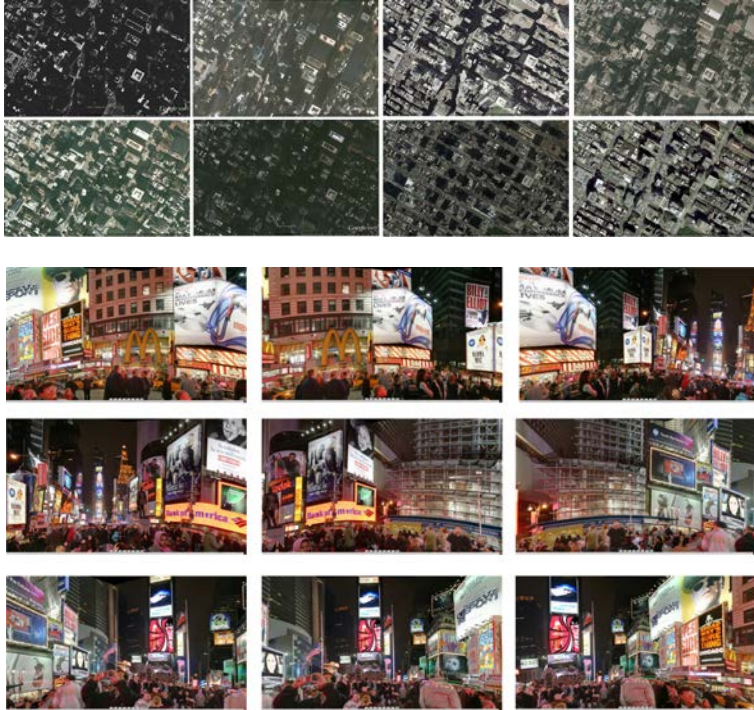

Figures 3-4: *Up to down.*
3. Zenithal vision of Times Square taken by Google Earth from 1995 to 2014.
*4. Multiple. Some frame caught from Street View.*

3.3 *Automatic*

All major cities are equipped with surveillance systems, thousands of eyes that constantly record the status of the sites. Data that could not be processed, but which could provide valuable information on the use of the space or on

the modality of fruition of the city. Some artists[6], such as Curt Caviezel, Swiss, J. Sundheim, Aleman or Mocksim, Irish, have taken over of this potential in order to develop the poetics which represents the city in a completely automatic way. In fact, webcam and cameras, placed in hidden and inaccessible places, record images without the direct control of one operator. So Caviezel, collects images from the public webcam that contain surprising elements, like bird's wings, or insects, that are resting for a few moments on the lens. J. Sundheim produces self-portraits which represent himself caught in the frame of webcams placed all around the world. The mechanism of automatic image generation suggests a kaleidoscopic and Borgesian play.
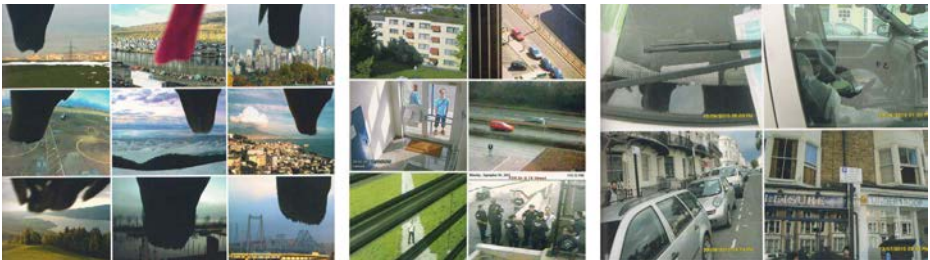
Figure 5: *Automatic. a) Curt Caviezel, some pictures with birds wings taken from web cam .b) J. Sundheim, self-portrait from web Camera. c) Mocksim, Images from surveillance cameras.*
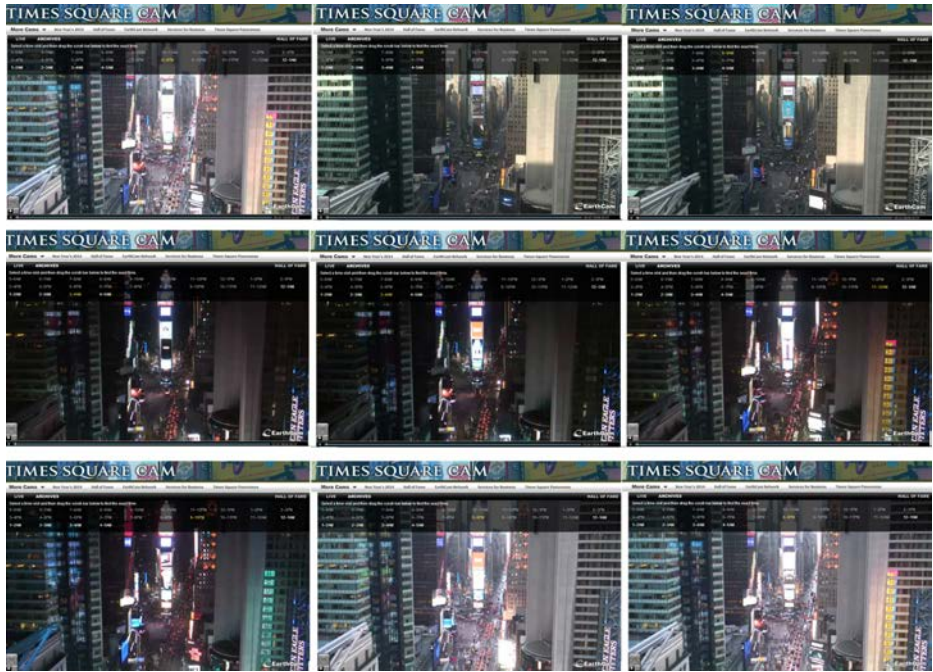
Figure 6: *Automatic. d) One day in Times Square described with the images of web cam.*

3.5 *Amateur*

The representation of the city in the web, but often also on the printed page, is left more and more to casual players, amateurs , who are provided with of one piece equipment that is not professional, but still very sophisticated. The great mass of images that we observe is therefore the result of amateurs who probably do not have the skills to build a comprehensive and coherent graphic story. Our ability to observe distant places or unknown ones is filtered and heralded by random, partial, "dirty" images. All of these crowd our collective imaginary and arrest our capacity to build a structured picture of each place that we have seen or will ever see in the future.

Figure 7: *Amateur*. The site of Times Square inside the private life of the people.

3.4 *Plural*

The city that shows us the web is a pluralistic city. The representation is processed by many people. Every space and every place is described by thousands of different people, with different techniques and approaches. Globalization, the opportunity to travel, the virtuality of the images, the absence of cost, allow the creation and sharing of thousands of photos and digital representations. Social networks encourage photo sharing, so multiplication of representations is becoming uncontrollable. On one place, even if of great interest and fascination, such as Times Square, we can find thousands and thousands of photos.

Figure 8: *Plural. A screen shot showing a little selection of the images related to Times Square.*

3.6 *Illusory*

In the end the representation of a place has a strong mystifying component. The images are constructed to show or hide things. A lot of photos are overtly or covertly reworked. Some are part of the history of the world like the famous photo of VJ Day Kiss, caught by Alfred Eisenstaedt in Times Square in 1945. Instead, when the image is spontaneous and casual, the operator often resorts to his imaginary and, unconsciously, reproduces a stereotype. The images of Times Square, taken from the screen of Google, clearly show a crowded, colourful portrait which is always caught in one direction, from the 42th Street towards the old building of the New York Times, now known as One Times Square.

Figures 9-10: *Left to right. Illusory.*
9. VJ Day Kiss, caught by Alfred Eisenstaedt in Times Square in 1945 and the colorized photograph by Sanna Dullaway published on The Guardian.
10. Different kind of manipulated pictures.

4. Conclusion

The point is, to return to the Theuth's challenge, these *new languages* improve our ability to understand and remember the city and its places or rather than dull our senses impoverishing our ability to critique and revision?

After analysing thousands of images, reconstructions and drawings, can we go back, through the mind, to the structure of the Square, the localization of high-rise buildings or the position of access? The vision that each of us re-elaborates after having perceived the site is closer to reality?

Perhaps the contemporary vision of reality is similar to the pictures taken by a great oriental photographer, Atta Kim[7], a few years ago. They are photos taken with a very long exposure time. You could imagine hundreds of thousands of photos overlapping one another. In fact, every photo, every image, as said Paul Auster[8], contains an omission: they "do not lie, but neither do they tell the whole story". So every representation of reality is partial. In fact every author deliberately chooses to delete a detail, an imperfection, an element, both because the operator is inexperienced, or because of the use of the wrong instruments.

Maybe the total sum of all these pictures is able to restore the figurative and inclusive vision that we were looking for.

The photo of Atta Kim gives us the same sensation while showing a Times Square unnaturally empty. The long exposure times have bridged the gaps and omissions. They have eliminated the contingent facts of the representation to return an image in which solid surfaces, usually covered by cars, pedestrians and buses, leaving the square to appear naked and finally, free from superfluous elements.

The strength of the new multimedia language is, perhaps, all here. The overlap of partial aberrant features, when read as a whole, offers an objective

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7   Atta Kim, ON-AIR Project, New York Series, 57th Street, 8 Hours, 2005

8   "The old man sits on the edge of the narrow bed, palms spread out on his knees, head down, staring at the floor. He has no idea that a camera is planted in the ceiling directly above him. The shutter clicks silently once every second, producing eighty-six thousand four hundred still photos with each revolution of the earth. Even if he knew he was being watched, it wouldn't make any difference. His mind is elsewhere, stranded among the figments in his head as he searches for an answer to the question that haunts him. (…) The pictures do not lie, but neither do they tell the whole story. They are merely a record of time passing, the outward evidence." in Paul Auster, Travels in the scriptorium

picture of reality built with what we might call a "mythopoetic"[9] approach.

Figures 11-12: *Left to right.*
11. Atta Kim, ON-AIR project. The photo shows the square completely empty using a very long exposure time: 8 hours.
12. A little visual experiment elaborated with twenty photos

Figure 13: *Mythopoetic approach. The overlapping of these twenty photos shows us, at same time, how the people see the Place and how it is real made.*

9   "Directed to the construction of collective narratives that are based, and at the same time guide, a community." In A. Facchetti, The city as a narrative dispositive

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