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## **An hermeneutic representation of Beograd after Yugoslavia's wars**

Applying Walter Benjamin's hermeneutic today

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Our age is situated at the summit of three different trends: an exorbitant increase of the relevance of the city; the capillary diffusion of an almost infinite quantity of images and information; the difficulty of manage urban spaces with a complex and integrated vision. How can these three elements became a potentiality for urban planners in reading and planning a city? Between 1920 and 1939 W. Benjamin analyzed the Paris of half XIX century in it's images and texts, retracing it's face in the traces whom lets in Bibliothèque Nationale. Today, using internet, we can accede to an enormous quantity of first hand materials. Is it possible to use Benjamin's method to gather a constellation of sense that can represent the identity, or the identities, of a space? The aim of this paper is to apply the hermeneutic method to find Beograd's face after the Yugoslavia's wars (1992-2002), deepening in particular four categories: the images; the relation with the wares; the biographies; the topographical representation. Is it possible to see a figure? Can this image be useful to understand and orientate the processes and the develop of this city?

**Keywords:** hermeneutic; Beograd; constellation of sense

### **1. Introduction**

We live in an epoch of big transformations for many aspects: the climate is changing with really perceptible effects over our lives; meanwhile our cities are becoming bigger and much more important for the human race; thirdly we are everyday more connected with internet, and, for this reason, we receive and broadcast everyday more information and more images. These processes are changing the faces of our cities in unexpected ways. How can we use these events as an opportunity and a tool to govern the change, and to make more hospitable and valuable our cities? Let's see everyone of these processes by himself.

The first factor, climate change, is affecting cities in an unexpected way: in lasts 30 years we have seen an increment of floods, hurricanes and desertification in areas never effected by those phenomena (Bittner P.,



2012). Wherever the effects aren't too heavy, the phenomena impacts with more moderate, but sensible, force, and with the indirect effect of an increase of migration.

The second factor, the constant increase of urban population (McClellan D., 2010), kept the quote of urban inhabitant from the 29% of 1950 to the 50% of today, factor that has to be summed at the unrestrained increase of world population. One of the most relevant effect of this boost, also in Europe and U.S.A., has been a deregulated expansion of cities. As a chain reaction this not so in deep ruled expansion had effects on the vulnerability of urban centres against disasters, with a relevant loss of soil, necessary to seep the rain; with constructions not able to resist to earthquakes; with deviation of river banks, etcetera (White G. F., Kates R. W., Burton I., 2001). These changes of city's form and dimensions have been so trenchant that Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, yet in 2001, wrote that cities became extremely complicated, and, for this reason, is very difficult to do a general reasoning over these (Amin A., Thrift N., 2002).

The third factor we mentioned is the enormous quantity of information and images we see and broadcast everyday with internet: in an occidental society describable for the permanent connection by the net, we can accede to an almost infinite archive of images, descriptions, news and personal visions over nearly every space in the world.

Last, but not least, an element from ever considered fundamental to make a good decision: a good knowledge of the sphere over which the decision has to be taken. Applying this consideration to the urban field, we can say that is very important to know the distinctive characters of the space object of a decision.

In this situation is urgent to find a representative method able to give back a precise image of an urban space, that could replace the history-based traditional methods. We have to find tools able to describe the "right now" of a city and to give information over the relations and visions yet not represented.

Effectively there is a method of represent and describe an urban space used in an embryonic way between the end of 19th century and the first half of the 20th: the micromonadology, or, using a more known word, the hermeneutic. This method, not so clearly formalized, but used a lot, after a first period of global application has been separated in different sectors, which now appears totally separated.

If the abstraction links the occurrences to pose them in a systemic relation under a global theory, organized by fields and chronological continuity, the hermeneutic method, as applied by Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin, start from the single expression to search a specific model (Kracauer S., 1928).

Kracauer, about it, said that: «The analysis of the superficial occurrences of an epoch allows to determinate the place that it takes in the history much more that it's proper auto-evaluations» (Kracauer S., 1920).

We can define the urban hermeneutic as an analysis method that, observing a constellation of occurrences collected from a single space in a precise time, can recognizes the character of it (Gurisatti G., 2006).

The procedure starts identifying those occurrences that could have been reads as emblematic of relevant aspects of the space inquired. Everything can be take as occurrence, exactly like in a police investigation, clearly the selection have to be justified paying attention to not became the defence of a pre-concept. Moreover the interest of the hermeneutic isn't linked to a single occurrence, not so relevant as single event, but to the constellation of a relevant number of different occurrences which gives the same symptoms (Simmel G., 1900; Pinotti A., 2009). The objective of this process is to «let emerge an underlying unity» (Gurisatti G., 2010, p. 7), able to let understand processes and relations unknown or underestimated. The object of this investigation isn't a theory that could organize a geographical or chronological reconstruction of the main events, but, like in the Benjamin's version of historical materialism, is an image that, from an analysis of the physical ruins of the history is able to expound the truth face of that time (Gurisatti G., 2006, pp. 14-16). The hermeneutical investigator «find, in the handwriting of the city, images, symbols, or truths rebus which displays the unconscious of the writer: the historical collectivity» (*Ibidem*, p. 404).

Karl Schlegel, in his *Reads Time in Space*, wrote that «The place is the scenery, and the most adapt referring system, to portray an epoch in all its complexity» (Scarpa L., Gado Wiener R., 2009). His purpose, for this reason, an «historiography based on topography», which finds his maps in the singular representations, narrations and collections of images, considering the *collage* as the method to organize a more representative text (*Ibidem*, pp. 3, 7).

## 2. The origin.

Before describing a possible formalization of the Benjamin's hermeneutic method, it is useful to spend some words to remind the origin of it, in Simmel's, Kracauer's and Benjamin's works.

The first of them, Georg Simmel, thought that the philosophy can be used as a *habitus* to describe the form and the spirit of a time, starting from the surface of the life (Simmel G. 1911; Pinotti A., 2009 p. 121). He thought that «is impossible to understand how the world is without a precise question over how the body of the world is organized» (*Ibidem*, p. 123).

So he started to select apparently *inessential* elements, and to search in them a sort of micro-representation of the epoch, a micro-monadology (Lukács G., 1918). Simmel, in this way, recognize in the money, in the fashion, and in the metropolis, the three subjects in which search the face of an epoch, opening that street that today keeps to sociology and modern urban studies (Simmel G., 1895; Lukács G., 1918), p. 68).

Like Simmel predicted he died without a single disciple, he didn't found a school, but many researchers of his time took a part of his job, «like cash divided between many heirs» (Cacciari M., 1970). One of them, Siegfried Kracauer, tried to apply Simmel's method to analyze urban relations, overall in the 20th century's Berlin, and in 19th century's Paris (Bodei R., 1982).

In Kracauer's works the objects, yet analyzed by Simmel, started to be flanked by relevant human views (Kracauer S., 1931 pp. 88, 91-94, 96-98). He spoke about those people as *social biography*, intending with it the correspondence between the history of a person and the history of his epoch (Kracauer S., 1937).

Kracauer, with his works, recognizes some categories as relevant to read a specific space in a specific age: the photographs, the films, the streets, the places, the things, the biographies. His objective wasn't to realize a total representation of an epoch, but to find different lights to illuminate and understand it (Kracauer S., 1931, pp. 9, 50, 100, 126; Pisani D., 2004). Here we find a first try to individuate precise *topoi* to find the character of a city, in it we can see the first application of that model that with Benjamin could become a formalized tool, but, maybe for historical reasons, has been only applied.

If Simmel represent the first step in the history of urban hermeneutic, Walter Benjamin is the author that embody a programmatic use of this method. His aim was to organize an historiography separated to the traditional model, finalized to retrace a «progressive time, homogeneous and empty» (Benjamin W., 1935). His materialistic historiography would be oriented to find a concrete dialectic, which lights up the present to understand how to make it better, so an historiography based on the attention to a possible turn of the history, in which the researcher is involved in the process he study (Benjamin W., 1935; Gurisatti G., 2009). 29] This is, maybe, the most relevant aspect that make so interesting Benjamin's urban hermeneutic to an urban planner: the aim of represent truly and in deep a space to understand how to make it better.

The most important work thought by Benjamin as application of this method is the never accomplished *Passagenwerk*. In this monumental opera Benjamin would try to represent the Paris of the half 19th century as image of that age. Nonetheless the work has never been wrote, we have all the materials prepared by the author in many years passed in the National Library of Paris, and a *résumé*, in which he organized the structure of the text.

The materials, sorted by keywords and labelled with initials by Benjamin, have been collected in a book of more than 1000 pages by Rolf Tiedemann. The result is a sort of map of all the occurrences dedicated to the Paris in 19th century available in the Library (*Ibidem*, p. 80).

There are lines from articles, books, diaries, advertisement, images, and more. Every occurrence is reduced to the essential part that Benjamin considered representative of the true face of that space in that time. The result is a sort of *collage* of all these minimal parts, that express by itself the image of that city, with it's tensions, desires and hypothetical development. Is the city suspended in the last moment after to take a direction for it's evolution (Tiedemann R., 2000; Gurisatti G., 2009, pp. 90-91).

«For some time I wouldn't go away from Paris – unless I should do it for political reasons – because I depend from the National Library to work on my book» (Benjamin W., 1935). Like a mine the National Library of Paris is the only place where Benjamin could dig for the occurrences necessities to his *Passagenwerk*. He saw the library as the place in which explore the city in the 19th century, the space in which the *hic et nunc* of 19th century Paris didn't disappeared in the time evolution (Schlögel K., 2009). In the capital of the Library

Benjamin «open the book of the occurred» (Benjamin W., 1935), to collect that constellation necessary to let see the face of that epoch (Schlögel K., 2009).

For his work, so linked to the contact with first hand materials, was unavoidable to be there. In the National Library of Paris there are, at the same time, the fulfilment of the urban hermeneutic model, incarnate in the materials and the *résumé* prepared for the *Passagenwerk* (*Ibidem*, p. 56), and the sentence of death for the author, whom, to not lose the opportunity of work at his opera, lost the opportunity to escape from the nazi invasion of France.

With the tragic dead of Benjamin the project of an hermeneutic reading of the city haven't been completed, but everyone of the tools used by the three authors cited became a deeply elaborate field. With the evolution of the sociology, divided in many trends, of the psychology, the human geography and the semiotic, the elements recognized by Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin as essential to recognize the character of a city have been studied and different methods and approaches have been tested and confirmed.

### 3. Formalizing the method

Now, in debt with all these studies, and with the results of the work of Rolf Tiedemann over the *Passagenwerk*, we can trace easily a summary of a possible method for an hermeneutic analysis of the city, useful to represent an urban space in a such difficult moment for the chronological-based methods.

First of all we have to specify that this is an hermeneutic method, and not a semiotic one. The principal difference is, in a very simplify description, that the objective of the semiotic is find known elements in a new object, recognize them and analyze these presences or absences; the hermeneutic, on the other hand, recognize an image as relevant by itself, not for her parts. An hermeneutic analysis try to find images and elements that, in the observation of them, could inform and arouse empathy (in the most literal definition of empathy: en-pathós, feel inside, or, in application to this case, the ability to make perceptible the character of something) (Ferraris M., 2008; Gurisatti G., 2006).

The occurrences recognized by the three authors as relevant, and then amplified in the different studies yet cited, can be organized in four categories to make a more clear formalization of the method. The categories purposed are: the images of the city; the relation with the goods; the biographies; the topographies.

#### 3.1. The images

The most used tool in the hermeneutical approaches is the image: the film, the photography, the drawing, or the simply description of a scene, is by itself an occurrence (Casetti F., Di Chio F., 2007; Flusser V., 1983). In an image there is always a vision of the world, it contains the metaphysic structures used by its author to understand and describe the present. Flusser, in *A philosophy of photography*, tell us that in every picture we can find two elements: the world represented with all it expressive charge, infinite emblem of its social, economical and political relations; the eye of the author, that, choosing *that* image describe his perception, and his vision of the real. Those visions and structures, that Kracauer called *social ideology*, are very representatives of the peculiarities of an urban space. For this reason the first net to collect relevant occurrences, to be posed in constellation for recognize the face of a space, is the image, in every form (Faccioli P., Losacco G., 2010).

#### 3.2. The relation with the good

An analysis of the fashion, and, more over, of the relation between a society and the goods, corresponds to an analysis of the dominant elements of that society. Benjamin tells that the study of the fashion is a tiger's jump over the past: in the choose of its physical representation a society expose its habits, its values and its faiths. The relation between a society and the material goods, the way in which promote or make more difficult the commerce, the use of the advertisement and the form and place dedicated to the markets are very clear elements to understand the vision of the life of its inhabitant. In the relation with the goods we find the dominant ideology of a community, but also the minority oppositions, in their alternatives purposes. Studying the advertisements, the places dedicated to the commerce, the most relevant fashion tendencies and the

economical ideologies of a specific place can illustrate in deep the character of that place (Codeluppi V., 2001; Mele V., 2002; Gribaudo M., 2007).

### 3.3. The biographies

The first author that showed a personal biography as description of an age has been Kracauer with his *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*. In it he said: «This book has to be intended also as a biography of that city» (Kracauer S., 1937). After it the concept of *social biography* evolved, showing how in deep a personal history is linked to the history of its space. There are to different chapters of this tool: the biography of a public personality, as Kracauer's book; the diaries and the interviews of the stakeholders of the inquired space. Rita Bichi tell us that, in the biographical materials, we can find «a tool to a *different* knowledge of the society, not bureaucratic and not authoritarian». Bichi call all the possible bibliographical occurrences *the biographical field*, seeing in it the territory in which the personal types of the stakeholders are crystallized and readable (Olagnerio M., Saraceno C., 1993; Bertaux D., 1997; Bichi R., 2007).

### 3.4. The topographies

The most relevant innovation in Benjamin's work is the use of the map as object in which is possible to find the real face of a city. In his researches he dedicated a lot of space to topographical representation, to Paris' toponymy, and to the strategic use of urban planning. A lot of time before the Farinelli's works over the not objectivity of the map (Farinelli F., 1992; Farinelli F., 2009), he demonstrated the relevance of the different spatial representations. After him, Kevin Lynch apply a similar intuition in an upset perspective, using the personal perceptions of the stakeholders of a city to understand how was the map of it in their minds (Lynch K., 1960). With this tool an urban hermeneutic has to collect both official and personal maps to understand how the people related to a space describes it. Furthermore a such collection can illuminate the analyst over the differences between the different subjects, authors of the different representations (Banerjee T., Southworth M., 2002; Schlögel K., 2003).

## 4. Using it

«The *interpretation* is the identification of the symbolic signify of images produced in a social activity, examples of it are all the dimensions of the visible world and the material culture» (Faccioli P., Losacco G., 2010, p. 189). The aim of an application of this hermeneutical method should be to draw an expressive constellation of occurrences collected with these four tools. In that collective image the hermeneutic analyst will find the representation of the character of that city he inquired.

Using it can be very helpful to understand the processes and the relations in a contemporary city, in a time in which the characteristics and the tensions of a specific urban space are changing so fast.

As we said before, today, differently from every other epoch in the history, we have an infinite collection of occurrences from which select the more interesting and the more representative, a sort of *National Library of Paris* extended to all the urban world, that can be consulted from everywhere: the internet. The last part of the sage will illustrate very shortly an example of an application of this method to find Beograd's face after the Yugoslavia's wars (1992-2002).

### Representing Beograd.

The aim of this part is not to make a complete representation of Beograd after the wars, but to show an example of the application of this method. The city has been selected for some characteristics in common with the half XIX century Paris, in particular the situation of interruption of the normal evolution by some events that made a threshold, a before and an after. For Beograd that line obviously is represented by the Yugoslavian wars between 1992 and 2002. In the analysis, of which here we only can show some spots and the results, appeared two different faces, totally antithetic, everyone linked to a different vision of the present and the future of Beograd. One is more *popular*, if I may use this word, by its words and behaviours we see the desire of preservation of the historical roads, shops and green areas, and they ask for a partition of the big

building propertities. The other part, linked to the big investors, most of whom are Russian or European, is much more western in its habits and dress style. Its population don't consider a value the restore of the ancient port, or the share of the richness with an high taxation, but hope a big increase of employ and general richness by the foreign investments. Reading and watching the city we can see a sort of big scar between the two parts, everyone considers the other a sort of barbaric, and speaks about its own desires and visions as the great majority ones. We report here, divided by the four tools, four examples of this division, to make more clear how we arrived at this conclusions.

### Beograd Images

For the images we report six frames from two shorts: the first is the videoclip of a song, *Yugo*, by the group *RockPartizansky*, made to celebrate the lose Yugoslavia, and to hope a return to that past<sup>1</sup>.

The second one is the video *UnderBEOgrad*, made to celebrate the new, western and cool Beograd<sup>2</sup>.



Figure 1.1. *Yugo*, by *Rockpartizansky*



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Figure 1.2. *Yugo*, by *Rockpartizansky*



Figure 1.3. *Yugo*, by *Rockpartizansky*



Figure 1.4. *Yugo*, by *Rockpartizansky*

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<sup>1</sup> Rock Partyzani, *Yugo*, [www.rockpartyzani.com](http://www.rockpartyzani.com)

<sup>2</sup> A. Forcella, *UnderBEOground*, per Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, [www.balcanicaucaso.org](http://www.balcanicaucaso.org).



Figure 1.5. *Yugo*, by *Rockpartizansky*



Figure 1.6. *Yugo*, by *Rockpartizansky*



Figure 2.1. *UnderBEOgrad*



Figure 2.2. *UnderBEOgrad*



Figure 2.3. *UnderBEOgrad*



Figure 2.4. *UnderBEOgrad*



Figure 2.5. *UnderBEOgrad*

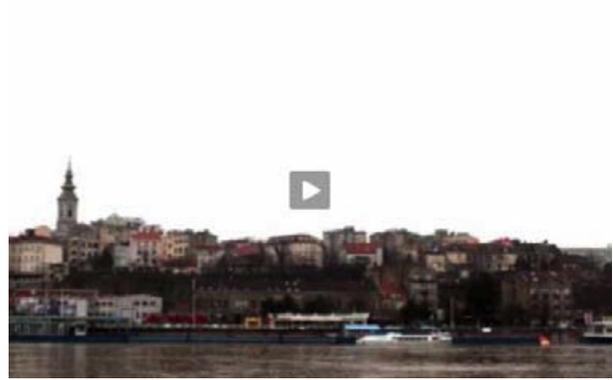


Figure 2.6. *UnderBEOgrad*

The six frames, as six chapters, represents six models considered good in each one, they are: the nice woman; the joy; the ideology represented in the street; the collective realisation; the relation with the past; the relation with the other Countries. For each one we need a lot of space to describe the sense and the context, but, for text limits reasons, we can only show it.

### **Beograd and the goods**

The relations between Beograd and the goods can be analyzed watching those process of commodification of some spaces of the city, both in terms of real estate speculation and of changes of the forms of the market.

«We, the Serbians, are inclined to live in the past, to appreciate it... For us every moment start in the past... Also our foods have a better taste if they are done the day after ... After to exit from the museum I stopped in a little shop, here the artists used to keep their artefacts in wood, ceramic or woven. A kind lady tell me that today there remains only few exemplars, because only the tourists have the money to buy them» (Djerkovic T. M., 2001).

The *čaršije* [ancients market streets], some years ago were the centre of the Beograd relations and commerce, today the most part of them has been destroyed, and «the more conserved ones are a truth museum of extinguished jobs» (Rukaj M., 2010).

### **Beograd peoples**

«My neighbour is a poor alcoholic that didn't adapted himself to the new illegal way to gain money. He lost the money and the sense, drink beer all the day on the pavement. Isn't good nor bad, isn't a homeless nor an ex-citizen. He's just one of the thousands of persons whom lives on the pavement in the new post-modern Serbia» (Rukaj M., (2010).

«Our mission is: "new people, new city", it represents our idea of Belgrade as enormous potentially place for a responsible dynamic development, based on the competences of the young citizens» (Lučić S., 2006).

### **Beograd topography**

Speaking about the topography we can see this scar reading the two description of the effects of the bombs, in the juxtaposition between the words of the daughter of the most important poet of the Yugoslavian Beograd and the ones wrote by the managers of the ProjectBelgrade:

«I find a Beograd that I don't know. I feel the seriousness of the situation, every street corner hurt me. I don't meet any known face, only anonymous faces, diverse, strangers whom live in my life-space... My city will change another time. I'm not sure that it is my city, I'm a refuges in my city, like all that people over there in the streets» (Djerkovic T. M., 2001).

«Belgrade is at the mercy of disasters and changes from thousand years, and we want to play with these theme» (Lučić S., 2006).

Other two overlaps can help us to understand this situation, the first is composed by two visions of two streets in the centre, totally renewed after the bombs:

«Now my street is full of expensive cars, of restaurants and of upscale shops, and of strange shaven head people with the gun» (Tesanovic J., 1999).

«The *Kneza Mihaila ulica* is the most commercial road of the city, in which appears important shops which in the summer colonize peacefully the centre of the street. Is interesting to see how in a street dedicated to the consumerism and to the appearance, there are six bookshops, as image of the intellectual curiosity and the collective love for the literature» (Vertovec M., 2009).

The last occurrence I purpose came from an interview to a professor of the University of Beograd, at whom was asked to describe the physical transformation of the city in the last years.

«This is the higher palace, it was the Central Committee of the Communist Party, is the symbol of the change, it was the place of the ideals, now it is a bank... A bank!»<sup>3</sup>

### Final notice and conclusion.

As I yet said this can't be considered a real and complete application of the hermeneutic method. It is just a collection of examples extrapolated from a big research over the possible application of Benjamin's hermeneutic method in a contemporary city, as a possible solution to the problems of representation and understanding of a city, trying to not lose the complexity, the informal relations and visions of the space in stakeholders' mind.

What appear from this overlook is the concrete possibility of apply an hermeneutic method to the enormous quantity of information and images available in internet about a city, useful to understand the different perceptions about a space and its changes.

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