

JOURNEYS INTO POSTMODERN CITYSCAPES. OR HOW TO FIND ONE'S WAY THROUGH THE CHAOS

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The paper is a critical exploration of postmodern approaches to contemporary cityscapes. Although the way postmodern ideas have been applied and discussed within the field presents a remarkable diversity, it seems possible to outline some of the recurring points those postmodern approaches have made on the interpretation of globalization-driven changes on spatiotemporal regimes.

Mainly, the paper focuses on the two following topics: on the one hand, the problem of memory within contemporary Western societies and the meaningless pastiched images and aesthetic forms which History is argued to have been reduced to within them; and, on the other hand, the thematizing of contemporary spatial logics around the idea of chaos and fragmentation, and the subsequent dislocation of subjects within those labyrinth-like surfaces. Both of them have been thought to be the key entry points for understanding global cityscapes. They have been given their quintessential form in 1984 neomarxist Jameson seminal work *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. The paper largely engages with some of its ideas and seeks to explore postmodern geographers' different reactions to Jameson interpretation and their controversial relationship with cultural criticism.

The aim here is to clarify and to put in their context -especially in terms of their epistemic frameworks and their intellectual lineage- mainstream images of postmodern cityscapes and their complex relation to Marxist standpoints. The paper attempts to point out some of the limits and problems of the interpretation these analysis have helped to set, by problematizing the link between the explorations those approaches have made of the underlying forces and structural processes bringing about these cityscapes, and the dystopic interpretation they put forward according to the alienated nature of the relation we are supposed to be having with those landscapes.

I. POSTMODERN DISORDERS: FROM LANDSCAPE TO TEXT AND BACK TO SPACE

First of all, the paper comments on several relevant issues postmodernism has raised within the field, specifically the development of highly semiotic and materially-oriented

approaches to landscape-as-text. It reflects on the adoption of social-constructivist-like epistemologies by postmodern and neo-Marxist currents in Anglo-American geography, and their influence on the retheorization of geographical-key categories, as it is the case of space.

A much wider process of theoretical renewal has shaken Geography foundations over the past decades in terms of their own inner development, but, for sure, postmodernism has played a decisive role in this process, to the extent that a «radical break» has argued to have happen within the field because these «postmodern encounters». According to that, major changes within human geographical imaginations have brought questions of power, knowledge and social processes to the forefront of Geography research agenda. New ways of «reading» geographical realities have been developed in order to reveal the complex interwoven of those elements, and to avoid reifying traditional approaches that used to render those processes invisible and to naturalize their meanings.

Stating the social-cum-cultural construct nature of landscapes themselves, these perspectives have sought to explore how the building and fixation of hegemonic ideology-loaded meanings is produced and transformed. Thinking about landscapes as texts have allowed geographers to refute the naïve and neutral appearance of geographic representations and to infuse geographical inquiry with more cultural and social-oriented concerns, as well as political commitments.

To a large extent, urban landscapes have received great attention within this framework, since they have thought to be a privileged stage where a closer scrutiny of contemporary capitalist transformations can be unfolded. Aesthetic forms and urban morphologies have argued to be the most unmediated expression of capitalism logic. Therefore, contemporary cityscapes are argue to starkly show the penetration of commodity form, so an important point has been made about how much culture gets shaped by structural and economic processes.

Postmodern and more Marxist-oriented approaches have passionately focused on this relationship between spatial form of the built environment and socioeconomic structural processes. Nevertheless, different takes on the topic, and on the interpretation of the effects of those processes, have been worked out: these differences make clear how deep runs the underlying theoretical controversy, and, thus, how much the ongoing postmodern-related discussion keeps gathering momentum.

II. TIME: LANDSCAPES WITHOUT MEMORY?

The paper, then, goes on to analyze canonical postmodern depictions of contemporary cityscapes as landscapes without memory: that is, depthless environments of unconnected styles, forms and signs, no longer holding a meaningful connection to their material or historical referents. As contemporary societies have lost their proper historic sensibility, all what postmodern epoch is able to retain is but a degraded historicism: an aesthetized mixing of historical styles from different periods devoid of the political tensions and socioeconomic contradictions those styles embodied in the past. Urban capitalist-driven transformations and the international increasing competition among global cities for attracting investment, have dramatically increased the pressures contemporary cityscapes have borne all through modern times. Urban environments have been seized by global branding processes, their

landscapes becoming a chaotic and contradictory mosaic of commercial and advertising images. Enhancing cultural particularities by means of visual and mass-mediated strategies, or marketing historic heritage as main place's uniqueness feature, worldwide cityscapes present encapsulated and oversimplified identity images, unable to retain or articulate any proper sense of past.

Moreover, the increasing speeding up of sign circulation and the out-of-context-use and repetition of historical images have produced complex and incoherent cityscapes, visually oriented and ready to be consumed. The nostalgic and profit-driven appropriation of the past that contemporary capitalism entails gets materialized within those fake and touristized environments. Their naïve and past-like atmospheres, it has been asaid, radically reduce History to a mere aesthetic effect.

Moreover, it is the highly mediated and saturated visual surfaces of those landscapes which make them illegible. Thus, the meaning chain gets collapsed within those convoluted iconographies, and the individual is no longer able to articulate his/her relationship to those landscapes in any meaningful or subversive way. Contemporary subject gets trapped in the fragmented and present-like temporalities of those cityscapes, since all possibility of holding confident and coherent narratives has been abolished.

III. PLACES: JOURNEYS WITHOUT MAPS AND POLITICS OF SPACE

As far as space is concerned, postmodern approaches have put the emphasis on the chaotic nature of the spatial logics governing these cityscapes. Fragmentation and flatness have been argued to be the main features of those glittering surfaces. The dislocating and confusing qualities those postmodern architectural and urban forms are argued to have are but the crude example of capitalism's violence and wide-ranging effects.

Processes of commodification have largely penetrated all levels of society and, thus, colonized its spaces. The kitch saturation of those façade-like spaces is argued to be due to the intertextual, ephemeral and scattered ways those landscapes are given form, as if it were a collage. These complex and illegible urban morphologies are said to be unmappable, for the subject is no longer able to locate him/herself with those spaces and, then, cannot trace the totality of the great global system in which he/she finds him/herself caught. It is exactly here where the problem of the actual abolition of critical distance lies: no possibilities of resistance and political struggle are accessible to the individual consumer-reduced and perceptually-overstimulated postmodern subject.

According to this depiction, Jameson's work might be seen as a journey without maps through the chaos of contemporary cityscapes, and a subsequent attempt to draw new and revolutionary mappings that might help us to locate ourselves and understand the social totality of late-capitalist and multinational-networked space. His «cognitive mapping» strategy seeks to unravel economic processes and power relations hidden on the dazzling surfaces of contemporary cityscapes. He wants to make the aesthetics and politics of the cityscapes visible and legible, in order to get individuals becoming aware of these logics as they navigate through the chaos of contemporary cityscapes.

Jameson's proposal of «cognitive mapping» is, thus, a politically-oriented strategy for recovering the sense of totality one needs to get some historical and spatially-based

orientation back, and to get rid of the «false consciousness» the commodified spaces of postfordism capitalist trigger. That is how those journeys without maps through the chaotic surfaces of contemporary cityscapes are turned into a new spatial awareness that provides a radically politized understanding of space.

IV. LANDSCAPE, AUTHENTICITY AND MEANING: BETWEEN REPRESENTATIONS AND PRACTICES

Given that particular and much-spread neomarxist depiction of contemporary cityscapes, the paper attempts to establish a dialogue with both these standpoints and the more postmodern-friendly approaches that have sought to reinterpret these seminal work, in order to explore the problematic assumptions both they make and the limits those Critical-analysis-rooted categories used in these theories present.

Two are the main arguments put forward in the paper. The first, that a more subject-centred account of this contemporary spatiotemporal transformations is needed, for more attention has to be paid to the practices people display within their everyday environments in order to avoid reducing landscape and spatial surfaces to mere power channels or transparent ideology carriers. If we are to understand how new meanings are produce and transform, and how value is attached to those cityscapes it is important to gain some insight on how different and competing readings of these urban environments are brought about by different social groups.

The second argument concerns how those critical standpoints are laid down, and the problematic nature of the discursive and epistemic strategies helping to build their legitimacy in contemporary academia. Not only important dichotomies (as the high and low culture, ore the authentic vs. the inauthentic ones) underlie those analyses, but new hegemonic and generalizing fixed meanings are given to those cityscapes, since they are supposed to be the «critical» (meaning, critically authentic) ones, and are standing for denaturalizing views on the alienating processes veiled within those landscapes.

However, those standpoints have exclusionary effects, because not only they do not acknowledge their own situatedness, but are unable to integrate non prevailing subjectivities and to take into account the creative and disruptive skills of subjects and their ability to subvert power-laden hegemonic meanings of those cityscapes.