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***Title: 'Novel': Between photographing and writing the city***

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*This paper looks at the history of a half-photography, half-fiction, project, whilst it contemplates the possible links between visuality, narratives and space. The article accounts for the development of a partly photographic, partly textual documentary, as well as a theoretical exploration of, space as experienced, perceived or imagined. Both levels upon which the article operates are mutually defined by their co-existence, much like the two different, but interconnected narratives of the project. Through theoretical association, the article attempts to explore the existence of personal associations as definitive and significant in the occupation and interpretation of urban space.*

*'Novel' combines a series of urban photographs and a text of fiction. It resulted from my parallel activities of photographing and writing, inspired by my 'passing-by' and 'transient inhabitation' of different cities over a period of a year. I started off with an initial idea to write a fictional piece of text, illustrating it with photographs of urban spaces. However, it soon appeared difficult to realise. Unable to produce a coherent story accompanied by visual material, I started reworking texts and images in order to bring them together into a narrative as much textual as visual. In a sense, 'Novel' is the result of my failed attempt to write a proper 'novel', a straightforward 'narrative'. I ended up with a 'hybrid' project, neither photography, nor literature.*

*Such a composite project of documented images and creative narrative was the only possible outcome of two quite integrated activities: my writing and my photographing, which not only informed, but also formed one another whilst I was producing them. For me, writing has always accompanied a visualisation of spaces, where the action could be taking place; whilst the photographs had been taken in places that, somehow, corresponded to the initial image, or, in their turn, inspired new imaginary settings. What could there be in common, I asked, between a series of urban photographs and a text of fiction? I recognised that, for me, it was a certain spatial and topological quality, which both image and text had: in effect they both sprang from a visualisation of space.*

In spatial discourses, relationships between visual images and narratives have been consistently identified within the experience of space. Phenomenologically, spatial experience is interweaved with embodied perception, but also with imagination and visuality. Specifically, for Bachelard,

spatial experience is formed by ‘images’ with a localising quality that results from psychical activity<sup>i</sup>. In *The Poetics of Space*, the house, the room, even chests and drawers, are dreamed, imagined or remembered. Walter Benjamin had, further, observed that various architectural spaces are imprinted onto the mind, as ‘photographic’ images, through events that take place, and we experience there in those places. In *One-Way Street*, he directly compares the operation of memory to the process of photographing:

‘Nothing prevents our keeping rooms in which we have spent twenty-four hours more or less clearly in our memory, and forgetting others in which we passed months. It is not, therefore, due to insufficient exposure time if no image appears on the plate of remembrance. More frequent, perhaps, are the cases when the half-light of habit denies the plate the necessary light for years, until one day from an alien source it flashes as if from burning magnesium powder, and now a snapshot transfixes the room’s image on the plate.’<sup>ii</sup>

For Italo Calvino, on the other hand, the process of creative writing derives from visual imagination. In his essay *Visibility*, Calvino places emphasis on the significance of visualisation for the construction of narratives, observing that ‘The poet has to imagine visually both what his actor sees and what he thinks he sees’<sup>iii</sup>, but also the place where his actor is. Calvino, further, quotes Ignatius Loyola, who sees the ‘visual composition’ of places and the contemplation of an ‘object’ as essentially interrelated:

‘in visual contemplation or meditation [...] this composition will consist in seeing from the view of the imagination the physical place where the thing I wish to contemplate is to be found.’<sup>iv</sup>

*My visualising of urban spaces was not dependent upon conventional optics: either in memory or imagination, the cities of ‘Novel’ were somehow reconstructed as a series of pictures taken out of a deeply personal photographic album. This understanding inspired, for me, two lines of inquiry through which my project could be developed: first, the idea of visual perception as unfocused vision, and second, the ‘subjective’ or ‘psychical’ dimension of spatial apprehension.*

In this sense, visibility and spatial visualisation appear to operate beyond the objective, focused modern vision, and in the areas of subjective perception and imagination. The phenomenological notion of sight as ‘embodied’ vision, a less optical and closer to a habitual, tactile perception, should be considered in regards to visualising architectural space<sup>v</sup>; as Benjamin observes:

‘Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception – or rather by touch and sight... On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception.’<sup>vi</sup>

Juhani Pallasmaa also discusses ‘peripheral’ vision, as a kind of unfocused vision, which for him transforms retinal gestalt into a spatial experience. In opposition to the focused vision, which pushes us out of and distances us from the space, making us mere spectators, peripheral vision, in fact, integrates us with space<sup>vii</sup>. For this reason, Pallasmaa suggests that visual architectural representation should explore realms beyond focused images:

‘Photographed architectural images are centralised images of focused gestalt; yet the quality of an architectural reality seems to depend fundamentally on the nature of peripheral vision, which enfolds the subject in the space...’<sup>viii</sup>

*The perception of architectural space, in terms of unfocused vision, provided me with an idea of how to begin to treat and present my photographs. I thought that a ‘manipulated’ slide show could be an appropriate way: photographs that change at a variable speed, showing different or zoomed-in views of the same place, shown consecutively, would somehow reconstruct the experience of unfocused vision - and would create a sense of spatial ‘thickness’ through a flow of images. Such a filmic presentation, of a series of views of the city, would reflect an ever-changing, incomplete spatial apprehension.*

Pallasmaa, further, draws a link between perception outside the sphere of focused vision and a pre-conscious understanding of space<sup>ix</sup>. For Pallasmaa, the body is not simply a viewing point of the central perspective, instead it becomes ‘the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration’<sup>x</sup>. As in Benjamin’s ‘unconscious optics’<sup>xi</sup>, the visual experience of architectural space involves, if we were to make any distinctions, body, psyche and mind, together.

*I further realised that my photography was, always, accompanied by a feeling of fusing between myself and the spaces I had photographed. I would take a picture when I realised that I was in a place that somehow corresponded to my psychological state at the time - where my inner world and the reality of the place intersected. In the final project, I attempted to reflect this continuity between ‘self’ and ‘architectural space’, by inscribing the text on the photographs: by ‘etching’ my personal, poetic narrative on the documented images of spaces.*

In his essay, *A Berlin Chronicle*, Benjamin recollects his home city through the formation of ‘street images’<sup>xii</sup> - photographic snapshots of the urban fabric invested with a personal sense of

meaning<sup>xiii</sup>. Furthermore, Benjamin discusses experience of the urban environment as taking place through a certain identification with it. In his essays *On the Mimetic Faculty* and *Doctrine of the Similar*, he describes that process as ‘mimesis’; however, he uses the term in the psychoanalytic sense, of a creative empathising with the object<sup>xiv</sup>, not in the Platonic sense of a compromised ‘imitation’ of an original. For Benjamin, the ability to assimilate to the environment refers to a constructive re-interpretation that goes beyond mere imitation and becomes a creative act in itself. From that perspective, visualising architectural space implies a creative engagement with it.

Psychoanalytic theory, further, provides a framework for reflecting on the creative dimension of ‘subjective’ encounters with the ‘objective’ reality of architectural space. The mechanisms of free association could be a background for considering our experience of the external world through ‘associative chains’: through selectively incorporating ‘fragments’ from the environment as psychic representations and putting them together into new narrative structures. Freud’s ‘dream-work’ offers a good example of such an operation. Through ‘dream-work’, the ‘raw materials’ of the dream produce a series of images with a narrative sense: the dream we narrate. However, the narration does not happen in any kind of rational order, since the ‘raw materials’ are subject to the activity of unconscious desire, whereby an impulse seeks the repetition of an achieved satisfaction by, again, finding the perception that accompanied it; as Elisabeth Wright describes:

‘since more is included in the perception than the conscious mind can recognise, this perceptual sorting is not some pre-given recognition, but a perceptual ‘identifying’ of sensory patterns, complexes of colour, shape and sound across time.’<sup>xv</sup>

Thus, a stream of associations takes place, which brings this material, piece by piece, into the dream-stories: a coherent but irrational narrative<sup>xvi</sup>. Furthermore, associations operate through a number of subversions and distortions; such as, the condensation of words and images, displacement or substitution, which can turn a chronological succession of events into an image, containing them all in spatial proximity<sup>xvii</sup>. Free association turns narrative into a rather spatial than temporal unfolding.

*A rather ‘architectural’ way of creating narratives informed my reworking of the texts and photographs. The fact that the initial text was a collage of thoughts, recreations of events, dreams and memories, which had more of a topological rather than a chronological significance, indicated that ‘Novel’ should be more spatial than temporal. For this, I broke down the initial narrative into sentences, textual-fragments, which were in*

*turn merged with the photographs, image-fragments from the three cities. 'Novel's final 'narrative' came out of a process similar to the psychoanalytic 'free association': a fusing together of images and text into a fragmented, irrational narrative. Novel's narrative sprang from two operations of the psychoanalytic perspective: the alteration of photography by text, and, the other way round, text's 'dissemination' by photography. The result is a 'hybrid' project that represents my experience of space as a 'hybrid' environment, an environment made out of materiality, narratives and psychic space.*

*In retrospect, I can also see 'Novel' as my way of coming to terms with new environments: during the time I was working on the project, I was dividing my life between cities that were unknown to me. Borrowing a psychoanalytic term, I would call my activities of writing and photographing of that period as 'transitional phenomena': activities that provided me with an intermediate, 'transitional' area between my subjective reality and the external reality of the new environments.*

Psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott invented the terms 'transitional objects' and 'phenomena' to describe certain processes through which the infant gradually understands the external world as separate from his/her subjective self; that usually involves the infant's attachment to a particular object, which is not part of his/her body, yet not fully recognised as belonging to external reality<sup>xviii</sup>. Winnicott also observed that the human being is always concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of. Transitional objects and phenomena allow for an intermediate area between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' to exist; and further for Winnicott an area for creativity to develop:

'The transitional objects and transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience. This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.'<sup>xix</sup>

For psychoanalysis, the task of reality-acceptance is never completed; in Freud's words, 'Reality will always remain unknowable.'<sup>xx</sup> In this sense, no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality. A relief from this strain can only be provided in an intermediate area of experience which is not challenged: in the arts, in children's play in Winnicott's terms, through 'mimicry' according to Benjamin, or, I would add, through any other kind of creative appropriation of the external world.

Visualising and narrating architectural space allows us to exist in that intermediate area, and further to address the 'objective' aspect of architecture in a creative way: while going beyond the initial understanding of our subjective selves as separate from the outside world, we are at the same time offered insights of the outside world through the recognition and understanding of our subjective experience. Such experiences as 'peripheral' vision could be part of the 'raw material', which might enable us through such tools as 'free association' to further document, in some way, the qualitative in architectural space: to describe a dialogue between perceptions and the perceived, and to create, perhaps, a model of personal, subjective experience.

This thinking places the subject-user of architecture in a unique position. The use of architectural space is not limited only to its physical occupation, but it also involves an internal creative appropriation, which transforms our understanding and interpretation of the world. A subjective narrativisation of architecture not only helps us to understand the modes of our reception of the built environment, but also to consider them as ways of reproduction and appropriation, recognising the subject as an active agent in everyday urban life and re-evaluating his/her role in the conception of architectural space.

*My narrative is a sequence of flux, made out of ephemeral perceptions, poetic practice and creative appropriation. Photography and text enabled me to create that narrative out of urban spaces, which further acted as a mediating, appropriative tool between the city and myself. But, if to adapt is to create, to go beyond existing narratives, 'Novel' could then simply be the story of an exploration beyond the 'stories' about architecture that we already know.*

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> E. S. Casey, *The Fate of Place. A Philosophical History* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1998), p. 287

<sup>ii</sup> W. Benjamin, *One-Way Street* (London, Verso, 1979), pp. 342-343

<sup>iii</sup> I. Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London, Vintage, 1996), p. 82

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>v</sup> Merleau Ponty's and even Descartes' equation of vision with touch, that forms an 'osmotic relation', in Merleau-Ponty's words, with architectural space. In J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (London, Academy Editions, 1996), p. 20

<sup>vi</sup> W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, Fontana Press, 1992), p. 233

<sup>vii</sup> J. Pallasmaa: *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (London, Academy Editions, 1996), p. 13

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13

<sup>x</sup> J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin. Architecture and the Senses* (London, Academy Editions, 1996), p. 11

<sup>xi</sup> From Benjamin's famous affirmation, 'The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses'. In his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London, Fontana Press, 1992), pp. 230-231

<sup>xii</sup> W. Benjamin, *Reflections* (New York, Schocken Books, 1978), p. 9

<sup>xiii</sup> N. Leach, 'Walter Benjamin, mimesis and the dreamworld of photography', in I. Borden and J. Rendell (eds.) *Inter/Sections: Architectural Histories and Critical Theories* (London/New York, Routledge, 2000), p. 28

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<sup>xiv</sup> As being discussed by Freud, the joke communicates through a certain empathising with the subject of the joke, which takes place in the imagination. That kind of mimesis implies a creative engagement with the 'object' and could be of potential significance for aesthetics. In S. Freud, *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* (London, Penguin, 1976)

<sup>xv</sup> E. Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism. A Reappraisal* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1998), p. 18

<sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22

<sup>xviii</sup> See 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena', in D. W. Winnicott *Collected Papers* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1958), pp. 229-254

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242

<sup>xx</sup> S. Freud, 'An outline of psychoanalysis', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 23 (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 196