

# Can we capture the imaginary dimension of cities?

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## 1 ABSTRACT.

We use the ideas of the French philosopher Castoriadis exposed in his book “The imaginary institution of society”. He defines the imaginary dimension of any society. We try to apply these notions to cities. We have to interpret the imaginary dimension of our society. In the style of Kracauer, we explain it thanks to the dilemma: either we choose stakes as Peace and to Save the Planet, either we continue to like the trance provided by electronic extensions of our bodies.

Finally we propose explanations of several urban phenomena like the preference for cottages (or telecottages), taste for Nature, migrations ...

## 2 INTRODUCTION.

We find a definition of the “imaginary dimension of society” in the French philosopher Castoriadis’s book “The imaginary institution of society”.

After being a Marxist and a Freudian, Castoriadis rejected Marxism and Freudism:

- Marx made an error which is inherent to any historical thought: wanting to interpret the historical past in the light of a stake of his time, the “growth of productive forces”, he attributed this goal to the main actor of History according to himself, the working class. It was the cause of bureaucracy. However Castoriadis keeps the idea of a radical change of society, which should be more autonomy for all.
- Freud brought a relevant description of the socialization of the Self (the Oedipus complex) but it is true in any society, and psychoanalysis does not consider this question. Indeed, the Id is permanently crossed by a flow of representations, images which are not the consequence of experience, since they precede it.

The Castoriadis’s hypothesis on the imaginary dimension of society is that society shapes every Self thanks to these images: the sublimation consists in a vocation to be a knight, a priest or a peasant in the Middle Ages, or a capitalist, a worker, a doctor etc. at the time of capitalism. Castoriadis takes into account the descriptions of various societies by anthropologists<sup>(1)</sup>.

According to Castoriadis, the complete and relevant description of any society comprises two ontologies:

- Historical/social. Here creation is at stake because one has to create new worlds of significations each time that society is changing in the course of History. The radical imaginary dimension of society has its role.
- Physical/material. Here the principle of identity and logics are applied. In any society there are a coded language and tools. Castoriadis calls them *Legein* (to say, to count, to gather, to separate, to measure) and *Theukein* (to make, to adjust, to assemble).

According to the Castoriadis’s words, the imaginary dimension is “shored up” in the *Legein* and the *Theukein*. Language is not only a code, but also access to significations (and the imaginary dimension is implied). Tools always imply imaginary significations.

In any society, the imaginary significations are instituted.

Castoriadis has not described the imaginary dimension of our society except in two cases: the occidental mindset (belief in a perfect knowledge allowing handling Nature) and the bureaucratic mindset (belief in grand plans, perfect anticipations, authority and obedience). Therefore we have to propose an interpretation of the “modern soul” if we want to show the role of the imaginary dimension in our society.

<sup>(1)</sup> For instance, the French writer Le Clézio, who received the Nobel Prize, wrote the nice book “Le rêve Mexicain” (“The Mexican dream”). He shows the influence of the traditional religion on Mexican indigenous people at the time of the Spanish Conquest and even after it.

In this paper, we shall propose an interpretation of the “modern soul”. Then we shall expose the imaginary dimension of cities. To conclude, we shall propose some interpretations of urban phenomena.

### 3 THE IMAGINARY DIMENSION OF SOCIETY.

We find an inspiration in the book “From Caligari to Hitler: a psychological history of German film” by Sigfried Kracauer. He was a member of the Frankfurt School, sociologist and studied culture. According to him, one can explain the German film during the years 1920-1933 thanks to the conditions in which the Germans lived at this time. The middle class was in a dilemma: either they struggled with the working class to defend the democratic institutions of the Weimar republic, either they preferred to attempt to keep their privileges which were threatened by the end of old statutes, the mechanization of work, layoffs etc. therefore accepting the adventure of following a “guide”. The dilemma appears in the themes of the German films:

- fear of insecurity and chaos. Chaos is symbolized by the street For instance, a character attempts to live in the street but returns to home where there is comfort. Adventure is only a sorry experience.
- fascination with a strange character with extraordinary powers over human beings. Examples are Dr Caligari and Dr Mabuse. Obviously it was fascination with some Saviour, a guide able to use efficient, secret and guilty means in favour of people (a premonition of the dictator Hitler). Later the Leni Riefenstahl’s film on the congress of the Nazi Party in Nuremberg (1934) was made, showing Hitler as a magician, a demigod. Hundreds of Germans, young and old, males and females, soldiers and civilians were the ornaments of the chief (to use the Kracauer’s words).
- refuges. Examples are romanticism, mountain films, historical films etc.

To describe the “modern soul” we can start from Sigfried Kracauer in his book “The mass ornament” quoting the Russian Christian philosopher Soloviev: “during a long time we shall need this kind of forceful persons who achieve tasks which are beneficial to society but overlook ethical questions”. Today, the dilemma is no more ethics/action but this one: either we devote our energy to stakes like Peace or to Save the Planet, either we continue to like the trance provided by electronic extensions (and other ones) of our bodies. The second alternative consists in consuming more and more technical artefacts providing a sentiment of power, since they extend the capabilities of our bodies (this idea was exposed by Marshall Mac Luhan).

In the same way than Kracauer analyzing the German film we can see these themes in the today’s movies:

- catastrophes and chaos. An example is the popular film “An inconvenient truth”. Many movies show catastrophes.
- films on Savours. James Bond is a tyrant saving the humanity. In the Kracauer’s words in his book “The detective novel”, he is a disembodied agent serving the Ratio<sup>(2)</sup>. More, it is explicit that he is violent and gives up any sentiment, since he fights terrifying foes. Gadgets and even characters are the ornaments of the hero.
- refuges. Today the cultural industry is so sophisticated that this fabric provides many refuges: mystery, fantastic, detective movies, historical movies, comedies etc. For instance, there are psychological movies displaying two themes: Personal Force (often), Immaturity (sometimes). Objects and even characters are the ornaments of the strong person. The immature person attempts to change objects and characters in his (her) ornaments, but fails and it is the source of gags.

Concerning cities one can see three themes in the movies:

- urban catastrophes
- the city as an ornament of Force<sup>(3)</sup>
- movies which are successes from the point of view of aesthetics show the objects in the city, but are indifferent to any social content.

It corresponds to the three themes: insecurity and chaos, recourse to Savours and refuges.

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<sup>(2)</sup> That is to say an Order the norms of which are not precisely defined because the dilemma ethics/law is avoided.

<sup>(3)</sup> Like in the Fritz Lang’s movie « Metropolis », which Siegfried Kracauer has analyzed.

#### 4 THE IMAGINARY DIMENSION OF CITIES.

The urban ontologies are a precious tool, but rely on logics and cannot take into account the imaginary dimension. Take the example of the book “Paris, ville invisible” (“Paris, invisible city”), by the French sociologist Bruno Latour. He describes the various networks in Paris, the very different professional milieus in charge of them, the formatting of users ... When the city is “equipped” (the Castoriadis’s Legein and Theukein), it goes to its “destiny” (here the imaginary dimension matters).

Indeed the imaginary dimension of cities cannot be “known”, but can be explored thanks to artists.

According to Baudelaire, the poet in the city sees allegories of the eternal aspects of human life: good and evil, force and weakness, richness and poverty, happiness and adversity ... The poet seeks and finds images thanks to his intuition. For novelists as James Joyce and Dos Passos, the city displays the Destiny, the Star, and the Decline ... The French novelist Francis Carco showed the streets of Paris as allegories of Decline. According to the French sociologist Pierre Francastel in “Peinture et société” (“Painting and society”) the painter Degas was the first to paint the “interpenetration of spaces” in paintings like “Ballerinas exiting a staircase”<sup>(4)</sup>. The painting shows ballerinas dancing in a room with a dark staircase leading to the room, in front of it. The painting displays the aesthetic unity of opposites: the common and the grace, effort and beauty, the transfiguration of effort. In the city, allegories emerge from the interpenetrating urban spaces, which allow seeing contrasts, triggering images. It is also the research of encounters by poets (or people).

In the Baudelaire’s words, it is a “surprise”. In the Benjamin’s words, when he speaks of cinema, it is a “shock”. The artist is an interceding person who is sensitive and displays the imaginary dimension of society in his works. Another person, less sensitive “feels” it.

If we go back to the Degas’s painting, we see that spaces which are “engaged, not adjacent” (according to the Francastel’s words) suggest or show a move from an opposite to the other (here, from effort and nerves to beauty), triggering an allegory because an allegory is an image, casting light, destroying any lack of sense, explaining the last stage of the move. Here, photography has an influence: a move is explained by an instant, the last stage of the move. We see how the imaginary dimension of society is “shored up” in the Theukein, according to the Castoriadis’s words. Its expression is influenced by the tools at disposal at some time (photography, cinema ...). Benjamin has shown how modern art is obsessed with speed. Beauty is symbolized by the maintained move of the dancing ballerinas, provoking an impression of photographic effect of movement (“motion blur”).

According to Kracauer commenting Walter Benjamin in “The mass ornament” the aesthetic means of allegory is neo-platonic. The allegory displays platonic ideas which are independent, separate, monads. This shows that the imaginary dimension of society is given, ultimate, irreducible. It is analogous to language. One cannot change it (or each one can change it a very little)<sup>(5)</sup>.

#### 5 AN EXPLANATION OF SOME URBAN PHENOMENA.

The imaginary dimension of cities helps to explain several urban phenomena:

The different representations of life in small cities and large cities. In his novel “Main street” written at the beginning of the 20th century, Sinclair Lewis showed his character, Daisy, a woman, hesitating between living in a large city, Washington, or in a small city, Gopher Prairie (Minnesota). The representations of life in a small and a large city seem to be:

Small city	Large city
Mutual knowledge	Dynamism
Security	Adventure
Comfort	Fashion and culture

Of course, today all this is changed. It is more as follows:

<sup>(4)</sup> The curious reader could go on [www.wikipedia.fr](http://www.wikipedia.fr) → Degas and see the painting “L école de danse” (“The dance school”).

<sup>(5)</sup> In France, an institution like the Academy codes the language, but only after the changes have occurred.

Small city	Large city
Past and future	Present
Tolerance	Competition
Ecology and culture	Fashion
Quality of life	Performance

Perhaps, there are areas in some large cities where the values of the small cities are accepted (neighbourhoods inhabited by artists and intellectuals) and areas in some small cities with towers, a high density and an adaptation to economic competition which is seen as the priority. However in most cases the distinctive features appear.

*The preference for cottages.* Sociologists have studied how those who inhabit cottages consider these cottages and the life in the suburbs. They use platonic words. The suburbs being near Nature, life is nice, pure. Moreover, to live in a cottage allows personal autonomy. At the opposite, the large city is ugly, corrupt, and persons are constrained. Since in the future we shall live in a greener, more ecological society, the cottage could survive as a telecottage. The image could be strengthened. Not only the telecottage should be near Nature and far away from large cities, but information technologies (teleworking, electronic commerce) should be used to economize energy, to contribute to the goal of preserving environment.

*Taste for Nature.* Nature is pure, generous and eternal. This image explains the taste for Nature. It will be strengthened in a greener society. In the large cities people will appreciate parks. Natural parks will survive, and perhaps new ones will be created. Products which are produced by means which preserve environment (bio agriculture, for instance) will be preferred by many people.

*The marking of urban spaces by tribes and users.* Often urban spaces are symbolic. They are marked by tribes or users. It favours what is called by sociologists “adjustment”. When urban spaces interpenetrate, visible contrasts allow allegories, symbols and images emerge. A group recognizes itself with such symbols. As they are visible, other groups can think about them. It facilitates the understanding of a group by another. Obviously the imaginary dimension of society has a role.

In “The mass ornament” Kracauer has shown how homogeneous and disciplined crowds can provoke an aesthetic effect. He commented on these shows displaying hundreds or even thousands of people making the same gesture at the same time (a kind of rhythmic gymnastics). It is the ornament of the Ratio. All seem to execute the same program. Sometimes in a city, where there are parades a homogeneous and disciplined crowd can provoke this kind of effect. In general, in a city there are various groups valuing the present in different ways. They mark the urban space. The “adjustment” occurs when any group accepts the values of another group.

*Migrations.* In general, migrations are explained by three causes: needs, projects which are not illusory since the migrants will find the satisfaction they were expecting, and the image of the place where migrants come. For instance, to those leaving large cities to live in the countryside, Nature seems pure and regenerating. To those leaving the countryside to live in a large city, it seems the place of marvellous success and happiness. Often it is the same in the case of migrants leaving a country to live in another. Of course, needs matter, and projects which are achieved, but the imaginary dimension of society has its role.

## 6 CONCLUSION.

Obviously the imaginary dimension of society is involved in many urban phenomena: unique cities (Paris, Rome ...), political capitals, religious capitals, cultural capitals and metropolis with an “ambiance” thanks to “specialties” like cultural “events” or mass events (fairs, festivals). However in this paper we spoke of the radical imaginary dimension of society, that is to say the imaginary dimension of society concerning social change. Therefore to conclude we shall evoke the influence of the imaginary dimension of society on the information technologies, in the future.

According to the Mac Luhan’s criteria, Internet is a cool media, that is to say not a media triggering passion (like radio and cinema) but more a media triggering a need of participation (like TV). It is because the

definition of images is low, two senses are stimulated (eyesight, hearing), the media is interactive and provides a view on innumerable phenomena everywhere in the world, and also the possibility of instantaneous intervention thanks to exchange of messages. Mac Luhan has called this effect “mosaic” in the case of American press and TV. It triggers the sentiment that we are immersed in a diverse and complex world, that we are unable to analyze and understand. We “feel” it. All this contributes to create a need for participation. Whatever the pace, society will become greener and more ecological. The prestige and attractiveness of Internet will change. It will be considered to be useful to allow substitutions of activities to preserve environment: to work at home, to buy goods on line, to communicate with others without physical meeting, to learn without going to schools etc. Internet will be less fun but more attractive because it will be a tool to achieve a prestigious goal, to preserve environment.

## 7 REFERENCES.

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