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Bruno Pelucca

**PROGETTO E TERRITORIO
LA VIA PORTOGHESE**

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José Machado Pais

IMAGINATION ON CITY AND CULTURAL POLICIES

ONE DAY I'LL BE A TOURIST IN MY OWN CITY

Immaginazioni su città e politiche culturali
Un giorno sarò turista nella mia propria città

Partendo da un approccio fenomenologico, il presente contributo intende mostrare che è possibile esplorare ed investigare la città quando uniamo la sensibilità sociologica con l'interrogativo teorico scaturito da osservazioni spontanee: contrattempi, messaggi sulle bustine di zucchero, annunci pubblicitari, espressioni linguistiche e comportamentali ... modi di fare e di dire la città.

A partire da questo atteggiamento metodologico, si indagano modelli culturali di vita urbana le cui basi spaziano dalla routine (*métro-boulot-dodo*) all'evasione (desideri di realizzazione frustrati che si ripropongono a livello immaginario). In che misura le politiche culturali potranno contribuire ad una cittadinanza partecipata, a partire dalla riconquista del significato della città?

Imagination on city and cultural policies
One day I'll be a tourist in my own city

Following a phenomenological approach, this article seeks to show how we can explore and probe the city when we combine sociological sensibility with theoretical questioning issue from spontaneous observations, such as hitches, messages on sugar sachets, advertising messages, linguistic and behavioural expressions ... ways of living and expressing the city.

*Starting from this methodological attitude, the article questions cultural models of urban life based on concepts ranging from routine (*métro-boulot-dodo*) to escapism (thwarted fulfilment desires recreated in one's imagination). To what extent can cultural policies contribute to a sense of common citizenship, by reclaiming the meaning of the city?*

1. Introduction

Might being pressed for time be a trait of urban culture? This hypothesis occurred to me in a café, at the precise moment I was putting sugar in my coffee. There on the sachet I read: "One day I'll be a *tourist in my own city*". A curious phrase that set my mind working. Whilst sightseers in a city are able to discover its beauties and places of interest, it would seem that for the most people in the street, the people who move through the city every day, the city remains to be discovered, remote whilst close at hand. In other words, people who live in a city worn thin through familiarity seem not to see it or experience it as they would like, lost instead in their routine journeys which make them mere passengers, or passers-by (*métro-boulot-dodo*).

2. Creative cities: places to be seen

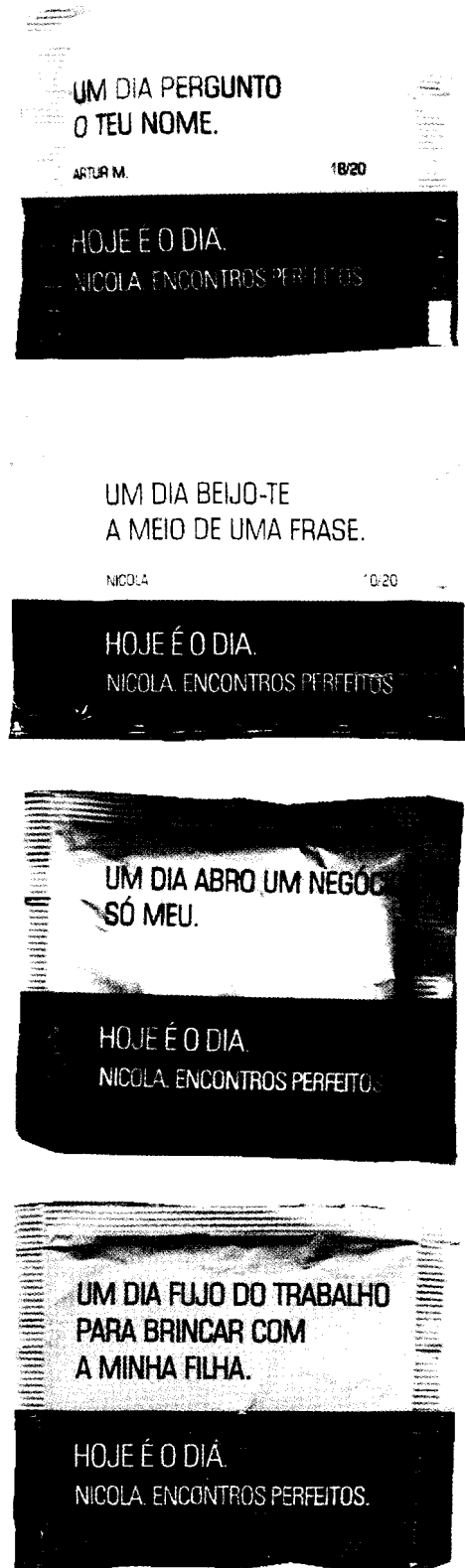
"Creative cities" have been defined as places to be seen¹. But, if someone feels the impulse to spend a day as a tourist in its own city it is because people look without seeing. They're probably pressed for time. This probability, merely insinuated, gained statistical substance when, out of curiosity, I began to sift through the basket of sugar sachets, in search of other thoughts². I started by grouping the thoughts by affinity, in the manner of Hiernaux³ when he suggests the *isotopes* method for analyzing the content of large quantities of material – in my case, a basket full of sugar sachets.

So I had one pile of sachets with thoughts which might support an *isotope of escape*. For example: *One day, I'll grab my backpack and see the world; One day I'll go and live by the seaside; One day we'll drop everything and run away together; One day I'll escape from work to play with my daughter...* This idea of escape – of "imagined lives" projected

onto an illusory field⁴ - alerts us to the fact that the city can act as a prison: everyday routines and traffic jams. There are even advertisements which make a joke of the congested road system. Last week, in stationary traffic on the IC19 between Lisbon and the Sintra suburbs, I noticed an advertising hoarding for products at "traffic stopping" prices. A well-known brand of beer promotes itself on the slip road onto the heaving Lisbon ring road with an image of three bottles and the caption: "3 [miles] an hour". Driving home, we often telephone in justified exasperation to say "I'm stuck [in Portuguese – imprisoned, trapped] in the traffic". Pedestrian crossings, traffic lights and road signs all show that cities are designed for cars. Dominated by roundabouts – built to help the traffic flow more quickly – cities are subjugated by the power of cars which, not by accident, are parked abusively and lawlessly on the pavements intended for pedestrians. The car no longer adapts to the city, it's the city that has to adapt to the car, even when the streets are fitted with "sleeping policemen", suggestively known in Brazil as "spring busters", clearly reflecting the constant tension between drivers and pedestrians. Similarly trapped in the traffic are those who, on public transport, travel with the marks of fatigue⁵ stamped on their faces. Some take the chance for a snooze – another form of escape, tired from the day's labours. Public transport offers a rich field for sociological inquiry. Suffice it to look at the passengers' faces, their fleeting eye contact, the insolent and disdainful looks which typify superficial relations, dominated by distance and indifference. Simmel refers to this looking away as "preserving subjective life in the face of the violence of the great city"⁶. He also wrote: "there is perhaps no other phenomenon of the soul so unconditionally limited to the great city as indolence"⁷. This state (or disposition) is manifested through alienation from what is going on, not because what is going on is not understood but because it is understood as being meaningless. Anyway, the fact that cities are governed

by the principle of anonymity is not to say that, deep down, a sporadic desire may not be felt to get closer to whoever is calling our attention. As I read on another of the sugar sachets: *One day I'll ask you your name*. However, although urban life is unthinkable without a community dynamic, its most salient feature is a commitment to deferred encounters. The idea of entrapment (suppressed feelings, repression, containment in different forms) gives rise to longings for liberation through culture: *One day I'll start singing in the street; One day I'll dance until I drop...* You might say that anyone who actually did this might gain release from the prison of life's worries, but would risk being labelled as "off their head". As Simmel has lucidly shown us, the mobility and anonymity offered by large cities is associated with a generous measure of individual freedom; however, individual subjectivity does not wholly evade the mechanisms of social control. Even in an urban milieu, fingers are ready to point accusingly at anyone who shamelessly deviates from the norm. But we should recall the hypothesis, proposed by Giddens⁸, that the cultural domain is propitious for the affirmation of "life policies", to use a fashionable concept. These "life policies" project desires either for professional realization (*One day I'll start my own business*) or else, and above all, for investment in one's personal image: *One day I'll get a whole new look; One day I'll join a gym; One day I'll lose weight; One day I'll get a tattoo; One day I'll get a makeover...* My "life policies" pile is the largest, which might suggest that the "me culture" overshadows other forms of culture in our imagination. Although the sample for my study – the basket of sugar sachets – is limited, and needs to be complemented by other more refined forms of sociological enquiry, I would take the liberty of suggesting that the reference to Mead's⁹ "generalized other" may be being supplanted by self-reference, a preoccupation with the self.

Trusting that no-one will report me for



1. Some sugar sachets

UM DIA SOU TURISTA NA MINHA PRÓPRIA CIDADE.

FILIPE GOMES

17/20

HOJE É O DIA.
NICOLA. ENCONTROS PERFEITOS.

2. "One day I'll be a tourist in my own city"

the theft of sugar sachets, another one of my piles pointed to an *isotope* which I baptized as *deferred passions*. The messages reveal a predisposition for love. I won't say "unfortunately" – because sociological discourse excludes value judgements – I shall just say that this predisposition appears frustrated, once again, by the lack of time or opportunity: *One day I'll make you the happiest person in the world; One day I'll fill your room with flowers; One day I'll write you a song; One day I'll serenade you in the moonlight...* One day, one day, one day! Why put it off? Why not today?

Sorting through the basket of sachets, I found that a lot of the messages are repeated – a warning sign that I was getting close to what is called the "saturation point" in my investigation. Even so, I discovered thoughts expressing propensities to *sociability* (*One day I'll get my friends together for a big party*), to *solidarity* (*One day I'll do voluntary work*) and to *compassion* (*One*

day I'll take in a stray dog). To a greater or lesser degree, wild ideas which are projected as possible at an indeterminate date. Another sugar sachet evoked symptoms of the current crisis – *One day I'll ask for a discount in a pound shop* – symptoms which might lead us to question whether cultural policies for attracting audiences take into account the constraints of real life.

The dominant idea to emerge from analysis of these messages is one I would like to propose for reflection: the thoughts point to a cultural model of escapism, driven by desires of realization, thwarted but recreated in the imagination. In other words, whilst the urban lifestyle is dominated by a *dromocratic* system, in which everything is done as a race, and the city experienced and seen in a constant rush or hurry, the meaning of life is recovered at the level of the collective imagination – in what we could do one day to attain the fullness of being.

3. From the world of constraints to the world of escape

Urban life is associated with a particular geographical territory, but we often forget the other dimension of everyday experience: time. So on issues of urban life, much has been said about space but little about time. Does it make sense to consider the cultural dimension of our cities without referring to time and counter-time?

The attitude of "what isn't done on St. Mary's Day is done the next day" reflects a hedonistic ethic geared to enjoyment of the present. This focus on the present is further supported by a particular moral or pragmatic attitude which tells us "[not to] leave for the morrow what you can do today". At the same time, the thoughts on the sugar sachets present us with one of life's dramas: the inevitability of putting off to a distant date things we could do in everyday life. In other words, the imaginary world expressed by the sugar sachets mirrors projections of life which are no more than sketchy plans of action, to be put in motion at an indeterminate point in the future. But there is nothing to stop us questioning the "unconscious structure" concealed in these messages, taken as flows of consciousness which, although corresponding to individual impulses, might be socially shared. I analyze these flows of consciousness at two levels: at the level of the express messages and at that of the meta-messages (by means of inference). It seems to me that what evades the process of rationalization of social life is not just the "disenchantment of the world", to use the Weberian jargon. Even if this disenchantment is real, it may give rise to a search for life's sweeteners – however illusory or utopian.

As Canclini¹⁰ has rightly suggested, in the context of globalization presented as a form of escape, culture – from a socio-anthropological perspective – will have to be analyzed using both statistical means and also narrations and metaphors which condense everyday tensions. That is why I have taken the thoughts on the sugar

sachets as metaphors for urban life. Paul Ricoeur has described metaphor as the representation of one idea under the mantle of another, more surprising idea.¹¹ It is this shift in meaning that I would propose exploring, taking the messages on the sugar sachets as the cloaks of ideas cloaked in other ideas. For example, bitterness is implicitly present in the concept of sweetness, as is adventure in that of routine, and freedom in that of imprisonment. Similarly, the idea of a different day emerges from the humdrum flow of the everyday. It is the heuristic power of metaphor which leads me to look on the residual objects of everyday life as paths along which to search for symbolic significations which might reveal ways of living. Symbolization consists of metaphorical transposition from an actual meaning to another, figurative meaning. Deciphering the symbols means tracing this path backwards: moving from the figurative meaning to arrive at the actual meaning at its source. If the collective imagination is home to dreams to be realized, it is because reality has proven unable to achieve them. In other words, the symbolic is not independent of the material, nor the imaginary of the real.

Everyday life is regulated by multiple stable references: rhythms, rules, obligations. How can we move from structured routine to rupture? This is the question left open by the *dot-dot-dot* projecting into a future yet to be attained: one day... I will do this or that. In the ellipsis, the impulse for emancipation converges with resignation, in a constant tension between what we do unwillingly and what we would like to do one day, to break the mould. But the ellipsis also points to the enormity of the leap from imagining to attaining Utopia. Why play with the words which are the objects of desire? And why are there objects of desire whose existence goes no further than words? The answer is simple. The reality of what we might envisage doing one day is confined, basically, to a universe of idealizations. It may be argued that the city cannot

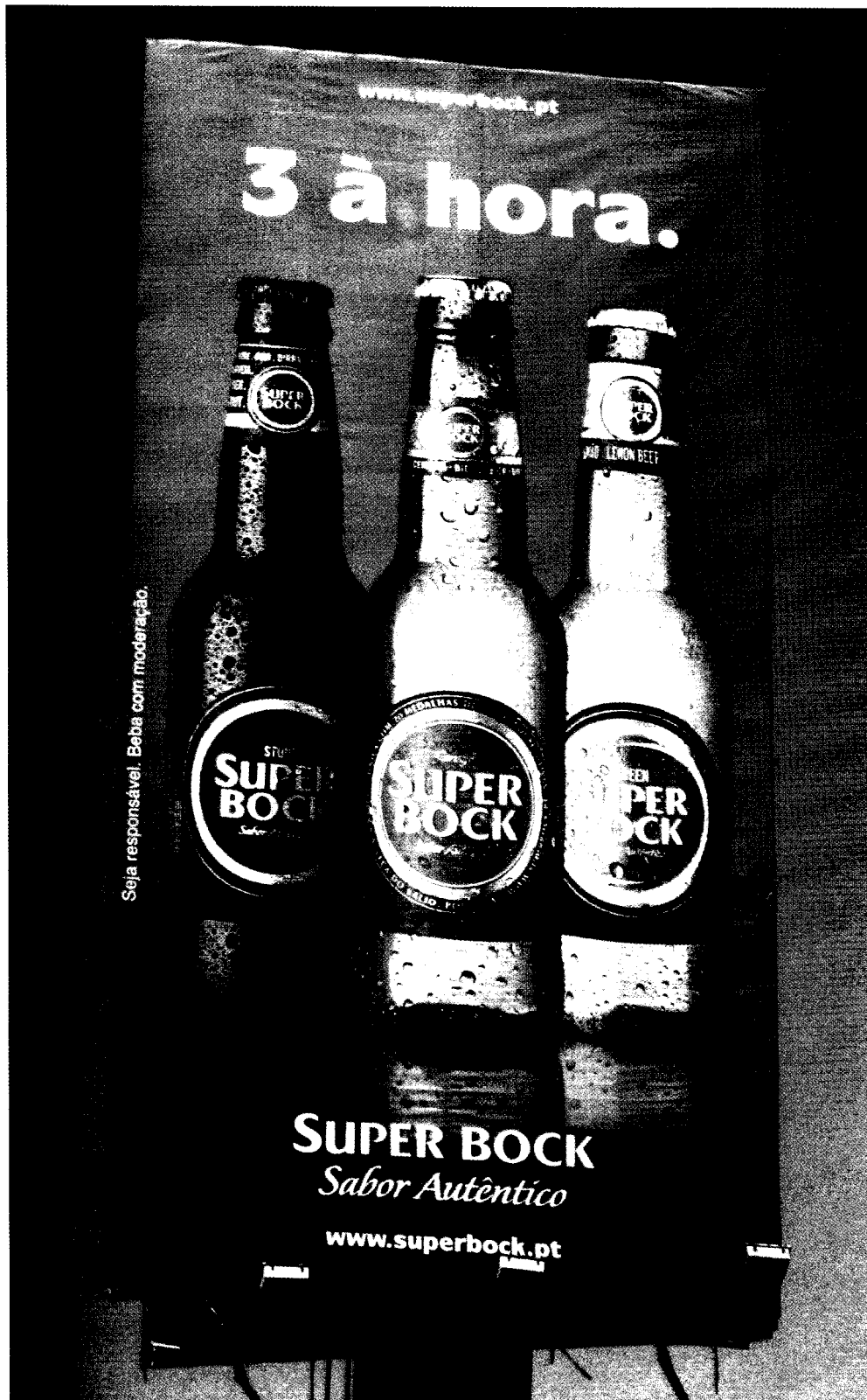
be appropriated without first being dreamed about – as happens with life. This is true. The city is not just a place to live, it is a place to imagine. In other words, the city manifests itself in buildings but also reveals itself in mystifications conveyed through soap operas, literature, sightseeing, etc.. The fantastic side of a city is often found in the fantasies of its inhabitants, in the imaginary worlds it yields. Indeed, urban experience combines concepts (diction) which form their own denial (contradiction), as phenomena which presuppose each other: order in the face of chaos, public versus private, alienation versus identification.¹² We can match the imaginary worlds of the sugar sachets with those of the city. In both cases, the imaginary worlds set up order against the disorder of life. Whilst flows of dispersal dominate the urban fabric, ideas of concentration prevail in the imaginary worlds: idealizations, memories, utopias. Cultural policies have a vast field here in which to work, mainly in relation to the intangible heritage which sustains the legends, the myths, the music, in short, the multifaceted images of the city. This heritage, decked out in evocations and memories, leads us to think that the images of the city express not so much the city itself as the affective relations its inhabitants have with it.

It is impossible to speak of urban life without speaking of urban language. In Canclini's words, "cities are not just a physical phenomenon, a form of occupying space [...], they are also place where expressive phenomena occur and contend with rationalization".¹³ This also opens up a vast field of research for sociological investigation – especially in exploration of how cities tell their stories to themselves: through chronicles, documentaries, engravings or music. These manifestations of the collective imagination, very often fictionalized, are what nourish feelings of belonging to cities, generating forms of cultural citizenship shaped by imaginary projections of the city. A city imagined the better to be loved.

4. Conclusion

It is clear that the increasing urban mobility which characterizes the hurried life of our cities – implying a logic of deferral of the good things in life (as we say in the messages on the sugar sachets) – is an obstacle to urbanity. However, without the creative force of urbanity, capable of developing sciences and arts, the humanism of the Renaissance or the philosophy of the Enlightenment would never have existed. As a result of constraints on the real world, this creative force has established itself in imaginary worlds, as we have seen. These idealized imaginary worlds correspond to forms of escape, allowing creativity to be set loose from institutional control and imposed routines. These imaginary worlds also offer the possibility of reconstructing uprooted identities and reworking the meaning of the city itself. Kevin Lynch, in his classic study, *The Image of the City*¹⁴, pointed out the alienation experienced by city dwellers caused by their inability to conjure up a mental map of their city in its entirety. If de-alienation from the city presupposes regaining a sense of the city as life-experience, so that the city as conceived can also make sense as a store of memories and images, then there is vast scope here for the cultural policies of the city.

The desire to be a *tourist in our own city* also raises another question: a person who nurses this longing feels lost in time. This is because the "tourist attractions" – principally the historical centres of cities, often emptied of inhabitants due to large-scale development of outlying urban areas¹⁵ – are more than just magnets for sightseers: they are places converted into evocations of the past. Here we see that de-identification with the city means above all a rupture in time: identity is lost in the workings of time from which historical awareness is woven. This is not to say that cities should be immobilized in the past, because then they would merely stagnate in time. The past changes as time passes it by. But historical awareness is always soaked, like a sponge, in the marks of the past. Creative cities should be able to recreate this past.



NOTES

1 Jinna Tay, «Creative Cities», in John Hartley (Ed.), *Creative Industries*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 220.

2 To clarify the nature of the sample under study, I should explain that these thoughts were selected from entries to a competition organized by *Nicola* coffee.

3 Jean Pierre-Hiernaut, «Análise estrutural de conteúdos e modelos culturais: aplicação a materiais volumosos», in Luc Albarello et al., *Práticas e Métodos de Investigação em Ciências Sociais*, Gradiva, Lisboa, 1997, pp 156-202.

4 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

5 Peter Handke, *Essai sur la Fatigue*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991.

6 Georg Simmel, «Las grandes urbes y la vida del Espíritu», in *El Individuo y la Libertad. Ensayos de Crítica de la Cultura*, Barcelona, Península, 1986, p. 248.

7 *Id. Ibid.*, p. 251.

8 Anthony Giddens, *Modernidade e Identidade Pessoal*, Oeiras, Celta Editora, 1997, p. 56.

9 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992.

10 Néstor García Canclini, *La Globalización Imaginada*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2008, p. 89-93.

11 Paul Ricoeur, *La Métaphore Vive*, Paris, Seuil, 1975.

12 Daniel Innerarity, *El Nuevo Espacio Público*, Editorial Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 2006, p. 108.

13 Néstor García Canclini, *Imaginarios Urbanos*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 2005, p. 72.

14 Kevin Lynch, *La Imagen de la Ciudad*, México-Bracelona, Gustavo Gil, 1984.

15 Paolo Perulli, *Atlas Metropolitano. El Cambio Social en las Grandes Ciudades*, Madrid, Alianza, 1995.