

FLASHES OF MODERNITY

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How can we speak about modernity? David Harvey(1970/1997) speaks of spatio-temporal experiences and social practices that bring about a break with the past. How can one represent, Harvey constantly wonders, the coexistence of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable, or better, how can these elements actually coexist? To find an answer I believe it is indispensable to re-examine the work *Passagenwerk* by Walter Benjamin. He proposes adopting the principle of montage in the study of history. Therefore, when he says: “the first stage in this journey will consist in adopting the principle of montage in history; in other words, in erecting great constructions out of tiny building elements, cut out with clarity and precision; in discovering, indeed, by the analysis of the single small moment the crystal (essential nature) of the whole event; in breaking, therefore, with popular historical naturalism; in understanding the construction of history as such; in the structure of the comment (515) he is reflecting on how to increase the transparency of history itself by the application of the Marxist method. His method consists in using quotations and comments on life at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. His intention is overtly declared: “This work must develop to the highest degree the art of quoting without using quotation marks. The theory behind it is closely connected with that of montage” or yet again “The method of this work is literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only something to show. I will not remove anything precious and I will not appropriate any ingenious expression. Rags and rubbish, therefore, but not in order to make an inventory of them, but to do them justice in the only way possible: by using them” (514).

So, montage. An operation similar to montage can be found in the field of mechanics (where the word *assembly* refers to an operation by means of which the various constituent elements of a device are put together, according to a plan, in their proper places so as to form a single working whole) or in typography (where assembly refers to the operation of fixing the stereotypes or engraving plates to wooden or metal bases) The word montage itself is used in cinematography (where it refers to the concatenation in a single organic whole of the various scenes and sequences shot in a film). Industry, printing and the cinema make use of a similar device. Can this be attributed purely to chance?

Therefore, whether we consider the operation of a machine, or cinematography, or typography, montage seems to join pieces together in order to create a whole and therefore places them within a frame (besides, the French word *montage* also has the meaning of ‘frame’). Now this might make one think of something complete but as we shall see this is never more than an appearance.

But if we examine the city what is the space *par excellence* where one can see a work of montage? In my view the space *par excellence* is where exhibitions take place. The interesting thing is that from London 1851, the date of the first universal exhibition, right down to Hanover 2000, the exhibition which is now taking place, the space which is conceived is always external and is assembled and disassembled. In the operation of montage space is enclosed, a place is set up with its walls, its openings, usually with one main monumental entrance, the area is measured, and the influx of visitors is calculated. In the stage of dismantling or disassembling, the problems are connected with the cost of changing the function of the place as well as the work of trying to make it fit in with the rest of the city. Often these places become axes of development because of their capacity to light up spaces that would otherwise be left in the shade.

But let us take one step back, what is the nature of exhibitions?

Exhibitions, whether international or national, were creations of western society in the second half of the nineteenth century. They were places of innovation; because of their capacity to exhibit; they were important events because they were the tangible manifestation of social change. The first attempts made in this area were in London (1756) and Paris (1798) but they were undoubtedly more modest and probably their aims were different from those of the first universal exhibition. Indeed, Sigmund Englander(1864), commenting on the 1798

Paris exhibition speaks of a festival of emancipation marked by popular features (woollen instead of silk fabrics, materials that would cater for the domestic needs of the third state rather than laces and brocades), a festival created to entertain the working classes. As I said before, the first universal exhibition took place in London, from 1 May to 15 October 1851. Its full title was “the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations” and it was held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. The name is important because it declared its objectives: it was to be not only an artistic exhibition but rather, and above all, the first exhibition devoted to products and goods as well as to commerce, international relations and tourism. Therefore it was a clear manifestation of the new emerging class, the *bourgeoisie*, (the middle classes) and its aim was to reach an ever-increasing public in order to show, one might add by means of spectacular events, the progress of the new age, the progress of the modern city. Political power, as evidenced by the competition and rivalry between states and the theme of colonialism, and economic power, as evidenced by the volume of the business market were clearly on display in all these exhibitions.

Thus we come up against the problem of the whole and its parts, a constant problem of modernity, or of its many facets (but perhaps not just of modernity).

Therefore, once more, montage. If we look at Universal Exhibitions we note at once the relationship with the operation of montage, for the organisers of these great events have constantly been obliged to face challenges that concerned, fundamentally four areas: the speed of execution, the safety and solidity of places that would host thousands of people, ease in the reconversion and re-employment of the spaces, and the ability of the place to attract and captivate the visitor. Whenever an event causes a flash of lightning, the city undergoes a transformation which may fade with time but nevertheless leaves its mark. Assembling in a limited period of time a place which has the characteristics I have just described makes it necessary to rethink the whole way a city is organised. And if it is true that this impact today is studied in theory we can imagine the effect of the crowds (the bewildering effect it must have had) on cities at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

In these empty spaces, completely or almost completely un-urbanized, in a limited period of time fantasmagorical cities were and still are founded and their overriding purpose was and still is to astonish. The way they astonish is ably explained by Eisenstein, who was a master in this field, when he says what montage is: “It is not a thought composed of pieces that occur in succession, but rather a thought that springs from the clash of two pieces that are independent of one another”(1986, 22.) It is conflict between elements that “explode into a concept”, it is the ability to create movement from immobile images.

It is impossible to mention all the transformations caused by exhibitions; nevertheless, a few examples may illustrate the range of effects that these events have had on life in cities. Architectural forms more than anything else have been affected, for all exhibitions consecrate and are consecrated by particular buildings. Let us begin with the Crystal Palace of Joseph Paxton, who invented the first monumental construction in glass and iron. It undoubtedly embodied the nature of exhibitions because it possessed their four fundamental features, (namely the speed of execution, the solidity and safety of the places; ease in the re-conversion and re-employment of the spaces, and the ability of the place to attract and captivate visitors). The place chosen for the Exhibition was Hyde Park, where the Crystal Palace absorbed an avenue of elm-trees to avoid having them cut down, thus creating an even more surprising effect.

But in some cases, for example Chicago 1893, work is not limited to a single project but the spaces of the exhibition are conceived as a city within the city. Daniel Burnham, the architect in charge of the Chicago exhibition, put forward the concept of an ideal city and adopted a single style, the neo-classic, abandoning glass and iron in favour of more lasting materials. This style, taken up in many other exhibitions, resulted in what was called the White City.

Exhibitions therefore afford the opportunity to reflect on the nature of the city as a whole. As in the case of Chicago, attention is directed towards the general organisation of the city. Thus town planning took the leading role in New York in 1939; the structure of the Pèrisphère was the symbol of the ideal city: Democracy. Different but still concerned with the idea of the city was the example of Futurama. Here Norman Bel Geddes’s construction was projected

into the future: an attempt was made to describe the futuristic city, and the life-style of the inhabitants of such a city. The same idea was adopted in 1964 in the huge pavilion of General Motors.

Another significant example is that of the Montreal Exhibition of 1967. Here, the architect, Moshe Safdie, put forward a project that in effect envisaged the creation of dwellings. His design, though safeguarding space and garden, aimed at making use of the space itself. His solution consisted in assembling cubic constructions. The project was realised only in part, and though it was not a pavilion, it became one of the symbols of the 1967 exhibition that have remained. A final example linked to the future is provided by the 1970 Osaka exhibition. Here, apart from the odd traditional pavilion, both the materials and the colours generally gave one the impression of being inside a science-fiction film.

Finally, we must examine the effect of exhibitions on the city seen as consisting of human relationships. For those who listen, the various voices of the city produce effects that are utterly discordant. In the spectacular world of exhibitions the discourse of hegemony and silence are the most evident features. But both underline a break, a rupture. The former stages a coup de théâtre; the latter is by definition a break, a rupture. Besides, “universal exhibitions were the school where the masses excluded from consumption learnt empathy through exchange value” (Benjamin).

So if “The relativism of postmodernism has produced a cacophony of competing voices that are difficult to distinguish” When Vincenzo Guarrasi says that this statement derives essentially from the demise of modern temporality as an ordering principle, I believe he is close to Ejezestejn’s idea of montage, that is montage resulting from a collision. It is precisely the demise of temporality that allows us to regard universal exhibitions as elements in a series, vectors of globalisation that traverse reticulated space, lighting up a different metropolis on each occasion. In any case, if it is to obtain credence, the demise of temporality and of spatiality as well, has an increasing need of spectacular events. A single unbroken thread connects the reconstructed village inhabited by “masks” to cyberspace.

The flashes of lighting I have in mind are like psychedelic lights which arrest movement. Montage transforms immobility into movement. The oscillation between these two devices might allow us to grasp the essence of a limit: the limit of modernity.

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