

## VISIONS OF THE MODERN TOWNSCAPE BETWEEN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES

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It is the restless dynamic omni-directional glance which distinguishes the modern vision of the townscape. It also encompasses a sensitivity to the transformations of the spatial units and to the moments of individual and collective existence.

The transformations, which are produced as images, affect totally different spheres – painting, photography, literature, architecture and the cinema. They should be considered in terms of formation of their specificities and in the effect they have on each other. In this way it is possible to assess a field of phenomena which unfold in all their intensity, perceiving the originality of the meanings, the interactions and the complications arising from the comparison and from the intermingling of new cultural formations.

The subject-matter is the town and its transformation, the changing of those “paysages de pierre”, as Baudelaire used to say, in which modern experience is formed and historically consumed<sup>1</sup>.

The effort to give an image of the town in its totality is clearly visible in the nineteenth century. The panoramic technique is based on the exceptional raising of the point of vision. The centralisation of the viewpoint and the extension of the all-round gaze all around, brings back a method of observation known to civilian and military topographers and surveyors and to natural landscape painters: it is the experience of the observer situated in a lofty position, on top of a tower or the peak of a mountain. The same principle is applied to the description of the town so as to realistically detail the physical organisation of the town and especially the nature of its buildings and monumental projections. The limitations of this method of representation are recognisable, however, when the dimensional extension reveals the impossibility of a detailed, thorough description of an all-embracing view (Hyde 1988). In the panoramas of London in the first half of the nineteenth century – painted from the dome of the Colosseum, from the top of St. Paul’s or from other

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<sup>1</sup> *Curiosités esthétiques. Le peintre de la vie moderne. L’artiste, homme du monde, homme de foules et enfant* (Baudelaire 1951: 882).

high observation points –, the city appeared as a spectacular “microcosm” which opens up to a new dimension. It also became obvious that the great complexity of the metropolis of the future could not be envisaged through the same methods. It would be necessary to have a more dynamic, mobile gaze, ready to absorb general visions rapidly as well as more limited images, glimpses, fragments of the reality that is being observed.

This involves research into new means that are able to record a large mass of information, through more efficient and far-reaching techniques. Photography has proved a means capable of overcoming a vision that is too literally descriptive, reaching a deeper understanding of phenomena and transformations connected with the development of the large city. The photographic means introduced new perceptive times and new ways of penetrating space, without, however, excluding known and codified methods of observation. The influence exerted by photography on painting in the second half of the nineteenth century is well known, but it is appropriate to point out that photography also took on, in the first half of the twentieth century, schemes from pictorial representation, especially the most modern, innovative ones. The angle perspective, for example, comes from the eighteenth century as does the panorama technique.

The reality that the photographic lens reveals to the gaze is different, however, even if the visual system is almost as strongly affected by the use of traditional codes. Photographers such as Balbus, Le Secq, Marville produced images of modern Paris from the street, favouring long perspectives or meticulous descriptions of isolated buildings, searching for the meanings of the characters and the masses of the buildings (Rice 1997). The Bisson brothers focussed their lens on the spires of Notre Dame, conjuring up the emotions of Paris “from a bird’s-eye view” in the pages of Victor Hugo (Hugo 1972). Their images, however, still appear highly traditional if compared to those achieved by Nadar from air balloons. Nadar sensed the great potential of this discovery and devoted himself to a series of systematic aerial “reportages” which formed a revolutionary survey of Paris and its territory. He proposed a scientific survey, useful for catastral or strategic purposes. The images, conceived to form a surprising palimpsest, provide documentary evidence of every aspect of the natural conformation and of the built-up environment, the situation of the fringes, the road net-

work, the spreading and intensification of buildings, the establishment of neighbourhoods and monumental areas. Nadar's work takes on the significance of a very useful survey for scientific purposes, of documentation but also of identification of the urban face.

In Haussman's Paris, in the city-exhibition (Hamon 1995: 10), the dynamics of the flows is dominant and plays a decisive role in the process of changing the town image. The railway stations form the extraordinary projections of a mechanised network which integrates territory and city. The station appears as a radically new place, a flow organisation pole and city "gate", a true place in an architectural and monumental sense. Gustave Caillebotte, in his research dedicated to the Gare St. Lazare in the Europe quarter (Caillebotte 1994: 140-145), viewed the station from above, putting in the foreground the great metal bridge which overhangs the tracks and which has the function of connecting six important routes: true city "exchange point" and impressive monument. Caillebotte was attracted by the metal structure of the bridge, which became the fundamental subject-matter of his representations, not only as an extraordinary construction and a symbol of modernisation, but also as a visual device through which the underlying station could be observed. In this case the construction is both instrument of vision and object of the vision.

Claude Monet instead chose to represent the same station from the inside, placing himself at platform level (Wilson-Bareau 1998: 103-130). The daily activities, the movement of the locomotives, the architecture of the station and the atmospheric aspects are directly correlated. The significance of the introduction of the machine into the town space takes on value in relation to the changes in the described environment. In Monet's studies, the metal covering of the hangars is shown to full advantage through an accentuated perspective effect. The upturned V of the pitched roof has a function of "parergon", like the X motif of the trestle of the metal bridge in Caillebotte's pictures. It is a question of visual representations which serve to fix the dynamic components of the represented space (Dubbini 1994: 171-172). It was, however, the architecture of Haussmann's Paris which provided these devices: it was the very architecture of the modern metropolis which defined the underlying system of a method of representation.

The description of the architectural structures as formal and material expression of the processes of organising the physical space is accompanied by the identification of an environmental quality which is something more than a meteorological specification of the phenomena and of the conditions of a landscape subjected to intense changes. This appears in Monet and shortly afterwards even more markedly in the pictures of Norbert Goeneutte, where the objects are placed in a space invaded by glimmers, flashes, vapours, space subjected to “thermodynamic” effects, which are themselves the consequence of the processes of mechanisation and industrialisation that affect the territory and the large city.

The stations rise up as immense exchangers of flows, just as the Halles by Victor Baltard (Lemoine 1980) occupied the “heart of Paris” and, with their skeletal structures of metal and glass, offered themselves up as devices of rationalisation of trade and exhibition of merchandise. The “Louvre of the people” Napoleon III defined them, referring to their dual nature as exhibition place, which they show best advantage and for the consumption of merchandise. The roofs and metal columns, as in the immense, aerial palaces of the universal Exhibitions, indicate a construction method, the consequence of which were quickly put into practice. Structure and transparency and lightweight materials mark, distribute, and give perspective more than any masonry structure; it could be said that they define the space in essential, abstract yet perfectly recognisable figures with a strong graphic expressiveness. The new large constructions occupy places and define nodal points. They are placed inside a traffic and exchange network creating analogies between functions and images, between the modes of existence and exploitation of the space. As Siegfried Giedion pointed out: “concealed behind facades, the basis of our present existence is taking shape... Fields overlap: walls no longer rigidly define streets. The street has been transformed into a stream of movement. Rail lines and trains, together with the railroad station, form a single whole... We are beginning to transform the surface of the earth. We thrust beneath, above, and over the surface... the point is reached where building falls in line with the general life process” (Giedion 1995: 87, 90-93). Movement and new building techniques form part of a new integrated system which changes the forms of existence.

The boulevard is the basic element of this system. It is the place of metropolitan life and display the line of movement. Its functio-

nal ambiguity is in itself a sign of a many-sided role, of a connection between dynamic and representative systems. The fluid, dynamic state of the boulevard was praised by Baudelaire. The boulevard is the line where the crowd thickens like an “immense réservoir d’électricité” (Baudelaire 1951: 881). Marshall Berman wished to underline: “it is crucial to note Baudelaire’s use of fluidity (‘floating existences’) and gaseousness (‘envelops and soaks us like an atmosphere’) as symbols for the distinctive quality of modern life. Fluidity and vaporousness will become primary qualities in the self-consciously modernist painting, architecture and design, music and literature, that will emerge at the end of the nineteenth century” (Berman 1982: 145). The large, looming, residential buildings of Haussmann’s Paris line the boulevards, framed in a partial view or observed from the “étoiles”, in the points where several streets converge or branch off – as happens – in the impressionist paintings. The network of boulevards defines the image of a dynamic, transparent, modern and spectacular city, where the crowd can show itself and identify itself with the modern processes of transformation.

The changes are fixed through faster, more sensitive and sometimes fleeting visual procedures. In the boulevards painted by Camille Pissarro, certain characters, essential lines and patches of colour are isolated. Realism becomes more abstract, resulting in a dynamism of the image which is fruit of the blending together of fragments recomposed at a glance, lacking in a unitary perception. The process of fragmentation of the image becomes increasingly stronger in Robert Delaunay’s visions of the townscape (Rosenthal 1998). In his studies on Paris, Delaunay tried to identify the characters and the structures of a architectural space, sometimes starting from photographic documentary material or critically taking up the clichés of more commercial images. His research concentrated on the areas around the Eiffel tower and on the actual monument-symbol, a projection which dominated the city and which, with its dynamic metal structure, was the image of the ultimate technological development. The tower appears as a monument distinguished by the dynamic images of the surroundings, through an increasingly more abstract and elaborated visual recomposition. The link with Braque and Picasso’s studies is obvious. Delaunay’s city is formed from a variety of viewpoints within a spatial structure, where the contiguity of views is accomplished through a new con-

ception of perceptive times. In the *Fenêtres* (Windows) series, the concept of “simultaneous contrast” is even clearer, in a mirroring between the place of observation and the perceived object.

Reality and abstraction form the poles of a system of representation which attempts to go beyond pure description. The gaze goes towards a system of representation of the whole, beyond the traditional figurative schemes, beyond any principle of recognisability. The process appears evident in the methods of defining the images of the landscape and of nature in general. The great change was introduced by Cézanne, especially in his studies on the landscapes of southern France. Space and objects define a new level of reality, as can be seen in the famous picture *La montagne Sainte-Victoire au grand pin* (1885-1887). Here the pine has the function of element of comparison, of framework, but also of announcing the landscape theme in an almost classical way, as in the paintings by Poussin or Claude Lorrain. The optical laws, however, are completely changed, as are the conventions of the representative system. In this flat, stable work, the railway viaduct (ambiguously represented as an old aqueduct) forms a horizontal median line opposing the verticality of the pine, as in a system of cartesian axes. A succession of near and far planes are established which are, however, lacking in any bond normally established by true perspective. The objects are placed on an extended surface, like an unrolled plan or blueprint. There is a flattening that makes one think of old topographical representations without perspective (and therefore without a defined point of observation), which also alludes to certain effects of “flattening” obtained by the photographic lens or to the flat verticality of oriental landscapes. We can see an orderly, solid, non-perspective vision, based on a new way of representing the landscape, where the variety of viewpoints is sought (Impressionisme 1985: 336-337).

An elaborate process of abstraction of the image is accomplished in Signac's landscapes through a “pointilliste” technique. A total abstraction of forms and colours is reached in the painting *Dune*, by Piet Mondrian, c. 1910. Only a few prevailing structures, vibrant colour, dynamic effects can be discerned in the painted coastal landscape. In *Railway in Murnau*, by Kandinskij, there is a strong deformation of the characters and an accentuation of the contrasts. In the famous painting by Boccioni, *Visioni simultanee*, the townscape is the result of a visual vortex in which multi-di-

rectional viewpoints merge. The townscape is greatly changed, deformed, increasingly subjected to dynamic, dilating or flattening processes through perceptive effects, processes of “collage”, “cartesian” or “cubist” optics.

Accentuation of perceptive speed is taken as correlated to the increasingly intense development of the networks of town flows and communications. It is the multi-directional, mechanised city prefigured by the futurists, crossed over by horizontal and vertical traffic lines which connect to airport facilities, funiculars, platforms, lifts or elevators, as seen in the drawings of Antonio Sant’ Elia. It is the city which grows and develops in the three dimensions and where the reduced time of exchanges, of communications is absolutely dominant, the city-clock is intense, geometrical, illuminated, transparent (Hulten 1986). The city of dynamic processes can only be perceived through a rapid, detached aerial view. It is the city-landscape which appears in the aero-painting of the futurists. “In flight the landscape moves” – said Crali – “it changes with time, it changes physiognomy and even its anatomy... flight only stimulates the space-time relationship, which is the constant of the human universe” (Crali 1996: 45-46). These are the reasonings which led Le Corbusier in *Aircraft* (Le Corbusier 1935) to prefer the aerial view and which would lead his pilot friend and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry to extol a true poetics of the landscape observed from the plane. For Le Corbusier, the “view from above” is a theoretical notion and a constructive method to study the image of the modern city. As Alan Colquhoun observed, “the design of industrial order left on the earth, fragmentary and alienating when looking at it from the ground, can become significant if observed from a sufficient height... and it is not surprising that Le Corbusier talks so much about aerial views of buildings” (Colquhoun 1989: 157). The moral implications are obvious, but it is a question of a modality which the actual modifications of the habitat have brought to the attention.

It is the American city in particular that brought about a process of modernisation which consisted of innovation and extension of the transportation system, of development of the road network and of the skyscrapers. The American city radically developed the mechanisms already present in European cities. The metropolitan railway bursting into the residential areas was more than anything the sign of the new great transformation.

Photographs of the late nineteenth century which document the expansion of Lower Manhattan in New York, show the rails of the overhead railway winding through the streets in front of the windows of the houses (Black 1976). In the port area, the masts of ships are almost reminiscent of a tranquil Dutch landscape, but the brutal presence of the railway announces the significance of the transformations which the city was undergoing. The machine which had crossed over extensive territories, which had changed the American "garden", now shook the buildings of the metropolis (Marx 1987).

What strikes most are the aerial views in the heart of the city: views from the means of transport, with its continuous flow of images, or from skyscrapers, a type of architecture which deeply changed the relationship between ground and construction, which changed the skyline and the actual perception of the city (Damisch 1996). The skyscraper now defined the new city outline, opposing a horizontality which the new regime of land development had by then made impossible. The Flatiron Building, one of the most surprising New York constructions, rose like a huge ship's bows on the corner of Broadway and Fifth Avenue, symbol of the fast building process which involved the whole city. With its aris it became a sort of watershed or divide for those directed towards the business centre of the city and vice versa, as the advanced bows of building speculation reaching downtown, with an indicative value of future transformations (Tafuri 1973: 415-550). In a photograph by Edward Steichen from 1904 (Stieglitz 1904), the skyscraper is strikingly shown thanks to soft-focussing and *chiaroscuro* effects. The building, in a variable and progressive definition, from the top downwards, appears as a grey silhouette, but the scanning and the design of the vertical floors is clear at the base. The street scene is distinguished by a marked contrast of shade and reflected lights on the wet asphalt. The outline of the carriages and horses, the lamp-light, the bare trees contribute to creating an atmosphere like that of an impressionist painting. The contrast between a "futuristic" building, with an entirely metal internal structure, and forms of transport which by then belonged to the past, is expressive.

The famous picture of Alfred Stieglitz, *Old and New New York*, 1910, became emblematic of two contrasting situations: the low buildings of the old city and the relentless advance of the new vertical city. The enormous skeletal mass of a skyscraper being built



dominates a frontage of old nineteenth-century houses with mansard roofs and crowned by classic cornices (Robinson-Herschman 1987).

The principle of panorama reappeared, even though with a highly different meaning, in the collection of pictures of the city by Hugh Ferriss, published in *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*, 1928 (Ferriss 1986). The book starts with a misty panorama of New York observed from a terrace; place which took on the same function as the platform of the nineteenth-century panorama. In this case, however, the metropolis seems to be an assembly of crystalline shapes. The principle of the artificiality as well as the naturalness of the townscape is confirmed. The terrace opens out towards an expanse of buildings which appear in a *chiaroscuro* contrast, like in a theatre backdrop. The presence of a symbolic painter's easel is eloquent. The terrace was the chosen place from which a modern city, looking like a work of art, could be observed. The elaborate road network breaks up the skyscrapers, which appear like pure, regular crystals. These images suggest the analogy between mineral and architectural forms. They reveal to the gaze a planned world with fascinating, surprising shapes. The city of Ferriss is close to the oniric landscapes of Grandville or the architectural fantasies of Taut and Scheerbart.

The same views were developed in dramatic and more strongly expressive forms in cinema images. In its more aggressive, radical form, *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang is the strongest elaboration of the image of the modernist city (Neumann 1996). The conjuring up of archaic and futurist architectures creates a strong sense of bewilderment, leads to the perception of a disturbing, distressing historical dialectic. In the virtual city recreated by Erich Kettelhut, enormous architectural agglomerates crowd together with pyramidal skyscrapers, they collect around the huge Tower of Babel or form the background to a super high tower building on top of which there is the platform of an airport. No less disturbing and spectacular is the city organisation which appears in *Just Imagine*, 1930, by David Butler. The story unfolds in a totally mechanised New York of the future, organised in stratified levels of traffic, and equipped with futuristic communications systems. A development of the futuristic themes of the vertical city can be distinguished, as well as the interpretation of the most advanced architectural studies. In Butler's imaginary world, the images of Ferriss merge with

and permeate those of the more real skyscraper bridges designed in those same years by Raymond Hood.

There is no doubt, however, that the imagined city takes on similar shapes to those of the real city and raises the same questions regarding its future development, the consequences which concern environmental transformation and lifestyles. The presence of the fully glazed skyscraper often has an ambiguous virtue not only in the transparency but especially in the mirroring, and as far as verticality is concerned, in its being both construction and sign. This contradictory state and expressive force is emphasised by John Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer* (Dos Passos 1925: 351), in the significance of the telescopic architecture of Woolworth's. The glittering outline of the enormous skyscraper, with its illuminated or reflecting windows, dominates the landscape and seems to follow the observer everywhere, stretching out or shortening, depending on the position and viewpoint, but always remaining an inescapable presence. Woolworth's became the emblem of "the city of scrambled alphabets, ...the city of gilt letter signs", a city of many languages, whose image is defined by the outlines and by its most significant buildings.

The new realism of the image reveals the mechanisms of developing an original language, where the studies of European pioneers and themes that are typical of American experience meet. The union of different spheres – of experiences which involve photography, painting, cinema, architecture, literature – occurs within thematic fields, which highlight the controversial aspects of city and territorial development. In the photographs by Berenice Abbott or by Walker Evans, great engineering works, highways, metal bridges, gas stations, the objects which mark the crucial points of the townscape are documented. What is striking is the totally unusual simplicity, essentiality and character of the new utilitarian buildings, which re-establish in the most direct way the image of the transformations which had completely changed the environment and the cities. The very same objects haunt the pictures of Edward Hopper – such as *Manhattan Bridge Loop*, 1928 or *The City*, 1927, where isolated, heterogeneous buildings appear in the heart of an anonymous city, where human presence is strangely confined in an almost metaphysical aura. In this case the more daily aspects of the modernist city are perceived in relation to the transformations of the space and to their influence on lifestyles.

Industrial buildings, smoke-stacks and water tanks are the mysterious central figures of Charles Demuth's paintings in the early thirties. The wheat silos dominate in the works of Ralston Crawford, in subtle analogy with the photographs of the granaries published by Erich Mendelsohn in *Amerika* (1925-1928) – work which collects together townscapes and views of buildings of New York, Chicago, Detroit, giving the portrait of a dynamic world in rapid transformation, a world of unusual, fascinating shapes (Robinson-Herschmann 1987: 97).

Interest seemed to be directed in particular to the overpowering smartness of what was new, even if interest in history was still keen, as can be seen in the images of Berenice Abbot and Walker Evans, Paul Strand and many others. They are small obsolete houses in a suburbs, old villas in New England or a small gothic church suffocated by skyscrapers. The eye looks for a contrast with a previous world, comparing the contemporary shapes with those that remain of a city which no longer appears fashionable and to which it is difficult to give an identity. The representation of the great city, its buildings, therefore swung between a radically new imaginary state created by the inventions of artists, architects, scenery painters, and a vision which still set off past and present. It is that very contrast, however, which becomes even more significant in the panorama of the American city. The "old" building, especially if inserted in the "sea" of new buildings, is exciting in that it represents the noble background of the city, it identifies the roots of its historical development. It is even more striking if only a partial detail of it appears in a cut-off image, a residual part of a whole. In a certain sense it is presented as an "iconic" ruin of all that is modern. It should be taken into account that the American city has no "obvious" past; the past is evoked by its "historicist" buildings and what therefore is stimulating is the "feeling of the past", to use an expression which sends us back to the complex ambiguity of Henry James's interpretations. Emotion arises from perception of the sense of history and not of history in itself.

The images guide us, with a critical eye to interpret the transformations which have affected the places, but which also presuppose our capacity to look at landscapes or townscapes with an awareness that is adequate to the complexity of which they are the materialisation. The images represent the transformations of history, as design and memory, mirror of the places in which our ex-

perience is registered. The future seems to have appeared instantaneously, like the lightening note in one of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's notebooks: "She climbed a network of steel, concrete and glass, walked under a high echoing dome and came out into New York" (Fitzgerald 1978: 45).

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