Mobile lives, screens and vision (II)

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Auteur(s) (texte brut)

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Chapô

Big data and the proliferation of screens may change perceptions of what the world is and the way we move through it. Could a 'living city' exist beyond metaphor?

Présentation longue

In the last few years there has been a profusion of analyses about the advent of an 'urban age'. Based on a series of demographic, economic and environmental indicators, cities are being described as key sites and players for addressing some of the challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century such as security, health, inequality and climate change. Compared to this mass of academic production based largely on quantitative projections, relatively little effort has been made to examine possible *qualitative* changes in the cities of the future. Social scientists are beginning to fill this gap by discussing, for example, how the profusion of big data may change perceptions of what the world is and the implications this may have for everyday patterns of mobility.

Sentient cities

Casting aside the epochalist hype surrounding new information and communication technologies, it seems clear by now that new practices of organizing, analysing, storing, displaying and communicating information are beginning to shape cities in new ways. This increasingly involves thinking about cities as more than mere assemblages of infrastructures channelling flows to beginning to acknowledge some sort of sentient capacity, although what this sentient capacity may entail is not yet quite clear.

Central to this process is the proliferation of data-rich materials. Current technological developments presage a future in which the surfaces of streets, parks, vehicles, offices, and homes become overlaid with data. Sensors embedded everywhere would be sending, receiving and *representing* streams of data making it no longer possible to think of surfaces merely as inert backgrounds. Urban infrastructures would be clothed in a glowing skin of data and spring to life as a sort of living canvas for the display of visual indexes of change in the world.

While this kind of organic language may sometimes be used metaphorically to convey the magic-like nature of augmented environments, artists, architects and social scientists are beginning to speculate about the possibility that cities may indeed take new forms of vitality emerging from computational objects and organic beings tied to each other in manifold ways.

Cities would by no means be sentient or alive in a naturalistic or human way but would display different degrees and forms of awareness to movement. The unfolding landscape would not just provide a frame in which bodies move but would itself be responsive to and altered by movement, rendering people sensitive to passing worlds and provoking new activities and understandings. Some of these processes are already underway or being prefigured in laboratories, but the future capacities to intensify the experience of place may well exceed the limits of our imagination.

We can only begin to speculate how this morphological plasticity and representational capacity of urban environments may change perceptions of what the world is. Nigel Thrift, for example, has suggested the possibility that these processes could prompt a reassessment of everyday understandings of the social as the realm of inter-subjective relations to include human to non-human interactions in the way that animist cultures do. This could be understood as a new phase in the evolution of 'ideas of nature' involving the blurring or even disappearance of centuries-old distinctions between 'nature' and 'culture'.

These processes may also involve an intensification of processes of individuation relying not so much on a deepening of the inner self but on an expansion of possibilities in the technologically-mediated outer world to construct increasingly provisional personal profiles through means of self-description. Every email, tweet, website update, online search, every bit of digital data about oneself would not just be leaving traces about one's history and giving scope for a more fluid or mobile identity, but would also be shaping the emotional repertoire through which individuals encounter, define and respond to

others and the world. As Elliott and Urry have argued, 'digitized information and communication systems are assuming a structuring nature in themselves by shaping scripts of selfhood, textures of emotion and everyday routines'. Involved in these individuation processes will be the development of remote control doubles (holograms) as a form of emulated co-presence.</p><p>New urban landscapes may also provoke new understandings of what is proximate and distant. Ubiquitous screens would provide permanent and intimate access to daily life in far-away places diluting or at least redefining established notions of 'here' and 'there', 'exotic' and 'familiar', perhaps even extending and deepening compassion for 'distant' others.</p><p>Mobile lives, screens and vision (I)</p>

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