

HOW TO GO BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE ACADEMY AND RETURN?

Piotr Jakub Fereński

The University of Wrocław, Poland
piotr.fereński@uwr.edu.pl

The city as one of the most important phenomena of the modern globalized world is the subject of investigations of various scientific disciplines. It is important phenomena for studies on the history of civilization, on urbanization processes, on the development of architecture, on the relationships between spatial planning and religious and political ideas, for studies on social and economic changes, for studies on urban ways of life, studies on the history of art, as well as critique of contemporary art. There are also elementary analyzes of a city in the field of literary studies, sound studies, performance studies, psychology (the perception of space and its properties), pedagogy, political science (interested in direct democracy or even urban movements). The issues of optimization of models of the city's functioning are important for departments oriented on transport and infrastructure (water, gas etc.), as well as underground construction (car parks, garages, tunnels, metro). Informatics dealing with the process of creation of new communication technologies is involved in the design of "smart city". The faculties of biology or environmental protection conduct research and didactic activities in the field of "applied ecology" – relations that occurring between the human environment and nature. Today technological innovation and creative power of culture are the key to the development of the city. However, what does it mean for the representatives of humanities? What can they bring to it? The city space then appears as a heterogeneous place, full of constant tensions, collisions, circulation of meanings, values, representations, as well as the field of great social experiments. I perceive the human practices and creations as something that is a subject to constant transformation and that constantly requires new readings. In my search, I often go beyond the walls of the academy and try to sense the character of the city and experience its space with all my senses. I keenly observe the ways of life of the inhabitants, their daily practices. I listen to what they say and read what they manifest on the walls of buildings. This peculiar wandering around the city is aimed at capturing what is visible, but also at reaching what remains inaccessible to us at first glance. It is a collection of notes, it is an attempt at visual and audio recording of the surrounding world, which I then try to structure and interpret. However, as experts, we academics need to "go out" to the city also in a different way – we must take the floor in public debates and have an influence on the decisions of various municipal institutions, have an impact on local politics. There is a discussion about the role of the university in shaping urban space and life in the city.

Keywords: visual studies of urban culture, academy, university, scientific disciplines, culture, city, urban space, daily practices, flaneur, ocularcentrism, conceptual rationalism, politics.

КАК ВЫЙТИ ЗА СТЕНЫ АКАДЕМИИ И ВЕРНУТЬСЯ?

П. Я. Ференски

Вроцлавский университет, Польша
piotr.ferenski@uwr.edu.pl

Город как одно из важнейших явлений современного глобализированного мира является предметом исследования различных научных дисциплин. Это важный феномен для изучения истории цивилизации, процессов урбанизации, развития архитектуры, взаимоотношений между пространственным планированием и религиозными и политическими идеями, для исследования социальных и экономических изменений, городского образа жизни, истории искусства, а также для критики современного искусства. Элементарный анализ города присутствует также в области литературоведения, исследований звука и перформанса, психологии (восприятие пространства и его свойств), педагогики, политологии (с интересом к теме прямой демократии или же городских движений). Вопросы оптимизации моделей функционирования города важны для департаментов, ориентированных на транспорт и инфраструктуру (водоснабжение, газ и т. д.), а также подземное строительство (автостоянки, гаражи, тоннели, метро). В проектировании «умного города» участвуют и информатика, занимающаяся процессом создания новых коммуникационных технологий, и факультеты биологии или охраны окружающей среды, которые ведут исследовательскую и дидактическую деятельность в области «прикладной экологии» – отношений, возникающих между средой, непосредственно окружающей человека, и природой. Сегодня технологические инновации и творческая сила культуры являются ключом к развитию города. Однако что это значит для представителей гуманитарных наук? Какую пользу они могут принести в этой области? Городское пространство может быть показано ими как неоднородное место, полное постоянной напряжённости, столкновений, круговорота значений, ценностей, представлений, а также как область значительных социальных экспериментов. Я воспринимаю человеческие практики и человеческое творчество как то, что постоянно подвергается трансформации и постоянно требует новых прочтений. В своих поисках я часто выхожу за стены Академии и пытаюсь ощутить характер города, ощутить его пространство всеми своими чувствами. Я непосредственно наблюдаю образ жизни жителей, их повседневные практики. Я слушаю, что они говорят, и читаю, что они выражают на стенах домов. Это своеобразное блуждание по городу имеет целью запечатлеть то, что видно, а также то, что остаётся для нас на первый взгляд недоступным. Это собра-

ние заметок, попытка визуальной и аудиозаписи окружающего мира, которые я затем пытаюсь структурировать и интерпретировать. Однако нам, академикам, нужно как экспертам «выходить» в город и по-другому – мы должны выступать в общественных дебатах и влиять на решения различных муниципальных учреждений, оказывать влияние на местную политику. Такова и дискуссия о роли университета в формировании городского пространства и жизни в городе.

Ключевые слова: визуальные исследования городской культуры, академия, университет, научные дисциплины, культура, город, городское пространство, повседневные практики, фланёр, окуляроцентризм, концептуальный рационализм, политика.

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I wish to share a few reflections on the specific situation in which representatives of the humanities and social studies dealing with research on the city find themselves. I am not concerned, however, with the position within the academic structure as much as with the moment when they leave the walls of a higher education institution to do social or cultural analysis of particular urban phenomena, at the same time including complex global and local relations. Going about different areas and encountering various problems of contemporary urban centres, not only do they deal with theories and concepts (which they confront with the most broadly defined reality), but also with power and economy relations, that is with the activities of the public administration units, with the sphere of politics and work of diverse groups with different goals and interests. At the same time, one has to remember that the concept of the university or the institution that the researcher represents, at least since the times of Wilhelm von Humboldt, is based not only on the pursuit of truth which relies on liberty and freedom of thought, but also on educational and cultural project which assumes the emancipation of the representatives of more and more broad circles of society. Since ancient Greece, the academy impacted the polis, the living environment of citizens, forms of interpersonal communication and the structure of the community space. It is difficult to find anyone who would question the fact that the university remains one of the main agents of development of culture and civilization. Nowadays, the academy and city unite in what can be described as the laboratory of the future. Representatives of individual disciplines together with various other specialists actively transform and organise the common space. The relationships between scientific knowledge and

phenomena in the field of urban culture are being redefined. The transformation of the role of the academy in the processes of city formation results from the need to develop new ideas concerning the human and natural environment. Creative practices and activities connected with the performative aspect of the residents' identity are also taking on new forms. Still, I wonder what researchers bring to the city, what kind of luggage they carry (or what they are burdened with), how they perceive objects and their inherent meanings, how they place themselves in relation to human needs and actions, or in relation to material and spiritual results of these actions.

As we know, the city, or – more broadly speaking – urbanised space, is the subject of theoretical and empirical studies of many different scientific disciplines. In case of each one of them we are dealing with the production of a different area of knowledge, which results from differences in respect to adopted cognitive perspectives and methodological assumptions, as well as from divisions that are inherent to the reality itself. As I wrote in my book *Materie kultury*, the city constitutes the subject of studies on the history of civilization, on the development of architecture and art, on the relations between space and religious and political ideas, on social and economic transformations, on everyday styles or ways of life, on contemporary artistic phenomena, activism, etc. Nowadays we speak about philosophy of the city, sociology of the city, anthropology of cities, the humanistic geography. This is accompanied by aspect-based analyses of urban phenomena in the field of literature studies, performance studies, psychology (perception of space and its properties), political science [Fereński 2018, 53].

Beyond the humanities and social sciences, it is important to consider the research carried out at technical universities. Researchers are looking for models to optimise the functioning of the city. Innovative solutions are developed not only by architects, urban planners or road designers, but also by employees of institutions focused on transport and infrastructure. They design network architecture, i.e. sewage systems, water and gas supply elements, as well as underground structures, such as car parks, pedestrian crossings, subways and railway tunnels. ICT, dealing with the creation of new communication solutions, increasingly contributes to the establishment of so-called smart cities. The aim is to increase efficiency of urban infrastructure through the introduction of interactive connections (“Internet of Things”). Ultimately, this is to serve a better use of human potential, capital and creativity and to raise civic awareness related both to the political sphere and the concepts of sustainable development, and rational management of natural resources.

Departments of biology and environmental protection studies conduct research and educational activities in the field of “applied ecology”. They address the processes occurring between the human environment and nature. The constant expansion of cities and the resulting energy demand contribute, among other things, to global warming. According to the latest prognoses, over the next three decades the average temperature on earth will increase by at least one degree. The main cause of greenhouse gas emissions is the burning of fossil fuels, i.e. oil and coal. The increase in their level is connected not only with the change in the atmospheric composition, but also (as a result) with the emergence of climate phenomena beyond the human influence or control. Energy derived from fossil fuels is mainly used to satisfy the ever-growing needs of the inhabitants of growing cities – i.e. driving their cars, maintaining their buildings and flats. Natural scientists working with animals and plants also consider the city an important field of observation. Obviously, this is not about ZOO institutions (which are otherwise interesting in terms of the history of architecture and urban planning), but about insects (including bees, now being moved to cities, as well as ticks threatening human and animal lives, intruders such as mosquitoes, blackflies, ladybirds, ants), birds (pigeons, nightingales and golden orioles), foxes, martens, wild boars, and finally domestic (also stray) animals. Here, however, we return to the fields related to cultural research, sociology and philosophy, such as animal studies or the ideas of analyses proposed within actor-network theory [Fereński 2018, 55]. In view of this multitude of approaches, it may seem legitimate to ask the fundamental question as to whether there exists a single scientific definition of what a city is, and – if not – whether it is possible to form one. In an attempt to create such a definition, Deyan Sudjic rightly points out that it is “a word used to describe almost everything. A tiny settlement in the mid-West, with fewer than 10,000 people, and nothing more than a sheriff to represent civic authority, is called a city. So is Tokyo, with a population approaching 40 million, an urban structure based on multiple electoral districts, a parliamentary chamber, a governor, a prefectural government employing 250,000 people and a multi-billion-dollar budget. If anywhere can be defined as a city, then the definition runs the risk of meaning nothing” [Sudjic 2017, 9]. Sudjic believes that a city is created by its inhabitants, “within the bounds of the possibilities that it can offer them: it has a distinctive identity that makes it much more than an agglomeration of buildings” [Ibid.]. In his opinion, at present, the most successful cities are those immersed in a creative cultural environment. Certainly, technological innovation and creative power

of culture are the key to the development of the city, but what does it mean for the representatives of humanities and social sciences? How do they see a city? How do they read it? What can they bring to it? I myself try to think of a city as a “blurred genre” or a formation composed of many overlapping and permeating layers. The city space then appears as a heterogeneous place, full of constant tensions, collisions, circulation of meanings, values, representations, as well as the field of great social experiments. I perceive the human practices and creations as something that is subject to constant transformation and that constantly requires new readings. I question the causative factors of these permanent transformations with constant suspicion and distance from the successive answers. In my search, I often go beyond the walls of the academy. I try to sense the character of the city and experience its space with all my senses. I keenly observe the ways of life of the inhabitants, their daily practices. I listen to what they say and read what they manifest on the walls of buildings. This peculiar wandering around the city is aimed at capturing what is visible, but also at reaching what remains inaccessible to us at first glance. It is a collection of notes, it is an attempt at visual and audio recording of the surrounding world, which I then try to structure and interpret. Of course, what comes to mind is the figure of the flâneur appearing in the works of Walter Benjamin and George Simmel as a symbol of the modern experience of the city. The flâneur is certainly not only a patron saint of artists and writers, but also of scholars. Nevertheless, I see my wandering around the city, both physically and metaphorically, in a slightly different way than what can be read about the flâneur from Benjamin’s notes in his *Arcades Project*. In fact, one can find there very different observations on the way in which he functions. The German cultural theoretician notes that the promised land of the flâneur is the “landscape built of sheer life” [Benjamin 1999, 417]. He is to go about the city in an anamnestic intoxication, feeding on what he sees. At the same time, he assimilates knowledge “as something experienced and lived through” [Ibid.]. The fundamental thing for him is the “colportage phenomenon of space” [Ibid., 418]. It is difficult to say whether one of the basic elements distinguishing a situation in which contemporary city researchers who spend time outside their offices find themselves is contact with something or someone that they consider to be inferior to themselves. The flâneur is also supposed to be an insightful “observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the occult science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers” [Ibid., 427]. Importantly, for Benjamin, the idleness of the flâneur is at the same time a manifestation against the

division of labour. "God has the Creation behind him; he rests from it. It is this God of the seventh day that the bourgeois has taken as the model for his idleness. In flânerie, he has the omnipresence of God; in gambling, the omnipotence; and in study, it is God's omniscience that is his" [Ibid., 805]. The author of the *Arcades Project* believes that it is crucial to strive to "show how deeply idleness is marked by features of the capitalist economic order in which it flourishes". On the other hand, however, "idleness, in the bourgeois society that knows no leisure, is a precondition of artistic production. And, often, idleness is the very thing which stamps that production with the traits that make its relation to the economic production process so drastic" [Ibid., 805]. "The student «never stops learning»; the gambler «never has enough»; for the flâneur, «there is always something more to see»" [Ibid., 806]. In the notes we find an extract on three aspects of flânerie, represented in literature by Balzac, Poe and Engels: the illusionistic, psychological and economic. The untranslatable literature of flânerie is supposed to be Paris studied street by street and house by house. Regardless of whether the figure described by Benjamin avoids or emphasizes the actuality, his interaction with the city seems to boil down to aesthetic contemplation of the landscape, to ocularcentrism (the theory of vision and its status in the culture of modernity [see: Jay 1993]) rooted in European culture at least since the Enlightenment. In this context, the view dominates over experiencing or the position of involvement (the issue of the primacy of sight in visual anthropology dealing with the interpretation of the visual aspects of culture should be considered separately). In other words, the image of urbanity is developed from a distance, which finds its symbolic representation in watching exhibitions or peeping at people. On the other hand, Benjamin says that the promised land of the flâneur is a landscape built on sheer life and that for him there is always something more to see. I do not know if this was the case in the winter of 1926, when the German scholar went to Moscow for two months, but the notes contained in his *Moscow Diary* certainly reveal an interesting portrait of the Russian capital during the NEP period. Perhaps the form of a very personal and intimate diary determines why Benjamin does not include any theoretical concepts in the narrative, but instead simply looks at the everyday life of the city. He wanders around the streets observing practices in the field of commerce, gastronomy, but also the cinemas and theatres. Is his perspective that of the flâneur? Idleness may point to it, it is after all a prerequisite for artistic production, but what about omniscience?

We return here, of course, to the question of what the researcher brings to the city. Drawing on my numerous experiences, I am inclined to argue the truism that the rationalism founded in the Enlightenment period is more present in science than we tend to think. Our practices are deeply rooted in it, which is not always evident enough. “Zurück zu Kant”. The thinker associated with Königsberg, a city he would practically never leave, decided to reformulate his understanding of the cognitive value of concepts and categories so that the opposition between rationalism and empiricism could be eliminated by means of synthetic a priori judgements. The point was that judgements should remain unconditionally true, at the same time bringing new knowledge about the world. As we remember, according to Kant, they can be only based on what he considered to be irreducible elements of our impressions – on “experiencing” time and space. This was to be complemented by categories allowing for a conceptual approach to objects, i.e. substances and causes. According to Kant, all phenomena are mediated by the senses and captured in the forms indicated above. What stays beyond them – the thing-in-itself – for us remains unknowable. In effect, synthetic judgements transcend the subject and expand knowledge, but their origin or basis is in the mind itself. In other words, it is the theories, concepts and categories that we impose on the observed world that ultimately determine its image. As Kant’s biographer and philosopher Steffen Dietzsch explains, cognition requires two types of representation – on the one hand, intuitions through which objects are given to us, and, on the other hand, the concepts through which we can think of them. “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”, says Kant [Kant 2003, 193–194]. It is important to remember that these inalienable elements of the cognitive process are always brought about by the activity of the subject. However, this subject is specifically (revolutionarily) conceived. Cognition, which is to be considered as objective, must bind the forms of the intellect and the phenomenon. Sensibility “realizes the understanding at the same time as it restricts it” [Ibid., 277]. The sphere of all these constellations and operations taking place in the mind is the space of transcendental subjectivity, which, however, cannot be identified with a particular individual or with some kind of psychological, inner self-consciousness [Dietzsch 2005, 96]. By re-modelling the notion of the “transcendental”, it becomes possible to redefine the scope and limits of the (constructive) power of human subjectivity.

It is difficult to disagree with the claim that our minds have certain universal qualities and that we always – inevitably, of necessity – make

certain assumptions based on them. We are forced to do this, otherwise we would not be able to make any observations. The problem arises when we take the position that if the reality does not correspond to the theories and categories we assume, so much the worse for the reality. Reason is the foundation of knowledge and organizes what is given to our senses, i.e. through perception. It constitutes concepts and categories by means of which science describes the world. As long as we consider that not only do we have something to say about this world (by means of instruments developed on the grounds of reason), but also that the world can tell us something about itself, it is not so bad. However, it does not always work. During my research on the social and cultural aspects of urban space, I have heard more than once that “the area is mistaken, it is wrong”. Nevertheless, like the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer, whom Heidegger attacked in Davos in 1929 for the bourgeois character of the doctrine he presented (it concerned the universality of such notions as freedom and rationality, yet there were also certain political issues in the background [see: Gordon 2010]), one can recognize that culture is a world of symbolic forms, while cognition itself is simply an operation consisting in symbolic perception of phenomena by reason. In this way, the philosopher from Wrocław rejected the interpretation of the object of cognition in the spirit of realism. The subject and the object remain here in one functional relation, they are moments of a specific relationship, which is sometimes called empirical. “An object does not exist in an absolute way, individually or independently of experience and its conditions. There is no being in itself or metaphysical knowledge about being in itself. Cognition, in its development, constitutes its object, undergoes constant change and is constantly re-created. Individual forms of cognition, individual images of the world create different objects that exist only as correlates of these forms of cognition” [Buczyńska 1963, 36].

The dominance of sight associated with the ocularcentrism of European culture, omniscience and cult of concepts resulting from the rationalism of the Enlightenment are to some extent disrupted by concepts proposing to link cultural phenomena with the unconscious or hidden (from this perspective, the suspicious Freud should be considered one of the greatest opponents of rationalism). Of course, such theories do not protect us completely against the “fetishization of categories”, because only to some extent do they stand in opposition to the approach that considers the object to be constituted by the cognitive activity of the subject. The authors of these concepts acknowledge, however, that it is worth analysing not only what is on the surface, but also what remains

hidden in the deeper layers of reality. Lacanian concept of the “real” can be used as an example here. It concerns what is repressed, negated and at the same time remains fundamental; in other words, what every “reality” must suppress in itself. As the French psychoanalyst argues, the world around us is primarily constituted by repression. It disguises “the unrepresentable X, i.e. the traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of the apparent reality” [Fisher 2009, 17]. Another example of this type of concepts is that of Michel Foucault’s observations of total vision seeing everything by power (and knowledge), i.e. the will to control, repress and isolate the subjects produced along the way.

The circle of urban culture researchers opposing “conceptual rationalism” also includes those who, following Marx, find the foundations of spiritual creations in matter. They seek links between economic dependencies and the cultural order. In the case of city-related issues, today’s attention is drawn above all to social inequalities resulting from class divisions. This is particularly important in times when each of us becomes an element / object of urban policies. Starting from the late 1970s, the explorations of researchers such as H. Lefebvre, D. Harvey and M. Castells have initiated a reflection on the role of the market, income disparities, consumption, power relations, conflicts of interest reflected in the political sphere, as well as on the systems, forces and regimes associated with it, the struggle for public space and citizens’ rights, and finally strategies and tactics of resistance.

In both of the above-mentioned positions we may find attempts to step outside the walls of the academy. These attempts are far from aesthetic contemplation of the cityscape. They are not only marked by experiencing and perceiving the surrounding world, but also by the engaged approach. The image of urbanity is not created from a distance, but from up close. It is not just a matter of watching people and describing their behavior by means of categories and concepts, but of interacting with various actors / actants. For this reason, we can speak here of a laboratory of the future, of transforming a common living space, of developing new ideas concerning the social and natural environment. At this point it is worth mentioning one more anti-Kantian tendency in research, whose representatives attempt to look at various objects as existing relatively independently of humans, demonstrating a kind of autonomy, having its own “goals”, producing new meanings / senses or functions. It concerns the characteristics of ontological complexity of the surroundings, providing an opportunity for insight into deeper and less obvious relationships between people, animals, plants,

objects, as well as the components of processes and phenomena taking place in the atmosphere – in our case, primarily between various other objects “inhabiting” urban space. The results of these studies are intended to introduce a correction in the beliefs regarding the relationship between being and consciousness.

By no means am I calling for the complete rejection of concepts and categories, or for the renunciation of ocularcentrism, which I simply consider impossible. I am rather interested in rooting the knowledge in the everyday life of people and objects, i.e. rejecting the primacy of independently existing, symbolic forms of cognition which organise the entire stream of (scientific) experience. It also involves recognising the significance of various unconscious dependencies in their connection with power relations. One cannot content oneself with wandering around and voyeurism; a contemporary approach to urban space is an action, a creation of new ideas and testing them within an ever more complex world of existence.

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