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Camera: Modern City and Photography

There seems to be an inseparable connection between the city and philosophy. This particular mode of theoretical thinking originated in polis – an urban formation of the antiquity. First thinkers were addressing issues relevant to their contemporaries who were also inhabitants of the shared urban space. The foundational role of the city is also visible in many other areas of culture. Photography is no exception here. Not only major inventions in its field have been made with urban environment as a background, but also earliest photographs of human surroundings more often depict towns and cities than rural areas. This paper aims at examining a thesis that an object central to photography – a camera – can serve as a theoretical model for comprehending transformations of the contemporary metropolis.

An introduction of this subject requires three main objectives to be taken on. First, what characteristics does a camera possess that make it a suitable figure for representing a city and in what respects does it work like its prototype. Second, explanation of what makes a modern city modern and how it can be differentiated from past forms of urban arrangements. Third, what is the position of the human being, or how does a citizen converge with the user.

As for the first point, a camera will be rendered in a twofold way: as an object and as a model. In addition to this, an attempt at uncovering the provenance of the very term “camera” will be made, in order to expose its genetic interrelation with the urban sphere. The second task will focus on the differences between the polis and the contemporary metropolis. Characterizing the relation between these two urban formations will rely on the notions of the apparatus, the black box, and the city, as introduced by Vilém Flusser (2000, 2005), as well as on the results developed in the first section of the text. The last part will be devoted to the setting a human being finds himself in both forms of the city, and to identifying in what way his role changes with passing from one to another. The article will close with remarks on possible further development of presented ideas.

Camera – camera – κάμερα

A brief look at history of photography will guide us to the invention of camera obscura, a box with black interior and a hole on one of its sides through which the light comes in to produce an image on the opposite side. This confined space is mirrored in the very meaning of the Latin term camera,

meaning “chamber”. It is worth noting that the term more frequently referred to a private chamber, for example a bedroom, accessible only by its user, rather than a public one, like a library or a throne room. This claim can be further supported and expanded by investigating ancient origin of the Greek term *καμάρα*, meaning a vault, sewer, cellar, or tomb – any room with arched cover. It should be emphasized that the definition of the term involves arched cover. A room having the roof supported by arches was by no means a typical engineering solution for the ancient Greek constructors, who did not use this method for their temples and other representative buildings. The arches were instead applied in places that have not been used for political or cult purposes, belonging mainly to the underground realm of architecture (Levy 2006: 7-12). Furthermore, *καμάρα* could also mean a covered carriage or boat, once again turning us away from the heights of polis, this time towards various means of transport and the state of being “on the move”, as opposed to having a defined place in the political community of citizens.

As much as the notion of *καμάρα* seems to be detached from the ideas that constituted polis, it is close to the idea of a black box and – as it will be argued – also to the idea of a modern city. First, however, the interrelations between the black box and the camera need to be investigated. Flusser inspected this connection through the notion of apparatus (Flusser 2000). An apparatus is straightforwardly defined by Flusser as an arrangement that simulates thinking. This definition can be supplemented by stating that simulating is a computational process. It is an imitation of mental patterns on mechanical or digital scaffolding. Every entity that takes such modus – a computational modus of thinking – as its operating principle can be called an apparatus. There are hence socio-economic formations, industrial complexes, particular enterprises and of course computers, all of which can be called apparatuses. A camera is also an apparatus in its “embryonic form” (2000: 21). Flusser argues that cameras, like all apparatuses, possesses inner programs, whether they are functioning on digital sequences or mechanical principles (2000: 21-28). Such programs allow photographers to perform an input action, which is to choose a scene and press the shutter button, which should subsequently result in a photographic image on the output. Photographers, however, as Flusser points up, do not have knowledge of the process that undergoes in between, nor of the processes that led to creation of cameras and their programs. An apparatus, also when it takes the form of a camera, consists of sets of “programs and metaprograms” that are ultimately indistinguishable (Fuller 2007). On that account Flusser interprets a camera as a black box. The production of images takes a particular form when a black box is applied for such a task, as it allows the injection of information at the input and provides an output result on account of its inner operations. The black box produces technical images that are outcomes of its encoding capabilities. Such images differ from traditional ones in a sense that they do not employ imagination in the process of creation. The origin of this feature is to be found in the fact that the rules of

encoding for black boxes are the product of “applied scientific texts” and consequently so are technical images. Traditional images, on the other hand, “precede texts by millennia” (Flusser 2000: 14).

Keeping in mind of what has been said about apparatuses, it can now be acknowledged that the obscurity of a black box is an inherent feature of each and every instance of an apparatus, camera obscura being perhaps the simplest of them all, having the basic program of bending incoming light to produce a reversed image within.

It would be however insufficient to state that the program resides inside a camera or that it is an operational principle restricted to its internal elements. The execution of a program, in the sense Flusser attributes to it, extends beyond the phase determined by the input and output events to the point where it contains all possible output results of the camera, which is all photographs that can be taken with it. This is because a camera is designed for taking photographs and it makes taking them possible by means of its internal program. Every photograph taken is therefore “a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera” (Flusser 2000: 26). It follows that photographers do not take pictures themselves but only execute the functions of the program. They are described as the “people of the apparatus future” (Flusser 2000: 80), playing with symbols and producing things deprived of value and meaning. The agency of the photographer is therefore put into question and can only be taken into account once he manages to outmanoeuvre the camera's deterministic adjustment, by putting into its program something that was not anticipated.

It seems now legitimate to say that the act of taking a photograph differs significantly from providing an input to a camera. The latter is merely a movement, while the first is indeed a gesture. Furthermore, it can be acknowledged that Flusser's inquiry shed some light on the question, what kind of object can a camera be actually taken for. Along with the exploration of the ancient meaning of the word, these reflections paved a way for comprehending a camera as a model.

Metro-polis Modelled

An essential feature of any model is that it reproduces characteristics of what is being modelled. The reproduction however must differ from replication in a sense that allows the reproduced to reappear in contrasting manner, which is to expose what was previously hidden. This is arguably the case of every scientific model, such as the Bohr model of atom or mathematical models of weather. When it comes to humanities, texts also can be perceived as models of subjects they discuss. The way a camera serves as a model for the modern city has already been hinted at. It can and will reproduce particular features of the city, as long as both – the model and the modelled –

share the common form of an apparatus. Let us once again turn to Flusser for further clarifying of this idea. When a photographer succumbs to apparatus it means that he fails to perform a gesture. Instead, he merely presses a shutter button, thus allowing the apparatus to execute its internal program. A photographer then becomes in fact a part of a broader scheme of things that are designed in order to allow apparatuses to operate. The inspection of the very act of taking a photograph is here required for grasping the essence of apparatuses. They were namely designed as tools, but not as tools in the industrial sense of the word, a means for changing the material fabric. Their purpose is to “change the meaning of the world” (Flusser 2000: 25) and as such, they belong to the post-industrial society that takes advantage on operating on symbols, rather than on material objects. A photograph, being of course a material object itself, does however contain an image, which is a cluster of ideas and symbols relating one to another. To reposition the symbolic elements is to make a photographic gesture. Failing in doing so is to allow them to be repositioned under the rule of a program.

One of the precursors of the photographic gesture is reminded by Walter Benjamin (2005). Eugene Atget was a photographer who took record of the streets of Paris at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What made Atget's photographs stand out in Benjamin's eyes was their ability to escape the intrusiveness of recurring photographic topics and the photographer's eagerness to explore scenes that stayed out of sight or were deemed irrelevant. “Atget almost always passed by the 'great sights and so-called landmarks.' What he did not pass by was a long row of boot lasts; or the Paris courtyards, where from night to morning the handcarts stand in serried ranks; or the tables after people have finished eating and left, the dishes not yet cleared away – as they exist by the hundreds of thousands at the same hour; or the brothel at No. 5, Rue –, whose street number appears, gigantic, at four different places on the building's façade” (Benjamin 2005: 517).

Atget's photographs of the city mark the end of a certain period. They were being taken roughly at the time when Ford introduced the first production line, thus beginning the processes of automation and marking the dawn of the post-industrial society. Atget's body of work holds a record of this transition, which is accurately recognized in Benjamin's text. “Remarkably, however, almost all these pictures are empty. Empty is the Porte d'Arcueil by the fortifications, empty are the triumphal steps, empty are the courtyards, empty, as it should be, is the Place du Tertre. They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant” (Benjamin 2005: 517).

Atget's achievement was possible by the virtue of his skills in rearranging the symbolic imagery of the city. He managed to perform what Flusser calls a photographic practice of freedom

by "forcing the camera to create the unpredictable, the improbable, the informative" (Flusser 2000: 80).

Although briefly discussed, the contours of the apparatus hopefully take at this point clearer form, as they have been inspected both in positive and negative approach. Recapitulating first of the two, Flusser's approximation: an apparatus performs computational operations between the input and the output events, by means of its program, which remains enshrouded to its user. On the other hand, Benjamin's insightful writings on photography provided an example of what it means to evade the deterministic force residing in the program of the apparatus, and convincingly pictured Atget outside of the black box.

We can now go back to the question of the relation between the camera and the city. The connection that interests us the most is not the one concerning just any city, but a modern city. We should then clarify what a modern city is or at least what it is not. The question is however not merely historical, and defining "modern" as belonging to nineteenth, twentieth or twenty-first century would not bring us remarkably closer to accomplishing our task. The vital aspect that should be hereby recognized is that the question concerns cultural presuppositions that regulate certain ways of life. We have already adopted the view that the camera is an embryonic form of the apparatus. Let us refer once again to this figure of thought in order to envisage Greek polis as an embryo of a modern city. The validity of the analogy will not become pronounced until examined with respect to prior elucidations of the notion of *κἀμἀρρ*. We have seen that the *κἀμἀρρ* is an inherent part of the polis, at the same time being detached – symbolically and actually – from the very principles that the polis is constituted upon. The status of *κἀμἀρρ* is therefore inapparent and dualistic in its nature and so is its relation to polis. Some questions arise along with this observation. Is it the case that a somewhat grandiose picture of polis should be held responsible for such a state of affairs? We certainly maintain a sort of mental photograph of the polis. Following the remark that "every photograph is a fetish", made by Derrida (2010: 41), can we be sure we are not fetishizing polis? The remark comes from Derrida's work that is a collection of reflections on Athens – present and bygone – provoked by the set of photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme. The work undertakes death, loss and mourning as the main themes; the mourning for the contemporary city, that Derrida is witnessing with his own eyes and that at some point will cease to exist, the mourning caused by his own inescapable demise and, above all, the mourning for the polis, the ancient Athens that is not within reach anymore, except for its ruined remains.

A photograph is also a remnant itself. It is an image bound to some past event that occurred at the moment of pressing a shutter button – a moment "fatal like a click" (Derrida 2010: 29). If a photograph is conjoined with passing, is then a mourning for Athens, a mourning for the actual bygone polis, or rather a mourning for the image of polis we cherish so much, the photograph of

polis? Let us try to find out what exactly is mourned in the demise of polis. In other words, what polis had that we lack today? Is it the theatre, the symposium, and other prominent cultural institutions? Is it perhaps the clear distinction between the private (οἶκος) and the public (ἀγορά)? Or is it rather the predictable life cycle dictated by the recurring Athenian festivals? We could grieve over all of the above, but at the same time we must have acknowledged that none of the most significant landmarks of ancient culture is definitely absent nowadays, even though they may often persist in altered forms.

The mourning for polis may thus pertain not to something that was lost, but rather happens because something was gained and, as a result, the cultural formation of ancient Greece was left behind. Let the shift that at some point must have taken place be referred to as the inclusion of the apparatus. This shift did not happen at the agora and perhaps was not even discussed between the leading figures of the polis. The inclusion of the apparatus must have happened in the dim space of *καμάρα*. It may be beneficial to recapitulate the characteristics of *καμάρα* at this point. We can conclude that the *καμάρα* functioned mainly on the economical plain, with its objectives limited to transporting and organizing goods. Such purposes required accounting, stock-taking, indexing and similar operations all of which fall under the category of computing – the principle of the apparatus. Under no case did they play the leading role, which was reserved for a gesture and a word – the main political tools of the polis. The economical ones, on the other hand, were destined to serve and support. However, this state of affairs has changed with the inclusion of the apparatus that elevated the *καμάρα* to a position that threatened Greek social, political, and religious institutions, where a gesture and the order of gestures dictated the traditional shape of the polis.

Towards the City

At this point referring to another work of Flusser, an article “The City as a Wave-Through in the Image-Flood” (2005), could be helpful in positioning the above considerations in a more stable relation to his thought. In this text Flusser challenges the customary image of the city, as no longer useful, and calls for replacing it with a more adequate one. The customary image consists of three spaces: economic, political, and theoretical. First one is associated with the private sphere, second - with a public one, and third with the sacred. Throughout history the relation between the three spaces shifted. In the antiquity the economical served the political, and both of them were in debt to the sacred. Later, in the renaissance period, the political sphere started to gain more substance over the remaining two – the economical and the sacred. Today, the most important is the economical, while the private and the sacred work in its favour. According to Flusser none of these theoretical figures rightly corresponds to the form of a modern city anymore. With the

development of mass media and advanced means of communication the three spaces started to overlap and are no longer distinguishable. Flusser suggests instead to see a city as “a net of relations among human beings, an 'intersubjective field of relations'” (2005: 325). The said intersubjectivity is however a notion that should be reimagined as well. We should no longer talk of and perceive ourselves as subjects or selves that have the will and ability to influence their surroundings. As Flusser states, “[t]he human being can no longer be seen as an individual but rather as the opposite, as a dense scattering of parts; he is calculable.” (2005: 324) In the place once occupied by a subject a new form of human being emerges. It is a form no longer defined by its actions and motivations but rather one that takes shape relative to its position in the net of interrelations: “[t]he threads knot themselves together provisionally and develop into what we call human subjects” (2005: 324). In this approach the city is no longer a place, a specific area that can be located geographically, but rather a space defined by a specific shaping of the net of interrelations – particularly dense where the subjects are here and functioning as an attractor, like a flection in a field of waves.

In the discussion on relations between the polis and the *καμάρα* we referred to categories of the political and the economical, only hinting at the sacred. We can now further specify these notions. The category fundamental to the *καμάρα* is the economical. In the meaning we brought up, the economical space it is not exactly the same as the one indicated by the acts of providing for the needs of *οἶκος*, even though it may be related. Flusser's critique renders this rooted meaning obsolete and not useful for tracing the shifting of a modern city. That might be the case if we were to leave it embedded in the context it originated from. We would like, however, to think of it precisely in the Flusserian way. What then should sound most clearly is that the economical is the calculable.

How does an image of the city as a network of interrelations correspond with the notion of *καμάρα*? The relation needs to be yet uncovered. First, let us notice that Flusser presents the situation a subject finds itself in as a task, rather than diagnosing it. He calls for the reinventing of the individual: “[w]e must break out of the capsule of the self and draw us into concrete intersubjectivity. We must become projects out of subjects” (2005: 327). This call, however, is not to be seen as a press on making some sort of radical changes in ourselves. Such an action would be redundant, as the shift has already occurred. Flusser only stresses the need of recognizing new state of affairs in which a network itself is the causative factor and not an individual. His description of the new self takes under consideration the fact of splitting an individual into many areas that are perceived independently of each other. “Not only can atoms be split into particles but so can all mental objects; actions become 'aktomes', decisions become 'dezidemes', perceptions become stimulations, representations become pixels” (2005: 324). Such a radical operation on the self requires “new anthropology” (Wojnowski 2017). It should be also noted that it could not have been

performed from within of the individual. Therefore, it must have been in a way external, which means that the subject happened to find itself being a part of a network, and not an active designer of it. What kind of entity should the network be actually taken for? Flusser suggests that it could be understood as an intersection of channels, "through which information like representations, feelings, intentions, or knowledge flows" (2005: 325). Such an approach opens the way to expand the meaning behind the idea of a city to a new ground (Darroch 2008). The city is no longer located where the buildings and the marketplace are but can take form of a community exchanging information regardless of their whereabouts with the use of electronic means of communication (Guasque 2008).

The benefits of the new city come at a price. Human beings can now engage in a variety of communicational practices and form communities, even from great distances, they will nonetheless enter the black box while doing so. The net of communicators, messaging applications and channels invites everyone, but it does not take care of its guests. It is programmed with the purpose of enabling the flow of information from one point to another, but the content of information, the words actually uttered or written are not relevant to its functioning principles. Defining the self in the terms of various modes of participating in the interrelations is therefore fraught with risk, as other human beings are not the only existing nodes in the net. There are also non-human actors – programs and algorithms, engaging in complex computational operations. Any piece of inserted information is decomposed into bits and processed multiple times before reaching its destination. Just as the network provides freedom to create information (Wojnowski 2017) it also takes away one's agency regarding its ultimate fate.

Fate of the User

Specifying what exactly happens with the inclusion of the apparatus is decisive in diagnosing the condition of the modern city. The principles of the *καμάρα* have been integrated into a program and applied no longer only to a limited field of economic operations, but to the polis as a whole. When programs take place of the political practice, the city becomes concealed, obscure, cryptic. The rules behind its social institution are no longer detectable. What previously belonged to the field of social game is now being transferred elsewhere. As the culture of the city gives in to the rules of the programs of apparatuses, the production of “smart” devices and the “help” of algorithms in addressing the “needs” of the people come into effect. The citizen becomes the user.

The modern citizen does not inhabit the city anymore, he instead tries to use it just as the photographer uses the camera. His actions are inputs. He provides inputs to various parts of the city by using its “services”. He travels to work, orders goods, and makes use of the cultural offer.

In every case he receives a desired output, which keeps him convinced that he is the competent user of the city. In no case however does he perform an action we proposed to identify as a gesture. A gesture is a deed. Deeds have consequences. They can be judged or evaluated and, as such, they require responsibility or at least certain ability to foresee what they can lead to. None of the above applies to providing an input. Such a class of actions does not have consequences, only the results or outcomes. When dealing with apparatuses, the component of responsibility in one's motives is therefore absent. As long as the user performs an input action "correctly", he can be confident of not being condemned in the case of any undesired turn of events. The lightness experienced at this point by the user comes from the fact that he is no longer a causative factor of events, as the program of the apparatus took over that role.

If the ultimate task of the philosophy of photography, as Flusser indicates, is to make sense of the practice of freedom, then the similar one stands before the philosophy of the city. Just as the photographer engages in the predetermined game with the apparatus, and only rarely succeeds in outplaying it, so must the user in order to become the citizen again. We must learn how to "play against the camera" (Flusser 2000: 80). At the same time, we should also keep in mind that the nature of this game is not restricted to one of the two possible outcomes, victory or defeat, but rather lies in adopting a sort of constant attitude toward the city and the camera. A way of performing a gesture needs to be thought of again. We have seen what it takes to perform a photographic gesture with the help of Benjamin's writings. Is it the sufficient ground for developing the practice of freedom within the city? How should the kind of practice be conducted? Should it be individual or collective, political, or artistic? Has the practice of the polis relied on such distinctions? We intuitively realize that there is no straightforward answer to these questions, and that if they can hope for any, it should come in a form none other than a gesture.

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