

Evenemential images: photography as mediation and reconfiguration of urban experience

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Abstract

This paper discusses the photographic act and its capacity of not only indexing, but also producing and mediating human experience in urban spaces of Latin America. Taking as an object of analysis the series “Fisionomia Belém”, a collection of photos made during a research project conducted in Belém, state of Pará, Brazil, we defend the hypothesis of the existence of evenemential image – a specific category of visual representation that is able to determine symbolic appropriation and aesthetic experience through certain procedures that involve the photographic act and the capture of signs and elements from daily life. To do this, we work with some presuppositions from Vilém Flusser, Dietmar Kamper and others about how imagetic representations compose human conscience processes and may change them when submitted to technical procedures. Our analysis intends to link different contributions from contemporary visual culture studies, in order to determine some characteristics of evenemential images, considering the works of Josep María Català about the complex image theory; Dulcilia Buitoni’s debates about narrative embryos; Phillipe Dubois’ argumentation about the photographic act and the indexicality of images; Milton Santos’ contributions to the studies of social processes in urban spaces; and Lucrecia Ferrara’s works on the relations between cities, media and mediation processes. At the end, we conclude that evenemential representations are able to build new significations in the contemporary urban environment of Latin America, considering its ability to link mediation, media documentation and human concrete experience in the cities which are converted into image.

Keywords

Evenemential image. Photography. Urban space. Mediation. Experience.

Introduction

Ruptures, fragmentations, passages, references, signification changes. All these notions are somehow very appropriate to designate effects of the production and reading of images which bring to light all that belongs originally, but not exclusively, to concrete experience. To examine how these processes are related to each other – the recognition of the world by image observation and the experience of translating the world itself into image – is an opportunity to comprehend how imagetic media record is able to guide us in our comprehension of the world, becoming media and generating perceptive mediations which define, in a certain way, how our senses roam through it.

For sure, this debate has been strengthened for a long time in the scope of social communications. There are many media devices available for analysis: video, audio, interconnected networks, hypertext, pictorial images... each one of them has its own system of signification that, as already stated by authors such as McLuhan (1971),

serves as a legitimate extension of human senses. This text, however, focuses on a specific object – photography – to understand how visual representation may allow reconfigurations of contemporary urban experience.

The point of view which is adopted proposes that, recognizing elements of narrative complexity and resources from the language of photography, we are able to apprehend, in some images from urban spaces (cities), meaning effects or “embryos” – events, objects, edifications, architectural elements, phenomena – that enable the mediated experience of its spaces and also that make photographic production and reading convert themselves into meaning reconfigurations about urbanity.

These reflections aim to frame what we call *evenemential image*: a specific category of visual representation that is at once the captured experience and its point of departure, subject and object of social mediation. For this we will explore some studies about the language of photography, the processes of technical image productions and their relations with city space – considered here as a complex communicative system, which combines medium, media and mediations to be experienced through its spaces (Ferrara, 2008). We will also discuss aspects about narration and social representation processes, as well as the notions of visual complexity, elaborated by Josep Maríà Català (2005), and narrative embryo, from Buitoni (2010), in order to demarcate a specific sort of photographic record.

The practical application of these concepts is made through the analysis of images produced during the research project “Comunicação, antropologia e filosofia: estética e experiência na comunicação visual urbana da contemporaneidade de Belém do Pará” (“Communication, anthropology and philosophy: aesthetics and experience in urban visual communication of contemporaneity of Belém, Pará”), organized in order to study visual urban communication of this 2-million citizen city, located in the eastern Amazon, state of Pará. The project gathers images in 11 categories that allude to spaces, architectural modules and specific scenarios, which we will examine willing to understand narrative potentialities and senses produced through photography.

From narratives to images: on the demarcation of worlds – and of self

Before reaching this analysis, however, we are urged to rescue some reflections that indicate the role and presence of visual discourse in societies throughout history. The perspective being worked here demands understanding of the ongoing dialogue between the production – technically or organically – of images, the creation of

narratives and symbolic demarcation of mundane spaces. This will also involve later the different perspectives that photography, as a technique of reproduction and expansion of our visual potentialities, came under scrutiny over the past decades.

In social psychology, sociology or anthropology, it became consensual to consider that all human symbolic production permeates somehow the production of images. Long before the rise of technical devices, capable of abstracting fragments from daily life on physical and digital media, mankind found in the visual language a way to express desires, perceptions and to understand the world surrounding it, with direct impacts on culture and identity. No wonder, Flusser says that “it is not possible to orient ourselves in the world without making before an image of it” (Flusser, 2007, p. 167).

This cognitive role concerning visual language has manifested since antiquity, through cave painting and the visual arts, and reaches contemporaneity through devices such as photographic cameras and audiovisual devices. Through these images that individuals create on the world, it is possible to “elaborate visual representations of their history” (Buitoni, 2010, p.2) – and, in many instances, this relates to creative and ludic roles, also very relevant to representation processes.

Additionally, it should also be noted how appropriation that individuals make from the outside world by means of psychical images influences self-awareness, with direct effects on identity demarcation. Some authors, like Dietmar Kamper, give this man-image-reality relation an important role, as essential as the one commonly attributed to linguistic expression:

Men live in the world nowadays. They don't even live in language, They actually live in the images of the world, of themselves and of other men that were made, in the images of the world, from themselves and from the other men who were made for them (Kamper, 2001, p.7).

Therefore, we see that the image is, at once, mediation between the concrete life and the symbolic, locus of access to the world and space of sedimentation of views of it. It is also a way to perpetuate what's been seen and witnessed – the experience. No wonder Kamper says that the nature of image is to be “presence, representation and simulation of something absent” (Kamper, 2001, p 12.); or, using the words of Baitello (2005a, p.22), we can conclude that every image is the “presence of an absence and the absence of a presence”, with documentary assignments prior to its own materiality in specific media.

It is not difficult to find associations between this logic and the production of narratives that, as Sodré (2009, p.180) says, constitute a communicative basis that is an essential transmission “of traditions and ways of being”. The correct understanding of the processes of narration allows us to understand how image, when raised to the photographic device, is a new way of non-verbal enunciation of the world, marked by its identity and cognitive functionalities. Many authors, such as Hall (2001), Moscovici (2003) and Bhabha (1998), discuss how the production of narratives and texts serves to the consolidation of identities, the formation of self-consciousness and the construction of sociality; Hall, for example, explains how national narratives (or *narratives-of-the-nation*) allow us to understand how human groupings delimit their cultural boundaries in order to “connect their present with their past and images that are constructed about them” (Hall, 2001, p.87) by means of a certain “writing” of tradition.

Medina (2003, p.47) also points that without the narrative the individual “does not express itself, doesn’t deal with the disorganization and infeasibility of life”. Moscovici (2003, p.51), regarding social psychology, links the production of discourse with the construction of social representations, which are able to generate “threads of stability and recurrence, a common basis of significance among its practitioners” and to set symbolically ties of familiarity with the world. The main task of the narrative, however, is thoroughly discussed by Walter Benjamin and lies at the core of verbal narrative: the *transmission of experiences*. By analyzing the role of the narrator in sharing the knowledge of societies, the author develops, in a famous essay, a critique of contemporary ways – romance, news information etc. – of enunciation and compares them to the stories told and retold by anonymous, which would still be able to sustain the creative and constitutive dimensions of mankind. And these would be the true forms of enunciation (1996, p.198).

Benjamin’s perspective is quite clear: textual genres that rose in the early twentieth century, notably those made possible by technical devices, suggest self-explanatory and instrumental narratives of life and its phenomena; the legitimate narration, unconcerned with values such as the “novelty” of an event, would resist with the true transmission of experiences. The narrative should, finally, be renewed in every instance of enunciation – cannot be exhausted in the emission and reception of raw information (Benjamin, 1996, p.204). The author says:

The narrative [is] (...) an artisan form of communication. It is not interested in conveying the 'pure in itself' of the narrated thing as an information or a report. It plunges the thing in the narrator's life to withdraw it from him. This is how it prints elements from the narrator in the narrative, as the potter's hand in the vessel's clay (Benjamin, 1996, p.205).

All these perspectives can help us to analyze narratives and images – an essential process if we wish to understand the representation procedures perpetrated in the photographic device. Both – narrative and image – share roles such as the transmission of experiences, the identitary formations and the cognitive orientation before world's phenomena, as well as differ substantially in the support of expression – word/text versus imaginary or visual field. Anyway this does not invalidate the ease of combination of its conceptual elements.

Therefore, we think that a detailed study about the photographic language should consider not only its relation to human visual expression, but also its potentialities linked to documentation, symbolic (re)creation and demarcation of the world. To see the photographic act as a narrative production requires overcoming old oppositions like visual/verbal, imagetic/textual, which sometimes mark the analysis of discourses engendered in images. Now, we must understand the specificities of this format and review some recent reflections on the practice of photography.

Technical images and narrative embryos: perspectives on the photographic act

Since its appearance, photography has come to be the object of study according to various guidelines. That's because, despite all the technological developments following it, this technique of recording and framing the everyday world remains today as one of the most important means of human expression, with significant developments in the fields of visual arts, documentation, journalism, advertising and serial fiction.

Related to the consequences of the industrial revolution and the enhancement of research and science in the nineteenth century, its invention contributed to the construction of the language of various other forms of communication of the next century, with direct influence on cinematographic processes, television and even in symbolic structure of digital media. It is imperative to understand it as a process, a technique, a specific language and especially as mediation, in order to apprehend the significations of contemporary visual culture.

Reflection or subversion of the world, “trace” or “cut” of its scenarios and phenomena, the photographic act is nowadays an important mean of access and, why

not say it, experience of contact with reality. Flusser (2007) discusses the emergence of technical images – category that designates both photography and other device-based modes of visual production – as a natural consequence of our processes of abstraction. According to the author, these processes are connected to the “world of images” created by mankind, which is responsible for performing “the mediation between man and the world of facts, with which he had been losing touch as he retreated to observe them” (Flusser, 2007, p.121).

By proposing a certain type of human history centered on processes of “manufacturing” of visual technology, Flusser identifies two modes of thought: conceptual and imagetic. The first, which is clearer, demands a profound work of abstraction – being attached, for example, to the textual media and the psychical processes arising from its reading. The language of images, on the other hand, presents greater detail for immediate viewing, offering an “outsider view” (Flusser, 2007, p.109), predetermined and free from abstraction at first; but its reading offers equally relevant fruition. Using the author’s words, “we must follow the text if we want to capture its message”, whereas in painting and other media “we can grasp the message first and then try to decompose it” (Flusser, 2007, p.105).

In the same direction we can evoke Benjamin (1996, p.104) and his reflections about the weakening of the “aura” generated by technique: for him, the methods of mechanical reproduction “constitute a miniaturization technique and help to ensure a certain degree of mastery over works by man, without which they could no longer be used”. Flusser also states that this work makes man no longer subject, but object of technique: after all, when allowing mediated experiences, “the device will only do what the man wants, but man can only want what that appliance is capable to do” (2007, p.40). Flusser’s arguments, that run deep into a critical discussion on ways of linking the conceptual and the imagetic thought, so that images do not “entrap” mankind (2007, p.143), bring to light a narrative system that, since its emergence, generated suspicions and prejudice, closely related to its almost magical ability to capture and expand, at first sight indefinitely, the work of the human eye.

Journalism, serial fiction, the artistic field and other genres have been widely using the photographic discourse to enlarge their narrative potentialities throughout the twentieth century. Naturally, some of photography’s assumptions – such as the verisimilitude, the phenomena documentation and its transformative potential of reality

– were judged and analysed considering the natural limits of capturing the world through camera lens.

According to Dubois (1994), the photographic act came under analysis in at least three directions – from one extreme, in which visual representation is taken as a reflection or mirror of the world to another, where it consists of a trace or excerpt of it. The first discourse is easily associated with that of journalistic language of the late nineteenth century: photograph must reflect, servile and fully, the world that offers itself before his lens, as a legitimate documentation tool. The second, more accustomed to the assumptions of Fine Arts, considers visual language as a tool for transformation and deconstruction of reality. The third perspective, which is defended by the author, overcomes the previous ones: believes that every work of representation is the result of an arbitrary selection by one who performs it, prioritizing aspects being portrayed and determining aspects which shall remain in the shades, outside the photographic frame – performing symbolic construction, after all.

This point of view is linked in a remarkable way to the semiotics and philosophy of language, among other fields: it establishes that the camera is not a neutral device, that every picture/image carries subjectivity. Therefore, to understand the photographic message demands a watchful eye, which considers not only the material product (the image), but also the process of capture, the reading dynamics and appropriation and the context surrounding the photographic act:

The photograph offers to the world an image determined at the same time by the chosen viewing angle, by its distance from the object and by the framing process; then it reduces, on one hand, the three-dimensionality of the object to a two-dimensional image and, on the other one, all the field of chromatic variations to a black and white contrast; finally it isolates a precise point in space and time and is purely visual (Dubois, 1994, p.38).

The author indicates, then, that the most appropriate way to understand the language of photography demarcates its *indexical* nature: it is primarily a trace of the real, a process from which an excerpt of the world is represented, preserving its physical materiality. The index mainly confirms the existence of the photographed object, landscape or scene; leaves trails (physically or digitally) that ensures its permanence, even as virtuality. The image or the picture leads us to the existence itself – and not to the meaning – of a certain reality which is object of representation (Dubois, 1994 p.52). Buitoni also says that:

Photography cuts, establishes limits. A click separates the scene from the rest of the world. However, the rest of the world maintains its “virtual” presence. The space left out of the frame (or off space, extra-frame space) is absent from the representation, but at the same time we know and imagine its presence. Being always partial, the photographic image requires the presence of an externality in its surroundings (Buitoni, 2010, p.4-5).

While discussing the imagetic record of the world in the field of journalism, Buitoni also develops a fruitful reasoning related to our purpose: the concept of *narrative embryo*. Anchored in discussions about the indexical and documentary/informative roles of photographic works, the author discusses how an image is able to articulate more effectively the nature of a shape, object, scene and/or action that is submitted to the camera capture. In addition to the “catch” – the immobilization of a part of a sequence which evokes the temporal freezing –, narrative embryos would be able to give us “clues of an action to be continued, or that at least suggests the existence of actions before or after the registered scene” (Buitoni, 2010, p.12). This concept is similar to the one of *punctum*, crafted by Roland Barthes. Explains Buitoni:

The concept of narrative embryo involves an idea of sequence, of progressiveness: the temporal modification is implicit in its perception. Thus, narrative embryo is every gesture or form frozen in time *that allows us to imagine the past or the immediate future of that action*. (...) The narrativity that may be present in an isolated photo is the same narrative potentiality of a fragment of action (Buitoni 2010, p.12).

Starting from the assumptions of the technical image as mediation and indexical document, capable of producing sense from the excerpts of reality that it captures and from the experiences that surround it, as well as the existence of a narrative embryo in images, capable of capturing and suggesting various enunciative paths, we can grasp the importance of *understanding technical images as evenemential productions*: as a process of demarcation of the world that is, at once, a document or trace of its existence and a production that guides its apprehension and perception by the eyes that read the images.

From visual complexity to evenemential image

Despite the multiplicity of possible devices and media, the images that we have today to observe the worldly phenomena do not always provide us with the necessary

connections for full understanding of what they effectively represent. In addition to the discussion of the effects of its reading and the repertoires necessary to do so, however, there is an issue that is at the origin – in their production processes of visual language. Josep Maria Català, professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, came examining these processes in recent years, while developing his long works on the concept of *complex image*.

Català's perspective is clear: with the rise of various technologies that enable the proliferation of images in the world, supported by equally varied platforms – press, online, audio-visual –, he says, we must rethink the status of visual representations in contemporary life. The author reinforces the need to see the image as a multifaceted product: or rather, as the author says, it's necessary to understand that "the image does not exist anymore, nowadays we have images, always in the plural" (Català, 2005, p.43).

Referentialities, connections and interactions between the various images we receive and perceive about the world create a new narrative nexus in the field of visual culture – which comes to replace the culture of the isolate image, hermetically sealed in processes that determine senses to be captured. The author calls "complex" all images that belong to this new logic, which considers and uses the multiplicity to propose symbolic constructions that allow a broader reading – less "epidermal" – of reality.

In visual culture, image and other textual productions do not interact as complementary or conflicting parts anymore, but as elements in permanent dialogue and intertextuality. *The construction of meaning is in the symbiosis between image and other languages*. Instead of "pictorial structure as an emblem", as ready "communication" or "message", says Català (2005, p.43), one should think of the images in ongoing dialogue and interaction with themselves and with other textual media. This marks the end of the "isolated image" era and its replacement by the moving – or flowing – image:

Contemporary images are hardly perceived in isolation, either because they present themselves together, even if they belong to different territories, organizing visual constellations as in television, or because our gaze, now entered into a peculiar perceptual system, is responsible of grouping different images, as it can happen when we walk through a city. There are no longer isolated images, not even those that were designed in isolation, those belonging to the period of the closed image (Català, 2005, p.46-47).

The author attempts to trace, in his reflections, some basic features of images which belong to this paradigm of complexity. We will briefly evoke them, in order to understand their relationship to the notions worked so far. The first is the *multiplicity*: the need to construct representations that are able to “explore the elements network that composes the phenomena” (Català, 2005, p.61), considering not only multiple perspectives about it but also multiple platforms to capture it and present it.

Secondly, there is *inter-capture* – the images’ capacity to establish connections with the group of images, as well as the ability of connecting this group with individual representations. Another important point is that Català also says that the plurality of a visual phenomenon is able to continuously transform particular elements, while the opposite also happens. Finally, the author indicates the *dissipative structure*, which makes complex images in a permanent flow experience permanent imbalance combined to self-organization and creative drive; this notion is closely linked to the idea of managing “the fundamental relationship between change and stability” (Català, 2005, p.61).

Although directed mainly to the various electronic media emerged throughout the twentieth century and the opportunities to expand the visual experience, the reflections made by Català are appropriate to rethink the role of photography as an instrument of symbolic demarcation. By pointing characteristics that compose a “genealogy” of complexity, the author enriches the reflection we have been tracing here about the enunciative potentialities of the photographic image, used as an access path to worldly experience.

In this field we can finally set up what we denominate evenemencial image: *category and at the same time construction pattern* of visual representations that, indexing the elements, objects and phenomena of reality, allow the visualization of its possible facets, generated by narrative embryos present at the time of capture. In line with the idea of visual complexity, we understand that such designation must allude to those images that allow individuals to know, live – experience – the surrounding environments under representation through permanent multiplicity and referentiality, based on the dialogue between different interconnected images presenting diverse angles and connections which are able to suggest the (symbolic) logic of sense, the (indexical) materiality and the (iconic) viscosity of the registered instant.

Through evenemencial image we can think of a process from which it is possible, at once, to *recognize the world by contemplation* (mediated contact with the

world) and to *experience through capture* – the event of registering images consisting itself in an instance of contact with the real, thus allowing the connection between conceptual and imagistic thinking, following Flusser's (2007) reflections. In short, these are the images that can be considered able to indicate, produce and direct human experience, generating constituent mediations of sociabilities, cultures, relational networks. *Life in and through images – with all the complexities, possibilities and risks involved.*

This exercise of reflection on the nature of images and photographic language allows us to look closely to the visual representations held within the project "Communication, anthropology and philosophy, aesthetics and experience in the contemporary urban visual communication of Belém do Pará". First, however, it is necessary to understand how urban spaces relate to their own representations and discussions held in the scope of social communication.

Image and experience: city as medium, media and mediation

"Contemporary man doesn't want to possess or to make, he wants to live. He wishes to experience, to know and especially to enjoy" (Flusser, 2007, p.58)

Few spaces are able to put in evidence the complex web of relationships and systems of contemporary societies so as appropriate as the city. Symbolic structure of modernity, field of circulation of significations which expresses with exemplary precision the communicative forms generated by media technologies, urban space is to some extent product and reason for the planning of industrial societies – creation of states and economic systems aimed at the regulation of flows and lifestyles and at the maintenance of political and cultural order. The city is and tends to be for long centuries the global cell that organizes the dynamics of life. It is not difficult to note its relations with the media and, in particular, with the visual culture that surrounds the individual in postmodernity.

In social communication and philosophy, studies already done about urbanity tend to focus on the processes of socialization of individuals, on their subjectivation within the urban spaces and on permanent links between spaces of social interaction and the production of collective identities. Or, as Ramos (2005, p.1) says, in its threads "of life, of social relations, of political exercise and of daily survival". The city, in short, is seen as a "living organism", as the geographer Milton Santos says, and to understand its

operations is to bend over the collective social, political and cultural life, to comprehend its movements, inflections, instabilities and movements.

Another important point of concern – that interests us in a particular way – is to understand the links between the processes of mass communication and the construction of urban space, both in its structural materiality and in its images and representations. Following this path we comprehend the city, more than as a place of life and identity, as a complex system where mediatic supports, images that form and deform urban space and mediations – generated by and able of generating sociability – confront themselves.

Ferrara (2008) provides important inputs in this issue in a work that discusses how the city becomes a medium (space or circulation structure), as an efficient media – which enunciates itself and has its landscapes converted into visual representation – and as mediation. As the author summarizes, “being construction, the city is medium; being image and landscape, the city is media; being mediation, the city is urbanity” (Ferrara, 2008, p.43). Based on the thoughts of Aldo Rossi, Ferrara maps how the construction of the city, especially after the industrial revolution, is able to blend functionality (required for the planning of capitalist societies) and the threads of communicative relations possible through it. Through technical and constructive ways, the architecture assigns “the role, use and value of space and, in this sense, is the support through which the city is built as a communication medium”, which “enables interaction and sociability in constant transformation” (Ferrara, 2008, p.41). It’s easy to identify, therefore, an important object of analysis for the field of communication: the city and its double face, at once a communicative object (mediatic support) and space/subject of interactions that occur in it.

The notion of the city as medium refers to the “skin” of the buildings, as Ferrara says: it’s the physical media that creates (or blocks) sociabilities, also constituting, through the architectural traces, the symbolic identity of the space. However, it is in the city as *media* and *mediation* that we concentrate – these two “functionalities” can put in evidence the role of the photographic image as an access path to urbanity. Ferrara considers that being closely linked to the images produced by it, for it, the city-as-media consists in a mechanism that simplifies the “contours” of complexity of urban life. Touristic photos, skylines denoting greatness of skyscrapers, perspectives of great avenues reinforce what the author calls “mediatic centralism”, which would determine (negatively) the ways we see or admire the cities.

The image is the media of the city under the aegis of the visual that distorts reality to become palatable to the rapid and reckless perception. A “prêt-à-porter” city, as if it were a miniature toy or caricature favorable to business and commercial game that takes itself as an object. This linearity between cause and effect causes the image to be the foundation and the instrument of a mediatic centralism operation that determines a way to view, use, and value the city and makes the undisputed iconic base of the image migrate to an interpretation that transforms the icon to bage and gives to the city medialogy a symbolic representation. The image is therefore the first form of communication between the city and its user by the icons/ symbols that, juxtaposed or not, are the first intelligible form of architecture as a cultural code (Ferrara, 2008, p.46).

Ferrara’s perspective, therefore, is that the enjoyment of the image of the city would create an *effacement of experience*: we’d be before a control of the modes to see programmed by the media. Selected pieces of a city would be valued as a full representation, being “more visual rhetoric than properly landscape” (Ferrara, 2008, p.47). The mediatized city is *disciplinary*, using the terminology of Foucault (1996): exposes what must be seen, what is discursively determined in the threads of power relations. It’s the postcard, the advertising or the map from the tourist office in its purest expression. The escape point for this, says Ferrara, would be in media’s “zero degree”: in facing the city as a space of sociability and practical experience. Overcoming the mediatic aspect of the city demands us to “use” it as *mediation* – experiencing it as a process, as a space in constant motion. For Ferrara, the fundamental difference is that the city allows, as mediation, the extent of possible senses for its phenomena; beyond what is shown in representations, there is a latent meaning in urbanity to be unveiled by the interpreter, which develops itself as user and reconfigures it as a system.

Unlike the image of the city that is iconic representation of imaginary desires of identity, individual and collective, from the user through the city, mediation implies some self-organization and transformation of the user as it interferes with the city and contributes to the organization of the routine that characterizes it (Ferrara, 2008, p.49).

It is precisely in the interstitium of media and mediation discussed by Ferrara that we believe the evenemential image sets itself. The capture of the world that meanwhile becomes experience itself, the record of the world that is capable of reworking it and determining its (re)cognition, represents a “zero degree” that relies on the media device itself – responsible for the perpetuation of the instant, the frame, the narrativity which forms in the spaces and landscapes of the city. Beyond a purely instrumental, specular or spectacular view of the world perpetrated in technical images,

we believe we can unravel brand new senses from reality inside the visual narrative – bringing back the essence of experience transmission, evoked by Walter Benjamin and his reflections on verbal discourse, to apply it on photographic records. More than serving advertising, journalism, Art or other genres, imaged representations of urban space would serve the city itself and those who live in it: they would serve to set urbanity as a way of life and also as a repository for human culture.

“Fisionomia Belém”: perspectives on urbanity

Developed by teachers and students of the University of Amazonia (Unama), with collaborators from institutions such as the Federal University of Pará (UFPA) and University of São Paulo (USP), the project “Communication, anthropology and philosophy: aesthetics and experience in urban visual communication of contemporaneity of Belém, Pará” proposes a study of the forms of visual communication from Belém, a metropolis of about 1.4 million people, considering media and supports such as outdoor advertising, houses, shopping malls, buildings, churches, monuments, squares and avenues.

The images contained in the photographic series “Fisionomia Belém” (“Physiognomy Belém”) resulting from the research project were produced with amateur or semi-professional digital cameras by the group's researchers – these are, therefore, informal records, made at various times and days of the week, throughout 2013, without specific guidance. The material was collected, edited and organized in 11 categories, which were defined by the nature of focused urban spaces: Commerce; Squares; Publi-City; Paths and passengers; Urban Interventions; Streets and Buildings; Glass; Machinery; Boundaries; Joints; and Temples.

Compiled into a website and also assembled in an exhibition, the result of the research indicates the applicability of our hypothesis evenemencial image, gathering images able to resignify urban experience while electing it as an object of attention. These visual representations take the camera as a starting point for researching and producing new ways to experience and contemplate the contemporary city, with all its nuances and narrative possibilities. *The research is in itself a new experience of space, and its result feeds new forms of world's presentification.* The photographs are all capable of putting into practice the central purposes of the project, described in the following text:

The images are locus-signu that can display the contemporary condition of the city. These images are seeking a certain record of this existence. We say a certain record because of the well-known condition inherent to photography of being an intervention on reality – this would give the image not anymore the condition of a reproduction of reality, but the one of representation, a certain construction of the real. It is intended, in these images, to view certain density to display; certain display to split. (...) In this site there are no banal images, and we don't expect vulgarity of those who see them. What may seem like a common picture is expected to be seen as a sign that relates to the contemporary existence of an opaque and shimmering city; distinguishable and inseparable; fast and static; multiple and unique. (...) The challenge is huge. We are unable to capture the city in its completeness; so we hope to display it on its signs. It is to recognize these signs that these images are produced¹.

One of the most remarkable points in the observation of such images is their *instability*. Many pictures, especially those produced at night, display buildings, characters and avenues out of focus, not always well positioned. The point of view, considering both the framing and the position of capture (height, angle etc.), resembles the use of subjective camera in cinema and television: it seeks to give the impression that the image was captured by the human eye. The idea is that there is an individual, analogous to the flâneur mentioned by Walter Benjamin (1991), which crosses the city in order to observe its phenomena freely and contemplatively, experiencing it as if it was the first time. The contemplation of *alterity* marks his way of relating to the outside world, as it does not feel stuck to the threads of urban space; there are not traces of familiarity in these representations. “The look of the allegorical crossing the city is the look of estrangement. It is the look of the flâneur, whose way of life involves with a reconciling halo the disconsolate form of life from man in the city” (Benjamin, 1991, p.39).

Multiplicity is another important aspect, considering both technical issues (resolution, used equipment etc.) and the documentation of many spaces and places of the city. Another element is *connectivity*/interrelationship of the photographic records: through the articulation of specific “themes”, it is possible to analyze the angles of city representations separately, but with a common direction that provides synergy to the series. In the Glass category, buildings of neighborhoods as Umarizal and Batista Campos are highlighted; in Commerce, the pictures show destroyed or degraded facades

¹ Available at: http://projetoфизионииабелм.blogspot.com.br/p/blog-page_22.html. Accessed on 30 september 2013.

of historic buildings interacting with modern equipment, outdoor advertising, multicolored panels and revitalized mansions, often with colors and elements that diverge from colonial and art nouveau architectural styles – which are very common in historic neighborhoods like Cidade Velha (*see pictures below*).

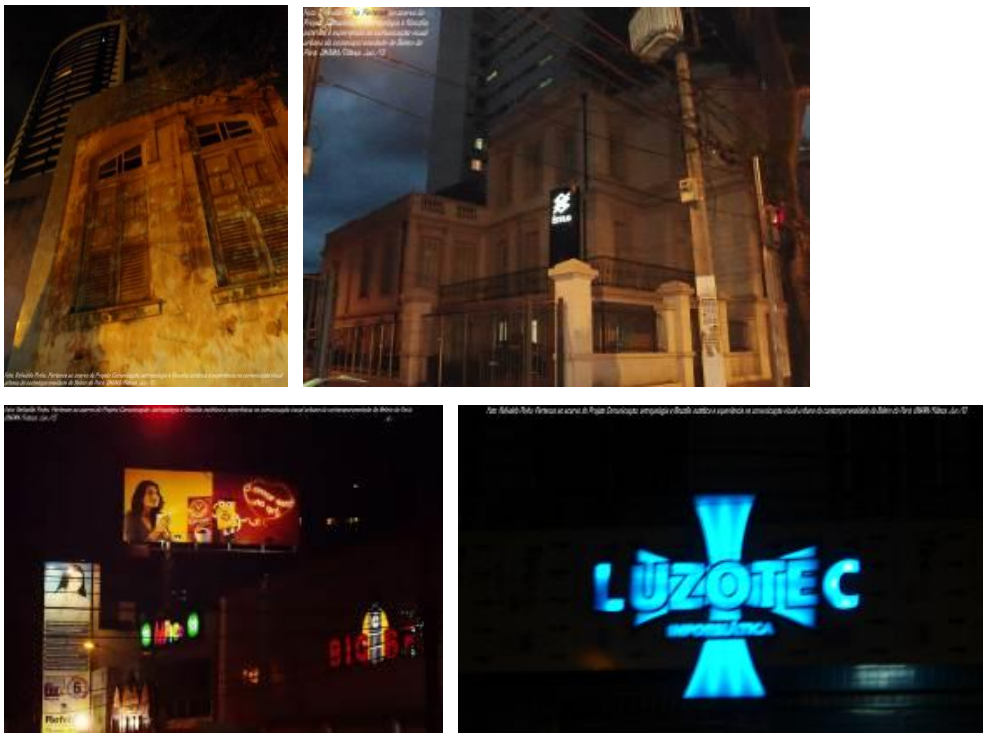


We can see, therefore, that the series brings together elements of visual complexity, according to the definitions of Català (2005). The pictures gathered promote serialization of photographs that allow a detailed observation of certain areas of the capital of state of Pará, with materials that can be interpreted very differently. It is important to mention that the registered sites are not credited: either there are clear visual references – such as street signs of tourist attractions. The images serve mainly as a “trace” of the social body, of a visually represented urbanity. Following Català’s reflections, we can say that these eventful representations are inside:

(...) a conceptual movement, through which they offer us different facets of the same phenomenon, different possibilities, each of which capable of modifying the relationships of the elements that make it up (Català, 2005, p.546).

Another relevant point is the focus on the representation of hybridities that shape the urban space. Especially in categories such as Temple – which brings together

images of Christian religious buildings – and Publi-City – whose photos show interactions between advertising logos, buildings and neon technologies – it is easy to identify the use of medium, the physical support in terms of Ferrara, to emphasize the “distinct cultural skins of the city” (Ferrara, 2008, p.44), which mix different temporalities and say much about the interactions between tradition and modernity in the Brazilian metropolis. Although with no characters or large scenarios, these images attest, in a notably indexical, but also symbolic procedure, the existence of certain signs that form a striking element of the urban landscape: its multiple, chaotic, for many postmodern character, which is evident in the mix of aesthetic/architectural styles, in the “desecration” of historical references and in the reappropriation of classical and traditional elements. Global and local mingle in buildings like the bank office installed in a nineteenth century mansion, the skyscraper erected next to a degraded old residence and the advertising icon that alludes to the local Portuguese colonization by means of a neon logo, framed over a stylized Maltese cross (*see pictures below*).



Regarding *narrativity*, the images act subtly, mostly through people or vehicles moving in the photographed sites. The notion of narrative embryo can be evoked here: photographs of some categories, such as Commerce, Paths and passengers and Joints, are able to present several suggestions concerning the past and future of the moment that was frozen at the moment of capture. The photo is more than the moment of its record; trespasses what the lens demarcated immediately.

In order to discuss the presence of the embryo in the narrative photojournalism, Buitoni says that “a picture that shows a latent narrativity is able to promote a better interface with the text or to be the main informative piece” (Buitoni, 2010, p.12). We understand that, when proposing itself as part of registration of the city, “Physiognomy Belém” series seeks to present elements that allow the appropriation of its urbanity exclusively by the images. The focus in public areas, in a certain “outsider look” – or, even when inside, focused on outer spaces, like the image that registers a woman walking beside a bus door (*see pictures below*) –, represents the objective of enunciating urban scenarios that remain in referentiality with the lived moment, in a relationship that goes far beyond the here-and-now that was photographed.



The contemplation of some excerpts from the work of the research group allows us, therefore, to identify the potential of evenemential images to resignify urban spaces: products and documents from a certain type of reality mediated by technical devices, at the same time subject to the conditions of the captured moment and to the multiple possible readings of its signs, these images are an effective tool for understanding the processes by which the urbanity is represented visually and transformed by its own

representations. By which, in short, what was once media becomes constitutive mediation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we presented the photographic discourse as a path to understand how visual representations, experiences of contact with the world and urban space could be interconnected, producing images able to articulate meanings that constantly slide on the city environment. The use of reflections on the processes of image production, its enunciative potentialities and its effects in the understanding of the world was carried out in order to shed light on the process of signification in visual narrative. Understanding this as a condition of contemporaneity, we emphasize its ability of modifying the relations maintained between individuals and their spaces of conviviality and sociability.

Through observation of the photographic series “Physiognomy Belém”, we identified narrativities, productions of signification and forms of symbolic demarcation of urbanity that point to the potential of the photographic act to build possible worlds; it is essential, however, to study the feasibility of applying the hypothesis of evenemencial image in other media contexts and languages such as audiovisual and the one perpetrated on interconnected networks. Anyway, our hypothesis is that this way of visual production seems to be a kind of natural way, with no return, for images that mediate the dialogue between our eyes and the world to be seen – and experienced – in contemporaneity.

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