



URBAN SCENOGRAPHY: EMOTIONAL AND BODILY EXPERIENCE

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The idea, that spatial configurations produce comical and critical situations by encouraging certain “choreography” of its users, is brilliantly developed by Jacques Tati in his films (*Mon Oncle* (1958), *Playtime* (1967) and others). In his turn Michel de Certeau develops the idea, that city space is “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (de Certeau 1984: 117). For a moving body a city emerges as a configuration of obstacles and their absence, which influence the routes and the rhythms of a walker.

The idea of interconnection between spatial configurations and scenarios of everyday use of it was developed by the Situationists who proposed the concept of *unitary urbanism* (Chtcheglov 1958; Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961). According to them, spatial structures produce certain type of behaviour as well as emotional experience and constellations of urban elements are able to encourage citizens to participate actively in the reorganization of urban surrounding.

As an analytical tool, the concept of urban scenography reveals the interconnections between spatial configurations and everyday scenarios that take place in urban settings. On the practical level, the concept of urban scenography as a dynamic set of city elements (which includes even temporal and accidental items) appears to be a tool applicable for revitalization of underused public spaces.

Keywords: bodily experience, city spaces, emotions, routine scenarios, situationists, urban interventions, urban scenography.

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to start developing a concept of “urban scenography” as an analytical tool, which reveals the interconnections between spatial configurations and everyday scenarios that take place in urban settings. Following the phenomenological tradition and the ideas of de Certeau, each spatial configuration embodies certain bodily possibilities and corresponds to a set of micro-practices (like standing,

running, sitting, jumping, laying, dancing, etc.). Also, each spatial configuration supports a range of social scenarios (like reading, meetings, playing games, listening to music, drinking coffee, etc.). According to de Certeau, city space is “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (de Certeau 1984: 117). That means, that for a moving body a city emerges as a configuration of obstacles and their absence, which influence the routes and the rhythms of a walker. Citizens can be either passive or active “interpreters” of urban space: their bodies can passively follow spatial instructions or they can start developing alternative interpretations of public spaces, turning from “blind walkers” (de Certeau’s term) to urban activists, who reveal new possibilities of urban space by practicing alternative activities (e.g. parkour¹ and skateboarding), by arranging art interventions and by initiating new urban rituals (Lavrinec 2011). After examining the forms of urban activities which reinvent urban places by producing alternative meaning and encouraging alternative scenarios of behaviour (e.g. flash-mobs and all kind of urban rituals, such as bridge love padlocks), it is worth examining urban structures as modifiable scenography in connection with everyday scenarios and citizens bodily and emotional experience. It was the Situationists, who provided a critical perspective on architecture, determining bodily and emotional experience; they started with the proposal to practice an active attitude toward urban settings and developed the idea of “détournement” (Debord, Wolman 1956) and “constructing situations” (Debord 1957), and then turned to the idea of “unitary architecture”, which disturbs and activates citizens, encouraging them to take an active part in reinterpreting urban space. In contemporary practices of urban interventionism this idea of the creative disruptions of everyday life, which is seen as a tool for reactivating citizens and stimulating community involvement, is very strong.

Spatial configurations and bodily experience

According to de Certeau, these everyday practices are embedded in urban spaces. Moreover, citizens’ everyday actions, which take place in various urban settings, in their turn shape urban space. De Certeau points, a city space is “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities” (de Certeau 1984: 117). In other words, space happens through everyday practices. A constellation of urban elements (or “space syntax”, as de Certeau calls it) has a narrative structure. So a walking in the city is comparable to a speech act.

The idea, that spatial configurations produce comical and critical situations by encouraging certain “choreography” of its users, is brilliantly developed by Tati in his films (*Monsieur Hulot’s Holiday*, *Mon Oncle*, *Playtime* and others). Tati reveals an interconnection between organization of the places and bodily experience of its users.

¹ Parkour is a urban training discipline, which takes place in urban settings and based on challenging spatial structures by running, jumping and climbing.

ers both from the position of film director (from the perspective of architect of filmic space) and as a comic actor (from the perspective of user or interpreter of constructed space). The films of Tati are focused on the relation between spatial text and its readers, who actualize scenarios, embedded in the space. By moving through the space, by using doors, stairs, elevators, passing corridors and spending time in waiting rooms film personages reveal its possibilities, some of which are paradoxical: instead of being instrumental these elements disorientate and confuse. In his films, Tati reveals a disorientating and de-individualizing character of modern architecture, which decades later was discussed by Fredric Jameson, who analysed further mutation of architectural forms (Jameson 1991).

As a films director Tati explores the impact of modern architecture to citizens' everyday life by building special urban settings, which shape individual bodily experience and initiate inter-subjective situations. For example, expensive decorations of spatial settings for *Playtime* were built applying five principles of modern architecture (pilotis, horizontal window, free façade, open floor plan, roof gardens), which were formulated by Le Corbusier. Series of modern spaces, presented in *Playtime* (the airport, the offices, the trade exhibition, the apartments, and the restaurant) are isolated from each other. Each film episode takes place in a new space, and each episode is autonomic. But this isolation and autonomy of film spaces is not only a narrative gesture: each space is detached by glass walls from the surrounding city. In a similar manner, commenting on architecture of Westin Bonaventure Hotel (built in 1976 and designed by architect John C. Portman), Jameson notices, that “the glass skin achieves a peculiar and placeless dissociation of the Bonaventure from its neighbourhood: it is not even an exterior, inasmuch as when you seek to look at the hotel's outer walls you cannot see the hotel itself but only the distorted images of everything that surrounds it” (Jameson 1991: 42).



Fig. 1. An episode from Jacques Tati's *Playtime*

In Tati's films modern architecture appears as dehumanized sterile surrounding with huge windows, long empty corridors, sterile grey rooms and innovative design and technological items (Fig. 1). A space starts producing comical effect when someone gets into it. A space itself appears to be quite active: elevators and sliding doors "catch" a visitor, making him helpless, a monotony of long corridors and waiting rooms makes visitor feel small and uncomfortable, the rational structure of rooms and cabinets turns into a labyrinth for those who do not use it day by day (i.e. for those who are not used to "read" it). In his analysis of Bonaventure Hotel Jameson pays special attention to the role of lift and escalators, which architect Portman calls "gigantic kinetic sculptures":

"I believe one has to see such "people movers" (Portman's own term, adapted from Disney) as somewhat more significant than mere functions and engineering components. We know in any case that recent architectural theory has begun to borrow from narrative analysis in other fields and to attempt to see our physical trajectories through such buildings as virtual narratives or stories, as dynamic paths and narrative paradigms which we as visitors are asked to fulfill and to complete with our own bodies and movements. In the Bonaventure, however, we find a dialectical heightening of this process: it seems to me that the escalators and elevators here henceforth replace movement but also, and above all, designate themselves as new reflexive signs and emblems of movement proper" (Jameson 1991: 43).

Despite the Bonaventure Hotel is rather the mutation of logic embedded in modernist architecture, scenography constructed by Tati functions in the same way. Some of Tati's filmic spaces are quite close to what Jameson calls "postmodern hyperspace", which "has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson 1991: 44). Commenting on the Jameson's text, Arthur Asa Berger notices: "The Bonaventure functions, then as a signifier of both a mutation in architectural design and, analogously, of the new global communication networks found in postmodern societies. In both cases, individuals lose their ability to determine where they are and how to get to wherever it is they might wish to go" (Berger 1998: 103–104). Still, in Tati's movies there is a character, who resists de-individualisation and the logic of "postmodern hyperspace".



Fig. 2. Offices. Jacques Tati's *Playtime*

In his films Tati himself plays a role of Monsieur Hulot. He is a passer-by, who explores the possibilities of spatial settings as a visitor of various places, and falls into spatial traps: elevator takes him away, glass walls confuse him, spatial order tangles him. Monsieur Hulot seems to be just a passive and helpless reader of urban text, who follows the “spatial syntax” (de Certeau), but periodically finds himself in comical situations. In *Playtime* he gets lost in sterile and monotonous bureaucratic spaces (Fig. 2). His bodily dynamics (or “choreography”, which he performs in this space), i.e. the way he moves, sits and looks around, creates an effect, which I would call a “spatial syncope”. Monsieur Hulot disturbs routine rituals embedded into spaces he visits, confuses other “readers” of the space. And it is exactly the collision of routine choreography (or “movement proper” as Jameson puts it) and alternative bodily interpretation of spatial element which questions the same rationality of modern architecture. The trajectories and rhythms of Monsieur Hulot are different from routine ones. He is permanently surprised by spatial configuration. In this sense, he is aware of the space, while other readers of this space are “blind” (de Certeau’s metaphor) and use it automatically.



Fig. 3. Transparent structures of waiting room. Jacques Tati’s *Playtime*

From the other hand, the transparency of offices and private apartments (Fig. 3) produces series of comical situations, which bring the idea, that even transparent structure of the Panopticon is able to generate comical effects (and it is an interesting alternative to the intonation of Foucauldian analysis of panoptical structures as of metaphor of power). The idea that spatial forms of power can produce comical effect is quite similar to street art projects, which reinterpret social order in a playful way, demonstrating a comical potential of forms of power. For example, street sign art project, developed by Clet Abraham, reinterprets simple forms of road signs, proposing small funny scenes. An object of special attention in these playful interpretations (or “detournement” in the Situationists’ terms) becomes a “Stop” sign, which in paradoxical way encourage street artists to think about moving further with artistic interpretations.

Reconfiguring spatial settings: unitary architecture

The idea of interconnection between spatial configurations and scenarios of everyday use of it was developed by the Situationists who proposed the concept of *unitary urbanism* (Chtcheglov 1958; Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961). One of the aims of this movement was critical revision of everyday living conditions and routine scenarios that take place in everyday urban settings. According to the Situationists, spatial structures produce certain type of behaviour as well as emotional experience, while certain constellations of urban elements are able to encourage citizens to participate actively in the reorganization of urban surrounding. These interconnections could be revealed by derive, or a special technique of exploring urban settings, which implies “playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects” (Debord 1956).

Alongside with a special method of reconnaissance, the Situationists developed the idea of “détournement” as an active attitude toward the everyday (the meanings of “détournement” are diversion, rerouting, distortion, etc.), Guy Debord and Gil J. Wolman urged to reinterpret urban settings by bringing changes: “If détournement were extended to urbanistic realizations, not many people would remain unaffected by an exact reconstruction in one city of an entire neighborhood of another. Life can never be too disorienting: détournement on this level would really spice it up” (Debord, Wolman 1956). They also proposed a modifiable spatial model, which reinterpret existing architecture and activates user of urban settings: “the *architectural complex* – which we conceive as the construction of a dynamic environment related to styles of behaviour – will probably detourn existing architectural forms, and in any case will make plastic and emotional use of all sorts of detourned objects: careful arrangements of such things as cranes or metal scaffolding replacing a defunct sculptural tradition” (Debord, Wolman 1956).

The idea of detourned architectural complex as a dynamic scenography just few years later turned into the idea of unitary architecture. Preparing for the “revolution of everyday life” (Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961) and “resisting the controls of city planning” (Knight 2008: 119–120), the Situationists proposed the idea of “unitary architecture”, which aimed “to enable people to stop identifying with their surroundings and with model patterns of behavior” (Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961). In his turn, Henri Lefebvre sees this concept as the Situationists reaction toward the fragmentation of the cities (Stanek 2011: 170), according to him, “Unitary urbanism consisted of making different parts of the city communicate with one another” (Lefebvre 1997).

Some of the Situationists were professional architects, and several projects of disturbing architectural complex were prepared (like a huge city-tower in the desert, which was proposed by Ivan Chtcheglov: each segment of the huge tower is turning around, so that for the dwellers the same surrounding is unpredictable). Though these projects have never been realised, the idea that architecture should be modifiable, and the appearance of architectural complexes should “change totally or partially in accordance with the will of their inhabitants” (Chtcheglov 1958) is a source of inspiration for contemporary interventionists.

More realistic idea of the Situationists was a proposal to “create situations” in the city. Commenting on the ambition of the Situationists to redesign the city life and deconstruct everyday by “constructing situations” (Debord 1957; Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961), Simon Sadler notices, that “the constructed situations would clearly be some sort of performance, one that would treat all space as performance space and all people as performers” (Sadler 1999: 105). He also points out, that “the mission to construct situations was proposed as an honorable and revolutionary alternative to the creation of traditional artworks” (Sadler 1999: 105). But also “situations” were constructed by modifying urban settings and vice versa – as Lefebvre puts it, “Their idea <...> was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the derive” (Lefebvre 1997).

The important insight of the Situationist Movement was the idea, that spatial structures are able to “activate” citizens and encourage them to take part in the constructing urban surroundings. From this perspective urban art interventions are quite a productive method of articulating urban experience and rearranging emotional landscape of the city (see more Lavrinec 2011). By disturbing usual everyday rhythms and trajectories, urban art interventions establish a reflexive distance from the routine choreography of the place and propose alternative scenarios of behaviour in public space. Therefore urban art interventions and urban games can be considered as a tool for creative re-conceptualization of spatial structures and social order, embedded in urban space.

“Detoured” urban settings: urban interventions

There is a close relation between the Situationists’ idea of arranging disturbing surroundings seeking to reactivate citizens and urban intervention movements in contemporary cities, the aim of which is usually defined as “a creation of situations” (Thompson, Sholette 2004: 10). The intention of the Situationists to “construct situations” in public spaces for to re-conceptualize everyday city life is recognizable in nowadays glocal movements, which question the routine scenarios of behaviour in public space (Free Hugs Campaign, all kind of dancing, freezing, singing flash-mobs) and the traditional models of organization of public spaces. Contemporary interventionists, who follow the idea of “initiating situations” in public space for to disturb routine models of behaviour, embedded into certain urban settings, as a rule stress the importance of the experience of being together and sharing emotions in public spaces. For example, Charlie Todd, an initiator of *Improv Everywhere* group, which causes unexpected events in public spaces, like freezing at Central Station in New York, dance flash-mobs and other actions, which propose alternative scenarios of behaviour in public, describes these actions through “shared experience of absurdity”. A New York based group defines itself as a “prank collective that causes scenes of chaos and joy in public places” (official site of *Improv Everywhere* 2013).

Providing a ground for shared bodily and emotional experience in alienated public spaces, urban art interventions encourage the emergence of temporal forms of

sociality: first of all, it is temporal communities of passers-by involved into intervention, which could become a community of active like-minded citizens. Hence a difference between a position of public artist, who locates the artworks in public space, defining them as an art gesture and a position of art activists, who develop open formats of collaboration with citizens inviting them to join the playground becomes apparent. For the latter, an art intervention is a tool for critical re-thinking of space (it is what Jane Rendell calls “critical spatial practices” (Rendell 2006)) and for arranging a space for direct dialogue, verbal and bodily, in collaboration with citizens. For example, “Street Komoda” (documentation of Street Komoda 2013), which was installed in public place in Vilnius 2012, is an art object, for which invited graffiti artists developed an original concept of “urban camouflage”, turning a place for sharing into a “public secret” (a texture of asphalt was recreated on the surface of the chest of drawers, so that it became almost invisible) and ensuring in that way longevity of the object. As a place for sharing small items and books, this urban furniture was managed by citizens, and its content depended upon preferences and choices of passers-by (Fig. 4). A concept of sharing in public space was dominating in this case, while a concept of “urban furniture”, which domesticates a public space and “urban camouflage” were orientated toward the main function of this object.



Fig. 4. Street Komoda: a place for sharing (Vilnius 2012) brought together temporal communities of those who enjoyed sharing with the strangers. Photo: Jekaterina Lavrinec

Alternative models of behaviour, introduced by urban activists or public artists, reveal the potential of public places and encourage citizens to rethink spontaneous traces they leave in urban surrounding day by day as a creation of certain micro-scenography. Citizens take active part in arranging and rearranging urban scenography by leaving, losing and sharing items in public spaces. For example, a home chair, which someone brings to the street to sit by the house is a temporal element, but it supports a wide range of possibilities and provokes a number of situations in the street: it could be used in different ways and for different purposes, for chatting with the people passing by or for observing the place. A chair is not only a place for sitting; it's also a tool for socializing. Thus a micro-scale change in urban setting can be also analyzed in the terms of social interactions. These interactions are not necessary direct; they are rather about being next to somebody and sharing the same place with the possibility of communication. It is what geographers Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin call "light-touch intimacy" or "light sociality", which refers to the connections and relations emerging in public spaces and encourages exploring scenarios of micro-communication in urban space.

Everyday interventions shape a common space of shared emotional experience, bring changes into an everyday scenography of city spaces and establish momentary citizen solidarities. Everyday creativity becomes a source of inspiration for the art projects, which explore forms of communication and cooperation in public spaces. In many cases these initiatives deal with the problem of deactivated public spaces and proposes citizens formats for participating in urban planning on micro-scale. In his study on street art Johannes Stahl notices, that participants of street art scene "postulate, that the machinery of 'the public' functions wither too well or too unconsciously and it is the responsibility of the artist to perceive this and to reverse. Logically, these interventions will suggest and demonstrate alternative scenarios" (Stahl 2009: 112).

By encouraging the others to take part in these actions, citizens develop new communication spaces. By exposing things, making them visible and accessible to the others, citizens arrange open spaces of mutual aid and care.

Conclusions

A notion of "urban scenography" appears to be instrumental both on theoretical and practical levels. On the practical one (from the perspective of urban activists) it is helpful while working on revitalization of underused public spaces by rearranging configurations of spatial elements, creating new points of attractions on micro-level and developing alternative scenarios of use of the place. While on theoretical level it encourages to use micro-optics, concentrating not only on artistic urban interventions.

Urban art interventions are seen as critical creative activities in public space, which not only reveal the potential of public space by deconstructing (in a playful way) spatial and temporal structures and regulations, but also encourage co-action and new forms of citizen solidarities. In the context of interventionists' practices, citizens become active scenographers of their everyday urban surrounding.

The proposed notion (or rather a metaphor) of “urban scenography” is quite similar to what de Certeau calls “space syntax”, but it brings more attention to urban materiality and encourages the analysis of dynamic configurations of urban elements, including even small accidental items, which are brought into city space not by power institutions and space experts (city planners and architects), but by citizens.

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MIESTO SCENOGRAFIJA: KŪNIŠKAS IR EMOCINIS PATYRIMAS

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Santrauka

Idėją apie tai, kad kiekviena erdvinė konfigūracija numato tam tikrą „choreografiją“ (arba kūnišką dinamiką ir judėjimo trajektorijas) ir generuoja kritiškas bei komiškas situacijas, savo filmuose atskleidžia Jacques'as Tati (filmai *Mano dėdė* (1958), *Metas žaisti* (1967) ir kt.). Šis Tati atradimas primena Michelio de Certeau tezę apie tai, kad „erdvė yra aktualizuojama per judesius, atliekamą šioje erdvėje, ansamblį“ (de Certeau 1984: 117). Judančiam kūnui miesto erdvė atsiveria kaip kliūčių ir galimybių konfigūracija.

Plėtodami tezę apie tai, kad erdvės konfigūracijos formuoja tam tikrus elgesio tipus ir emocinius turinius, situacionistai priėjo prie „unitarinio urbanizmo“ idėjos (Chtheglov 1958; Kotányi, Vaneigem 1961). Siekdami užtikrinti sąmoningą miestiečio laikyseną savo aplinkos atžvilgiu, jie siūlė konstruoti dinamiškas atviras aplinkas, kurias galėtų reorganizuoti patys miestiečiai. Kaip paralelinę miestiečių „aktyvinimo“ taktiką situacionistai siūlė „konstruoti situacijas“. Miesto scenografijos (kaip dinamiškos elementų konfigūracijos) koncepcija yra paranki analizuojant ne tik menines intervencijas į viešąsias erdves, bet ir kasdienes spontaniškas intervencijas, prie kurių priskiriame platų diapazoną miestiečių inicijuojamų (valingai arba nevalingai) miesto pokyčių. Taip pat ši koncepcija naudotina kaip analitinis įrankis, atskleidžiantis abipusį urbanistinės aplinkos, kasdienių scenarijų ir emocinio bei kūniško miestiečių patyrimo sąveiką.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: kūniškas patyrimas, miesto erdvės, emocijos, rutininiai scenarijai, situacionizmas, miesto intervencijos, miesto scenografija.

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