



**THE CITY AS MEDIA:
The Signatures of Order and the Scopes of Real Life**

A CIDADE COMO MÍDIA:

As assinaturas do ordem e as margens da vida real

DIE STADT ALS MEDIUM:

Die Signaturen der Ordnung und die Spielräume des Realen

Thomas A. Bauer¹

Abstract:

This text was presented by Thomas Bauer during the 4th International Congress for Culture and Communication, event organized by CISC in November 2008. Right after the moment that established pre-remarks about the topics communication, sense, image and passage, analyses the cities as media. That is, the urban environment functioning as a media. Considering the city as a symbolic environment, reflects about the meaningful relationship between city, imagination of social life and mediality (mediatisation) of social communication as a reference of sense of living.

Keywords: City; communication; media; identity.

Resumo:

Este texto foi apresentado por Thomas Bauer durante o IV Encontro Internacional da Comunicação, Cultura e Mídia, evento promovido pelo CISC em novembro de 2008. A partir do momento em que o autor estabeleceu uma noção prévia a respeito dos tópicos comunicação, significado, imagem e passagem, faz uma análise das cidades como mídia. Isto é, do ambiente urbano funcionando como uma mídia. Considerando a cidade como um ambiente simbólico, reflete sobre a relação de significado entre cidade, imaginação da vida social e mediatização da comunicação social como uma referência do sentido da vida.

Palavras-chave: Cidade; comunicação; mídia; identidade.

¹ University of Vienna. E-mail: thomas.bauer@univie.ac.at





Premises:

I do this presentation in respect of following pre-remarks:

1.

Communication: I understand communication as a social model of construction of sense and meaning. Each consideration and verification of the social, cultural and symbolic environment is done in order (with the purpose) to decide in favour of sense. (Vilém Flusser: communication is the art-trick to forget the finite nature of life. In that philosophical / anthropological context communication is the way to find (create) the difference as a resource of sense. That gives sense to following definition: communication is the unification of difference and the distribution of sociability ("Gesellschaftlichkeit")

2.

Sense: I understand sense (meaning) as a figure or a model of implicit knowledge (not of explicit prove or evidence) on the relation of man with his/her situation ("sitio") on three levels (Edmair):

- sense is, where is utility,
- sense is, where things happen according to aesthetics needs,
- sense is, where things happens according to ethical principles

3.

Image: The city as a model of construction of sense. Talking about the image of the (a) city is to reconstruct the structural references for a usable life, an aesthetical life and an ethical life. Images are cultural complexes of social observation of individual observation.





4.

Passage: Talking about the city as a structural complex of sociability and as a structural and cultural passage of social practice we are in search of an explication of the media quality of a city. The image of a city is not as the city appears. The images of cities are the result of the conversation about life and lives in city. In this sense images always represent a social conversation (discourse) and - following Michel Foucault - and social orders.

I should start with examples in order to give accessibility to the theoretical concept I try to build: The French filmmaker Mathieu Kassovitz has made a film about life in these urban environments, outside Paris. „Le Haine" (the hate) is a movie which plays in the so-called „Banlieue", some twenty miles from Paris, where 80 percent of the inhabitants and 100 percent of the youth have nothing to do. The youth doesn't go to school any more, but instead the young people hang out at the entrances of the buildings, smoking joints and waiting... they wait until they get offers to do little deals with drugs and weapons, because, so Kassovitz, where drugs are, weapons are not far. For Kassovitz, the "Banlieue" is a space of cultural diversity. Although he portrays the increasing problems in connection with drugs and weapons, he also finds some moments of peace and integration.

Amsterdam Zuid, is a "peaceful" example for an edge city. It is completely artificial, generated at the Southern edge of Amsterdam, directly on the water. It is a floating urban dwelling with modern apartment houses and stores, made of glass, wood and concrete. It is quite well connected to the city centre and it is not too far away to not take the bike, which is a crucial factor in Amsterdam, defining what is connected and what is disconnected.

The Austrian filmmaker Barbara Albert has portrayed the life of people in such a commuter dwell house at the edge of Vienna. "Nordrand" (1999) is a movie which





impressingly describes the life and routine of various people living in this environment. Topics like social exclusion, drug abuse and illegal trade with weapons, unwanted pregnancy and decay of the youth. etc., are all packed into the plot of the movie.

The inhabitants of these dwellings are often unemployed, depending on social support, or foreigners without perspectives on their lives, spatially and physically excluded from the culture of the city they are living in. These housing complexes are not "cities in the city", because they are totally lacking of infrastructural public institutions. Although they create an environment of their own and as such some sort of solidary and community, this kind of social surrounding is anti-productive and enforces violence due to its internal, as well as external closure.

These dwellings are source of various social milieu studies. Almost every city has some of those, where unemployment, crime and drugs seem to dominate day-to-day life.

These dwellings are neither so-called "edge cities", nor are they suburbs, because the former term ("edge city") is used to describe "(...) urban places of residence and work which have grown up on the outer rims of established cities" (Barker, 2000: 308) and the latter ("suburb") is a term that describes urban places close to big cities, where jobs are rare and commuters travel every day into the city to do their job and return. But nevertheless we could call them suburban universes, worlds that got stuck between city and countryside, urban places which are always in "established cities", but they are excluded from the centres because observed among the youth in these areas. They skip school, have no jobs, too much time to spend when leisure facilities and jobs are missing.

On the other side every city has a district or a region it is especially famous for. There is for example the Portobello market as a favourite infrastructural symbol of London, but here is more to say about it. The district where the market is situated in, is called Notting Hill. It has always been an upper class district with a lot of green and leisure





facilities, but it also hosts a crowd of young people of all cultures, mainly artists, who have gathered around the market, having their ateliers and flats in the surrounding area. The turning point of the district's development was the release of a Hollywood movie, called "Notting Hill", after the district's name. It introduced the region worldwide as one of the most cultural, most international, most artistic and most beautiful areas of London, with the result that people from all over the world (of course only the ones who could afford it) wanted live in Notting Hill. Half of the Hollywood starlets and half of New York's model and movie scene had decided to own a little apartment in London's most famous area. The result was a gigantic rise of real estate prices which forced most of the young artists and the former alternative crowd to leave Notting Hill, because they couldn't afford life in this district any more. They were replaced by an upper class society, partly young successful Londoners, working in financing and economic professions, partly international stars and wannabes. Notting Hill has changed ever since Hollywood has launched its attack against a part of original London culture.

Anyway, all I want to say is, that the image of districts changes in the course of time. Also in the case of Amsterdam, a former worker and proletarian district, de Jordaan, has become the "number one spot" for young upper class crowd. Basically, every city has a Notting Hill. In the case of L.A. it is Beverly Hills, in the case of New York it is Soho, or Manhattan as a whole, Amsterdam has the Jordaan, Hamburg its Schulterblatt, São Paulo's Notting Hill maybe is Jardins. All these regions, areas or districts have in common that they are sources of identification, meaning that, for instance, every Londoner, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender.. etc., identifies with Notting Hill, being proud of its international recognition and the fame the city receives from it.

Situation, Place and Media:





Generalizing and abstracting this phenomenon brings me so far to give favour to a situation-theoretical model of media that says: the city, maybe better to say: the urban environment functions as a media: Citizens, insiders living with the ambient take this environmental setting as a common point of reference for local myths, local narrations and for the definition of the community or for stimulation of conversation - and thus they find themselves in communication, feeling and sharing that feeling that they are connected due to a common setting: the city as it is meant, not as it is (appears). They agree on a media that makes sense for them to come or to remain in communication, to exchange meanings, to construct and to create a common reality: the city.

The city (better to say: the imagination of what people thinks the city is) becomes a means of reference and fosters and stimulates the symbolic interaction. Outsiders take the environment as a point of reference for identification and assessment and reflect in the same time their own status in relation to what they see. The city (architectural environment, public space, urban life, local events and eventual locality) is primarily a visual media, is a media because it is taken as an image and creates an image because it is taken as a media. And what is important: insiders and outsiders refer to complex composed pictures / images, better to say. they visualize (imagine, construct) through that reference the identity of the citizen and they shape their social personality in relation to such symbolism. Citizens use the city as a source of images that are taken as references for sociability, community, common pride or common shame, in any way for representing and reflecting identity, self-awareness and self-assessment - always in use of the supposition, that anyone else knows or could know, what one knows. That's, what media is: it is a means of reference and a code of generalisation making things real and true, because there are so many others to be supposed that they are thinking in a way as I do.





The media becomes a certification and a code of reality. Those public codes that are composed

-by architecture,

-by special assemblies or emblems,

-by facilities of using place and time for leisure, culture, communication and togetherness

-by events.

There is an important point to be seen: media are not media by themselves, just existing as structures, media are media, because those structures and codes are used as that. It is the meaningful usage that makes a infrastructure becoming a media. A newspaper becomes a paper of news, because it is read in purpose of that, television becomes a media, because it is used for that purpose, and a city becomes a city, because it is used as such. The media quality of a city is mediality (in Anglo-American language context: "mediatisation"). That says: everything that has a meaning for the sense of living gains a meaning in relation to the environment of living.

Active Means of Communication

Urban communication can either be active and direct, or passive and indirect. I use the term active, when communication doesn't depend on a carrier medium - a newspaper, billboards, TV... etc. Direct communication takes place, when the city itself takes over the role of the medium. Architecture, for instance, is active communication. Of course, it could be argued, that the building is a medium of urban architectural communication which carries the message and has therefore be seen as passive as, for instance, communication through a city magazine. But I still want to call this kind of communication active, because by using the term "city" it is already implicated, that we have to deal with





an accumulation of buildings that, more or less, stand in relation to each other and all together form an urban environment.

Before I start to describe the various means of communication, it seems quite useful to make categories, in order to bring a kind of structure into the work. While I had done my research, I realized that I could differentiate two major categories: active and passive means of communication.

Anyway, I declare architecture to be active. Which means that the way buildings are constructed and out into relation with their environment, already carries a message and is, in the sense of my work, an act of communication. An example therefore is the architecture of "Red Vienna", the historio-political period, which is responsible for the social achievements of the social democratic party in the city of Vienna. The buildings of this period all carries the same message: they wanted to provide decent living conditions to lower class workers. Due to accurate housing needs and terrible living conditions after the fall of the monarchy, the proletariat had to live in rooms of twenty square meters, sometimes in six or more, without toilets and running water. Helmut Weihsmann has published his work about the socio-democratic architecture of "Red Vienna" in 1985. It brilliantly portrays the surrounding social and political conditions of the 1920ies and 1930ies in socialist Vienna, by focusing on the political message of its architecture.

Another active form of urban communication is geography or topography. It is direct because it doesn't need a medium either. By topography, I would like to refer to the topographic conditions a city is grown in. For example, Amsterdam is situated right next to the sea, which makes it a very specific environment. The city itself is characterized by the canals, which flow through it. The city's history is marked by a seemingly endless struggle for land against the sea, which has also formed people's attitudes, in terms of their strong identification with the city but also with the water.





Another prominent example is Rio de Janeiro, which is geographically formed by the countless mountains surrounding the city. The best-known mountain, which has also become the symbol of the city, is the Corcovado, Rio de Janeiro's inhabitants most famous landmark to identify or to be identified with.

Passive Means of Communication

In opposition to direct urban communication stands the indirect, or passive communication. I can't admit that the difference between active and passive urban communication is problematic because the borders are not fixed but shifting, and it is sometimes unclear whether we could call some forms active or passive. It is indeed doubtful if architecture is active because it uses buildings as messengers. But I still would like to remain with this differentiation/distinction because, in this case of passive means of communication it is not the city itself that communicates, but it is a medium, thus tightly connected to the city, reporting on topics, which are concerning the city. For example, I would like to mention urban media, such as city-newspapers, magazines, radio channels, billboards, city-lights, info-screens. etc. What all of them have in common, is that the city uses a medium, other than architecture, to communicate with its inhabitants - the newspaper, the internet or the radio and television. Buildings, abstractly spoken, are direct, whereas newspapers and internet pages are the indirect media.

Differing the active means from the passive has brought me to the fact of visibility. Active communication, like architecture and geographic conditions, are more visible than urban media, in terms that their communication reaches far more people than just the city's inhabitants. What I mean is, that architecture represents a city, by allowing certain buildings or constructing, including their messages, to become signs/symbols of the city. The World Trade Centre, with its enormous height, was not just an important part of the





economic growth, communicating the message of successful capitalism of one of the most advanced industrially and financially development societies to the entire globe.

The Urban Identity

The aim of this part of analysis I am presenting here is the description of what could be understood by an urban person, regardless of actual race, ethnicity, gender and age. Of course, these characteristics play a major role in the reflexive discourse about self-identity, and I would now like to focus on something that could fit, like a coat, on each identity, something like a supra-identity which would be able to leave certain social constructs of identity, such as social class, ethnicity and nationality behind.

The urban identity is something like a creation, which consists of all other forms of identity, including race, ethnicity, sex, gender, nationality, age. etc. but without evaluating, or weighting it. Urban space is open for everything and everybody - the city itself doesn't have any preferences, in terms of being more favourable to males than to females or less friendly to foreigners than to indigenous. Urban governments or the economy are the factors, of course tightly connected to urban space, which have preferences of males over females or for foreigners over locals. But city space in its very meaning is free of prejudices. Again: the city is neutral. Its interpretation ("use") is valuating.

It could be argued that the urban environment is less attractive for children to grow up, but this is, at least to my mind, not true. It depends on leisure facilities, parks, schools and many other things important for children to feel protected, as well as to find enough opportunities to grow up and play or learn. Taking all this into consideration we can't admit that the existence of all these facilities depends on urban governments, and not on the city space itself.





Anyway, what I want to stress is that urban space is a neutral territory.

Urban identity is multifaced and individually differing, which means that there are uncountable possibilities of what an urban identity consists of. It could, for example, be Austrian Asian, female, at the age of twenty-five, working in an ICT profession and being single, as well as it could be Austrian, at the age of thirty, unemployed and married. What all combinations have in common is the fact that they are urban, which means that they are living one of the various possible urban lifestyles.

Again, what all of these lifestyles have in common are the characteristics of an urban environment which is defined as being spatially limited, having a high concentration of people and activities within this limited space, and of the existence and diffusion of a certain set of values or a particular cultural system - the urban culture.

The urban identity, from an anti-essentialist approach, is a discursive construct, as any other form of identities and is defined by pointing out what it is not. Urban identity, and therefore the urban person, stands in opposition to rural identity and the rural person, thus it is significant that the urban identity is not a fixed, universal entity, but it is changeable and always open for changes. For instance, a person who decides to migrate to a city for whatever reason he/she might have, will witness and identity change from rural person into an urban person, while a part of his/her "rural self" remains. This fact makes him/her different to another urban person who lives in a city for his/her entire life.

I believe that urban identities are all cosmopolitans, because the city itself is a cosmopolitan space, where so many nationalities, ethnicities and cultures melt into what we call the urban culture. I agree with Brah's (1996) concept of diaspora space, when he declares the indigenous being a diasporian as much as the diasporian being a native. I go further and say that the concept of cosmopolitanism works in similar way, which means that the simple worker is a cosmopolitan because he is surrounded by cosmopolitan





values, cosmopolitans and cosmopolitan culture. Being cosmopolitan doesn't only mean to travel around the world and to see different cultures, but it also means to live in a cosmopolitan environment, surrounded by cosmopolitan influences. Again, I bring the issue of travelling into the discourse.

Diaspora and cosmopolitanism, although being totally different in its meaning, are two similar concepts, meaning that they work outing a similar way. Cosmopolitan's travel around the world, bringing pieces of the foreign, visited cultures back home and enriching their cultural environment by introducing new practices or styles. Diasporian's (in the original concept) are forced to leave their homes, but they too arrive in another environment and enrich it by introducing their cultural values. In the new concept of diaspora, the diasporian is anyway compared to a cosmopolitan by the means of travel.

I would like to point out again the fact, that although urban space in theory is a neutral space, in practice it is often not. We all accept that space, especially urban space can be gendered. This means that in some cities, women know that it is dangerous for them to enter certain spaces and so they don't. Parks, narrow alleys or subway stations. etc., are such gendered urban spaces. This means, that some urban persons/identities have to learn to live with certain constraints, which only the urban space comes up with. The same is true for children and foreigners. more general, gendered spaces especially occur for vulnerable groups.

Identification and Integration through Urban Communication

Cities have always been and will always be great melting pots of various cultures and peoples. More than ever before, the postmodern city faces challenges, in terms of how to integrate these various cultures and identities by providing a decent environment for everyone. And further, due to already recognizable changes in world order, identities and identity projects (Giddens, 1991) have been driven into crisis. It almost seems as if it





has become the latest fashion to consult a psychiatrist to discuss ones "urban neurosis", looking at American metropolises, seeing a shrink once a week is part of the contemporary urban lifestyle. But what happens to those people who cannot afford psychotherapie? Is the urban environment so stressful and unhealthy that cities drive its inhabitants crazy? What happens to all the stress and mad rush, a city dweller is confronted with all day long? Does it have to result in violence, neurosis, anger and ignorance?

Cities are quite challanging environments, they demand a complex reflection. Not only that class struggle divides the urban popultaion into two or more "rivalling opponents", also anti-social dynamica like racisms, crime and all forms of social intolerance, create a highly explosive environment which makes a peaceful "together" of the various cultures a utopian illusion.

The fundamental issue at stake is the increasing lack of communication between the directional functions of the economy and the informational elite that performs such functions, on the one hand, and the locally oriented population that experiences an ever deeper identity crisis, on the other. (Castells, (1993) 2000: 73)

As Castells has pointed out, there is a great lack of communication within the separated social classes. None of them feels the need and desire to communicate with the other, which is sad because the city could be a fantastic source of creativity, providing positive vibes which could be used by everyone, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, age. etc. But in fact, integration hardly ever takes place, and if it does, it is based, in most of the cases, on economic means. Who is included and who is excluded depends upon his/her (or the group's) necessity and importance for those who have the power to decide upon whom to integrate or whom to marginalize. This last argument could be understood in terms of including a city into the network of important industrial





cities, as well as it could be understood in terms of referring to a single person's skills and the question if those skills are needed within the dominant group. The urban environment, one could assume, is a highly selective one, and having once been integrated doesn't necessarily mean to remain integrated forever. Integration is dependent upon necessity, or the need for one's skills, and if this need vanishes, for whatever reason, integration stops immediately and the revised process starts - the process of exclusion and marginalization.

What I described here is not necessarily characteristic for the urban environment in particular, but it rather describes societies as such. But what additionally defines the urban situation, is that, contrary to the countryside, the social skills and relations are often missing. Whereas a person, who is not (or not anymore) integrated into urban processes, "falls out of" this social net, a person in the countryside is more likely to be rescued from falling, because the social networks in a different way in rural areas. The urban environment is a tough environment, especially in American cities, where social institutions are almost completely missing. But also in Europe, urban development has started to work after the American model, which indicates an even harsher challenge for social and cultural integration.

It seems as if the further we are economically progressing, the more possibilities arise to become socially excluded. The latest "possibility" is described by Manuel Castells (1998) as the Rise of the Fourth World - the story of social exclusion of people in the Information Age, who are not connected to, or bypassed by, the flows of wealth and the networks of information and communication. This leads to the social group of information-poor, the unconnected, or in general the fourth world. The fourth world is a phenomenon, which is not only to appear in developing countries, but also, and this is what I am mainly interested in, in highly developed societies, most likely in urban areas. It





doesn't only describe whole populations, but it could also just affect a single person, or the vast majority of an ethnic minority in a city. Taking this into account, Sarre and Blundon (1996) have indicated, that most global cities will encompass within a third world city.

Contemporary cities are marked by class struggle and social polarization, due to (although not exclusively) an ever increasing informationalization of human life. As I have described, the Dual City (Castells, 1989) is the urban form, which bases on this division. Globalization is the driving engine of contemporary urbanization and therefore responsible for many social problems happening in postmodern metropolises. Rural exodus and mass migration into metropolitan area have resulted in enormous and rapid urban growth and have additionally, especially in cities of the developing world, led to uncontrolled urban growth. It is not any more the ghetto which is most problematic for urban administrations, because although ghettos are dodgy areas and the living standards are very low, inhabitants are registered and the basic needs of human life, such as running water and electricity can be granted by the city government.

But the latest development, connected to urban growth, is the rise of so-called container or shuttle towns. These areas are inhabited by unregistered people, people who live there illegally, without paying taxes on the one hand, and as a result, on the other hand without receiving anything from city administrations. Since those people are illegals, they are not allowed to do legal work, and so they often work for the so-called criminal economy. These "urban districts" are not connected to any kind of urban network, not to electricity, running water and sanitation, transport. etc. These areas are totally excluded from the rest of the city, even police or street workers have no access to these "negated urban spaces". The criminal economy which has managed to establish itself within shuttle cities, is mainly based on prostitution, the production and distribution of illegal drugs and





trade with weapons. Once trapped in this vicious circle, it is very unlikely to get out again, so that the exchange from people of this kind of social milieu to another one is very rare.

Conclusion: Urban Literacy

To conclude my reflection about the meaningful relationship between city, imagination of social life and mediality (mediatisation) of social communication as a reference of sense of living:

1.

Understanding cities as a media needs to be aware of mediality as a key factor of quality of urban life. The everyday experience of a citizen is that his/her identity feeling depends from usability of the city as a mediating complex of structures, events and relations.

It also needs a concept of urban competence, somehow something like media literacy which is the competence of an intelligent use of media as a cultural tool for cultural interests and needs - thus understanding the city as a challenging model of social practice. In that sense I am thinking of a preventive program of education pointing out the chances and challenges of social life in cities, in order to develop more public attention to values of sociality like mutual awareness and attention, civil courage etc. The pathology of the city always is the pathology of the social image of it and expresses itself in mutual distrust or in other variations of social phobia.

2.

Cities need a concept of mediality and it is a part of the responsibility of administration and governance to take care for the city not only as a social as a infrastructural, as an economic, as a social or as a cultural, but also as a symbolic and





imaginative environment. The city as an image and the images of the city are matrices of sense, matrices of substantiality of life, matrices of sociability and models of distribution of sociality. Having come so far, we have arrived at Vilém Flusser: Understanding the city as a situative media, being the reference model for communication, but also being the symbolic product of communication, the city is a structural, social, cultural, symbolic, and imaginative matrix of unification of difference and of distribution of sociality - and in that way the art-trick against the solitude and against the tendency of (social) nature in the direction of entropy. The city is the experiment to deny the nature:

"Interpreting our engagement for communication in that way, then statistical (and generally quantifying considerations) become meaningless. The question how probable it is that stones and bricks will arrange to become a city and when they will fall apart again becoming a heap of ruins, is then a wrong question. The city result due to the proposition to give a meaning to the senseless existence to death": (Flusser 1998, p. 14)





Referências Bibliográfica

BARKER, C. (2000): Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice. London

BAUER, Thomas A. (2008): Signaturen der Mediengesellschaft: Stil-Bildung und Ästhetik des Lebens im Fluidum von Medialität. In : Thomas A. bauer / Gerhard E. Ortner (eds.): Bildung für Europa. Politische Ansprüche und Anregungen für die Praxis. Paderborn, p. 122 - 145
 BRAH, A. (1996): Cartographies of Diaspora. London

CASTELLS, M. (1993): European Cities, the Information Society and the Global Economy. In: A. Gray / J. McGuigan (eds.): Studying Culture. Arnold

CASTELLS, M. (1998): The Information Age. Vol 3: End of Millenium. Oxford
 FLUSSER, V. (1998): Kommunikaologie. Ed by Stefan Bollmann und Edith Flusser. Frankfurt
 FOUCAULT, M. (1977): Discipline and Punish. London

SARRE, P./Blundon, J. (1996): Environment, Population and Development. In: J. Beynon/D. Dunkerly (eds.): Globalization. The Reader. London

WEIHSMANN, H. (2002): Das Rote Wien: Sozialdemokratische Architektur und Kommunalpolitik 1919-1934. Wien

