

# CORPORE PRAESENTI. WALKING IN URBANSCAPE WITH SIEGFRIED KRACAUER AND GEORGES PEREC

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*We did not seek the formula for overthrowing  
the world in books, but by wandering*  
Guy E. Debord

## 1. Walking in Urbanscape

In chapter 6 of *Don Quixote*, Cervantes draws a very clear distinction between courtiers and knights based on the different relationship that these subjects maintain with the world:

the courtiers, without stirring out of their apartments, or crossing their thresholds, traverse the whole globe in a map, without a farthing expense, and without suffering heat or cold, hunger or thirst. But we, the true knights-errant, measure the whole earth with our own feet, exposed to sun and cold, to the air and the inclemencies of the sky, by night and by day, on foot and on horseback. Not only do we know our enemies in picture, but in their proper persons.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the fascination the cartographic simulation inspires, by offering the chance to see all the world with ease, without even having to go out and suffer the hot and the cold weather, hunger and thirst, geography still remains an uncomfortable, tiresome science that measures the world with its feet. And there's more, according to Armand Frémont, "geographers often have muddy feet"<sup>2</sup>. New-born errant knights, their feet are muddy because

<sup>1</sup> Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1847, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Armand Frémont, *Aimez-vous la géographie?*, Paris: Flammarion, 2005, p. 28.

geographers roam everywhere, stepping on the ground and taking deep breaths. They walk around the world without ever stopping, 'by night and by day': they know that, as a great 18<sup>th</sup> century walker reminds us,

wheresoever I go, I always see before me a space in which I can proceed further. Thus I am conscious of the limits of my actual knowledge of the earth at any given moment, but not of the limits of all possible geography.<sup>3</sup>

Walking can represent a revolutionary act. It contradicts the typically modern idea of a static subject, which contemplates the world standing motionless in front of it. On the contrary, the experience of places solicits movement. Leibniz was also perfectly aware of this, when in §57 of the *Monadology* (1714), he wrote that "the same town, looked at from various sides, appears quite different and becomes as it were numerous in aspects".<sup>4</sup>

To this first consideration, the source of so-called 'perspectivism', we add another, this time from Leibniz's short essay *On social life* (1679):

Thus one can say that the place of others [...] is a place proper to help us discover considerations which would not otherwise come to us; and that everything which we would find unjust if we were in the place of others must seem to us to be suspect of injustice.<sup>5</sup>

In these two fragments Leibniz is not just simply stating that the vision of the city from different points of view enables us to observe different things; but that the city does not exist as a 'total' object, a reassuring and definitive unit. In order to bring into focus a global image that is as variegated and accurate as possible, it is necessary to multiply the points of observation. The result of this operation goes well beyond the specific case: a single look at the city is, for its own nature, misleading; the compresence of different gazes (of different evaluation criteria, different observation practices, etc.) overcomes the limits that every individual point of view holds, and it is a *necessary condition to discover new things*.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, London: MacMillan & Co, 1922, p. 609.

<sup>4</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *The monadology and other philosophical writings*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, *Political Writings. Translated and edited with an Introduction and notes by Patrick Riley*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 81

This idea can be found across various fields of knowledge. We can find it, for example, in the theories of James J. Gibson, the great psychologist of visual perception. In *The Ecological Approach To Visual Perception* he states that “The single, frozen field of view provides only impoverished information about the world”.<sup>6</sup>

The way in which we meet the world (what Gibson calls *natural* or *ambulatory vision*) is not one that can be artificially created “we look around, walk up to something interesting and move around it so as to see it from all sides, and go from one vista to another”; and so it is necessary to start again from the fact that “the observer who walks from one vista to another, moves around an object of interest, and can approach it for scrutiny”.<sup>7</sup>

We can find a similar approach in the words of the urbanist Bernardo Secchi. For Secchi, urbanism is also made by feet and the city is a space we experience with our body:

bodies in movement that with their movement explore territories [...].  
Bodies of men and women, bodies that meet houses, sidewalks, pieces of asphalt and stone, cars and trains, pools and gardens.<sup>8</sup>

The experience of urbanscape implies movement, and for this reason it necessarily passes through our body, forcing us to confront ourselves with the hardships connected to corporeity (‘bodies that meet houses, sidewalks, pieces of asphalt...’). We have to walk, we have to move, to change our point of view, if we really want to explore different aspects of reality.

Walkscaping is a complex, tiresome, probably infinite activity (the limits of all possible geography can never be known, only the limits of our actual knowledge of the world can), but also necessary. This activity can use or produce very different descriptive practices, which are embodied respectively by the German sociologist and philosopher Siegfried Kracauer and by the the French writer Georges Perec. These two authors, so different from each other in terms of biography, geography, cultural background and *forma mentis*, still present some features in common. Both are deeply in love with

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<sup>6</sup> James J. Gibson, *The ecological approach to visual perception*, New York: Psychology Press, 1986, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 303.

<sup>8</sup> Bernardo Secchi, *Prima lezione di urbanistica*, Roma: Laterza, 2000, p. 143.

the urban space, and so dedicate themselves elegantly to the art of *flânerie*, walkscaping as a philosophy and a writing practice; both use the eye as an instrument of investigation into reality; both are interested in what usually passes by unnoticed, the obvious, the secondary, the daily (both have polemical instances against sociology, which captures only the most extravagant and exceptional aspects of life). Borrowing an expression from Stefano Boeri, both Percec and Kracauer can be defined as ‘detectives of space.’<sup>9</sup> Their apprehension (as much as their hopes) denote an unmistakable urban matrix that makes their work actually unintelligible if it’s deprived of its reference to the urbanscape (whose chasms they explore restlessly, walking on its streets). The city is an integral part of their personality, it’s their *chez soi*. But, leaving these affinities aside, there are also differences between the two in the way that they look at the urbanscape. In the following pages we will try to point out their visions of walkscape, focusing and discussing them.

## 2. Siegfried Kracauer: There is an ‘Inner Siberia’ in Urbanscape

Born in Frankfurt in 1889 and deceased in New York in 1966, architect, writer, journalist, philosopher, sociologist and cinematographic critic of Jewish origin, Siegfried Kracauer was one of the leading intellectuals of the Weimar Republic. Author of two novels (*Ginster*, 1928; *Georg*, published posthumously but written in 1934), of the theoretic-methodological essay *Sociology as Science* (1922), of a philosophical treatise about *The Detective Novel* (1922-1925) and of a study on *The Salaried Masses* (1930), in the 1930s Kracauer directed the cultural supplement of the Berlin issue of the prestigious ‘Frankfurter Zeitung’. In 1933, following the fire of the Reichstag, Kracauer leaves Germany and goes into exile in Paris. In 1938 he publishes *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*. In 1941 he moves to the U.S.: his works during the American period, with titles like *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947) and *Theory of the Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (1960) strengthen his fame as a theorist and cinema critic.

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<sup>9</sup> Stefano Boeri, “I detective dello spazio”, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 16 March 1997.

In the 1960s the same Kracauer tries to draw attention to his Weimar production with two collections of articles from the 1920s and 30s: *Das Ornament der Masse* (1963) and *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (1964). The latter in particular highlights the undisputable fascination that urban spaces – Berlin, first of all, but also Paris, Marseille, Nice and Positano – inspire in him. According to David Frisby, who in *Fragments of Modernity* attributes the utmost importance to the German philosopher, alongside Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, “if the metropolis is one of the key sites for the changing modes of experiencing modernity, then Kracauer must be judged to be one of its most sensitive excavators”<sup>10</sup>. Effectively, the texts he dedicates to urbanscape often assume the tendency of walkscapes, of a “reportage on the spot”, as though their author redacted them ‘with the pencil in hand’ – taking the expression from Adorno –, little by little, as, taking a walk, he sneaked into streets, squares, alleys and passages.

Methodologically, Kracauer is a flâneur: the city appears to him as a *terra incognita*, a fragmentary and labyrinthic space that can only be known in one way: piece by piece, street after street, walking all its distances. Only an eye like his, trained in architecture studies, can read in the jumble of street life and in its constitutive elements the topic qualities that make the places unique and unmistakable. In his own words, he describes this aspect as an “obsession”, an “intoxication of the streets”, which he cannot resist, and which leads him to walk Paris streets “for several hours each day through the quarters”. Let’s have a look at this emblematic passage from *Memory of a Paris street*:

I roamed about on these routes and must have awakened in every passerby the impression of an aimless stroller. And yet, strictly speaking, I was not aimless. I believed that I had a destination, but to my misfortune I’d forgotten it. I felt like someone who searches his memory for a word that burns on his lips, but he cannot find it. Filled with the longing to finally reach the place where what I’d forgotten would come back to me, I could not pass the smallest side street without entering it and turning the corner at its end. I would have liked best to explore all the courtyards and search through one room after another. When I peered to all sides, from the sun into the shadows and

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<sup>10</sup> David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*, New York: Routledge, 1986, p. 5.

back to the day, I had the distinct sensation that I was moving not only in space in search of my desired goal, but often enough transgressed the bounds of space and penetrated into time. A secret smugglers' path led into the realm of hours and decades, where the street system was just as labyrinthine as that of the city itself.<sup>11</sup>

This passion for urban details lets him capture the differences between Paris and Berlin in the different relationships these metropolises have with the memory of their past. In Paris the present has the shimmer of the past: the city carries the signs of age upon its urbanscape, and retains its hand-down possession as something alive. Berlin, on the contrary, is a vanguard city dominated by rootlessness, by the frenzy of the eternal and the ever-changing which eradicates the memories. If in Paris what has passed remains fixed to the urbanscape that during its lifetime was its home, here the streets appear to be without memory: "If in Germany something has not crumbled which remains standing in France, then this is only because it has never existed for us".<sup>12</sup>

The observation programme he adopts does not end simply in the impressionistic registration of the most blatant aspects of urban reality. Walkscaping suggests to Kracauer that the city isn't a smooth and homogeneous space, but a differentiated and qualitatively heterogeneous one: "Each social stratus has a space that is associated with it".<sup>13</sup> A great metropolis like Berlin for example harbours *at least two different kinds of urbanscape*:

We can distinguish between two kinds of urbanscape: first, those that are knowingly formed, and then those others which reveal themselves unintentionally. Those first ones spring from artistic will, realized in squares, vistas, groups of buildings and perspectival effects which Baedeker usually marks with an asterisk. The latter emerge, on the other hand, without prior planning. These are not compositions which, like Parisier Platz or the Concorde,

<sup>11</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Memory of a Paris Street", translation by Ross Benjamin of "Erinnerung an eine Pariser Strasse", in *Id., Strassen in Berlin und anderswo*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009, pp. 9-16 (<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/memory-of-a-paris-street>) (accessed 13/04/2016).

<sup>12</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "Paris Beobachtungen", *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 13 February 1927.

<sup>13</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, "On employment agencies: the construction of a space", in Neil Leach (ed.), *Rethinking Architecture. A reader in cultural theory*, London-New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 15.

owed their existence to a uniform built meaning, but are the creations of accidents, which cannot be drawn into calculation. Wherever stonework and roadways find themselves together, the elements of which proceed out of wholly different directions of interest, such an urbanscape is brought into being which has never itself been the object of any interest. It is as unformed as nature, and therefore resembles a landscape, in that it maintains itself unconsciously. Uncaring for its expression, it dawns over time.<sup>14</sup>

This distinction between intentional and unintentional/unconscious urbanscapes must be taken very seriously, because it has a central place in his Berlin reportages. As a whole, the city does not necessarily owe its overall configuration to a uniform built meaning: just like a building presents two façades – the main one, public, official, visible to everyone, while the other stays in the back, apart, hidden from view – in the same way it is possible to individuate a knowingly formed urbanscape, produced by conscious intentions, and an urbanscape that society refuses and removes, that gives voice to the contradictions that grow inside the city and where the vegetation of common people flourishes. If we read the miniatures that Kracauer dedicates to urban spaces with the attention they require, we notice that certain surroundings, details and atmospheres constantly recur, almost obsessively. These are uninhabited or dilapidated houses, railway stations, amusement parks, employment agencies, bars, passages, proletarian quarters, heated halls and underpasses. The atmosphere of each of them is one and the same, and this impression comes from the fact that these urbanscapes are characteristic locations, typical spaces that correspond to typical social relationships (small dependent existences, ordinary people, etc.). These spaces can be described as actual *darkscapes* – places of shadow, hidden from view, wrapped in the light of dusk: the employment agency is located “in the shadow”, in the rear sections of large building complexes; in the heated halls men “have stopped to shine”; inside the passages a “furtive half-light” seeps, etc. But why has Kracauer’s flânerie led him here? What does he hope to find?

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<sup>14</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Looking out of the window”, translation of “Aus dem Fenster gesehen”, in *Id., Strassen in Berlin und anderswo*, 2009, pp. 53-58 (<http://coyotedialectic.tumblr.com/post/125164140163/siegfried-kracauer-looking-out-of-the-window>) (accessed 13/04/2016). I have slightly modified this translation.

We can see it clearly in one of the most fascinating essays of the '30s, *Farewell to the Linden Arcade*. This is a real immersion in one of those characteristic marginal locations, where, similarly to what happened in "the inner Siberia", all memories, instincts and desires unfit for the adornment of the social façade are stored ("Desires, geographic debaucheries, and many images that caused sleepless nights were not allowed to be seen among the high goings-on in the cathedrals and universities, in ceremonial speeches and parades").

The Kaisergalerie – also called the Linden Arcade–, was inaugurated in 1873 in the presence of the Emperor; it was a covered gallery that connected Linden Avenue (a boulevard in the Mitte District of Berlin, so named for the lime trees that line its grassed pedestrian mall between two carriage-ways), with the crossing between Friedrichstrasse and Behrenstrasse. When Kracauer crossed it ("When I recently strolled through it once again...") it was already experiencing a later stage of decadency: it is no longer the destination of the strolls of the elites, and the luxurious Wiener-Café no longer rests under its arcades, where it has been replaced by small shops selling stamps, lingerie and souvenirs. Slabs of ice-cold marble and a partially opaque vault of glass have covered its Renaissance architecture, making it "completely neutral", similar to the vestibule of a department store. Transformations like this, which denaturalize the vocation of these transitional places to receive the "waste materials" of society, permit them to show, in the name of 'modernization', their enormous salvific potential:

The peculiar feature of the arcades was that they were passageways, ways that passed through the bourgeois life that resided in front of and on top of their entrances. Everything excluded from this bourgeois life because it was not presentable or even because it ran counter to the official world view settled in the arcades. They housed the cast off and the disavowed, the sum total of everything unfit for the adornment of the facade. Here, in the arcades, these transient objects attained a kind of right of residence, like gypsies who are allowed to camp only along the highway and not in town. One passed by them as if one were underground, between this street and the next. Even now the Linden Arcade is still filled with shops whose displayed wares are just such passages in the composition of bourgeois life. That is, they satisfy primarily bodily needs and the craving for images of the sort that appear in daydreams. Both of these, the very near and the very far, elude the bourgeois public sphere – which does not tolerate them – and like to withdraw into the



furtive half-light of the passageway, in which they flourish as in a swamp. It is precisely as a passage that the passageway is also the place where, more than almost anywhere else, the voyage which is the journey from the near to the far and the linkage of body and image can manifest itself.<sup>15</sup>

This fragment highlights a fundamental element in the exploration of the urban labyrinth: marginal and decadent places host the last shards of a memory that is destined to disappear.

In other words, they are counter-spaces, places of a possible albeit temporary escape from the rules and power relationships that supervise the functioning of society. Later, others will call “heterotopies” these crossing spaces, where the infringement of the social norm is allowed.<sup>16</sup> But it is in Kracauer that we can already find the discovery of the presence, in urban archipelagos, of frail and ghostly eterotopic islands: in 1944 the Linden Arcade would be bombed, and, at the end of the war, burned to the ground.

### 3. Georges Perec: The Neutrality of the Gait

Born in Paris in 1936, son of Polish immigrants, Georges Perec loses his parents very young: his father dies in the war in 1940, his mother is deported to Auschwitz, where she dies in 1943. A student at the Sorbonne (where he gets to know Roland Barthes) and a documentary researcher at the CNRS, he makes his debut as a novelist in 1965 with *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, which wins the Renaudot Prize. Member of the OULIPO (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, which means ‘workshop of potential literature’) and author of crosswords, Perec publishes in 1966 the novel *Which Moped with Chrome-plated Handlebars at the Back of the Yard?* and in 1967 *A Man Asleep*, which will later be turned into a film in 1974. Among his variegated literary production we cannot forget to mention *A Void*, entirely written without using the letter ‘e’ (the most common letter in French) and, most of all, his masterpiece: *Life a User’s Manual*; in 1984 Italo Calvino wrote that this book represents “the last real event in the history of the novel thus far” and defines its author as “one of the most significant literary personalities in the

<sup>15</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Farewell to the Linden Arcade”, in *Id.*, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar essays*, London: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 338.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, Spring 1986, pp. 22-21.

world".<sup>17</sup> Perec dies at the age of 46, in 1982, from lung cancer.

To live, explains Perec, "is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself".<sup>18</sup> Now, these spaces are always, inevitably, urban spaces: "I am a man of the cities". The special relationship the writer maintains with the urbanscape is intimately connected with one of the principal themes of his poetic: memory. Writing is commemoration and an uncertain but incessant stitching of the shreds of a negated childhood, an intent to re-elaborate a trauma – the loss of his parents – through a continuous work of remembrance that is a struggle against oblivion and the tragic consequences of History.<sup>19</sup> The frailty of memory finds an antidote in space: this is a reservoir of mnemonic traces of the past, and the practice of walkscaping is the privileged instrument of memory rescue. Perec's topophilia is manifest both in the book *Species of Spaces* and in an unfinished project significantly called *Lieux* (Places), and based on a precise working plan. After choosing twelve spots in Paris, which were somehow related to his biography, starting from 1969 the author would write every month, and for the following twelve years, two descriptions of one of them; the first one by going personally to the chosen spot and noticing in the most neutral way possible everything he came across while walking, or which he saw while sitting at a café. The second description would be written while staying far from the place and remembering all the memories related to it.<sup>20</sup> A double writing, of the place and of the memory; as Jacques-Denis Bertharion suggests once again, this project combines description and narration of the urbanscape to reach a simple yet very difficult objective: *lest we forget*, or, as Perec himself writes,

keeping something intact, rehearsing the same old memories year after year, summoning up the same faces, the same tiny events, gathering everything together into a crazy tyrannical memory.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Italo Calvino, "Perec e il salto del cavallo", *Riga*, 4, 1993, p. 134.

<sup>18</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London: Penguin, 1999, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques-Denis Bertharion, *Poétique de Georges Perec*. "...une trace, une marque ou quelques signes", Saint-Genouph: Librairie Nizet, 1998, p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, London: Penguin, 1999, pp. 55-56.

<sup>21</sup> Georges Perec cited in Philippe Lejeune, *La mémoire et l'oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe*, Paris: POL, 1991, p. 159.

From one part of this project the small book *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris* was born; sitting at a café in Place Saint-Sulpice in Paris, Perec spends three days (from the 18 to the 20 October 1974) taking note of everything that passes by – every person, object, event, action, and atmospheric condition – in a kind of stenographic report of a fragment of urban reality:

There are many things in Place Saint-Sulpice, for instance: a district council building, a financial building, a police station, three cafés, one of which sells tobacco and stamps, a movie theater, a church on which Le Vau, Gittard, Oppenord, Servandoni, and Chalgrin have all worked, and which is dedicated to a chaplain of Clotaire II, who was bishop of Bourges from 624 to 644 and whom we celebrate on 17 January, a publisher, a funeral parlor, a travel agency, a bus stop, a tailor, a hotel, a fountain decorated with the statues of four great Christian orators (Bossuet, Fénelon, Fléchier, and Massillon), a newsstand, a seller of pious objects, a parking lot, a beauty parlour, and many other things as well.

A great number, if not the majority, of these things have been described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, or registered. My intention in the pages that follow was to describe the rest instead: that which is generally not taken note of, that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds.<sup>22</sup>

The deal is to rescue and give value to what he calls “the infra-ordinary”, that *background noise* that fills everyday life, the whole of the habits and the repeated, ordinary, taken-for-granted gestures, which are never mentioned in official discourse, which only cares about the “great events”, what is extra-ordinary, and uncommon:

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist.

[...]

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<sup>22</sup> Georges Perec, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*, Cambridge: Wakefield Press, 2010, p. 3.

Behind the event there has to be a scandal, a fissure, a danger, as if life reveals itself only by way of the spectacular, as if what speaks, what is significant, is always abnormal: natural cataclysms or historical upheavals, social unrest, political scandals.

In our haste to measure the historic, significant and revelatory, let's not leave aside the essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible.

[...]

The daily papers talk of everything except the daily. The papers annoy me, they teach me nothing. What they recount doesn't concern me, doesn't ask me questions and doesn't answer the questions I ask or would like to ask.

What's really going on, what we're experiencing, the rest, all the rest, where is it? How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?<sup>23</sup>

In all these efforts to elaborate a phenomenology of daily life, walkscaping is the recovery of memories and fragments of the past which are inscribed in space and which are waiting to be saved before falling into oblivion for ever. It's not a coincidence that, among the twelve Parisian spots chosen by the author, Rue Vilin is included. Here, at no. 24, stood the house where Perec spent his early years with his parents and, after 1940, with his mother (who also worked there as a hairdresser). It's here that, after entrusting him to a Red Cross train that will take him to his father's family, his mother will be arrested and then deported to Auschwitz, where she will die "without understanding", as we read with discomfort in *W, or the memory of Childhood*.<sup>24</sup> At the time of the project on urban places Perec's birth house still existed, but it was already threatened with demolition: bulldozers and excavators tore to pieces the old, impracticable walled-up houses to transform the old popular neighbourhood of Belleville (where the house was situated) in accordance with new urban plans.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Georges Perec, "Approaches to what?", in Ben Highmore (ed.), *The Everyday Life Reader*, Oxon: Routledge, 2002, p. 177.

<sup>24</sup> Georges Perec, *W, or the memory of Childhood*, London: Harvill, 1988, p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> About this, the short-film *En remontant la rue Vilin* (1992) directed by Robert Bober and dedicated to the French writer: <https://youtu.be/ZBhQAYHRo3c> (accessed 13/04/2016).

From this perspective I would like now to focus my attention on the third novel of the author, *A Man Asleep*. Its plot is weak and can be easily summarised: one day an anonymous student, instead of getting up and getting ready for an exam, suffers a deep ataraxic attack, feeling indifference towards everything and everyone. The motto of his days becomes “to be without desire, or resentment, or revolt”<sup>26</sup>. His non-rebellion (since in order to rebel some force of will and interest in the world are still required) becomes an apprenticeship in neutrality: “All hierarchies and preferences must crumble and collapse”.<sup>27</sup> He becomes a murky shadow, hard kernel of indifference to which words such as hope, enterprise, success and perseverance sound void, because they have lost all their meaning; whose eyes “register no interest in what they see”.<sup>28</sup> Now, what is more relevant is that this “neutral eye” on the world, when it isn’t laying down sleeping or observing the cracks on the ceiling, when it isn’t playing solitary day-long games, or listening to the noises coming from the flat next to his, strolls through Paris, covering its spaces far and wide (as shown by the insistent use, in the text, of verbs of movement, such as walking, drifting, wandering, strolling...). A restless and desperate flâneur, “like someone carrying invisible suitcases” he goes in or goes out, crosses, skirts around or, “sitting outside a café”, gazes at the places which form the urbanscape, in an obsessive pilgrimage, which seems endless because it lacks a final destination: local cinemas where the insistent stink of disinfectant hangs in the air, bookshops and galleries, monuments, churches, equestrian statues, public urinals, Russian restaurants, fenced gardens, fun-fairs, markets, museums and back-street bars selling only wine by the glass; the Louvre colonnade and hoardings disfigured by tattered posters, etc. There is no element of the complex topography of Paris that is not touched by this “messenger delivering a letter with no address”: roads, squares, boulevards, stations and passages where an anonymous crowd bustles, unaware, restless, flocking together in useless and frantic gestures. An example, among several others:

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<sup>26</sup> Georges Perec, “A Man Asleep”, in *Id., Things. A story of the sixties with A Man Asleep*, p. 161.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

Still you walk, ever onwards, untiring, immortal. You search, you wait. You wander through the fossilised town, the intact white stones of the restored façades, the petrified dustbins, the vacant chairs where concierges once sat; you wander through the ghost town, scaffolding abandoned against gutted apartment blocks, bridges adrift in the fog and the rain.

Putrid city, vile, repulsive city. Sad city, sad lights in the sad streets, sad clowns in the sad music-halls, sad queues outside the sad cinemas, sad furniture in the sad stores. Dark stations, barracks, warehouse. The gloomy bars which line the Grands Boulevards, the ugly shopfronts. Noisy or deserted city, pallid or hysterical city, gutted, devastated, soiled city, city bristling with prohibitions, steel bars, iron fences, locks. Charnel house city: the covered markets that are rotting away, the shanty towns disguised as housing projects, the slum belt in the heart of Paris, the unbearable horror of the boulevards where the cops hang out: Haussmann, Magenta – and Charonne.<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger's *Being and Time* comes to mind, especially when he writes that "Even when these and still more are objectively present, Da-sein can be alone"<sup>30</sup>. In *A Man Asleep* the Da-Sein gives evidence of a perfect overturning of the Heideggerian concept of be-distancing. Not only the distance between himself and others, between himself and the world doesn't disappear, but he himself retreats and backs off, cutting ties with the world, building an impenetrable wall of indifference of his own. Walker without direction, he transforms the condition of him being-alone from "a deficient mode of being-with" into an armour, somnambulism, invisibility. If the crowd appears anonymous to him it's principally because he himself is, first of all, an anonymous individual, with no face nor name.

"Essentially, nothing else stands 'behind' the phenomena of phenomenology".<sup>31</sup> In *A Man Asleep* the stare directed to the urbanscape simply consists in recording visual stimuli: describing the urban spaces is just a matter of capturing the immediate presence of things, without programmatically pushing oneself beyond their appearance: "there is nothing for you to understand, just something to look at".<sup>32</sup> This programme of observation of reality renounces posing questions, trying to decipher the urban

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 113.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Georges Perec, "A Man Asleep", in *Id.*, *Things. A story of the sixties with A Man Asleep*, p. 153.

space going beyond the immediacy, looking for hidden meanings. There is nothing to understand, no meaning 'behind' the "combinations of shapes and lights".<sup>33</sup> Phenomena *are*, urbanscape *is* – there is nothing more to say: "All moments are equivalent, all spaces are alike".<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. The Detectives of Urban Space

Whether they look at urbanscapes as pure, self-evident, factual and irreducible meanings (like in *A Man Asleep*); or as signifiers to decipher in order to reclaim individual or collective memories, the modalities through which Perec and Kracauer, these two great detectives of urban spaces, describe urbanscape, follow three main paths.

The first one is the odologic dimension: walkscaping as a practice of observation and a description of reality. The city is not only a place or a series of places where you "stay", it's also a network of crossings, of routes, of deviations. In other words, it cannot be truly known from above, as in a map or from a sedentary observation; it can only be revealed in all its variety and vastness of internal articulations through an ambulatory vision. This implies measuring the urbanscape with the feet, and, consequently, a series of actions requiring movement, restlessness, apprehension: walking, exploring, sauntering, dawdling, wandering, going, idling about, etc. (all these actions require more than just an intellectual effort; walkscaping is a *corpore praesenti* activity, which means it's primarily done with the body... to quote Certeau, Kracauer and Perec are not 'voyeurs', but 'walkers'). As the knights-errant described by Cervantes, the flâneur is dominated by a fever, an impulse to stir out of his apartment and explore all the streets, all courtyards, all squares, one after another (true, some healthy pause at a café table is conceded; but Perec's experiment in Saint-Sulpice doesn't take more than three days). He wants to question deserted or packed squares, badly broken sidewalks, gutted building sites, scruffy down-at-heel cafés, rows of houses and slightly convex asphalt surfaces, streets where cars never pass, stinking cinemas, parks, passages, pale walls. It's important to remember that the exploration of the urbanscape takes place in perfect solitude: the flâneur is

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

an isolated being; his being-alone is his existential trademark; he roams the city like a ghost.

If the first path can be associated with the figures of the knights-errant and the flâneur, the second presents some affinities with the excavator and the detective, people who follow their personal investigation, looking for hints that can help them solve the enigma. They roam pointlessly, but only apparently so; they trust that their instinct will indefectibly lead them somewhere, even though they don't know exactly where. What matters the most is what they are looking for, which is never something completely unknown (familiar memories in Perec; the memories of society in Kracauer). What are the clues that the detective follows? What does the excavator expect? Surely, not big events – what is usually described, inventoried, photographed, talked about, registered – but, more modestly, *the infra-ordinary*: life that doesn't shimmer, fragments of daily memories to recognize, keep, rehearse, summon, gather. The urbanscape is a secret smugglers' path to cover with no hesitations, a land rich in treasure to excavate patiently, an archive to be explored carefully; if you walk the path correctly, avoiding the traps set out along its course, if you make the right questions, the mnemonic traces the urbanscape retains can be rescued before they are lost forever.

Rescued from whom? From what? This is the third, fascinating trajectory of walkscaping. Rescued from fascism, the incubation of which Kracauer perceives with preoccupation along the streets and behind the façades of Berlin's buildings; the same fascism that shattered Perec's childhood, brutally severing the history of his family, as *W, or the memory of Childhood* testifies. The hint here is the city in perennial transformation, constantly changing its skin, deleting, with its urbanscape, also the memories associated with it: Berlin across the '20s and the '30s, Paris in the '60s and '70s. The demolition of old houses, the widening of the streets, follow the deliberations of programmes of urban renovation, in a fast spiral of renewal, treating urbanscape as a palimpsest which can be erased and then written again, in a potentially infinite process. Rootlessness, frenzy, forgetfulness – and then oblivion. What once existed is on its way to being never seen again. In this way, from different perspectives, these two authors tell a similar story, the daily struggle between an intentional and 'official' urbanscape that swallows and deletes a resisting urbanscape,



which gives body to the dreamlike images of the city (the fight is uneven and its result uncertain, but it seems more in favour of the first type of urbanscape). The flâneur fights this hurry in so promptly shaking off historic time. How? While he cannot avoid the destruction of the past, after his daily walk through the city, after collecting the traces of the perishing urbanscape, with his shoes still dirty with mud, he goes back to his newspaper's newsroom, or sits down at a café, and *writes*. His writing, configured as testimony, archive and transmission, perpetrates the memory of what is in peril of being swept away, disappearing for ever – and, in this way, writing *saves* the memory of what we were, by *checkmating Death*.