

Abstract

The City on Display Urban Aesthetics in the Digital Age

Tea Lobo

Cityscapes are increasingly being shaped by digital technologies. The design of “responsive” or “senseable” cities is, at least ideally, an expression of a bottom-up notion of city planning. Architects and urbanists are interested in collecting data on citizens’ responses to urban landscapes in order to plan cities that can in turn sense and adapt to these responses. This data is gathered from e.g. social media feeds, or eye-tracking studies performed on pedestrians—in order to design neighborhoods that respond to citizens’ real needs, and streets more conducive to a stress-free flow of urban crowds. In order to accomplish these goals, digital technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for analyzing and managing enormous data volumes (“big data”) and enabling customized solutions in city planning. The proposed project complements urbanists’ and architects’ empirical data-driven and statistical investigations with the study of art, particularly literature. The kinds of perceptions that novels describe are of course not in any way statistically significant, since they usually involve fictional characters. Art’s epistemological potential is of a different kind; it offers valuable insights beyond reductively quantitative studies. Even though an artwork need not represent actual perceptions, it arguably puts perception itself on display. An artwork is an aesthetic object, but it also has aisthesis (ancient Greek: perception) as its object. Therefore, a novel, for instance, allows the scrutiny and public communicability of hitherto unspoken, private sensations and a better perceptibility of today’s urban life forms and responses to the city. In the proposed project in comparative literature and the philosophy of the city, I will focus on contemporary novels (from 2000 onwards) in languages accessible to me in the original: English, German and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian.