

Introduction: Paris, invisible city: The plasma

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Introduction

Paris, invisible city: The plasma

Everything in the city remains invisible, everything and, over and above everything, the city taken as a whole.

One might say that we now have satellite maps enabling us to zoom in on every level, so conveniently that in a few clicks we can switch from the entire Ile-de-France to the roof of our building. We do therefore have the right, for once, with regard to Google Earth or the National Geographic Institute's site, to talk of a panopticon, since we "embrace the entire city" and are able, at the same time, to keep delving down into its minutest detail.

Well no, we do not actually "embrace" anything, we do not see anything, we do not "keep going down"! The illusion is strong, I admit; it is such fun roller-coastering up and down from the whole to the parts until your stomach turns, but if you think you are omniscient, you are kidding yourself. It is like confusing a video game with actually playing a rugby match. Moreover, satellite photos date; they are not in "real time". What you see is the city, your neighbourhood, your building, as they were a few months or years back, and in any case in another season, from a different light, and from the most improbable point of view – and the least informative. What does it matter to you to see the roof of your building? Are you an installer of antennae or a chimney sweep? The images are refreshed at intervals that are far too long for you to be faced with anything other than an illusion of seeing everything live – not to mention pixels that instantly mute into big brownish squares as soon as you go off the beaten track.

What would the view of Paris be if it could be refreshed so swiftly that you found yourself in real time and, above all, *real space*?

To refresh a space and make it a little more realistic, it is not a map that we need, irrespective of the number of pixels, but *oligopticons*. By this neologism I mean narrow windows through which, via numerous narrow channels, we can link up with only some aspects of beings (human and non-human) which together comprise the city. An official at the police prefecture watches the videos installed at Paris' main intersections. What does he see? A lot, from very close up; hence, the word "oligo-ptic". But videos film only certain aspects of what happens at intersections, and only that which serves to alert their colleagues on site – if they are able to reach them by radio and if these colleagues are willing to obey. Another example: you open

the yellow pages of the Paris telephone directory to find a plumber, and you find one. But you have seen virtually nothing, apart from pages and adverts, even though in your hands you do have "all" the artisans and trades in Paris. The map is no different to the directory: it simply sets out lists of sites, by longitudes and latitudes, whereas the directory does so by alphabetical order, with trades and names. No one would consider the big volume of Yellow Pages to be Paris, so why consider the map of Paris to be the territory?

The illusion of the zoom is so deceptive because of the impression of continuity. Because computers can so easily adjust pixels to all scales and link up data (ultimately, they are never more than zeros and ones saved as electric potential on sheets of silicon), they enable us to believe that between all these points of view there is a passage with no solution of continuity. And yet there is no straightforward relationship, no bridges, between what the police officer sees on the monitors at the Paris prefecture and what you see in the pages of the directory when you point to the name of your favourite plumber. We have really got to avoid connecting these two oligopticons in the same space, as if they were two points of view of the same whole. They are not joined. They are incommensurable – even if Google, cleverly using the new property of all this data that can now be arranged in digital files, manages to superpose your plumber's address with the little bunch of pixels that marks the location of his workshop, seen from the sky. Yes, it is true, digitization does enable us to throw some bridges between oligopticons that were separate until now, but that still does not make a panopticon. Finding your plumber's name and the photo of his street superposed on a screen still does not put you in the position of the Divine Eye – especially since all you have done is to pay your attention and some money for the extension of a new network, that of the firm Google, which makes the plumber's business pay hard cash for your little mouse clicks. The most complete panopticon, the most integrated software, is never more than a peep show.

One might say that it is absurd to seek real space on a map, on a screen, in a directory, and that Paris can be seen via the only channel that is realistic and experienced firsthand: strolling, walking, wandering around. No one but the pedestrian, doing window-shopping, drinking a coffee at a pavement café, rummaging about the flea market, handing out flyers at the entrance to the metro, or chatting up the girls or boys on the Grands Boulevards, really grasps the

* Translated from French by Liz Carey-Libbrecht

space of the City of Light. Thus, ultimately, only the subjective, personalized, individualized view is objective. From this point of view, that of maps, control rooms, lists and directories can offer no more than an abstraction of space and life in the city. There is no lack of writers, sociologists, psychologists, even town planners, who maintain that the city can be apprehended *in concreto* only by an individual who moves around in the framework that it offers.

Yet there is nothing more abstract than this point of view, nothing less realistic – apart from the illusory zoom sliding, without the slightest tremor, from the European continent to the Beaubourg square in Paris, continuously changing scale. Ultimately, a city cannot be the framework *within which* an individual moves, simply because this framework itself is made of nothing more than *traces left* by *other* individuals who have moved about or are still *there, in place*. Favouring the point of view of the pedestrian, the person strolling, wondering around, prevents us from understanding what is so particular about living in the city; it cuts us off from those channels that precisely enable us not to distinguish the frame from the person moving about within it. A space can become more real only if we are able to follow these channels.

One might say that a tourist, for example, is only passing through Paris, and this clearly reflects the separation between the individual who is visiting and the framework that is being visited: he or she passes through, Paris remains. The stroller is set against a background. And yet this is merely a very superficial point of view – as superficial as the zoom. First because tourists are generally in groups, and are therefore a fraction of a touristic infrastructure encompassing the Bateaux-Mouches, the Tourist Bureau of Paris, the offices of officially approved translators, the drivers of coaches and the problems they have parking their iron beasts. Do not forget, moreover, just how much infrastructure is needed to be able to walk around Paris. From this point of view, we all have “reduced mobility”.

This touristic infrastructure has shaped the city in so many ways that the visitor is no longer outside a set frame on which he or she will have no influence. “Frame” and “visitor”: two perfectly reversible ways of talking. In the final balance the tourist may be worth no more than a few dollars, but without this infrastructure there would be no tourists at all and Paris would be sleepy and provincial, somewhere “outside of the touristic circuits”. And that is without counting all the renovations of buildings that had no aim other than pleasing the passers-by, the campaigns (always to no avail) to attempt to make taxi drivers “friendly to foreign visitors”, and the countless clichés in films which make all the shots by these same tourists, from the Place du Tertre or Notre-Dame, as inevitable as they are accessible.

Clearly, whoever claims to do justice to the visitors' subjective and individual points of view without taking into account the infrastructure in which they move about, would give a version of the city that is even more illusory than someone who believed the map of Paris was the city itself. Between the visitor and the visited framework, there is only the difference between the n th + 1 participant in the continuous elaboration of Paris, and all those who have preceded him or her on the paths he or she effortlessly follows. Hence there is a path – tenuous, I admit – enabling us

to make equivalent the “frame” and the individual situated “within” it. The frame is *they*, since the survival of the infrastructure partially depends on the money that visitors will leave behind and the good impression that they will have of their visit. On the other hand, the visitors are to some extent this frame, since from now on their biography, in a part of their trajectory, will include the fact that they have “done Paris”, whereas Paris “has been done” (admittedly, to a very small degree) by such-and-such particular visitors, who went through *this* turnstile at the Pompidou Centre, added *their* coffee to the list of drinks served at the Café Flore, etc. All that is needed is a bit of astuteness to morph from one into the other.

But this infrastructure is society, one might say, in which, “of course”, one must always “situate” tourists, so as not to believe that they are “really” detachable individuals. By following their desire to visit Paris, they merely responded to the tour operators' advertising campaigns and, going even further back (or deeper down), to the interests of the firms whose business is globalizing tourism. Just as there is a zoom in geography, enabling us continuously to slide from the scale of the planet to the Place Beaubourg, there seems to be a zoom in sociology, from Capitalism to the poor Chinese tourist having his portrait done by a dauber on the corner of the Place du Tertre. From this point of view, Paris is situated “in” Europe and “in” Capitalism, each place being pinpointed by its longitude and latitude, and each individual by a certain overlapping of interests and passions.

And yet, while the geographic zoom has the appearance of likelihood, the same cannot be said for the sociological zoom. The former is merely a procedure of displaying the same digital file that distributes pixels according to the requested image size, a simple matter of DPI; the latter does not even have that resource. As soon as I leave the individual tourists to go towards “that in which” they are situated, I start no longer knowing what I am talking about. I settle for a vague gesture, saying “All that is no coincidence, there are big interests *behind* it”. At the bar counter where I pronounce this definitive sentence, as my stooges' nod their heads in agreement, I think I have said enough... Images of the social bear too much of a resemblance to those T-shaped maps in medieval geography: surrounding them lies an Ocean about which nothing is known, except that it is vast and dangerous, due to the monsters inhabiting it. About “society as a whole” nothing is known, except that it forms a circle encompassing everything, which enables one to close the conversation peremptorily.

If we really had to study what is “social” in Paris, we would have to go about it very differently. We would have to be able to do for totalizing enterprises what we have just done for maps: tilt them over from the illusion of panopticons onto the paths of oligopticons.

“Paris has become unbearable”, “the municipality's doing crazy things”, “they have got to consult with the municipalities of neighbouring suburbs”, “the police would do better to patrol the suburbs”, “dog owners should pay heavier fines”, “there are no halls for amateur music”: all statements circulating from mouth to media, media to concierges, concierges to co-tenants, co-tenants to petitions, petitions to offices, offices to decrees, decrees to administrative courts... Can we study these myriads of

statements? To some extent: on blogs, in newspapers, cafés, dinner parties, squares, SMS. I suppose that the mayor has informers, like the police prefecture has videos and the intelligence services have big ears. A mass of rumours and detached statements whose circulation, from point to point, compose Paris as surely as do cars travelling on the ring road or the millions of users transported daily in the metro. There are often public transport strikes, but this transportation of statements (what I call “collecting statements”) are never on strike. . . . Fortunately. . . or Paris would disappear for good.

Some of these words “totalize” Paris, which has become the subject of ready-made phrases like “Paris wants to breathe”, “Paris welcomes you”, “Paris refuses”. But these totalizing phrases do not circulate differently to individualizing ones, like that of the little girl who murmurs from the sandpit: “Mummy I am bored. . .”. Recording the circulation of a statement is very different to deciding whether that statement totalizes or individualizes. While the allegorical statue of Paris does indeed represent “all of Paris”, it is simply situated at an intersection and does not occupy “any more place” than that of Balzac on the Boulevard Raspail or that of the Republic on the square with the same name. Just as the map is not the territory but is situated inside the territory, of which it accelerates or facilitates certain movements, and just as the directory is not “all of Paris”, of which it is nevertheless part and parcel by rapidly pinpointing addresses, so too the totalizing statements that consider Paris “as a whole” also circulate in Paris, to which they add, one might say, their *fragments of totalization*. The most global panoramas also have an address, and even if they present a scholarly and quantifying version, if one does see “everything” in them, it is always “in” a dark hall.

Why is it so important to “locate” with such obstinacy the totalizing views of Paris? It is a matter of atmosphere and breath, and thus, Peter Sloterdijk would say, a serious matter of *politics*. The illusion of the zoom, in geography and sociology alike, has the drawback of making life in the city completely suffocating. There are *no more loci*, since everything is filled by the apparently smooth transition from the whole to the parts and from the parts to the whole, as if there were not a single gap, not a single breathing space. The filling up has been done. We are suffocating. This – to use a scholarly word – is a question of *mereology*: the relationship of the parts to the whole, which is the privilege of politics. It is not up to geography or sociology to simplify it too quickly, assuming the problem has been solved and the totality is already known, as if Paris were merely an image, sliced up, waiting to be reassembled. This relationship of the parts to the whole, like a jigsaw puzzle, is the very negation of politics.

For politics to be reborn, for Paris to be breathable again, the city has to remain *invisible*, in the sense of neither the parts nor the different wholes into which they fit, being determined in advance.

From this point of view, there is nothing more suffocating than Google Earth with its pretention of zooming in seamlessly; nothing more reactionary than the conventional discourses on the continuous passage of global Capitalism to the market stalls of Maubrt, through the (recently computerized) waste paper basket of the Palais Brongniart. As Sloterdijk put it, politics is not the revolution

but the *explication*, that is, the unfolding of the artificial elements that, until now, we did not know we depended on to exist. In other words, politics is a question of *air conditioning*, the gradual realization that we live together in enclosures which are as unnatural as greenhouses, and the intricate mechanisms of which are gradually appearing to us. Whosoever believes that politics stands to reason because it deals with a Public Good whose form and bounty they will know in advance, commits more than a crime: they commit political misconduct.

I use the term *plasma* for this space – but it is not a space – in which lie – but there is no rest – the various circulations of totalizations and participations waiting for explication and composition. The term seems abstract, but it is because all the usual metaphors are defined by the zoom, which forces us to believe that we know what they are talking about when they say that there is a continuous path between the parts and the whole. Suspend the zoom, multiply the connections between the different views of Paris, without making them commensurable too quickly; measure the fundamental invisibility of all the oligopticons (each of them sees well but very little), relocate the sites where they talk of Paris “as a whole” (the mayor’s office, the headquarters of the Paris prefecture, the control room of the water utility, the building in the Boulevard Morland, etc.), and ask yourself *in what* you could situate these *membra disjecta*, without immediately relating them to a “natural context”, a “society” or, of course, “discourses”. Well, this background, it is the plasma. This is what makes it possible to measure the extent of our ignorance concerning Paris. Above all, it enables us to give its chances back to politics, by reserving for it the task of composition, and by not naturalizing or socializing it, or turning it into a simple question of words.

For the past ten years or so, we have been giving in to the temptation to replace politics by management, and the exercise of democracy by the awful word “governance”. We now see why: good management, like good governance, are used to regulate the relationship of the parts to the whole as harmoniously and effectively as possible. They like the zoom. They see things first from on high, then from the middle, and finally around the bottom. All that is a sequence linked up and fitted together perfectly. Each Russian doll is set without any debate in a bigger one and contains other smaller ones, always without force. That is the visible Paris. It is the managed Paris. Now open all the dolls and plunge them into the plasma, leaving each of them to define what is bigger and what is smaller than it, without ranking them in advance and by opening all the controversies on the challenged relations of the parts to the whole. That is the invisible Paris. It is the political Paris. It is the Paris that has to be composed.

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