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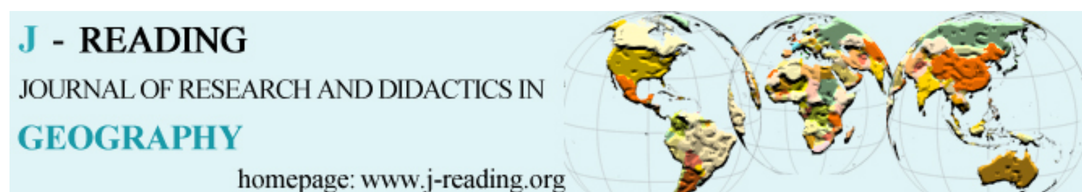

Landscape and conflict in the age of digital surveillance. Participatory Walking through the surveilled cities

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Abstract

The securitarian paradigms, developed in recent decades, react to social problems by controlling and monitoring the population in order to accumulate personal data useful for analysing and promoting new needs. Surveillance capitalism finds the opportunity in cities to control and collect a gigantic amount of data from the unconscious or unaware surveilled, the citizens all. The city adapted to the rules of this contemporary form of capitalism has favoured the implementation of surveillance and control of urban space through – especially but not only – digital technologies. There is thus a new emphasis on the visual in the politics of the street and the utopian panoptic device theorised by Jeremy Bentham in the punitive city (Cohen, 1979). The strategy followed by states is to create a visually pleasing urban space in which invisible or inconspicuous surveillance devices contribute to the same process of space and landscape production. The aim of this article is to understand the motives and effects on the landscape of digital surveillance policies in the urban context with particular reference to three important themes: marginality, spectacle and surveillance.

To conclude the theoretical reflections, a didactic experiment is proposed such as participatory walks useful to observe surveillance tools in the urban landscape and to reason, in cooperative learning, about their use and the impact they have on cities and people's daily lives.

Keywords: Digital Capitalism, Surveillance Capitalism, Surveilled Landscapes, Participatory Walking, Cooperative Learning, Digital Surveillance Technologies

1. Introduction

Currently, the issue of digital capitalism and the modes of surveillance it feeds on seem to extend to every sphere of living. Indeed, this contemporary version of capitalism draws from human experience the primary resource on which it sustains itself. Human experience is captured, catalogued and converted into behavioural data that are translated into market products: as Zuboff puts it, these data become prediction products that are then traded in behavioural prediction markets (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, we can say that surveillance capitalism feeds on human experience. What better place to

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absorb data on human experience than cities? Contemporary cities have become factories of behavioural data due to their increasingly smart approach to economic growth and quality of life. New technologies, sensors, QR codes etc. have made our cities encodable (Kitchin, 2014) and this, as well as improving the performance of cities (Batty, 2013) has fuelled the collection of behavioural data and, in turn, fuelled the market for behavioural predictions. At this juncture, it is this latter aspect that we focus on, and so we will consider Bentham's Panopticon (2001) to interpret surveillance issues in the so-called smart city. Panopticon was the giant of Greek mythology Argo Panoptes, a skilful guardian endowed with 100 eyes, like the prison structures Bentham speaks of, super-rational structures founded on the perfect and continuous visibility of the inmates by a single central overseer who can see them thanks to a circular architectural structure. The motto: to be observed without being able to see. From a literary point of view, the concept of the Panopticon inspired several authors who used Bentham's ideas from the late 18th century to analyse power and its different forms within modern society. George Orwell also drew inspiration from the Panopticon when he wrote 1984, where Big Brother, a supervising body, is able to internally manipulate the people through telescreens placed in the homes of all citizens. Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1995), also uses the structure devised by Bentham as a metaphor for a new power, based on bureaucracy and technology, which controls society from within through surveillance.

Urban panopticism, therefore, can be defined as a system that makes the methodical control of every space and every landscape its main weapon and is substantiated by the non-verifiability of the control itself. This assumption is the crux of the question: is the presence of the overseer always unverifiable? That is, where does Argo Panoptes hide in the city? The surveillance network extended throughout the city or the nation since the beginning of the digital revolution has enslaved social control but, at the same time, while surveillance and control is exercised in urban space, this is promoted with strategies that create a visually pleasing, perceived as benign, people-centred and often celebratory landscape, precisely to divert the attention from the surveillance devices scattered throughout the city.

With this paper we wish to enter the debate initiated by various scholars who have focused their attention on surveillance devices in cities in the United Kingdom (McCahill and Norris, 2002), the United States (Ferrell, 2001) and in European cities (Belina and Helms, 2003; Koskela, 2004), inserting considerations on the Italian case. The adaptation of the Italian city to the new rules imposed by urban competition has also forced changes in the surveillance and control of space and landscape through increasingly advanced technological devices. Italian cities are re-imagining themselves in order to reposition themselves in the national and international market for capital investment and, to do so, are placing great emphasis on visual elements in urban aesthetics. At the same time, producing urban landscapes consistent with the entrepreneurial role of cities also means nurturing digital urban surveillance practices. These practices are harbingers of new spatial inequalities and injustices. In fact, Italian cities have not always been under video surveillance. The change occurred after the de-centralisation of public security from the central state to the municipalities in the late 1990s. The justification for an expansion of surveillance in cities is not based on objective, but rather on perceptive grounds: the perception of insecurity is fuelled by the mainstream media, crime has an ever-larger space in the news, fear grows, surveillance appears necessary. Regardless of the real state of security in Italian cities, the perception of insecurity increases and justifies the massive recourse to cameras, scanners and various other digital tools for an invisible social control and storage of behavioural data.

For this very reason, after an analysis of the status quo, a participatory walk is proposed as a didactic tool through which to recognise the landscapes of surveillance in the city and reflect in cooperative learning on the location of surveillance tools, the implications in terms of spatial justice and the actual need for these tools, and on whom the benefits of this contemporary Panopticon fall.

2. Aesthetics of surveillance. An Italian overview

Smart cities have been criticised for being the worst embodiment of technocratic neoliberalism (Cardullo and Kitchin, 2019). The acquisition of data from the digital devices of people walking through cities has been strongly criticised using a strong definition: data colonialism (Thatcher et al., 2016). Furthermore, the issue of data collection and analysis in cities is seen as a new, additional threat to spatial justice. Following Jacques Rancière (2006), contemporary power is exercised precisely according to the norms of the Panopticon because its strength lies in its ability to insinuate itself into everyday perceptions and lived experience (lived sensory experience). Therefore, since contemporary social life is exercised on the basis of sensory experience, which is exercised in cities, it is particularly important to observe how power is manifested through urban aesthetics. With the term aesthetic, it should be specified, the author specifies that one should not only consider the visual arts and literature, on the contrary, one should include all elements of the visible.

"I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-eviden facts of sense-perception that simultaneously discloses the existance of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancière, 2006, p. 7).

In this section we focus on the aesthetic aspects of the issue, thus observing the landscape of surveillance, with particular reference to the Italian case.

Landscape, as we read in the preamble of the European Landscape Convention, "[...] contributes to the formation of local cultures and [...] is a fundamental component of [...] natural and cultural heritage, contributing to human well-being".

Thus, we ask ourselves whether the surveyed landscape is really capable of contributing to human well-being.

A policed landscape feeds on social control, this form of control is sustained by a new way of displaying urban landscapes. They are portrayed as benign and, above all, celebratory. Such practices certainly serve to reshape the appearance of urban landscapes, but the spectacularisation of landscapes is very useful in altering the perception of cities while simultaneously establishing new logics of social control within public spaces and landscapes. In this way, as Coleman (2005) writes, the practices of social control and surveillance feed the issues of spatial injustice, accentuating the differences between places, reinforcing some social spaces and landscapes to the detriment of others and, again, censoring and promoting urban behaviour increasingly marked by repetitiveness. Repetitiveness, remembering Lefebvre (1991) also means better social monitoring of urban spaces in which highly repetitive actions favour the monitoring of behaviour, defined by the reproducible character of "repetitive actions" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 75). Many authors have addressed this issue by resorting to empirical examples in which intensified surveillance has led to increased social control with obvious spatial justice repercussions (McCahill and Norris, 2002; Davis, 1990; Parenti, 1999; Ferrell, 2001). Following the thread outlined by Zuboff, this happens because a strategically important landscape for behavioural prediction markets is a landscape in which digital surveillance devices are protagonists and always active in order to collect behavioural data and, in this way, collect exchange goods.

Thus, the new circuits of urban landscape definition seek to tie together the spectacularisation of urban landscapes, in a careful projection of *ordered disorder* (Featherstone, 1991, p. 82) and the issues of behavioural surveillance in public landscape. The link between these two contexts of spectacularisation and surveillance is ideologically reinforced through a dominant theme: the freedom to use public spaces and to design public landscapes.

A "new" vernacular, identifiable inlocal news media, trumpets a developmental and "progressive" tone of urban sensibility in an attempt to capture and construct a common sense around issues of local quality of life, crime and safety (Coleman, 2005 p. 135).

The success of this type of neo-liberal

urbanism reinforces the imagery of a socio-spatial order as necessary to maintain high levels of security and justifies the intensification of surveillance measures in cities.

In Italy, several cities have been notable for taking part in this neoliberal re-organisation of spaces with a view to surveillance and social control. In the city of Treviso, in Veneto, a substantial share of citizens' taxes, as much as two hundred thousand euros, was used to buy and add 50 new cameras in the city (i.e. a 30 per cent increase over the ones already present) with a widespread rhetoric centred on the safety of spaces, describing Treviso as the safest city in the whole region, thanks to cameras. Again, we should mention Udine, in Friuli Venezia Giulia, where the dominant rhetoric is even more explicit: the presence of cameras in the city serves to increase perceived safety. Perceived. And to increase this perception of security, the city's investment in surveillance is close to €700,000. Turin, in Piedmont, is implementing intelligent video surveillance systems with the Argo project, which plans to install 275 cameras to identify people in real time on the basis of specific identification elements using artificial intelligence, clouding and big data. In Rome, in 2021, a mayoral candidate built his election proposal around the installation of 6,000 new cameras, to be added to the existing 1,300. These cities are filmed here because they are the ones that have given the most narrative value to the issue of surveillance as a tool for urban well-being, yet it is striking that in none of these cities have studies been carried out that correlate security and surveillance.

The installation of these cameras also has visual effects and restructures urban aesthetics with direct effects also on the very enjoyment of urban landscapes (Belina and Helms, 2003). In the last decade, the approach to the study of landscape as a process and as a common good has been extended, as the Landscape Convention itself requires, to include cultural uses and processes as a participation in the definition of what the landscape itself is. Therefore, the presence of cameras that modify public landscape and its uses must now also be included in the urban landscape (Koskela, 2004). At the same time, the study of cities in a broader sense increasingly includes a spatial justice approach so that urban interventions can also take into account subcultures and neglected sites in the city. The openness of the study of landscape towards processes and people fuels the discussion of cities as symbolic places where processes of social justice are exercised. Aesthetic access to landscape is a prerequisite for this spatial justice. This access can be physical, virtual, sensitive, intellectual, through which local practices, identities and cultures are decided, and in addition, as required by the Convention, the foundations are laid for its sharing also with those who do not live in that urban context.

3. Securitised landscapes: between spectacularisation and securitisation

The gradual increase of surveillance actions in cities, as mentioned above, has led to a consequent collection and exchange of behavioural data. Although Coaffee and Fussey refer to the securitisation actions of cities to host sporting events, we can nevertheless refer to their reflections (in Duarte and Firmino, 2018) for general considerations on the securitisation actions of cities developed on the occasion of temporary events, installations and performances and then permanently absorbed by the urban landscape.

"According to Coaffee and Fussey (2011), the evidence for this kind of urban transformation for more securitised cities is represented by four types of interventions: the growth of electronic surveillance within public and semi-public urban space; the increased popularity of physical or symbolic notions of the boundary and territorial closure; the increasing sophistication and cost of security and contingency planning; and the way that resistance has been embedded within the urban context through urban architectural and design interventions" (Duarte and Firmino, 2018, p. 83).

The spread of digital surveillance technologies, particularly visual ones, characterises the international security trend and, therefore, increasingly characterises the aesthetics and perception of urban landscapes since the 1990s, especially in Europe. Video surveillance systems have grown exponentially

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since 1976, when they were widely used for the Summer Olympics in Montreal. From then on, major events were managed with the massive use of cameras and scanners, up to biometric recognition tools et similia in more recent years. This has meant that, in all cases, the presence of these control technologies has soon outgrown their relationship with major events to be slowly acquired in multiple urban neighbourhoods and on a permanent basis. This has fostered the perception of urban security, which, in this *differentiated postmodern fragmented urbanism* (Murakami-Wood, 2009), has crystallised around a surveillance that is mythologised and desired because it is capable of controlling and disciplining society, because it is useful in making cities more beautiful, safe and spectacular.

Spectacularisation. Urban spectacularisation is increasingly integrated into the planning logic of the contemporary city. These are cities decorated and decked out to increase the visibility, notoriety and recognisability of neighbourhoods, in the context of the urban competition that on a global scale concerns cities increasingly traded like commodities in the destination market. These are neighbourhoods that increase the screeching compared to unrenewed, unspectacular, unrenovated neighbourhoods, and, what is more, these are neighbourhoods where people become spectators and not actors in their relationship with the territory. The spontaneous perception and transformation of urban landscape, as occurs during popular celebrations, is scarcely taken into account while instead a dual will prevails that widens urban separations between spectacular and unspectacular neighbourhoods. The process of urban spectacularisation has as its counterpart an impoverishment of bodily experience in ordinary practices since spectacularisation and securitisation are closely related. Indeed, the processes of spectacularisation find in the processes of pacification, securitisation and urban homogenisation an alter ego necessary for their survival.

Securitisation. At present, urban security is interpreted as an instrument of annihilation of the very fears it paradoxically produces. It produces them at different levels. The first, the material level, is recognisable in barriers, turnstiles, bollards, fences, artefacts that characterise places. The second level is what Lisa Parks (2007) calls corporeal, and by corporeal level, through a sensitive approach, she uses the powerful example of a guard's rough touch intruding on privacy and bodily integrity. The third level is the most subliminal of all and has to do with perception: it is about perceptions with respect to a surveillance that is imposed as a sub-surface, constitutes the environment in which the behaviours that are allowed in public space are restricted and delineated (McCahill and Finn, 2010).

These levels of experience of securitised spaces place the focus on the inner and psycho-political components and, at the same time, on the urban practices and furnishings of security in which that urban atmosphere, sensation and moods that John Allen (2006) calls “ambient power”, thus expressing the power that urban atmospheres exert on those who experience public spaces. Will this promise of security make the increasing urban securitisation acceptable?

4. Didactical proposal: walking through securitisation

Following De Certeau, those who use the city daily and routinely live below the threshold of visibility. These people walk, practising an elementary form of experience of the city. De Certeau calls these ordinary people Wandersmanners, they are bodies that write an urban text but do not know how to read it (De Certeau, 1998) and it is from these crucial reflections that one imagines a didactic experience such as the one that follows. To walk in space and learn to read it, this is the aim of the didactic experience proposed here, to train space-conscious authors in movement. It involves producing space by using it and, in the very act of its dynamic production through walking, learning to read the experiences that are linked to this act. In short, it means experiencing awareness of the environmental power just mentioned. Well-established teaching methodologies consider learning in the unitary vision of the person. By intervening in the learning process, intellectual, bodily and social movement brings about a change in the primary

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learning process itself and fosters the development of a more flexible and creative mind. Furthermore, during the crossing of space, movement actors learn to read through their movements the perception of *moved spaces* in everyday life. I call moved spaces those spaces in constant movement, the result of a collective and mobile construction. This moved construction is generated through bodily and discursive practices that simultaneously operate on places and the meaning of places. The action of walking operates an early form of sense of place, establishing vital, emotional, experiential and social relationships with it that constitute a form of learning about the territory and, by walking, physically and psychologically limit the space. Therefore, walking through a specific space, sharing a common cause, speaking the same language, summarised in the same signs, is a way of activating memorial practices that produce more or less temporary territorial identities. These atypical identities are modelled on experienced, practised, shared, observed realities, and the narrative on social media of these experiences is, in turn, able to establish that dependence between geographical reality and human reality, such that the perception of the same places through the digital images, is absorbed with the same value as a declaration of reality (Albanese, 2021, p. 141).

It is made clear that being surveilled is not only an experience of the body, but also a psycho-cognitive acquisition. Therefore, an observation of surveillance-free and securitised spaces can prompt a greater understanding of conflicts, insecurity and the (alleged) legitimisation of surveillance in the city. The objective of surveillance tools in public spaces is evidently an exercise in control, but it is not enough to observe the ability to surveil; rather, it is crucial to observe in what relationship the observed bodies stand in relation to surveillance.

Didactic Methodology. Since the European Landscape Convention of 2000, experiences of awareness-raising, landscape mediation and participatory approaches to landscape have entered our horizon of meaning. These methodological tools, as Anne Sgard (2022) points out, are also increasingly used as tools for the investigation of landscape controversies. To quote Sgard (2022): "Landscape controversies are situations in which landscape is examined; in which its qualities, values and future, are discussed".

Analysing controversies means having a political approach to the semiology of landscape and also serves students to enter into the democratic debate in cities. A participatory didactic approach to the supervised landscape also serves to stimulate reciprocal influences between education and landscape research, as Cisani, Castiglioni and Sgard (2022), also emphasise in the light of the European Landscape Convention (CEL; Council of Europe, 2000), which gives people a relevant role in the conservation, management and transformation of landscapes. Neighbourhood walking.

> The neighbourhood walk is a participatory method that can be used as a technique for actively listening to the local area. Underlying this technique is the idea that it is fundamental to value the ordinary practices of life experienced while walking, through the public spaces and moved spaces, which are expressed and unfolded by walking. One's perception of one's own landscapes leads to one's own knowledge of those who live and walk in spaces without technical knowledge but only through experience and experience. An aspect that characterises the neighbourhood walk consists in the recognition of the importance of not only ordinary knowledge, but also perceptive, spatial and active knowledge that takes shape in walking together through a place, trying to recognise and highlight one's own way of experiencing that space and its landscape. The neighbourhood walk presupposes, and affirms in practice, a relationship of reciprocity between professionals and inhabitants, which excludes relationships of dominance-dependence, either on one side or the other, and recognises a kind of mutual intelligence that leads to mutual learning between professionals and inhabitants. Through this participative technique, the moment of sharing the practice of walking in the same space becomes an opportunity to build and expand the network of local actors involved in the process and stimulate a collaborative climate between the actors of the space.
>
> For the neighbourhood walk to be effective, it is important that it is preceded by a thorough outreach phase and interviews with some local

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stakeholders. In this way, students can gather more willingness for active involvement from citizens and local actors, based on trust and collaboration. The question arises as to how subjects respond to the growth of surveillance in cities: the presence of negatively perceived surveillance can generate different forms of opposition, although it must be considered that this is perceived differently according to contexts, eras and gender differences. The reaction also depends on the purpose for which they are installed. Surveillance processes depend on the involvement of those being surveilled in order to function. In contexts where surveillance has the effect of surveillance or is perceived as a form of control, the fact that subjects interact and react to these tools implies that their effects can be mitigated or reinforced according to their involvement.

Thus, as they walk around, students and those variously involved will try to understand how securitised landscapes are perceived and what feelings they provoke; where security, intimacy and atmospheres conducive to solidarity, bonding and solidarity are perceived and why; what (r)existence behaviours are generated and where, with respect to security, inclusion and exclusion. By adopting the mobile perspective of the reflexive pedestrian, students physically and metaphorically walk through the city, starting precisely from the elements of surveillance. The city is read through the suggestions of the street, tracing unconventional narrative itineraries that give value to the practices of everyday life, that emphasise the presence of the watcher's eye, in which the successions of steps become a form of enunciation and, finally, of semantic organisation of space. By walking, the pedestrian appropriates the topographical system and spatially realises places. Although the act of walking is very ancient, it is rediscovered didactically as a countercultural urban practice especially during the era of mechanisation, when traits of uprooting and emotional sterilisation are beginning to be felt in cities.

Students in this practice are observers, at once curious and detached, as they wander on foot in search of the meaning of digitisation and, above all, of surveillance in their own living spaces. By walking, discovering and interpreting urban interstices, students re-appropriate the city as it becomes more intelligible.

5. Conclusions

In this historical context of exceptional confinement to private spaces and exceptional surveillance through even pandemic tracking apps, reflections on the securitisation of urban contexts have expanded.

Securitised urban landscapes were significantly increased during the pandemic exception state. This gave the green light to surveillance actions accompanied by the dominant narrative of protecting the common good and public health through the securitisation of spaces. The pandemic has laid bare one of the greatest current weaknesses of state power: a paradoxical difficulty in controlling the socio-technical arrangements represented by the flow of information on the Internet. Among these events, the release of personal data on health and geographical location in space has aroused and continues to arouse many suspicions that relate to the theme of data colonialism mentioned above.

Often, video surveillance systems are not preceded by systematic assessments of contextual issues and are implemented regardless of actual needs or, alternatively, are implemented without considering an alternative of a different social impact to increase security. In reality, the effectiveness of technological surveillance with devices of various kinds installed in cities is mostly useful as a situational prevention tool and, for this reason, is strictly dependent on the physical, social and cultural context.

Furthermore, surveillance has led to several cases of non-acceptance and resistance by the users of the neighbourhood because the securitisation of spaces affects the usability of spaces as *lived spaces* (Lefebvre, 1996). They have an influence on possible experiences, representations and self-representations in public space (Németh and Schmidt, 2011). In this context, reflection, struggle and resistance in the context of surveillance, particularly in the context of the introduction of technology, stand out. These are what I call moved spaces, they are flexible and transient spaces that are constituted with and through everyday objects and imaginaries.

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In order to investigate this, we suggest a participatory didactic methodology that stimulates the reading and understanding of the securitised landscape, achieving, through the students' moving together and experiencing the territory together, not only the formation of sharper students, but also of aware citizens.

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