

The Use of Narration as a Tool for Enriching Emotional Cognition in Urban Planning: A Research in the Città Diffusa of the North - East Italian Region

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Abstract

This paper argues on the importance of narration (written and oral) as a socio-spatial diagnosis tool for urban studies. Throughout the use of novels, as well as of oral testimonies of their authors, hidden dimension of the urban space are revealed. We need tools to understand these dynamics and help to create a link between society and research. Exploring the emotions of the individual who is living in a particular urban space is crucial for planners, if we want an environment in which people flourish and reach their best of their development. Planning analysts are taught to separate cognitive and emotional qualities of judgment and tend to study cognitive rather than emotional relationships. In order to respond to the needs of a particular society in urban planning, we need to know as much as possible about this society, and the authors inside of it, could act as the “voice” of a patient (society) while narrating his emotions to a researcher. The paper continues in reporting some of the results of a research done in the *città diffusa* of the Italian North-East Region, with the collaboration of four contemporary Italian authors of the Region. Through a *colloquium* between different approaches and methodologies such as literary text, sociological text, empirical observation and oral narrations, we tried to describe the dominant emotions present in these spaces.

Keyword: narration, emotions, daily life, emotional cognition, città diffusa.

1. Introduction

This paper argues on the use of narratives (literary and oral) as a tool for a more accurate socio-spatial diagnosis, and for extracting information about the individual’s emotions, in relation to the urban space and to the local society. In the first chapters we try to underline the reasons why narratives (literary in particular) can help us be more open and inclusive by seeing the urban space from the eyes of another person, cultivating our emotional intelligence and preparing us in reading emotions and desires; a necessary act for succeeded participatory planning procedures. Some of the scholars who tried to connect narratives and planning are being mentioned, as well as their thoughts on the subject.

Secondly, the importance of emotions as cognitive tools is being highlighted. Emotions are socio-cultural products and can testify to us how the individual receives urban space, how he interacts with the rest of the society and why, as well as the quality of life of his nature as a whole (physically and emotionally). If urban planning is a social science, it seems that it doesn't take in consideration the human nature in its completeness, translated in biological but also emotional needs. As a result, the emotional impact of urban space on the individual, which can have a huge consequence on his everyday quality of life, is being completely overlooked by planners. During participatory planning procedures though, planners have to try to translate the citizen's needs and feelings in plans.

Finally, we report briefly the results of a research done in the diffused city (*città diffusa*) of the North-East Italian Region, therefore, a socio-spatial diagnosis, and an emotional "screening" of the individual living in these spaces. Through the selected literary narratives, the oral narratives of the selected authors, together with scientific texts which describe the particular urban phenomena under investigation, as well as through empirical observation, we tried to deliver a socio-spatial diagnosis; in other words through a "cross section" of different "voices" on the same subjects. We believe that such diagnosis emotional screening of the local society, is a necessary and of major significance first step, before any kind of future urban transformations.

2. Towards a more inclusive urban planning theory and practice

2.1. Literary narratives as a socio-spatial diagnosis tool

The contribution of narratives (literary and oral) has a long history in socio-spatial research, for understanding society. Numerous scientists have worked in proving that observations extracted from literary and narrative sources can illuminate hidden aspects of reality and important details of the daily life of the individual, which could be crucial for understanding urban phenomena. The founding fathers of Sociology such as Comte, Durkheim, Weber and Simmel, as well as Park, Burgess and Znaniecki, all used literary resources in order to interpret the world around them. Later on, great scholars such as Coser, Schutz, Lepenies, Bourdieu, Berger, Mills, Turnaturi, Jedlowski, Longo to name just a few, with their work, sustained the use of narratives as a tool in socio-spatial research, in order to deeply study and understand all hidden aspects of the everyday life, the "possible realities" (Schutz, 1962; Turnaturi, 2003) but also the emotions, desires, feelings and needs of the individual, in order to be more inclusive.

In particular, Mizzau (1998) suggests that narrative can make us go beyond what is said in the treatises of psychology or linguistics and to show us something not contemplated by scientific discipline. We need the contribution of literature precisely because it illuminates many points of view, many hypotheses, many different worlds and helps us to have a more complete view of a given space-time

reality, an operation that can not always be obtained from quantitative and purely scientific analysis. As Turnaturi suggests, the coexistence of so many possible worlds makes the gaze of those who study the most acute social processes (Turnaturi, 2003, p. 20). The most fantastic stories can be used as metaphors to talk about dimensions of reality that are noticeably graspable but not “unreal”: of emotions, feelings or intuitions that otherwise would only remain obscurely perceptible (Jedlowski, 2010, p. 26). The exploration of urban emotions is a great contribution of literature. In particular, film narrative according to Ezio Marra (2008), is a popular *medium* to understand how the city is represented in the collective imagination, as cinema occupies an important part in our historical memory that characterizes our identity built through emotions (Marra, 2008). Literature in this way is also a trainer for cultivating empathy, the necessary but overlooked ingredient for urban planning; a kind of planning in which people can reach the best of their capabilities.

Another contribution of literature concerns the illumination of the singular, the dissimilar, not only of the universal and the general, of which the social sciences are concerned. What literature does, Turnaturi writes, is to make visible types of characters and situations of everyday reality, which we come to know only through the literary text. Literature brings out figures, processes and social relationships and highlights behavior; thus it helps us in the formation of analytic categories, with characteristics enriched by the literary work (Turnaturi, 2003, p. 23-27).

Howard Becker, in a report on the *Invisible Cities* of Italo Calvino, writes that the analysis of the cities by sociologists are precise, systematic but sufficiently abstract to allow the creation of analytical classifications and typologies, while Calvino describes descriptions of desires, fears, emotions, and the states of mind that cities create. These “insignificant details” offer an extraordinary contribution to the study of cities, "to understand the nature of a city, of how it is made, to grasp its culture" (Becker, 2000). Becker continues:

«Every detail could be, for the shrewd reader, the springboard for the analysis of an area of urban life. (...) The well-defined concepts of social scientists produce well-defined results. The literary description renounces this possibility of clarity and unidimensionality in favor of the ability to make multiple analyzes and multiple possibilities contained in a story».

We need narration in order to be able to reach as many realities as possible in our cities. To try to restore a high quality of life equally distributed to the entire population, we must get to know as much detail as possible about the individuals who inhabit an urban space, and these cannot be provided only by their testimonies, but by that acute look of the writer who illuminates these worlds. The feeling of the places and all the details on the emotions of those who live in an urban space is delivered by the literary work and the stories of the writers and, thanks to these, we come to the knowledge of hidden

worlds and of the way the weakest subjects of the population receive the world. After all, Literature exposes the single hidden thoughts of different people; a very precious material for the curious researcher of the social world, who aims in understanding not only the general, but also the particular, the single cases of the society. Studying the particular is an act of inclusion, necessary for the discipline.

According to Turnaturi (2003), the knowledge of different worlds helps us to open up to the other, to “come out” of ourselves and to see the world through the eyes of the other: «through literature we can look at men not only in their daily affairs, but to put it in Proust, to see them as “giants in time”. Literature opens our imagination and our judgment on what is far away, outside the particularistic circle, to the unknown and to the different».

Literary imagination is «an essential component of an ethical position that asks us to worry about the good of other people whose lives are far from ours» (Nussbaum, 1996). This means that what we take for granted and the solutions we seek to respond to the daily problems of cities, perhaps are not suitable for everyone, at least for those who think the world in ways other than ours. If, as planners, we must create environments based on the true needs of the local community, literature invites us to look at the world through the eyes of another person and from a position that is not ours. The desire to know the different worlds and to take them all into consideration is a necessary task if we want to build a city for everyone and not for a single part of society. Turnaturi suggests (2003, p. 45):

«The novel shows us the needs of individuals, their desires, the particular conditions of their conditions of life. (...) What is underlined in this perspective is that the resources which each individual needs are different not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. Even with this type of approach we get to the definition of models and measures, but these measures are not homogeneous, and different in quality».

Thinking about the creation of public policies for the orientation of the development of a territory in which no one feels excluded is the main task of planners, and literature not only teaches us this fact, but helps us to have more tools and data possible in order to be able to respond to this need. Narration, therefore, helps us to interpret different realities and puts us in constant questioning with ourselves and with others in order to make sure that we are always flexible and ready to listen to the different needs of each member of the society. According to Martha Nussbaum, Turnaturi suggests, literary imagination is an essential part and a source both for theory and for practices of social justice, for theory and for the practice of citizenship (Nussbaum, 1996). In this sense, we can hypothesize that these new theories of social justice are indebted to literature, to literary imagination, to a gaze that focuses on the individual, to tell a specific and concrete case at the same time and to question

certainties and classificatory formulas. «An ethic of impartial respect for human dignity would fail to engage real human beings if not enabling them to enter the imagination of the lives of distant people and to experience emotions connected with participation» (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 14). It is the enhancement of individuality, not at the expense of the common good but on the contrary to optimize it, which emphasizes Nussbaum commenting on the contribution of the literary work *Hard Times* by Charles Dickens. Nussbaum notes: «A history of the quality of human life without the stories of individual human actors would be too indeterminate to show the mechanism by which resources actually determine the various types of human activity» (Nussbaum, 1996, p. 92). As Leonie Sandercock (2003) underlines «a better understanding of the work that stories do can make us better planners in at least three ways: by expanding our practical tools, by sharpening our critical judgment and by widening the circle of democratic discourse».

We must never forget though that, as Jedlowski notes, using the novel as a source for social research requires a great deal of caution: it is a complementary form, valuable for certain elements that are otherwise unavailable, but which must be supported by some comparison with different sources (2010, p. 23). When referring to literary works in order to represent reality from a theoretical point of view, a sociologist «depends in this enterprise on the novelist» (Elias, 1970; 2001) as a sort of co-author. The resulting theoretical interpretation is the output of the combined efforts of both the novelist and the sociologist (Longo, 2015, p. 123). In other words, novel interpretations must be supported by scientific texts, that is through a “cross-section” of different “voices”. With this conscious use of narratives, sociological research demonstrates the cognitive openness of the discipline and also, the ability to respond to new challenges (Longo, 2012, p. 123).

2.2. Narratives and storytelling in urban planning

In the most recent years, the importance of narratives has been underlined also in the field of planning practice. Urban planners have come to realize that not only do narratives matter in planning, but their centrality is not sufficiently examined or taught, and their premises and implicit causal links are not adequately subjected to scrutiny (Isserman & Markusen, 2013). We can all agree that interdisciplinarity in urban planning research and practice is of crucial importance. In particular, the recent demands made on urban planning are to be more inclusive, democratic and more compatible with local experiential knowledge. Towards that direction, there is a “narrative” turn in urban planning practices and theory (Ameel 2014a; Cohen 2008, 111–115; Sandercock 2010). For Secchi (2002), an interest in narratives means also an interest in the various scenarios that could be drawn up for a specific area. As Bloomfield notes «cities should draw on the diversity of social perspectives through research on citizens’ narratives to forge a more democratic, pluralist and inclusive urban

imaginary» (Bloomfield 2006, p. 45). Mark Childs, for example, argues that «stories of place can inform designers about the narrative fabric that is as much a critical part of the context of a site as the soil type» (2008, p. 185). Or, as Bond & Thompson-Fawcett argue in a call for more qualitative methods in urban research, «the tiny details, often reduced and overlooked in analysis, can reveal the depth of the meaning people have for places and spaces with which they identify. Narratives provide a means to make sense of and understand social phenomena and individual experience» (2008, p. 56–57). Contemporary planning increasingly aims to encompass a more diverse range of urban voices, to facilitate the inclusion of more diverse voices, and to take into account more diverse kinds of knowledge (Ameel, 2017).

3. Emotions and urban planning

3.1. Why emotions?

In order to understand the inhabitant and his well-being, the relationship between sociology and design must be differentiated, which means putting people's quality of life at the center and looking for alternatives and new paths; in order to do this, we must also deal with emotions, the sensations, the feelings experienced, not only with the characteristics, more or less reliable, that is, with something that must be concretely read, beyond the domain of what is measurable (Dobosz-Federici, 2018, p. 30-33). Nevertheless, planning analysts are taught to separate cognitive and emotional qualities of judgment and tend to study cognitive rather than emotional relationships. In participatory planning processes, though, planners try to explore the inhabitants' needs, desires and emotions, in order to design together with them the future transformations of their urban space. Planners will eventually have to translate the inhabitants' needs and emotions in plans. In this direction, literary work, is not only a tool to explore different worlds, but also a “trainer” who can teach us a way to cultivate emotional intelligence, necessary for innovating the discipline itself.

We will ask ourselves, why emotions are significant for urban planning? Emile Durkheim, in his texts on social solidarity, about a hundred years ago, wrote that emotions are the "glue" that holds society together (Durkheim, 1893; 1897). Marx's perception of human nature also speaks of human "passions" and "emotions" as fundamental aspects of our social nature. The basic emotions affecting fear, anger, disgust, sadness, happiness/pleasure, boredom and (perhaps) contempt (Ekman, 1982; 1986) probably evolved as species-specific physiological reactions and expressive signals due to their usefulness for individual and group survival (Thoits, 1989). Over time it has been understood that emotions are mainly socio-cultural products (Kemper, 1980; Shott, 1980; Hunsaker, 1983) and that they are linked to certain socio-cultural factors. What determines an emotional experience, writes Thoits (1989, p. 320), is not a physiological but a socio-cultural factor. What scholars have tried to

emphasize is that emotions are fundamental to social stability and social change and determine social relationships. Emotions lead to changes in one's behavior that could affect relationships with other individuals and ultimately have consequences for the social structure (Thoits, 1989). If, therefore, emotions are part of human nature, capable of modifying the social structure and human behavior, our studies on man and his needs, without the study of emotions, are fragmented. If urban planning is a social science, it can only take human nature into its fullness: in it we not only find basic needs of physical well-being, but also needs related to emotional, social and cultural well-being.

3.2. Emotional cognition in urban planning

However, as Weyher (2012) suggests, Western culture was founded on the perception of "reason", which was immediately separated from the "emotion". In general, the role of emotion in social life and in action, has been denied, or even when it has been taken into consideration, has been negatively addressed.

In particular, Charles Hoch (2006), argues that for the drafting of urban plans, planners judge the value of current acts in relation to future consequences. They build paths for intentions linked to future expectations, which anticipate and evaluate these consequences. Analysts and professionals pay close attention to these paths, studying how beliefs, which people hold, lead them along this path from concept to intention and intention to action. Analysts study whether and how environmental, political, social, economic and cultural influences shape beliefs as descriptions or guides. Eventually, urban plans are based on rational judgment.

However, the attention, perception and reflection used to form a judgment in planning are also based on emotional dispositions and sensitivity. Despite the ubiquity of emotions and feelings, professionals and analysts rarely focus on them as a resource for understanding targeted future-oriented action; they learn to treat emotions as a source of prejudice and distortion. They need to control their emotions for fear that feelings do not influence their judgment (Hoch, 2006).

Two arguments justify the strategy of this posting. First, the influential method of experimental scientific inquiry relegates emotions and feelings to a lower role in human judgment. Emotions and feelings in this vision undermine the quality of intellectual judgment (Forgas, 1990; Goldie, 2005). Second, analysts argue that although we cannot easily avoid or control the emotional impacts on our judgment, we can learn how to adapt, modify and channel them to improve the quality of cognitive judgment we make to guide successful action. This is the sensitivity approach. In the first approach, emotions must be identified and controlled in order to plan objectively; in the second, emotions must be identified and tamed to reduce emotional bias on plans (Hoch, 2006).

Objectivity encourages planners to frame beliefs about the future using concepts that completely exclude emotions and feelings, while sensitivity prepares planners to anticipate and channel emotional responses to future plans. In this direction, planners, in order to cultivate this sensitivity, should “train” themselves to “read” the emotions and increase their “emotional intelligence” for participatory planning processes, in which different members of the society express opinions and communicate their needs and desires for future urban transformations. Knowing how to read emotions, identify the actual needs and discover the different possible worlds is fundamental. As Sclavi suggests (2003) «emotions are fundamental cognitive tools if you can understand their language. They don't tell you what you see, but how you look. Their code is relational and analogical». In this direction, even here, literature is an extraordinary tool for cultivating an ability to read emotions.

We believe that an evaluation of the emotional impact that future urban transformations would have on a local society, evaluation built through participatory planning procedures with citizens and different actors of a given place, is necessary to anticipate these emotional responses and to prevent negative emotional impacts, after the realization of future urban transformations.

4. Exploring the dominant emotions in the diffused city⁸ of the Italian North-East Region through narration

4.1. The research procedure

Our intention in this research was to measure the social consequences (the “social cost”) of the radical change in economic conditions of the society in the Italian North-East Region, in the last forty years;

⁸ The term “diffused city” (*città diffusa*) is a definition introduced by Francesco Indovina (1990) in order to describe the formation of a model of a city not based on concentration but on low density, generated as a result of the intertwining of two convergent phenomena, an endogenous one, of densification of rural areas, and the other exogenous, of de-densification of central urban areas. This is not a suburbanization *tout court*, but a real new city, triggered by a profound process of economic transformation, deriving from the pulverization of productive activities in small and medium-sized companies and the consolidation of industrial districts. To this process is added a demographic decline that affects medium-small sized cities.

This dispersion/diffusion has three main causes:

- a) the diffusion of the automobile and its preferentiality as a means of movement, with consequent spatial structuring determined by the road layout, the junctions, the parking areas and private garages;
- b) the demographic transformation of industrialized societies, with smaller families, longer life expectancy, separated families and a decrease in the person/accommodation relationship);

years of an impressive and very particular economical growth and radical spatial transformation, which also brought an emotional impact. Through a *colloquium* between different “voices” as we noted above, we tried to “measure” the emotional product of socio-spatial transformations.

Firstly we selected literary narratives fruitful in observations on the territory under investigation, or else stories in which territory is not the “setting” but the “protagonist”. As Longo suggests, the possibility of a sociological use of the (literary) text does not depend on any intrinsic quality that qualifies it as sociologically significant, but on the specific cognitive objectives that the researcher sets himself and which justify the selection of that text. It is not an attempt to classify texts that are not recognized as such, but to give “momentary sociological value” to a text that otherwise would not have (Longo, 2012). Moreover, we chose authors that are also inhabitants of the urban space under study, because we were also interested in their personal experience of living in these places. Therefore, personal interviews were made by the author, in order, not only to collect more details on their work, but also for having their views, opinions and experiences of the everyday life in this urban space and society. All interviews took place in the North-East Italian Region, from June to September 2018. Finally, the research was the result of putting side-by-side the selected literary texts, the transcriptions of the authors’ interviews and scientific text that described the socio-spatial phenomena under study, as well as our empirical observation on the particular urban space.

The writers selected for the research were:

- a) Romolo Bugaro;
- b) Francesco Maino;
- c) Davide Tessari;
- d) Vitaliano Trevisan.

4.2. The daily life’s dominant emotions in the diffused city of the North-East Italian Region

4.2.1. Socio-spatial diagnosis

According to the authors, the economic and spatial development were not guided by appropriate governance in order to ensure a high quality of life for the society as a whole. Diffused city doesn’t promote the feeling of citizenship and the feelings of common cause, common good, social life, active life and participation in decisional procedures. The individual is seen as a consumer and not as a citizen, with rather an individualistic and consumerist culture that puts the “I” before the “Us”, which

c) housing policies that have supported horizontal growth as a solution to the degradation and overcrowding of the compact city (Esposito, 2015).

explains the radical (and kind of “anarchic”) transformation of the territory. The necessary use of the automobile generates anxiety, in a continuous «circulatory delirium» (Trevisan, 2010). Social interaction is mainly located in shopping malls and bars for the necessary-before-dinner-aperitif, defining patterns of everyday life and social interaction that in, either ways, include consumerism. Public spaces weren’t planned in advance during the radical spatial transformations of the last years, which led to today’s social patterns of interaction. As a result, public spaces such as squares, playgrounds and streets are deserted, apart from the historical city centers in which vehicles are forbidden. We can imagine that an urban space with empty public spaces is a space without social interaction, which can be translated in weak social tissue, lack of solidarity and relational goods. All this has an enormous impact on the society, in terms of socio-economic, cultural and emotional resilience.

Moreover, the profound desire of eliminating elements of the poverty of the past in these places, drove the individual in following certain patterns of life for its new “social status”, which don’t reflect the local identity. Social interactions are seen more as “economic transactions”, in which trust is rather weak, and there is always the fear of marginalization, if one doesn’t follow a certain lifestyle trend. The lack of proper cultural background of the local society contributed in those results, and could also be the solution, according to the authors.

4.2.2. Emotional “screening”

The dominant emotions of the individual, according to narration, are linked to social status and economic conditions; for example, *happiness* related to purchase capacity and lifestyle profile, or *fear of contempt* and *marginalization* because of social position. A continuous comparison of the individual with others’ possessions creates *frustration*, *depression* and *aggression*, emotions that eliminate interest in common good. The relation of the individual with the urban space of the *città diffusa*, is related to *anxiety* and *boredom*, emotions linked to the lack of public spaces for everyday social interaction that enhance citizenship and solidarity, and because of the monotony and repetition produced by the homogeneous and very specific “suburban” architecture, which is spread all over the Region transforming it in an enormous suburb, without socio-cultural stimuli. The lack of *trust* and social bonds produces a rather weak social capital, which usually leads in blocking economic growth, but also to low emotional resilience in times of difficulty due to social, cultural, physical and economic changes.

5. Conclusions

The complex processes that characterize the city today and the global world require flexibility and creativity in our approaches to “reading” space and its relationship with the individual. We need innovative tools to “read” these complex changes; tools born within the society itself, from the same society that is being under study from time to time. Writers, in this direction, are like “reporters”, “reporting-from-the-front”, trying to transmit emotions and thoughts on a reality that we do not understand fully. Let us not forget that cities are always, in the words of Doreen Massey, «the intersections of multiple narratives» (1999, p. 165).

The study of emotions is becoming increasingly significant to measure the quality of life of an urban space, as emotional status is crucial for the growth of the individual and of the society in its whole. Planning practice should incorporate emotional cognition before and after the urban transformations, in other words, during participatory planning procedures, but also as a feedback on the emotional impact produced after those transformations. The literary production of a certain urban space as well as oral narration about the latter, with the help of scientific text, could help us immensely in understanding the space under investigation, in order to deliver the best possible solutions. These are tools rich in information about emotional impact, which cannot be excluded from the urban planning agenda, in order to create the best possible requirements in our cities, for a balanced growth for the individual, both biologically and emotionally. We believe that a socio-spatial diagnosis and an emotional “screening” of the society are crucial before any kind of urban transformations. In this direction, narratives are important cognitive tools that we must evaluate and incorporate in our studies on urban space.

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