

Visibility as a stake for cities

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Introduction

The idea of the paper is to explore an analogy . In all the professional milieus there are “Stars”, but there are two different kinds of Stars: some are “visible” (they are exposed to Medias, their personal features are displayed, people are interested in viewing their face, style, moods ...) and other are merely famous because of their talent (their name is known, and it is the consequence of meritocracy). If audience is concerned, it corresponds to the difference amateurs / fans.

In the same way, there are visible cities (the large metropolises like London, Paris, Berlin ...) which display a décor which is viewed in TV shows and movies and are very much visited, where the Medias are, etc. and mid-sized cities less visible.

The paper explores the analogy between visible persons and visible cities in several fields.

Amateurs and fans

The audience of amateurs is described by the American sociologist HS Becker in his book “Worlds of art”. An artistic milieu knows some conventions, that the artists themselves master. The success is when the artist performs in accordance with these conventions. The audience of amateurs recognizes it.

At the opposite, the audience of fans is passionate and even tribal. The audience of sport competitions is a good example. We quote the French novelist Louis Hémon (describing a boxing match): “The crowd, suddenly infuriated, became a living clamor, a horrendous unleashed wrath. Men got up out of their seats, apoplectic, the veins of their forehead as prominent as cables, shouted insults and blasphemies, shaking fists and ready to rush forward etc.”.

The link between the visible star and his (her) audience relies on empathy and the use of Medias. The person of the visible star is worshiped (face, style, moods ..) by the fans. Objects and persons linked to the Star are interesting: the house of the Star, the kins of the Star, the journalists interviewing him (her) etc.

The Heinich's theory on visibility

According to the French sociologist Nathalie Heinich, in her book “On visibility” visibility stems from an asymmetry: the Star is alone and his (her) fans are many. Cheap technology (photos, movies, recordings, TV shows ...) allows creating the popularity of the Star among the fans.

This follower of the French sociologist Bourdieu adds a “capital” to the capitals (like “cultural capital”) which are defined in the famous book “Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste”. It is the “capital of visibility”. Its features are:

- it is measurable (the size of the audience)
- it is accumulable
- it is transferable (to the heirs of the Star)
- it is worth money (Stars benefit from many advantages like gifts, sponsoring, appearance in advertisings etc.)
- it is convertible (a Star can convert his or her activity into another one, an actor becomes a singer etc.)

The existence of the capital of visibility triggers an upheaval of the social hierarchy.

Interestingly, Heinich distinguishes “endogenous value” and “added value”.

“Endogenous value” is when talent is magnified by the Medias, that is to say the Star is talented and his or her person is displayed by the Medias very much. “Added value” is when the visibility of the Star is only the consequence of the exposure to Medias and the curiosity of the public: journalists interviewing the Stars, actors of reality shows and even ... weathermen and weatherwomen.

The analogy between visible persons and visible cities

This analogy can be explored in several fields:

- **A new spatial division of labor.**

In the visible cities are located the nice places, the popular décor and even they are “artified” (according to the French sociologist Lipovetsky). The visible city benefits from its capital of visibility, which is accumulable.

In the large cities (visible cities) flows of transport are as follows:

- from a borough to another, to work, to shop and to buy services etc.
- from the periphery to the centre to entertain (visit museums, exhibitions, to go to the show and to dine in restaurants etc.).

But this does not mean that quality of life is at its top in these cities, for several reasons:

- artification means permanent building sites to embellish the city
- noise
- shooting movies
- given the numerous visitors and the increasing purchasing power of the inhabitants, there are more and more people in the streets, shopping, going to shows etc.

The networks are often saturated

- security (this topic is dealt with later in the presentation)
- other reasons (like illuminations, making darkness impossible during the night).

Indeed, the quality of life is perhaps at its top in some mid-sized cities which are silent, walkable, secure ...

- Differences in mindsets.

The inhabitants of the visible cities are used to observe the “laws of visibility”. They understand them. At the opposite the inhabitants of mid-sized cities understand the “laws of fame”.

- Adverse selection.

When a mid-sized city has some reputation (festivals, fairs, renowned products ...) it cannot organize events which are not in accordance with this reputation. Example: if a mid-sized city is well known for its festival of classical music, it cannot organize a festival of jazz of world music.

At the opposite, visible cities can organize all kinds of events, and benefit from profitability, since auditoriums, concert halls, places for exhibitions etc. are used more often.

- **The stake of security.**

In the visible cities are the political and religious symbols. Here are the crowds (in the means of transport and places for entertainment) . This is why the terrorist attacks occur in these cities.

- **The interaction between visible cities and visible persons.**

The visible cities and the visible persons are in mutual dependency and exchange services.

The visible city benefits from the purchasing power of the visible persons (who live there). They strengthen its capital of visibility.

The visible persons find what they need in the visible cities: specialized professionals impresarios, script writers ...), journalists, entrepreneurs of visibility (interviewers writing about stars ...). Also, the needed atmosphere is in the visible cities, since there the whims of the consumers are fashioned, the new “trends” appear etc.

The “events industry” is located there.

Also, the possible sponsors are there.

- The visible cities and the brands.

The visible cities and the well known brands are very much linked.

For the brands the visible cities are the ground where they can observe the trends of consumption and make tries. In principle the “creative people” working for them are there. Sales and production are another story: stores are anywhere and the production is often located in low wages countries.

For instance the Swedish brand H&M (selling clothes) is linked to tens of Stars and well known creative people who design clothes for it (it is an example of convertible capital of visibility). The stores are anywhere. The clothes are made in low wages countries.

Zara is a counter-example: the creative people are in La Coruna (Spain) and the clothes are made in Spain. They use Information Technologies very much.

- The exploration of the social imaginary.

Social sciences not only explain, analyze and understand, but also ... explore. More and more, the social imaginary is involved in theories on the evolution of the society. It can be only explored. The place for that is visible cities. This is done mainly by moviemakers (Lipovetsky). The new trends which fashion Society and concern the social imaginary appear in the visible cities.

Conclusion

Since the visibility of persons has changed the social hierarchy (Heinich) it has also changed the hierarchy of cities. From the visible cities comes the novelty in our everyday lives (like from the USA comes the technological novelty). The mid-sized cities imitate the visible cities. However this hierarchy is not absolute for two reasons: (1) the quality of life is (possibly) better in mid-sized cities and (2) competency is there, which allows the production of goods. The production of goods matters, of course. In mid-sized cities, are famous people (fame being very different from visibility).