In Praise of Ambiguity: the Contemporary City between Virtuality and Materiality of its Digital Places
by Andrea Pollio
Tutor: Francesca Governa
Co-tutors: Raimondo Iemma, Gabriele Pasqui

The city is the most complex social product among those we experience in our lives. And the Internet, the technological form of our society, inevitably designs the future of the urban. This text concerns such design, through those places of the contemporary city where the narrative threads of the physical space and the virtual realm are interwoven. They are the places where conflicts, struggles, knowledge and identities are formed from that ambiguous overlapping between matter and networks, space and cyberspace, real and digital. Ambiguous, because it is the city to be elusive. Therefore, the praise of ambiguity in the title is a praise of the city itself, the acknowledgement that it reveals the most advanced achievements and the most incurable contradictions of our civilization. Even when it comes to technology.

There are many ways to approach an issue as the relationship between the Internet and the city. I have chosen Urban Geography as it was the perspective that the more seemed to be able to hold together, in the study of urban space, the contributions of all disciplines who deal with it, from economics to sociology, from anthropology to science and technology studies (STS). Which Geography then? In the title _In Praise of Ambiguity_ lurks the risk that such praise is interpreted as an apology of an unstructured research method, of a postmodern relativism which I do not feel close to. On the contrary, it is to what Neil Brenner (2011) reconstructs as the critical school of Urban Geography that will look more carefully in the course of this work. Guided by the idea that the task of Urban Geography, as David Harvey wrote, is to show the developments and the declines of a dialectic that has its own hope in the future of the city. And in the non-neutral power of knowledge. The ambiguity, as I have already stated, is all in the city, and in the ways in which the physical space enters the digital world and transforms it, being transformed at the same time. But, perhaps, not all the ambiguity is there. Because of its innate diversity, there are many ways in which the city can be seen. There are many views that geography can have. How to choose, then, becomes what distinguishes one geography from the other. And choosing is not a neutral, but a critical act, both scientifically and ethically.

The first chapter of this essay is devoted to an overview that covers the last century of the debate on the urban and that has its own red line in the death of the city. The end of urban civilization, in fact, was the terrain of a rich academic production, and has particular relevance in this thesis since one of the most powerful, rooted and imaginative narrative strands was the one that saw the sunset of the city in the diffusion of the information and communication technologies .

In the second chapter, I will analyse the relationship between the Internet and the city starting from the history of *the* network of networks, in an attempt to understand why and how a technology product of a society has become, at some point and in some respects, the paradigm of the society itself. The story of the Internet narrates how the real has been invading the cyberspace over the last ten years. How the virtual has become a layer of the physical world, and how the latter has burst into the virtual - if the virtual ever existed, as I shall try to show.
Having explained the evolution of the network, in particular how the city is tied to the dense network of relationships that the Internet allows, I will devote the third chapter to some empirical examples, cases where the real and the virtual overlap. Mix. Where the places of geography - places of conflict, innovation, knowledge, power - are in the gap between the physical space and the space of the network. I will call them digital places, but any other denomination would be fine.

In the final chapter, rather than summarizing, I will undertake the attempt to show what are the issues that the digital places put on the table. Without the presumption of an in-depth analysis of the vast literature that concerns the rationality of the geographical representation, or social innovation, or deliberative democracy, I will try to show some causes of reflection offered by the ambiguous nature of digital places, eventually for a future research agenda. Faithful to the idea that geography, geography as I understand it, can offer a fertile field of investigation for its most salient feature - its being the discipline that builds, draws problems from space.

For further information, e-mail:
Andrea Pollio: andretwp@gmail.com