

MULTISPECIES BRNO: ENCOUNTERS IN A CENTRAL EUROPE CITY

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Cities provide an expanded experience of encounters. Almost a half of humanity lives in cities, with growing rates of urbanization everywhere, multiplying such encounters. Every city, as well as every encounter, offers the possibility to rethink the network of intermingled subjects co-producing the experience of lived spaces, fragments, borders, flows, structures, and other components of the “urban”. As declared by Deleuze: “(...) something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*” (1994, 139, emphasis of the author). Subjects encountered while experiencing the cities are consequently forces that enable us to sense the experience: “[the object of encounter] is not a sensible being but the being *of* the sensible. It is not the given but that by which the given is given” (Idem, 140, emphasis of the author). Only accepting such (s)objects of encounters the experience acquires the potential to redefine the pluralities involved in the shared production of the city. Anyhow, such production does not involve only human beings.

Despite their alleged human oriented design, cities proliferate also encounters with other-than-human beings, characterizing them as rich multispecies panorama. Beyond their being epiphenomenon of a claimed human exceptionalism, cities stimulate “arts of attentiveness” toward multispecies entanglements (Van Dooren, Kirksey and Munster 2016). Moving along




the streets, crossing the squares, contouring buildings, or bordering neighbourhoods, cities introduce several other-than-human inhabitants, with whom humans, perceptively or not, engage in their daily encounters. Recognizing such inhabitants lets new curiosities and hybridizations to emerge, with the consequent implications on the ethnographic effort of mapping such encounters (Bollettin 2021a). The movement of the attentiveness beyond the human, anyhow, does not imply to disband the engagement of multiple subjects, humans and other-than-humans, in a shared world, but rather their “ordinary multispecies living”, as stated by Haraway (2008).

The recognition of a shared living involving humans and other-than-humans is clearly not a specificity of the cities, neither of the anthropological curiosity. Current concerns about environmental crisis, the anthropo-capitalo-plantation(etc.)-cene, the exploratory model of capitalism, and so on, are reflected in the proliferation of suggestions for alternatives, less disastrous, anthropocentric, or autocratic, as become evident during the Covid-19 pandemic (Bollettin 2021b). A nice example is offered by the investigation on the disordered multispecies living in Indian postcolonial literature realised by Walter (2021), in which she claims for the association between human and other-than-humans as a form of resistance of the subalterns toward a cosmopolitan and multiple reality. In this sense, a multispecies approach to the city acquires an ethical commitment facing the anthropocentric humanism of modernity.

Meanwhile, the choice to focus on the multispecies description is also associated with an epistemological tension. Another Indian author, Ravindranathan (2020), moving from Barthes reflections about the “reality effect”, appoints in the direction of pluralistic narratives in which the presence of animals has the effect of making the histories more similar to the ones the readers experiment, animals assuming the role of producing a “true life”. In order to achieve this goal, she affirms, animals need to be in the meanwhile over-represented and under-represented, being this ambiguity what enables them to bridge the gap between the real and the fictional, consequently proliferating their potentialities from the narrative and epistemological dimensions back to the realm of multispecies sensorial experiences.

Assuming such ambiguity as a starting point, it is also possible to observe the cities as a more plural, polysemic, and poliedric spaces-times of encounters with animals occupying them. Similar reflections are promoted inclusive in the controversies about urban planning, with a movement toward the recognition of the cities as “biomes” as proposed by Pincetl (2015). A biome, assumed as a product of the direct human action, but that should be accessed, she suggests, equally than the “natural”



biomes, in its multispecies networks. In this photoessay, I would like, then, to rapidly move along some of the possible multispecies encounters I experienced moving along diverse public spaces in the city of Brno, in the Czech Republic.

Brno is the second largest and more populated city of the Czech Republic, with almost 380.000 human inhabitants that increase, when considering the metropolitan area with the neighbouring municipalities, to almost 700.000 human inhabitants. Additionally, it is necessary to add the almost 100.000 off-site students from Czech Republic and abroad enrolled in the thirteen tertiary educational institutions located in the city, which make of Brno one of the hundred largest cities of Europe. Historically the capital of capital of Great Moravia, along the history it passed through several central European dynasties, kingdoms, conflicts and disputes. During the soviet time, it also developed in an important industrial site and more recently in a services as well as information and technology European hub. All this long historical trajectory is still visible in the city's poliedric architecture, which mixes stiles such as the medieval, baroque, classical, modernist, art nouveau, and functionalist in a rich sensorial travel.

The site, located at the confluence of the Svitava and Svatka rivers, is inhabited since the prehistoric times by the *Homo sapiens*, but previously was occupied also by the *Homo neanderthalensis* (Jelinek 1980). Surrounded by a complex of hills covered by forest, patched by the *otevřená zahrada* (open gardens), and crossed by large parks, in 2017, Brno was awarded as one of the European greenest cities. Such recognition offers one more incentive to the curiosity toward the possible multispecies encounters in the experience of this city in Central Europe. Anyhow, it is not these “living” other-than-humans that I would like to introduce in this photoessay, but other companions spread in diverse and multiple spaces of the city, specifically the ones that is possible to encounter on the buildings, on the squares, on the roads and in other public spaces of the city.


One of the most shared histories in Brno narrates the presence of a dragon in the medieval times. This dragon would have lived in the waters of the Svatka river, menacing the local inhabitants until when a tradesman, with a cunning stratagem deceived the animal, killing it and freeing the city. Other versions state that a crocodile would have been taken to the city by a local noble when returning from the crusades in the Middle East and that this animal would have then escaped from the cage going to live in the local rivers. Despite legends about dragons being spread all over Europe, in Brno the body of the “dragon” (*drak*) – or crocodile (*krokodýl*) – is exposed in the Old City Hall in Radnická (photo 01). It is clear how the presence of animals in public spaces enables the people (*lidé*) to have

experiences of multispecies encounters far beyond the over-represented and under-represented possibilities mentioned above.

Moving along the city, the dragon is not the only mythical animal with whom it is possible to have encounters in Brno. Some griffins (*gryf*) adorn the windows of the Masaryk University Rectorate building in Žerotínovo náměstí (photo 02) and a hydra (*hydra*) heads the Kašna Parnas fountain in Zelný trh square (photo 03). Despite these examples of mythical animals certainly could motivate a romantic experience with other-than-humans, exotic animals are not uncommon all around the city. A camel (*velbloud*) meets people in front of the New Town Hall in Dominikánské náměstí (photo 04), while lions (*lev*) are present in several buildings, such the one looking at the door of a private building in Jaselská (photo 05). Other unexpected encounters happen when the human visitor meet aquatic beings, such as lobsters (*humr*) at the intersection of Masarykova with Jánská (Photo 06), despite others cause less strangeness, as it is the case of the fishes (*ryba*) again in the Kašna Parnas fountain (Photo 07).

But not all encounters are with mythical, exotic or unexpected companion species. In several places all around Brno, it is possible to meet animals which have their “living” counterparts present in the, more or less, common environment of the region. This is the case of the eagle (*orel*), which adorn the main entrance of the New Town Hall, again in Dominikánské náměstí (photo 08), a symbol of the Moravian coat of arms introduced by the King Ottokar II in the Thirteen Century and lately appropriated by the Habsburg emperors since the city protected the Empire from the Swedish invasion. Also a wolf (*vlk*) and a snake (*had*) meet the visitors while these visit the Botanical Garden (*Botanická zahrada*) in Veveří (photo 09 and photo 10). But also more friendly animals are awaiting for being encountered, as it is the case of a bull (*býk*) in Moravské náměstí, a square in the core centre of the city (photo 11).

Clearly, not all the animals are present by their own. Some of them are directly engaged with their human counterparts. An enormous statue of a horse (*kůň*) of almost eight meters high, carries his horseman (*rytíř*), the Moravian Margrave Jošt, who was the Emperors of the Romans for a year in the Fifteen Century, in Moravské náměstí (photo 12). The statue is a work of the contemporary Czech artists Jaroslav Róna. Moreover, in order to symmetrize the presentation of some encounters that can happen when moving around in Brno, it must be considered the possibility to meet also with other humans. As in the most most part of European cities, also in Brno uncountable humans are present in diverse materials: stones, marbles, granites, iron, etc. An unexpected one of these encounters can be the one happening in the garden of the Faculty of Science of



the Masaryk University, in Kotlářská, where a couple of humans (*lidé*) is waiting there in an “unusual” position (photo 13).

Along this photoessay I tried to introduce some possible encounters faced while moving around the city of Brno, in the Czech Republic. The photos I presented here have been realized as much “spontaneous” as possible, registering the moment in which the encounter happened, recording it with the cellphone (a Motorola MotoG7). The choice of recording the instantaneous event was not associated with a preoccupation with light, framing, etc., but yes with the concrete act of photographing, the individual and shareable experience (Putti 2021). In this direction, using the photographic records of these multispecies encounters, selected among others possible and effective, I hope to have introduced some feelings of curiosity toward the hybridity of the multispecies panorama, architectural, artistic, as well as sensorial. These pictures are in the meanwhile “evocative” and “fragmentary”, as Novaes described (2021), introducing my own way of seeing and sensing such encounters. They are not exhaustive of all the happenings, and other could be identified, as well it should be recognized as they are the result of a subjective experience, but what they introduce is properly an open-ended sensation of multiplicity and proliferation of possible intermingled experiences of a plural urban spaces. Pictures and images let to create plural narratives in which diverse experiences shape multiple semiotics (Xikrin and Bollettin 2022), and in this photoessay I tried to highlight how this movement can let to include also the other-than-humans. As mentioned above, Brno is a city with an eclectic architecture, in which diverse styles mix each other, but it could be possible that it is also a multispecies eclectic city, in which mythical, exotic and domestic other-than-human animals encounter as much as mythical, exotic and domestic human animals in shared spaces and sensorial experiences.



























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ABSTRACT

This photoessay is dedicated at introducing some possible encounters with a multispecies network in the City of Brno, in Czech Republic. Moving around the city, several animals appear in the buildings, streets and squares, enabling a hybrid experience with these other-than-humans sharing the urban space. The reflections about the multispecies character of urban spaces enable to highlight the collective and hybrid dimension of the sensorial curiosity promoted by the encounters with the other-than-humans. Mythical, exotic and domestic animals are present in diverse locations of the Brno, some connecting with the history of the city, other with its social and public dimensions. The proposal is that representing such multispecies encounters enables an eclectic city to emerge and to be experienced.

KEYWORDS

Brno;
Multispecies;
Urbanity;
Encounters;
Animals.



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