

# Urban semiotics a system of signs & practices

M. de Certeau,

“Walking in the City”, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1984

perceiving, sensing, inventing the city

# From perception to practice

“We are not simply observers of the city but **are ourselves part of what we see**. Our perception is usually partial, fragmentary, mixed with other concerns [..] The environmental image is the product both of **immediate sensation** and of the **memory of past experience**.”

Kevin Lynch, “The Structure of Urban Perception”,  
*The Image of the City* (1960)

Perception depends on the **positioning** of the observer and on his/her **movement** through the city, origin, occupation, culture, experience.

Michel de Certeau

*The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984

“Spatial Practices: Walking in the City”

- **seeing** from **above** and from **afar**
- **living** and **moving below** and **within**

# Seeing from above and from afar

- urban island in the sea
- texturology – **immobilizing** opaque mobility in a transparent, readable text (NB moving cityscape subjected to the gaze from above in de C's writing)
- voyeurism
- universal, anonymous subject surveying a '**whole**', **detached** reality: totalizing scopic and gnostic drive; geometric, panoptic vision

# Living the city – below and within

- Living, using, writing – being possessed by – the city **from below** and **from within**
- Experience of reality (fragmented, plural) through the **senses** and the **movements** of the **body**
- Style of **tactile** apprehension and **kinesthetic** appropriation

# Living the city from within as a way of resisting the “**concept-city**” (city from above)

“concept-city” (city from above) founded on:

- rational organization
- the city as a synchronic system – a transparent, flattening “no-when”, replacing the opacities of lived, plural histories and traditions
- the creation of a universal, anonymous subject: “the city”, providing a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, interconnected properties (94-5)

# concept-city

- Rejection of the “waste products” of rational, functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death...) 94
- Mythification of the city in strategic discourses
- Priority given to progress = time; neglect of space 95
- Totalizing, mythical landmark for socioeconomic and political strategies

# outside the concept-city: a counter-discourse

- But outside and beyond the reach of the “urbanizing” language of power and its panoptic vision there are contradictory movements.
- Beneath the discourses that ideologize the city **proliferate** the **ruses** and combinations of alternative, powers or forms of power whose identity is ‘illegible’. Without points where one can take hold of them, without rational transparency, they are impossible to administer.



# Surreptitious creativity

- The **microbe-like, singular and plural** practices the urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress
- **Swarming activity** of procedures that have reinforced themselves in a **proliferating** illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance, and combined according to unreadable **tactics**, constituting **surreptitious creativities** (96)

# indisciplinary spaces

- What spatial practices correspond, in the area where discipline is manipulated, to the apparatuses that produce a **disciplinary space** (see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1977) ?  
[...] secretly structur[ing] the determining conditions of social life.
- Multiform, tricky, stubborn procedures that elude discipline **without being outside the field in which it is exercised**, and which should lead us to a theory of **everyday practices**, of lived space, of the disquieting familiarity of the city. 96

# The *langue* and *parole* distinction applied to the city

- *Langue*: spatial order, code, normative urban system

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- *Parole* (*speech act, utterance*): individual ways of experiencing, using and expressing, and therefore ‘actualizing’, ‘differing’ and communicating the city

- official city maps as “procedures for forgetting” that substitute legible, disembodied traces for the embodied practice(s)

vs.

- Footsteps – myriad singularities, but not a series, intertwining, weaving spaces together, re- or counter-mapping the city
- Pedestrian speech acts: walking as a space of enunciation

# Creation of a rhetoric of walking

- **Actualization** of some possibilities implied by the spatial order, transformation and creation of other possibilities and prohibitions
- **Selection and displacement**
- **Phatic function**: ensuring communication by constituting near/far, here/there relations with others.

- **Style** as manifestation on the symbolic level of individual ways of being
- **Use** referring to elements of a code: actualization

### “**style of use**”

- **Tropes** as deviation from normative order or ‘literal meaning’ defined by the urban system
- **Drifting** of figurative language opposed to ‘proper meaning’ of geometrical space

- **SYNECDOCHE** – part for whole...  
creating **enlarged singularities**
- **ASYNDETON** – suppression of links:  
ellipses fragmenting the space traversed,  
opening gaps... creating **separate islands**

101

- *Langue*: spatial order, code, normative urban system

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- *Parole (speech act, utterance)*: individual ways of experiencing, using and expressing, and therefore ‘actualizing’, ‘differing’ and communicating the city



- technological system of a coherent and totalizing space that is 'linked' and simultaneous

VS.

- story/ies assembled out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes

# Totality and fixity vs. lack and precariousness

- the moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates

makes the city itself

- an immense social experience of *lacking a place*
- City as pullulation of passers-by, network of *temporary* residences, universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places.

- Walking as way of giving new senses – meanings = “signifieds”, feelings and modes of feeling – to the city “signifiers”
- Or subtracting and deviating - obscuring - the apparently transparent sense and direction of the “urban text”.103

# “proper names” and urban discourse

- “In the spaces brutally lit by an alien reason, proper names carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings” ... “make sense” differently, changing places into “passages” 104
- Naming “imposes an injunction proceeding from the other (a story) ... altering functionalist identity”

# Symbolic mechanisms organizing discourse on/of the city

- Legend
- Memory
- Dream

“Proper names make habitable or believable the place they clothe with a word (by emptying themselves of their classifying power, they acquire that of ‘permitting’ something else); they recall or suggest phantoms (the dead who are supposed to have disappeared) that still move about, concealed in gestures and in bodies in motion” 105

# City “paroles” vs. city “langue”

- Walking, living, using the city as city speech acts, “paroles”, “practices of everyday life” – “l’invenzione del quotidiano”
- What happens when the city is put into writing, the walking, living, using, inventing re-invented?