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. 95

Surreptitious creativity

- The **microbe-like**, **singular** and **plural** practices the urbanistic system was supposed to administer or supress
- **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 prceeding 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?