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The practice of Everyday Life

THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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Part III

Spatial Practices

Chapter VII Walking in the City

SEEING Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center. Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea, lifts up the skyscrapers over Wall Street, sinks down at Greenwich, then rises again to the crests of Midtown, quietly passes over Central Park and finally undulates off into the distance beyond Harlem. A wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. The gigantic mass is immobilized before the eyes. It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today's urban irruptions that block out its space. Unlike Rome, New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. In it are inscribed the architectural figures of the *coincidatio oppositorum* formerly drawn in miniatures and mystical textures. On this stage of concrete, steel and glass, cut out between

two oceans (the Atlantic and the American) by a frigid body of water, the tallest letters in the world compose a gigantic rhetoric of excess in both expenditure and production.'

Voyeurs or walkers

To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of "seeing the whole," of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts.

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was "possessed" into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a

viewpoint and nothing more.

Must one finally fall back into the dark space where crowds move back and forth, crowds that, though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below? An Icarian fall. On the 110th floor, a poster, sphinx-like, addresses an enigmatic message to the pedestrian who is for an instant transformed into a visionary: It's hard to be down when you're up.

The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it. Medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed.' This fiction already made the medieval spectator into a celestial eye. It created gods. Have things changed since technical procedures have organized an "all-seeing power"?³ The totalizing eye imagined by the painters of earlier times lives on in our achievements. The same scopic drive haunts users of architectural productions by materializing today the utopia that yesterday was only painted. The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text.

Is the immense texturology spread out before one's eyes anything more than a representation, an optical artifact? It is the analogue of the facsimile produced, through a projection that is a way of keeping aloof, by

the space planner urbanist, city planner or cartographer. The panorama-city is a "theoretical" (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. The voyeur-god created by this fiction, who, like Schreber's God, knows only cadavers,⁴ must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them.

The ordinary practitioners of the city live "down below," below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk-an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmanner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness.⁵ The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: in relation to representations, it remains daily and indefinitely other.

Escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not

surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible. Within this ensemble, I shall try to locate the practices that are foreign to the "geometrical" or "geographical" space of visual, panoptic, or theoretical constructions. These practices of space refer to a specific form of operations ("ways of operating", to "another spatiality",⁶ (an "anthropological," poetic and mythic experience of space, and to an opaque and blind mobility characteristic of the bustling city. A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.

[...]

2. The chorus of idle footsteps

"The goddess can be recognized by her step"

Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these "real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city." They are not localized; it is rather they that spatialize. They are no more inserted within a container than those Chinese characters speakers sketch out on their hands with their fingertips.

It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or "window shopping," that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map. They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhen of a surface of projection. Itself visible, it has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting.

The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.

[...]

3. Myths: what "makes things go"

[...]

From this point of view, after having compared pedestrian processes to linguistic formations, we can bring them back down in the direction of oneiric figuration, or at least discover on that other side what, in a spatial practice, is inseparable from the dreamed

place. To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper. The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City. The identity furnished by this place is all the more symbolic (named) because, in spite of the inequality of its citizens' positions and profits, there is only a pullulation of passer-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic, a shuffling among pretenses of the proper, a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places.

Names and symbols

An indication of the relationship that spatial practices entertain with that absence is furnished precisely by their manipulations of and with "proper" names. The relationships between the direction of a walk (*le sens de la marche*) and the meaning of words (*le sens des mots*) situate two sorts of apparently contrary movements, one extrovert (to walk is to go outside), the other introvert (a mobility under the stability of the signifier). Walking is in fact determined by semantic tropisms; it is

attracted and repelled by nominations whose meaning is not clear, whereas the city, for its part, is transformed for many people into a "desert" in which the meaningless, indeed the terrifying, no longer takes the form of shadows but becomes, as in Genet's plays, an implacable light that produces this urban text without obscurities, which is created by a technocratic power everywhere and which puts the city-dweller under control (under the control of what? No one knows): "The city keeps us under its gaze, which one cannot bear without feeling dizzy," says a resident of Rouen.³⁶ In the spaces brutally lit by an alien reason, proper names carve out pockets of hidden and familiar meanings. They "make sense"; in other words, they are the impetus of movements, like vocations and calls that turn or divert an itinerary by giving it a meaning (or a direction) (sens) that was previously unforeseen. These names create a nowhere in places; they change them into passages.

A friend who lives in the city of Sevres drifts, when he is in Paris, toward the rue des Saints-Peres and the rue de Sevres, even though he is going to see his mother in another part of town: these names articulate a sentence that his steps compose without his knowing it. Numbered streets and street numbers (I 12th St., or 9 rue Saint-Charles) orient the magnetic field of trajectories just as they can haunt dreams. Another friend unconsciously represses the streets which have names and, by this fact, transmit her-orders or identities

in the same way as summonses and classifications; she goes instead along paths that have no name or signature. But her walking is thus still controlled negatively by proper names.

What is it then that they spell out? Disposed in constellations that hierarchize and semantically order the surface of the city, operating chronological arrangements and historical justifications, these words (Borrego, Botzaris, Bougainville...) slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition. Saints-Peres, Corentin Celton, Red Square... these names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passers-by; they detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meeting-points on itineraries which, as metaphors, they determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recognized or not by passers-by. A strange toponymy that is detached from actual places and flies high over the city like a foggy geography of "meanings" held in suspension, directing the physical deambulations below: Place de l'Etoile, Concorde, Poissonniere... These constellations of names provide traffic patterns: they are stars directing itineraries. "The Place de la Concorde does not exist," Malaparte said, "it is an idea."³⁷ It is much more than an "idea." A whole series of comparisons would be necessary to account for the magical powers proper names enjoy. They seem to be carried as emblems by

the travellers they direct and simultaneously decorate.

Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning. They insinuate other routes into the functionalist and historical order of movement. Walking follows them: "I fill this great empty space with a beautiful name."^{3B} People are put in motion by the remaining relics of meaning, and sometimes by their waste products, the inverted remainders of great ambitions.³⁹ Things that amount to nothing, or almost nothing, symbolize and orient walkers' steps: names that have ceased precisely to be "proper."

[...]

7. "Walking in the City"

16. See Alain Medam's admirable "New York City,"

Les Temps modernes, August-September 1976, 15-33; and the same author's New York Terminal (Paris: Galilee, 1977).

2. See H.Lavedan, Les Representations des villes dans l'art du Moven Age (Paris: Van Oest, 1942); R.Wittkower, Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism (New York: Norton, 1962); L.Marin, Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces (Paris: Minuit, 1973); etc.

3. M.Foucault, "L'Oeil du pouvoir," in J.Bentham, *Le Panoptique* (Paris: Belfond, 1977), 16.

4. D.P.Schreber, *Memoires d'un nevropathe* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 41, 60, etc.

5. Descartes, in his *Regulae*, had already made the blind man the guarantor of the knowledge of things and places against the illusions and deceptions of vision.

6. M.Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard Tel, 1976), 332-333.

7. See F.Choay, "Figures d'un discours inconnu," *Critique*, April 1973, 293-317.

8. Urbanistic techniques, which classify things spatially, can be related to the tradition of the "art of memory": see Frances A.Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). The ability to produce a spatial organization of knowledge (with "places" assigned to each type of "figure" or "function") develops its procedures on the basis of this "art." It determines utopias and can be recognized even in Bentham's Panopticon. Such a form remains stable in spite of the diversity of its contents (past, future, present) and its projects (conserving or creating) relative to changes in the status of knowledge.

9. See Andre Glucksman, "Le Totalitarisme en effet," *Traverses*, No. 9, 1977, 34-40.

10. M.Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975); *Discipline and Punish*, trans. A.Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

11. Ch. Alexander, "La Cite semi-treillis, mais non arbre," *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuite*, 1967.

12. See R.Barthes's remarks in *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, No. 153, December 1970-January 1971, 11-13: "We speak our city... merely by inhabiting it, walking through it, looking at it." Cf. C.Soucy, *L'Image du centre dans quatre romans contemporains* (Paris: CSU, 1971), 6-15.

13. See the numerous studies devoted to the subject since J.Searle's "What is a Speech Act?" in *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black (London: Allen & Unwin; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1965), 221-239.

14. E.Benveniste, *Problemes de linguistique generale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 11, 79-88, etc.

15. R.Barthes, quoted in C.Soucy, *L'Image du centre*, 10.

16. "Here and now delimit the spatial and temporal instance coextensive and contemporary with the present instance of discourse containing I": E.Benveniste, *Problemes de linguistique generale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 1, p. 253.

17. R.Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique generale* (Paris: Seuil Points, 1970), p. 217.

18. On modalities, see H.Parret, *La Pragmatique des modalites* (Urbino: Centro di Semiotica, 1975); A.R.White, *Modal Thinking* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975).

19. See Paul Lemaire's analyses, *Les Signes sauvages. Une Philosophie du langage ordinaire* (Ottawa: Universite d'Ottawa et Universite Saint-Paul, 1981), in particular the introduction.

20. A.J.Greimas, "Linguistique statistique et linguistique structurale," *Le Francais moderne*, October 1962, 245.

21. In a neighboring field, rhetoric and poetics in the gestural language of mute people, I am grateful to E.S.Klima of the University of California, San Diego and U.Bellugi, "Poetry and Song in a Language without Sound," an unpublished paper; see also Klima, "The Linguistic Symbol with and without Sound," in *The Role of Speech in Language*, ed. J.Kavanagh and J.E.Cuttings (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1975).

22. *Conscience de la vine* (Paris: Anthropos, 1977).

23. See Ostrowetsky, "Logiques du lieu," in *Semiotique de l'espace* (Paris: Denoel-Gonthier Mediations, 1979), 155-173.

24. Pas a pas. Essai sur le cheminement quotidien en milieu urbain (Paris: Seuil, 1979).

25. In his analysis of culinary practices, P.Bourdieu regards as decisive not the ingredients but the way in which they are prepared and used: "Le Sens pratique," Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales, February 1976, 77.

26. J.Sumpf, Introduction a la stylistique du français (Paris: Larousse, 1971), 87.

27. On the "theory of the proper," see J.Derrida, Marges de la philosophie (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 247-324; Margins of Philosophy, trans. A.Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

28. Augoyard, Pas a pas.

29. T.Todorov, "Synecdoques," Communications, No. 16 (1970), 30. See also P.Fontanier, Les Figures du discours (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 87-97; J.Dubois et al., Rhétorique générale (Paris: Larousse, 1970), 102-112.

30. On this space that practices organize into "islands," see P.Bourdieu, Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique (Genève: Droz, 1972), 215, etc.; "Le Sens pratique," 51-52.

31. See Anne Baldassari and Michel Joubert,

Pratiques relationnelles des enfants à 1 et institution (Paris: CRECELE-CORDES, 1976); and by the same authors, "Ce qui se trame," *Paralleles*, No. 1, June 1976.

32. Derrida, *Marges*, 287, on metaphor.

33. Benveniste, *Problemes*, 1, 86-87.

34. For Benveniste, "discourse is language considered as assumed by the person who is speaking and in the condition of intersubjectivity" (*ibid.*, 266).

35. See for example S.Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. J.Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1955), Chapter VI, § 1-4, on condensation and displacement, "processes of figuration" that are proper to "dreamwork."

36. Ph. Dard, F.Desbons et al., *La Ville, symbolique en souffrance* (Paris: CEP, 1975), 200.

37. See also, for example, the epigraph in Patrick Modiano, *P/ace de /Etoile* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

38. Joachim du Bellay, *Regrets*, 189.

39. For example, Sarcel/es, the name of a great urbanistic ambition (near Paris), has taken on a symbolic value for the inhabitants of the town by becoming in the eyes of France as a whole the example of a total failure. This extreme avatar provides its

citizens with the "prestige" of an exceptional identity.