

# Urban aesthetics : movement as performative utterance

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## Urban Aesthetics: Movement as Performative Utterance

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How can we begin to understand what a city is and means? First and foremost, in terms of its dynamism, vitality, thus its movement, its activity. As Michel de Certeau points out, a city *is* the irrepressible movement and gestures of innumerable actors caught up in potentially intersecting dramas. This movement and these gestures allow us to see streets and other urban sites not as the abstract forms mapped by urban planners but as facilitators of movement, involvement, interaction, and participation – in a word, *space* in its most pregnant sense. A city is not an abstract place, but a human space – not a map of purely formal possibilities, but an ongoing *remapping* of reconfigured actualizations. This is what I will attempt to explore, with the help of Certeau's notion of cities as a set of practices and (in particular) the act of walking as having the status of utterances, actualizations and implications of the "pedestrian speech act", to see how this is manifested in Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* and *City of Glass*.

A city devoid of life and movement is a contradiction in terms; the very idea of a city as a metropolis, Greek for "mother city" – *matrix*: that from which new forms of life spring forth – a network produced by the interaction of socio-economic, political and cultural forces and their institutions – presupposes movement and dynamism, which makes the city also a state of mind. In *The Invention of Solitude*, Paul Auster (*Invention* 122) equates the wanderings of his mind and walking through a city, according urban movement epistemological importance:

. . . just as one step will inevitably lead to the next step so that one thought inevitably follows from the previous thoughts . . . and in this way, if we were to try to make an image of this process in our minds a network of paths begins to be drawn, as in the image of the human bloodstream (heart, arteries, veins, capillaries), or as in the image of a map (of city streets, for

example, preferably a large city, or even of roads, as in the gas station maps of roads that stretch, bisect and meander across a continent), so that what we are really doing when we walk through the city is thinking, and thinking in such a way that our thoughts compose a journey, and this journey is no more or less than the steps we have taken. (*Invention* 122)

Thought is a *discursus* and discourse itself an ensemble of movements. Movement and thought are inseparable. The physical movements of human beings are almost always symbolic or significant, being enactments of desire, purpose, and not infrequently confusion and ambivalence. Physical movement produces other forms of symbolic performances: they themselves are and, moreover, generate various forms of utterance, written, oral, or gestural. This presupposes a space in which such performances and movements take place; it also presupposes a vast array of everyday practices in which these utterances are articulated, that is, an environment with which to interact. Which is why they automatically involve role-playing: in order to locate ourselves, we must dramatically interact in order to position ourselves in the environment in which our urban movements negotiate and occupy the city's communal space as we walk or drive or stand on places where somebody else just has been walking, driving or standing.

In so doing, these utterances are performative and productive, as they *are* themselves actions and as they produce new spatial "realities." But what "realities" do they generate and what does performativity precisely imply in this context? This is what I will attempt to explore, with the help of Certeau's notion of cities as a set of practices and (in particular) the act of walking as having the status of utterances, actualizations and implications of the "pedestrian speech act," to see how this is manifested in Auster's *City of Glass*.

### *Urban utterances*

As John Austin argues in his seminal *How to do things with words*, the performative is that particular dimension of language by which certain conventional procedures are enacted by uttering certain words in appropriate contexts, such as naming a ship or making promise. Some utterances describe an action ("she named the boat *The Queen Elisabeth*"); others are themselves a performance of the act identified with a verb ("I *name* this ship the *Queen Elisabeth*"; Austin 7). But Austin also came to realize that even when we are making something that seems like a straightforward

statement or description, we are *doing* something, such as offering advice, contesting an authority or issuing a warning. Utterances actually *do* something: they perform an act that produces an event.

Michel de Certeau takes the theory of speech acts and makes a very interesting generalization of it. He argues that “the act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statement uttered” (Certeau 98). It has, he says, a triple “enunciative” function:

1. it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language);
2. it is a spatial acting out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language)
3. it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is among pragmatic “contracts” in the form of movements

Just as one speaks of “floor-taking” and “floor-holding” in conversational analysis, in which speakers take “turns” to produce “speech events” (Hymes 1964), our movements within and through a place are ways of taking possession of it. It is a spatial acting out of the place that produces events in accordance with our communicative competence that provides us with the knowledge of unwritten, pragmatic contracts. And although we seem to take these pragmatic contracts that movement constitute for given, they are anything but that. What happens if these contracts are systematically broken, just like a promise can be broken and contracts violated? What happens if one twists and turns these pragmatic practices – which Certeau compares to “poaching,” stealthily seizing possession of space that has already been claimed by others (see Colapietro 2002) that underlie our daily existence because we trust that they function and totally disregard that they are the outcome of highly complex negotiations of space?

### *Pedestrian speech acts*

The Certeauan act of walking thus acquires the status of actualizations and implications of the “pedestrian speech act” which is what makes the city both a lived and imagined experience, a concrete encounter as much as a state of mind. In his *New York Trilogy*, and in particular in its first part, “City of Glass,” Paul Auster gives a wonderfully creative expres-

sion of an intriguingly similar idea. Readers familiar with the novel might remember the maps of Professor Stillman Sr's meanderings around Manhattan, that Quinn, Auster's New York writer/detective protagonist, draws in his red notebook. Quinn has been catapulted from his comfortable metafictional and theoretical world of crime into the "real" world by some bizarre phone calls by someone looking for a private detective called Paul Auster. This results in Quinn's hiring (under the name of Auster) to trail Stillman, a strange linguistics professor, who has threatened to kill his son.

But Quinn soon finds out that Stillman has other plans: he is trying to reinvent a "natural," prelapsarian language, a language before Babel, with no gap between an object and its representation – "a language," as Stillman says, "that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world." ("City" 91-92). And, as I have pointed out elsewhere (Ljungberg 2005), Quinn is trailing Stillman's daily strolls which each seems to form an alphabetical letter, he suddenly sees what Stillman is up to: Stillman is performing the process of transforming the world of objects into signs. It even seems to Quinn that Stillman is walking the letters of TOWER OF BABEL into the streets of Manhattan, which Quinn then tries to represent in his red notebook.

Quinn's attempts to make meaning out of Stillman's seemingly purposeful wanderings do in fact correspond wonderfully with Certeau's central argument of the city as founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse, a panoptic blueprint meant to repress all the physical, mental, and pollutional elements that would compromise it (Certeau 94; see Ljungberg 2005). Yet, as he says – and here Certeau is much more positive than Foucault – "those caught in the net of discipline" find ways to resist its ideologies: *in the recesses and margins of the city, people invest places with their own meaning, memories and desires. They invent strategies to resist social constraints by developing practices to "appropriate" space; strategies that avoid the controlling, "totalizing eye" from above. These individuals are what he calls "the practitioners" of the city, the ones who live unnoticed "below the thresholds at which visibility [from the tall and "all-seeing" buildings] begins.*" Most of them, at least if they live in big cities, are walkers whose movements write an "urban text" they cannot read from "down below," an urban text "compos[ing] 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" (Certeau 93). What

eludes those watching from above is this pedestrian "text," an opaque network crisscrossed by textual "fragments" and intersecting discourses that only *appears* transparent from a summit perspective.

Certeau is in effect suggesting that modern cities can be seen as languages – or even more precisely, as *discourses*, the sedimented structures constituting languages Auster so ingeniously thematizes. Certeau is interested in the dynamic, transformative and improvisational aspects of our signifying practices and therefore subordinates syntactical frameworks to discursive acts. Certeau is adamant about this: "We privilege the act of speaking," he says, and, in so doing, foreground *how* acts of speaking "effect [. . .] an appropriation or reappropriation of language by its speakers" (xiii). Buildings do not make up a city, nor will they last forever, just as languages do not consist of the words we find in dictionaries, as forms that will last forever – like words, "buildings are the residues of past acts and the resources for present and future deeds" (Colapietro 152): it is the practitioners, the walkers, who are its raw material, who transform these objects into dynamic city space.

The "pedestrian speech act" involved in this urban "text," that is, the act of walking, "affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, et cetera, the 'trajectories' it speaks." It also makes use of "walking rhetorics" created by the walker's selection of "turns (tours) and detours" of speech events (100). Comparing these pedestrian processes to verbal "turns of phrase" or "stylistic figures," Certeau assigns to them a mythical structure, in the sense that they form a discourse "relative to the place/nowhere (or origin) of concrete existence, a story jerry-built out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and garmented tale whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes" (102). Challenging the "totalizing space" created by technology, the walkers break it down into parts that are haphazardly joined together, rearranging it and shaping it into make-shift and random "spatial stories."

This notion of narrative is wonderfully illustrated by Auster who picks up on Certeau's notion of the materiality of this pedestrian language by having Stillman collect the broken objects he finds in the streets of New York, an "endless source of material, an inexhaustible storehouse of shattered things," with its "broken people, . . . broken things, . . . broken thoughts" ("City" 94). Stillman takes these objects and renames them, in order to fill the gap between sign and object and thereby recover the instrumental function of language. In the same vein as Humpty Dumpty in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, who, as

Stillman says “gives the clue to our [human] salvation: to become masters of the words we speak” (98), he assigns ad hoc meanings to signs and to the fractured objects that he collects and names; he revives dead metaphors and creates new ones such as “For all men are eggs”: in Humpty’s view, “we are pure potential, an example of the not-yet-arrived” (98). This is what Auster has Stillman enact: Stillman takes the act of renaming literally by equating words, that is signs, with physical objects. Austin’s classical performative of naming that I mentioned at the outset – (“I name this ship *The Queen Elisabeth*”) – thus gets a very material expression as Stillman’s step by step *fiat* names objects anew and invests the urban text’s debris with new meaning, thereby creating a “real” language in physical space, mapped by Quinn’s drawings of his movements.

### *Walking rhetorics*

But Auster complicates the relationship between language and movement suggested by Certeau by making Stillman’s walked letter maps an iconic reenactment of an incomplete and aborted semiosis. Stillman’s attempts to create an iconic language, with “new words that will correspond to the things” (94), is a theoretical concept based on the notion of a “true” and instrumental language to which only a chosen few have access. Not only are languages and communication infinitely social phenomena that need a social and cultural context to function but iconic signs must be different from their objects, because sign economy demands a practical function. Representation can never be a one to one relationship, since successful sign generation needs a sign, the object to which it refers, as well as what C. S. Peirce would call “cognition produced in the mind” (CP 1. 372), an interpretant. Language results from complex cognitive processes of interaction between individuals and world, processes in which signs mediate between thought and reality. Stillman violates these pragmatic rules by naming things arbitrarily and thus disregards both conventions and practicality, transforming signs into uncommon and curious possibilities of meaning. This is what appeals to Quinn as a writer. Stillman’s fear that “[u]nless we can embody the notion of language, we will continue to be lost” (“City” 103) corresponds precisely to Quinn’s own struggle for meaning as a writer and

his own problems with mediating between his fictional world and reality.

Confused by the collapse of the semiotic process, Quinn gets increasingly disoriented. The urban "reality" that Stillman's movements and gestures have produced have landed him in an urban text that he cannot relate to as it is the hidden "murky intertwining daily behaviors" (Certeau 93) that urbanist and panoptic ideologists viewing the city from above would rather not see: a reality populated by "the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and drunks" ("City" 129). Nor do his maps give him any comfort. He does not even have any proof that they interpret Stillman's movements correctly, nor that Stillman has left him any message at all: as he muses, the walked maps are thoroughly virtual, they are "like drawing a picture in the air with your finger. The image vanishes as you are making it" (86). Therefore, we can never be sure whether these maps are just another example of Quinn's already problematic relationship with his interpretation of "reality." Excluded from the process of signification, Quinn loses his bearings in Stillman's new Wonderland of signs, and finally disappears from the story, leaving only his red notebooks behind, estranged from everyone including himself.

The story's ending in fact ties in nicely with Certeau's contention that practices of everyday life are a politics developed by those who are forced to *make do*, those who have to adjust to environments and circumstances over which they have little control but survive by constantly negotiating a passage in this urban "texturology" (Certeau 94). What use do these people make of urban space? Certeau suggests that this "making do" is a production but *another* one, called "consumption" which is "devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order" (xxii-xiii). In other words, even practitioners like Quinn who ends up living a passive life at the margin with those "down below" do so subversively. As "unrecognized producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in a jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices" (xviii). The *present* is the actualization of possibilities by these "consumers" in their negotiation of the possibilities and interdictions of space: the urban pedestrian creatively positions these possibilities and/or invents others, "since the crossing, drifting away, or improvisa-

tion of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements" (98). The actuality of the present is generated by the actualization of possibilities, negotiated by dramatically and discursively positioned "speakers" and "interlocutors." At the center of his query is what, precisely, is being said or negotiated by these movements and gestures on this urban stage? According to Certeau, walking about in a city is the movement toward alterity, the most fundamental differentiation of all. He concludes: "To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent expression of childhood; it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other*" (Certeau 110, emphasis added).<sup>1</sup> This is why Quinn loses his relationship with reality, as he refuses to move toward the other – he stops moving at all – refusing to let go of Stillman's impossible project.

In Auster's creative appropriation of Certeau's concept of the relationship between space and language, the city functions both as a state of mind and a category of thought, not in the sense of being a mental construct but one that has a material and performative function: it makes things happen. City space is both a scene of textual events and a text for individual interpretation similar to Auster's concept of the semiosis of walking, when "just as one step will inevitably lead one to the next step, so that one thought inevitably follows from the previous one." The constant negotiations of space taking place on different levels will, in turn, endlessly generate new processes of movements and gestures that are dynamic and transformative aspects of our signifying practices. This is what accounts for the city's ever-increasing complex and improvisational character which not only makes it a prime example of the creation of the "new realities" that performative utterances bring into being, but also a mirror of our metropolitan signifying practices of movement, mapping and mobility.

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<sup>1</sup> As Certeau argues, both Freud's story about his grandson's game of Fort-Da and Lacan's theory of the mirror phase fundamentally concern the movement toward alterity (109-110).

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