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URBAN SEMIOTICS

CINEMA AND TEXT SEMIOTICS

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A frequent source of inspiration for many writers and poets, the city is recognized both as a setting for social and individual dramas and a personified entity with its own personal charm and story. With its network of streets and map of places, the city becomes also an expanse of text to be read and interpreted as an urban book with layers of semiotic meaning. According to Michel de Certeau, 'The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered [...] a rhetoric of walking [...] the long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be' (1980: 97; 99; 101). In order to understand how a city becomes a text that can transform the postmodern city's spatial order through individual or collective ways of actualizing and communicating the city so that eventually power relations in politics, class, gender and sexuality are reflected, works by Michel De Certeau, Abdollah Karimzadeh, Alireza Khosravi and Hamid R. Rabie Dastgerdi, Daniel Chandler, Bornali Nath Dowerah, Matej Jaššo, Göran Sonesson, Michel Foucault, Isabella Pezzini and Paolo Peverini, George Lipsitz, Irina Novikova, and Nina Glick Schiller will be analyzed with illustrations of examples of a semiotic reading of Riga.

M. De Certeau writes that "the city," like a proper name, [...] provides a way of conceiving and constructing space on the basis of a finite number of stable, isolatable, and interconnected properties' (1980: 94), thus different places in a city can be read as discrete signs in a linguistic system, 'endless substitutions of signifiers [where] every signified is also a signifier' (B. N. Dowerah, 2013: 3), but 'according to Semioticians any chain of signs constitutes a text [which] produces meanings through establishing syntagmatic/paradigmatic and diachronic/synchronic relations ' (A. Karimzadeh, A. Khosravi, H. R. Rabie Dastgerdi, 2013: 1). M. De Certeau argues that through the possibilities of choice which arise due to spatial organization 'the walker [...] makes a selection [...] and thus creates a discreteness, whether by making choices among the signifiers of the spatial "language" or by displacing them' (1980: 98) while 'tours' taken by citizens arrange places in 'spatial syntaxes' creating 'stories of journeys and actions [...] marked out by the "citation" of the places that result from them or authorize them' (ibid.: 119; 115; 120). Consequently, the combination of spatial elements which constitute a tour, being sequential and temporal, corresponds to syntagms in semiotics that create a narrative whereas the preference of certain places along the route over others correlates with paradigmatic relations which deal with 'comparing and contrasting each of the signifiers present in the text with absent signifiers [...] to define the "value" of specific items' by assessing the implications of meaningful "absences" (D. Chandler, 2002: 88). As B. N. Dowerah points out, substitution and displacement figure as metaphor and metonymy also in Lacan's analysis of the relations between the signifier and the signified where "displacement" operates in the mind unconsciously and involves emotions, ideas, or wishes

being transferred from their original object to a more acceptable substitute' (2013: 2) so that signifiers which fail to make sense stand for 'lack (desire)' due to psychological repression (ibid.: 4). Likewise, the development of a city as a social construct includes desirable spatial elements which testify to the progress of ideological and technological solutions and excludes those which cannot be contained, administered or accepted. But, as M. De Certeau observes, though 'the city serves as a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socioeconomic and political strategies, urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded' (1980: 95). As a result, a semiotic reading of a city involves deciphering patterns of subjective interpretations of the objective spatial organization of space into various structures of specific places linked with personal memories of the inhabitants and guests of the city and their individual ways of perceiving the collective myth experienced through the process of walking as the dichotomy of place – the city per se and the city dreamed/imagined.

Because 'the citizens as the authors translate their identity into the text of the city' (A. Karimzadeh, A. Khosravi, H. R. Rabie Dastgerdi, 2013: 1) which itself is a legend – 'what is *to be read*, but also what *can be read*' (M. De Certeau, 1980: 106) and therefore, according to a Benjaminian reading of the city shapes the identity of the citizen' (A. Karimzadeh, A. Khosravi, H. R. Rabie Dastgerdi, 2013: 5), urban semiotics is a dialogue between the 'city's historical memory [...], the events that shaped its appearance, and especially its hierarchy of values, social atmosphere and hypothetical personality' (M. Jaššo, 2012: 90) and the private memories of its dwellers and walkers – the 'fragmentary and inward-turning histories [of places], pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reverse, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body' (M. De Certeau, 1980: 108). As essentially stories of memories inscribed in the space of the city and unfolded as the urban narratives, these mental images can be treated in terms of cognitive semiotics as 'mental pictures' generated by the human mind as projections of perception 'not images in a phenomenal sense' and consequently are to be approached, according to G. Sonesson, as presentifications – signs that are 'present in a modified mode: as imagined, as past, etc.' (2011: 177; 179). Like ghosts triggered to appear by places revisited, memories mark places with the aura of expired events: 'the places people live in are like the presences of diverse absences. What can be seen designates what is no longer there: "you *see*, here there used to be..."' (M. De Certeau, 1980: 108). But, as M. De Certeau maintains, precisely this hauntedness of places renders them livable (ibid.) in contrast to places bypassed: 'The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place' (ibid.: 103). So individual and collective

memories of the city intertwine and converse during the rhetoric of walking and influence the identity of the author-reader reflecting upon the urban story of spatial relations and power manipulations that shape the face of the city.

Interpreting the city as a semiotic text requires to recognize the ‘different genres [...] inscribed within urban spaces, from traffic signals to street art, from billboards to institutional communication, from political discourses to signs of protest’ (I. Pezzini, P. Peverini, 2014) which reflect various modes of power relations and, according to A. Karimzadeh, A. Khosravi and H. R. Rabie Dastgerdi, can be grouped and read as three types of linguistic signs defined by Jakobson: firstly, expressive signs that signify ‘emotive states and attitudes,’ secondly, conative signs that invite the interpreter ‘to do a specific action or to show a specific behavior’ and, thirdly, phatic signs that incite ‘communications between people’ (2013: 2). According to I. Pezzini and P. Peverini,

In the complex and intricate semiotic geography of urban areas, every kind of space (subway stations, shopping malls, tunnels, road networks, sporting areas) elaborates and defines more or less codified narrative programs of its own use, becomes available for different activities, permits some behaviors and obstructs others (2014).

As a result, as M. Foucault indicates, ‘Endeavouring [...] to decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power’ (1980: 70) which ‘marked by a contradiction between the collective mode of administration and an individual mode of reappropriation [are transgressed by] spatial practices [that] secretly structure the determining conditions of social life [eluding] discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised’ (M. De Certeau, 1980: 96). Thus the surveillance of the interiorized gaze (M. Foucault, 1980: 155) is confronted with an individual’s capacity to dream, altering the prescribed function of a place by marking it with personal memories. As M. De Certeau states, ‘The memorable is that which can be dreamed about a place’ (1980: 109), but ‘this freedom to dream means that the flâneur is able to construct a new and imaginative relationship with the city’ (A. Karimzadeh, A. Khosravi, H. R. Rabie Dastgerdi, 2013: 5). So, although the politics of the ‘Concept-city’ (M. De Certeau, 1980: 95) manipulates the actions and feelings of its citizens from codes prescribing certain behavior models attributable to specific public and private spaces to gender roles engrained in the patterns of urban planning, it is possible to realize, shift and surmount the underlying power structures that govern general social urban communications by way of actualizing and individualizing the city through personal experience.

But the city with its population is not an isolated island on the world map. With the growth of global and transnational processes, the city becomes ever more a meeting place of different identities, a center of transforming confrontations. According to G. Lipsitz,

Globalization affects nearly every aspect of human life [...] from the realities of low-wage labour, [...] the shake-up in social identities engendered by migration, economic restructuring, and new communications media, and the creative adaptations and unlikely affiliations (and antagonisms) that emerge under current conditions (1999: 217).

Thus changes in social life necessitate shifts in urban landscape, introducing immigrant districts, adding languages to signage of shops, reflecting in dress and music styles and national cuisines that color the shapeshifting image of the city, but at the epicenter of change are issues of gender and sexuality ‘where the most important changes of our era are being experienced’ (G. Lipsitz, 1999: 231). N. Glick Schiller reminds that ‘women’s decisions about their location of settlement are mediated by a commitment to the collective family well-being that serves to reinforce male authority’ (1997: 158). However, due to political and economic restructuring, traditions begin to change. As I. Novikova indicates, ‘the private and para-public spaces should be seen as spaces inflecting women’s gender identification with traditional knowledge and values of what it means to be a woman’ but ‘in dominant re-inventions of ethnic, gender and cultural belongings and identities, women’s roles and relationships with men have been re-imagined and women’s access to cultural identity restricted and even devalued’ (10; 11), causing women to search and establish new patterns of self-expression.

Consequently, aspects of social life which once could be observed in public places such as ‘granny clubs’ retreat to private spaces and vice versa, reflecting shifts in identities and becoming a political propaganda, e. g. prides popularizing homosexual relationships. Instead of small children guarded by their mothers or grandmothers in public playgrounds, these places are increasingly occupied by rebel teens smoking spice thus marking the negative effects of the loss of the granny gaze in the yard, the lack of which has not yet been substituted with internalized self-discipline. The toddlers are mostly attending kindergartens and the pupils are the ones out of place after lessons but the public space is slow to adapt to shifts in social demands for meeting places appropriated for different generations. Yet, border zones which split citizens in social classes, age and gender groups, indicating possible conflict areas, may be interpreted also as places for spiritual growth. As M. De Certeau explains, though elements of the city such as ‘the river, wall or tree *makes* a frontier’ they also have ‘a mediating role’ that creates ‘a middle place [...] a narrative symbol of exchanges and encounters’ which via the medium of the story “‘turns” the frontier into a crossing, and the river into a bridge [that]

alternately welds together and opposes insularities' (1980: 127-8). Thus it is up to personal choice which of the possible interpretations to favor in creating a story to remember.

Reading Riga as an urban text is like reading a poem. It is not epic like Rome. It is not vast like the novel of St Petersburg. Riga is small compared to the metropolises of the world, yet the history of Europe and shifts in political ideologies are inscribed in its streets. Riga has its own story and lessons to teach but what is best it allows to breathe: the many parks and green zones of Riga provide a space for walking, recalling and dreaming. Grown out of the Old Town with its Hanseatic skyline of church spires, which have not been challenged by a multitude of skyscrapers, Riga has organically expanded over time in concentric stanzas that mark its historical periods of development and former colonization. Separated from the Old Town by waterlines of the city canal and the river Daugava, the city center invites its visitors to marvel at the beautiful houses built in the style of Art Nouveau. Divided from the upscale Riga by railway but linked to it with bridges, the latest districts built during the Soviet times for the working class as plain block apartment buildings yet rhyme with the roots of Riga planted in the Old town by mirroring the winding paths between the blocks of houses, creating the enclosed magical space of neighboring yards which, if proper care would be taken, could bloom and charm no less than the celebrated center.

Yet what enchants the most is the composition of the urban story of Riga: the placement of discrete pictorial signs with a symbolic meaning which, read together, relate the narrative of life. Three places in particular have a deeper semiotic meaning – the area around Bastejkalns, Riga Port and the Central Market. Bastejkalns is a fifteen meters high hill artificially created in 1857 after the tearing down of the city ramparts and turned into a beautiful park with water cascades. It faces the Old Town and the Powder Tower on the west, signifying past battles and bearing testimony to former colonization periods inscribed in the architecture of the Old Town. It looks upon Riga State Gymnasium Nr. 1 between the French Embassy and former embassy of the U.S. on the east, reminding of the presence of foreign powers and the influence of their politics on education and formation of identities through transnational interactions. It is sided on the north and south by the National Theatre of Latvia and the National Opera, pointing to the drama of life. Memorial stones by the paths of Bastejkalns mark places of the fallen during the Barricades and the Monument of Freedom rises high beyond the hill as an emblem of the one goal to be remembered in all times: to be free means to know one's true identity, to be free means to be able to narrate one's own story, employing the given signs but finding a trail among the battling powers and having a place to call home. Thus looking at the area of Bastejkalns from a semiotic perspective reveals a moving urban story, and perhaps Bastejkalns is crying its

cascades, knowing that to reach the height of freedom means to destroy useless structures in order to have space and material for building new stairs towards the dream so hard to attain.

Linked by a water road to Riga Port and the Central Market, Bastejkalns also symbolizes the crossroads of decisions. Taking a boat at the foot of Bastejkalns and going down the city canal, one arrives at Riga Port where ships and ferries are waiting to take their passengers to the wealthy Nordic cities. At the docks, cranes are loading and unloading containers of goods linking Riga with the market of the world. Employed in lifting weights as well as building houses, cranes at the docks associate with dreaming: of being connected, being rich, holding one's hand on the harbor of life. Arriving at port is a symbol of home, leaving it – the access to new adventures. And it is, again, up to individual choice what treasures to share and what level of foreign influence to welcome. Going back up the canal one lands at the Central Market. Built in 1930 using hangars left after World War I and situated next to the Academy of Sciences added to the landscape during the Soviet times, it ranks among the largest markets in the world. The horizontal expanse of the Central Market competes with the skyscraper height of the Academy as if marking the eternal battle between the human urge to acquire more goods and the longing for greater knowledge. But the balance between the horizontal and vertical axes of the two places signifies the importance of finding an equilibrium and means of collaboration between the material and spiritual realms of human interests so that true values would not be exchanged in the ensnaring market world resulting in a loss of identity and place. The success or failure of the city in doing so reflects in its urban language of street art: graffiti relates the emotional states, individual protests, dreams and approvals of its reader-walkers, and the highest commendation seems to be a smiley on one's gates.

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