

NON-PLACES
Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity
MARC AUGÉ
Translated by John Howe

An ever-increasing proportion of our lives is spent in supermarkets, airports and hotels, on motorways or in front of TVs, computers and cash machines. This invasion of the world by what Marc Augé calls 'non-space' results in a profound alteration of awareness: something we perceive, but only in a partial and incoherent manner.

Augé uses the concept of 'supermodernity' to describe the logic of these late-capitalist phenomena – a logic of excessive information and excessive space. In this fascinating and lucid essay he seeks to establish an intellectual armature for an anthropology of supermodernity. Starting with an attempt to disentangle anthropology from history, Augé goes on to map the distinction between place, encrusted with historical monuments and creative of social life, and non-place, to which individuals are connected in a uniform manner and where no organic social life is possible.

Unlike Baudelairean modernity, where old and new are interwoven, supermodernity is self-contained: from the motorway or aircraft, local or exotic particularities are presented two-dimensionally as a sort of theme-park spectacle. Augé does not suggest that supermodernity is all-encompassing: places still exist outside non-place and tend to reconstitute themselves inside it. But he argues powerfully that we are in transit through non-place for more and more of our time, as if between immense parentheses, and concludes that this new form of solitude should become the subject of an anthropology of its own.

Marc Augé is Director of Studies at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. His books include *La traversée du Luxembourg. Un ethnologue dans le métro* and *Domaines et châteaux*.

Shopping malls, motorways, airport lounges – we are all familiar with these curious spaces which are both everywhere and nowhere. But only now do we have a coherent analysis of their far-reaching effects on public and private experience. Marc Augé has become their anthropologist, and has written a timely and original book.

Patrick Wright, author of *The Village That Died for England*.

ISBN 1-85984-051-5



9 781859 840511




VERSO

UK: 6 Meard Street London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street New York NY 10014

www.versobooks.com

Cover designed by the Serate

Photograph courtesy Frankel Gallery, San Francisco. © The estate of Gary Winograd
\$17.95/\$22CAN



non-places
introduction to an
anthropology of
supermodernity

Marc Augé

Translated by JOHN HOWE

This translation has been published with financial assistance from the French
Ministère des Affaires Étrangères.

First published by Verso 1995
This edition © Verso 1995
Translation © John Howe 1995

First published as *Non-Lieux, Introduction à une anthropologie de la
supermodernité*

© Editions du Seuil 1992
All rights reserved

7 9 10 8 6

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-956-3
ISBN 1-85984-051-5 (pbk)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the
British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Augé, Marc.
[Non-licux. English]
Non-places : introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity /
Marc Augé ; translated by John Howe.

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 1-85984-956-3. — ISBN 1-85984-051-5 (pbk.)

1. Ethnology—Philosophy. 2. Space perception. I. Title.
GN345.A92513 1995
301'.01—dc20 94-46299
CIP

Typeset by M Rules in Bembo
Printed in Great Britain by
The Cromwell Press

Contents

Prologue	1
The Near and the Elsewhere	7
Anthropological Place	42
From Places to Non-Places	75
Epilogue	116
<i>A Few References</i>	121

*From Places to
Non-Places*

The presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it: it is in this reconciliation that Jean Starobinski sees the essence of modernity. In a recent article he points out in this connection that certain authors, indubitably representative of modernity in art, outlined

the possibility of a polyphony in which the virtually infinite interlacing of destinies, actions, thoughts and reminiscences would rest on a bass line that chimed the hours of the terrestrial day, and marked the position that used to be (and could still be) occupied there by ancient ritual.

He quotes the first pages of Joyce's *Ulysses*, containing the words of the liturgy: '*Introibo ad altare Dei*'; the

beginning of *Remembrance of Things Past*, where the cycle of the hours around the Combray bell tower punctuates the rhythm 'of a vast and solitary bourgeois day'; and Claude Simon's *Histoire*, in which

memories of religious school, the Latin prayer in the morning, grace at midday, the evening Angelus, provide landmarks amid the views, the disassembled schemes, the quotations of all sorts that stem from every period of existence, from the imagination and the historical past, proliferating in apparent disorder around a central secret

These 'premodern figures of continuous temporality, which the modern writer tries to show he has not forgotten even as he is becoming free of them' are also specific spatial figures from a world which since the Middle Ages, as Jacques Le Goff has shown, had built itself around its church and bell tower by reconciling a recentred space with a reordered time. Starobinski's article begins significantly with a quotation from the first poem in Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, where the spectacle of modernity brings together in a single poetic flight:

. . . the workshop with its song and chatter;
Chimneys and spires, those masts of the city,
And the great skies making us dream of eternity.

'Bass line': the expression Starobinski employs to evoke ancient places and rhythms is significant: modernity does not obliterate them but pushes them into the background. They are like gauges indicating the passage and continuation of time. They survive like the words that express them and will express them in future. Modernity in art preserves all the temporalities of place, the ones that are located in space and in words.

Behind the cycle of the hours and the outstanding features of the landscape, what we find are words and languages: the specialized words of the liturgy, of 'ancient ritual', in contrast to the 'song and chatter' of the workshop; and the words, too, of all who speak the same language, and thus recognize that they belong to the same world. Place is completed through the word, through the allusive exchange of a few passwords between speakers who are conniving in private complicity. Vincent Descombes writes of Proust's Françoise that she defines a 'rhetorical' territory shared with everyone who is capable of following her reasoning, those whose aphorisms, vocabulary and modes of thought form a 'cosmology': what the narrator of *Things Past* calls the 'Combray philosophy'.

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or

concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are not themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places: instead these are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned to a circumscribed and specific position. A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shantytowns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it may be amenable. We should add that the same things apply to the non-place as to the place. It never exists in pure form; places reconstitute themselves in it; relations are restored and resumed in it; the 'millennial ruses' of 'the invention of the

everyday' and 'the arts of doing', so subtly analysed by Michel de Certeau, can clear a path there and deploy their strategies. Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten. But non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified – with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance – by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself.

The distinction between places and non-places derives from the opposition between place and space. An essential preliminary here is the analysis of the notions of place and space suggested by Michel de Certeau. He himself does not oppose 'place' and 'space' in the way that 'place' is opposed to 'non-place'. Space, for him, is a 'frequented place', 'an intersection of moving bodies': it is the pedestrians who transform a street (geometrically defined as a

place by town planners) into a space. This parallel between the place as an assembly of elements coexisting in a certain order and the space as animation of these places by the motion of a moving body is backed by several references that define its terms. The first of these references (p. 173) is to Merleau-Ponty who, in his *Phénoménologie de la perception*, draws a distinction between 'geometric' space and 'anthropological space' in the sense of 'existential' space, the scene of an experience of relations with the world on the part of a being essentially situated 'in relation to a milieu'. The second reference is to words and the act of locution:

The space could be to the place what the word becomes when it is spoken: grasped in the ambiguity of being accomplished, changed into a term stemming from multiple conventions, uttered as the act of one present (or one time), and modified by the transformations resulting from successive influences . . . (p. 173)

The third reference, which stems from the second, highlights the narrative as an effort that ceaselessly 'transforms places into spaces and spaces into places' (p. 174). There follows, naturally, a distinction between 'doing' and 'seeing', observable in everyday language which by turns suggests a picture ('there is . . .') and organizes movements ('you go in, you

cross, you turn . . .'), or in map signs: from medieval maps, essentially comprising the outlines of routes and itineraries, to more recent maps from which 'route describers' have disappeared and which display, on the basis of 'elements of disparate origins', an 'inventory' of geographical knowledge. Lastly, the narrative, and especially the journey narrative, is compatible with the double necessity of 'doing' and 'seeing' ('histories of journeys and actions are punctuated by the mention of the places resulting from them or authorizing them', p. 177) but is ultimately associated with what Certeau calls 'delinquency' because it 'crosses', 'transgresses' and endorses 'the privileging of the route over the inventory' (p. 190).

A few terminological definitions are needed at this point. Place, as defined here, is not quite the place Certeau opposes to space (in the same way that the geometrical figure is opposed to movement, the unspoken to the spoken word or the inventory to the route): it is place in the established and symbolized sense, anthropological place. Naturally, this sense has to be put to work, the place has to come to life and journeys have to be made, and there is nothing to forbid the use of the word space to describe this movement. But that is not what we are saying here: we include in the notion of anthropological place the possibility of the journeys made in it, the discourses uttered in it, and the language characterizing it. And

the notion of space, in the way it is used at present (to talk about the conquest of outer space, in terms which, for the time being, are more functional than lyrical, or to designate unnamed or hard-to-name places as well as possible, or with the minimum of inaccuracy, in the recent but already stereotyped language of travel, hotel and leisure institutions: 'leisure spaces', 'sports spaces', rather like 'rendezvous point'), seems to apply usefully, through the very fact of its lack of characterization, to the non-symbolized surfaces of the planet.

As a result, we might be tempted to contrast the symbolized space of place with the non-symbolized space of non-place. But this would hold us to the existing negative definition of non-places, which Michel de Certeau's analysis of the notion of space may help us to improve upon.

The term 'space' is more abstract in itself than the term 'place', whose usage at least refers to an event (which has taken place), a myth (said to have taken place) or a history (high places). It is applied in much the same way to an area, a distance between two things or points (a two-metre 'space' is left between the posts of a fence) or to a temporal expanse ('in the space of a week'). It is thus eminently abstract, and it is significant that it should be in systematic if still somewhat differentiated use today, in current speech and in the specific language of various institutions

representative of our time. The *Grand Larousse illustré* makes a separate case of 'airspace', which designates that part of the atmosphere in which a state controls the air traffic (less concrete, however, than its maritime equivalent, 'territorial waters'), but also cites other uses which testify to the term's plasticity. In the expression 'European judicial space' it is clear that the notion of frontier is implied but that, setting aside this notion of frontier, what is expressed is a whole institutional and normative mass which cannot be localized. The expression 'advertising space' applies either to an area or to a length of time 'set aside for advertising in the various media'; 'buying space' refers to all the 'operations carried out by an advertising agency in connection with advertising space'. The craze for the word 'space', applied indiscriminately to auditoriums or meeting-rooms ('Espace Cardin' in Paris, 'Espace Yves Rocher' at La Gacilly), parks or gardens ('green space'), aircraft seats ('Espace 2000') and cars (Renault 'Espace'), expresses not only the themes that haunt the contemporary era (advertising, image, leisure, freedom, travel) but also the abstraction that corrodes and threatens them, as if the consumers of contemporary space were invited first and foremost to treat themselves to words.

To frequent space, Michel de Certeau writes, is 'to repeat the gleeful and silent experience of infancy: to be other, and go over to the other, in a place' (p. 164).

The gleeful and silent experience of infancy is that of the first journey, of birth as the primal experience of differentiation, of recognition of the self as self and as other, repeated later in the experiences of walking as the first use of space, and of the mirror as the first identification with the image of the self. All narrative goes back to infancy. When he uses the expression 'space narratives', de Certeau means both the narratives that 'traverse' and 'organize' places ('Every narrative is a journey narrative . . .', p. 171) and the place that is constituted by the writing of the narrative ('. . . reading is the space produced by frequentation of the place constituted by a system of signs – a narrative', p. 173). But the book is written before being read; it passes through different places before becoming one itself: like the journey, the narrative that describes it traverses a number of places. This plurality of places, the demands it makes on the powers of observation and description (the impossibility of seeing everything or saying everything), and the resulting feeling of 'disorientation' (but only a temporary one: 'This is me in front of the Parthenon,' you will say later, forgetting that when the photo was taken you were wondering what on earth you were doing there), causes a break or discontinuity between the spectator-traveller and the space of the landscape he is contemplating or rushing through. This prevents him from perceiving it as a place, from being fully

present in it, even though he may try to fill the gap with comprehensive and detailed information out of guidebooks . . . or journey narratives.

When Michel de Certeau mentions 'non-place', it is to allude to a sort of negative quality of place, an absence of the place from itself, caused by the name it has been given. Proper names, he tells us, impose on the place 'an injunction coming from the other (a history . . .)'. It is certainly true that someone who, in describing a route, states the names appearing along it, does not necessarily know much about the places. But can a name alone be sufficient to produce 'this erosion or non-place, gouged' out of a place 'by the law of the other' (p. 159)? Every itinerary, Michel de Certeau says, is in a sense 'diverted' by names which give it 'meanings (or directions) that could not have been predicted in advance'. And he adds: 'These names create non-place in the places; they turn them into passages' (p. 156). We could say, conversely, that the act of passing gives a particular status to place names, that the faultline resulting from the law of the other, and causing a loss of focus, is the horizon of every journey (accumulation of places, negation of place), and that the movement that 'shifts lines' and traverses places is, by definition, creative of itineraries: that is, words and non-places.

Space, as frequentation of *places* rather than a place, stems in effect from a double movement: the traveller's

movement, of course, but also a parallel movement of the landscapes which he catches only in partial glimpses, a series of 'snapshots' piled hurriedly into his memory and, literally, recomposed in the account he gives of them, the sequencing of slides in the commentary he imposes on his entourage when he returns. Travel (something the ethnologist mistrusts to the point of 'hatred'⁵) constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape. And while we use the word 'space' to describe the frequentation of *places* which specifically defines the journey, we should still remember that there are spaces in which the individual feels himself to be a spectator without paying much attention to the spectacle. As if the position of spectator were the essence of the spectacle, as if basically the spectator in the position of a spectator were his own spectacle. A lot of tourism leaflets suggest this deflection, this reversal of the gaze, by offering the would-be traveller advance images of curious or contemplative faces, solitary or in groups, gazing across infinite oceans, scanning ranges of snow-capped mountains or wondrous urban skylines: his own image in a word, his anticipated image, which speaks only about him but carries another name (Tahiti, Alpe d'Huez, New York). The traveller's space may thus be the archetype of *non-place*.

5. 'Je haïs les voyages et les explorations . . .' (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*). [Tr.]

To the coexistence of worlds, and the combined experience of anthropological place and something which is no longer anthropological place (in substance Starobinski's definition of modernity), movement adds the particular experience of a form of solitude and, in the literal sense, of 'taking up a position': the experience of someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating, 'strikes the pose' and derives from his awareness of this attitude a rare and sometimes melancholy pleasure. Thus it is not surprising that it is among solitary 'travellers' of the last century – not professional travellers or scientists, but travellers on impulse or for unexpected reasons – that we are most likely to find prophetic evocations of spaces in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality, in which only the movement of the fleeting images enables the observer to hypothesize the existence of a past and glimpse the possibility of a future.

of spatial indication ("It's to the right," "Take a left"), the beginning of a story the rest of which is written by footsteps, to the daily "news" ("Guess who I met at the bakery?"), television news reports ("Teheran: Khomeini is becoming increasingly isolated . . ."), legends (Cinderellas living in hovels), and stories that are told (memories and fiction of foreign lands or more or less distant times in the past). These narrated adventures, simultaneously producing geographies of actions and drifting into the commonplaces of an order, do not merely constitute a "supplement" to pedestrian enunciations and rhetorics. They are not satisfied with displacing the latter and transposing them into the field of language. In reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it.

These proliferating metaphors—sayings and stories that organize places through the displacements they "describe" (as a mobile point "describes" a curve)—what kind of analysis can be applied to *them*? To mention only the studies concerning spatializing *operations* (and not spatial systems), there are numerous works that provide methods and categories for such an analysis. Among the most recent, particular attention can be drawn to those referring to a semantics of space (John Lyons on "Locative Subjects" and "Spatial Expressions"),¹ a psycholinguistics of perception (Miller and Johnson-Laird on "the hypothesis of localization"),² a sociolinguistics of descriptions of places (for example, William Labov's),³ a phenomenology of the behavior that organizes "territories" (for example, the work of Albert E. Schefflen and Norman Ashcraft),⁴ an "ethnomethodology" of the indices of localization in conversation (for example, by Emanuel A. Schegloff),⁵ or a semiotics viewing culture as a spatial metalanguage (for example, the work of the Tartu School, especially Y. M. Lotman, B. A. Ouspenski),⁶ etc. Just as signifying practices, which concern the ways of putting language into effect, were taken into consideration after linguistic systems had been investigated, today spatializing practices are attracting attention now that the codes and taxonomies of the spatial order have been examined. Our investigation belongs to this "second" moment of the analysis, which moves from structures to actions. But in this vast ensemble, I shall consider only *narrative actions*; this will allow us to specify a few elementary forms of practices organizing space: the bipolar distinction between "map" and "itinerary," the procedures of delimitation or "marking boundaries" ("*bornage*") and "enunciative focalizations" (that is, the indication of the body within discourse).

"Spaces" and "places"

At the outset, I shall make a distinction between space (*espace*) and place (*lieu*) that delimits a field. A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*). The law of the "proper" rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are *beside* one another, each situated in its own "proper" and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability.

A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions, situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a "proper."

In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs.

Merleau-Ponty distinguished a "geometrical" space ("a homogeneous and isotropic spatiality," analogous to our "place") from another "spatiality" which he called an "anthropological space." This distinction depended on a distinct problematic, which sought to distinguish from "geometrical" univocity the experience of an "outside" given in the form of space, and for which "space is existential" and "existence is spatial." This experience is a relation to the world; in dreams and in perception, and because it probably precedes their differentiation, it expresses "the same essential structure of our being as a being situated in relationship to a milieu"—being situated by a desire, indissociable from a "direction of existence" and implanted in the space of a landscape. From this point

of view "there are as many spaces as there are distinct spatial experiences."⁷ The perspective is determined by a "phenomenology" of existing in the world.

In our examination of the daily practices that articulate that experience, the opposition between "place" and "space" will rather refer to two sorts of determinations in stories: the first, a determination through objects that are ultimately reducible to the *being-there* of something dead, the law of a "place" (from the pebble to the cadaver, an inert body always seems, in the West, to found a place and give it the appearance of a tomb); the second, a determination through *operations* which, when they are attributed to a stone, tree, or human being, specify "spaces" by the actions of historical *subjects* (a movement always seems to condition the production of a space and to associate it with a history). Between these two determinations, there are passages back and forth, such as the putting to death (or putting into a landscape) of heroes who transgress frontiers and who, guilty of an offense against the law of the place, best provide its restoration with their tombs; or again, on the contrary, the awakening of inert objects (a table, a forest, a person that plays a certain role in the environment) which, emerging from their stability, transform the place where they lay motionless into the foreignness of their own space.

Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organize the play of changing relationships between places and spaces. The forms of this play are numberless, fanning out in a spectrum reaching from the putting in place of an immobile and stone-like order (in it, nothing moves except discourse itself, which, like a camera panning over a scene, moves over the whole panorama), to the accelerated succession of actions that multiply spaces (as in the detective novel or certain folktales, though this spatializing frenzy nevertheless remains circumscribed by the textual place). It would be possible to construct a typology of all these stories in terms of identification of places and actualization of spaces. But in order to discern in them the modes in which these distinct operations are combined, we need criteria and analytical categories—a necessity that leads us back to travel stories of the most elementary kind.

Tours and maps

Oral descriptions of places, narrations concerning the home, stories about the streets, represent a first and enormous corpus. In a very

precise analysis of descriptions New York residents gave of their apartments, C. Linde and W. Labov recognize two distinct types, which they call the "map" and the "tour." The first is of the type: "The girls' room is next to the kitchen." The second: "You turn right and come into the living room." Now, in the New York corpus, only three percent of the descriptions are of the "map" type. All the rest, that is, virtually the whole corpus, are of the "tour" type: "You come in through a low door," etc. These descriptions are made for the most part in terms of *operations* and show "how to enter each room." Concerning this second type, the authors point out that a circuit or "tour" is a speech-act (an act of enunciation) that "furnishes a minimal series of paths by which to go into each room"; and that the "path" is a series of units that have the form of vectors that are either "static" ("to the right," "in front of you," etc.) or "mobile" ("if you turn to the left," etc.).⁸

In other words, description oscillates between the terms of an alternative: either *seeing* (the knowledge of an order of places) or *going* (spatializing actions). Either it presents a *tableau* ("there are . . ."), or it organizes *movements* ("you enter, you go across, you turn . . ."). Of these two hypotheses, the choices made by the New York narrators overwhelmingly favored the second.

Leaving Linde and Labov's study aside (it is primarily concerned with the rules of the social interactions and conventions that govern "natural language," a problem we will come back to later), I would like to make use of these New York stories—and other similar stories⁹—to try to specify the relationships between the indicators of "tours" and those of "maps," where they coexist in a single description. How are *acting* and *seeing* coordinated in this realm of ordinary language in which the former is so obviously dominant? The question ultimately concerns the basis of the everyday narrations, the relation between the itinerary (a discursive series of operations) and the map (a plane projection totalizing observations), that is, between two symbolic and anthropological languages of space. Two poles of experience. It seems that in passing from "ordinary" culture to scientific discourse, one passes from one pole to the other.

In narrations concerning apartments or streets, manipulations of space or "tours" are dominant. This form of description usually determines the whole style of the narration. When the other form intervenes, it has the characteristic of being *conditioned* or *presupposed* by the first. Examples of tours conditioning a map: "If you turn to the right, there is . . .", or the closely related form, "If you go straight ahead, you'll see . . ." In

both cases, an action permits one to see something. But there are also cases in which a tour assumes a place indication: "There, there's a door, you take the next one"—an element of mapping is the presupposition of a certain itinerary. The narrative fabric in which describers (*descripteurs*) of itineraries predominate is thus punctuated by describers of the map type which have the function of indicating either an *effect* obtained by the tour ("you see . . .") or a *given* that it postulates as its limit ("there is a wall"), its possibility ("there's a door"), or an obligation ("there's a one-way street"), etc. The chain of spatializing operations seems to be marked by references to what it produces (a representation of places) or to what it implies (a local order). We thus have the structure of the travel story: stories of journeys and actions are marked out by the "citation" of the places that result from them or authorize them.

From this angle, we can compare the combination of "tours" and "maps" in everyday stories with the manner in which, over the past five centuries, they have been interlaced and then slowly dissociated in literary and scientific representations of space. In particular, if one takes the "map" in its current geographical form, we can see that in the course of the period marked by the birth of modern scientific discourse (i.e., from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century) the map has slowly disengaged itself from the itineraries that were the condition of its possibility. The first medieval maps included only the rectilinear marking out of itineraries (performative indications chiefly concerning pilgrimages), along with the stops one was to make (cities which one was to pass through, spend the night in, pray at, etc.) and distances calculated in hours or in days, that is, in terms of the time it would take to cover them on foot.¹⁰ Each of these maps is a memorandum prescribing actions. The tour to be made is predominant in them. It includes the map elements, just as today the description of a route to be taken accompanies a hasty sketch already on paper, in the form of citations of places, a sort of dance through the city: "20 paces straight ahead, then turn to the left, then another 40 paces. . . ." The drawing articulates spatializing practices, like the maps of urban routes, arts of actions and stories of paces, that serve the Japanese as "address books,"¹¹ or the wonderful fifteenth-century Aztec map describing the exodus of the Totomihuacas. This drawing outlines not the "route" (there wasn't one) but the "log" of their journey on foot—an outline marked out by footprints with regular gaps between them and by pictures of the successive events that took place in the course of the journey (meals, battles, crossings of rivers or mountains, etc.): not a "geographical map" but "history book."¹²

Between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the map became more autonomous. No doubt the proliferation of the "narrative" figures that have long been its stock-in-trade (ships, animals, and characters of all kinds) still had the function of indicating the operations—travelling, military, architectural, political or commercial—that make possible the fabrication of a geographical plan.¹³ Far from being "illustrations," iconic glosses on the text, these figurations, like fragments of stories, mark on the map the historical operations from which it resulted. Thus the sailing ship painted on the sea indicates the maritime expedition that made it possible to represent the coastlines. It is equivalent to a describer of the "tour" type. But the map gradually wins out over these figures; it colonizes space; it eliminates little by little the pictorial figurations of the practices that produce it. Transformed first by Euclidean geometry and then by descriptive geometry, constituted as a formal ensemble of abstract places, it is a "theater" (as one used to call atlases) in which the same system of projection nevertheless juxtaposes two very different elements: the data furnished by a tradition (Ptolemy's *Geography*, for instance) and those that came from navigators (portulans, for example). The map thus collates on the same plane heterogeneous places, some *received* from a tradition and others *produced* by observation. But the important thing here is the erasure of the itineraries which, presupposing the first category of places and conditioning the second, makes it possible to move from one to the other. The map, a totalizing stage on which elements of diverse origin are brought together to form the tableau of a "state" of geographical knowledge, pushes away into its prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the wings, the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition. It remains alone on the stage. The tour describers have disappeared.

The organization that can be discerned in stories about space in everyday culture is inverted by the process that has isolated a system of geographical places. The difference between the two modes of description obviously does not consist in the presence or absence of practices (they are at work everywhere), but in the fact that maps, constituted as proper places in which to *exhibit the products* of knowledge, form tables of *legible* results. Stories about space exhibit on the contrary the operations that allow it, within a constraining and non-"proper" place, to mingle its elements anyway, as one apartment-dweller put it concerning the rooms in his flat: "One can mix them up" ("*On peut les triturer*").¹⁴ From the folktale to descriptions of residences, an exacerbation of "practice" ("*faire*") (and thus of enunciation), actuates the stories

narrating tours in places that, from the ancient cosmos to contemporary public housing developments, are all forms of an imposed order.

In a pre-established geography, which extends (if we limit ourselves to the home) from bedrooms so small that "one can't do anything in them" to the legendary, long-lost attic that "could be used for everything,"¹⁵ everyday stories tell us what one can do in it and make out of it. They are treatments of space.

Marking out boundaries

As operations on places, stories also play the everyday role of a mobile and magisterial tribunal in cases concerning their delimitation. As always, this role appears more clearly at the second degree, when it is made explicit and duplicated by juridical discourse. In the traditional language of court proceedings, magistrates formerly "visited the scene of the case at issue" ("*se transportaient sur les lieux*") (transports and juridical metaphors), in order to "hear" the contradictory *statements* (*dits*) made by the parties to a dispute concerning debatable boundaries. Their "interlocutory judgment," as it was called, was an "operation of marking out boundaries" (*bornage*). Written in a beautiful hand by the court clerk on parchments where the writing sometimes flowed into (or was inaugurated by?) drawings outlining the boundaries, these interlocutory judgments were in sum nothing other than meta-stories. They combined together (the work of a scribe collating variants) the opposing stories of the parties involved: "Mr. Mulatier declares that his grandfather planted this apple tree on the edge of his field. . . . Jeanpierre reminds us that Mr. Bouvet maintains a dungheap on a piece of land of which he is supposed to be the joint owner with his brother André. . . ." Genealogies of places, legends about territories. Like a critical edition, the judge's narration reconciles these versions. The narration is "established" on the basis of "primary" stories (those of Mr. Mulatier, Jeanpierre, and so many others), stories that already have the function of *spatial legislation* since they determine rights and divide up lands by "acts" or discourses about actions (planting a tree, maintaining a dungheap, etc.).

These "operations of marking out boundaries," consisting in narrative contracts and compilations of stories, are composed of fragments drawn from earlier stories and fitted together in makeshift fashion (*bricolés*). In this sense, they shed light on the formation of myths, since they also

have the function of founding and articulating spaces. Preserved in the court records, they constitute an immense travel literature, that is, a literature concerned with actions organizing more or less extensive social cultural areas. But this literature itself represents only a tiny part (the part that is written about disputed points) of the oral narration that interminably labors to compose spaces, to verify, collate, and displace their frontiers.

The ways of "conducting" a story offer, as Pierre Janet pointed out,¹⁶ a very rich field for the analysis of spatiality. Among the questions that depend on it, we should distinguish those that concern dimensions (extensionality), orientation (vectorality), affinity (homographies), etc. I shall stress only a few of its aspects that have to do with delimitation itself, the primary and literally "fundamental" question: it is the partition of space that structures it. Everything refers in fact to this differentiation which makes possible the isolation and interplay of distinct spaces. From the distinction that separates a subject from its exteriority to the distinctions that localize objects, from the home (constituted on the basis of the wall) to the journey (constituted on the basis of a geographical "elsewhere" or a cosmological "beyond"), from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers.

In this organization, the story plays a decisive role. It "describes," to be sure. But "every description is more than a fixation," it is "a culturally creative act."¹⁷ It even has distributive power and performative force (it does what it says) when an ensemble of circumstances is brought together. Then it founds spaces. Reciprocally, where stories are disappearing (or else are being reduced to museographical objects), there is a loss of space: deprived of narrations (as one sees it happen in both the city and the countryside), the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality. By considering the role of stories in delimitation, displacement or transcendence of limits, and as a consequence, to set in opposition, within the closed field of discourse, two movements that intersect (setting and transgressing limits) in such a way as to make the story a sort of "crossword" decoding stencil (a dynamic partitioning of space) whose essential narrative figures seem to be the *frontier* and the *bridge*.

1. *Creating a theater of actions.* The story's first function is to authorize, or more exactly, to *found*. Strictly speaking, this function is

ize, or more exactly, to *found*. Strictly speaking, this function is not juridical, that is, related to laws or judgments. It depends rather on what Georges Dumézil analyzes in connection with the Indo-European root *dhē*, "to set in place," and its derivatives in Sanskrit (*dhātu*) and Latin (*fās*). The Latin noun "*fās*," he writes, "is properly speaking the mystical foundation, which is in the invisible world, and without which all forms of conduct that are enjoined or authorized by *ius* (human law) and, more generally speaking, all human conduct, are doubtful, perilous, and even fatal. *Fās* cannot be subjected to analysis or casuistry, as *ius* can: *fās* can no more be broken up into parts than its name can be declined." A foundation either exists or it doesn't: *fās est* or *fās non est*. "A time or a place are said to be *fasti* or *nefasti* [auspicious or inauspicious] depending on whether they provide or fail to provide human action with this necessary foundation."¹⁸

In the Western parts of the Indo-European world, this function has been divided in a particular way among different institutions—in contrast to what happened in ancient India, where different roles were played in turn by the same characters. Occidental culture created its own ritual concerning *fās*, which was carried out in Rome by specialized priests called *fētiāles*. It was practiced "before Rome undertook any action with regard to a foreign nation," such as a declaration of war, a military expedition, or an alliance. The ritual was a procession with three centrifugal stages, the first within Roman territory but near the frontier, the second on the frontier, the third in foreign territory. The ritual action was carried out before every civil or military action because it is designed to *create the field* necessary for political or military activities. It is thus also a *repetitio rerum*: both a renewal and a repetition of the originary founding acts, a *recitation* and a citation of the genealogies that could legitimate the new enterprise, and a *prediction* and a promise of success at the beginning of battles, contracts, or conquests. As a general repetition before the actual representation, the rite, a narration in acts, precedes the historical realization. The tour or procession of the *fētiāles* opens a space and provides a foundation for the operations of the military men, diplomats, or merchants who dare to cross the frontiers. Similarly in the *Vedas*, Viṣṇu, "by his footsteps, opens the zone of space in which Indra's military action must take place." The *fās* ritual is a foundation. It "provides space" for the actions that will be undertaken; it "creates a field" which serves as their "base" and their "theater."¹⁹

This founding is precisely the primary role of the story. It opens a legitimate *theater* for practical *actions*. It creates a field that authorizes dangerous and contingent social actions. But it differs in three ways from the function the Roman ritual so carefully isolated: the story founds *fās* in a form that is fragmented (not unique and whole), miniaturized (not on a national scale), and polyvalent (not specialized). It is *fragmented*, not only because of the diversification of social milieus, but especially because of the increasing heterogeneity (or because of a heterogeneity that is increasingly obvious) of the authorizing "references": the excommunication of territorial "divinities," the deconsecration of places haunted by the story-spirit, and the extension of neutral areas deprived of legitimacy have marked the disappearance and fragmentation of the narrations that organized frontiers and appropriations. (Official historiography—history books, television news reports, etc.—nevertheless tries to make everyone believe in the existence of a national space.) It is *miniaturized*, because socioeconomic technocratization confines the significance of *fās* and *nefas* to the level of the family unit or the individual, and leads to the multiplication of "family stories," "life stories," and psychoanalytical narrations. (Gradually cut loose from these particular stories, public justifications nevertheless continue to exist in the form of blind rumors, or resurface savagely in class or race conflicts). It is finally *polyvalent*, because the mixing together of so many micro-stories gives them functions that change according to the groups in which they circulate. This polyvalence does not affect the relational origins of narrativity, however: the ancient ritual that creates fields of action is recognizable in the "fragments" of narration planted around the obscure thresholds of our existence; these buried fragments articulate without its knowing it the "biographical" story whose space they found.

A narrative activity, even if it is multiform and no longer unitary, thus continues to develop where frontiers and relations with space abroad are concerned. Fragmented and disseminated, it is continually concerned with marking out boundaries. What it puts in action is once more the *fās* that "authorizes" enterprises and precedes them. Like the Roman *fētiāles*, stories "go in a procession" ahead of social practices in order to open a field for them. Decisions and juridical combinations themselves come only afterwards, like the statements and acts of Roman law (*iūs*), arbitrating the areas of action granted to each party,²⁰ participating themselves in the activities for which *fās* provided a "foundation."

According to the rules that are proper to them, the magistrates' "interlocutory judgments" operate within the aggregate of heterogeneous spaces that have already been created and established by the innumerable forms of an oral narrativity composed of family or local stories, customary or professional "poems" and "recitations" of paths taken or countrysides traversed. The magistrates' judgments do not create these theaters of action, they articulate and manipulate them. They presuppose the narrative authorities that the magistrates "hear" compare, and put into hierarchies. Preceding the judgment that regulates and settles, there is a founding narration.

2. *Frontiers and bridges.* Stories are actuated by a contradiction that is represented in them by the relationship between the frontier and the bridge, that is, between a (legitimate) space and its (alien) exteriority. In order to account for contradiction, it is helpful to go back to the elementary units. Leaving aside morphology (which is not our concern here) and situating ourselves in the perspective of a pragmatics and, more precisely, a syntax aimed at determining "programs" or series of practices through which space is appropriated, we can take as our point of departure the "region," which Miller and Johnson-Laird define as a basic unit: the place where programs and actions interact. A "region" is thus the space created by an interaction.²¹ It follows that in the same place there are as many "regions" as there are interactions or intersections of programs. And also that the determination of space is dual and operational, and, in a problematics of enunciation, related to an "interlocutory" process.

In this way a dynamic contradiction between each delimitation and its mobility is introduced. On the one hand, the story tirelessly marks out frontiers. It multiplies them, but in terms of interactions among the characters—things, animals, human beings: the acting subjects (*actants*) divide up among themselves places as well as predicates (simple, crafty, ambitious, silly, etc.) and movements (advancing, withdrawing, going into exile, returning, etc.). Limits are drawn by the points at which the progressive appropriations (the acquisition of predicates in the course of the story) and the successive displacements (internal or external movements) of the acting subjects meet. Both appropriations and displacements depend on a dynamic distribution of possible goods and functions in order to constitute an increasingly complex network of differentiations, a combinative system of spaces. They result from the operation of

distinctions resulting from encounters. Thus, in the obscurity of their unlimitedness, bodies can be distinguished only where the "contacts" ("*touches*") of amorous or hostile struggles are inscribed on them. This is a paradox of the frontier: created by contacts, the points of differentiation between two bodies are also their common points. Conjunction and disjunction are inseparable in them. Of two bodies in contact, which one possesses the frontier that distinguishes them? Neither. Does that amount to saying: no one?

The theoretical and practical problem of the frontier: to whom does it belong? The river, wall or tree *makes* a frontier. It does not have the character of a nowhere that cartographical representation ultimately presupposes. It has a mediating role. So does the story that gives it voice: "Stop," says the forest the wolf comes out of. "Stop!" says the river, revealing its crocodile. But this actor, by virtue of the very fact that he is the mouthpiece of the limit, creates communication as well as separation; more than that, he establishes a border only by saying what crosses it, having come from the other side. He articulates it. He is *also* a passing through or over. In the story, the frontier functions as a third element. It is an "in-between"—a "space between," *Zwischenraum*, as Morgenstern puts it in a marvelous and ironic poem on "closure" (*Zaun*), which rhymes with "space" (*Raum*) and "to see through" (*hindurchzuschauen*).²² It is the story of a picket fence (*Lattenzaun*):

Es war einmal ein Lattenzaun
mit Zwischenraum, hindurchzu-
schaun.

One time there was a picket fence
with space to gaze from hence to
thence.

A middle place, composed of interactions and inter-views, the frontier is a sort of void, a narrative symbol of exchanges and encounters. Passing by, an architect suddenly appropriates this "in-between space" and builds a great edifice on it:

Ein Architekt, der dieses sah,
stand eines Abends plötzlich da—

An architect who saw this sight
approached it suddenly one night,

und nahm den Zwischenraum
heraus
und baute draus ein grosses Haus.

removed the spaces from the
fence
and built of them a residence.

Transformation of the void into a plenitude, of the in-between into an established place. The rest goes without saying. The Senate "takes on"

the monument—the Law establishes itself in it—and the architect escapes to Afri-or-America:

Drum zog ihn der Senat auch ein.	the senate had to intervene.
Der Architekt jedoch entflo nach Afri-od-Ameriko	The architect, however, flew to Afri- or Americoo. (Max Knight, trans.)

The Architect's drive to cement up the picket fence, to fill in and build up "the space in-between," is also his illusion, for without knowing it he is working toward the political freezing of the place and there is nothing left for him to do, when he sees his work finished, but to flee far away from the blocs of the law.

In contrast, the story privileges a "logic of ambiguity" through its accounts of interaction. It "turns" the frontier into a crossing, and the river into a bridge. It recounts inversions and displacements: the door that closes is precisely what may be opened; the river is what makes passage possible; the tree is what marks the stages of advance; the picket fence is an ensemble of interstices through which one's glances pass.

The *bridge* is ambiguous everywhere: it alternately welds together and opposes insularities. It distinguishes them and threatens them. It liberates from enclosure and destroys autonomy. Thus, for example, it occurs as a central and ambivalent character in the stories of the Noirmoutrins, before, during, and after the construction of a bridge between La Fosse and Fromentine in Vendée in 1972.²³ It carries on a double life in innumerable memories of places and everyday legends, often summed up in proper names, hidden paradoxes, ellipses in stories, riddles to be solved: Bridgehead, Bridgenorth, Bridgetown, Bridgewater, Bridgman, Cambridge, Trowbridge, etc.

Justifiably, the bridge is the index of the diabolic in the paintings where Bosch invents his modifications of spaces.²⁴ As a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of the place, it represents a departure, an attack on a state, the ambition of a conquering power, or the flight of an exile; in any case, the "betrayal" of an order. But at the same time as it offers the possibility of a bewildering exteriority, it allows or causes the re-emergence beyond the frontiers of the alien element that was controlled in the interior, and gives ob-jectivity (that is, expression and re-presentation) to the alterity which was hidden inside the limits, so that in recrossing the bridge and coming back within the enclosure the traveler henceforth finds there the exteriority that he had first sought by

going outside and then fled by returning. Within the frontiers, the alien is already there, an exoticism or sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity. It is as though delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to its other.

Delinquencies?

What the map cuts up, the story cuts across. In Greek, narration is called "diegesis": it establishes an itinerary (it "guides") and it passes through (it "transgresses"). The space of operations it travels in is made of movements: it is *topological*, concerning the deformations of figures, rather than *topical*, defining places. It is only ambivalently that the limit circumscribes in this space. It plays a double game. It does the opposite of what it says. It hands the place over to the foreigner that it gives the impression of throwing out. Or rather, when it marks a stopping place, the latter is not stable but follows the variations of encounters between programs. Boundaries are transportable limits and transportations of limits; they are also *metaphorai*.

In the narrations that organize spaces, boundaries seem to play the role of the Greek *xoana*, statuettes whose invention is attributed to the clever Daedalus: they are crafty like Daedalus and mark out limits only by moving themselves (and the limits). These straight-line indicators put emphasis on the curves and movements of space. Their distributive work is thus completely different from that of the divisions established by poles, pickets or stable columns which, planted in the earth, cut up and compose an order of places.²⁵ They are also transportable limits.

Today, narrative operations of boundary-setting take the place of these enigmatic describers of earlier times when they bring movement in through the very act of fixing, in the name of delimitation. Michelet already said it: when the aristocracy of the great Olympian gods collapsed at the end of Antiquity, it did not take down with it "the mass of indigenous gods, the populace of gods that still possessed the immensity of fields, forests, woods, mountains, springs, intimately associated with the life of the country. These gods lived in the hearts of oaks, in the swift, deep waters, and could not be driven out of them. . . . Where are they? In the desert, on the heath, in the forest? Yes, but also and especially in the home. They live on in the most intimate of domestic habits."²⁶ But they also live on in our streets and in our apartments. They were perhaps after all only the agile representatives of narrativity,

and of narrativity in its most *delinquent* form. The fact that they have changed their names (every power is toponymical and initiates its order of places by naming them) takes nothing away from the multiple, insidious, moving force. It survives the avatars of the great history that debaptises and rebaptises them.

If the delinquent exists only by displacing itself, if its specific mark is to live not on the margins but in the interstices of the codes that it undoes and displaces, if it is characterized by the privilege of the *tour* over the *state*, then the story is delinquent. Social delinquency consists in taking the story literally, in making it the principle of physical existence where a society no longer offers to subjects or groups symbolic outlets and expectations of spaces, where there is no longer any alternative to disciplinary falling-into-line or illegal drifting away, that is, one form or another of prison and wandering outside the pale. Inversely, the story is a sort of delinquency in reserve, maintained, but itself displaced and consistent, in traditional societies (ancient, medieval, etc.), with an order that is firmly established but flexible enough to allow the proliferation of this challenging mobility that does not respect places, is alternately playful and threatening, and extends from the microbe-like forms of everyday narration to the carnivalesque celebrations of earlier days.²⁷

It remains to be discovered, of course, what actual changes produce this delinquent narrativity in a society. In any event, one can already say that in matters concerning space, this delinquency begins with the inscription of the body in the order's text. The opacity of the body in movement, gesticulating, walking, taking its pleasure, is what indefinitely organizes a *here* in relation to an *abroad*, a "familiarity" in relation to a "foreignness." A spatial story is in its minimal degree a *spoken* language, that is, a linguistic system that distributes places insofar as it is *articulated* by an "enunciatory focalization," by an act of practicing it. It is the object of "proxemics."²⁸ Before we return to its manifestations in the organization of memory, it will suffice here to recall that, in this focalizing enunciation, space appears once more as a *practiced* place.

THE PRACTICE OF
EVERYDAY LIFE

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, LTD.
London, England

Copyright © 1984 by the Regents of the University of California
First Paperback Printing 1988

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Certeau, Michel de.
The practice of everyday life.
Translation of: *Arts de faire.*
1. Social history—Addresses, essays, lectures.
I. Title.
HNB C4313 1984 909 83-18070
ISBN 0-520-23699-8

Printed in the United States of America
10 09 08 07 06 05 04
12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (Permanence of Paper). ©

SOCIOLOGY · ANTHROPOLOGY · HISTORY · LITERATURE

IN THIS INCISIVE BOOK, Michel de Certeau considers the uses to which social representation and modes of social behavior are put by individuals and groups, and describes the tactics available to the ordinary person for reclaiming autonomy from the all-pervasive forces of commerce, politics, and culture. In understanding the public as a meaning of ingeniously defended private meanings, de Certeau draws brilliantly on an immense theoretical literature—analytic philosophy, linguistics, sociology, semiotics, and anthropology—to speak of an apposite use of imaginative literature. His work thus joins the most demanding and abstruse of scholarly analyses to the humblest concerns of men and women who are simply trying to survive while retaining a fundamental sense of themselves.

"*The Practice of Everyday Life*... offers ample evidence why we should pay heed to de Certeau and why more of us have not done so. The work all but defies definition. History, sociology, economics, literature and literary criticism, philosophy, and anthropology all come within de Certeau's ken.... In studies of culture *The Practice of Everyday Life* marks a turning point away from the producer (writer, scientist, city planner) and the product (book, discourse, city street) to the consumer (reader, pedestrian)... In sum, de Certeau acts very much like his own ordinary hero, manipulating, elaborating, and inventing on the scientific authority that he both denies and requires." PRISCILLA P. CLARK, *Journal of Modern History*

"Littered with insights and perceptions, any one of which could make the career of an American academic." THOMAS FLEMING, *Chronicles of Culture*

"Former Jesuit, erudite historian, ethnologist, and member of the Freudian school of Paris, Michel de Certeau died at the beginning of 1986. *The Practice of Everyday Life*... is concerned with a theme central to ongoing research in cultural anthropology, social history, and cultural studies: the theme of resistance. De Certeau develops a theoretical framework for analyzing how the 'weak' make use of the 'strong' and create for themselves a sphere of autonomous action and self-determination within the constraints that are imposed on them." MICHÈLE LAMONT, *American Journal of Sociology*

"De Certeau's book is to be praised for setting out some of the practical procedures, in which we are all implicated, that are used to invent what appears to us as our reality, and for finding at least some ways in which the totalitarian nature of our current systems of sense-making can be subverted." JOHN SHOTTER, *New Ideas in Psychology*

The late MICHEL DE CERTEAU was Directeur d'Études at the École des Hautes Études et Sciences Sociales in Paris and Visiting Professor of French and Comparative Literature at the University of California, San Diego.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY 94720 www.ucpress.edu

ISBN 0-520-23699-8
017805208236998

Introduction

To the ordinary man.

To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets. In invoking here at the outset of my narratives the absent figure who provides both their beginning and their necessity, I inquire into the desire whose impossible object he represents. What are we asking this oracle whose voice is almost indistinguishable from the rumble of history to license us, to authorize us to say, when we dedicate to him the writing that one formerly offered in praise of the gods or the inspiring muses?

This anonymous hero is very ancient. He is the murmuring voice of societies. In all ages, he comes before texts. He does not expect representations. He squats now at the center of our scientific stages. The floodlights have moved away from the actors who possess proper names and social blazons, turning first toward the chorus of secondary characters, then settling on the mass of the audience. The increasingly sociological and anthropological perspective of inquiry privileges the anonymous and the everyday in which zoom lenses cut out metonymic details—parts taken for the whole. Slowly the representatives that formerly symbolized families, groups, and orders disappear from the stage they dominated during the epoch of the name. We witness the advent of the number. It comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics. It is a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric with neither rips nor darned patches, a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one.

Michel de Certeau

The practice of Everyday Life

Cover design: Veronik Kerkwood. Cover illustration: Announcements on Street, photograph by John Stock. Courtesy of Princeton University Press.