

## Semiology and Urbanism

### Roland Barthes

The subject of this discussion concerns a certain number of the problems of urban semiology.

But I must add that anyone who wants to sketch a semiotics of the city must be at once a semiologist (a specialist in signs), a geographer, a historian, an urbanist, an architect, and probably a psychoanalyst. Since it is obvious that this is not my case—as a matter of fact, I am none of all this except, barely, a semiologist—the reflections I shall present to you are those of an amateur, in the etymological sense of the word: an amateur of signs, one who love signs, an amateur of cities, one who loves the city. For I love both the city and signs. And this double love (which is probably, as a matter of fact, only one love) impels me to believe, perhaps with a certain presumption, in the possibility of a semiotics of the city. On what conditions or rather with what precautions and what preliminaries will an urban semiotics be possible?

This is the theme of the reflections I shall present. I should like first of all to remind you of a very familiar thing which will serve as a point of departure: human space in general (and not only urban space) has always been a signifying space. Scientific geography and especially modern cartography can be considered as a kind of obliteration, a censorship objectivity has imposed upon signification (an objectivity which is a form like any other of the image-repertoire). And, before speaking of the city, I should like to recall several phenomena of the cultural history of the West, more specifically of Greek antiquity: the human habitat, the "oekoumène," as we can glimpse it through the first maps of the Greek geographers: Anaximander, Hecataeus, or through the mental cartography of a man like Herodotus, constitutes a veritable discourse, with its symmetries, its oppositions of sites, with its syntax and its paradigms. A map of the world by Herodotus, graphically realized, is constructed like a language, like a sentence, like a poem, on oppositions: hot countries and cold countries; then on the opposition between men on the one hand, and monsters and chimeras on the other, etc.

If we turn from geographical space to urban space, strictly speaking, I shall remind you that the notion of *isonomy*, created for sixth-century Athens by a man like Cleisthenes, is a truly structural conception by which the center alone is privileged, since all the citizens have relations with it which are at the same time symmetrical and reversible.<sup>1</sup> At this period, the conception of the city was exclusively a signifying one, for the utilitarian conception of an urban distribution based on functions and usages, which incontestably prevails in our day, will appear much later on. I wanted to point out this historical relativism in the conception of signifying spaces.

Finally, it is in a recent past that a structuralist like Lévi-Strauss has produced, in *Tristes Tropiques*, a form of urban semiology, even if on a reduced scale, apropos of a Bororo village whose space he has studied according to an essentially semantic approach.

It is strange that, parallel to these strongly signifying conceptions of inhabited space, the theoretical elaborations of the urbanists have not hitherto granted, if I am not mistaken, anything but a very reduced status to problems of signification.<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are exceptions; several writers have discussed the city in terms of signification. One of the authors who has best expressed this essentially signifying nature of urban space is, I believe, Victor Hugo. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Hugo has written a very fine chapter, of an extremely subtle intelligence, "This will kill that"; *this*, which is to say the book, *that*, which is to say the monument. By expressing himself thus, Hugo gives

evidence of a rather modern way of conceiving the monument and the city, actually as a writing, as an inscription of man in space. This chapter of Hugo's is devoted to the rivalry between two modes of writing, writing in stone and writing on paper. Moreover, this theme can find its current version in the remarks on writing by a philosopher like Jacques Derrida. Among present-day urbanists, signification is virtually unmentioned: one name stands out, therefore, that of the American Kevin Lynch, who seems to be closest to these problems of urban semantics insofar as he is concerned with conceiving the city in the very terms of the perceiving consciousness, i.e., of identifying the image of the city in the readers of that city. But in reality, Lynch's researches, from the semantic point of view, remain quite ambiguous: on the one hand, there is a whole vocabulary of signification in his work (for example, he grants a good deal of attention to the *readability* of the city, and this is a very important notion for us) and, as a good semanticist, he has the sense of *discrete units*: he has tried to rediscover in urban space the discontinuous units which, within limits, somewhat resemble phonemes and semantemes. He calls these units paths, enclosures, districts, intersections, points of reference. These are categories of units which might readily become semantic categories. But on the other hand, despite this vocabulary, Lynch has a conception of the city which remains more gestaltist than structural.

Aside from those authors who explicitly entertain the notion of a semantics of the city, we note a growing consciousness of the functions of symbols in urban space. In several studies of urbanism based on quantitative estimations and on motivation-research, we see appearing—in spite of everything, even if this is only for memory's sake—the purely qualitative motif of symbolization frequently used even today to explain other phenomena. We find for example in urbanism a relatively common technique: simulation; now, the technique of simulation leads, even if it is used in a rather narrow and empirical spirit, to a more thorough investigation of the concept of *model*, which is a structural or at the very least a prestructuralist concept.

At another stage of these studies in urbanism, the demand for signification appears. We gradually discover that there exists a kind of contradiction between signification and another order of phenomena, and that consequently signification possesses an irreducible specificity. For instance, certain urbanists, or certain of those investigators who are studying urban planning, are obliged to note that, in certain cases, there exists a conflict between the functionalism of a part of the city, let us say of a neighborhood or a district, and what I should call its semantic content (its semantic power). Hence they have noted with a certain ingenuousness (but perhaps we must begin with ingenuousness) that Rome presents a permanent conflict between the functional necessities of modern life and the semantic burden communicated to the city by its history. And this conflict between signification and function constitutes the despair of the urbanists. There also exists a conflict between signification and reason, or at least between signification and that calculating reason which wants all the elements of a city to be uniformly recuperated by planning, whereas it is increasingly obvious that a city is a fabric formed not of equal elements whose functions can be inventoried, but of strong elements and nonmarked elements (we know that the opposition between the sign and the absence of sign, between the measurable degree and zero degree, constitutes one of the major processes in the elaboration of signification). From all evidence, each city possesses this kind of rhythm; Kevin Lynch has noted as much: there exists in every city, from the moment when it is truly inhabited by man, and made by him, that basic rhythm of signification which is opposition,

alternation and juxtaposition of marked and nonmarked elements. Lastly, there exists an ultimate conflict between signification and reality itself, at least between signification and that reality of objective geography, the reality of maps. Investigations made by psychosociologists have shown that, for example, two neighborhoods are contiguous if we rely on the map, i.e., on "reality," on objectivity, whereas, from the moment they receive two different significations, they are radically split in the image of the city: signification is experienced in complete opposition to objective data.

The city is a discourse, and this discourse is actually a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak to our city, the city where we are, simply by inhabiting it, by traversing it, by looking at it. Yet, the problem is to extract an expression like "language of the city" from the purely metaphorical stage. It is metaphorically very easy to speak of *the language of the city* as we speak of the language of the cinema or of the language of flowers. The real scientific leap will be achieved when we can speak of the language of the city without metaphor. And we can say that this is precisely what happened to Freud when he first spoke of the language of dreams, emptying this expression of its metaphorical meaning in order to give it real meaning. We too, we must confront this problem: how to shift from metaphor to analysis when we speak of the language of the city? Once again, it is to the specialists in the urban phenomenon that I am referring, for even if they are quite remote from these problems of urban semantics, they have nonetheless already noted (I am quoting the results of one investigation) that "the usable data in the social sciences offer a form poorly adapted to an integration into models." Indeed, if we have difficulty inserting into a model the urban data supplied us by psychology, sociology, geography, demography, this is precisely because we lack a final technique, that of symbols. Consequently, we need a new scientific energy in order to transform such data, to shift from metaphor to the description of signification, and it is here that semiology (in the broadest sense of the word) may by a still unpredictable development afford us some assistance. It is not my intention to evoke here the procedures for discovering an urban semiology. It is likely that such procedures would consist in dissociating the urban text into units, then in distributing these units into formal classes, and, thirdly, in finding the rules of combination and of transformation for these units and for these models. I shall confine myself to three observations which have no direct relation with the city but which might usefully orient us toward an urban semiology, insofar as they draw up a balance sheet for current semiology and take account of the fact that, in recent years, the semiological "landscape" is no longer the same.

The first observation is that "symbolism" (which must be understood as a general discourse concerning signification) is no longer conceived nowadays, at least as a general rule, as a regular correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. In other words, one notion of semantics which was fundamental some years ago has become outdated; this is the lexicon notion, i.e., that of a set of lists of corresponding signifieds and signifiers. This erosion of the notion of lexicon is to be found in many sectors of research. First of all, there is the distributive semantics of Chomsky's disciples, such as Katz and Fodor, who have launched an attack in force against the lexicon. If we turn from the realm of linguistics to that of literary criticism, we see that the thematic criticism which has prevailed for some fifteen or twenty years, at least in France, and which has formed the essential part of the studies which we know as the new criticism, is nowadays limited, remodeled to the detriment of the signifieds which that criticism proposed to decipher. In the realm of psychoanalysis, finally, we can no longer speak of a term-to-term symbolism; this is obviously the dead part of Freud's work: a

psychoanalytic lexicon is no longer conceivable. All this has cast a certain credit on the word "symbol," for this term has always (till today) suggested that the signifying relation was based on the signified, on the presence of the signified. Personally, I use the word "symbol" as referring to a syntagmatic and/or paradigmatic but no longer semantic signifying organization: we must make a very clear distinction between the semantic bearing of the symbol and the syntagmatic or paradigmatic nature of this same symbol.

Similarly it would be an absurd undertaking to attempt to elaborate a lexicon of the significations of the city by putting sites, neighborhoods, functions on one side, and significations on the other, or rather by putting on one side the sites articulated as signifiers and on the other the functions articulated as signifieds. The list of the functions that a city's neighborhoods can assume has been known for a long time; there are by and large some thirty functions for a neighborhood (at least for a neighborhood of the center-city: a zone which has been closely studied from the sociological point of view). This list can of course be completed, enriched, refined, but it will constitute only an extremely elementary level for semiological analysis, a level which will probably have to be revised subsequently: not only because of the weight and pressure exerted by history, but because, precisely, the signifieds are like mythical beings, of an extreme imprecision, and because at a certain moment they always become the signifiers of something else: the signifieds pass, the signifiers remain. The hunt for the signified can therefore constitute only a provisional undertaking. The role of the signified, when we manage to isolate it, is only to afford us a sort of testimony as to a specific state of the signifying distribution. Further, we must note that we attribute an ever-growing importance to the *empty signified*, to the empty site of the signified. In other words, the elements are understood as signifiers more by their own correlative position than by their content. Thus Tokyo, which is one of the most intricate urban complexes imaginable from the semantic point of view, nonetheless possesses a sort of center. But this center, occupied by the imperial palace which is surrounded by a deep moat and hidden by verdure, is experienced as an empty center. As a more general rule, the studies made of the urban core of different cities have shown that the central point of the center of the city (every city possesses a center), which we call the "solid core," does not constitute the culminating point of any particular activity, but a kind of empty "heart" of the community's image of the center. Here too we have a somehow empty place which is necessary to the organization of the rest of the city.

The second remark is that symbolism must be defined essentially as the world of signifiers, of correlations, and above all of correlations which can never be imprisoned in a full signification, in a final signification. Henceforth, from the point of view of descriptive technique, the distribution of elements, i.e., of signifiers, "exhausts" semantic discovery. This is true for the Chomskian semantics of Katz and Fodor and even for the analyses of Lévi-Strauss which are based on the clarification of a relation which is no longer analogical but homological (this is a demonstration made in his book on totemism, one rarely cited). Hence we discover that, if we want to produce the semiology of the city, we must intensify, more meticulously, the signifying division. For this, I appeal to my experience as an amateur of cities. We know that, in certain cities, there exist certain spaces which present a very extended specialization of functions; this is true, for example, of the Oriental *souk* where one street is reserved for the tanners and another exclusively for the silversmiths; in Tokyo, certain parts of the same neighborhood are quite homogeneous from the functional point of view: we find there only bars or snack bars or places of entertainment. Yet we must go beyond this first

aspect and not limit the semantic description of the city to this unit; we must try to dissociate microstructures in the same way we can isolate tiny sentence fragments within a long period; hence we must get into the habit of making a very extended analysis which will lead to these microstructures, and conversely we must accustom ourselves to a broader analysis, which will lead to macrostructures. We all know that Tokyo is a polynuclear city; it possesses several cores around five or six centers; we must learn to differentiate semantically these centers, which moreover are indicated by railroad stations. In other terms, even in this domain, the best model for the semantic study of the city will be furnished, I believe, at least at the start, by the sentence of discourse. And here we rediscover Victor Hugo's old intuition: the city is a writing; the man who moves about in the city, i.e., the city's user (which is what we all are, users of the city), is a sort of reader who, according to his obligations and his movements, samples fragments of the utterance in order to actualize them in secret. When we move about in a city, we are all in the situation of the reader of Queneau's *100,000 Million Poems*, where we can find a different poem by changing a single verse; unknown to us, we are something like that avant-garde reader when we are in a city.

Lastly, the third observation is that nowadays semiology never posits the existence of a definitive signified. Which means that the signifieds are always signifiers for others, and reciprocally. In reality, in any cultural or even psychological complex, we find ourselves confronted with infinite chains of metaphors whose signified is always recessive or itself becoming a signifier. This structure is beginning to be explored, as you know, in Lacan's psychoanalysis, and also in the study of writing, where it is postulated if it is not actually explored. If we apply these notions to the city, we shall doubtless be led to emphasize a dimension which I must say I have never seen cited, at least never clearly, in the studies and investigations of urbanism. This dimension I should call the *erotic* dimension. The eroticism of the city is the teaching which we can derive from the infinitely metaphorical nature of urban discourse. I am using this word *eroticism* in its broadest sense: it would be absurd to identify the eroticism of a city merely with the neighborhood reserved for such pleasures, for the concept of the place of pleasure is one of the stubbornest mystifications of urban functionalism; it is a functional and not a semantic notion; I am using eroticism or *sociality* here without differentiation. The city, essentially and semantically, is the site of our encounter with the other, and it is for this reason that the center is the gathering point of any city; the center-city is instituted above all by the young, the adolescent. When the latter express their image of the city, they always tend to limit, to concentrate, to condense the center; the center-city is experienced as the exchange-site of social activities and I should almost say of erotic activities in the broad sense of the term. Still better, the center-city is always experienced as the space in which certain subversive forces act and are encountered, forces of rupture, ludic forces. Play is a theme which is very often underlined in the investigations of the center; in France there is a series of investigations concerning the attraction exerted by Paris upon its suburbs, and through these investigations it has been observed that for the periphery Paris as a center was always experienced semantically as the privileged site where the other is and where we ourselves are the other, and the site where one plays. On the contrary, everything which is not the center is precisely what is not ludic space, everything which is not alterity: family, residence, identity. Naturally, especially in terms of the city, we would have to investigate the metaphorical chain, the chain which substitutes for Eros. We must especially investigate, among the major categories, other great habits of humanity, for

example food and shopping, which are actually erotic activities in a consumer society. I refer once again to the example of Tokyo: the great railway stations which are the points of reference of the main neighborhoods are also great department stores. And it is certain that the Japanese railroad station, the station-as-shop, has a unique signification and that this signification is erotic: purchase or encounter. Then we would have to explore the deep images of the urban elements. For example, many investigations have emphasized the imaginary function of the *watercourse* which, in any city, is experienced as a river, a canal, a body of water. There is a relation between the road and the watercourse, and we know that the cities which offer most resistance to signification, and which moreover often present difficulties of adaptation for their inhabitants, are precisely the cities lacking water, the cities without seaside, without a body of water, without a lake, without a river, without a watercourse; all these cities offer difficulties of life, of legibility.

To conclude, I should like to say merely this: in the observations I have just made, I have not approached the problem of methodology. Why? Because, if we seek to undertake a semiology of the city, the best approach, in my opinion, as indeed for any semantic enterprise, will be a certaintingenuity on the reader's part. It will require many of us to attempt to decipher the city where we are, beginning, if necessary, with a personal report. Mustering all these readings of various categories of readers (for we have a complete range of readers, from the sedentary to the foreigner), we would thereby elaborate the language of the city. This is why I shall say that the most important thing is not so much to multiply investigations or functional studies of the city as to multiply the readings of the city, of which, unfortunately, till now, only the writers have given us some examples.

Starting from these readings, from this reconstitution of a language or of a code of the city, we might orient ourselves toward means of a more scientific nature: investigation of units, syntax, etc., but always remembering that we must never try to fix and render rigid the signifieds of the units discovered, for historically these signifieds are extremely imprecise, challengeable, and unmanageable.

Every city is somewhat constructed, created by us in the image of the galley *Argo* of which each piece was no longer an original one, yet which still remained the ship *Argo*, a group of readily legible and identifiable significations. In this attempt at a semantic approach to the city, we must try to understand the interplay of signs, to understand that any city is a structure but that we must never attempt and never hope to fill that structure.

For the city is a poem, as has often been said and as Hugo put it better than anyone, but not a classical poem, not a poem centered on a subject. It is a poem which deploys the signifier, and it is this deployment which the semiology of the city must ultimately attempt to grasp and to make sing.

#### Notes

1. On Cleisthenes and Isonomy, cf. P. Leveque and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Clisthène l'Athénien* (Paris: Macula, 1983).
2. Cf. F. Choay, *L'Urbanisme: utopie et réalités* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965).

# 1967

The implications for architecture theory and practice of the writings of French philosopher and historian **Michel Foucault** were profound, if somewhat belated in being felt. Beginning in the 1960s with *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (first published in French in 1961, translated 1965), *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963, translated 1973), and *The Order of Things, An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966, translated 1970), Foucault's "archaeological" project of inquiring into the origins of modern reason and its institutions necessarily extended to architecture, understood in its broadest possible sense as a discipline—an order of discourse—having to do with "the spatialization of knowledge." Within this perspective, the meaning of space, which modern philosophy in its positivistic affiliation with science had tended to subordinate to that of time, again became crucial to understanding the distribution, circulation, and regulation of human life.

Working his way out of the scientific Marxism of Louis Althusser, Foucault sought to redirect critical theory toward a conception of knowledge that was founded on a systematic description of the material relations between history and the formation of consciousness, but no longer predicated, like previous critiques of ideology, on any assumed "truth." He chose to study this process of formation in its most "problematized" or intense contexts, privileging moments of rupture rather than continuity, and contexts exceptional rather than normative, those in which "all the real arrangements . . . that can be found within society are at one and the same time represented, challenged, and overturned." Thus beginning from the "epistemological break"—a concept derived from Gaston Bachelard—inaugurated by the Enlightenment, he focused his inquiry on the formation of modern institutions like the insane asylum, the teaching hospital, and later the prison, places where deviant or noneveryday behavior was subjected to a regime and technology of normalization. In the following paper of 1967, Foucault terms such places *heterotopias*. Distinguished from utopias by their concrete and disparate existence within reality, they represent arrangements that are "other" with respect to society, and as such stand as a "contestation of the space in which we live."

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After the political upheavals of 1968 Foucault would more explicitly link his investigation of knowledge production with questions of power. He would now describe his method as "genealogical" rather than archaeological, working, as he put it in a seminal essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971), to establish "not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations." Reason, a historical instrumentality beyond good and evil, as Nietzsche had recognized, was seen by Foucault as both capable of producing terror through its disciplinary regime and indispensable in the evolution of human knowledge. For a new generation of architectural historians—Manfredo Tafuri and Anthony Vidler, to mention two—this approach would have the powerful impact of an "event of thought" in Foucault's own sense. After the essay that follows, Foucault would return to questions of built space on several other occasions, notably in remarks on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon entitled "The Eye of Power" (1977).

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