Walking and Talking (In) the Space.
An Approach to Urban Practices

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Abstract

Yuri Lotman (1987) ascribes to the city the characteristics of a «polylogue»: a configuration which is more complex than a dialogue, since different discourses, semiotic conflicts and relations weave together, escaping a unique or even a biunique logic. Analysing the city as a site of negotiation, a relational space, means to look at how it is continuously remade, reinterpreted and transformed by its inhabitants' practices, through interactions with the built environment. Studying the city means, as a consequence, to deal with a very heterogeneous corpus of analysis, that has to be confronted integrating different methodologies (ethno-semiotic observation, analysis of the architectural space, textual analysis). This paper aims at exploring these methodological issues, focusing on the investigation of the processes of change and re-signification in urban centres with a high presence of immigrants, through the study of the inhabitants' practices: which conflicts or practices of spatial negotiation arise from alternative or concurrent uses of space? How is space re-written by the intertwining of old and new practices? How are borders constructed or negotiated, crossed or reinforced? Bibliography CAVICCHIOLI, S., 2002, I sensi, lo spazio, gli umori, Milano: Bompiani. HAMMAD, M., 2006, Lire l'espace, comprendre l'architecture. Essais sémiotiques, Limoges: Pulim. LOTMAN, J.M., 1987, «Architektura v kontekste kul'tury/Architecture in the Context of Culture», Architecture and Society/Architektura i obscestvo, n. 6. MONDADA, L., 2000, Decrire la ville : la construction des savoirs urbains dans l'interaction et dans le texte, Paris: Anthropos.

1. OTHERNESS IN THE CITY, A MULTIPLICATION OF QUESTIONS

This paper will focus on some very specific methodological issues I have tackled in the broader context my PhD research, which investigates the processes of change and re-signification in urban spaces with high percentage of immigrants.

After presenting a brief overview of the theoretical implications and the practical consequences of dealing with practices in space, I will focus on two main points. First, the paper presents the complex process of construction of a pertinent and signifying corpus of analysis. Secondly, it dwells upon the possible integration of other disciplines in the semiotic study of practices in space. This issue will lead to a more specific question: is it possible to conduct a fieldwork similar to the ethnographic one, with a semiotic perspective?

My research approaches the city considering it as a «polylogical space», to use Lotman's definition (1987: 42): a configuration which is more complex than a dialogue, since different discourses, semiotic conflicts and relations weave together, escaping a unique or even a biunique logic.

The city as a space of negotiation is evoked also by Greimas, when, in his seminal work on topological semiotics, he underlines that a urban semiotics cannot neglect the different meanings given to the city by its inhabitants, who are, each one in a different way, «interpreters of the urban space» (Greimas 1976: 138), in a city which is defined as the «whole of interrelations and interactions between subjects and objects» (*ibidem*: 132).

This constant negotiation process is especially evident, and the image of the polylogue especially appropriate, in certain specific places of our contemporary cities: those neighbourhoods where the presence of immigrants is conspicuous, where diversity breaks into local territories. These are places where semiotic conflicts often become concrete conflicts, where the «intersection between different traditions and sub-texts» (Lotman 1987: 40) can lead to the clash between actors bearing definitions of space that are apparently too different to hold a dialogue.

Here are some prime examples: Matonge, «mythical» neighbourhood of the Congolese immigration in Brussels; Barrio del Raval, «ethnical» neighbourhood which lies right next to the central *ramblas*, in Barcelona; Porta Palazzo, open market in the city centre of Turin, where different languages and cultures mix; Carmine, the most ancient neighbourhood in the city-centre of Brescia (a medium-size city in the North of Italy), now the area with the highest concentration of immigrants in the city.

In all these cases, diversity is not relegated to the margins — the suburbs — where it tends to be secluded (by powerful institutions and by the discourse of the media): cultural difference imposes its presence in full view in the inner parts of the city, making it difficult to ignore. The evident presence of *Otherness*, as the central feature of these places, enhance their complexity: centre and periphery, core and marginality are not neutral and opposed categories, but they are embedded in one another, they reframe each-other on different levels.

Investigating these spaces, thus, arise a number of methodological questions.

How can we reflect the multiplicity of «enunciations of the city», in a context characterised by a great cultural diversity, where issues related to cultural belonging and memory, identity processes, negotiations of space, are deeply intertwined? How can we seize the different ways of thinking, perceiving and living — in a word «signifying» — the city?

2. HETEROGENEITY AND POLYLOGIC: DIVERSIFYING THE CORPUS

In my research, I have tried to answer these questions focusing on the study of one of the neighbourhoods I presented at the beginning: Carmine, in the centre of the Italian city of Brescia.

First some information to understand the context: located in the North of Italy, Brescia is a medium-size industrial city that has always been a receptive place for immigration: while in the Sixties people came from the South of Italy, in the last 20 years immigration has come mainly from extra-European countries. In the last years, the foreign presence has become a structural, and constantly increasing element of the city. The percentage of people of foreign origins in the whole city is 14.3%[1]. In Carmine, the percentage goes up to 37%. To understand how quickly the presence of immigrants increased, it is enough to think that in 1992 this percentage was only 9%[2].

Carmine is part of the historical centre, and, finding its roots in the Middle Ages, it is one of the most ancient areas in town. Even if it has always had the tendency to present pockets of marginalisation (prostitution, illegal commerce, etc.), it has also been, especially in the Eighteenth century, the residence of rich families, who built expensive and luxury mansions there, still inhabited by the «high-class families of the town», or chosen by professionals for their offices: in different ways, it has always been a «mixed» neighbourhood. This characteristic is meaningfully «forgotten» or proudly remembered, depending on the different narratives told by different subjects.

This place can be considered as an exemplary border space, since it hosts different logics and it puts into crisis given categories: it is central but we can identify in it «peripheral» aspects; legal and illegal practices mingles; it is inhabited by persons who have always lived in the city centre and by others coming from the Wolrd's periphery. As a border space, it is fluid and productive: drawing on Lotman's work, the border, in its being «bilingual and poly-lingual» (Lotman 1990: 136), is a contradictory zone, where connections are not easy, but essential for the emergence of new sense, constructed only through a constant translation and re-interpretation.

And the production of sense in such a place only can respond to the logic of the poly-logue. Investigating such a place makes this logic emerge, with all its features.

First of all, this place is at the centre of a polyphony of different enunciations. As Mondada (2001: 1) argues: «Different actors tell the city and so contribute to mould it, to change it, to give sense and intelligibility to it». Secondly, this place enlighten the inner polysemy of the city: different logics govern the construction of different images of the city. Quoting again Greimas (1976: 132), the city is «a complex and polysemous object, which cannot be seized immediately». Finally, the inherent heterogeneity of these places reflects one of the main characteristics of the semiotics spaces: according to Lotman (1990: 126), «The semiosphere is marked by its heterogeneity. [...] It is a set of connected but different systems».

[1] In Italy, the percentage of migrants over the whole population is 6.2% (Caritas-Migrantes 2007).
[2] Data from Comune di Brescia 2008.

If I insist on this character, that's because it is the one which is guiding me in the *discovery* and *construction*[3] of my object of study, starting from a principle of pertinence towards my descriptive project which is based on the definition of «text» in Greimas and Courtès Dictionary (1979: 358-9): «The text is constituted only of the semiotics elements conformed to the theoretical project of description».

As a consequence, to reflect this heterogeneity and to answer to this poly-logic, I have tried to diversify as much as possible the corpus of analysis, constructing it as an intertextual net, trying to identify the translating connections, the crossings and the differences between the very different texts and practices involved. A very diverse set of texts has been individuated (from media texts to tourist guides, from informal discourses to institutional acts). A morphological analysis of the place is accompanied by ethno-semiotic observations. Acknowledging Hammad's recommendation (2003: 48), I have given special attention to the identification of *topoi*, those «spatial configurations that rule the interactions between subjects».

This heterogeneity of the corpus has immediately produced a multiplication of points of view, necessary to seize such a complex object. But it was soon clear that it wasn't enough: I realised that I had to come closer to the immigrants' experiences of the city (none of which emerged from the varied set of texts I had collected).

I realised that, to seize the different urban practices and the different images of the city involved in it, my research had to increasingly resemble a fieldwork. But I didn't shrink from that and I decided to start conducting interviews to the immigrants who live in the neighbourhood.

3. FIELDWORK REVISITED

Different motivations guided me in this choice. The first one directly refers to that exigency of conformity and pertinence towards the object of analysis that I have just mentioned. At a certain point, I found a gap in the intertextual net I was investigating: I could identify a latent intertextual call, but the recalled text was missing. In the texts I was examining, I continuously find reference to an «Other» to a «Them», which was always the direct object, never the subject of enunciation. So, trying to fill this gap, I decided it was time to look for — and build — these texts, though interviews.

Moreover, this methodological step can help to seize the identity of the neighbourhood as a place lived and built by a plurality of different subjects, each one holding a subjective experience. This exigency is even more pressing when dealing with cultural diversity: the incumbent risk is to cage migrants in generic definitions, and static and Eurocentric categories. Collecting personal tales could help enlightening that «multiplicity of singular othernesses» recalled by Patrizia Violi (2006: 135) in this passage: «Isn't the *Other*, defined in the absoluteness of that

[3] I here refer to what Marrone (2007: 239) defines *invention*: «talking of 'invention of the text' would mean putting forward the hypothesis that the text is constructed thanks to a double, concomitant operation of discovery and creation, of founding and configurating at the same time».

majuscule, an umpteenth metaphysical deceit, which should leave the place to a multiplicity of singular othernesses?».

But I am conscious, of course, of the methodological problems implied by this interdisciplinary movement and I am convinced that it has to be done carefully, considering the theoretical implications involved.

3.1. Interviews: a semiotic stance?

The main problem presented by the use of interviews is that they are constructed through an intentional manipulation by the researcher. If it is true that the researcher always constructs its object of study, in this case it is obviously a more explicit and intrusive action.

Acknowledging this criticism, though, is not an obstacle but a point of departure, to consider the role of such a tool and its integration in a semiotic research.

If, as recognised by the first studies of urban semiotics (Barthes 1970, Greimas 1976, de Certeau 1980) and reiterated in the most recent works (Hammad 2003, Marrone Pezzini 2008, Marrone 2009, Violi 2008), the city is at the centre of multiple enunciations, the interview is, first of all, one of the places where the urban language expresses itself.

Thus, we will have to highlight the enunciative mechanisms taking place in this specific kind of interaction, considering that, as Mondada (2000: 90-91) argues, it is «a communicational event in which the interlocutors, including the interviewer, build collectively a version of the world», which, as such, emerges from the constant and reciprocal *ajustement* between the two subjects «in a work of negotiation, of interactive construction, of collective elaboration».

When we study enunciation, one central issue we have to take into account is the placing of the point of view, *on space and in space*. If it is true that this issue is always implied in a semiotic research, it results of course enhanced when we have to do with practices.

If, as Bourdieu (1980) reminds us, social actors move within «relational fields», these, to be signifying horizons, request to be assumed by a glance — whether it is the glance of a subject giving sense to a place moving in it, or the glance of the researcher who tries to give sense to her investigation.

Reflecting upon the focalisation is especially important when we are talking about practices in space: to quote again Greimas' article on semiotics of space: «Every topological study is compelled to choose, as a preliminary step, its point of observation, making a distinction between the place of enunciation and the place enunciated and specifying the modes of their syncretism» (1976: 127).

Also Lorenza Mondada, in her book *Decrire la ville,* reminds that «the description of space is always accompanied by a placing of its enunciator» (2001: 115).

So, making an interview, in a semiotic perspective, means making a situated construction of texts, starting from a glance on space and from an intersubjective relation between the two interlocutors.

3.2. Tracing itineraries in the space

In order to show how such an approach can help seizing the multiple practices and interpretations moulding the urban environment, I will focus on a specific part of the interviews I've done, which explicitly take in charge the issues just raised.

The last part of the interviews I am conducting is the re-elaboration of a methodology known in ethnography under the name of «go-along interview»[4]: I ask the interviewees to bring me around in the area, to build some itineraries *for me*, but *starting from their own way of giving sense* to the places we are visiting[5].

In this way, I am explicitly manipulating my object of analysis, but, in the same time, I can observe an itinerary in its making and the parallel narrations elicited by the places seen and perceived during our walk.

This methodology, I argue, at the same time rises problems *and* tries to give a contextual and provisional answer to them. And, I hope, helps approaching to a study of practices in space. The itineraries elicited in the interviews, though artificial as they are, take in charge the problem of the point of view explicitly: doing the itinerary together with the interviewee, the researcher will be able to observe[6] subsequent positioning of points of view, *in space* and *on space*.

Observing the process and the description of the process in their making opens up a series of possibilities in the observation and definition of a space moulded by the practices. In fact, if the description of space goes along with a placing of its enunciator (towards the description and in the space), during these itineraries we can identify an enunciative position together with a placing and moving in space.

We obtain, in this way, a progressive description, deploying itself in the itinerary and in the discourse, which offers a series of useful guidelines to understand the neighbourhood.

First, focusing on the process allows seizing the syntagmatic transformations and the aspectualisation of space (Cavicchioli 2002: 183; Hammad 2008). Secondly, it is possible to observe the itinerary as it unfolds and to situate the discourse in it, identifying and comparing narrative and spatial rhythms. Moreover, this interview method facilitates the description: placing themselves in space, the interviewees will be able to articulate some spatial categories that are inherently indexical.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The city, as I have underlined, is continuously re-interpreted and resignified by its inhabitants. As Michel de Certeau (1980) says: «Space is a crossroads of moving beings. It is somehow animated by the set of movements that take place there». Caught in this whirl of re-configuration processes, what the researcher can do is just to «interpret interpretations», to quote Geertz (1973) — whether these interpretations take the form of a «classical» text or of a practice like wandering and narrating the city.

[4] For an overview of this methodology, see Kusenbach 2003.

[5] This part of the interview opens with a simple request («Let's have a walk in the neighbourhood»), without giving any specific indication, so that the interviewee can interpret the itinerary as freely as possible and following his/her own motivations. In this way, each one defines his/her own «significance» of places — whether it is cognitive, affective, linked to memory or to a project, etc.

[6] It is important to stress that the researcher, in this way, is only observing someone who observes. Of course I am not suggesting that the (at least) two points of view are overlapped in this special interaction.

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