

Barthes

SEMIOLOGY AND THE URBAN

The subject of this discussion¹ involves a certain number of problems in urban semiology.

But I should add that whoever would outline a semiotics of the city needs to be at the same time semiologist (specialist in signs), geographer, historian, planner, architect and probably psychoanalyst. Since this is clearly not my case – in fact I am none of these things except perhaps a semiologist, and barely that – the reflections that I am going to present to you are the reflections of an amateur in the etymological sense of this word: amateur of signs, he who loves signs; amateur of cities, he who loves the city. For I love both the city and signs. And this double love (which probably is only one) leads me to believe, maybe with a certain presumption, in the possibility of a semiotics of the city. Under what conditions or rather with what precautions and what preliminaries would an urban semiotics be possible?

This is the theme of the reflections that I am going to present. I would like first of all to recall something very obvious which will serve as our starting point: human space in general (and not only urban space) has always been a satisfying space. Scientific geography and in particular modern cartography can be considered as a kind of obliteration, of censorship that objectivity has imposed on signification (objectivity which is a form like any other of the 'imaginary'). And before I speak of the city, I would like to recall certain facts about the cultural history of the West, more precisely of Greek antiquity. The human habitat, the *oecumenè*² such as we glimpse it through the first maps of the Greek geographers – Anaximander, Hecataeus – or through the mental cartography of someone like Herodotus, constitutes a veritable discourse with its symmetries, its oppositions of places, with its syntax and its paradigms. A map of the world of Herodotus in graphic form is constructed like a language, like a phrase, like a poem, on oppositions: hot lands and cold lands, known and unknown lands; then on the opposition between men on the one hand and monsters and chimaeras on the other, etc.

If from geographic space we pass now to urban space proper, I will recall that the notion of *Isonomia* forged for the Athens of the sixth century by a man like Cleisthenes is a truly structural conception by which only the centre is privileged, since the relations of all citizens to it are at the same time both symmetrical and reversible.³ At that time the conception of the city was exclusively a signifying one, since the utilitarian conception of an urban distribution based on functions and uses, which is incontestably predominant in our time, will appear later.

I wanted to remind you of this historical relativism in the conception of signifying spaces. Finally, it is in the recent past that a structuralist like Lévi-Strauss in his book *Tristes Tropiques* introduced urban semiology, although on a reduced scale, on the subject of a Bororo village whose space he studied using an essentially semantic approach.

It is odd that parallel to these strongly signifying conceptions of inhabited space, the theoretical elaborations of urban planners have up to now given, if I am not mistaken, only a very reduced place to the problems of signification.⁴ To be sure, exceptions exist, many writers have spoken of the city in terms of

signification. One of the authors who best expressed this essentially signifying nature of urban space is in my opinion Victor Hugo. In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Hugo has written a very beautiful chapter, very subtle and perceptive, 'This will kill that'; 'this' meaning the book, 'that' meaning the monument. By expressing himself in such a way, Hugo gives proof of a rather modern way of conceiving the monument and the city, as a true text, as an inscription of man in space. This chapter by Victor Hugo is consecrated to the rivalry between two modes of writing, writing in stone and writing on paper. Indeed, this theme is very much current today in the remarks on writing of a philosopher like Jacques Derrida. Among the urban planners proper there is no talk of signification; only one name emerges, rightly so, that of the American Kevin Lynch, who seems to be closest to these problems of urban semantics in so far as he has been concerned with thinking about the city in the same terms as the consciousness perceiving it, which means discovering the image of the city among the readers of this city. But in reality the studies of Lynch, from the semantic point of view, remain rather ambiguous; on the one hand there is in his work a whole vocabulary of signification (for example, he lays great stress on the legibility of the city and this is a notion of great importance for us) and as a good semanticist he has the sense of *discrete units*; he has attempted to identify in urban space the discontinuous units which, *mutatis mutandis*, would bear some resemblance to phonemes and semantemes. These units he calls paths, edges, districts, nodes, landmarks. These are categories of units that would easily become semantic categories. But on the other hand, in spite of this vocabulary, Lynch has a conception of the city that remains more *Gestalt* than structural.

Barthes

Beyond these authors who explicitly approach semantics of the city, we can observe a growing awareness of the functions of symbols in urban space. In many urban planning studies based on quantitative estimates and on opinion questionnaires, we nonetheless find mention, even if only as a note, of the purely qualitative issue of symbolization which even today is often used to explain facts of another nature. We find, for example, a technique fairly current in urban planning: simulation. Now, the technique of simulation, even if used in a fairly narrow and empirical manner, leads us to develop further the concept of model, which is a structural or at least pre-structural concept.

In another stage of these urban planning studies, the demand for meaning appears. We gradually discover that a kind of contradiction exists between signification and another order of phenomena and that consequently signification possesses irreducible specificity. For example, some planners or some of the scientists who study urban planning have had to notice that in certain cases a conflict exists between the functionalism of a part of a city, let us say of a neighbourhood, and what I will call its semantic contents (its semantic force). It is thus that they have remarked with a certain ingenuity (but maybe we must start from ingenuity) that Rome involves a permanent conflict between the functional necessities of modern life and the semantic charge given to the city by its history. And this conflict between signification and function is the despair of planners. There exists, furthermore, a conflict between signification and reason or, at least, between signification and the calculating reason which would have all the elements of a city uniformly assimilated by planning, while it is growing daily more evident that a city is a tissue formed not of equal elements whose functions we can enumerate, but of strong and neutral elements, or

Barthes rather, as the linguists say, of marked and unmarked elements (we know that the opposition between the sign and the absence of sign, between the full degree and the zero degree, constitutes one of the major processes of the elaboration of signification). Apparently every city possesses this kind of rhythm. Kevin Lynch has remarked that there exists in every city, from the moment that the city is truly inhabited by man and made by him, this fundamental rhythm of signification which is the opposition, the alternation and the juxtaposition of marked and unmarked elements. Finally, there is a last conflict between signification and reality itself, at least between signification and that reality of objective geography, the reality of maps. Surveys directed by psycho-sociologists have shown, for example, that two neighbourhoods are adjoining, if we rely on the map, which means on the 'real', on objectivity, while, from the moment when they receive two different significations, they are radically separated in the image of the city. Signification, therefore, is experienced as in complete opposition to objective data.

The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it. Still the problem is to bring an expression like 'the language of the city' out of the purely metaphorical stage. It is very easy metaphorically to speak of the language of the city as we speak of the language of the cinema or the language of flowers. The real scientific leap will be realized when we speak of a language of the city without metaphor. And we may say that this is exactly what happened to Freud when he for the first time spoke of the language of dreams, emptying this expression of its metaphorical meaning in order to give it real meaning. We also must face this problem: how to pass from metaphor to analysis when we speak of the language of the city. Once more I am referring to the specialists on the urban phenomenon, for even if they are quite far from these problems of urban semantics, they have nevertheless already noted (I quote the report of a survey) that: 'The data available in the social sciences presents a form poorly adapted to its integration in the models.' Well, if we have difficulty inserting in a model the data on the subject of the city provided us by psychology, sociology, geography, demography, it is precisely because we lack a last technique, that of symbols. Consequently, we need a new scientific energy in order to transform these data, to pass from metaphor to the description of signification, and it is in this that semiology (in the widest meaning of the term) could perhaps, by a development yet unforeseeable, come to our aid. I do not intend to discuss here the discovery procedures of urban semiology. It is probable that these procedures would consist in decomposing the urban text into units, then distributing these units in formal classes and, thirdly, finding the rules of combination and transformation of these units and models. I will confine myself to three remarks which do not have a direct relation with the city but which could usefully point the way to an urban semiology in so far as they draw a summary balance sheet of current semiology and they take into consideration the fact that for the last few years the semiological 'landscape' is no longer the same.

My first remark is that 'symbolism' (which must be understood as a general discourse concerning signification) is no longer conceived today, at least as a general rule, as a regular correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. In other words, a notion of semantics which was fundamental some years ago has

become defunct; this is the notion of the lexicon as a set of lists of signifieds and their corresponding signifiers. This kind of crisis, of attrition of the notion of lexicon, can be found in numerous sectors of research. First of all, there is the distributive semantics of the disciples of Chomsky such as Katz and Fodor who have launched a strong attack against the lexicon. If we leave the domain of linguistics for that of literary criticism we find thematic criticism, which has been dominant for fifteen or twenty years, at least in France, and which has formed the essence of the studies in what we call the *Nouvelle Critique*, and which is today being limited and remodelled to the detriment of the signifieds it proposed to decipher.

Barthes

In the domain of psychoanalysis, finally, we can no longer speak of a one-to-one symbolism; this is clearly the dead part of Freud's work: a psychoanalytical lexicon is no longer conceivable. All this has discredited the word 'symbol', for this term has always allowed us to suppose till now that the relation of signification depended on the signified, on the presence of the signified. Personally, I use the word 'symbol' to refer to an organization of meaning, syntagmatic and/or paradigmatic but no longer semantic: we must make a very clear distinction between the semantic dimension of the symbol and the syntagmatic or paradigmatic nature of the same symbol.

In the same way, it would be an absurd enterprise to want to elaborate a lexicon of the significations of the city, putting on one side places, neighbourhoods, functions, and on the other significations; or, rather, putting on one side places uttered like signifiers and on the other functions uttered like signifieds. The list of the functions that the neighbourhoods of a city can assume has been known for a long time. We find approximately some thirty or so functions for a neighbourhood of a city (at least for a neighbourhood of the city centre: a zone that has been rather well 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 reviewed later: not only because of the weight and the pressure exercised by history but because, precisely, the signifieds are like mythical creatures, extremely imprecise, and at a certain point they always become the signifiers of *something else*; the signifieds are transient, the signifiers remain. The hunt for the signified can thus constitute only a provisional approach. The role of the signified when we succeed in discerning it is only to be a kind of witness to a specific state of the distribution of signification. Besides we must note that we attribute an ever-growing importance to the empty signified, to the empty space of the signified. In other words, elements are understood as signifying rather by their own correlative position than by their contents. Thus, Tokyo, which is one of the most tangled urban complexes that we can imagine from the semantic point of view, nonetheless has a kind of centre. But this centre, occupied by the imperial palace, surrounded by a deep moat and hidden by greenery, is felt as an empty centre. As a more general rule, the studies of the urban nucleus of different cities has shown that the central point of the city centre (every city has a centre) which we call 'solid nucleus', does not constitute the peak point of any particular activity but a kind of empty 'focal point' for the image that the community develops of the centre. We have here again a somehow empty place which is necessary for the organization of the rest of the city.

Barthes

My second remark is that symbolism must be defined essentially as the world of signifiers, of correlations, and, especially, correlations that we can never enclose in a full signification, in a final signification. Henceforth, from the point of view of descriptive technique, the distribution of elements, meaning the signifiers, exhausts in a certain sense the semantic discovery. This is true for the Chomskian semantics of Katz and Fodor and even for the analyses of Lévi-Strauss, which are founded on the clarification of a relation which is no longer analogical but homological (a point demonstrated in his book on totemism which is rarely cited). Thus, we discover that when we wish to do the semiology of the city, we shall probably have to develop the division of signification further and in more detail. For this I appeal to my experience as amateur. We know that in certain cities, there exist spaces which offer a very elaborate specialization of functions: this is the case for example with the oriental souk, where a street is reserved for the tanners and another one for the goldsmiths; in Tokyo certain parts of the same neighbourhood are very homogeneous from the functional point of view: practically, we find there only bars or snackbars or places of entertainment. Well, we must go beyond this first aspect and not limit the semantic description of the city to this unit. We must try to decompose microstructures in the same way that we can isolate little fragments of phrases in a long period; we must then get in the habit of making a quite elaborate analysis which will lead us to these micro-structures and, inversely, we must get used to a broader analysis really arriving at the macro-structures. We all know that Tokyo is a polynuclear city; it has several cores around five or six centres. We must learn to differentiate semantically among these centres, which, in fact, are indicated by railroad stations. In other terms, even in this sector, the best model for the semantic study of the city will be provided, I believe, at least at the beginning, by the phrase of discourse. And here we rediscover Victor Hugo's old intuition: the city is a writing. He who moves about the city, e.g. the user of the city (what we all are), is a kind of reader who, following his obligations and his movements, appropriates fragments of the utterance in order to actualize them in secret. When we move about a city, we all are in the situation of the reader of the 100,000 million poems of Queneau, where one can find a different poem by changing a single line; unawares, we are somewhat like this avant-garde reader when we are in a city.

My third remark, finally, is that today semiology never supposes the existence of a definitive signified. This means that the signifieds are always signifiers for other signifieds and vice versa. In reality, in any cultural or even psychological complex, we are faced with infinite chains of metaphors whose signified is always retreating or becomes itself a signifier. This structure is currently being explored, as you know, in psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan, and also in the study of writing, where it is postulated if not really explored. If we apply these ideas to the city we would doubtless be led to reveal a dimension which I must say I have never seen cited, at least explicitly, in the studies and surveys of urban planning. I will call it the *erotic* dimension. The eroticism of the city is the lesson we can draw from the infinitely metaphorical nature of urban discourse. I use the word eroticism in its widest meaning: it would be pointless to suppose that the eroticism of the city referred only to the area reserved for this kind of pleasure, for the concept of the place of pleasure is one

of the most tenacious mystifications of urban functionalism. It is a functional concept and not a semantic concept; I use eroticism or *sociality* interchangeably. The city, essentially and semantically, is the place of our meeting with the *other*, and it is for this reason that the centre is the gathering place in every city; the city centre is instituted above all by the young people, the adolescents.

Barthes

When they express their image of the city, they always have a tendency to limit, to concentrate, to condense the centre; the city centre is felt as the place of exchange of social activities and I would almost say erotic activities in the broad sense of the word. Better still, the city centre is always felt as the space where subversive forces, forces of rupture, ludic forces act and meet. Play is a subject very often emphasized in the surveys on the centre; there is in France a series of surveys concerning the appeal of Paris for the suburbs, and it has been observed through these surveys that Paris as a centre was always experienced semantically by the periphery as the privileged place where the other is and where we ourselves are other, as the place where we play the other. In contrast, all that is not the centre is precisely that which is not ludic space, everything which is not otherness: family, residence, identity. Naturally, especially for the city, we would have to discover the metaphorical chain, the chain substituted for Eros. We must search more particularly in the direction of the large categories, of the major habits of man, for example nourishment, purchases, which are really erotic activities in this consumer society. I am thinking once again of the example of Tokyo: the huge railway stations which are the landmarks of the principal neighbourhoods are also big shopping centres. And it is certain that the Japanese railway station, the shop-station, has at bottom a unique signification and that this signification is erotic: purchase or meeting. We should then explore these deep images of the urban elements. For example, numerous surveys have emphasized the imaginary function of the water course, which in every city is experienced as a river, a channel, a body of water. There is a relation between road and water and we are well aware that the cities which are most resistant to signification and which incidentally often present difficulties of adaptation for the inhabitants are precisely the cities without water, the cities without seashore, without a surface of water, without a lake, without a river, without a stream: all these cities present difficulties of life, of legibility.

In conclusion, I would like to say only this: in the comments I have made here I have not touched on the problem of methodology. Why? Because if we want to undertake a semiology of the city, the best approach, in my opinion, as indeed for every semantic venture, will be a certain ingenuity on the part of the reader. Many of us should try to decipher the city we are in, starting if necessary with a personal rapport. Dominating all these readings by different categories of readers (for we have a complete scale of readers, from the native to the stranger) we would thus work out the language of the city. This is why I would say that it is not so important to multiply the surveys or the functional studies of the city, but to multiply the readings of the city, of which unfortunately only the writers have so far given us some examples.

Starting from these readings, from this reconstruction of a language or a code of the city, we could then turn to means of a more scientific nature: definition of units, syntax, etc., but always keeping in mind that we must never seek to fix and rigidify the signified of the units discovered, because,

Barthes historically, these signifieds are always extremely vague, dubious and unmanageable.

We construct, we make every city a little in the image of the ship *Argo*, whose every piece was no longer the original piece but which still remained the ship *Argo*, that is, a set of significations easily readable and recognizable. In this attempt at a semantic approach to the city we should try to understand the play of signs, to understand that any city is a structure, but that we must never try and we must never want to fill in this structure.

For the city is a poem, as has often been said and as Hugo said better than anyone else, but it is not a classical poem, a poem tidily centred on a subject. It is a poem which unfolds the signifier and it is this unfolding that ultimately the semiology of the city should try to grasp and make sing.

NOTES

- 1 Lecture given on 16 May 1967, under the sponsorship of the *Institut Français*, the Institute of the History of Architecture at the University of Naples, published in *Op. Cit.*, 10 (1967).
- 2 *Oecumenè*: the word used by certain geographers to designate the inhabited world or an inhabited region. The Greek word means all the inhabited world.
- 3 Cf. P. Lévêque and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Clisthème l'Athénien*, Paris: Macula, 1983.
- 4 Cf. F. Choay, *L'Urbanisme: Utopie et Réalités*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965.

THE EIFFEL TOWER

Maupassant often lunched at the restaurant in the tower, though he didn't care much for the food: 'It's the only place in Paris', he used to say, 'where I don't have to see it.' And it's true that you must take endless precautions, in Paris, not to see the Eiffel Tower; whatever the season, through mist and cloud, on overcast days or in sunshine, in rain – wherever you are, whatever the landscape of roofs, domes, or branches separating you from it, *the Tower is there*; incorporated into daily life until you can no longer grant it any specific attribute, determined merely to persist, like a rock or the river, it is as literal as a phenomenon of nature whose meaning can be questioned to infinity but whose existence is incontestable. There is virtually no Parisian glance it fails to *touch* at some time of day; at the moment I begin writing these lines about it, the Tower is there, in front of me, framed by my window; and at the very moment the January night blurs it, apparently trying to make it invisible, to deny its presence, two little lights come on, winking gently as they revolve at its very tip: all this night, too, it will be there, connecting me above Paris to each of my friends that I know are seeing it: with it we all comprise a shifting figure of which it is the steady centre: the Tower is friendly.

The Tower is also present to the entire world. First of all as a universal symbol of Paris, it is everywhere on the globe where Paris is to be stated as an image; from the Midwest to Australia, there is no journey to France which isn't made, somehow, in the Tower's name, no schoolbook, poster, or film about France which fails to propose it as the major sign of a people and of a place: it belongs to the universal language of travel. Further: beyond its strictly Parisian statement, it touches the most general human image-repertoire: its simple,