

## Practice and the Theory of Practice. Rereading Certeau's 'Practice of Everyday Life'

*Review Essay by Helga Wild*

### **Introduction\***

When I first read the *Practice of Everyday Life*, I had just left my discipline (neuroscience) as well as my country and was struggling to find my way in intellectually and socially unfamiliar terrain. I was encouraged thus to find a book, which legitimated the ways by which a stranger might appropriate and transform the materials of another culture. Several years later I read it a second time from the position of a researcher-consultant and found its insights still relevant: this time it was his outline of the stance of the intellectual towards the object of study that deeply moved me - first in its insistence on one's obligation towards the implicit, informal, non-verbal subject matter; and second in its acknowledgement of the power axis inherent in every research project, which is all too often ignored or suppressed in the literature on methodology in the social sciences.

Now, returning to the book for the third time, what was striking and sometimes bewildering in earlier days seems eminently familiar; yet the book retains its freshness and relevance. This time my project is to take in the whole book rather than to just *poach* on the text for my own purposes (a term Certeau uses and a practice he actually endorses) with a concern for the conditions of its genesis. I am folding later chapters into the treatment of earlier

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\* Throughout the essay, the works of Michel de Certeau have been abbreviated in the following way: PEL: Practice of Everyday Life. CP: Culture in the Plural. CS: The Capture of Speech & other Writings. WH: The Writing of History.

ones as illustrations or further developments in order to do justice to the richness and complex overtones of Certeau's thought, while keeping this review within a tolerable length.

### **About the author and his milieu**

Michel(-Jean-Emmanuel de la Barge) de Certeau was born in 1925 in Chambéry, in the southeast of France. He studied the classics and philosophy in Grenoble and Lyon, then went to Paris to study History of Religion in Early Modern Europe at the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE)*. This school boasts among its former students such eminent personalities as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marcel Mauss, Alexandre Koyre, Alexandre Kojève, Cornelius Castoriadis and many more. (Certeau's affinity with practices and methods of anthropology go back to the orientation of the school. Bourdieu, for instance, did a seminar on his work on Kabyle society at the school in the sixties.) At EPHE Certeau discovered the works of Pierre Favre, one of the founders of the Jesuit order, and through him his religious calling: he joined the Jesuit order and was ordained.

Throughout his life he comfortably balanced his stance as priest, as academic and as public intellectual traversing the boundaries of theology, history, anthropology, sociology, and psychology. He founded a journal and wrote on the student and worker protests in '68. Together with Lacan he founded the *Ecole Freudienne de Paris*, an informal group dedicated to discuss the works of Freud. He was part of the critical movement in history — Braudel of the Annales School was also an instructor at the Ecole Pratique, participated in a department in Ethnology in Paris and taught at the universities of Paris VIII (Vincennes) and Paris VII, the university of Geneva and UC San Diego. This last academic appointment may explain the reception of his work in the US and can also account for the American influences on it, notably from Goffman, Garfinkel and Illich<sup>†</sup>.

Other French intellectuals whose works are contemporaneous with his own are Lyotard's "The Postmodern Condition," Derrida's "Of Grammatology" (1967), and Bourdieu's "An Outline of a Theory of Practice" (1977) and "The Logic of Practice" (1980), to name a relevant and prominent few. Foucault's work on the link between knowledge and institutional power was published earlier and formed a cornerstone in Certeau's thinking. Structuralism was the dominant position in all the debates of the time. Together these influences made for a rich intellectual climate in which he struggled to express his own views.

Despite the 70s' practice of critically interrogating every theoretical position for its ideological underpinnings and despite a lifetime spent in criss-crossing disciplinary and institutional boundaries, Certeau's writings appear very much of a piece, consistently exploring and extending a number of

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<sup>†</sup> I am grateful to J.-P. Dupuy for telling me about the friendship between Certeau and Illich in San Diego.

themes that occupied him throughout his life. These were his concern with historiography and writing as a mode of production, his critical stance with respect to the universality of knowledge and the truth claimed for scientific representations and their political use in society. As a consequence of this he saw the intellectual, including himself, as non-neutral part of society, necessarily carrying a political role and responsibility. And last, but not least, was his concern with cultural practice as an object resistant to representation and his investigation of the ways by which it is made into, or fails to be made into, knowledge, which is the main concern of the book here reviewed.

None of the aforementioned ideas are news today. One might even say, they are considered self-evident and taken for granted in some academic circles. But in the seventies questioning institutional rationality and exposing its exercise of and collusion with power was still a courageous act. And even if we today claim to "know" theoretically this to be the case, we have not overcome that state of affairs any more for being aware of it.

Certeau himself did not believe that a society could do without *governmentality*. He saw the need for a dominant rationality as an endoskeleton that makes society cohere – even if by fantasy (Lacan 2004), but he nevertheless thought of the members of society as essentially able to escape from complete submission to this rationality, in contradistinction to Bourdieu and Foucault. If rationality outlined options and paths that any member of society was expected to follow, Certeau posited the possibility for everyone to creatively explore the interstitial spaces and to design new paths. In this way Everyman (an expression representing all humankind) is able to both question and affirm membership in society, and society might benefit even against its overt goals from such liminal or covert creation.

Certeau dedicates the book to the common man. One may ask what this gesture means. It is unlikely that anyone outside the educated elite will be able or want to follow the argument it presents. Moreover, the book is not really dealing with the common man in the sense that it establishes a psychology of what is common to every man, woman or child. Rather it reaches beyond individual experience and action towards the (transcendental) ground of everyday practice and includes a defense of "ordinary" language. More likely the gesture is directed at his fellow-academics and constitutes an invocation of the common man as the absent arbiter of the veracity and relevance of the text. This is a sort of endorsement of the ethnological discourse and methods, despite Certeau's general criticism of such discourse and writing.

### **The Making of Practice of Everyday Life**

In 1974 a government institution commissioned Certeau to carry out an investigation into France's popular culture with the goal to inform political and financial decision-making. The two volume study of *L'Invention du Quotidien. Arts de Faire (vol 1)* and *Habiter, Cuisiner (vol 2)*, the latter written by Pierre Mayol and Luce Giard, was the result of this commission. It was published in 1980 in France and in 1984 in English under the title "The Practice of Everyday Life." Certeau worked with the translator on the first part, which contains his theoretical and epistemological considerations a propos such a study. After

his death Luce Giard, his collaborator, guided the subsequent translation and publication of Certeau's works in the US.

The study departed radically from what a state institution would have expected and it frustrated all attempts to inform political decisions. Instead of studying the demographics, which could claim to be representative of French society, Certeau and his collaborators, in a gesture that comes close to defiance, describe a family in a specific neighborhood in the context of their everyday life. The choice of method and subject is highly significant. Consonant with his writings in *Culture as Plural*, Certeau refuses to entertain the normal understanding of popular culture as relating to special groups, whose activities are outside the norm of mainstream society. Instead, he approaches culture as the daily activities and habitual procedures of normal, but not average, humans.

*Culture, Certeau says, consists in what someone does for him- or herself, and not for the boss. (CP p. 275.)* This claims first, that culture is active and posits the act by which each individual marks what others furnish. And second, by reference to the "boss" it relates culture to present-day economic and historic conditions. Culture at present, he claims consonant with Foucault, is the space left over from a long process of knowledge-making which brings human practices under greater economic, scientific and technological control. What has been left over after 250 years of Enlightenment are merely those activities that "had no legitimacy with respect to productivist rationality" (PEL p. 69)– i.e. everyday activities such as cleaning, cooking, sewing.

If culture does not enter into the accepted representations or academic disciplines, it is constituted as the other of society's control: the realm of the evanescent, unstructured and playful, if not useless. This state of affairs is itself in need of analysis and motivates Certeau's oblique approach: one cannot treat practice as just another object of study; it calls for reflection on the methodology of the knowledge-making disciplines as well. His calling the study the "Invention of the Everyday" (*L'Invention du Quotidien*), a phrase that leaves unspecified whether one witnesses the invention of practices by the common man or the invention of the concept of the everyday by the researcher, teeters between these two kinds of making. For Certeau, both readings are possible and can hold at the same time: the first, because of the way he conceives of culture as play, poiesis, and invention; the second because of his reflection on the work of the historiographer or scientist as a producer of a reality made permanent through writing. The tension persists throughout the book in his reaching towards a genuine expression of the phenomenon of practice as well as his reflections on the limits of theory.

### **Writing of history/ history as writing.**

The second reading goes back to Certeau's work as historiographer. Alongside the New Historians of the *Annales* school Certeau critically examined history's claims to truth. The New Historians pointed out the naïve realism of earlier approaches, which treated history as a series of objective happenings that could be represented without bias, and emphasized instead that history was

*made* (through a writing practice, by a profession) and thus is essentially indistinguishable from fiction.

Certeau tries to reconcile the two positions on history, old and new (Courtois-l'Heureux 2009, p.118), through his conception of the *event*: it grows from existing conditions and yet can occasion an intervention that redirects future developments. He is not the first or the only one who uses the concept of an event (Blanchot 1980, Lyotard 1988). This 'eventful' conception of history is at the root of the opening that enables the common man to intervene in the fabric of pre-existing structures and to transform a prescribed rationality into a personal, individual expression of culture.

Certeau's work in historiography investigates the practice of writing as the means of producing a reality and establishing itself as its authoritative ground, a practice that underlies all academic disciplines. The gesture of writing creates a complete break with the past, as if the blank page constituted a tabula rasa of actual fact. One discerns, says Roland Barthes, "the movement of negation and the impotence of accomplishing it, all at the same time, through which literature invents itself as if starting from a place without signs, with a dream of Orphean quality – as a writer without literature." (Barthes 1953, p. 9). In this manner writing replaces what was before it and produces a new beginning as a voluntary rupture with history. Certeau uses Freud's book on Moses to illustrate how Moses, the Egyptian, has been forgotten and erased by the fictional character of Moses, the founder of the new Jewish tradition.

Writing produces then first and foremost the empty page as a proper place free of the ambiguity of the world, cleared for the operation of a subject. Only after that does it produce a text put together from materials and fragments and ordered based on rules and procedures. The traces on the page are the trajectory of these operations as they chain together and lay down a path – a world not received, but made by the subject with the help of representations. In the process orality and folklore come to be seen as things that must be left behind because they resist progress or at least do not contribute to it. They are suppressed, and finally displaced by writing.

But, Certeau counters, *writing is itself subject to the actions of time and history*. It draws on and continues the representations whereby a society presents itself to itself. In that it is repetition – a repetition generated from structure, as the New Historians claim, and left to itself a potentially endless recreation of the same. The researcher, the scientist and the intellectual as members of the elite participate in this writing in the service of a continuation and reproduction of society. This state of affairs, too, Certeau conceives as the outcome of a historical development: "The mastery of language guarantees and isolates a new power, a bourgeois power, that of making history and of fabricating languages" (p. 139), challenging the aristocratic order, and establishing a new order in which socio-economic position and advancement depends on the mastery of that language. Finally the educational system creates and recreates the dominant class, i.e. those that make language the instrument of their production. (All that is very much in Foucault's vein.)

Certeau juxtaposes the writing, which creates mere repetition, to reading as an active, performative, even subversive poesis. This is an inversion

which he performs several times in the book: it mirrors his rejection of the common man conceived as duped and passive consumer and his treatment of everyday practices as an active construction of culture set against the supposedly mindless reception of mass-produced goods. In this his analysis is reminiscent of early Baudrillard, who was also a contemporary.

In criticizing the dominant representations besides making a political point shared by Marxist colleagues he also makes a philosophical point about the nature of representation. Like Derrida, Blanchot and other theorists of writing, Certeau points to the peculiar status of representation as the place of an absence. It is in its reference to the absent other that the representation finds its ground and its legitimacy. The relation is necessarily an ethical one, indicating an obligation not just towards the Other as another human being, but also towards the other – lower-case – as subject matter of a discipline. The representation can maintain an openness or filter out alterity in the (illusory) production of a totalizing knowledge – one of the dangers and triumphs of the structuralist approach. Making knowledge and ordering material under the auspices of the institutions and disciplines of a society is thus a far from harmless and value-neutral enterprise.

### **Institutional rationality**

Certeau shares with Foucault, Bourdieu, and Lyotard the stance that society is essentially violent in its imposition of categories and procedures on its members. Like Foucault who describes the medical and educational practices of modernity as ways by which institutions render visible, control and shape behaviors, Certeau sees society as a space where power is wielded and rationality is imposed. The type of rationality itself may change over time, but it is a singular one and must be, in order to present the image of a unified society to its members.

Certeau defends culture against this homogenization. In *Culture as Plural* (CP 1980) he emphasizes the relativity of perspectives and the legitimacy of alternative forms of life in society. This explains his resistance to the instituted categories of French demographics, when he engages in a study of popular culture. In that sense all knowledge-making practices are suspect because in making something visible they draw on pre-existing categories and in the process reinforce them. They serve the institutions of society rather than any specific group, but in general they are more influenced by the elite, which tries to reproduce society in its own image.

On the other hand, these *panoptic* procedures by becoming universal and built into socio-technical apparatuses (Foucault's "dispositifs") escape the control of the system itself. They cannot be turned around at a moment's notice even by the powers-that-are, because they have become embedded in the physical environment and linked by habit to the mental makeup of their human counterparts: dispositif and disposition together deliver the desired product of regulated behavior. Certeau senses here already an opening for the tactical practices of the common man.

Foucault and Bourdieu are both convinced that free will is an illusion: Foucault, because the instituted apparatus constrains the available pathways; Bourdieu, because for him society instills in its members the motivation and values consistent with its reproduction. In both cases societal mechanisms of control operate underneath the radar of individual choice and political awareness. A member of society can feel perfectly free in choosing these procedures. Certeau agrees, but denies that the control is a total one.

Certeau advances the argument for the ability of the common man to escape from total control by showing that there is *play* (*Spielraum*) in the prescriptions of society. The procedures that the system has elected to reinforce, are only one set of possible procedures, he states. Others are equally feasible and can be composed with the means that society has set aside for its own. "A society is thus composed of certain foregrounded practices organizing its normative institutions and of innumerable other practices that remain minor, always there, but not organizing discourse and preserving the beginning or remains of different (institutional, scientific) hypotheses for this society or for others." (PEL p. 48)

Since the foregrounded apparatus is nevertheless not the only (possible) one, there is a repertoire of non-dominant partial apparatuses, logics and procedures available to users, that offer "a polytheism of scattered practices" (PEL p.48). The institutions are thus stealthily colonized, the system of discipline and control is today itself "vampirized" by other procedures. One can view this as a way for newness and innovation to emerge through a recombination of existing parts, a case of *composting* in the societal realm (Wild 2012).

Certeau also turns the Foucauldian logic of visibility around: the panoptic strategies of society see only what they are prepared to see; they are blind when faced with a practice that appropriates their positions and means and uses them for different ends. If someone makes up a new path, the divergence will not be noted because the system is restricted to reading all behavior in terms of the dominant procedures. Thus panoptic procedures produce their own mirage of complete knowledge from partial areas of visibility resulting in the blind spot of a system to its outside. Society then uses the authority of intellectuals to legitimate this unified representation and to confer power on this knowledge.

Certeau's argument against Bourdieu is slightly different, but makes a similar point: a system that sees all practices motivated by the accumulation of all kinds of capital to serve the reproduction of society, cannot conceive of a rebellion in its own space. Its own intellectual achievement of closure prevents it.

The role of *the intellectual* in the production of knowledge and representations for and in society must therefore be subjected to critical analysis. Certeau refuses the researcher a position outside, above or neutral to society. Instead he sees intellectuals – himself included- function in the service of society: through their making of representations and knowledge they create possible pathways for the members of society to explore. As such their work relates to the production of culture as well as to the maintenance of power. Society makes the expert its spokesperson by granting him authority beyond his

area of expertise. This is how the system extends and confirms the power of scientific representations beyond their natural sphere of applicability. Zygmunt Baumann makes a similar point in his *Legislators and Interpreters* (Baumann 1989).

But the intellectual is really in no better position to view the whole than any other one cultural agent. Scientific representations are construed from within the politics of place and strategies of engagement like other practices. "Theory," Certeau says, "is a way of participating in events" (PEL p. 79).

### **What happened to the authentic voice?**

Certeau discusses the role speech is made to play in a society dominated by writing, where true orality has been long silenced (WH p.346). In the beginning, he claims, was not the word, but the "voice of the master:" the bible was not experienced as writing; it was heard. Little by little the voice recedes, the "spoken word" loses its authority through a corruption of the text, ironically, because copying brings in mistakes and additions. But as writing appears to take over, orality remains its backer, so to speak, and speech retains its traditional connection to an incorruptible authenticity. As a practice of the loss of speech, writing's meaning still claims to lie outside itself, in a place beyond, towards which it moves, but which its very movement keeps reproducing at a remove.

This situation is a productive kind of limbo, from which systems of authority can extract a large array of possible meanings, but the source of which is usually kept under wraps. When societal representations of knowledge present themselves in the modality of speech, this indicates an important shift, because then it claims to be speaking in the name of reality. Voice and Speech are supposed to be spontaneous expressions and they thereby project authenticity: the eyewitness account is more believable than the remarks of the official commentator or the newspaper article after the fact. Any government is well aware of the effect conveyed by spontaneous speech and has developed its own strategies to control access and expression. Certeau's article *The Capture of Speech* on the '68 protests in France describes precisely a moment in time when students and workers managed for a short period of time to take over this authority from the government. Writing can dissimulate voice and convincingly present a picture of reality, precisely because reality is always some part fictional. Official writing can produce a complete and convincing picture of events through a concatenation of dispersed reports, maps and data, overriding the isolated "anecdotes" of the eyewitnesses (Smith 1987, p.160).

### **Everyday practices. The ruses and tricks of the common man.**

It is time to return to the practices of the common man, who is after all the hero of Certeau's book. When the common man *makes* culture – always in a manner that is personal and local, not conscious of being "culture" and called upon by an urgent situation – he must do so in-between and sometimes despite the institutional effort. He is called to act, but he is weak in two respects. He does not have the power to impose his will on the system. And the moment



in time when action can be successful is not chosen by him, but determined by the situation.

*This lack of power determines his choice of method.* He improvises with what is ready-to-hand in the system; only it must be fitted to the occasion, so it cannot be used in the expected way or for a pre-existing goal. He must turn the material into something else, something new. This is the *ruse* he performs. It becomes necessary, because the system has no ready-made answer or because its process is too slow to produce one in time; yet the system also does not allow for invention and so the creation is carried out underneath the radar, so to speak (PEL p.85). What is described as a workaround in an organization is often of that kind – a response that is not sanctioned, but occasionally tolerated because it successfully settles a case; tolerated, yes, but never acknowledged by the system.

The ruse is then a just-in-time assemblage, which does not outlast its application. Having done its work it dissolves into thin air, since it has no place in the system or a representation to sustain it. From the standpoint of the system, ruses resist the effort to bring everything under one regime of rationality. In that sense cultural practices undermine and evade the force of the system. Yet it is “a silent and common, almost sheeplike subversion,” says Certeau (PEL p. 200), which does not leave the system or threaten it. These practices have nothing in common with liminal pockets of society or attacks from the margins. They are the constant “murmuring of the everyday” (PEL p. 200).

### **Murmur of the everyday - Reading, walking, speaking**

Reading takes on a new status in Certeau's description. It is a performance that shares characteristic features with the ruse: it is an invisible production, using materials not of one's own making, freely gathering and selecting (hence his term *poaching*) from what is presented. Reading is transformative because it moves in an affective circuit freely combining images, words and sound and memories; it is a process, which leaves neither the target domain nor the start domain unchanged.

Certeau compares readers to the walkers of the city: they do not create, but traverse space and leave no trace of their passing. This makes implicit reference to the distinction between tactic and strategy, where strategy is always associated with a proper space, a territory. Writing accumulates; reading “takes no measure against the erosion of time,” (PEL p. 174), it is a bricolage made from the pieces at hand, without a goal or project, a game played out with and against the text, which advances and retreats, “alternatively captivating, [...], playful, protesting, fugitive” (PEL p. 175).

Walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language (PEL p. 97) or the act of writing to the written text: it is a illocutionary activity, where turns of path resemble turns of phrases, a composition in both symbolic and environmental registers using rhetorical moves like synecdoche (– a part stands for the whole) and asyndeton (– leaving out parts) and physical moves of skipping, pulling in and doubling back. One can identify a tendency to concentrate – to attach heightened intensity to a place, and another to separate —

to string out islands of intensity across some empty distance. Instead of the planar simultaneous organization of the panoptic (concept) city, in which the metric of space remains always the same, walking happens in a heterogeneous world of sensuous impressions, enacted stories and memories. *To walk is to lack a place*, he says, and the city is the social experience of lacking a place, and so the experience of time as unfolding takes over. To enact space is “to be other and to move towards the other” (PEL p. 110) and this is the opening to and the pre-condition for the potential intimacy of an encounter with strangers.

Language inserts itself into these spatial wandering as a tool that affects reality: signs, proper names and well-known stories orient the unplanned wanderings, turn a place into familiar and inhabitable site and create a defense against the exposure to spaces “brutally lit by an alien reason” (PEL p.104). Places are themselves inward-turning histories full of accumulated time. By walking and stringing them together one composes a unique affective trajectory. (Remember in this context the practice of “derive,” an unplanned journey through the urban landscape, which was cultivated by the Situationists (Debord 1956).

Storytelling looks then very similar to walking, except that it performs in language: one starts with a pre-existing tale, but plot and characters are adjusted and shift their relative positions in response to the situation and the audience. New elements or details are added in, some parts expand while others contract or disappear. The telling responds to subliminal clues from the physical and social place of its enactment; it modifies to accommodate constraints, to flatter or anticipate critic, to create places for the audience, and thereby stages a satisfying collective experience. It creates its own reality and its own space of performance, closer to theatre than to the epic genre of writing.

It is clear that Certeau sees talking as the exemplary case of a practice. It unites all the elements he lists as definitional: the capacity for creating newness from within an established structure, which includes the element of chance creation; the responsiveness and indebtedness of this creation to the cultural and physical context; the performative force inherent in enunciations, which extends from the performer to the community and holds the power of speech to manipulate the reception of reality; its modulation of time and reliance on memory for lasting effects. Speaking as the practice par excellence accounts for the peculiar status of rhetoric: it is not a science, but a qualitative collection of linguistic moves (in memory) of what speaking *does* and *how* it does it.

### **Efficacy of everyday practices**

Certeau sees these diverse practices as the spontaneous expression of a heterogeneous society and juxtaposes the universal rationality of the system to the *local efficacy* of everyday practice. These practices must be evaluated then not in terms of conforming to rationality or living up to a grand ideal, but in terms of what they bring about (Jullien 1995).

The common man is an anti-hero: his goal is to *get by by making do*, not to fulfill an aesthetic or moral ideal, and certainly not to stand up to fate or state power and go down in a brilliant flash of destruction like the hero of Greek tragedy. He is opportunistic: he wants to respond as well as possible to the challenge that faces him and make it to the next one just down the road. He is *satisficing*, as Herbert Simon would say: he uses the minimal effort to get the desired effect (Simon 1956).

One cannot really speak of a goal in this pursuit, because there is no final state when the process might come to a halt and no resting place along the way. As someone said: Life is just one damn thing after another. Having done one thing one moves on to the next; each move opens up new situations and offers new occasions – and obstacles.

Certeau was inspired by the Chinese ideal of efficacy as the art of exploiting the conditions of the world to achieve maximal impact with minimal effort (Jullien 1995). He invokes the I Ching and Sun Tzu's Art of War and later in the book he explicitly draws out the sequence of effects derived from a tendency to use less force and focus instead on accumulating memory, which in turn reduces the time preparing a response and creates maximal effect with minimal effort. The scheme is inscribed in a semblance of a Greimasian square (PEL p. 83):

(I) less FORCE → (II) more Memory → (III) less TIME → (IV) more EFFECTS, and hence again (I) less Force.

The situation itself furnishes the material – physical, linguistic, imaginary – used in the response. By selecting and putting elements of the situation together into a specific, effective configuration, the ruse creates a new path or enforces an existing one and thus brings about a distinct future, which can be subsumed under a goal and a rational end only in retrospect. *Ruses are a-rational*, if rationality means planning steps in advance followed by an execution according to that plan. They take in the situation and respond with an intuitive leap, which only the outcome can justify, hence are, as Certeau says, “aleatoric a priori, and necessary only a posteriori” (PEL p. 153).

Ruses escape from the differentiation of project and means and ends. They are outside calculative goal-driven rationality. Certeau takes this as indication of a deep philosophical rift. Deleuze listed three ways whereby rationality finds itself limited: stupidity, madness, and malice (Deleuze 1984). With the ruse Certeau is adding a fourth, but one that operates on an outside *within* the system of rationality.

### **Limits to rationality. Limits to knowledge.**

Ruses share a common ancestry with storytelling and games. One of the first books on ruses is a collection of morality tales written at the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century: *The Book of Ruses* (1995). Ruses are associated with deception, tricks, subterfuge, and in an old French reading, with the roundabout path game uses to escape the pursuit of the hunter, as defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Obviously, ruses relate to conflictual situations and to the means employed to escape from them.

But it is a specific mode of escape, one that Certeau illuminates with the classical distinction of tactic and strategy. Tactical is the move that seizes the occasion and plays with the un-attended, the unexpected. Tactic is without the ambition to defend a certain terrain, whether physical or conceptual. It operates always on someone else's territory and neither can nor wants to hold on to what it creates. Practices and ruses are tactical in this sense. Strategy, in contradistinction, is the art that makes use of a proper place and is characterized by having a proper place. The proper place might be the stronghold from which one starts a military operation and to which one returns. In intellectual matters it might be the theoretical position one defends or the disciplinary boundary one protects. Strategic moves are predicated on territory and hence tend to be acquisitive in that respect. If the pursuit is of an intellectual nature, then the nature of the ruse is to escape from the grasp of the discipline.

Here is the dilemma that Certeau recognizes so clearly: If one wants to get a hold of practice, one either transforms/ translates it into inert matter — a move he demonstrates with Bourdieu's writing strategies, or one must give up on the scientific project altogether and use a language that mirrors the features of the ruse and becomes performative in turn; this manner of use Certeau illustrates with the help of Detienne and Vernant's work on the Greek concept of *Metis*.

Detienne and Vernant, in narrating the use of *metis* in Greek ancient times, revert to a language use that is itself tactical and full of ruses: there is no definition or description, no straightforward course of an argument. Instead they approach obliquely, retell what others told on the subject and through rhetorical means — elisions, inversions, puns, word plays — invite the reader to enter into the narration, but they themselves cannot be tied down.

Certeau claims that the same procedures are at work in operating and in speaking: in both cases it is the art of harmonizing the operations and consequences with the participants and the occasion. *The story does not express; it makes the practice. Narration does not describe reality; it creates a fictional space* for a performance that takes in the narrator and the audience along with the fictitious characters of the story. There are highly successful attempts to produce the same experience in writing. However, though they are common in poetry and literature, they are very rare in philosophy. And when they are used, they are often misunderstood as failures to describe or deliberate obscurity. (For an instance of such writing see Blanchot's *Writing of Disaster* (1995) and its review by Sturrock 1982).

Language used in this way cannot be called upon to capture its own action. If language turns to describe itself in operation, the effect is gone — in the same way one might try to turn around to see one's own backside in the mirror. This is one of the reasons that prompt Certeau to say that attempts to capture practices will always return one to question the manner and limits of language (PEL pp. 11).

*Metis* plays, first, on *Kairos* — i.e. the right point in time; second it uses disguises, physical and linguistic to dissolve proper place, and third, it disappears in its own doing: it has no mirror of itself. These three elements can be attributed to stories in general. This, he claims, also shows the nature of prac-

tices: they exist only in time, in the performance; like the stories of oral culture they leave no trace of their passing, claim no territory, occupy no place.

Metis is efficacious in virtue of a body of knowledge made up of the “unending summation of particular fragments” (PEL p. 82). This summation of many moments and heterogeneous elements is just another name for *memory*, which retains items in relation to the occasion of their use. “Metis in fact, counts on an accumulated time which is in its favor to overcome a hostile composition of place.” (PEL p.82)

In the Iliad Ulysses was given the epithet *polimetis*, i.e. possessing of many tricks. It is tempting to see the ruse as something one can have, like a skill that gets activated relative to specific events and reveals itself at specific points in time. But it would be misleading to make it appear as if the ruse pre-existed the moment of its performance and independent of the situation, when indeed it is impossible to make that separation, just as it is impossible to identify the ruse completely with the moment and the situation. There is something more at work, but it is difficult to grasp, precisely because it performs within the situation, it creates with minimal effort and disappears.

If ruses acquire something of the character of a knowledge that can be *had*, for instance, as a “bag of tricks,” it is because of memory. Memory lets them gather imprints of former use, by retaining stories of earlier occasions or proverbs that have a rule-like character. But they follow no proper rules or logic. If one can speak of a logic here at all, it is “a logic of the operations of action *relative to types of situations*” (PEL p. 21; ital. mine).

### **Practice as knowledge**

The juxtaposition of theory and practice opened up already in the times of ancient Greece as a bifurcation in knowledge. Philosophers distinguished the knowledge acquired and secured by contemplation from the more dubious knowledge of the artist and artisan. While the first was of a theoretical kind, secured by a deliberate and repeatable (scientific) process, its truth guaranteed by a higher authority (Remember that the term *theoria* relates to the vision of transcendent eternal forms (Nightingale 2004) the knowledge of the artists and artisans was of a different and, philosophers said, inferior kind.

This kind of knowledge is only revealed in practice, even if it can be recognized as knowledge in the resultant works. Practitioners do not understand it themselves: they do not know what it consists in, cannot reason from it or reflect on it, and cannot pass it on other than by demonstration and imitation.

And yet, over the centuries philosophers have failed to adequately dispose of this form of knowledge by either accounting for it within their own model or reducing it to irrelevance. The irritation persists. The distinction is alive to this day in the separation of *creation* from *production*, which Certeau illustrates by citing the response of Fiat leadership to the workers' attempts to discuss their own change ideas with them. The workers' input was cordially rejected: creation is after all the domain of management, workers merely produce (CP p. 142).

“One can acquire it only by doing,” says Diderot about this know-how along with many others before and after him. The manifold practices of apprenticeship, formal and informal, bear him out. The immediacy and unreflected nature of operations, more than that: the absence of a theory, of a discourse that explains how the product comes about, renders artistic practice “improper” in the eyes of the philosopher or scientist. (The term *proper* relates not just to a moral judgment, but also related to *property* and *appropriate*, hence to a place that is fitting and deemed rightfully one’s own).

Originally many of everyday practices were considered artistic creations. But since they cannot claim a proper theoretical place, they are perfect candidates for *expropriation* in a society that recognizes only the scientific form of knowledge and its disciplinary realm. What is outside that space needs to be brought into the proper discourse of science. But how should this be done?

Certeau makes the inspired claim that the gap was to be filled through the invention of a new middle ground between art and science/ practice and theory: the discipline of engineering. While it did not succeed in spanning the gap, its practical accomplishments gradually replaced many of artful practices of earlier times with technology and thereby removed more and more of these everyday practices and with it the gap itself from public view. The so-displaced practices turn up in the setting of novels and stand in the background of questions of taste and style.

Kant is the notable exception to this general blindness. In his *Critique of Practical Reason (Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft 1788)* he talks about good judgment, which needs to intervene when theory is applied to practice, because one must decide whether a theoretical rule or principle should be applied and that decision cannot be part of theory else it leads to an infinite regress. Good judgment is an intuition that is formed by considering the situation in all its manifold aspects and possibilities, and combines all considerations in a quality he calls “logical tact” (Kant in Eisner 1971). Logical tact tells one what clothes to wear for what occasion; what ornament is right for a building, and so on. The faculty of judgment comes up with the right result without knowing or understanding how the decision is made. It is a real art that can be observed in practice, says Kant, like the balancing act of a tightrope walker, unlike the skill of a stage magician, which is dismissed as art once one has understood how it is worked (Kant 1788, § 43). Such skill cannot ever become theory, but it can inform the making of theory. It can ground knowledge, says Certeau, and “shape the opaque reality out of which a theoretical question can arise beyond the frontiers of any discipline” (PEL p. 51).

### **How to capture Everyday practices (Tricks and ruses of scientific writing practices)**

Having gone this far in claiming the essential difference of practice, one may ask how Certeau envisions their relation to the discourses that purport to deal with them in a scientific manner. He asserts that they can only be brought into discourse by being transformed. However, he adds that a discourse can legitimate itself and “maintain[s] the mark of scientificity by explicating the condi-

tions and rules of its own production and the relations that gave rise to it" (PEL. P. 72). This, I take it, he offers as a redemptive move on behalf of the theoretical disciplines.

Foucault's notion of discourse informs Certeau's use of the term. He sees it as a historically and institutionally conditioned universe of signs, symbols and objects, which manifests itself in the enunciations of its members and in turn constraints what meaning and knowledge they can express. Knowledge must be seen to exist only in reference to such a discourse, never in isolation, and never given as independent fact.

In order to show the process of transformation of a practice into an theoretical discourse Certeau analyzes the specific writing practices that Bourdieu uses in his "Outline of a Theory of Practice" (1977) and the "Logic of Practice" (1980). Certeau presents these as prime examples of the techniques and stylistic devices that researchers in general may use to bring practice into discourse.

One basic trick employed by Bourdieu could be called *Ysteron Proteron* (Damiris & Wild 1997) which can be rendered in English as "taking the second to be first:" Bourdieu places the theoretical notions he derived from his studies on Kabyle and Bearnian societies, i.e. the habitus and society as a space of transformational rules, in the foreground as if they had come first, while gradually erasing their origin in ethnographic observations and dispersing references to the ethnographic material throughout the text to claim them as effects and confirmations for the theory.

Next Certeau sees Bourdieu and other researchers apply a simple recipe, namely to "cut out and turn over" (PEL p. 62). Cut out: that is, from a undifferentiated and bewildering cultural field the researcher cuts out a piece and names it a specific practice (say, of healing, initiation, marriage, etc.); then the cutout is turned over and used to identify and illuminate a state of affairs in one's own society.

Another device for bringing practices into discourse is the use of tables, charts or other type of synoptic representation, which replaces the dynamics of practices with spatial arrangements of nodes and links. Certeau invokes the earlier comments on strategy as the art of a place that drives out the temporal aspect and "with which the scientific method conceals the operation of withdrawal and power that makes them possible" (PEL p.53). Certeau calls this spatial rendering a first deception, because the nodes and links in these tables do not hold a stable meaning: what they mean depends on and changes with their activation within a concrete situation. And there is always the possibility that an earlier meaning is undone by a future development (for instance, if no legitimate child is born in a marriage). A second deception comes from the practitioners themselves, who silently tolerate the claim that their practice has been captured in such a table (- possibly a ruse to escape appropriation?). "[K]nowledge of practices," says Certeau, "is thus the result of a twofold deception" (PEL p.53).

Once a practice has been inserted into such a structure of nodes and links, this can be dynamicized and made to operate along quasi-mechanical transformational rules. In the *Logic of Practice* Bourdieu identifies the set of

meta-rules that operate upon the first-level structure at the level of differences and variations. These meta-rules indicate then how practices change and transform their meaning due to circumstance, the turning and re-turning of the situations. With that the different practices appear contained as variations within one total economic system: they appear to function completely within the system's rationality of accumulation and recreation of order or symbolic capital.

One needs to step back to see that such meta-rules do nothing to identify practices; they are only comprehensible if one accepts as an article of faith that the whole field of these practices serve the larger purposes of the society – i.e. if one accepts that they are really strategies of the symbolic order to make the individual pursue goals society deems useful, such as procreation, marriage, succession, education and so on.

The closure Bourdieu achieves relies on the notion of the habitus, which functions like a generative grammar, except that it does not rely on a universal mind. He defines habitus as a system of “durable transposable dispositions, structured structures [...], predisposed to function as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or a mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.” (Bourdieu 1993 p.5) With this he moves into the realm of impersonal strategies culled from the invisible habitus that produce the observed individual behaviors. Improvisation on that view must be a fiction produced by the projection of the habitus into the stable forms of the physical world while all along a subterranean logic causes agents to strive for the requisite capital: reputation or power or wealth.

Certeau claims that this logic camouflages that what Bourdieu calls “practices” are really transgressions in the existing symbolic order, and appear legitimate only because they work within the determinations and ordinary uses of language, while surreptitiously undermining them.

### **Undoable, hence unthinkable**

Certeau finishes the book with reflections on the changing function of writing in establishing what is real. If earlier analyses accused writing of subduing the body to function as a mobile, fleeting page – with Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Kafka's *Penal Colony* as favorite reference points, writing today, Certeau claims, is after a scientific vision of the future. It seeks to make the body into the forum on which science plays out its struggle against time: by battling aging, promising continuous progress on all technological fronts, and in general, bringing everything under the reign of the will-to-do (p. 196).

Society supports the vision with a general prohibition to speak of conditions that fall outside what science can do or any critique of the vision itself. “Nothing can be said in a place where nothing more can be done” (p. 190), says Certeau. As a result certain aspects of life disappear from view, notably death and all kind of disease or disaster that science and technology are helpless to control. One can no longer speak about death or technological violence;



they substitute for the repressed figures in the times of Freud, sexuality and aggression.

However, "[...] the death that cannot be said, can be written [...]" (PEL p. 195) so that retroactively the limits can be recaptured in writing. Only the limit that is found thereby always lies in the past, moved at a distance and made approachable and tame – like the everyday practices of old – in a literary form. "Only the end of an age makes it possible to say what made it live, as if it had to die in order to become a book" (p. 198). Others have remarked on this relation between writing and death in the practice of science. At least in the West it is built on a drive to conquer through writing and to understand by taking apart: whether in anatomy or history, representation, depiction and still life (*nature morte*) take over after life is extinct.

But the repressed returns; despite all efforts of science the body-support wears out and death appears again at the limits of what can be said. This appears more as a triumph of the human condition over a totalizing system than a defeat. One might expand this note of hope and invoke the ruses of everyday life as a corrective counterpoint to the death drive of writing: if ruses can create new beginnings from within a structurally determined universe, then one should be able to use them to revitalize and reverse an exhausted or misdirected system of rationality. In the days of old, before innovation acquired its quasi-theological aura, new ideas were always inserted into the mouth of a well-established, ideally dead, authority and by the time the true origin was discovered, the innovation had become accepted as commonplace. One might learn from such tricks the ways of introducing corrective change under the guise of the established and thereby make a rigid system softer on its members.

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