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Fabio B. Josgrilberg

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# A Door to the Digital Locus: Walking in the City with a Mobile Phone and Michel de Certeau

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A city offers us many places wherein life unfolds. We take the idea of place in Michel de Certeau's sense: a "proper space" wherein its elements are organized in a relatively stable form, an "instantaneous configuration of positions". Such an organization, which can be purely symbolic but also material, is articulated by strategies founded on specific relations of power (Certeau, 1990, p. 172-173). What of the places created by information and communication technologies (ICT)? What is the role of the mobile phone in all this? Let me further the discussion with a few examples from everyday life before returning to the mobile phone in the context of ICT.

Some places are materially evident such as buildings, streets and sidewalks. Nonetheless those constructions have a symbolic power as individuals inter-subjectively attribute

meaning to them, that is to say they are not simply agglomerates of bricks and cement. Just think of the multiple feelings one may have about the different buildings that populate the urban scenario such as one's home, school, church, work, hospital, to name but a few sites. In contrast, some places appear to be only symbolic, like social conventions, laws and traffic signs, but they all have material consequences influencing behavior and possible movements within the city.

A city, then, is an immense stage full of different sets, symbolic and material (if these two dimensions are ever to be separated) which foster the conditions for the pedestrian movement or its citizens survival. In this way, these reference points open possibilities and limit everyone's experience of urban territory.

For Certeau, the city is not only a site or location of inquiry into "the practices of everyday life". Certeau used the city as metaphor to brilliantly describe how subjects may inhabit different places. One can find analogous examples with discourses. As the city opens and limits the ways for the pedestrian, discourses open the possibility and limit the creation of our own discourses – think of the stories produce by the media and what people make of them. In Certeau's words, "it's the other's discourses which allows for the construction of a proper discourse" (Certeau, 1985, p. 256) .

Although cities are assemblages of symbolic and material references organized by and within relations of power, the subjects who must negotiate these relations are not condemned to simply reproduce what is given. Every social group, such as the residents of a city or teenagers in a school, constructs its own authorities and creates their own places. Note that the notion of authority is used here with no judgment implied. They

are rather the common recognized references that make possible every social group to exist; or, as Certeau says, they “make a society breathable” (Certeau, 1993, p. 17).

Taking Certeau’s metaphor of the city as a starting point, I reconsider what is perhaps the most famous chapter of *L’invention du quotidien 1. Arts de faire*, and take a ‘walk in the city’ in light of the presence of mobile phone. In so doing I elaborate on the concept of the digital locus, which I have adapted from Certeau’s concept of place, and suggest that the mobile phone is a door to this locus.

The digital locus is a place, in Certeau’s sense, organized by strategies of power that articulate digital information and communication systems and mobilize the symbolic and infrastructural dimensions of the present technical period. It is a place wherein human beings are not only submitted to pressures, even multiple determinations, but also recreate life, create spaces (Josgrilberg, 2007). Therefore, the digital locus is a site of fulfillment and the struggle for survival. It has its social conventions and physical infrastructures that are systematically related to other previous systems and techniques – techniques used according to Milton Santos as the social and material means with which humankind create and transform the world (2002).

The digital locus is than just one place among many overlapping ones that make “society breathable”. Therein people not only engage themselves in different prosaic social relations, but also work and do business.

From the point of view of strategies of power, all the stories about ICT that help articulate the digital locus, more often than not, revolve around development, competitive advantages, economic growth and so on. However, within the clean and

perfect functional world of ICT advertisements, everyday life practices create their spaces, silently, without retaining what they produce, animating life. An extreme example of the unpredictable uses of the digital locus, with other existential references, can be found on the streets of Bogota, Colombia, where some people are literally selling off minutes of their mobile phones credits. Once the door to the digital locus was opened they profited from a contingent opportunity (kairos) as best they could. As mobile telephony evolves, the cell phone will become an even more important door to the digital locus, as it goes way beyond the simple exchange of voice data.

To understand the idea of the digital locus, it is first of all crucial to reiterate that everyone inhabits different places at the same time. For instance, we inhabit the place of the media, family, religion, group of friends, each of them with their own power relations and references, or authorities, in an apparent equilibrium. What the expansion of the telecommunications networks has to offer, including the Internet as one of its dimensions, is yet another place that is superposed to the urban territory, namely, the digital locus. This new scenario provides new references, physically (computers, mobile phones, digital signals, etc.) and symbolically (a new vocabulary, social behaviors) speaking for people to live their lives.

Even those who are not 'connected' have somehow been touched by the social changes that information and communication technologies promoted – for better or for worse. Take the case of the municipal public school teachers in Mauá, an industrial city in the Greater São Paulo area, Brazil. The municipality decided to build Infolabs in local schools and even those who had no experience at all with computers could come up with examples of how to use the machines and the Internet with their students (Josgrilberg,

2006). They were already inhabiting the symbolic dimension of the digital locus, creating their own vocabulary based on contingent situations and on their existential experience as educators in a developing locality.

In the present technical period, the cell phones have emerged as one of the most prominent media technologies for urban dwellers. In Brazil, for instance, by 2006, 60.61% of the population had used a mobile phone and 46.33% actually had mobile phones. 88.62% of all mobile lines are pre-paid (Cetic.br, 2007). These numbers that segments of the population share their mobile lines, and regard the cell phone as an affordable substitute for fixed lines even if in the pre-paid option. More recent numbers, from January 2008, shows that there are 122,857,577 registered mobile phones lines within an estimated population of 183 million people and of these 80.76% pre-paid (Anatel, 2008). With improved multimedia features and broadband access, mobile phones are one of the doors, perhaps the most important in the near future, to the so called digital locus. Despite its importance, very little effort has been made to create projects to bridge the digital divide of the Internet by seriously taking the cell phones as its key media connection— perhaps because this market segment is, in general, fully left to private interests.

What is also important to retain is that what people will do with their mobile phones does not blindly reproduce the main promises of ICT, but will profit from new fissures in the digital locus. One way that this happens is by articulating memories founded on existential experiences of the world. What one does with a mobile phone is not separated from how he or she projects him or herself in life. For instance, the teachers in Mauá who did not know how to use computer, let alone the Internet, could engage with

stories about ICT and come up with examples thanks in part to their local memories as educators and their access to a vocabulary borrowed from other places— like the media for instance. In a similar manner, what one does with a mobile phone is not separated from how one relates to other technical systems used by a society to perceive and transform the world. Again, this new place, the digital locus, can only be distinguished from other places for the sake of an analysis. The limit can only be drawn by a tour de force which imposes divisions foreign to everyday life practices.

The digital locus created by information and communication technologies is systematically interwoven with other technical and non-technical possibilities, from the most prosaic ones such as oral communication to high-tech bio engineering. As popular as it is to portray and differentiate the present historical period as the ‘Information Society’, or the ‘Knowledge Society’, previous technical systems and past organizations function as dialectical poles, with no universal historical project at the end. The digital locus fosters the possibilities of movements and these movements reinvent the digital locus in a tension whose outcomes are, perhaps, more unpredictable than they may at first seem.

Milton Santos calls the persistence of these past forms “rugosity” (rugosidade) (2002, p. 140) – perhaps a more colloquial translation to English would be roughness. A city, or any given society, is transformed by new technical systems but the local rugosities influence the possible paths such a transformation will take. Some examples might clarify this point. Why, for instance, does the intensity and use of SMS vary greatly between countries? If the technical object is the same and most of the ads sell more or less the alike, something local must have influenced the success of text messaging.

Rugosities may be not only cultural, but also physical. Again Mauá's case offers a good example of this phenomenon. The construction of Infolabs in municipal schools was highly oriented by previous architectural forms. For instance, in one school the cafeteria was cut in half to accommodate the computers. In a second building, a staff member's room was transformed into a storage space, which became an Infolab. In educational environments another huge influential factor, or rugosity for that matter, is the pedagogy in vogue. Hardly a new technical object can simply run over the educator's local memories and start all over again from scratch. What will be done with the computers is oriented by these past organizations or technical systems— the social and material means with which teachers engage in the world.

Geographically the digital locus coincides with previous forms of social and physical organizations. Where one use a mobile phone does not necessarily differ from where one lives, work or walk. The different places overlap with no clear frontiers between them. All these different inhabited places and what people make of them shape the rugosities of each city. In other words, the emergence of the digital locus is in constant tension with previous organized places, in Certeau's sense, and the everyday practices of a specific society. If that is the case, to walk in the city with a mobile phone is an experience that goes beyond the simple social reproduction of the references given by the digital locus, both symbolically and physically speaking. There is an existential dimension to every human being's experience of a technical system in a given urban territory. The tensions between different places, their unclear boundaries, but also how people use all these references instigates movements within what appears to be the

static organization of various elements. People create their own spaces within the digital locus profiting from contingent situations.

For Certeau, there are as many spaces as spatial experiences, cultivated by a “phenomenology of existing in the world” (1990, p. 173-174). The phenomenological experience of a mobile phone articulates multiple dimensions of everyday life practices related to where you are, what are you doing, who you are with or, in a broader reflection, how you perceive and give meaning to the world. Additionally, the phenomenological experience counts on how you apprehend the technical object itself – is it easy to manipulate? Is it big or small? What does it allow me to do? What colors does it display? What sounds does it emit? This existential engagement with the mobile phone forces the recognition of a fundamental degree of indetermination in the use of any media within urban territory. Alongside local memories and oral relationships, to stick with two other aspects highlighted by Certeau, there is also an immediate experience of the technical object.

The individual and social experience of the digital locus, accessed through the door of a mobile phone, points to the indetermination of our human presence in the world and our attempts to become and maintain some semblance of social organization. In this sense, contemporary processes are not so different from previous historical periods. Nevertheless there is a novelty in the rationalities put forward by places as they come into contact with new objects, such as the mobile phone. The way one perceives urban territory changes dramatically thanks to the technical systems and communication technologies fed with digital information. Two prosaic examples: one’s perception of a city square may change radically if he or she traverses it while talking on the phone.

Likewise the daily trip by metro to school or work is transformed if one is playing a game or accessing the Internet on his or her mobile. What lies ahead will depend on the political and economic decisions that each society takes based on its capacity to grasp the poetic movement of everyday life practices within the digital locus, including the existential experience of holding a mobile phone.

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## Biography

Dr. Fabio B. Josgrilberg is a lecturer and researcher at the Multimedia Communication Department of the Methodist University of São Paulo, and a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics and Political Science, funded by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo. E-mail: [fabio.josgrilberg@metodista.br](mailto:fabio.josgrilberg@metodista.br). Personal website: <http://www.metaphorai.pro.br>.