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Linguistic Surface

The City is the Locus of the Multitude

Cameron McEwan

Introduction

During the 1970s “age of discourse,” architecture’s boundaries, forms and operations were framed as a language, with rules and logics of combination and recombination, syntax and structure, as an historically conditioned project toward critical and operative ends. Since the 1990s, understanding architecture as a language has been rejected by architects and theorists who have since tended to interpret architecture as affective, technically instrumental or often as merely surface appearance. Critical and historical content has been eschewed. In recent years, political theorists have developed readings of the linguistic character of contemporary productive relations and subjectivity, understanding the centrality of language as not only individual and communicative but also a “creative force.”¹ It is possible to speculate that the categories and tools developed by political theorists can help address and resituate the relationship between architecture and language today, and the agency of architecture toward a new, collective, political and productive possibility.

The aim of this essay is to develop the notion of “linguistic surface” as a way to interpret the city as locus of the multitude: a place where the city produces and reproduces itself as a shared and collective surface of conflict turned into coexistence, of the real and the imaginary condensed and inhabited by thinking, creating linguistic subjects. Three surfaces are discussed: the city surface, the surface of thought, the linguistic surface that joins city and thought, interpenetrating, constructing and constituting the other. I will draw on what the architect Aldo Rossi called the city as an “historical text” and link Rossi’s notion of collective memory (memory ordered by language, syntax and association) with the description of the contemporary city as “modelled on language” put forward by the political theorist Paolo Virno.

The Linguistic Surface of the City: Aldo Rossi and Collective Memory

In a fundamental passage of his canonical book *The Architecture of the City* (1966), Aldo Rossi reflects on two points of view from which he analysed the history of the city. He writes:

In the first, the city was seen as a material artifact, a man-made object built over time and retaining the traces of time, even if in a discontinuous way. Studied from this point of view – archaeology, the history of architecture, and the histories of individual cities – the city yields very important information and docu-

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¹ See for instance Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. by Joshua David Jordan (Cambridge, Mass.: Semiotext(e); MIT Press, 2014); and Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy*, trans. by Gregory Conti (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2008). In the following notes I refer primarily to Paolo Virno.

mentation. Cities become historical texts . . . The second point of view sees history as the study of the actual formation and structure of urban artifacts. It is complementary to the first and directly concerns not only the real structure of the city, but also the idea that the city is a synthesis of a series of values. Thus it concerns the collective imagination.²

In Rossi's first point, the city is understood as a textual surface — an "historical text" and locus of the "real structure of the city." As Rossi says, the city becomes a text that yields material, formal and situated knowledge, which crystallise a particular moment in the history of the city, synthesising "a series of values," which is the "collective imagination," or as Rossi writes elsewhere, the "collective memory." On the one hand the city accumulates buildings, monuments, streets, typical institutions, the common and the exceptional places occupied by those who live and work in the city, and which are the representation of a collective will to coexist in the city. On the other hand the city constitutes the repository of human labour, thought, and the collective memory and imagination of its people made real in the material architectural form.

Within these two points of view there is a dialogue between the real and the imaginary, actuality and its formation, which condense the city as a representation of collective will. Rossi's words invoke de Saussure's model of *langue* and *parole* as well as Marx's framework for a materialist base and ideological superstructure, or Freud's latent and manifest content of the unconscious. The city as an historical text, a linguistic surface, characterises the urban situation and stretches from historical base, introjecting into the collective subject while projecting into the city: "the unconscious is outside" as Jacques Lacan has said, following Freud.³ The linguistic surface of the city is the locus where real and imaginary, individual and collective, language and speech, condense to the point at which surface crystallises into linguistic form.

It is worthwhile remembering that Marx, Freud and de Saussure were some of Rossi's key references and that structuralist thought in particular was at the core of Rossi's thinking on the city. Rossi wrote: "The points specified by Ferdinand de Saussure for the development of linguistics can be translated into a program for the development of an urban science. . . ."⁴ Rossi translated this into an understanding of the syntactic and associative structure of the city. It is interesting that the thought of Ferdinand de Saussure is a key reference point for the political theorist Paolo Virno who has linked de Saussure's structural linguistics with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and argues for the "intrinsically political nature of language."⁵

The Linguistic Surface of Thought: Paolo Virno and the Multitude

In recent years Paolo Virno has developed a reading of the linguistic and political character of contemporary subjectivity, which he calls "the multitude" — a collective subject of many different individuals who share the faculty of language and construct a linguistic mode of being.⁶ The notion of

2 Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* [1966], trans. by Diane Ghirardo and Joan Ockman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), p. 128.

3 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 123. Also refer Andrea Mubi Brighenti, *Visibility in Social Theory and Social Research* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), where Brighenti discusses the writing, inscribing and projection of thought into the "flesh . . . of the social" (p. 41) and the "deep surface" of the city.

4 Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, p. 23. Also refer Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* [1913], trans. by Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 2000).

5 Refer in particular to Paolo Virno, *When the Word Becomes Flesh: Language and Human Nature* [2003], trans. by Giuseppina Mecchia (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2015), p. 41.

6 Refer the following: Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. by Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2004); Paolo Virno, "Three Remarks

multitude appeared in the 1970s during the European transition from a Fordist to post-Fordist model of production, and from the cultural shift taking place around 1968. It was recognised that the physical raw materials of real estate, capital assets and machinery, crucial during the Fordist era, are in fact transformed by the human intellect and the faculties of language. Raw materials are “real abstractions”, such as thought, memory, imagination, creativity, communication. Thought is figured forth into the socio-economic process and made real by speech acts, flows of information, knowledge, images, the production of social relations, and spatialised by a precarious global multitude inhabiting the linguistic world of urbanisation.

Virno situates the multitude within the city and puts it thus:

... it is the contemporary metropolis that is built on the model of language. The metropolis appears as a labyrinth of expressions, metaphors, proper names, and propositions, of tenses and moods of the verb; and saying this is no simple analogy. The metropolis actually is a linguistic formation, an environment that is above all constituted by objectivised discourse, by preconstructed code, and by materialised grammar.⁷

The city produces and reproduces itself as a shared and collective surface of conflict turned into coexistence, of the real and the imaginary condensed and inhabited by thinking, creating linguistic subjects

For Virno, language is outside (as in Lacan’s “unconscious is outside,” the unconscious structured like language): it is in the city. The city is a “linguistic formation,” as Virno writes. The city is the field of the collective other, which is language. The city materialises the thought of the multitude in its architecture, its institutions and infrastructures. Virno’s metropolis is the locus of the multitude, who share the linguistic faculties of thought, Marx’s “general intellect”. The latter stands for the intellect in general because the intellect is a general faculty of language that belongs to all people. “General Intellect should not necessarily mean the aggregate of the knowledge acquired by the species, but the *faculty* of thinking; potential as such, not its countless particular realizations.”⁸ The value of the subject is not materialised in a singular product (a tool, image, machine, the city), but rather as a more general “potential,” as a basic precondition of thought, imagination, knowledge, and collective memory. Potential is distinct from realisation, insofar as it is non-present, non-current, and non-real. For Virno, potential is pure thought, and that thought is linguistically constructed (the linguistic surface of thought), materialised by the multitude in the city as a text, as the textual surface of the city.

The City is the Locus of the Multitude

Multitude is thus an echo of what Rossi called collective memory. “One can say that the city itself is the collective memory of its people,” Rossi said, “and like memory it is associated with objects and places. The city is the *locus* of the collective memory.”⁹ In other words, the city is the locus of the multitude. This is where Rossi and Virno coincide: architectural thought condenses into political thought, multitude and city, individual and collective. On the one hand the linguistic surface of the city has a political claim that figures forth the ethos of knowledge accumulated in the bodies of the multitude as imagination, as pure thought. On the other hand there is a formal claim with thought condensed into the form of the city. Thought, memory and imagination are collective, relational and linguistic. Language acts are realised in the collective sphere of the city giving a form to life. Collective memory is thus outside, exterior and shared. It is architecture and the city. It is subjectivity. It is the

Regarding the Multitude’s Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component’, in *Under Pressure: Pictures, Subjects, and the New Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. by Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), pp. 31–45.

⁷ Virno, ‘Three Remarks Regarding the Multitude’s Subjectivity and Its Aesthetic Component’, p. 33.

⁸ Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, p. 66.

⁹ Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, p. 130.

many bodies who share the linguistic experience. The linguistic surface connects the city, collective memory and the multitude. It is the surface upon which city and subject interpenetrate, produce and reproduce one another, construct and constitute one another. The linguistic surface emphasises the productive, political and collective dimension of language.

Today, thought is instrumentalised by market capitalism. Critical discourse and the intellectual culture of architecture is allowed ever less space. What is needed in this context is the thought of the multitude toward a reinvention of the world. We are reminded of the potential inherent to all human beings for thinking and feeling, remembering and imagining, and the possibility to project an alternative future presence. A presence that is counter to the prevalent tendency, alternative to what is current, and a view that something else must always be possible.