

The dissimulated city

Description

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As anyone who plays video games or works with digital media will tell you, a *simulation* of a city is a model or image of a city. A simulated city (as in SimCityâ?¢) is similar in some respects, but not the same as a brick and concrete city. Now consider the related word *dissimulation*.

Something is a *dis*simulation if it presents as a disguise. It offers a fake or feigned appearance. So a dissimulated city would be a city that is not as it appears, and in fact conceals what it is. So, an urban critic could say of a so-called smart city that the gloss of its flashy digital features conceals the inadequacies of its governance, accessibility, fairness, diversity, etc.

Dissimulation, disguise and concealment are key aspects of cities and politics, but also of entertainment, games, puzzles â?? and encryption. By a circuitous route in what follows Iâ??ll move from dissimulation, to cryptography, grammar, writing, speech, arche-writing, cities and back to dissimulation.

Disguised messages

Consider a simple word puzzle: â??I am an arxhitextâ?• What am I? The solution is to recognise the errant â??xâ?• and replace it with the letter â??câ?• to disclose â??I am an architect.â?• The simple challenge in this case is to detect that something has been substituted, concealed or *dissimulated,* disguising an original message. The challenge is to uncover that original message.

Cryptograms are a species of dissimulation: i.e. disguised messages. A *cryptogram* is â??A piece of cryptographic writing or anything written in code or cipherâ?• (OED).



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Cryptogrammetry 101

In my last post, Write me a city, I looked at the term *cryptograph*. The ending â??-*graph*â?• denotes something to do with writing. The â??*gram* of cryptogram is also about writing. Hence: program, telegram, ideogram, sonogram, hologram, monogram, anagram, ambigram, etc. People even make up *-gram* words, like gorillagram and cryptogrammetry. Over time the *-gram* ending has come to denote ordering and learning, as in a *language grammar* and *grammar-school*.

I made up the word â??cryptogrammetry.â?• It doesnâ??t exist, but in the 1950s the linguist Ignace Gelb coined the term *grammatology*, the science of writing, as an improvement on the terms *grammatography* and *graphology* (23). Jacques Derrida made much of the term *grammatology* in his book bearing the name *Of Grammatology*.

I investigated Derridaâ??s theories in *Derrida for Architects* published in 2011. Itâ??s worth recruiting Derrida to the theme of my last post about *writing* a city â?? and then to *dissimulate* it.

A digression on writing

Writing carries many obvious benefits, but the intellectual tradition on which Derrida drew regarded writing as somewhat inferior, less connected than speaking out loud. Improvised speech is closer to thought, is more fluid, engaged, and sensitive to changes in context.

On the other hand, writing pins things down, lacks spontaneity, loses the nuance of context and the dynamism of conversational exchange. At least, thatâ??s the position of Plato, Rousseau and other intellectuals in the tradition that Derrida sought to challenge.

The casual, dynamic and authentic nature of speaking, as opposed to writing, comes down to a few key properties. People repeat themselves and one another in conversational speech, even when delivering a formal speech â?? in an after dinner speech, at a political rally, or an address to the nation. A spoken utterance can be repeated by someone other than the originator. Itâ??s possible to address a group of people and so disseminate your speech. People pass on what was said by word of mouth.

When the speaker leaves the room

The person who first spoke the words can even be absent, as others relate the same content. The people retelling the original content donâ??t even have to fully understand what was said in order for a third party to receive and make sense of the spoken words.

After all, people commonly recite poetry they donâ??t understand, and the poem loses nothing of its power when recited. Choristers can sing in Latin without knowing what the words mean. Actors and orators rote learn and recite their lines without the mediation of meaningful intent.

Derrida showed that these features of how signs operate in speech are primarily attributes of writing, i.e. difference, reproduction, repetition, dissemination, absence and operating at a distance. Not least, the word â??contextâ?• is a writing term. It implies the primacy of text. So he argued that in a sense, our understanding of writing comes before our understanding of what it is to speak.

Iâ??ve explored these themes in *Derrida for Architects.* Here, itâ??s sufficient to note that Derridaâ??s arguments demonstrate the importance of writing above speaking. Initially, it sounds as though heâ??s asserting the priority of literacy, the intellectual superiority of being able to put pen to paper.

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But it is intellectuals who have insisted that their very medium, writing, is an inferior form of communication. In so doing they also commit to a *narrative of origins*: believing it all begins with speaking, with writing as something that extends or supplements that capability, but in the process diminishes it. Itâ??s also a narrative about *authenticity*.

There never was an origin

In fact, as if to play along with the idea that there must be an origin, Derrida posits the idea of *arche-writing*, or *proto-writing*, something that comes before either speech or writing, and from which both derive. I see Derridaâ??s argument as a polemic *against* the denigration of artifice (i.e. artificiality).

> â??We would wish rather to suggest that the alleged derivativeness of writing, however real and massive, was possible only on one condition: that the â??original,â?? â??natural,â?? etc. language [*langage*] had never existed, that it had never been intact, untouched by writing, that it had itself always been a writingâ?• (56).



Crypto-writing the city

Derrida follows that complicated sentence with a couple of clauses: â??Arche-writing whose necessity we wish to indicate and whose new concept we wish to outline here; and which we continue to call writing only because it essentially communicates with the vulgar concept of writingâ?• (56). Arche-writing precedes both writing and speech, conceptually â?? putting aside any question of chronology.

He then asserts that the cultural existence of writing and speech (as opposite concepts) has been potent enough to overwhelm and conceal arche-writing.

We can apply Derridaâ??s style of argument to the city. Few would dispute that cities are artificial. They are human-made and contrived â?? a kind of simulation. They bring obvious benefits, but they also withdraw us from something: the countryside, the land, the untamed, the wild â?¦ the natural. I rehearsed arguments that concepts of nature are already imbued with the artificial in *Network Nature*.

Which came first, nature or the city? If we want to play the intellectual game of identifying a first, then letâ??s settle on something that precedes either: i.e. the â??arche-cityâ?• or perhaps the â??proto-city.â?• There are some easy candidates. We could say that the *family* or *household* came first â?? as a kind of proto-city. Concepts of the city are extensions of the household. In the same way, our understandings of nature are grounded in concepts of birth, growth, care, competition, familiarity â?? the family (as the proto-city).

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Even more than artificial

To ground nature and the city in concepts of the family seems a bit conventional. Hereâ??s something more radical.

Writing and the city are at the same end of a spectrum, aligning with the artificial. At the other end is speaking and the natural. If writing is artificial, then coded writing, cryptograms and cryptography extend the artifice. Iâ??ll take a risk and posit *crypto-writing* as a candidate for arche-status. After all, concealment precedes most of our encounters with the world. (Martin Heidegger says something about that. See: Heidegger and the problem of technology.)

Derrida says that writing â??could not have imposed itself historically except by the *dissimulation* of arche-writingâ?• (56). The translator retained the French word *dissimulation,* which is usually translated into English simply as *concealment*. But as I said at the start of this ramble, dissimulation implies concealment by disguise. And what city is not prone to a surfeit of artifice, ruse and disguise, as if its character and power derives from that! QED the *dissimulated city*.

Come to think of it, the element of *disguise* is one of the ways that writers such as Roger Caillois characterise nature. See post: Pictures devour reality.

References

- Caillois, Roger. 1984. Mimicry and legendary psychasthenia. *October*, (31) Winter, 17-32 (First published in *Minotaure* in 1935).
- Coyne, Richard. 2011. *Derrida for Architects*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1976. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Gelb, Ignace J. 1963. *A Study of Writing* Chicago, Ill: Chicago.

Notes

- The first image is a shopfront in Bilbao, Spain, near the EstaciÃ³n de San MamÃ©s. The sign reads â??refugees are welcomeâ?• in Basque.
- The second image is Canary Wharf in London.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. city
2. cryptography
3. Derrida
4. speech
5. writing

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