MICHEL DE CERTEAU AND THE PRACTICE OF REPRESENTATION

Michel de Certeau's work, particularly the ethnography of everyday practices developed in *Arts de faire I* and *II*, has been extensively appropriated in recent years by English-speaking theorists of popular culture. The appropriation has been rather selective, ignoring much of de Certeau's output in, for example, sociology, history, and literary criticism. More to my point, it has taken from de Certeau a model of the popular which is at once powerful and simple, and which I therefore propose to treat in this paper both with respect and with theoretical caution.

One of de Certeau's key concerns is with the ways in which disciplinary knowledges work to conceal the position and the interests of enunciation. In his writings on historiography, for example, he has paid particular attention to the way the historian's discourse 'gives itself credibility in the name of the reality which it is supposed to represent, but this authorized appearance of the "real" serves precisely to camouflage the practice which in fact determines it. Representation thus disguises the praxis that organizes it'.¹

This is a crucial issue for the study of popular culture, and I shall return to it later. For the moment, however, let me note that, in setting up the category of 'popular culture' as an object of analysis, de Certeau operates a very interesting displacement which seeks to evade its essentialization as a distinct expressive domain. Rather than defining popular culture as a domain of texts or of artefacts, he understands it as a set of practices or operations performed on textual or text-like structures. His conception of operability is deliberately very general, and this allows him to set up a series of criss-crossing metaphorical equivalences between different systems of practice (poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring. . . .), such that no single concept of 'doing' subsumes them all. They have in common, however, that they are *uses* of representations rather than representations in their own right. By means of this shift de Certeau is able to move the analysis of popular culture away from the study of textuality, and in particular (while avoiding the psychologism of American 'uses and gratifications' analysis) to refuse the idea that textual effects are inherent in

texts. On the contrary, indeed, 'the presence and circulation of a representation . . . tells us nothing about what it is for its users. We must first analyse its manipulation by users who are not its makers.'² To use is not simply to apply, to put into practice, but to evade the prescriptions embedded in 'official' textuality. It opens up a gap between the two. Hence, as a general thesis, 'a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. . . . that is where the opacity of a "popular" culture could be said to manifest itself – a dark rock that resists all assimilation' (p. 18).

This appropriation of imposed systems involves users making 'innumerable and infinitesimal transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy in order to adapt it to their own interests and ends' (p. xiv). Transformation and adaptation can be thought of in terms of the metaphor of the manipulation of tools (a 'handling' that produces a bodily knowledge); or they can be thought of as a kind of production (a 'making' or '*poiesis*'). But as a making they are different from the 'official' system of production, hidden beneath its surface. This other system, or anti-system, could be called consumption, and indeed de Certeau often refers to 'users' as consumers, and suggests a kind of privilege for the metaphor over all the others he employs (p. 33). But this is not consumption as inertia or as receptacle, opposed to the efficiency of its opposite principle; and de Certeau refuses absolutely the valorization of 'authors, educators, revolutionaries, in a word, "producers", in contrast with those who do not produce' (p. 167). Rather, consumption is that set of tactics by which the weak make use of the strong. The polarity between consumption and production is dissolved, since

in reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called 'consumption' and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it. (p. 31)

In its most literal sense consumption is an incorporation, a swallowing up of the external world; it is a *reduction* of cultural products to bodily matter. When de Certeau wishes to stress the outgoing, creative aspects of use he is more likely to use the metaphor of enunciation, in which the product of speech (the statement or *énoncé*) takes second place to the activity of producing it. Enunciation is governed by a small set of conditions: it is the realization, or the putting to use, of the language system; it involves a creative appropriation of this system; it depends upon an implicit contractual arrangement with the interlocutor; and it is governed by (but also reconstructs as a set of discursive coordinates) a particular organization of time and space (p. 33). It refers to linguistic practices, but can be extended to cover non-linguistic activities such as walking or cooking. And it is the basis

for the construction of the rhetoric of ordinary conversation. This 'rhetoric', or repertoire of enunciative tactics,

consists of practices which transform 'speech situations', verbal productions in which the interlacing of speaking positions weaves an oral fabric without individual owners, creations of a communication that belongs to no one. Conversation is a provisional and collective effect of competence in the art of manipulating 'commonplaces' and the inevitability of events in such a way as to make them 'habitable'. (p. xxii)

Rhetoric is the broader term by which de Certeau designates the ruses, the jostling for position, the tropes and 'turns' that characterize all semiotic practice, and particularly the 'undignified' practices of the oppressed. Rhetoric is opposed, in de Certeau's conceptual mapping, to the fantasy of linguistic propriety that governs scientific and technocratic reason; and to the myth of an impersonal and disinterested speech. What the turns of language lay bare is the fact that all speech is constructed in relation to an Other, and that it thus embodies a struggle for symbolic power. It is this that the rhetoric of everyday speech has in common with practical ruses:

in relation to the legalities of syntax and 'proper' sense, that is, in relation to the general definition of a 'proper' (as opposed to what is not 'proper'), the good and bad tricks of rhetoric are played on the terrain that has been set aside in this way. They are manipulations of language relative to occasions and are intended to seduce, captivate, or invert the linguistic position of the addressee. Whereas grammar watches over the 'propriety' of terms, rhetorical alterations (metaphorical drifts, elliptical condensations, metonymic miniaturizations, etc.) point to the use of language by speakers in particular situations of ritual or actual linguistic combat. (p. 39)

The practices of everyday life are coded by the same logic that informs the enunciative moves of rhetoric, but they do not conform to the laws of a coherent system (or anti-system). Rather, they are parasitic on the host system; they are 'multiform and fragmentary, relative to situations and details, insinuated into and concealed within devices whose mode of usage they constitute, and thus lacking their own ideologies and institutions' (p. xv). Thus, in talking about acts of appropriation of an urban system, de Certeau speaks of 'microbe-like, singular and plural practices', a 'swarming activity' of procedures that have 'insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance' (p. 96). The metaphoric is that of the infiltration of the body by micro-organisms, and their evasion both of the body's defence mechanisms and of the medical gaze. This invaded and manipulated body is no longer the organic body of the consumer but the body politic, the body of the state and of the bureaucratically calculated networks of the city.

The function of the city, with its rational articulation of space, is to administer and to control the practices of everyday life; but de Certeau makes it clear that functions do not coincide with effects. The reference to surveillance (and, in the same passage, to 'panoptic administration')

indicates that he wishes this argument to be read as a direct rejoinder to the Foucauldian concept of discipline. His quarrel is not with the concept itself, or with Foucault's account of its historical extension; rather, accepting the essentials of this account, he is concerned to discover and describe the ways in which populations manage to resist the encroachment of disciplinary mechanisms, the practices of evasive conformity by which they camouflage their 'miniscule' disruptions of an order they cannot openly contest. De Certeau's task is thus the exact opposite of Foucault's: not

to make clear how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of 'discipline'. Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an antidiscipline. (pp. xiv–xv)

The central metaphor here is the distinction between strategy and tactics, which de Certeau superimposes on that between the large-scale manoeuvring of a regular military unit and the tactical skirmishing of a guerrilla force. Strategy, he says, presupposes the separation of the 'subject of will and power' from its environment in order to make possible the imposition of this will. Strategy constructs places as fortifications, and thus as distinctly defined and possessed locations. Tactics, by contrast (the word at times has connotations of 'tact' – that is, the unspoken, intuitive practices of interpersonal relations), is a logic of momentary occupation without ownership. A set of procedures that 'produce without capitalizing' (without controlling time), it is 'articulated on situations and the will of others' (p. xx); its place 'belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance' (p. xix).

The concept of place stands here for that exercise of self-control, of possession and self-possession, of propriety and security that, for de Certeau, characterizes the structure of power. Where strategy seeks to occupy a terrain and to construct place according to an abstract model, tactics is 'a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality' (p. xix). The law it obeys is that of the *ligne d'erre*, the 'errant trajectory' that traverses space without occupying it or leaving a trace of its passage: a calculus of the random, then, and the unpredictable, since 'in the technocratically constructed, written, and functionalized space in which the consumers move about, their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences, partly unreadable paths across a space' (p. xviii).

Just as the initially stable category of production was reworked to take on the sense of the transformation of a system through consumption, however, so the categories of space and time, which are initially thought of as categories of power, undergo changes in the course of de Certeau's exposition. The first move is to align strategy with space, and tactics with the use of time – and (since space and time are mutually dependent) this then

entails an opposition between two different uses of time: 'strategies pin their hopes on the resistance that the *establishment of a place* offers to the erosion of time; tactics on a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power' (p. 34). The further move is then to demonstrate that space itself is riven by complexity. Although it seems to be depthless, a punctual disclosure of presence, space is in fact radically heterogeneous, since 'the revolutions of history, economic mutations, demographic mixtures lie in layers within it, and remain there, hidden in customs, rites, and spatial practices' (p. 201). Apparently legible at a glance, it is in fact composed of overlaid fragments of language: the model here is Freud's description of the multiple archaeological layers of the city of Rome, which in turn acts as a model for the semiotic layering of the psyche. Concomitantly, the category of time loses its sense of calculability – or rather this sense is opposed to the concept of a contingent or 'casual' time which is 'narrated in the actual discourse of the city: an indeterminate fable, better articulated on the metaphorical practices and stratified places than on the empire of the evident in functionalist technocracy' (p. 203).

It is the possibility of *indeterminacy*, in the long run, that offers the best chance of popular resistance to technocratic rationality: not a resistance of one force or one reason to another, but an evasion of force and reason, an evasion of capture. The 'trajectories' of 'users' or 'consumers' are governed by the order of organized languages, spaces, and times, but they 'trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop' (p. xviii). Against the *conquête* of the economy and the system of scripture, popular resistance mutely asserts the body and the materiality of the voice (p. 130).

De Certeau gives two particularly powerful illustrations of the tactical reworking of a dominant system. The first is that of the subversive transformation by the conquered Indian peoples of South America of the 'successfully' imposed Spanish culture. While remaining submissive to their subjection, and even accepting of it, the Indian peoples 'often *made* of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept'. This redirection of cultural structures involves the classic compromise of power-within-weakness: 'Their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it.' And de Certeau makes the analogy directly with the uses made in contemporary societies 'by the "common people" of the culture disseminated and imposed by the "elites" producing the language' (p. xiii).

The other key illustration is that of '*la perruque*', 'the wig', which de Certeau describes as 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer', and of which he writes:

Accused of stealing or turning material to his own ends and using the machines for his own profit, the worker who indulges in *la perruque*

actually diverts time (not goods, since he uses only scraps) from the factory for work that is free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit. In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his *work* and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through *spending* his time in this way. With the complicity of other workers (who thus defeat the competition the factory tries to instill among them), he succeeds in 'putting one over' on the established order on its home ground. Far from being a regression toward a mode of production organized around artisans or individuals, *la perruque* reintroduces 'popular' techniques of other times and other places into the industrial space (that is, into the Present order). (pp. 25–6)

Rather than theft, then, *la perruque* is akin to poaching, or to the creativity of a popular *poiesis*.

Both of these examples are models of transgression – models of that 'silent, transgressive, ironic or poetic activity of readers (or television viewers) who maintain their reserve in private and without the knowledge of the "masters"' (p. 173). The peculiar ambiguity of the problematic of transgression lies in its total dependence upon the law that is to be transgressed. I can only transgress against the state or against God if I believe in them and in their authority; indeed, my very act of transgression confirms them in their authority, and confirms my need of them. This is exactly to 'escape without leaving'. The same is more generally true of the relation to the other, the broad model (specified in various metaphors, such as that of host and parasite, or the occupation of terrain) through which de Certeau theorizes popular resistance. By definition, the 'logic articulated on situations and the will of others' (p. xx) can never fundamentally challenge the order of power. It is integrated into the system it opposes, even as it undermines that system. The system understood as *game*, for example:

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game (*jouer/déjouer le jeu de l'autre*), that is, the space instituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. (p. 18)

To 'get along' is to be unable ever to challenge the ground rules themselves, ever to envisage the possibility of transforming the order of power. De Certeau proposes a destabilization or a subversion of power, but only on condition that the hold of power is maintained. Despite his criticism of the totalizing force of Foucault's conception of discipline, his own vision of domination is monolithic: power is held absolutely or not held at all.

The first of the arguments I want to make against de Certeau, then, concerns his understanding of power. Nowhere in his work is there anything other than a polar model of domination, according to which sovereign power is exercised by a ruling class (or, more often, by an 'elite'; or else by a technocracy or a technocratic rationality defined without reference to class)

over a mass of oppressed popular subjects who lack all power. It is true that these subject groups exercise an art of the weak which modifies or deflects the power of the dominant order, but the flow of power is nevertheless all in the one direction and from a singular source. Rather than being defined by complexity, diversity, and ambiguity, the struggle for social power is thought in terms of a simple pathos of resistance.

One reason for this is perhaps that de Certeau's privileged examples of popular resistance are drawn from peasant cultures; and, more importantly, that the class-specificity of political struggle is lost in the figure of 'le pleb', 'ordinary people': a figure that eternalizes popular struggle as a continuous tradition extending from tribal and peasant cultures through to an undifferentiated contemporary urban populace. There is no room here for the complexities and confusions of hegemonic struggle; for struggles and rivalries *between* the groups comprising 'the people'; or for complicity in and acceptance of domination (the current wave of Christian fundamentalism in Latin America, for example, which is inspired and financed by American evangelists and directly serves American interests in the continent, is a forceful example of the identification of the dominated with the values of a hegemonic group, and one which partly contradicts de Certeau's argument about the reworking by indigenous peoples of an earlier wave of imperialist culture). These problems are inherent, I think, in the conception of 'the people' as a unified bloc, the composition of which transcends class differences; and in the assumption that this bloc necessarily operates in a progressive way.

The second argument that I want to make against de Certeau concerns the problem of the textual form in which we have access to the 'doings' of popular culture. In order to broach this question I want to consider one final metaphor of these doings, that of reading.

Reading, it should go without saying, is understood in de Certeau's writings not as a passive absorption of information, an effect of the book (de Certeau, 1982: 67), but as a creative processing, 'a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance' (p. xxi). Reading is poaching, ruse, metaphor, invention, self-pluralization, adaptation, insinuation (pp. xxi-ii). It is singular and unorganized, the opposite of a systemic activity, since 'to read is to wander through an imposed system' (p. 169). And it is potentially a political activity, since it is the basis for a broader transformation of the social relationships that overdetermine the reader's relation to texts (p. 173).

At the same time, research into reading is rendered difficult by 'the lack of traces left behind by a practice that slips through all sorts of "writings"' (p. 170). Like walking, which is transient and fully subject to time, reading produces no storage of information; it is pure process, without textual form. And this is surely more generally true of the various operations that de Certeau subsumes under the concept of 'doing': poaching, tricking, speaking, walking, all lack textual realization.

This is not the whole story, however. As soon as we ask whether these doings, these *arts de faire*, are merely contingent – pure, unstructured actions, detached from any semiotic coordinates – it becomes apparent that there is another dimension to de Certeau's thinking. In this more structural aspect of his analysis he makes it clear that he is in fact concerned with 'modes of operation or schemata of action' rather than with actions in themselves, or with the subjects of these actions. To be more precise, operations are rule-governed, and we can therefore distinguish between practices and an underlying 'ensemble of *procedures*' which are 'schemas of operations and of technical manipulations' (p. 43). In relation to the 'official' systems governing the organization of social life, these disruptive 'styles' of operating are equally *systemic*; they are 'systems of operational combination (. . . *combinatoires d'opération*)' (p. xi), and the relevant model for describing them would therefore not be that of the opposition of a systematic *langue* to an unstructured *parole* but rather that of the relation between *langue* and the system of discourse (cf. Pêcheux, 1975). It is in this sense that de Certeau writes that the schemata of action:

intervene in a field which regulates them at a first level (for example, at the level of the factory system), but they introduce into it a way of turning it to their advantage that obeys other rules and constitutes something like a second level interwoven into the first (for instance, *la perruque*). These 'ways of operating' are similar to 'instructions for use', and they create a certain play in the machine through a stratification of different and interfering kinds of functioning. (p. 30)

Finally, and again resembling the codes that govern the production of discourse, the codes of practice are situation-specific; any act implies 'a logic of the operation of actions relative to types of situations' (p. 21).

I emphasize the semiotic and systemic dimension of de Certeau's categories in part because it is easy to miss it in his insistence on the singularity and particularity of practices, but also in order to indicate that he is concerned with elaborating something like an ethnography of actions through an analysis of the codes of practice that constitute a culture. These codes are, in one sense, *like texts*, and there is thus a certain circularity in the move – initially enlightening as I think it is – from texts to uses of texts. The point is that uses and doings are codified, and that these generative codes will necessarily feed back into the process of textual production. There are no codes of reading to which there will not correspond (at least potentially) a set of codes of writing. The appeal to a pristine (and invisible) *experience* of the text is both unwarranted and in principle dangerous.

The danger is this: that in the absence of realized texts which can be subjected to determinate analysis – in the absence of a definite and graspable object – the analyst will inevitably reconstruct such an object. This will usually be done either through a direct substitution of the analyst's own experience (whether or not it is acknowledged as such) for that of the user, or through indirect modes of textual objectification, such as the administration of questionnaires.³ In both cases there is a politically fraught substitution of

the voice of a middle-class intellectual for that of the users of popular culture; and it is characteristically in the space of this substitution that the category of the popular is constructed.

Notes

- 1 de Certeau (1986: 203); for a more extensive discussion see de Certeau (1978).
- 2 de Certeau (1984: xiii). Further citations will be given in the text.
- 3 David Morley's (1980) analysis of the responses of diverse groups to a television programme, for example, makes the classic mistake of confusing texts written in the conventional genre of the questionnaire answer with the direct experience of the programme; the mediating sociological apparatus is simply disregarded.

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