Semiotics of art, life, and thought: Three scenarios for (post)modernity

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Abstract

It is difficult to make sense of the notion of postmodernity, because "modernity" is clearly a shifter, in the sense of Jespersen and Jakobson: a term dependent for its meaning on its moment of enunciation. It is true that, from the Middle Ages onwards, several meanings of modernity have received an objectified reference. But in the arts, particularly in the visual arts, this is not true. Modernity has been defined as the ever-new transgression of norms established by the period coming immediately before. In another sense, modernity is connected to urbanity, as it first took place (or at least was observed) in the coffeehouses of the seventeenth century and the boulevards of the nineteenth century. This meant a close connection of individuals having nothing to do with each other from the point of view of family relationships. At the same time as this concept of modernity is overhauled by the perpetual presence of the mobile phones, it is confirmed and extended by the Internet. A third kind of modernity, perhaps closely connected to the second one (but essentially opposed to the first kind) is that of thinking, as initiated during the Enlightenment, striving to go beyond the divergent doxa of different cultures to some kind of rational understanding. Taking into account the standing of rationality in the history of humanity, postmodern philosophy really amounts to some kind of mobbing of the poorest and most feeble members of the crowd.

Keywords: *Modernity; urbanism; Prague school; cultural semiotics; Bakhtin circle; rationality.*

"Postmodernism" is nowadays a term so commonly heard that we are hard pressed to realize its paradoxical character. In fact, it contains a double paradox. Like more familiar words, such as "I," "here" and "now," "Modernity" is a kind of *shifter*, taking its meaning, at least in part, from the very moment of its pronunciation. As defined by Jespersen and Jakobson, a shifter is a word,

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the meaning of which refers to the act (for instance the time and place) of its own enunciation (cf. Jakobson 1963; Sonesson 1978). Thus, the time span included in the domain of reference of the word "modern" must comprehend the moment at which the word is pronounced. Modernity is always on the point of running ahead of us, unavoidably lagging behind by one inch. In this sense, there is no place in the history of enunciation for "Postmodernity."

This is the first paradox. Some Modernisms, however, become objectified in history: this no doubt is what happened to the new philosophy of the Middle Ages, the *via moderna*, to Modern Times in general history as starting out during the Renaissance, to Perrault's *modernes* struggling against *les anciens,* even perhaps to that Modernity of Baudelaire and Rimbaud which must be embraced unconditionally. The *Modern Times* of Chaplin may already be objectified, but probably not as yet that of Bob Dylan (announced at the time of writing). The Modernity, which was once upon a time relative to the moment of enunciation, can now only be defined in relation to some earlier moment of enunciation, which is quoted, or, "mentioned," by our enunciation.

This brings us to the second paradox. Even if Modernism, in the sense of art history as well as that of general civilization, may perhaps nowadays be considered to relay objectified shifters in this sense, they have acquired a further meaning of continuity beyond the instance of speaking. The other kinds of Modernities mentioned above appear to happen once in history. At a certain moment, a border is crossed, and we go on from the time before Modernity to the time after its initiation. But in art history, Modernity means much more: it means steady innovation, that is, a state in which we continuously cross new borders to that which is ever more modern. In a way, the same thing may be said about the general history of civilization: the Modernity of the twenty-first century is, so to speak, even more modern than that of the 1960s. And the Modernity of the twenty-second century is destined to be even more modern (there is no better way of realizing this than looking at old science fiction movies, for instance Godard's *Alphaville*). But this means that, while there is a time before Modernity, there is no time after it. There is a way into Modernity, but there appears to be no way out of it.

1. The mechanism of modernism in the visual arts

In the visual arts, those who claim that Modernism has come to end (or is in the process of meeting its end) take Modernism to be a particular movement in Art, with specific aims and contents. Connecting Modernism in the arts with some ideas of Modernity emerging in other quarters (to which we will turn later), they claim Modernism is a rationalist enterprise, which is trying to realize some

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kind of progress, and even that it is part of some heroic story of the advance of civilization. All this is misleading. Modernism is better considered to be a huge rhetorical device projected onto world history.

If Modernism had a particular content, then it might reasonably be maintained, as Lyotard has often suggested (see Appignanesi 1989), that Postmodernism originates before, or at the same time as, Modernism. But then, Modernism would not be Modernism. Lyotard's paradoxical observation, and the claims of Postmodernism, become understandable in the North American context, where the image of Modernism was very much influenced by the conception of Clement Greenberg writing mainly on the Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, and William de Kooning. According to Greenberg, the Modernist work of art was essentially a critical discourse applying to earlier works of art, and its methods required it "to avoid dependence upon any order of experience not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium" (quoted in Rorimer 1989: 129). Indeed, more recently, Greenberg himself has set up an opposition between Modernity and Postmodernity, quoting, in the latter case, in part the same persons and movements as are the heroes of Lyotard, many of which are contemporaneous with, or anterior to, his Modernists: Duchamp and other Dadaists, certain aspects of Surrealism, and Pop art (see Tomkins 1988: 7–8).

The result is a curious amputation of the Modernist movement, two of the most important early constituents of which were Dadaism and Surrealism, both of which left their imprint also on such an emblematic European Modernist as Picasso, *the* Modernist of popular opinion. Yet, it may perhaps be said that there were two, in some respects divergent, ingredients of early Modernism: on one hand, an *inward movement, a tendency to reduce art to its smallest denominator,* to highlight, under "aesthetic focus," in Prague school terms, the minimal properties of the art work as a thing; and on the other hand, *an outward movement, tending to include ever further properties, objects, and spheres* into the world subjected to the aesthetic function. Marner (1995) has suggested that we should term these two tendencies, first described in Sonesson (1993, 1998), the *centripetal* and the *centrifugal* moments of Modernism, respectively. What came to evolve, under the name of Modernism, in the United States, was mainly the first endeavor (with the exception of Pop art). When the second tendency began to predominate in the United States (and, thanks to the cultural hegemony of the U.S., in the rest of the Occidental world), it was baptized Postmodernism.

No one has better described Modernism in the visual arts, as a historical phenomenon, than the Russian formalists, except perhaps their followers in the Prague school, although in both cases the model was misconstrued as involving Art in general. In spite of what is usually taken for granted, a theory of history — of the *history of perception,* to be more specific — is clearly

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implied by the Formalist conception*,* well before the late socio-historical paper by Jakobson and Tynjanov (1978, orig. 1928), which is usually seen as forming the bridge to the Prague school. This theory emerges already from the central thesis of Formalism (as formulated by Sklovskij and, more in particular, Jakubinskij), according to which the habits of perception, which are acquired in our ongoing everyday experience of standard language and other standardized media (as, in the case of pictorial art, "non-artistic" pictures), thus being "automatized," are disrupted by artistic creation, and thereby "made strange," or "actualized," for us; and which, when they have hardened into standardized artistic forms, are again transgressed by the invention of new ways for making of art. The Prague school, which had a more clear-cut relation to history and society, suggested that norms are set up, within the domain of art, only to be transgressed, the transgression giving rise over time to another norm, which then again has to be overstepped.

In this respect, as in many others, Formalism no doubt has formulated, not a theory of art outside history, but of *the art of its time:* emerging Modernism, created, among others, by friends of the Formalists, such as Malevitch, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Chlebnikov, Brik, Majakovskij, Meyerhold, etc.; and even by the Formalists themselves in another incarnation, as in the case of Eisenstein and early Jakobson (cf. Steiner 1984). The Prague structuralists, who took over, specified, revised, and extended the theories of Russian Formalism, certainly entertained similar connivances with the contemporary Czech avantgarde (cf. Deluy 1972). Thus, the Formalist model, as well as its later Prague school version, is implicitly, if not overtly, historical, not only because it supposes a sequence of changing perceptual habits, but more fundamentally, it is historically dated, because of its reproducing the conception of art presupposed, and even explicitly formulated, by the exponents of Modernism. If the dialectics of art described by Formalism is really identical to the mechanism of Modernism, there must have been a time when it was not yet a correct description of art; and we may thus be justified in asking whether, as the prophets of Postmodernity submit, it could also cease to be such a description.

It should be clear that Modernism, and thus the applicability of the Formalist model, has a beginning, not, perhaps, as far as the divorce from the standard medium is concerned, but at least as to the ever-repeated dialectics of "struggle and reformation" (in the terms of the Prague theses) applied to established artistic forms. It is not only that "the character, direction and scale of this reformation vary greatly," as Jakobson and Mukařovský express it in the Prague theses, but, although re-formations must have taken place before the advent of Modernism, they were not the order of the day: the breaking of the norms did not constitute the *meta-norm* of all artistic work. In the case of painting, for instance, there appears to have been a guiding idea, a common endeavor, since the Italian renaissance, aspiring to render ever more perfectly the appear-

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ances of the visual world. In other terms, change was geared to a specific goal. "Progress in art," in the terms (misleadingly) applied to Modernism by Susy Gablik (1977), was thus conceivable — before Modernism. But it is wrong to think that there could be a similar progress in abstraction, as Gablik suggests[1]; rather, in accordance with the dialectics formulated by the Formalists, each new generation of Modernists found themselves, in Michael Fried's terms (as quoted by Singerman 1989: 158), under the obligation to work through the problems "thrown up by the art of the recent pasts," thereby creating new problems for the future generation to work on.

Duchamp, the Dadaists, the Surrealists, and contemporary Postmodernists, also have to work through the problems "thrown up by the art of the recent pasts," but these problems are now created, not by an ever finer isolation of the intrinsic properties of the artwork, but by the outward expansion of the art sphere, and the ever more comprehensive absorption of other objects, events and sphere into it. For the *inward-going*, or *centripetal*, tendency of Modernism, the problems "thrown up" involve the material by means of which the art work is constructed, that is, the mere spatiality of the painting, as Greenberg misconstrues Lessing, over any suggestion, not only of temporality, but of a world beyond the canvas. For the *outward-going*, or *centrifugal*, tendency of Modernism, on the contrary, art is destined to expand ever further into other spaces, if not other times, overrunning the boundaries between art and life, art work and creator, artist and art public, as well as the gallery and the world, and the aesthetic sphere and society.

In both its varieties, however, Modernism has no specific goal that can one day be attained. Its goal is to always change its goal. Whereas Classical art, from the Renaissance onwards, had the clear goal of (among others things) perfecting the capacity for mimicking the appearances of the visual world, the Modernist norm in time came to require the *abandonment of pictorial representation*, and thus, by implication, the central role of the human figure, thus denying another norm in vigor (in the Occidental world, but not, for instance, in the Islamic one) since prehistoric cave paintings and petroglyphs. This description, to be sure, is particularly apt as an analysis of Greenberg's conception of Modernism. As Frank Stella has testified (cf. Tomkins 1988: 141–143), it was simply unimaginable, at the time of his art studies, to make a painting that was not abstract. Indeed, when de Kooning started painting female figures, however caricatured, Georges Mathieu demanded his expulsion from the Artist's Club in New York for having betrayed the abstract cause, that is, broken the norm of American Modernism (cf. Tomkins 1988: 137–139). The fact that he was apparently not excluded illustrates Mukařovský's claim that not all norms acquire the force of law.

But, even before abstraction became the norm (itself broken by de Kooning, Pop art, etc), Modernism, in its heroic beginnings, put the artist under obligation

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to give up a particular mode of pictorial rendering, which has been the norm in the Occident, at least since the Renaissance[2]: *the striving to render the appearances of the perceptual world ever more perfectly,* and the value attributed to progress in this endeavor, which, no doubt together with over values, has been a regulatory idea of most Occidental art, unto, and in a way including, Impressionism. Thus, the two "giants" of European Modernism, Matisse and Picasso never, or only in passing, gave up depiction entirely, but the value regulating the kind of art they produced, and for which their works became exemplary, did not require any perfect rendering of visual appearance, but, on the contrary, laid stress on the reinterpretation and resegmentation of perceptual reality. No doubt, Surrealism, Hyperrealism, and Pop art never gave up depiction as a norm; but there ceased to be a value for them in striving for further rapprochement to perception. Indeed, with the exception of Surrealism, they all depict other depictions, or simulate their effect.

As Mukařovský (quoted by Galan 1985: 36) notes, every work of art contains an affirmation of some (aspects of) earlier works of art, together with a negation of others. This observation is also verified by later Modernist movements: Frank Stella's abstraction is even more studied than that of Rauschenberg and Johns; as for the more confirmed Minimalists who followed him, such as Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Sol LeVitt, their work may even appear to retain the simple geometrical forms found in early European abstraction (notably that of Malevich, Arp, etc.), yet without the claim to convey a higher symbolism which was essential to the latter. At least at the level of intentions, there is a curious contrast between, for instance, the esoteric conceptions of Malevich and Kandinsky, and Stella's saying that his work is "based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there" (quoted in Tomkins 1988: 31). Interestingly, this is the same opposition which is found between two groups of poets using meaningless phrases which were contemporary with the Russian Formalists, the *zaum'* poets, for instance Chlebnikov, sharing Malevich's ambition, while others such as Krucenych only relied on the sound effect as such (cf. Steiner 1984: 144–146). No generalization is of course entirely true: this means that, for early Modernists such as Malevich and Kandinsky, there was more to Modernity than simply the Machine of Modernism being kept going.

The use of ordinary, functional objects, and the inclusion of photographs and written texts, found in Conceptual Art, Pop art, and other transitory movements, may be said to hark back to Dadaism, Futurism, and Cubism; yet the strictly regulated manner of their appearance in the former art forms would seem to owe something to Minimalism, and contrasts with the apparently chaotic and random character of their appearance in collages and as ready-mades. Order versus disorder is a fundamental distinction, as Lévi-Strauss knew well: as least as fundamental as identity versus alterity, embodied in the isotopy

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concept; and Gibson (1982) used it to distinguish surfaces that are pictures or ornaments from others that are covered by dirt (cf. Sonesson 1989). It is easy to see that "pattern painting" reacts to, but complies with some of the norms set up by Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism: as against the asceticism of all these movements, they reclaim the right to create more complex and more prolific ornaments, inspired in textile decoration, calligraphy, and Islamic art; yet they often remain abstract. To the extent that they retrieve the possibilities of depiction, they do not follow the lead of the Western tradition, but prefer a more awkward, to our eyes rather caricatured rendering, deriving from the styles of Persian miniature and Chinese Vase painting (Brad Davis) or Mayan sculpture (like Joyce Kozloff).

In this way, it can be seen that much of the *newness of art* under Modernism, is in fact only a *newness to art,* while being well known already in some other domain. Thus, for instance, Duchamp's scribbled-over copy of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, does not constitute anything new in an absolute sense: caricatures of Mona Lisa, with a moustache and a pointed beard had appeared before, notably in the comic review *Le rire*, a few years earlier; what was new with "L.H.O.O.Q." was that is was included in the sphere of art. In this respect Modernism is aptly described by the *Tartu school model,* if we substitute the opposition between art and non-art for that between culture and non-culture. The same rules of inclusion/exclusion, translation, impossibility of translation, and translation as deformation, will then be found to obtain.[3] In one important respect the Tartu model must however be complemented: non-culture, in this case non-art, is not only progressively absorbed into culture, that is, art, but some elements forming part of earlier culture, or art, are later excluded. This, for a long time, was the case of the pictorial function in Modernist art, as it continues to be the case of the rendering of visual appearance, and the predilection for the human figure.

In a sense, all versions of Modernism involve the inclusion of earlier non-art into art. Stella used house painter's paint. Metal, wood, and plastic have been employed by other Minimalists in shapes and manners that were before inconceivable. Duchamp's urinal, Man Ray's iron, and other ready-mades were literally transferred from another, practical sphere to the world or art. Such functional objects may also be transmuted, by being remade in another material, as Jasper John's bear canes molded in bronze or Jeff Koon's metal casts of kitsch objects (Tomkins 1988: 37); or even Sherrie Levine's recasting of Duchamp's urinal in bronze. The material of art has even been extended to include the artist's own body, either physically present, as in happenings and performances, and in the "singing sculpture" of Gilbert & George; or photographed, as when Duchamp appears as Rrose Sélavy, Cindy Sherman figures in different disguises in film still format, or Jeff Koons makes love to la Cicciolina.

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This does not contradict the observations that there are two tendencies in Modernism, an outward, progressively more encompassing movement, transforming everything, with its Midas touch, into art, and an inward movement, reducing art to its smallest denominator. Thus, while Abstract expressionists and Minimalists may have used new materials and other new resources, this may simply be a consequence of their endeavor to explore new possibilities for art, conceived as a formal procedure of exploration. Duchamp and the other Dadaists, the Surrealists, Pop art, and contemporary "Post-Modernists," however, are more directly dedicated to the transgression of the artistic sphere, with the passage from art to non-art and the reverse. While both tendencies of Modernism may involve inclusions of earlier non-art into art, the *dominant,* in the Prague school sense, i.e. that which is not only most important, but also organizes other features of the work according to its proper purposes, is differently located: in one case it is found in the *formal exploration,* in the other in the *strategy of inclusion itself.* What has changed, however, since the time of Duchamp, even inside the latter movement, is that the sphere most directly neighboring the art world is now clearly seen to be inhabited by the mass-media, by the different instances of the universal information society, which is also, predominately, as society dedicated to the transmission of pictures. And this should explain why contemporary artists are so much more conscious than those of earlier times of using *signs,* that is, socially defined units, which they are often content simply to reproduce, select, and combine.

2. The meta-norm of Modernism: The perpetual return of the new

Once the machine of Modernism gets going, there is no escape from it, and there can be no Postmodernism, if not as a (mis-named) phase of Modernism. It is not only that once we get to Modernity, we have crossed the border into a new domain, but also this domain consists of ever-new borders, which have to be crossed. Postmodernity thus appears as only one of these numerous boundaries within the domain of Modernity which has no end in itself. The Mechanism of Modernism can never cease functioning, once it has started to work. Precisely in trying the break out of the "tradition of the new," the art work *confirms to the very mechanism of that tradition,* which consists in transgressing the norms set up by the art-forms preceding it.

Even if postmodernity consisted in returning to the ways in which art was created before Modernism was invented (which is only true, and only to some extent, of Postmodernist architecture, and of some particular cases of visual art), this could only be understood, after Modernism, as a break with the earlier, temporary, Modernist norm, and thus as a new phase of Modernism — that

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is, it could only be so interpreted, as long as Modernism was remembered, and not lost too far back in the past. Of course, there are uncompromising ways of bringing the Mechanism of Modernism to a stand-still, when society invades art, much more radically than art may ever be able to invade society, as happened during the long ideological night of Stalinism, which followed upon the Russian avant-garde, and was on the point of happening also in Nazi Germany. But the Mechanism of Modernism could only be halted because of factors outside of art.

Perhaps it is possible for the Mechanism of Modernism to be based, not on the Occidental model of progressive time, but on that of cyclical time, familiar from decidedly pre-modern societies dominated by myths. Indeed, invoking the Prague school model of the norms and its transgression, Gopnik (1984) once suggested that fashion could be seen as a cyclical back-and-forth of loose-fitting and straight-fitting garments. Such a model clearly may be applied to fashion using more specific descriptive terms, such as the clothing styles of the sixties returning in later decades of the twentieth century, as well as in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the same way, early Postmodernism, in the art historical sense, appears in many ways to be the last remake of Dadaism.

What I have termed the *Mechanism of Modernism* may be conceived as a particular application of what Husserl (1966: 331) has termed *Time consciousness,* in which, at each moment of time, some earlier moment is retained, while another is expected to occur, or as Husserl terms it, is protained. This model has been used, and revised, by Mukařovský (1974) and Veltruský (1977), in their studies of literature and drama; and by myself, when endeavoring to render the working of a perceptual hypothesis filling in the lacking details of everyday experience (Sonesson 1978). I have lately used it even more generally, as a substitute for the much too limited notion of isotopy, to render the idea of an interpretational scheme, present in the work of Schütz, Piaget, Bartlett, and contemporary cognitive psychology (cf. Sonesson 1988). In this sense, the dialectics of the norms and their transgressions is a simple extension of time consciousness. To the extent that the Mechanism of Modernism anticipates, not the confirmation of the expected sequel, but its lack of fulfillment, it appears as a rhetorical device spanning space and time.

The notion of norm suggested, on the basis of Husserlean time consciousness, by the Prague school, could be used to interpret the norm as understood in the rhetoric of Groupe μ, if a social and historical dimension is added. This would allow us to go beyond the simplistic notion of isotopy, introduced by Greimas, and used, among others, by Groupe μ (1977, 1992): According to the critique of the notion of isotopy, which I have set out in detail elsewhere (Sonesson 1978, 1988, 1996), this concept presupposes the return, at time t^2, of an event expected at time t^1, which, at some level of abstraction, is identical to

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the event occurring at time t^1. There is a break of norms, according to this conception, if instead, another event, categorically different from the event at t^1, occurs at time t^2. To my mind, rhetoric, as the art of transgressions, should be much broader: it should also include the occurrence, at time t^2, of an event which is identical to the one occurring at time t^1, when what is expected is an event different from the earlier one. The rhetoric of Modernism is really of the latter kind: it makes us expect, at time t^1, that the work of art created at time t^2 will be different from that existing at time t^1. Of course, even the expectancy of something different occurs inside a framework of familiarity and things-taken-for-granted: we expect, among other things, that the new work of art, however different, will be of the kind to which Modernism has accustomed us. Thus, the real surprise would be the occurrence, at time t^2, of an altarpiece of the style painted during the Middle Ages, or even of a painting like those which won awards at the French *salons* during the last century, when, at time t^1, a Modernist work of art is expected to appear.

What the Formalist model says, then, is, in sum, that every new event at time t^1 will tend to become the norm in vigor at t^2, which is applied and obeyed, only to be transgressed at t^3, when a new event occurs, which is then made the norm at t^4, and subsequently contested by yet another norm at t^5, and so on indefinitely. Clearly, this mechanism has a beginning, but no conceivable end.

What happens in the end, however, is that newness itself becomes something well known and familiar: in terms of isotopy theory, *non-iterability is iterated,* the non-expected is expected. That which, on a lower level of generality, is forever new, is, higher up on the ladder of abstraction, always the same. It is perceived, not as this particular new event, but as newness repeatedly instantiated. Thus, at last, that particularly modern sentiment, diagnosed by Berman (1982), and before him, of course, by Marx, that "all that is solid melts into air," tends to disappear. Newness becomes a frozen gesture. The habits of perception are never really upset. All that changes is the particular modification of the attribute *newness*.

Yet I think there is a way in which Postmodernity is a fact of the visual arts, not as a conception, but as a *condition*, of art, using Lyotard's (1979) familiar term in a rather different sense.[4] Postmodernity started out, it seems to me, following the cyclical model, as a remake of Dadaism, but, contrary to Dadaism not as a brief and turbulent moment of art history, but as something almost infinitely distended. But Postmodernism, like earlier Modernism, has refused to go away, not because it all the time throws up new problems to be treated, but because it completely ceases to produce anything new. It is a condition, because it definitively shifts the level of perception from the new event, to the return of the effect of meaning termed "newness." Is has not broken out of the Mechanism of Modernism, but the machine appears to go on working without anybody caring about it.

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3. The advent of postmodernity in the modernist city

The Modernity that so much fascinated artists — and in particular writers and film-makers — in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, was not the Modernity of art, but that of life, which was identified, in particular, with city life. It started out in the coffeehouse, and went on with the passages and the boulevards. Before Baudelaire, Poe wrote about the view from the café table. Gogol pondered the infinite possibilities of Nevskij Prospect, and Dostoevsky surveyed life in Saint Petersburg during the white nights. Numerous films by Eric Rohmer, from *L'amour l'après-midi* to *Les nuits de la pleine lune* are basically about life on the boulevards, and this is also largely the case of Robert Bresson's *Quatre nuits d'un rêveur*. Curiously, the Modernity of Poe and Gogol still appears to be the Modernity of Rohmer and Bresson. If the Modernity attributed to the city is still a shifter, referring to the moment of enunciation, it does not seem to involve the ever new transgressions of past Modernity characteristic of Modernism in art. Postmodernity therefore only seems to give rise to the first paradox of Modernity.

Unlike the road, the thoroughfares of the city are already some kind of information highway: they serve communication, in the double sense of displacement, and conveyance of meaning. From my point of view (which is also that of the writers and filmmakers mentioned), it is not, as Benjamin (1983) suggests, the Paris passages and department stores, with their abundance of products for sales, which constitute the principal spatial manifestation of Modernity, but rather the boulevard (and, as we shall see, the café). In contrast, the passages, and in particular the department stores, puts the emphasis on the display of goods for sale. The boulevard is a public place, as is, of course, the market place, better known from the work of Mikhail Bakthin. Spatially, however, the boulevard is a place of passing, while the market places, like the passages, are first of all places of display, and only secondary meeting places. On the boulevard, itineraries run in parallel (at least partly), but on the market place they tend to cross rather incidentally, following the order of display. Another implication of the same observation, however, is that the market place, as well as the passage, is basically static, whereas the boulevard stands for dynamism: the continuous thrust forward. And as it goes forwards, the boulevard opens up into ever-new cross-streets.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the boulevard, as a particular kind of meaningful space, could be analyzed using the paraphernalia of time geography (Sonesson 2003). In time geography, both space and time are finite; therefore, they are considered to be scarce resources. Space-time is inhabited by individuals, each one of which is characterized by his own trajectory, starting at a point of birth and ending at a point of death (see Hägerstrand 1970: 15). Indeed, each point in the geographic now is best understood as a bundle of

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processes, that is, "in terms of its double face of graveyard and cradle of creation" (Hägerstrand 1983: 23). Trajectories may be visualized as continuous paths inscribed in co-ordinate systems. If such a trajectory parallels the x-axis, it will describe an individual moving in space, but not in time, which is of course impossible; but a trajectory, which follows the y-axis, is quite feasible, and in fact indicates a stationary individual.

The boulevard is a place *in which individuals, whose lifelines start out and finish at very different places, permit them to run in parallel for a shorter or longer duration.* This is really the central topic of Gogol's short story *Nevskij Prospect*: the soldier and the painter, who come from different social classes, and who live in different parts of the city, walk together for a moment on the boulevard. So much for the different points of departure. However, they part again, when each one of them discovers a woman on the boulevard whom he decides to follow, which brings them both away from the boulevard, to new parts of the city where they have never been before. In Poe's short story, *The Man in the Crowd*, such a lifeline starts out abruptly from the café window and ends in the void twenty-four hours later.

Implicit is this description is a second property of the boulevard: its capacity for giving access to the whole of the city, being the stage for which all the rest forms the behind-stage. The soldier and the painter both leave the boulevard to go to other parts of the city, but the itineraries that they choose are only two out of many potential ones. In this sense, the boulevard is *the starting point for numerous potential trajectories.* This explains the sentiment, always expressed in the fiction of the boulevard, of the possibilities being infinite.[5]

Another particularity of the boulevard is that it puts emphasis on one of the fundamental laws of time geography: that *two persons cannot occupy the same space at the same time.* When you find yourself on the sidewalk, in particular on one being as crowded as that of the modern boulevard, it is essential to steer free of other people. As Ervin Goffman (1971) observes, it takes a lot of largely unconscious maneuvering to avoid bumping into other persons. Each encounter on the sidewalk involves a negotiation about who is to step out of the way, or, more ordinarily, the degree to which each of the participants it to modify his trajectory. However unconscious, such a transaction supposes a basic act of categorization: we may negotiate with somebody whom we have recognized as a fellow human being, but not with a lamppost, a statue, or even a dog. Indeed, when this process of interpretation becomes conscious, and the other is not simply seen as a stranger whosoever, but as an individual person, or even as a person of a particular class or other social group, negotiations may brake down. This is exactly what happens to Dostoevsky's Cellar man at the start of the story: neither the hero nor his opponent wants to give way.

But trajectories are important mostly for the kind of access they allow. Time geography, as such, has nothing to tell us about this. When those that

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follow the trajectories are human beings, each particular use of the limited temporal and spatial resources gives rise to potential trajectories, which are not displacements in space and/or time, but perceptual and/or semiotic exchanges between the persons occupying the trajectories. *Different positions in space and time*, connected by trajectories, do not only open up into other trajectories (as the cross-street beginning on both sides of the boulevard), but also *affords the permeability of the other for sight, touch, smell — and speaking.* The negotiation for space on the sidewalk described above already supposes this exchange, but it does not exhaust it. It is not the trajectories as such, but what they offer, which gives rise to the feeling of Modernity characteristic of city life.

It is the square, at least if it can be identified with the market place, which is the pivotal image of Mikhail Bakhtin's work, although the Modernity to which he ascribes it starts manifesting itself already during the Middle Ages. Curiously, Bakhtin did not construe the market place as an encounter of bodies in space, but as a cacophony of voices, epitomized by the cries of the different street vendors, giving rise to such concepts as *dialogicity* and *polyphony* and, when being projected to different social groups, *heteroglossia*.[6] The boulevard, as it may still be experienced today in Paris, as well in many other (particularly Latin) big cities, is not predominantly a polyphony of voices, but a tangle of gazes. Indeed, the primary function of interpretation, telling us that another person is approaching for whom we must give way (as noted by Goffman), is overdetermined by a secondary function of interpretation, normally at a higher level of awareness, which is aesthetic, as least in the old sense of involving "pure contemplation." As such it does not only pick up information but also gives it out: it conveys messages such as "I observe you" and "I find it worthwhile to observe you." The hero of Eric Rohmer's film *L'amour l'après-midi*, who spends his life on the boulevard, expresses this double function of the gaze very clearly, when he says life on the boulevard is basically a question of "trying oneself out on another."

The gaze, in this case, as in those of Baudelaire and Gogol, is exchanged between men and women. Frenchmen still unabashedly conceive this as a mutual interchange between the sexes. For Americans, on the other hand, this is something men do to women, and consequently, they talk about "visual rape." The metaphor is adequate, at least in the sense that it describes the crossing of the visual barrier. In fact, the trajectories of the boulevard are peculiar, in that they do not only allow for movement, but create virtual access to looking, and no doubt also to smelling, touching, and, more rarely, speaking.[7] At least this is what Rohmer's hero hopes for.

Before the boulevard there is the square, not in the sense of the market place, but as the central place of the village, not the *zócalo*, but the *alameda* or *parque,* to use the Latin-American terms. There is a Mexican folk song the refrain of which consists in telling the girl to go once again around "el parque" in

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circle in the hope that this time she will meet someone who will marry her. I have never seen anything like that in Mexico, but not long ago you could still experience something of the kind in the small villages on the Greek islands: every evening, all the inhabitants, including new-born children, assembled on the central square (which, on the islands, is often the harbor), walking up and down over and over again. The trajectories, which are here strictly parallel, although having opposite direction, are always the same: they do not open up to other potential trajectories away from the square; they certainly permit an exchange of gazes and also often of speech. But all this follows a well-known, repetitive, pattern.

However predictable, the village square is still a public sphere of exchange, that is, what Habermas calls a *bourgeois* public sphere. As such it is opposed to the official square, used for parades, which incarnates the representative public sphere, which is more or less equivalent to the theatre. A case in point is not only the official parade of the king and his nobles, the wedding of the crown prince, but also, for instance, the dismemberment of Damien (as described by Foucault 1975). In a way, of course, all public life is theatre, as Goffman maintained, and as Debord and other situationists have claimed about capitalist society. In fact many components of daily life exist in order to be perceived by others: this is true of all clothes and body decorations, not only different varieties of "piercing" and tattoos, which recently have become popular again, but also the more customary earrings and other adornments familiar in Western culture. To a greater degree, this is true of the market place, the town square, the popular festival, the boulevard, the café, and similar spatial configurations. But these are not exhausted by representativity, as is the theatre and the representative public sphere.

As I have pointed out elsewhere (cf. Sonesson 2000b), the *spectacular function* can be described as an operation resulting in a division applied to a group of people and separating those which are subjects and objects, respectively, of the process of contemplation; but, in fact, the subjects and objects of contemplation are often the same, at least temporarily. In the market, on the square, the boulevard, etc., observation is (potentially) mutual as well as intermittent, but this is not true of the official parade or the dismemberment of Damien, nor of the sport event or the theatre. In ritual, there is a difference between those who only observe, and those who, in addition to observing, are also observed.[8] As a contrast, on the boulevard, but also already on the town square, the spectacular function is *symmetric and continuously changing.* However, contrary to what happens in other parts of everyday life, it is certainly *dominant*, in the sense of the Prague school: it does not only retain the upper hand, but it uses everything else for its purpose.

As a spatial object endowed with meaning, the street-side *café* has a story of its own, but it cannot be left out of the story of the boulevard. The café occupy-

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ing part of the sidewalk, or turning one of its pane covered walls to the street, is part of boulevard life, a place where you may stop up for a moment, taking an outside stance on the stream of movements on the sidewalk, not as a man in the crowd, but enjoying the view from the café window. In Bakthinean terms, this is the glance of the Other, which is the only one who can take in the Ego in full, not the vantage point of the Ego, who is absorbed in the stream of behavior that is boulevard life. By sitting down at the café table, the Ego steps out of the flow, observing, not himself, but his earlier neighbors on the boulevard, from the point of view of the Other. But it would be wrong to think of the café table as being merely at the active end of the spectacular function, equivalent to the auditorium for which the boulevard is the scene. At least as I know boulevard life from Paris, the occupants of the café may very well also play the part of actors to which the people on the boulevard are the spectators. But, in contrast to the boulevard people, the café visitors tend to make up some kind of *tableau vivant*.

Although the anecdotal evidence from literature and cinema certainly suggests so, the scenery presented by the boulevard does not only allow for the categorical perception of men and women. From the male point of view, which has certainly until recently been the point of view of written history, woman has no doubt long been the foremost *inner other* of "Culture" (in the sense of Cultural semiotics), accompanied, in certain societies, by slaves, domestics, Jews, gypsies, and others: someone being present in the territory of "our culture" who does not share the ownership of that territory (cf. Sonesson 2000a, 2003, 2004). Indeed, in many historical societies and some contemporary ones, women are not allowed on the street, or only once completely covered up in a *burqua*, which means that they have been excluded or, if one prefers, preserved from the mutual exchange of the boulevard.[9] Such conventions serve to void the spectacle of the boulevard, as conceived by Rohmer's hero in *L'amour l'après-midi.*

But the categorical perception of the man in the crowd does no doubt take account of many other types and degrees of Otherness. Here it is useful to return to the time-geographical metaphor of trajectories spanning the cradle and the grave. The past time lines sedimented on the persons figuring on the boulevard go beyond their projection on the street. The past of the friends in Gogol's tale coming together on the boulevard from different parts of the city can still be staked out on the streets of the city, but *in the case of many people on the boulevard the time lines must be extended to different villages and countries.* Part of the fascination of the big cities, of which the boulevard is the central scene, no doubt consists in the coming together of people from different parts of the country, from smaller cities and villages. That may have been true of the Paris of Baudelaire, but the Paris I knew in the 1970s and 1980s brought people together from wider spaces, from many countries, continents, and

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cultures. At the time, the spell of Modernity consisted in this bringing together in a limited space of people whose past time lines extended to numerous cultures, far from the boulevard and foreign to it. In the streets, on the great boulevards, and at the courses and seminaries that I frequented, you could meet people from all parts of the world (or so it seemed to me). Every casual stroll along the boulevards seemed to be an adventure, a passage through the entire world. In Paris restaurants could also be found that served all kinds of cooking, as well as stores that sold products from all countries all over the world.

If this is Modernity in city life, one may wonder what it takes for Postmodernity to dawn on the city. It seems to me that, in this context, Postmodernity means only more Modernity everywhere. First of all, the foreignness of the foreigners coming together on the boulevards augments, because people from more places in the world congregate in the big cities. In the second place, the phenomenon of the inner other takes on a new importance, because it is no longer merely a fact of the big cities.

In Malmö, Sweden, where I lived before going to Paris, there were not only no restaurants serving food from other countries (with the exception of some Chinese restaurants and some pizzerias), but in the main all the people in the streets looked more or less alike: all boringly blond and white-skinned. Now Malmö has changed totally: it looks like Paris did before. One third part of the inhabitants of Malmö are immigrants or children of immigrants, from Latin America, from Eastern Europe, from Africa and Asia, and not least from the Middle East. The city is full of restaurants and stores whose offers stem from all imaginable cultures. Just like in Paris in the seventies, there is even on numerous corners the characteristic shop owned by an Arab, which, against local customs, never seems to close.

Moreover, the coffeehouse, which was a feature of political Modernity in England before it took the more permanent form of the Paris *café*, now seems to be a staple of our culture everywhere. In Sweden, it has arrived at long last, and with a vengeance: there are now street-side cafés everywhere. It has often been predicted that the trajectories of television, and later of the Internet, which are virtual in a more definitive sense that those of the boulevard, should take over from the latter. So far, this certainly does not seem to be happening. There is only one way in which the Postmodernity of the city seems to go beyond its Modernity, and then rather as an overlay than a substitute: the *flaneur* on the boulevard, now equipped with his always accessible cell phone, is permeable to other experiences, from a parallel space, while he follows his trajectory. There can be no doubt that this affords him further potential trajectories, not accessible from concrete city space. It is not clear, at present, to what extent this new permeability is also an impermeability to the city itself.

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4. Sirens at the café table: A final cheer for rationality

In the ideology of postmodern theory, Modernism in art, as well as in life, is somehow connected with the illusion of steady progress, itself associated with a continuous extension of rationality. Both progress and rationality are seen as "great narratives" and thus, I take it, as some kind of fiction. So far, we have seen that there is no progress in Modernist art, but only the eternal return of the new. The fascination with the city no doubt had something to do with progress at the beginning, but it has survived that reputation. Modernist theories of art are not notable for their rational underpinnings. In fact, they are largely mystical. The Modernity of the city is basically an experience of the senses. It has to do with the psychology of crowds. Whatever is offered by boulevard experience, its primary determination is certainly not rationality. It therefore seems that it is Postmodernist theory itself that is a great narrative, in the sense of a figment of fiction.

Modern thought, if it is dated back to the period of the great scientific breakthroughs in the natural sciences, attributed to thinkers like Galileo and Newton, certainly has something to do with progress, and at least a bit with rationality. Much more rationality, and a clear notion of progress, is connected to the Enlightenment, pioneered in Great Britain, but then reaching is acme in France, where it took on a decidedly social character involving more the conduct of life than the sciences. Modernity in this sense also has its roots in city life. This kind of Modernity antedates that of Baudelaire, but it is considerably more recent than that of Bakhtin, and its locus is the coffeehouse. Public man, the person taking part in a discussion about the means and ends of the state and other aspects of public life, and beyond that about all essential intellectual preoccupations, first came to his own in the English coffeehouses in the seventeenth century, and then flourished in the French cafés before and during the revolution (Habermas 1962; Sennett 1977).

A semiotics of modern thought may take its point of departure in Jürgen Habermas's theory of a *public sphere*, which, from being merely "representative" (of court authority) during the Middle Ages, began in the Age of Reason and came to involve the reasoned, critical interchange of rational opinion. In this *bourgeois* public sphere, rational discussion becomes possible, because persons coming from different social groups and classes, as well as from all parts of the country, can meet on an equal footing, without their individual history or personality having any importance. The coffeehouse is similar to the boulevard, and perhaps to the market place, in bringing together individuals from different social and professional spheres, permitting an interchange in which earlier trajectories and details of life history are irrelevant. In relation to the coffeehouse, the boulevard permits a less sustained exchange of signs, it involves many more individuals coming together for much shorter duration,

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and the exchange is rarely verbal, but more often visual and perhaps tactile: gazes and touch rather than words. Moreover, it might be argued that, on the boulevard, if not also in the coffeehouse, earlier trajectories and their sedimentations *are* relevant.

To the extent that emotions are not taken to be expressions of something else, for instance a personality, they do not have to be disciplined and rendered passive: Richard Sennett (1977) has argued that, with the "Fall of public man" and the disappearance of the ritualized behavior characteristic of the coffeehouses of the *ancien régime* (until the eighteenth century), we lost the possibility of having an authentic public sphere, where intersubjective issues could be discussed, and arguments advanced, in an impassive, non-sentimental way. Contrary to the diagnosis of Riesman and other sociologists, Sennett submits, Western societies are not moving from an inner-directed to something like an other-directed condition, but instead from public life to self-absorption, epitomized by the values of civility and personality, respectively. Television and other mass media, which render real public contact unnecessary, also indulges in sentimentality and the values of personality.[10] According to Sennett's analysis, therefore, it seems that Postmodernity has dawned on the café long ago.

And yet, the cafés played an important part all through Europe in the emergence of the different Modernist movements of art, and even later on, in the culture of popular music (cf. Bradshaw 1978); and at least in France, they have continued to this very day to have a very important role in intellectual life, giving rise to Existentialism, and then to Structuralism (and thus to semiotics), as well as to Poststructuralism and Postmodernism. In Sweden, as no doubt in many other places, coffee drinking never acquired this public character: it essentially took place in the private homes of friends and acquaintances; it was associated with gossip rather than with serious discussion; and, traditionally, it was mainly considered to be a practice characteristic of women.[11] Even traditional cafés in Sweden fail to manifest the public character they have in many other countries: they do not open up onto the streets, but are found behind the counter where pastries may be bought for home consumption. Curiously, it is in the age of the Internet that public cafés, turning their front to the street, have finally emerged also in Sweden, being at the same time transformed into as meeting-place mainly for young people. Also in this sense, the putative Postmodernity really shows itself to be as a kind of hypermodernity.

If the talk of contemporary youth cafés is no doubt not very much concerned with politics, nor with art, but rather with everyday life, it is probable that this was also the predominant theme of the English coffeehouse and the Parisian café. One of the pioneers of social psychology, Gabriel Tarde (1910), already noted the importance to public life of the kind of conversation having no fixed

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purpose that took place in the Parisian cafés. Conversation, in this sense, I take it, is opposed to instrumental talk that we may imagine being used by the more or less mythical pre-historical hunters pursuing their game together, and even at latter-day working places, where the exchange may be stereotypical to the point of being reducible to very simple gesture systems or *kinesic codes* (cf. Kendon 2004: 284–286). Conversation, on the other hand, would involve gossip, rumors, small talk, and deceit.[12] It may start out from what students of human origins call Machiavellian intelligence, which pertains to the ability to state that which is not, that is, to lie. The Modernity of conversation remounts very far back in time. But it might be argued that it could only really come to its own with the emergence of the city. Some "cities" described by archaeology have been dated as far back as 8000 years B.C. But they do not appear to be cities in our sense, because they lack public spaces such as market squares, streets, or cafés (cf. Sonesson 2003). The Modernity of conversation may therefore not be as old as it first seems.

Habermas is wrong, I believe, in giving so much importance to the nature of the content that is exchanged in public life, and in reducing this exchange to the verbal kind. It is true that, in Habermas's (1982) later work, an idealtypical speech situation, which presupposes rational argumentation, is said to be taken for granted by all verbal exchange in the public sphere. It therefore is part of the *form* of the exchange, not its content. But this idealtypical speech situation is far removed from the way real world conversation occurs in the extant cultures of the human world, where truth and sincerity can certainly not be taken as givens. Indeed, in many cultures, it is more important to show willingness to help than to tell the truth or only to talk about things you know anything about, which means it is quite normal to promise things you do not intent to do and to describe the way to a place you have never heard of. Veridical, sincere and rational discourse is only a small artificial island, which may be precariously set up in the big ocean of conversation. In the full sense, it can only take place in small communities of researchers who aspire to attain truth by accepting the regime of fallibility, as Peirce can be taken to say.

On the other hand, the dialogicity posited by the Bakhtin circle very rarely takes on the trappings of a true dialogue. Whereas Habermas sees conversation as a rational advancement of arguments and counter-arguments, Bakhtin and Vološinov's present it as a mere contiguity of voices, as the incidental intermingling of the street vendor's cries on the market place. Literary dialogicity, better known as intertextuality, is not a conversation, but the fortuitous encounter of quotations from different sources in a single text. As a definition of conversation, Habermas's characterization demands too much, and that of Bakhtin too little. The act of conversation is aimed at a partner to the conversation who is expected to answer back. What first and foremost defines the act of questioning is the expectancy of an answer, not any condition of sincerity and

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the like (cf. Sonesson 1978). In a much more general sense, every act of conversation contains within itself the anticipation of a response, of one kind or other. There may be no rationality in the exchange, but there has to be a (potential) anticipation of the other's voice. This basic sense of dialogicity is curiously absent from the work of Bakhtin and Vološinov.

The only discussion of examples approaching a dialogue in the work of Vološinov are the paragraphs dedicated to "Well" and "H'm" (1983: 10–12, 124–126), where they are said to signify very different things depending on the circumstances. In the former case, both the participants know that they are in Russia, that winter lingers on, etc. In the latter case, depending on what is taken for granted, the response of the other may be to rush away ashamed or to look pleased (cf. Sonesson 1999). I have observed above that both the boulevard and the café depend on the reunion in a single space of people having life-lines with different origin and perhaps different continuations. According to Habermas and Sennett, this is what permits objective, rational discourse. This means that the presuppositions of the conversation will not be as widely shared as Vološinov claims. The situation has to be defined more explicitly. Perhaps this explication is at the origin of rationality as a social norm. It may be argued that, in the coffeehouse, there is a new set of norms which are shared among the participants, partly along the lines suggested by Habermas, but there will certainly be others, more generally applicable to café discourse, also that which is not so very rational. In other words, when the presuppositions due to shared life experience are shattered, the coffeehouse presuppositions take over.

The city, which renders possible the boulevard and the café, would seem to guarantee the Modernity of such norms. Just as it was said above about the boulevard, Postmodernity really seems to offer only more Modernity. But if the advent of Postmodernity is taken to be synonymous with the globalization of the public sphere, we should perhaps expect it to give rise to a further breakdown of common presuppositions (cf. Sonesson 2004). What is more, if the public sphere, as it originated in the coffeehouse, brought with it its own homogenizing structures, there seems to be no reason to suspect that globalization will not do the same. The globalization presuppositions will take over. Indeed, contrary to what is taken for granted by Postmodernist ideology, globalization really seems to amount to a homogenization of the structures of the public sphere. There may be any number of radio stations, television channels, and even web sites, but they all become increasingly alike. Trajectories become more diversified, but the structures by means of which they are conveyed tend to be one and the same. As for rationality, it will probably always remain that little artificial island in the ocean of conversation.

So again, there is no escape from Modernity. The night came, and a new day has dawned, but we are still out there rowing.

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Notes

1. In particular, it is of course absurd to compare the progress of abstraction in art with the different stages in child development according to Piaget. Supposing abstraction to develop in the child, it is already there for the artist.
2. But not before that time, and not in all countries and domains of picture production; cf. Uspenskij (1976).
3. Such a use of the Tartu school model is obviously reminiscent of the so-called institutional theory of art, but even in its recent, sociological rather than philosophical, variety (see Becker 1982), the latter appears to be a much less potent theory, with much less conceptual machinery available. For other uses of the Tartu school model, see Sonesson (1993).
4. This is where the present text diverges from the conclusions of Sonesson (1993, 1998).
5. Perhaps a more pregnant image for this virtuality of trajectories is the tree describing the logic of action (e.g. von Wright 1968) or the narratological model of Bremond (1973).
6. Actually, an even better image of such a polyphony may be the street vendors going up and down one parallel street after the other, as they did in ancient Rome (cf. Archard 1991) and as they still do in the biggest city in the world, Mexico City. In that way, their cries really seem to weave a tissue of *intertextuality*.
7. As women in Mexico City and other places know well, the best chance for not so virtual touching is nowadays the subway wagon.
8. However, there is probably nobody in the rite who is *not* a subject but only an object of observation, for also the officiator partakes in the experience of the rite; he performs it for himself, in the same sense in which he does so for the others (unlike the actor).
9. Cf. Hammad (1989: 77, 2002: 102) about the female body having been for a long time a privatised space controlled by the male.
10. As I have argued elsewhere (Sonesson 1995), there is really no contradiction between Riesman's and Sennett's theses: sentimentality may very well be the form projected onto the abstract social relations simulating an intimacy which is no longer there. In any case, the process of compensation is not found on the boulevard, nor in the coffeehouse, but it is well known from television, and so far, I believe, absent from the Internet.
11. This observation was first made (Sonesson 1993) as a generalization from the present state of Swedish society, but I later discovered that Swedish ethnologists (notably Valeri 1991) have demonstrated the historical correctness of this surmise.
12. I do not mean to endorse the view expressed by Robin Dunbar according to which language takes its origin as a substitute for grooming.

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