Chapter 2
The Imaginary of the City

The language of the imaginary is multiplying. It circulates everywhere in our cities. It speaks to the crowds, and the crowds speak it too. It is our language, it is the artificial air we breathe, it is the urban element in which we have to think.

Mythologies are proliferating. The fact is clear. It might seem strange at a time when corporate enterprises are rationalized, when sciences are formalized, and when, not without difficulty, society reaches a new state of technical organization. In reality, for reasons that would be too lengthy to analyze, the technical development that inspires the discrediting of ideologies does not efface the needs to which they responded. It turns beliefs into legends that are still laden with meaning (but which? We no longer know). It marginalizes the doctrines that, turned into clouds of sparks, always evoke reasons for being alive.

Every society as a whole learns that happiness cannot be equated with development. It avows the fact by according a growing place to leisure—this nirvana and this "reward" for work—by cultivating the dream of vacations or retirement. Society takes note of it, sometimes with panic, when it sees arising before its eyes the various kinds of disgust and anger of a youth that denounces the common fiction, attests to a general insecurity, and rejects the official discourses whose soft seduction or superb stiffness merely dissimulates their role of papering over misery or plugging holes.

Yet, the imaginary discourse that circulates in the city endlessly speaks of happiness. It inspires us to wonder: exile or creativity, alibi or a work of invention? What, then, are the current forms that inform us about happiness?
Fiction Given to the Eye?

Eros fiction, science fiction . . . fiction is everywhere. We may take an example as our point of departure. Everywhere we find sexy magazines in our midst. And sex fiction, too. Is the wage earner or white-collar worker who buys one of these magazines when taking the commuter train home seeking an initiation? No, the buyer does not ask from his or her magazine a lesson to be put into practice. On the contrary, he or she reads it precisely because a practice will not be engaged. It’s sex-fiction: in its images and its “legends” a story about what “is not done,” an absent story. Hence a first observation: what goes into that language is what goes out of daily life and what existence no longer offers, either for reasons of fatigue or because one no longer dares think of changing what is possible. Thus, all that can be done is to be satisfied to dream about change. For lack of doing something, one looks on. As a television commercial puts it, “Take up a sport—in your own armchair!” We are spectators who refuse to be participants.

The imaginary is within the realm of the “visible.” It develops a particularly ocular exoticism; because, finally, a logic becomes evident everywhere, even in striptease, when the stripper who bares her body goes hand in hand with the spectator who is dispossessed. What is given to the eye is removed from the hand. The more we see, the less we take. The boredom of work or the impossibility of acting or doing is compensated for by the surplus of what we see being done. Everything assumes a dream. “Just dream, we’ll do the rest,” say the Ionel Schein advertisements. The development of the imaginary is the converse of a “civilization” in which visionaries and contemplative souls proliferate. Thus “current events,” this visual remainder of action, display the good and bad fortunes of others according to a law that combines the luxury of information with the passivity of its witnesses. Inaction seems to be the price of the image. Amorous pursuits, the bedazzlement of addicts, athletic exploits, or programs of social renewal pour into imaginary literature and offer, along with the spectacles themselves, an alibi of action. We only need to recall Borges’s Chronicles of Bustos Domecq and his chapter “Esse est percipi,” “To exist is to be seen.” Is it only the image of reality that remains? Yes, when the act that posits it is exiled from existence.

In any case, insofar as the objects that furnish the imaginary establish the topography of what we can no longer accomplish, we can wonder if, inversely, what is most seen does not define what is most lacking.

That itself invites us to take the themes of this literature seriously. For example, what are the magazines or photo-novels that form the base really telling? Over and through the sentimental bliss, the ecstasies of love, or bodily relations, they speak of communication. But a successful communication that overcomes obstacles and conflicts is not what is encountered in life. It is a legendary territory. It replaces the paradise of beliefs that have generally become unbelievable and that once opened a future of communion among saints. It displaces hopes that have themselves become no less unbelievable, that used to announce, with the days following the momentous evenings, the coming of a classless society. A continuity and relays among “utopias” indicate the trace of a function of the imaginary and a remainder of different kinds of paradise. No matter what, the present figure of the imaginary speaks of an absence in the most positive terms. It has been attesting to what, decades ago, David Riesman called “the lonely crowd,” a name he ascribed to the sickness from which modern Western society suffers.

Mythologies say what is being sought “in the image” because no one dares to believe in it anymore, and often what fiction alone is able to give. They betray at once hunger and action. They translate at the same time a refusal to lose and a refusal to act. Thus, too many words or images tell of a loss and an impotence, that is, the opposite of what they display. The great programs of a “new society” slyly substitute the message of discourses for action that would change our society. Revolutionary ideologies compensate for the deficit of will or the privation of power. Religion fiction, revolution fiction, eros fiction, or drug fiction insert into fiction the object that they display and, as if in a mirror, they produce but the inverted image of happiness whose flashes of sunshine they multiply in the urban landscape.

Discourse of Advertising

It would thus be vapid to believe that myths disappeared with the advent of rationalization. If we believed that the streets had been disinfected of myth, we would be deluding ourselves. On the contrary, myths reign over them. They spread out on surfaces of images the dreams and the repressed of a society. They surge up on all sides, but through outlets other than those of yesterday.
They invade advertising, whether in the form of "chocodreams," of a "direct return to native soil," of associations between "saving accounts" and "dreams," between "happiness" and "security," or between "celebration" and a bottle of Vichy water... In consumer society, such are the paltry joys of the rich. However, advertising parcels out in pocket money the equivalent of a golden age. Objects unfold a red carpet to a utopia that, far from being absorbed by consumerism, transforms the vocabulary of exchange, that is, commerce, into an imaginary literature, into a "Frigidaire mystique," as Lucien Goldmann so aptly put it. Refrigerators or food processors that fascinate the gaze of those who pass by replace the old words in order to assure, along with the tantalizing object, that "in two minutes we'll be able to celebrate!" Planted in the paradise garden of poster ads, the fruits of happiness are within arm's reach. They bring into proximity the eschatological end. They spell out an immemorial time by fragmenting its dream and by refusing its distance. But in reality, as in the way of words, objects always defer the desires they inspire beyond themselves toward other objects.

These consumer items are the subjects of every sentence. They have as their calling card the smile that modifies them through a sign of expectation and encounter, or the seductive gesture that encompasses the car and the washer with its dance. Thus is formed a discourse. It stipples the subway tunnels with signs of happiness where, squeezed like sardines, five million people circulate at rush hour. But what does it say, if not, with all the consumer goods that flicker on the main subway routes, the end that must halt the crowd's movement?

This imaginary discourse of commerce is pasted over every square inch of public walls. It unfurls from street to street and is scarcely interrupted by the intersection of avenues. The modern city is becoming a labyrinth of images. It is endowed with a graphics of its own, by day and by night, that devises a vocabulary of images on a new space of writing. A landscape of posters and billboards organizes our reality. It is a mural language with the repertory of its immediate objects of happiness. It conceals the buildings in which labor is confined; it covers over the closed universe of everyday life; it sets in place artificial forms that follow the paths of labor in order to juxtapose their passageways to the successive moments of pleasure. A city that is a real "imaginary museum" forms the counterpoint of the city at work.

This language of utopia is prolonged only when it moves from billboards to graffiti of protest, or from the underground tunnels of the subway to the corridors of the university; when it makes a sharp turn from solicitation to protestation. An identical mural writing announces that ready-made happiness is for sale. From the billboard to graffiti, the relation of offer and demand is inverted: but, in both cases, representation is "manifest" because it is not given. In this respect, refusal speaks the same language as seduction. Here too, commercial discourse continues to tie desire to reality without ever marrying the one to the other. It exposes communication without being able to sustain it.

This counterpoint of mural language has, moreover, many other equivalents. The dream intrudes in the fissures of the workweek, on weekends, and in leisure time. It emerges in the "vacation" of time with the artifices of the countryside or the freedoms of the "party." But it also ends up on the psychoanalyst's couch, where the client reclines, a spectator of the dreams his or she recounts and the object of a faceless concentration behind his or her back. The imaginary haunts sensitivity groups, organizing legends of a press that manufactures "good" and "bad," both "idols" and "resistance groups." It inhabits a common vocabulary and originates from everywhere. It is invested in technical organizations and, perhaps, turns them into dream factories. It is the indefinite water that laps the shores of scattered islets of reason, sites that new enterprises seek to capture and to exploit.

The Body of Happiness

It has often been noted that the universal infiltration of the imaginary was characterized by a growing eroticization. Eroticism immediately follows food products and comes before everything else (happiness, health, etc.) in a classification of the types of solicitation in order of importance. It is the normal end point of publicity that celebrates the sensations of eating and drinking, the marvels of the mouth and lips, the ease of unhindered movement, the joys of the flesh, the nasal metamorphoses of breathing, or the liberations of the body that lose weight and gravity. Announced everywhere, along with a celebration of the senses, is a celebration of the body. But it is a fragmented body, categorized by virtue of an analytical dissection, cut into successive sites of eroticization. The dispersion of pleasures replaces former unities with a sensorial space. A metaphor of happi-
ness, the body is serialized. It is antireason, but it is structured in the fashion of contemporary reason as its negative and its equivalent.

We have to call into question this "common" language that Freud, when he wrote *Civilization and Its Discontents*, distinguished from cultural or aesthetic "sublimations" reserved for an elite. The "ordinary man" is the fundamental problem. Thus, what is striking in the social discourse of happiness is the alternation between the confessions of the heart and the baring of the body. Love stories and eroticism no doubt tell of the same movement, but on two different registers. For both, however, an unveiling takes place.

It can be interpreted as a sexual or a sentimental exhibitionism. And often rightly so. But this gesture contains a more fundamental meaning. It seeks to display what is hidden and, thereby, to withdraw what separates. The confession of the heart and, in a more radical but (paradoxically) more symbolic way, the undressing of the body function as the allegory of a quest for pleasure, for communion, or for reality. It is a demystification even if it still retains the form of a myth. The search for a truth is thus "represented."

From this point of view, three properties characterize the return of the body within the imaginary. It expresses a transgression, it connotes a communication, and it aims at the grasping of a reality.

From the "bodily cares" and the weight-watcher diets all the way up to "the expressiveness of the body" or to the techniques of love, the fantastic dimension of the body translates a transgression with respect to societal norms. Is there a more rigorous and more ritualized code than that of clothing? It classifies, it distinguishes, it hierarchizes, it guarantees the secret contracts of the group. It maintains social "distinctions," cultural status, and the distance between classes. This code cannot be broken, nor can social decency be compromised without transgressing an established order. To be sure, this "indecent exposure" will be tolerated as long as it is more or less "theatrical." Thus everyone will take pains to prove that "it's only a representation." But in itself the language of the body is egalitarian. It removes defensive and protective barriers. Although still in the mode of fiction because it only lays blame on signs and clothing, it bares and relativizes securities, patents, and social privileges.

Then again it tells the tale of a communication linked to this risk of social transgression. In every society, as Freud showed in various ways, Eros is controlled or repressed by the group it threatens. Thus the first communication, that of bodies in love, is at once an object of desire and an object of fear. With respect to the law, it does not conform. At the very least, it does not suffice for it to conform. Men and women are judged on the basis of their sexual relations, and here they no longer have the assurance of social rank. Eros is an irreducible violence. It restores at once both conflict and pleasure. It shakes to the core all public contracts. Perhaps, by exiling it within the image, people seek to guarantee its presence; but there too the discourse of the body speaks of internal relations in the society that returns to it through the detour of the imaginary.

In a word, a kind of ferocity or nostalgia stirs up from within the media-produced mythology of happiness, translating the desire to attain something short of representations. Clearly, the baring of the body still remains in the order of representation. But the social "clothing" of representation designates its opposite as bare and barren reality. Inside of language, the naked body is the theme that aims at both the referent and the medium of language. It is the emergence (betrayed by its very inscription on the surface of images) of cultural movement that sets out in quest of "nature," along with the entire range of mythological images of a return to childhood and to the nudity of paradise, to the originary immediacy of nonknowledge, and to "reality" in its perpetually veiled condition. Behind social barriers, beneath the necessary artifices of work, there would be—there is, the images tell us—a tree of life: the body, the concealed and forbidden fruit, the pleasure in sleep, the promise of health, the fountain of happiness. This "deep body," messianic body, and trace of the body-God would remain for the social body its lost and long-awaited truth.

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**From the Exotic Body to Critical Speech**

Laden with meaning, these three traits of the body remain no less the traits of a representation. In a broad sense, they are stuck in a language that always vacillates between display and camouflage because it spends its time in deceptively concealing what it nevertheless unveils. Transgression turns to the profit of the techniques of consumerism that rehabilitate and exploit it. Communication is filtered through forms of social censure. It moves, by being alienated within, into spectacles devoted to the love of others or into the "exercise of pity" that dialogue becomes. Bare reality forever appears only in the form of "possessions"; it is fragmented and hidden in an exchange of pleasures or of consumer goods.
The body situates a new exoticism, our own, by expressing the
demystification of the utopias—lunar or ethnological—of former
times. The vocabulary of health and of medicine, of eroticism, or of
drugs furnishes a site for our legends that are destined, as they have
always been, to steal away the black sun they announce.

In a word, as Freud put it, “happiness is not a cultural value.”

The sciences of language are probably only one more sign of
what representations have become. The techniques of suspicion, psy-
choanalytic and sociological alike, depend on the society they ana-
lyze. Speech, as well, by becoming critical, avows in its own way what
it is denouncing. Already on billboards the name that is adjoined to
the object being shown is the ironic evocation of its absence. The
argument of the image contradicts it. But by endlessly designating
things, words are in a position that differs from theirs. Words name
that position precisely because they have nothing to give; they spell
out absences by distinguishing realities. Signs of distancing, they po-
tulate disposition as the very condition of designation. They rep-
resent, with respect to every form of happiness, a critical moment.

Speech, I believe, has become a denaturing act, an act that cul-
turally posits a distancing with respect to nature. It is also tantamount
to admitting the illusion of economic prosperity or of the progress
of consciousness. One does not speak with one’s mouth full. In order to
be pronounced, speech is opposed to eating, and its content says noth-
ing other than just that. It retracts from consumption the meaning it
puts forward. Through its function it is destined to become the labor
that constantly insinuates the dangerous gap or the critical rift of a
lack in the dumb certainty of satisfaction. It denies the reality of plea-
sure in order to institute symbolic meaning.

Words, nonetheless, are not everything. The inverse is also true.
Words are nothing or, rather, an “almost nothing.” Like an acid, they
eat at (and sculpt?) the immediate given of the imaginary. They eat
into the shell that encloses happiness; by opening it, they bore holes
into it. Surely, whether philosophical, poetic, theological, or born of
a popular “wisdom” that is bereft of these comely adjectives, speech,
in the magical act of being pronounced, does not make disappear the
immense deployment of possessions that are given to be seen. It is it-
self taken and nourished in the very element out of which it emerges.
But the sole fact of speech restores the absence, prohibits identifica-
tion with the imaginary, and, in the form of a no, permits a movement
that perhaps is one of meaning.

From then on, a space of play unfolds between speech and the imagi-
ary. It specifies the enigma of these forms of happiness promised
by the image and denied by words. The discourse of images repre-
sents them; the syntax of words refers them to a meaning that is
lacking. But from this play the tacit rules are indicated on the poster
or billboard by the finger pointed toward the spectator or by the in-
discretely mention of a price: it costs money. Such is the “morality” these
languages formulate. They mutually refer to a third element that can
be neither stated nor seen: the gesture. The allegory of the imaginary
and critical speech point in this way to the veritable site of hap-
piness, a site that cannot be placed in the space of the image or in the
coherence of the phrase: the act of spending.

This “act” restores the moments that escape the spatial continui-
ities of discourses. It is, like time itself, what exists only when it is
being lost. In all likelihood it will assume different forms, going as
far as the political or ceremonial gesture of being spent, or as far as
the revolutionary act of preferring a founding moment to a heritage,
or as far as the “madness” of receiving the grace of happiness in the
loss of profits, even the profit “gained” through consciousness of the
act. But this happiness is already figured in the mythology that rep-
resents transgression, risky communication, or a meaning to be un-
veiled. Finally, reality that is unveiled is not hidden in a “nature” that
can be situated somewhere. It can be identified with something un-
defined: with action itself.

Perhaps, after all, imaginary literature in its totality signifies noth-
ing other than this irreducible surplus with respect to any margin of
social profit, a luxury that cannot be eliminated from the most rational
of all societies. In the flickering of its consumable fictions, the imagi-
ary would bear the truth it could never offer. A metaphor of history,
it transposes into an act of seeing what can only be found in the act of
doing. It calls thus for the denigration of speech, and yet it is also in-
capable of replacing the praxis that alone provides meaning.

In an elementary way, it could be said that our age of mass me-
dia transmutes society into a “public” (a key word that replaces the
substantive “people”), that it pigeonholes happiness in the icons of
objects offered for consumption, and that it mobilizes the verb in the
direction of denegation (“please be hidden, object!”). It combines the
epiphany of the king-object and suspicion with regard to all repre-
sent forms. It similarly coordinates the language of figuration and the language of lack. The relation of these two idioms posits the ambiguity of happiness. It might already be uttering reality, but with out being able to say where that reality is found.

It would be impossible to conclude that happiness is subject to an indefinite postponement of something that is forever to come, toward a hereafter that is always renewable and that would merely indicate the vanity of its pursuit and the insignificance of its end. On the contrary, I believe this movement finds its support and jurisdiction in the act to which the combination of the two languages and their impossibility of enclosing it in a discourse refer: to have a blast. This “luxury” of celebration is that without which there is no more human experience, the “madness” without which there is no reason. It may simply consist, at least for the humble wage earner in Rio, in spending half of one’s annual salary during Carnival. For the lover, it might mean “tossing out the window” all one’s savings in order to offer a gift. For the person on vacation, it might mean “blowing a wad.” A strange and sacred generosity.

To be sure, a society controls the outlets when it can no longer make this same gesture and when it prefers the position of the spectator to that of the actor. Thus a Malthusianism of risk and of happiness (the two go together) puts off till vacation the celebration that is eliminated from political life for reasons of economic profit or national security. At that moment celebration is marginalized. It is often now limited to the cultural sectors; and yet they are themselves objects of jealousy as much as they are condemned by the moralists of economic or sexual “production” — ascetics who are, moreover, hypocrites, for their unremitting work is a game of the privileged class that cannot be avowed in public.

Despite all else, there remains the link between the happiness of living and the danger of existing, between finding and losing. It even inverts the techniques of assurance or the signs of prosperity in ways of venturing forth: medicine is metamorphosed into drugs; cars, into risks.

This redeployment from goods owned to goods to be lost probably gives its truest measure to the economy that links production to consumption. To consume also means to annihilate and to lose. There, surely, is the economy that articulates its end and jurisdiction by merely stating “Spend!” There is the economy that rejects its own law and retracts into a capitalistic stinginess by declaring, “Just get rich!” To this rift between spending and saving correspond many great political and cultural options. At the grand outer limit, it is the option of the revolutionary nation that prefers to run the risk of living over attaining goods, or even that of conservative groups that the fear of risking their heritage destined to fetishize the happiness that they are precisely in the process of losing.

This collective or individual “ethic” might be seen as paradoxical. Yet it must be reiterated. Whoever wants to conserve is established in the dependency of an order, a possession, or a science, and subject to the law (of profit or of assurance) that eliminates through risk the happiness that it promises. It alienates itself. It no longer “holds” onto happiness but onto representations. For there seems to be happiness only where the other is the condition of being, where people can have a blast, where the conservation of goods is distorted through an expenditure made in the name of others, of an elsewhere or of the Other, where the celebration of a communal generosity, a scientific adventure, a political foundation, or an act of faith intervenes.