Urbanism “In-Yer-Face”  
*Spatial Dissent, Filmic Intervention and Polemical Narratives in Design Thinking*

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**Abstract:** Not untouched by a wider philosophical discourse, the design professions have over the last decades gone through what is often referred to as a “linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967). A move away from foundationalist assumptions about ‘reality’ towards a recognition of the generative importance of signs and symbols, the turn has also involved what used to be spatial margins and borderlands. Not only has it brought into focus the everyday landscape of consumerism or suburban housing, but furthermore the more general spatial polemics of contemporary urbanity. Discussing three filmic interventions into urban discourse, the paper aims to bring out the rhetorical aspect of the turn, as it moves from signs to polemical agency. Actualizing a more agonizing, ‘in-yaer-face’ communication, the paper also draws attention to the rhetorical and political implications of the turn, as a “thinking of the new disorder” (Rancière 2006:88).

**Keywords:** Linguistic turn, anti-representationalism, urbanism, cinema, polemology, rhetorical turn, politics

**Introduction**

One of the main tendencies of the last decades within the design professions has been the attempt to reposition design practice in a context of signs, language and communication. From twinkling desert strips and mundane suburban settlements alike, architects, planners and designers have been obliged to learn that the urban landscape, far from a matter of form alone, is a composite of social justifications, persuasive discourses and proposed directions. In this respect, the design professions have not remained untouched by what in philosophical terms has been referred to as “the linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967); the move away from foundationalist assumptions about ‘reality’ towards a more subtle recognition of the conditioning importance of linguistic practices. On the contrary, this turn has rendered to design broadly speaking a new importance as the material equivalent to the rhetorical *persuasio*; the physical delivery of socially compelling statements. This has, however, also led to a new discrimination, now between different representational regimes, competing vocabularies or expert discourses, a situation that has come to obscure the more radical, ontological effects of the turn – the reconsidering of knowing in general and design in particular as a “language-game” (Wittgenstein, 1953:5).

As we accept the lack of absolute meanings or true representations for a given reality, we are confronted with the plurality and temporality of a communicative landscape, including also what might be considered spatial margins and borderlands.

It is this latter aspect of ‘the linguistic turn’ that constitutes the focus of the present paper. In this respect, the turn has not only made us aware of language as a spatially materialized signifying system, but furthermore brought into consciousness the more general spatial polemics of contemporary urbanity. Discussing three filmic interventions into urban discourse, the paper aims to bring out the *rhetorical* aspect of the turn; the move from spatially materialized signs towards argumentative agency. The main case developed
therefore concerns the need of a more radical twist, with the potential of squeezing out not only the persuasive benefits of design practice, but also its more polemical, and thus political bearings. In this respect, the current discourse on the city as acted out in films like Mathieu Kassovitz’ La Haine (1995), Fernando Meirelles’ and Kátia Lund’s Cidade de Deus (2002), and Shane Meadows’ This is England (2006) – provides an interesting and provocative starting point. In, and through, these films, communication unfolds not only as a matter of representation, but more concretely as a matter of speaking ‘in the face of the other’; in the distressed awareness of opposing views.

Linguistic turns and tropes – a background discussion

One of the main starting points for a discussion about the relationship between communication and design is the 60s and 70s debate, in particular as it appears in the seminal treatise Learning from Las Vegas (Venturi et al, 1972/1977) Here, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Stephen Izenour famously raised the question whether there is something to learn for a designer from the commercial urban landscape of mass-mediation. Their answer was emphatically positive: contemporary architects can learn as much from the Las Vegas Strip as their ancestors learnt from the Roman piazza. Ideal architectural space, they declared, is not enough – there is also an “anti-spatial” architecture, an architecture dominated by communicative styles and signs (Venturi et al, 1972/1977:8). If the modernist architect had been educated to believe that pure form is sufficient to guide man through life, the architect of a later era had to accept what was already apparent in the everyday urban landscape – that the complex program of contemporary human habitats require more multifaceted combinations of concepts than “the triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space” (Venturi et al, 1972/1977:9).

Unsurprisingly, the idea that communication dominates space has evoked much controversy. To emphasize the scenic and persuasive aspects of design is the same as to neglect the social responsibility of the designer; the essential vocation to envision solutions to precisely the problems that the “anti-spatial”, consumerist society produces. Even though there are all the reasons in the world to take this kind of criticism seriously, there are also reasons to follow up on the initial claim. As stated in the second revised edition of Learning from Las Vegas, the intention behind the close study of a sprawling gambling resort was never to embrace the entire morality behind commercial advertising, gambling or exploitation of basic desires. Instead, the objective was to turn the attention to the spatial manifestations of communication as they appear in the existing urban landscape, to learn from the actual, historical development of an everyday environment, and to shed light on the symbolic workings of architectural forms (Venturi et al, 1972/1977:xv-xvii).

In this respect, the talkative Las Vegas landscape in a direct way reflects the broader philosophical turn that has been termed ‘linguistic’. Colorful, twinkling, pushy and ‘anti-architectural’, the “pleasure-zone” (Venturi et al., 1972/1977:53) highlighted two central aspects of this turn. Firstly, it drew attention to the issue of representation, secondly, it emphasized the importance of visual impact. As a system of signs, architecture operates in relation to a wider imagery or associative landscape.

Yet, the most important effect of the Las Vegas study was not necessarily its findings, but the further questioning that it evoked. If architecture and design is about representation, what then does it represent? And if architecture now is to recognize the ornamental and the vernacular, the heraldic and the ironic – all those rhetorical gadgets historically excluded from the edifying endeavor of architecture – who are the spokespersons on this visual arena?

Described from an architectural perspective, the turn was a move from space to signs and symbols. As opposed to the “duck”, the building as idiosyncratic volume ideally representing itself, “the decorated shed”, was the bearing principle of Las Vegas. Consisting of a visual
sign tending towards a container, a box sheltering a content, it stood out as a semiotic scheme of “signifier and signified” (Saussure, 1915/1970; Jencks and Baird, 1969).

However, against such a structural understanding stands an understanding of a further turn, a move away from structures of signs to signifying interactions, or “language games” (Wittgenstein, 1953:5). The idea of language as a game was meant to “bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or a form of life” (Wittgenstein, 1953:11). Following Wittgenstein’s philosophical investigations, there might be a shed behind the sign, it might even have a content, but that is not what makes the sign meaningful. Rather, it is the diverse ways in which it is put to use, that is significant.

Emerging here is a field of potentials which to criss-cross. Rather than a representative structure where meaning might be stored and put to display, this field is a landscape of concurrence and proximity, of routes and crossroads, of gaps and desires.

These issues are vital, and not only to the design practice. In a broader sense, the linguistic turn is an attempt to outspokenly address and question a modernity that to a great extent had developed if not a deaf mutism, so a sophisticated indifference as to the societal clamor that it did itself produce. First performed by mavericks such as Nietzsche, Simmel and Benjamin, the turn was also an explicitly urban turn, drawing attention to the arbitrary situatedness of language and the immanent absence from which it emanates – the “tragic” negativity of a human existence so inescapably dependent upon its own incomplete creations (Simmel 1903/1997:55-57; Nietzsche 1927/1995; Benjamin, 1928/2003; Cacciari 1993:20).

Yet, it is not until the 60s, when among others American philosopher Richard Rorty launches the idea of “the linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967), that the turn is causing any wider repercussion. Rorty makes it clear that for him, the turn towards linguistic practice is not only anti-structural (or anti-architectural), but anti-representational. Language is not representative of anything beyond its own diverse and embodied practices. One consequence of this radical anti-representationalism is that “no description of how things are from a God's-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were” (Rorty, 1991:13). Our own culturally constructed environment is what makes certain options live, while others appear dead or irrelevant.

According to many critics of Rorty’s philosophy, this leaves us with pure relativism. Following Rorty, this is not the point. Instead, the important issue is that the turn towards language also leaves us with ‘a world’ that does not in any way constrain our possibilities to develop new vocabularies, language games or idioms, with which to deal with it. The crucial premise is instead the shift from ‘consciousness’ to ‘practice’; a shift in relation to which ‘knowledge’ becomes a matter of understanding its social justification. Knowing, for Rorty, or perceiving a meaning, is a social activity, and must therefore be distinguished from subjectivism or relativism.

It is in this sense we should understand also the lesson of “the decorated shed”, the basic and ordinary, yet chatty and persuasive, building block of Las Vegas: Rather than providing a structure of fixed meaning or a system of regulated communication, the turn towards the shed was a turn towards language as parole, language as agency, as game. Despite the focus on signs and symbols, the landscape of mass-mediation is not primarily concerned with meaning, but constitutes a performative realm, a more or less accessible visual sphere of social formation. In this sense, also ‘high-designs’ concerned with ‘pure form’, including “ducks”, are the results of kinships of linguistic practices, operating on a plane of visual agency. And as such, they are neither true nor false in the realist sense, but good or bad, “becoming tyrannies only when we are unconscious of them” (Venturi et al., 1972/1977:162).

The objection one might raise against the idea of communication by design as envisioned by Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour, is perhaps that it is so focused on the pleasurable sides
of communication. Along the Strip, design is truly a game, but a game in which there seem to be no harsh messages, no objections, no real conflicts and no apparent losers. Along the Strip, everything takes place side by side; antique sculptures residing next to pulsating neon signs, thus forming an environment that the authors describe as primarily “inclusive” (Venturi et al., 1972/1977:52). Even though the Strip is an example of an everyday commercial landscape, as commonplace as any suburban commercial zone, its conflicts are reduced to visual “allusions” (Venturi et al., 1972/1977:53).

This effortlessness gives rise to a sense of relativity, of exchangeability, of subjectivity, which is also what have occupied many critics. Yet, ‘understanding’ is utterly dependent upon awareness also of the possible negations; of that which has been excluded from the game; that which is not visible, that which could potentially appear. In order to disavow a threatening relativity, this is crucial. And Rorty’s recipe is clear. “[M]y strategy,” he announces, “for escaping the self-referential difficulties into which ‘the Relativist’ keeps getting himself is to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics into cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try” (Rorty, 1998:57).

While Rorty enabled us to see our societies as rhetorical intersections or junctions of cultural politics, he had a more idealistic view of their potentials as figures of “mutual understanding” and “social hope” (Rorty, 1999:229-239). Yet, having faith in communicative dialogue does not necessarily imply denying the deep-seated subversiveness of linguistic practice. On the contrary, a belief in egalitarian participation is perhaps the best excuse for seriously delving into the constitutive mis-match that characterizes communication. This heterological aspect of human dialogic practice, so fervently explored by Michel de Certeau, does instead constitute its reproductive power. What is so conspicuous about language as parole, is that not only is it an action unfolding from within a linguistic system, but, as de Certeau describes it, an action continuously challenging and re-appropriating the same.

The act of speaking is in this sense a situation that belongs to no-one – “a present relative to time and space” – “posit[ing] a contract with the other” (de Certeau, 1984: xiii). But what does it mean to create a present that is not ‘present’ from a realist point of view, a present that is not representative of a given time-space, but ‘relative to time and space’? And what does it mean in this situation to put forward a contract to the other?

**Urbanity as spatial polemic – three filmic examples**

In the following, I will propose some examples of such a relative present, furthermore explicitly unfolding as an active part of ‘urban space’. All the examples are cinematographic utterances, fictional expressions, however, also deliberately staged as encounters with the ‘other’; as a rhetorical and discursive practice unfolding in the tense awareness of opposing views.

The films are Mathieu Kassovitz’ *La Haine* from 1995, a dark depiction of life in the suburban Parisian grand ensembles; Fernando Meirelles’ and Kátia Lund’s *Cidade de Deus* from 2002, which describes the city from a violent favela perspective; and Shane Meadows’ *This is England* from 2006, a blunt recollection of small town life in Thatcher’s England. The common feature of the films is their point of departure in a specific urban location, and their common claim to provide a polemical evidence of contemporary urbanity from a position of dissent.

In this respect, Kassovitz’ *La Haine, or Hate*, is perhaps the film that most obviously communicates a spatial polemic. Relating to a specific happening, the death of Makome M’Bowole, a young African, who in 1993 was fatally battered by the police while in
detention, the film was, according to its director, evidently a film social; a film focusing on the everyday relationships and hierarchies of a specific suburban setting. Arrestingly black and white, the film already initially put forward a pushy and provocative face, famously acted out by one of the protagonists, Jewish skinhead Vinz, in the famous c’est à moi que tu parles sequence. This mirror monologue constitutes the agitated prelude of what then develops into a dark contribution to the avant-garde city symphony tradition. Fuelling the plot is a revolver, lost by a policeman during the riots following on the battering of what in the film is a young Arab. The gun is found by Vinz, who in front of his two friends, Said, of Arab origin, and Hub, a young African, threatens to use it, should their injured friend die. Following the three young men in their rambling throughout Greater Paris for twenty-four hours, the film provides a territorial mapping of a conflictive urban space, whose characteristics for these young men, more than anything, is its more or less policed borders and frontiers.

Everyday life in the suburbs is marked by an incessant vigilance, reacted upon by the three youngsters in their relentless and inevitable challenging of limits. Wherever they hang out, irrespective of whether in a burnt out fitness centre, in a desolate playground, in a dysfunctional suburban plaza or in an exclusive downtown art gallery, the young men fail to find anything but policed demarcations. Despite their constant and creative, at times even entertaining, jargon, they find themselves detached from the system of spatial meaning, in a kind of free linguistic fall.

After a series of violent confrontations, also within the group, Vinz finally hands over the gun to Hub, only to be caught by the police. In a final situation of inconsequential violence and spatial confusion, Vinz is killed by a stray bullet, fired from an unclear position. Before we have deciphered the spatial configuration and worked out the explanation, the image is frozen, and we are left with the uncanny experience of a fatal, twenty-four hour fall finally coming to an end.

In Meirelles’ and Lund’s Cidade de Deus, we encounter a similarly raw, violent, yet colourful geography. In the opening scene, repeated in the end, we are presented with the iconography of this world: accompanied by Brazilian rhythms, we see meals being prepared and instruments being handled, we see knives being sharpened and chickens trying to escape their destiny. This bustling township is Cidade de Deus, “The City of God”, a result of the municipal policy of dislocating the crammed favelas out of the centre, to the suburbs. Narrated in first person, from the viewpoint of Busca-pé, or “Firecracker”; a fishmonger’s son, the film describes an early phase in the township’s development, as the 60s turn into 70s and 80s. The plot circles around a number of predominantly male characters, all with explicitly narrative nicknames, and follows Busca-pé’s struggle to free himself from the grasp of the slums; his attempts to get away from drug wars, ignorance and corruption.

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1 Michel Kassovitz in a documentary accompanying the 2006 Universal Studios dvd release of the film.
2 A direct comment on Robert de Niro’s menacing speech in the mirror in Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver from 1976, thus drawing attention also to the inner logic of filmic communication.
Also in this film, the story literally emerges out of a detached location, left to form its own present, its own rules and laws. A confusing territory with invisible yet definite borders, it provokes what could be called a territorial awareness, an acute attention as to the material and environmental aspects of social formation. This spatial and relational attention is in the film embodied by Busca-pé, who, through the use of a camera that he gets hold of, develops a topological understanding of the intricate and fragmented geography. As we return to the initial scene, the final and fatal chase through the streets (a chase, which for Busca-pé also develops into a hunt for the ultimate photographic shot), faith catches up with the gangsters Galinha and Cenoura (“Chicken” and “Carrot”), who together with their opponent, petty drug emperor Zé, eventually end up as mere scrap in the hot and juicy favela stew.

The third of my examples is Shane Meadows’ depiction of 1980’s Thatcherist England. Far from the vibrant slums of Rio, we encounter Shaun, a stray twelve year old working class lad, who just lost his father in the meaningless Falklands War. His everyday landscape is a dull and ugly English coastal town, severely suffering from de-industrialization. If in the French and Brazilian suburbs borders were negotiated in heated spatial combat, they are here rather made present through continuous acts of humiliation – through bullying, through disciplinary punishment behind closed doors, or through the gnawing feeling of being hopelessly left behind. Also the environment bears traces of a similar disgrace, gradually unveiled in the beginning of the film as we follow a reluctant Shaun on his way to school. This feeling of degradation is further reinforced as the political and global interferes with the personal. Already initially, news reel footage of demonstrations and riots, of war scenes and political rallies are seamlessly blended into Shaun’s worn-out and graffiti-covered environment – the school yard, the dodgy pedestrian underpass, the derelict industrial sites, the run-down housing estates.

During one of his drifts through this landscape, Shaun runs into a gang of skinheads, who takes him on as a member. For them, everything is about style, about symbolic items like Fred Perry sweaters, Ben Sherman shirts, Dr Martens’ shoes and perfectly folded jeans. Using their own appearance, differentiating themselves from the significations of the small town, they quite innocently challenge certain regimes, such as that of wage labour or codes of conduct. In this situation, Shaun becomes the mascot, a special gadget in their own alternative plot. However, when the ex-convict Combo turns up with his racist ideas, the story takes another turn, and a more explicitly political geography unfolds. The gang splits in two, and Shaun, seduced by the vital force of political violence, follows Combo, whom he sees as a kind of
father. Finally, failing to reconcile his own split vision of a world of ‘we’ and ‘them’, the authority of Combo disintegrates as he is gradually confronted with his own insuperable marginalization.

Despite the fact that the three films present geographically and culturally distinct settings, the location does in all three appear as agent. As architectural theorist Nick Bullock points out in an analysis of Kassovitz’ film, “[t]he rendering of the location is crucial to the success of the film” (Bullock, 2003:393). In the case of La Haine, the location did not appear without considerable scouting. Most of the around twenty potential sites spotted by the team were not interested in appearing on screen, especially not in the context in question. The final site, the Noé estate at Chanteloup-les-Vignes in the north-west suburbs of Paris, designed in the early 70s by Émile Aillaud (Penz, 2008), is a large development typical for much of the housing projects of the 70s, however not at all of the stereotypical size that we associate with French grand ensembles like that of Sarcelles or Mourenx.

Cidade de Deus was shot in the streets of Rio, although not in the geographical Cidade de Deus, a social housing project in Jacarepaguá, in the Western Zone of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, which was considered too dangerous. Instead, the film was shot in a similar small-scale township planned and laid out in the 60s in the efforts to overcome discrimination and social exclusion in difficult districts of large cities.

The mundane municipality in Meadows’ film is similarly carefully singled out. A coastal town in the once industrial Midlands, not far from Hull, Grimsby was once England’s largest fishing port. Remote from the metropolitan area of London, and clearly suffering from de-urbanization, Grimsby performs in the movie as a generative spatial framework, even providing the protagonist Shaun, acted by Thomas Turgoose, a then twelve year old local resident of the godforsaken town.

In all three cases, the location provides more than an ‘authentic’ environment. Neither simply mirrored nor demonized, the location offers a field of interaction, a stage with evocative and specific props. In the case of Noé, we are not only presented with an official and patronizing social housing estate with dutifully decorated façades, obligatory public art works and children’s play sculptures, but also more complex ingredients, such as unofficial public spaces and social events. In City of God, we see a similar patter. Even though it would be simple to blame a poorly conceived social design project for fuelling hopelessness, we can see that on a detailed level, in the change between different perspectives, other narratives evolve, not the least a paradoxical ability in this environment, of re-configuration and change. In Grimsby, finally, although the stage and props are less abundant and more inert, there is a correspondent reappropriation going on. Embodied by young Shaun, as he moves from the bottom of the pecking order to a position where he is able to transgress both of his own predefined identity and the limits of the oppressive system, a feeling of spatial rediscovery is generated.

As rhetorical tropes rather than authentic geographies, the films rely on “a tradition of dystopian film-making” (AlSayyad, 2006:72). Through a quite forceful dislocation of perspectives, such films function as interventions not only into the actual debate about the city. Directly addressing the tragedy of human existence, they also tackle the issue of meaning. As in the situationist tactics of dérive (Debord, 1958), a kind of voluntary and exaggerated surrender to the urban signifying system, they also call into attention not only the field of forces in operation, but more importantly, also, at least potentially, constitute a call, or even cry, for change.

In rhetorical terms, however, this transformative power is dependent upon the persuasive unity of the gesture, as well as its ability to engage, to give rise to enthusiasm. Fundamentally contradictory and agonizing, the major unity the films referred to above rely upon is in this respect a topological unity of ‘place’, or as architectural theorist Francois Penz has expressed
it, an “immersive feel”, which “allows the audience to experience the space in real time, to get a feel for the topology of the place, its levels, its thresholds, conveying a more realistic sense of time and distance and of the overall scale of the environment” (Penz, 2008: 151).

However, loaded with unresolved ambivalences and conflicts, this ‘topological place’ is, as Penz carefully points out, not automatically equivalent with “the city being itself” (Penz, 2008:143). Far from the soulful streetscapes of the cinema vérité tradition, the locations in the above examples constitute rhetorical *topoi*, places of situated discourse and argumentation. What the films perform is in this sense what de Certeau would have described as an *operational extension* of our spatial presence; rather than simply “topical, defining places”, the films could in this sense be considered as “topological, concerning the deformations of figures” (de Certeau, 1984:129). Rather than simply a series of formal linguistic “turns”, we are here confronted with what could potentially give rise to more consistent spatio-material buckles in the urban structure.3

**In-yer-face urbanism – from signifying manifestation to polemical mobilization**

As popular and mass-mediated, full feature fables of the suburb (furthermore in all three cases staged with a large number of amateur actors), the films scrutinized here might not provide what would be considered cutting edge or ‘high-art’ contributions to urban re-invention. Yet, as polemical interventions into urban discourse, the films have in different ways stimulated a debate with direct repercussion also on urban policy making.

When Mathieu Kassovitz together with his crew received the prestigious mise-en-scène Prize in Cannes in 1995, the police force in charge of the event turned their back on what they considered to be a deliberate attack on their profession. With its close-ups of sadistic police brutally, the film conveyed nothing but an unjust and simplified ‘anti-police’ caricature, and was as such directly immoral. Other critics accused Kassovitz of presenting a distorted image of the *banlieues* and called for a more nuanced and balanced image. In June, shortly after the first screenings, new riots broke out, provoked by yet another death of a young beur, a second generation North African, this time in Noisy-Le-Grand, by the daily France Soir soon renamed “Noisy-La-Haine”; a sarcasm that in turn caused sociologist François Dubet to put forward the reminder that “one must not overestimate the role of cinema or television; the *banlieue* kids did not wait for *La Haine* to express themselves” (Vincendeau, 2007). Yet, the film had generated an engaging debate, to the extent that Prime Minister Alain Juppé decided to screen the film for government officials. Ten years after the film, as cars were once again burning in the Parisian *cités*, Kassovitz on his blog aimed an unmerciful attack at Nicolas Sarkozy, at the time minister in charge of the police and security, evoking a response by Sarkozy himself.

Highly polemical in character, the film was certainly not unproblematic. Even though fervently critiquing the constant harassment of young people in the *banlieue*, it also conceptualized ‘youth’ as entirely male (Vincendeau, 2007). When questioned on this, Kassovitz defended himself, claiming that the inclusion of women, and subsequently ‘love’, into the story would have resulted in a “softening” of the message, something he wanted to avoid. For Kassovitz, it seems, women signify nothing but intimate relations, and could have no significance, neither socially nor politically. Similarly, one has to ask what kind of spatial

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3 In his analysis of Kassovitz’ film, François Penz offers an intricate mapping of these locational deformations as they appear in the movie. He shows how “Kassovitz uses the environment to support and set the stage for the narrative” (Penz, 2008:150), deliberately employing among other gestures long sequence shots emphasizing the interaction with the location.
identity a film like La Haine produces, and what kind of performative, transformative of deformative effects it might have in relation to a certain social and political situation.\(^1\)

An immensely skillful and passionate in-yer-face statement, La Haine unfolded as a mass-mediated happening, occupying a place in the midst of urban events. Shot with handheld cameras and with a crew of more than 200 non-professional actors, the collaboration between Fernando Meirelles and the documentary filmmaker Kátia Lund constituted without doubt a similarly impressive urban mission. On the one hand a social undertaking based on a ‘true’ story, as retold by Paulo Lins in an epic novel (Lins, 1997), the shooting of the film transformed into an extensive learning project, owing a lot to the emancipatory philosophies of Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal. In this respect, the film constituted a sociopolitically ambitious reenactment, which also found its way into the public housing debate, thus drawing attention to the complex social geography of informal cities worldwide. Yet, distributed by the Disney Corporation, it was also an action movie, ostensibly devoted to entertaining bleeding-heart narration of poverty, which, according to critics, turned the film into an exploitation of the favelas as exotic spectacle. Considering the fact that the favelas of Rio today provide a tourist destination, this critique has its bearings. Though problematic as it may be, this inherent ambiguity of the film could also be seen as one of its communicative assets, actualizing the paradoxical logic of a global media industry.

Meaured’s film finally, reveals a similarly composite mission. Actualizing a topic intimately intertwined with both Thatcherism and the Third Way Politics of the Blair administration, it is perhaps the film that falls closest to a kind of urbanist everyday. Far from an action movie setting, Grimsby is commonplace and as such it lacks the dramatic ‘otherness’ that characterizes the previous examples. Yet, when re-enacted with the “edited engagement” (Bullock, 2003:387) of the cinema, it gains a new and empowering importance. The Grimsby communicated on the screen is in this sense no more ‘real’ than the Grimsby of the municipal plan. On the contrary, the cinematic Grimsby is an autonomous environment, ‘a present relative to time and space’, and as such an rhetorical space for projective action. The argument that might be raised against Meadows’ special rhetoric is perhaps his passionate use of historically symbolic props or details, offering to the spectator a nostalgic yet compelling flashback of the 80s. However, while nostalgia can be pacifying, the dystopian undertones in the film have an agitating effect also on the utopian, potentially provoking and re-inventing it. Shaun’s moves through the derelict and godforsaken 80s landscape in this sense unfolds as a rite-de-passage, allowing for radical mobilization of identities and positions.

Far from the pleasure zones of the American dream, the filmic interventions referred to above do not necessarily provide a sphere where you feel ‘at ease’. Nor are they neutral recordings, but artful rhetorical gestures, unveiling a surrounding of discomfort and confusion, of actualized power relations – and of creativity. As for the settings they bring into play, they might have the potential to “momentarily banish the sense of marginality that haunts even the most central urban locations” (Keiller, 2003:382). Even though for most filmic locations a matter of temporary celebrity, such moments in the starlight might also have a more long-term impact, bringing into attention the spatio-temporal conditions of communication.

Through a polemical use of spatial location, films such as that of Kassovitz, Meirelles/Lund and Meadows present a means to actualize both the ambiguities and potentials of communication in the realm of urban and architectural design. As reminders of the fact that communicative practice also includes performing ‘in the face of the other’, in the awareness of opposing views, these films accomplish a move beyond both semiotics, as concerned with

\(^1\) Penz points to the fact that two years after the release of La Haine, minister of integration Eric Raoult challenged film makers to propose alternative images of the banlieue, a call which inspired Bernard and Nils Tavernier to produce the documentary de l’autre coté du periph’ (1997) (Penz, 2008:153).
the ordering structure of language; and philosophy, as concerned with the conceptual structure of thinking. The ‘linguistic turn’ that they perform is a rhetorical one, problematizing the urban environment and its potentials of ‘being itself’. As for the urban fabric, the communicative practice of cinema may in this sense offer a possibility to understand spatial communication as a venture “where we play and – make up the rules as we go along” (Wittgenstein, 1953:39). Proposing both a polemical and an autonomous ‘as-if’ space, cinematic practice seems to suggest that communication is not only a matter of structure, form and meaning, or of grammar, syntax and vocabularies; but a field of forces consisting of spatio-temporal and dislocational turns and tropes.

Returning to the agitated face of young Vinz as he confronts us with his provocative question, we may acknowledge that, yes, as designers, architects and planners, we should open up for a communication also with him as well as with other mouthpieces of spatial dissent. As in the “political aesthetics” described by Jacques Rancière, these agents embody a rhetorical turn that does not give way to disagreement and incongruity. On the contrary, they present what could be called an ‘in-yer-face’ reenactment of the urban condition, which renders to the rhetorical approach its significance as a “thinking of the new disorder” (Rancière 2006:88).

Bibliography
