

Final Paper

Language, Subjectivity and Urban Imaginaries in an Expanded Cinematic Field:
Experiencing *ABCDF: The Graphic Dictionary of Mexico City* as a Work of Movement
Performed by the Act of Walking

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Abstract

This paper posits speculative arguments about interrelationships between media, the built environment, and subjectivity through an analysis of *ABCDF: Graphic Dictionary of Mexico City*, a project produced in 2001 that encompasses a 1502 page book, an interactive CD-Rom and a public museum exhibition. My methodology is interdisciplinary, situated across the disciplines of cinema and media studies, history and theory of urbanism, and literary criticism. Theoretically, I draw most heavily upon Giuliana Bruno's expansion of the cinematic field in her discussions of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne-Atlas* and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*; George Landow's writings about hypertext and hypermedia; Umberto Eco's ideas of performance and openness; and Michel de Certeau's exploration of the relationship between language and the city. I have chosen *ABCDF* specifically because I believe it illustrates a unique approach to representing the city that re-invents the dictionary, not as a vehicle for establishing a pretense of total knowledge, but instead as an "open work" that is "performed" through an embodied and active spectatorial subjectivity enacted through walking in the city. Produced on the cusp of the widespread adoption of the Internet and virtual geographic software such as Google Earth, *ABCDF* crystallizes the potential of hypermedia, not simply to interconnect multiple media objects, but to reveal the hypertextual nature of our physical environments and stimulate a subjectivity sensitive to our place within them.

Introduction

Through a multitude of media coverage, books, and museum exhibitions in recent years, the public's engagement with key issues of the city and urban culture seems to have reached a new high. By now, those who read daily newspapers and visit museums have all at one point or another been confronted by the statistic that for the first time in history 50% of the planet lives in urban areas and that this percentage is rising. Mexico City, one of the world's largest metropolises with a population hovering around 20 million inhabitants, is almost always included in such discussions about the state of the global cities today.¹ This recent attention and representation is not new to a city with an extensive history stretching across millennia from its origins as the capital of a mighty pre-Columbian empire, to its place at the center of the Spanish colonies, and its subsequent and current role as the seat of the modern Mexican state. However, the history of representing Mexico City has left dramatic gaps.

Rubén Gallo, in the Introduction to *The Mexico City Reader* writes, "One of the most popular modes of theorizing Mexico City posits the capital as a place that has evolved gradually but consistently through the centuries, where cultural traditions dating from the Aztec city survive in the megalopolis of the twenty-first century... These works present the history of Mexico City as an unbroken continuum from pre-Columbian times to the age of NAFTA."² As Gallo points out, one of the most significant drawbacks to this mode of theorization is its failure to effectively approach the city of today. In these works, contemporary Mexico City is presented "as an appendix — a tragic coda."³

In addition, what such modes of theory often fail to grasp is the everyday lived

¹ See for example the TATE Modern's recent exhibition *Global Cities* <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/globalcities/>

² Rubén Gallo, "Introduction" *The Mexico City Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004): 6.

³ *Ibid.*: 7.

experience of the city's residents. In the discursive history of Mexico City, many of the works focus on the city's architectural marvels, from Aztec ruins to Spanish colonial palaces. As Gallo writes, these building-obsessed studies "fail to take into account the most important element of Mexico City: its inhabitants."⁴ In addition, there is a large and important field of literature that explores the significant challenges the modernizing city has faced: from political corruption, to crime, pollution, poverty, and overpopulation. Compared to the typically rosy-eyed historical accounts, these works often present an exclusively dystopic view of the city. In this light, I agree with Gallo when he asks, "we might now wonder about an alternative model for theorizing Mexico City that avoids these extremes — the overly pessimistic and the overly optimistic — and allows us to reach a more balanced view of the capital in the twenty-first century."⁵ It is this theoretical and representational context in which *ABCDF: Graphic Dictionary of Mexico City* intervenes.

⁴ Ibid.: 8.

⁵ Ibid.: 9.

ABCDF: Graphic Dictionary of Mexico City

Like Mexico City itself, *ABCDF* is not small. The project consists of a 1502 page book organized as a dictionary from A-Z featuring a mixture of photography, design, historical imagery, literary fragments, and a complete glossary corresponding to each term. There is also an interactive CD-Rom that uses an interface of cross-referenced tags to access a selection of the book's photographs, as well as short videos and sound recordings. Lastly, the project also consists of a large-scale exhibition, held initially at the city's major public art museum, Palacio de Bellas Artes, that has since traveled to multiple institutions internationally. All of the material was produced by over 200 artists and everyday citizens, compiled and selected by lead editors Cristina Faesler Bremer and Jerónimo Hagerman.

The book is so large that it comes packaged in a thick bright red cardboard carrying case, complete with plastic handle. On the outside of the box, one side reads ABC (in black) DF (in white). DF stands for *Distrito Federal*, the Federal District, the common name for Mexico City used by residents and others in the country. The other side of the box is a holographic image of the city. Not an aerial photograph, the picture is taken at a slight incline overlooking the city. The bright lights of a freeway and residential neighborhood are in the foreground; in the middle swath are specks of office towers; and in the background rest the mountains surrounding the valley of Mexico. There is a big sky overhead. When you move the box, the hologram transforms from early morning to mid-day to evening, with the sky turning into a bright, vibrant sunset. The image sets the tone for the book: there is the clear ambition to represent the city as a whole, from morning to night, from the periphery through the center to the surrounding landscape. And while the image is elevated, it is not a scientific overview, but instead an overlook. One could easily imagine a person standing on a hill on the edge of the city taking the

picture, maybe from a place where couples drive on weekends on dates to enjoy the view. It is fundamentally situated and emotional. It is the lived city.

When you open the cover of *ABCDF*, the insides are covered by an MC Escher-esque graphic of an alphabet city. Letters stand on top of buildings, spiral staircases lead to pre-Columbian pyramids, the letter "I" looks like it's going into a church, and the letter "J" is resting on top of a gazebo. It is a labyrinthine city of letters composed of the Mexico's pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern history. On the first page, Cristina Faesler Bremer describes the inspiration for the project:

This project arose out of the idea to create a book about the experience of living in the Federal District.... This book is a collective exercise to discover and try to understand the sundry affection that this city inspires in its most mysterious, intimate, and devoted aspects. More than glorifying or denigrating, the intention was to dig into what it means to live in a cluster of these proportions.

The photos and texts share a similar point of view by containing a personal vision that contributes to the collective image. For this reason, we placed the credits of the authors and artists at the end along with a glossary that helps to give a context to the entries.⁶

ABCDF aims to represent the lived experience of the city, understood as a dialectic between the individual and the group, a composition constructed from "personal vision that contributes to the collective image."

Although a creative interpretation of the dictionary format, *ABCDF*'s fundamental matrix remains individual words. Literally organized from A-Z, the book includes generic words that one would find in every city such as Flag (*Bandera*), Food (*Comida*), or Hero (*Héroe*). Here, the specificity of place is created by the imagery, clearly drawn from the everyday life of Mexico City. Flag is illustrated by a photograph of a man driving an older VW bug with a Mexican flag on his hood. And following this page, there is a grid of Mexican flags in many different settings in the city: on license plates, in store windows, on rooftops, hanging in under the rearview

⁶ Cristina Faesler Bremer, *ABCDF: El Diccionario Gráfico de la Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Editorial Diamantina, 2001): 8.

mirrors of average cars. Food is represented by photographs of sliced fish, a man holding meat in a grocery store, a kid smearing mayonnaise onto a corn at a street vending station, a man pushing a fruit cart, amongst many other pictures. Hero is represented by two Mexican wrestling figures. These are all very everyday images, including panoramic and detail city shots, as well as people.

The dictionary also includes words of specific places in the city, such as the book's first term *Abasto* (the city's major industrial produce market), *Zócalo* (the city's central square) or *Tepito* (the neighborhood long infamous for inner-city crime). It includes city rituals, such as *Reyes Magos* (The Three Kings) and words for civic infrastructure, like Public Swimming Pool (*Balenario*) or the Subway (*Metro*). Some of the words are more political: *Zapatista* shows rebels marching in the *Zócalo*; *Prostituta* shows a solemn face of a pregnant woman; *Migrante* is illustrated by a two-page spread showing families struggling to move into the city. The list of words could (and does) go on and on. The abstract structure of the dictionary allows a new language to emerge, one specific to the city. The language embodies the imagined community of the city, and the particular words, images, and glossary definitions comprise the intersection of personal, individual, and subjective contributions.

Some words are used in unexpected ways to call attention to local practices, such as *Apartado*. The standard meaning of *apartado* is "reservation," like at a restaurant, but in the book it is illustrated by a series of pictures showing different buckets, poles, milk crates, bottles or boxes in the street. In a 2002 interview, Faesler said: "The idea behind what we are showing in this book is that things are really surprising. Sometimes they are so banal that you don't look at them while you are walking in the streets. For example, we use the word *apartados* [reservation] for these strange things to keep places for parking space on the street. If you only saw photos of these things, you wouldn't say that this an *apartado*, but when you say *apartado* like we do in

the dictionary you show that you understand, yes, in fact, someone thinks about taking a place in the street with something."⁷ While the dictionary format of *ABCDF* presents a veneer of objectivity, the reader quickly discerns the highly subjective nature of the associations of words and images. The overarching claim is indeed towards reality, as Faesler wants to represent "what it means to live in a cluster of these proportions," but that reality is understood to be fabricated and negotiated through the matrices of individual and collective imaginaries. In the end, it is this framework of constraints embodied in *ABCDF*'s re-interpretation of the dictionary format that is the work's most powerful element.

⁷ Jesse Shapins. "ABCDF: Urban Dictionary of Everyday Life" *MUSEO* Vol. 5 (New York: 2002): 16.

The Dictionary as Representational Framework: Traversing Warburg's and Richter's *Atlases* around Koolhaas and *Metapolis*

To begin thinking about the dictionary as a mode of representation, let us begin by investigating a traditional dictionary's self-understanding. The *Oxford English Dictionary* presents two related, but distinct definitions of the word "dictionary":

1. a. A book dealing with the individual words of a language.
2. a. By extension: A book of information or reference on any subject or branch of knowledge, the items of which are arranged in alphabetical order; an alphabetical encyclopædia: as a Dictionary of Architecture, Biography, Geography, of the Bible, of Christian Antiquities, of Dates, etc.⁸

With these two directions in mind, two critical questions arise: Which type of dictionary is *ABCDF*? Is it a project concerned with language or is it an "alphabetical encyclopedia"?

ABCDF is one of multiple projects in recent years in the field of urbanism that have framed themselves within the construct of the dictionary. Two specific projects I have in mind are Rem Koolhaas's 1995 book *S,M,L,XL* and *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture*, published in 2003. An analysis of these related, yet distinct, works will help discern *ABCDF*'s position as either a dictionary of language or an alphabetical encyclopedia.

S,M,L,XL

While the overarching structure of *S,M,L,XL* is scale, progressing from small to extra-large, the alphabetical sequence of a dictionary from A to Z provides another datum along which the book develops. Koolhaas never explicitly discusses the role of the dictionary in his book. Casually reading through the definitions, one is apt to discern that the statements might be the author's own. Many fragments are stated in the first-person in a tone consistent with Koolhaas's own writing. However, the intrepid reader eventually uncovers the sources of the short texts. On pages 1284-1299 is a comprehensive collection of "dictionary references." The vast majority of

⁸ "dictionary," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. 1989, *OED Online* (Oxford University Press): 10 Jan. 2007 <<http://dictionary.oed.com.ezp1.harvard.edu/cgi/entry/50063589>>

the statements are short excerpts from an enormous variety of sources, ranging from nursery rhymes to Joyce's *Ulysses* to *Cosmopolitan* magazine advertising slogans to fragments of Derrida and statements from Peter Eisenman. Koolhaas's own words are also strongly represented, with frequent selections from his previous books and interviews.

Returning to the *OED*'s definition, I would argue this dictionary is less about "the individual words of a language," as it is a method for Koolhaas to establish an aura of authority throughout the entire book. Koolhaas's dictionary does not propose or invite a shared, evolving mode of communication. By choosing to include all the references at the back, instead of with each statement, Koolhaas encourages readers to imagine himself as the author of this great body of thought. And while readers will eventually encounter the references, the list then serves as a form of bibliography that ostensibly grounds his theoretical project, as the reader has no way to easily find the words listed, to bring the definitions and sources back into relation. By contrast, in *ABCDF*, the textual definitions in the glossary are either clearly written by the editors, or their sources are included as part of the entry. The written definitions themselves are also straightforward, as in a dictionary of language, and tied to the cultural specificity of Mexico City. For example, the definition of such a seemingly banal word such as *Silla* (Chair), reads: "1. Piece of furniture designed for sitting on. 2. The seats of the representatives in government are called *curul* (curule), those of the senators are called *escaño*."⁹ Koolhaas's dictionary does not serve as a forum for engaging language as a shared social practice, but again returning to the *OED*, his work is a form of alphabetical encyclopedia, as it is a vehicle for him to imbue the whole book and his larger project with a sense of comprehensive knowledge.

The first word that appears is *Abolish*, and it is given the definition "To execute an

⁹ Faesler Bremer: 1435.

intention amounts to abolishing a desire."¹⁰ The last words are *Zoom* and *Zoom Ratio*. *Zoom*'s definition is: "Imagine looking at the Volkswagen from closer and closer, zooming in with a magnifying glass and microscope At first the surface seems to get smoother, as the roundness of the bumpers and hood passes out of view. But then the microscopic surface of steel turns out to be bumpy itself, in an apparently random way. It seems chaotic."¹¹ These two terms that bookend the dictionary reveal significant contours of the underlying logic of Koolhaas's dictionary project.

In general, Koolhaas's thought is characterized by a drive to abolish established values, and he creates a space for these exploits under the guise of a chaos theory. At the beginning of *S,M,L,XL* he famously writes, "Architecture is by definition a *chaotic adventure*."¹² By establishing this definition, Koolhaas allows himself complete license, since there is no order or set of understandable forces with which he must contend. While acknowledging the significant contributions of Koolhaas's writings on cities, William Saunders, editor of *Harvard Design Magazine*, precisely identifies this fundamental issue in Koolhaas's work:

The weakness of Koolhaas's writing on cities can be understood as resulting from his unfortunate conviction that creative freedom, which he values above all, does not need to be engaged with otherness — that it needs, in fact, to be capricious, private fantasy *ex nihilo*, inscribed on a tabula rasa.¹³

The dictionary within *S,M,L,XL* vividly reflects Koolhaas's mode of operation. The arbitrary structure allows him total creative freedom, indeed providing him a tabula rasa to fantasize a totalizing command of knowledge, with the vague notion of chaos as the backdoor escape from any real accountability.

¹⁰ Rem Koolhaas, *S,M,L,XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995): xviii.

¹¹ Ibid.: 1302.

¹² Ibid.: xix.

¹³ William Saunders, "Rem Koolhaas's Writing on Cities: Poetic Perception and Gnomonic Fantasy" *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 51, No. 1. (Sep., 1997): 61.

The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture

Another recent dictionary project in the field of architecture and urbanism is *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture*, published in 2003. The dictionary is at the foundation of the *Metapolis* book, not a subset of the larger book structure like in *S,M,L,XL*. All of the entries are written by a core group of six authors and select contributors, and ambitiously, they aim to provide a total breadth of knowledge about the "new kind of architectural action" that constitutes "advanced architecture," a term used to define practice that is unique to the information age. In the Introduction, the editors describe the project in the following way:

This is a question not only of exploring new territories but, above all, of proposing in, and for, them new definitions: discoverers, pioneers, adventurers — as well as scientists and philosophers and creators — constitute paradigms of the explorer destined not only to recognise reality, redrawing or replanning it, but also capable of reformulating it, founding new enclaves, locating points of tension, fostering intersections; marking it out — probing, signposting, demarcating — with other signs, with other codes, with other definitions, with other words or expressions ("with" and "in" other terms) those realities in need of new conceptions.

This *Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture* seeks to contribute to the shaping of an overall — not necessarily absolute — vision of what manifests itself as an architectural action linked to what has been called "advanced culture," now present in many disciplines of contemporary art, thought and technology.

The remaining text is essentially the written material necessary to understand the different elements and foundations of advanced architecture.¹⁴

Like Koolhaas, the *Metapolis* authors are rooted in the fantasies of the tabula rasa bequeathed from the Modernist project. They too are driven by a desire to abolish existing conventions and pioneer new territories *ex nihilo*. These convictions are laid bare with the authors' choice of adverbs: the dictionary is "not *necessarily* absolute", yet it "is *essentially* the written material necessary to understand...advanced architecture." Like *S,M,L,XL*, the *Metapolis Dictionary* operates primarily in the second dimension of the *OED*'s dictionary definition, as an alphabetical

¹⁴ Manuel Gausa, Vicente Guallart, Willy Müller et. al., *The Metapolis Dictionary of Advanced Architecture: City, Technology, and Society in the Information Age* (Barcelona: ACTAR, 2003): 12-17.

encyclopedia instead of as resource for the dialogic domain of language.

While *ABCDF*, *S,M,L,XL* and *Metapolis* were all developed within an eight-year period from 1995 - 2003, the underlying logics and motivations strongly differ. The creators of *ABCDF* make no proclamation of defining uncharted territory, but instead focus attention upon highlighting and re-framing an already existing, shared social context. Like Koolhaas's dictionary, *ABCDF* unites hundreds of contributors from multiple perspectives and histories; however, this integration is not in the interest of establishing authority for an individual firm or group of authors, but instead suggests a collective endeavor to excavate the landscape of the city as a shared language. As Bremer writes, "The photos and texts share a similar point of view by containing a personal vision that contributes to the collective image." To gain a deeper understanding of *ABCDF*'s unique approach to Mexico City, and its contrast with these two previously discussed projects, let us examine two works from the history of art with which *ABCDF* shares significant qualities.

Warburg's and Richter's Atlases

In her book *Atlas of Emotion*, Giuliana Bruno expands the history and theory of the cinematic field, illustrating intersections between architecture, visual art, and film. Two of the projects Bruno highlights are Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne-Atlas* and Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*. And although clearly distinct, these two paradigmatic image collections share much with *ABCDF*. As Bruno writes, Warburg's *Atlas* "was composed of diverse screens of pictures that ranged in subject from art to science to the everyday."¹⁵ And describing the content of Richter's *Atlas*, she writes, "Taken singularly, most of the pictures, unclassified and unclassifiable, are apparently

¹⁵ Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*, (New York: Verso, 2002): 341.

banal, routine, and disposable. These pictures are snapshots — intimate souvenirs."¹⁶ The same is true of *ABCDF*, also a collection that brings together images from high art to the everyday. And like these two historical *Atlases*, each picture in *ABCDF* derives its resonance not as an independent image, but instead in combination with others, in series, within the overarching network of the dictionary.

The process of experiencing each of these works, in the form of exhibition and publication, shares ground with the cinema, as the spectatorial experience is defined by movement. Describing Richter's *Atlas*, Bruno writes, "Traveling through the strata of Richter's *Atlas* is an experience that produces a *moving* effect."¹⁷ Motion was also critical to Warburg's own understanding of his work, as he describes his endeavor as "the representation of life in motion."¹⁸ Further articulating this link between these works and the cinema, Bruno writes,

Because one moves along a space when reading pictures, a photo installation may contain a cinematics: a spectacle of display enacting kinetic and spatial-corporeal affairs. In Richter's *Atlas*, this process is pushed to the limit, both authorially and spectatorially, as it drives the construction of the show. While it reveals the photographic bent of Richter's work as a painter, the exhibition fundamentally questions still photography and pushes the boundaries of the medium. By presenting an overwhelmingly cumulative "series," *Atlas* ultimately asks us to reflect on still photography's relationship to the moving image. Photography, investigated here, is transformed on the grounds of the cinematics exposed.¹⁹

Likewise, traveling through the pages of *ABCDF*, the entries of the CD-Rom, or the many images of the exhibition, the reader is engaged in a form of cinematic spectatorship. In a similar vein, it is a mistake to evaluate *ABCDF* within the exclusive terms of still photography. Not only is photography but one element of the multiple media contained in the project, the ontological substrate of *ABCDF* is the interrelationships between the images and the psychosomatic experience aroused in the spectator by the montage of media within the dictionary structure.

¹⁶ Ibid.: 334.

¹⁷ Ibid.: 332.

¹⁸ Ibid.: 342.

¹⁹ Ibid.: 339.

Unlike the dictionaries of Koolhaas and *Metapolis*, *ABCDF* further overlaps with Warburg's and Richter's atlases in its relationship, and resistance, to monumentality and taxonomic control. Discussing Richter's work Bruno writes,

This is not a collection striving to exhaust its own subject. By the same token, *Atlas* is not an encyclopedia. It does not wish to be all-encompassing. It gives definite form to the knowledge it presents. These are fragments set in motion in an orderly fashion but with no systematic or systematizing logic. The work is boundless, and yet bound. New images are constantly incorporated; and they can change the form — the territory — of the ever-growing atlas.²⁰

Instead of a fetishism of total knowledge and authority, *ABCDF* is also a work that is "boundless, yet bound." There is order, but no rigid system. And although the book, CD-Rom and exhibition indeed are static, the conceptual structure of the dictionary invites the spectator to imagine an infinite horizon of new entries. Further analyzing Richter's *Atlas* Bruno writes, "In this architecture of sequenced pictures, a haptic narrative evolves as the spectator traverses the images, makes them her own, and creates a personal atlas along the way. In this respect, *Atlas* displays the building of narrative space itself."²¹ Although *ABCDF* is firmly situated in a geographical discourse, it is however not an atlas. Instead of creating a personal atlas, the spectator of *ABCDF* creates her own dictionary. And by extension, she engages in the dialogic process of the language of the city, as the urban space of Mexico City is ultimately the narrative that unfolds. As Lydia Haustein writes, "Warburg places his selected images in a schema that today we would situate between 'hypertextual link' and tagging."²² Similarly, *ABCDF* must be grasped as a form of hypermedia, and in the terms of Italian semiologist Umberto Eco, also must be understood as an "open work," or more specifically a "work in movement."

²⁰ Ibid.: 335.

²¹ Ibid.: 332.

²² Lydia Haustein, "Magie und Digital Bilder," in *Der Bilderatlas im Wechsel der Künste und Medien*, eds. Sabine Falch, Inge Münz-Koenen and Marianne Streisand, (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2005): 321. Translation from German to English by myself.

The Path through the Finite and Infinite: *ABCD*F in the Context of Hypertext, "openness" and "Works of Movement"

Computer scientist Theodor Nelson is recognized as having initially coined the term "hypertext" in a 1965 lecture at the 20th national conference of the Association for Computing Machinery. His speech focused on his work towards developing a new system for structuring files he called the ELF, short for *evolutionary file structure*. He said, "Let me introduce the word 'hypertext' to mean a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper."²³ He also used the term "hypermedia," when referring to systems that interlink not just blocks of text, but also audio, video, or other media material. It was not until the early 1990s that the terms hypertext and hypermedia made a full-scale entrance into the discourse of the humanities, though their conceptual underpinnings were already established in literary theory. George Landow first made the link between the thought of Derrida and Barthes and the innovations of Nelson and other computer scientists, in his 1992 book *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*. Landow writes,

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes describes an ideal textuality that precisely matches that which has come to be called computer hypertext — text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web, and path.²⁴

Landow then quotes Barthes, who writes in *S/Z*,

In this ideal text, the networks [*réseaux*] are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable . . . ; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.²⁵

²³ Theodor Nelson, "A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate," in *The New Media Reader*, eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003): 144.

²⁴ George Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992): 3.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974): 5-6.

The hypertextual nature of *ABCDF* is most immediately apparent in the interactive CD-Rom. The user navigates the database either by choosing individual words from a list from A to Z, or by uncovering cross-references embedded within each picture that subvert a strictly alphabetical mode of discovery. For example, when a user is viewing the entry for airport, one of the four pictures is of a service worker on break, playing chess, passengers carrying luggage in the background. When the user scrolls over the chessboard, the word *tablero* (or "square area for playing chess and other table games"²⁶) appears as a button. When the user clicks *tablero*, she is taken to the *tablero* entry, which features historic photographs of people playing chess in the city. One of the pictures is a tournament in the *Zócalo*, in front of the main cathedral. When the user scrolls over the cathedral, she is then given this option for further navigation. One can see how this structure allows non-linear exploration ad infinitum. In this way, *ABCDF* approaches Barthes's "ideal text," as it is based "on the infinity of language," and indeed operates as a hypertext in the terms described by Landow. However, it is not only the CD-Rom that is "an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality," but instead the entire work. And this work is not only defined by the constellation of media products themselves, but also includes the infinite horizon of spectatorial interpretations. To uncover this expanded definition of "work," and its inherent "openness," let us now turn to the work of Umberto Eco.

In 1962, Eco published *Opera aperta*, or *Open Work*. In the opening chapter he writes,

A work of art... is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constructing an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.²⁷

Indeed, Eco argues that all art is in the end "open." Whether or not the original artist intentionally

²⁶ Faesler Bremer: 1437.

²⁷ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989): 4.

creates his or her work with multiple perspectives of audience interpretation in mind, this interpretation is inevitable. For this reason, Eco posits a more specific definition for works of art that "characteristically consist of unplanned or physically incomplete structural units."²⁸ This "more restricted classification of works...can be defined as 'works in movement.'"²⁹ While the emphasis of Eco's text is musical and literary works, his theory can easily be applied to other media, in particular an expanded field of cinema, as it is the domain of pictures in motion.

At the crux of Eco's text is an argument about the nature of human perception. He writes,

Sartre notes that the existent object can never be reduced to a given series of manifestations, because of these it is bound to stand in relationship with a continuously altering subject. Not only does an object present different *Abschattungen* (profiles), but also different points of view are available by way of the same *Abschattungen*. In order to be defined, the object must be related back to the total series of which, by virtue of being one possible apparition, it is a member. In this way the traditional dualism between being and appearance is replaced by a straight polarity of finite and infinite, which locates the infinite at the very core of the finite. This sort of 'openness' is at the heart of every act of perception. It characterizes every moment of our cognitive experience. It means that each phenomenon seems to be 'inhabited' by a certain *power* — in other words, 'the ability to manifest itself by a series of real or likely manifestations.' The problem of the relationship of a phenomenon to its ontological basis is altered by the perspective of perceptive "openness" to the problem of its relationship to the multiplicity of different-order perceptions which we can derive from it.³⁰

Eco's exploration of perception rests upon the paradox of locating "the infinite at the very core of the finite," and this is by the theoretical core of his notion of "openness." Every phenomenon posits infinite interpretations, yet is also always finite. For this reason, every work of art is inevitably "open," yet only certain works are "works of movement."

Interestingly, Eco speaks specifically about the format of the dictionary in his essay. He writes,

Now, a dictionary clearly presents us with thousands upon thousands of words which we could freely use to compose poetry, essays on physics, anonymous letters, or grocery lists. In this sense the dictionary is clearly open to the reconstitution of its raw material in any way that the manipulator wishes. But this does not make it a 'work.' The 'openness' and dynamism of an artistic work consist in factors which make it susceptible to a whole range of integrations. They provide it with organic complements which they graft into the structural vitality which the work already

²⁸ Ibid.: 12.

²⁹ Ibid.: 12.

³⁰ Ibid.: 16-17.

possesses, even if it is incomplete. This structural vitality is still seen as a positive property of the work, even though it admits of all kinds of different conclusions and solutions for it.³¹

For Eco, the traditional dictionary is not an "open work," because it lacks an artistic "structural vitality." It does not operate in a field of relations, but instead slips into chaos. *ABCDF*, however, subverts this character of the traditional dictionary. Its "boundless, yet bounded" nature is its ontological basis. The book is, of course, a static publication. And the interactive CD-Rom is also a closed database. Readers cannot author their own words or alter definitions. Instead the contents selected are highly curated, only a small subset of all possible words and associations. As media, *ABCDF* presents the city from the perspective of Faesler Bremer and her fellow editors. *ABCDF*'s boundlessness is then derived from its relationship to the city, as an invitation to perceive the city as a linguistic field, open to definition and re-definition, reading and writing. By establishing a framework that does not ally itself with the dictionary tradition in-line with the encyclopedia, but instead being "a book dealing with the individual words of a language," *ABCDF* provides an opening into the subjectivity of the spectator. As Michael Holquist writes, summarizing the work of Russian literary critic Mikhail Bahktin,

Existence, like language, is a shared event. It is always a border incident on the gradient both joining and separating the immediate reality of my own living particularity (a uniqueness that presents itself as only for me) with the reality of the system that precedes me in existence (that is always-already-there) and which is intertwined with everyone and everything else.³²

Although closed in content, *ABCDF* is open conceptually, its framework and content suggesting a specific mode of being in the city. The experience of *ABCDF* is not limited to reading the book, interacting with the CD-Rom or viewing the exhibition. It is ultimately through walking in the city with the conceptual provocation of this dictionary, that the work is performed.

³¹ Ibid.: 20.

³² Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, (New York: Routledge, 1990): 28.

Walking with the Dictionary in Mind: Cinematic Space, Subjectivity and Urban Imaginaries

Describing her opinion of what the dictionary structure evokes in the reader, *ABCDF*

editor Cristina Faesler Bremer says:

The dictionary form, curiously, makes you see the city as if you are walking. . . . Of course, when you walk you don't see things in alphabetical order, but when you are looking through the book, jumping from one side to the other, what happens is that you see a speed bump next to the man shining shoes which is next to the food-cart. Knowing that you cannot imagine what comes next, you allow yourself to just flow, allow yourself to enjoy the process. That puts you into an infantile state of enjoying surprise, and then you begin reflecting and realizing, "Yes, it is incredible that I can be surprised."³³

The dictionary form of *ABCDF* parallels the experience of walking in the city by stimulating a specific attitude of curiosity and reflection. The city is defined as the field of the unexpected, and *ABCDF* virtually reproduces this quintessential character of urbanity not through the content of its images, but through its psychological impact.

Michel de Certeau establishes the relationship between language and walking in the city in his classic *Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau writes,

The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. . . . It is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language). It is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language). It implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic "contracts" in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an "allocution," "posits another opposite" the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation.³⁴

So, to "speak" the language of the city via *ABCDF* is to walk in the physical city, imbued with an appreciation of the surprising, interrelated nature of the urban environment. The spectator of *ABCDF* that enacts the project in the streets of the city shares much with that classic figure of urban modernity, the *flâneur*. And to return the discussion to the expanded cinematic field, we

³³ Shapins: 16.

³⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 97-98.

can again reference Bruno, who writes, "The modern *flâneur* is the film spectator. The perfect *flâneur* is the passionate film spectator."³⁵ The film spectator is also a reflective subject, and cinema in its broadest sense, including mixed-media "works of movement" such as *ABCDF*, is a mechanism for facilitating particular subjectivities. As Bruno writes, "Cinematic space moves not only through time and space or narrative development but through inner space. Film moves, and fundamentally 'moves' us, with its ability to render affects and, in turn, to affect."³⁶

This ability to engage "inner space," is cinema's power to impact subjectivity. Film theorist Vivian Sobchack eloquently establishes this connection when she writes:

The cinematic mechanically projected and made visible for the very first time not just the objective world but the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision — hitherto only directly available to human beings as that invisible and private structure we each experience as "my own." That is, the materiality of the cinematic gives us concrete and empirical insight and makes objectively visible the reversible, dialectical, and social nature of our own subjective vision.³⁷

ABCDF, although clearly different than the classic film mechanism to which Sobchack refers, also carries the potential for illustrating such a reflective subjectivity. Bringing together individual perspectives into a collective whole, while maintaining the integrity of the single fragments, *ABCDF* is also "a lived-system that necessarily entails not only an enworlded object but always also an embodied and perceiving subject."³⁸ With each picture and associated term, the reader immediately asks, "Why is this image placed with this word? Who's vision does this grouping reflect? What do I associate with this term?" The suggestive strength of *ABCDF* is derived from this space of intersubjectivity in which it intervenes. It is the domain of the imaginary that bridges *ABCDF* as virtual media, the physical environment of the city, and the

³⁵ Giuliana Bruno, "Streetwalking around Plato's Cave, or the Unconscious is Housed," in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993): 49.

³⁶ Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion*: 7.

³⁷ Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic 'Presence,'" in *Materialities of Communication*, eds. Hans Ulbrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994): 96.

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 97.

lived experience of the spectator's consciousness.

Foremost, *ABCDF* can be understood as an investigation and action in the field of the urban imaginary. In the introduction to his upcoming book *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing World* (Duke UP, 2008), Andreas Huyssen writes:

An urban imaginary marks first and foremost the way city dwellers imagine their own city as the place of everyday life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities as well as the scene of histories of destruction, crime, and conflicts of all kinds. Urban space is always and inevitably social space involving subjectivities and identities differentiated by class and race, gender and age, education and religion. An urban imaginary is the cognitive and somatic image which we carry within us of the places where we live, work and play. It is an embodied material fact. Urban imaginaries are thus part of any city's reality rather than only figments of the imagination. What we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it.³⁹

Urban imaginaries bring together individual and collective perception and experience. They are the contested territories of local and global identity. And ultimately, they are significant because, as Huyssen states, they directly impact our conscious and unconscious lived experience of cities, "the ways we act." *ABCDF* is, in the end, a project that opens a dialogic space between the individual and the collective concerned with acting, performing, being in the city.

Looking back in 2008, post Web 2.0, *ABCDF* might be seen as a sort of frustrating work. Produced only a few years later, the creators certainly would have had the opportunity to evade the CD-Rom, a technology that was dated nearly the day it was created, but instead could have facilitated wide public interaction online and on the streets of the physical city. The curated nature of the project could be maintained, but constantly evolve through the voices of many contributors, like the nature of language and the city itself. Mobile phones could facilitate interaction on location, further embedding the structural framework of the dictionary in the urban landscape and the practice of walking. However, I would argue, it is precisely this seemingly unrealized potential of *ABCDF* that makes it so revealing as an interactive media project today.

³⁹ Andreas Huyssen, "Introduction," in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing World* (Duke UP, 2008): 5. (This text is a draft copy provided by Huyssen to myself before official publication).

Because it does not involve user-generated content, social networks, dynamic software, text messaging, GPS or any other of today's most vaunted technologies, it helps to critically distance ourselves from these tools we now witness daily. *ABCDF* helps to reveal the underlying conceptual structures behind the many web and mobile projects engaged with the city today. Without the option to fetishize digital technology, *ABCDF* helps us to see new media's extended history, and its deep relationship with the history of art and cinema. Produced on the cusp of the widespread adoption of the Internet and virtual geographic software such as Google Earth, *ABCDF* crystallizes the potential of hypermedia, not simply to interconnect multiple media objects, but to reveal the hypertextual nature of our physical environments and stimulate a subjectivity sensitive to our place within them.

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