

The Seminar as an Aesthetic-Linguistic Practice

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Abstract According to Michel de Certeau, Wittgenstein’s notion of language game provides a specific tool to understand everyday practices. In this paper I will focus on a specific linguistic practice, the seminar, addressed by Certeau in a short article in 1978. In doing so, I will use the Wittgensteinian reflection on language games as a theoretic framework – recommended for the investigation of cultural practices by Certeau himself – and I will apply some key concepts from the later *The Practice of Everyday Life* to clarify the nature of this practice typical of philosophical discussion (and of researchers’ ‘everyday life’). Finally, I will focus on the aesthetic and linguistic aspects of the seminar in order to show its proper nature: neither the mere ‘vertical’ communication of intellectual contents, nor a fusional, ‘horizontal’ and collective experience, the seminar represents a specific linguistic and tactical game in which participants shape a new ‘sense’, a way out of institutional and disciplinary fixed knowledge.

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0. Introduction

The proximity between aesthetics and the study of language lies in the notion of ‘practice’, a point of contact that can hardly be overlooked. If, on the one hand, aesthetics is not confined to the field of the arts, but involves a wide variety of behaviors and actions that characterize our common experience, on the other hand, language cannot be reduced to its propositional aspect (nor, *a fortiori*, to the study of apophantic propositions) but is articulated in what, from Wittgenstein onward, we call ‘language games’. As Wittgenstein points out in his *Philosophical Investigations*:

Here the term “*language-game*” is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them—

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements—

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—

Reporting an event—

Speculating about an event—

Forming and testing a hypothesis—

Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—

Making up a story; and reading it—
Play-acting—
Singing catches—
Guessing riddles—
Making a joke; telling it—
Solving a problem in practical arithmetic—
Translating from one language into another—
Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (Wittgenstein 1953, I, §23).

The list of examples that Wittgenstein offers is rather bizarre: although he understands language as an open set of language games, the activities listed – acting, singing, making a joke, even building an object – seem to belong to a typically practical-aesthetic dimension of everyday life in which words are accompanied by gestures, facial expressions, feelings, habits, expectations and other elements that a narrow conception of what language is would hardly be able to account for.

The idea of language as practice (or rather, in a line of research that goes from Gramsci to Wittgenstein, the idea of language as *praxis*; cf. Lo Piparo 2014) proposed by Wittgenstein and its capacity to illuminate the reality of everyday life in an innovative way are emphasized by Michel de Certeau (1925-1986). A French scholar trained in historical disciplines, a Jesuit, a polymorphous intellectual, throughout his life Certeau dealt with seemingly distant topics such as mysticism, psychoanalysis, history, anthropology, linguistics and the practices of everyday life.

In his groundbreaking essay *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980) Certeau devotes part of the first chapter to a discussion of the «Wittgensteinian model of ordinary language», thus declaring at an early stage the importance of the concept of language game for understanding everyday practices. More precisely, Certeau enhances Wittgenstein's tendency to observe language not from the outside but, conceiving it as a set of activities, proposing a portrait of it (or better some sketches) from inside:

Wittgenstein recognizes that he is “caught” in common linguistic historicity. Accordingly, he will not allow this dependence to be localized in the object (designated as “past”) whose historiographic operation is fictively detached (through a fiction that is moreover the very space where the scientific challenge of mastering history is produced). In reality, his position is not risked there, but rather in a double combat whose articulation furnishes us with a formal Landmark for the study of culture (Certeau 1980: 10).

And at the end of chapter 1: «By these characteristics, Wittgenstein's fragmented and rigorous body of work seems to provide a philosophical blueprint for a contemporary science of the ordinary» (*ivi*: 14).

In this paper I will focus on a specific language game, the seminar, addressed by Certeau in a short article published two years before *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In doing so, I will use the Wittgensteinian reflection on language games as a theoretic framework – recommended to the investigation of cultural practices by Certeau himself – and I will apply some key concepts from the later *The Practice of Everyday Life* to clarify the nature of this typical practice of philosophical discussion (and of researchers' ‘everyday life’). Finally, I will focus on both the aspects of the seminar, aesthetic and linguistic, in order to show its specific amphibious profile, which cannot be reduced to a single discipline and indeed, as Certeau suggests, a possible starting point for an ‘antidiscipline’.

1. Tactics and enunciation

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Certeau sets some key terms for future Cultural Studies (Buchanan 2000; Di Cori 2010: 286). Among them, the couple tactics/strategies offers an extremely useful and versatile conceptual pair to understand the way power and subjectivity unfold and, in some cases, confront each other. Tactics and strategies give rise to two different models of action and production, and follow alternative models of rationality. One way of introducing the distinction between tactics and strategies concerns the different spatial connotation of the two terms: strategy circumscribes and assumes a place of its own, while tactics exploit, often abusively, a place that does not belong to it, namely the place of the other. Lacking a place of its own, tactics depend on time, on promptness, on the ability to seize opportunities and exploit them to one's own advantage. It is precisely this spatially improper and temporally attuned character that makes tactics an extremely useful notion for the investigation of the everyday:

Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many "ways of operating": victories of the "weak" over the "strong" (whether the strength be that of powerful people or the violence of things or of an imposed order, etc.), clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, "hunter's cunning," maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike (Certeau 1980: XIX).

Strategy, which can be traced back to a powerful subject, organizes space from a proper place, while tactics, implemented by a subject in a mostly subordinate position, seizes the opportunity to open up ways out of the rules and constraints imposed. It is therefore not surprising that tactics offer the model for action and rationality that characterize everyday practices, i.e. the practices of the common man to whom Certeau dedicates his book: a marginal yet ubiquitous subject (for which one may, paradoxically, speak of mass marginality), a consumer of products conceived and realized by others but who nevertheless should not be considered as being merely passive or doomed to a sort of cultural slavery.

The issue of the relationship between the 'cultural industry' and the 'cultural consumer', which had been at the center of intense debates since the middle of the twentieth century¹, is one of the first themes Certeau addresses in the *General Introduction* to his essay. The originality of Certeau's position lies in the idea that between production and consumption there is not only an opposition, whereby producers dominate over consumers, but also a space for manoeuvre (space of 'play' – *jeu* – understood both as ludic activity and as backlash), an «interstitial freedom» (Giard 2010: XXXV) practiced in the different ways of using an object. With regard to this phenomenon of innovative use by the consumer, who appropriates the products received, Certeau speaks of «consumer production», effectively anticipating contemporary phenomena linked in particular to the world of the internet and social media².

¹ Entering into a critical dialogue with the Italian reception of the Frankfurt School, which had offered its best-known contributions on the critique of the cultural industry, in 1964 Umberto Eco also grasped the 'interstitial freedom' of consumers in the possibility of an unexpected reception and use of the cultural products received: «Whether the so-called masses go along with this, whether they have stronger stomachs than their manipulators think, whether they know how to use their powers of discrimination on the products on offer, and how to turn messages to unforeseen and positive uses – all this is another question» (Eco 1964: 25).

² The idea of consumer production in fact anticipates Burns' (2008) conceptualization of *produsage*, a contemporary phenomenon linked above all to the creation of content for the web, in which the

Now, it must be emphasized that to describe this consumer production, Certeau adopts a model explicitly derived from linguistics:

Our investigation is concerned with this difference. It can use as its theoretical model the construction of individual sentences with an established vocabulary and syntax. In linguistics, “performance” and “competence” are different: the act of speaking (with all the enunciative strategies that implies) is not reducible to a knowledge of the language. By adopting the point of view of enunciation – which is the subject of our study – we privilege the act of speaking; according to that point of view, speaking operates within the field of a linguistic system; it effects an appropriation, or reappropriation, of language by its speakers; it establishes a present relative to a time and place; and it posits a contract with the other (the interlocutor) in a network of places and relations (Certeau 1980: XIII).

Adopting the Chomskyan distinction between competence and performance but privileging, unlike the American linguist, the latter, Certeau proposes a linguistic model to explain how the use of a received product can be innovative. And in addition to Chomsky, he also turns to the theorization of another linguist, his own contemporary, Emile Benveniste, who in his *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (vol. I, 1966; vol. II, 1974) elaborates the distinction between *énonciation* (enunciation) and *énoncé* (utterance), assigning to the first term a value partially analogous to that of the Saussurian *parole*. Enunciation, i.e. the act of speaking³, introduces an element of novelty with respect to the meaning of the words of a language: the action of saying (*dicere*) modifies what is said (*dictum*) and indeed constitutes for Benveniste a form of continuous creation of the language used⁴. This is why the creativity of the speaker, which is continuously expressed in the instance of enunciation, can constitute for Certeau a valid model of production of the consumer, who is not limited to passively receiving the product of a dominant order but constantly appropriates the languages developed by others, modifying them and giving rise to his own practices.

On the basis of this linguistic model of structuralist derivation, Certeau will deal with everyday practices such as walking, cooking, reading, etc., looking for formal structures, recognizing modes of enunciation (such as in what he calls «pedestrian speech acts», Certeau 1980: 97), distinguishing different everyday tactics according to the different forms of rhetoric adopted.

2. The seminar as a *caquetoir*

The Practices of Everyday Life was published in 1980. Several years earlier (1974-1978) Certeau had held a doctoral seminar at the University of Paris VII, in the department of anthropology, ethnology and science of religions, devoted precisely to “cultural

traditional boundaries between producers and users or consumers blur into a new type of actor, the *produser*.

³ The role of enunciation and its primacy over utterance will also be central to Certeau’s reconstruction of mysticism between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Moreover, the primacy of enunciation is one of the points of contact that, according to Certeau, allow us to establish a comparison between mysticism and psychoanalysis (cf. Certeau 1982: 8-9; on this topic see also Oliva 2019: 144-148).

⁴ «Or comment produit-on la langue? On ne reproduit rien. On a apparemment un certain nombre de modèles. Or tout homme invente sa langue et l’invente toute sa vie. Et tous les hommes inventent leur propre langue sur l’instant et chacun d’une façon distinctive, et chaque fois d’une façon nouvelle. Dire bonjour tous les jours de sa vie à quelqu’un, c’est chaque fois une réinvention. À plus forte raison quand il s’agit de phrases, ce ne sont plus les éléments constitutifs qui comptent, c’est l’organisation d’ensemble complète, l’arrangement original, dont le modèle ne peut pas avoir été donné directement, donc que l’individu fabrique. Chaque locuteur fabrique sa langue» (Benveniste 1974: 18-19).

practices”. In a 1977 article, originally published in a student journal in the department and republished the following year in the journal *Esprit*, Certeau questions the nature of this experience and, more in general, outlines what a seminar is. As in the case of the tactics used by consumers to achieve their own production, the focus falls primarily on the linguistic nature of the seminar practice and the relationship between received language and the innovative dimension of enunciation:

A seminar is a common laboratory that allows each participant to articulate his or her own practices and knowledge. It is as if each participant brought to the seminar the “dictionary” of his materials, experiences, ideas and, through the effect of necessarily partial exchanges and necessarily provisional theoretical hypotheses, it becomes possible to produce sentences with this rich vocabulary, that is to say to “embroider” or to put into discourse his information, his questions, his projects, etc. (Certeau 1978: 176)⁵

The possibility of constructing new discourses from a received vocabulary, and in this particular case from the vocabulary proper to the knowledge of each discipline, makes it possible to place the seminar among the everyday practices Certeau himself will focus on in his 1980 book. A very specific practice because, in fact, it is related to the ‘daily life’ of a restricted class such as researchers in the academy. But just as everyday practices with their tactics exploit a place that is not their own, since it belongs permanently to the subjects of power who, as we have seen, use their space strategically, so the seminar, while taking place within the university institution (in the concrete case of Certeau, at Paris VII), does not identify with this place, which it exploits rather to exercise an interstitial freedom. In the same way, the seminar does not identify itself with the academic knowledge that is produced at the university but, starting from the information, vocabulary and knowledge of each of the participants, it formulates something innovative and irreducible to individual scientific ‘dialects’. It is in this context that Certeau proposes the evocative image of the seminar as a *caquetoir*, a place of chatting

This place of establishing exchanges could be compared to what, in the Loiret, is called a *caquetoir*, a weekly meeting on the main square, a plural laboratory, where “passers-by” stop on Sundays to produce both a common language and personal discourses (Certeau 1978: 176)⁶.

The seminar thus becomes the place for a production of discourse, both common and personal, in which first of all it is necessary to respect what is said but also and above all «what is not said», what the participants happen to be unaware of, i.e. what is not reducible to the will or knowledge of the individual participants. The seminar must be neither a form of vertical teaching, from teacher to students, nor a horizontal fusion between the participants: in these two extreme and opposite risks, to which every seminar is always exposed, Certeau sees a ‘paternal’ and ‘maternal’ aspect from which the practice of the seminar must remain distant. Rather, the seminar is a political

⁵ «Un Séminaire est un laboratoire commun qui permet à chacun des participants d’articuler ses pratiques et ses connaissances propres. C’est comme si chacun y apportait le “dictionnaire” de ses matériaux, de ses expériences, de ses idées et que, par l’effet d’échanges nécessairement partiels et d’hypothèses théoriques nécessairement provisoires, il lui devenait possible de produire des phrases avec ce riche vocabulaire, c’est-à-dire de “broder” ou de mettre en discours ses informations, ses questions, ses projets, etc.»

⁶ «Ce lieu d’échanges instaurateurs pourrait être comparé à ce que, dans le Loiret, on appelle un *caquetoir*, rendez-vous hebdomadaire sur la grand-place, laboratoire pluriel, où des “passants” s’arrêtent le dimanche pour produire à la fois un langage commun et des discours personnels»

experience of the word: the singular way of using language, including above all the received 'dictionary' that is proper to every discipline, which is turned towards the creation of an event and the production of a new *dialogical* language.

Reflecting on the practice of the seminar, and in particular on the seminar he held in Paris VII, Certeau sets out three points relating to the themes of space, method and the object of the research conducted. From the spatial point of view, even though it takes place in a university, Certeau states that the seminar is radically alien to the disciplinarity of knowledge that the university supports. The fact that it is no longer compromised by actual practices, as well as by political and affective investments, means that «the University is no longer *the* place or *a* place for research» (Certeau 1978: 177). The seminar introduces a game (*jeu*) that opens up a critical space, i.e. it allows us to distance ourselves from knowledge and professional tasks without constituting ourselves as a place of knowledge, even common knowledge. On the contrary, the seminar outlines lines of flight, exit doors and possibilities of re-entry from the different sciences involved, and thus presents itself as a place of passage (just like the town square, to use Certeau's image again) where one cannot establish oneself permanently. Hence also the «bastardy», or rather the promiscuity between distinct subjects, practices and research fields. With respect to the specific experience at Paris VII, Certeau recalls the object of study represented by socio-cultural practices, analyzed on the basis of the tactics implemented in particular by the «creativity of consumers', unknown poets and artists», capable of 'twisting' what is imposed on them by a dominant system by creating «temporary combinations».

3. The aesthetic-linguistic profile of the seminar

As will have been noted, starting from a concrete seminar experience on cultural practices, Certeau ends up offering an image of the seminar itself in general as a practice. That is, he uses terms and concepts formulated during the research to reflect on his own practice as a researcher involved in a seminar. The seminar, understood as *caquetoir* and as a linguistic practice in which a dialogical language is produced, can be considered an expression of that interstitial freedom that Certeau recognizes as characteristic of everyday practices. Tactically exploiting a space that does not belong to them, such as that of the university, the seminar participants, trained in their particular disciplines, produce a diversion (*détournement*) of their own dictionaries by creating precarious and original connections. This enunciative creativity, as we have seen, does not aim to construct a new place of its own but critically questions the very property of places of knowledge. Sébastien Caré and Gwendal Châton write in this regard:

Ces réquisits minimaux font du séminaire une pratique à part que Michel de Certeau voyait comme un "espace critique" originellement situé aux marges de l'enseignement universitaire, comme un "lieu de transit" où l'auteur et l'auditeur viennent pour sortir de leurs habitudes, pour entrer dans l'inconnu et pour assister à une performance qui influe parfois sur les économies de la grandeur académique (Caré, Châton 2018: 6)

While the seminar is undoubtedly a linguistic practice, the terms used, «critical space», «place of transit» and «performance», provide the first elements to approach the seminar also as an aesthetic practice. This is not intended as a generic and superficial aestheticization of academic life or as a theoretical debate, but rather it serves to underline the properly aesthetic aspects of a way of using language that, following Certeau, we have analyzed in terms of cultural practice.

Precisely, there are at least three aspects that allow the seminar to be understood as an aesthetic-linguistic practice: first of all, its playful nature; secondary, the primacy it assigns to sense over knowledge; finally, its specific spatial connotation, out of the enclosures of disciplines.

Often conceived of as the philosophy of art, originally aesthetics is a broader field since it presents itself as a theory of sensible knowledge, *scientia cognitionis sensitivae* according to one of the definitions given by the founder of the discipline, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1750; see D'Angelo 2011: 10-25). From Kant's *Critique of Judgment* onward, aesthetics frequently uses the image of *game* to present its processes. As Giovanni Matteucci (2019) recently pointed out, declining in different ways its relation to the *ludus*, aesthetic experience is *illusivae* (puts us in relation with an appearance) and *allusivae* (invites to play) but above all those involved in it find themselves *colluding*, i.e. playing and taking part in immersive practices in which one does not so much have an *experience of something* (a defined, objective content, external and independent of the subject) but an *experience with something* (through an environmental interaction that does not primarily aim at elaborating theories about the world). In the perspective adopted here, the seminar is an immersive practice in which we do not experience already defined contents nor aim at building theories, but participate in a collusive experience of the word, playing with different dictionaries and different knowledge, operating a decentralization and creating new dialogical languages. The seminar game is here also a game in the spatial sense, i.e. it is similar to the introduction of a space for manoeuvre within a defined and institutionalized place such as the university discourse. The seminar, given its nature as a tactical practice, realizes something new from the received languages, defunctionalizing them with respect to the usual expectations of their own places, trying to implement an interplay capable of indicating new directions out of disciplines⁷.

In fact, Certeau reminds us that the seminar is not intended to be the place of knowledge or even that of the construction of a common knowledge, constituted starting from the specialized knowledge of the participants. The game of the seminar does not aim at knowledge but rather at the playful construction of a *sense*, to be understood not as a generic synonym of meaning (according to the linguistic model) but, aesthetically, as an imaginative direction. Production of a *sensus communis* irreducible to a shared opinion or a collective knowledge, the seminar offers an example of what Baumgarten perhaps meant when he defined aesthetics as the «art of beautiful thinking» (see Herzogenrath 2022, in this volume). Linguistic but not purely communicative, the seminar is not limited to transmitting information from the teacher to the students or among the participants but, through a precise style that Certeau points out is marked by «narratives», «exhibitions», «ways of questioning», «analysis procedures», delineates paths out of the proper place of knowledge, towards an open space that is always improper. The 'sense' outlined by the seminar is analogous to that indicated by Giovanni Piana (1991: 330) for music: «too often we forget that this word can be understood in a sense, widely present in its current uses, according to which it is by no means bound to linguistic structures, but simply means: *direction*»⁸. The common sense produced by the

⁷ «These “ways of operating” constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production. [...] Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an *antidiscipline* which is the subject of this book» (Certeau 1980: xv, my emphasis).

⁸ «[...] si dimentica in realtà troppo spesso che questa parola può essere intesa in un'accezione, ampiamente presente nei suoi impieghi correnti, secondo la quale essa non è affatto vincolata a strutture linguistiche, ma significa semplicemente: direzione. Così talvolta ci è accaduto di usare l'espressione di

practice of the seminar, through a tactical use of the university's proper place, points precisely in the direction that leads away from the sphere of specialist knowledge, towards a space characterized by affective and political investment, a new every day space of research.

Finally, by opening exit doors and indicating paths that go beyond disciplinary enclosures, the seminar reveals an affinity with certain walking practices (Angelucci 2018) that, in the field of aesthetics, have produced new experiences of space. It is no coincidence that some of these practices, as mentioned earlier, have been the object of attention of Certeau, who devotes a chapter of his work to the types of «pedestrian speech acts» (see above, §1). It is impossible to further investigate this subject here, but to provide one example and a possible indication for future developments, the aesthetic-linguistic practice of the seminar that we have outlined starting from Certeau's essay has some similarities with the Situationists' own practice of walking, the *derive* (Debord 1956). It is not by chance that Certeau uses the term *détournement* (Di Cori 2020), that can be linked to Guy Debord's theorization (Angelucci 2015), to indicate one of the ways in which consumers appropriate the products they receive. Following the enunciative model that we have already seen, consumers can make a creative use, in turn productive, of these products, which determines unpredictable outcomes.

4. Conclusions

Détournement of university discourses and their dictionaries, the seminar as presented by Certeau is an aesthetic-linguistic practice that aims to produce an event capable of indicating a sense, spatially understood as a possible way out and as a critique of the 'proper places' of academic power. A daily practice in the life of research, the seminar can be counted among those linguistic games, marked by their own tactics, that exploit interstitial freedom by appropriating products (in this case cultural and theoretical) that they reuse in a new way. Effective exercise of an 'art of beautiful thinking', the seminar's product is a performance, a sort of linguistic improvisation, that shares with the *caquetoir* the public dimension of speech and the spatial connotation of place of transit, as a square or a crossroads. Precisely the metaphor of urban space brings us back to an observation by Wittgenstein, with whom this reflection began, on the relationship between the development of language and different language games:

Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses (Wittgenstein 1953: I, §18).

In this city, which grows and changes, where old language games die and are no longer played, new ones show themselves for the first time, the seminary takes the place of a passageway, which opens onto many possible roads still to be explored.

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