Epilogue

When an international flight crosses Saudi Arabia, the hostess announces that during the overflight the drinking of alcohol will be forbidden in the aircraft. This signifies the intrusion of territory into space. Land = society = nation = culture = religion: the equation of anthropological place, fleetingly inscribed in space. Returning after an hour or so to the non-place of space, escaping from the totalitarian constraints of place, will be just like a return to something resembling freedom.

A few years ago the talented British novelist David Lodge published a modern version of the quest for the Holy Grail, a novel set with effective humour in the cosmopolitan, international and narrow world of academic linguistic and semiological research. The humour in this case is sociological: the academic world depicted is only one of the social ‘networks’ deployed today all over the planet, offering diverse individuals the opportunity for singular but strangely similar journeys. Knight-errantry, after all, was no different, and individual wanderings, in today’s reality as in yesterday’s myths, still carry expectation, if not hope.

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Ethnology always has to deal with at least two spaces: that of the place it is studying (village, factory) and the bigger one in which this place is located, the source of influences and constraints which are not without effects on the internal play of local relations (tribe, kingdom, state). The ethnologist is thus doomed to methodological strabismus: he must lose sight neither of the immediate place in which his observation is carried out, nor of the pertinent frontiers of its external marchlands.

In the situation of supermodernity, part of this exterior is made of non-places, and parts of the non-places are made of images. Frequentation of non-places today provides an experience — without real historical

precedent — of solitary individuality combined with non-human mediation (all it takes is a notice or a screen) between the individual and the public authority.

The ethnologist of contemporary societies thus finds the individual presence in the surrounding universe to which, traditionally, he habitually referred the general determinants that gave meaning to particular configurations or singular accidents.

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It would be a mistake to see this play of images as nothing but an illusion (a postmodern form of alienation). The reality of a phenomenon has never been exhaustively understood by analysing its determinants. What is significant in the experience of non-place is its power of attraction, inversely proportional to territorial attraction, to the gravitational pull of place and tradition. This is obvious in different ways in the weekend and holiday stampedes along the motorways, the difficulty experienced by traffic controllers in coping with jammed air routes, the success of the latest forms of retail distribution. But it is also apparent in certain other phenomena that might at first be attributed to the wish to defend territorial values or recover patrimonial identities. Perhaps the reason why immigrants worry settled people so much (and often so abstractly) is that they expose the relative nature of certainties inscribed in the soil: the thing that is so worrying and fascinating about the character of the immigrant is the emigrant. The state of contemporary Europe certainly forces us to envisage the ‘return’ of nationalisms. Perhaps, though, we should pay more attention to the aspects of this ‘return’ that seem essentially to express rejection of the collective order: obviously the model of national identity is available to give form to this rejection, but it is the individual image (the image of the free individual course) that animates and gives meaning to the model today, and may weaken it tomorrow.

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In one form or another, ranging from the misery of refugee camps to the cosseted luxury of five-star hotels, some experience of non-place (indissociable from a more or less clear perception of the acceleration of history and the contraction of the planet) is today an essential component of all social existence. Hence the very particular and ultimately paradoxical character of what is sometimes regarded in the West as the fashion for ‘cocooning’, retreating into the self: never before have individual histories (because of their necessary relations with space, image and consumption) been so deeply entangled with general history,
history *tout court*. In this situation, any individual attitude is conceivable: flight (back home, elsewhere), fear (of the self, of others), but also intensity of experience (performance) or revolt (against established values). It is no longer possible for a social analysis to dispense with individuals, nor for an analysis of individuals to ignore the spaces through which they are in transit.

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One day, perhaps, there will be a sign of intelligent life on another world. Then, through an effect of solidarity whose mechanisms the ethnologist has studied on a small scale, the whole terrestrial space will become a single place. Being from earth will signify something. In the meantime, though, it is far from certain that threats to the environment are sufficient to produce the same effect. The community of human destinies is experienced in the anonymity of non-place, and in solitude.

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So there will soon be a need – perhaps there already is a need – for something that may seem a contradiction in terms: an ethnology of solitude.

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A Few References


