



The Performance of Improvisation: Traffic Practice and the Production of Space

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Abstract The aim of this paper is to discuss an ethnographic study of traffic in terms of the production of space. Traffic participation, negotiation and collaboration are viewed from a performative perspective in this study. That is, traffic involves multiple ways of creating differences between continuity and interruptions, making order in mundane spaces through a continuous and simultaneous struggle involving non-verbal, non-human, human, textual and other discursive means. Performance not only involves a process of the relational construction of identity; the term is widened to include all sorts of practices that are involved in the human project of creating places and producing spaces in conditions that can be defined as negotiations. Identity is one important aspect in this relational interaction. Empirical findings also suggest, however, that it might also be important to look further into a process called *presentational presence*. The performance of a presentational presence is here seen as one aspect of practice through which negotiations among traffic participants are constructed in relational ways. Performance in traffic can thus not be reduced to a mimetic practice of temporarily involved actors. Producing spaces and creating places is viewed as an existential project involving the negotiation of order. I argue that there are specific elements in the act of performance by way of presentation that hold a seed to perpetual change at the same time as they reproduce multiple and simultaneous order. This argument will be supported by examples from studies of

nonverbal communication in traffic.² Order is here represented by knowledge of script-like maps of pre-given and preconceived, normative and non-normative, clues on how to act in specific situations. Therefore the production of new acts, and thus a different order in traffic is dependent on the knowledge structures in which they take place. It is argued that multiple knowledge structures are used as the starting point for improvisation and negotiations. Practice in general could be said to be a continuously ongoing struggle for change in preconceived order. This continuous and simultaneous struggle can be defined as an *on-going-ness*. Thus, it is not any stable and given order that makes traffic work. Instead, traffic emerges out of certain practices that aim at reproducing, and at the same time changing an order, ultimately producing more or less safe and effective spaces. Rules represent such knowledge structure that aims at order and which traffic participants use as association for practice and meaning. Knowledge structures, order, improvisation and negotiation are thus intertwined and inseparable. Without order there would be no improvisation, and without improvisation, order would be difficult to define at all.

Introduction: Framing the study

The research for this study was made in relation to a PhD project, undertaken between 1996 and 2000, and it has continued up until the present.³ The research has involved systematic observations, interviews, intervening observations, text analysis, and image analysis. Systematic observations were made in Göteborg, Sweden and this article develops some of the themes from that study. The final data were gathered for about ten hours of focussed observation, which had been developed through about a year of participant observation. This article is an attempt to reframe an observational study of nonverbal action in traffic and to put it in tension with social theory and geography. Quotes are taken from studies made in the PhD project, mentioned above.

Field observations for this study, and analysis of findings, are influenced by ethnomethodological and text analytical approaches (See Goffman, 1970; Silverman, 1993). The fundamental question to be answered by observation is "what is going on there?" (Silverman, 1993: 30). Obviously, it is not relevant to observe just anything that goes on in traffic. If one is foremost interested in accidents or a particular "action" like speeding, driving through a red light and so on, it is unlikely that observations will result in anything more than a confirmation of what one already knew before the observation started. But, if one is interested in details of actions and the interaction between traffic participants, observation can be used to gain an understanding of practices that are otherwise easily taken for granted. Preconceived notions about how to interpret actions in traffic are very strong within applied traffic safety studies, in which the study of actions, or behavior as it is often called, is more or less strictly oriented towards legal offences and indications thereof. I should say here that all preconceived notions can not be eradicated. However, the important choice to make is whether one is willing to know as much as

² This study is from Göteborg, Sweden. See Jonasson, Mikael (2000) *The Creation of Places in Traffic through performative Action*. Publications edited by the Department of Geography, University of Gothenburg. Series B no 98, Dissertation.

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possible about these notions in order to perhaps produce new knowledge, or if one is interested in reproducing only the same knowledge over and over.

Here too, interruptions play an important role because traffic is based on the expectation of a continuous flow in movement from one point to another. Interruptions of these flows can be made by humans or by machines like the traffic light. These interruptions tell us something about ‘traffic’, and they are performances of meaningful action as well as elements in the production of spaces and the creation of places.

Thus, the reading is not of traffic as text, but of traffic as the *writing* of that text. Traffic cannot be reduced to text. Reading traffic, as the writing of a text is rather to employ the kinds of questions a text analyst would ask a text. It is hence an epistemological position taken in order to reach a certain perspective. Again, this is done with the reflexive knowledge that the observer has no privileged status in relation to other observers and that observation really is a question of moving among different frames of reference (Latour, 1998: 5).

The systematic observational study took place near Göteborg University, at the intersection Vasagatan and Victoriagatan in Göteborg.⁴ All types of traffic participants are represented at this intersection, including trams. This locale has been described by a survey respondent as suffering from ‘traffic problems’:

... Problems also in the intersection Vasagatan and Victoriagatan with all traffic participants, not least the bicyclists who are completely ruthless on the entire bicycle road at Vasagatan. Witnessed a bicyclist that runs into the front of a car standing still in the intersection. Bicyclists also have to give way to traffic from the right. (no 745, 47 year old woman)

Observations were spread over the day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. These hours were chosen because traffic at that time is characterized by so-called low traffic volume. The conditions under high traffic periods, or rush hours, make observations difficult because traffic participants are numerous and everything happens very fast.⁵

In this study I focused on observations aimed at descriptions, interpretations and explanation of three specific types of situatedly improvised actions: *continuity*, *competition*, and *positioning*. The situation at an intersection has the characteristics of being what Serres (1995: 106) terms as the multiple, that which at first glance appears as disorder. Several elements that separately have an order appear in juxtaposition as disorder. One difference between order and disorder is that the last is harder to study

⁴ Twenty-three accidents were registered at the intersection Vasagatan and Victoriagatan in Göteborg, Sweden between 1993 and 1995. All of them resulted in slight injuries. Traffic at the intersection has been measured in terms of an average daily traffic (ADT), from Monday to Friday, and spread out over the year. The ADT in 1983 was 16,500 vehicles; for 1975 it was 23,000 vehicles. Measurements have not been made in recent years. From “Personal injuries, Presentation of accidents in different locations“. Traffic and Public Transport Authority in Goteborg (1995), and Traffic and Public Transport Authority in Goteborg (1995).

⁵ Perhaps a stronger emphasis on what has been interpreted as belonging to a category called “rule of competition”, described later in this article, would have come forward if periods of high traffic had been studied.

scientifically. But at the same time it is a usual, ordinary, well dispersed and universal, and yet unique state. Chaos sometimes spontaneously appears in order and order sometimes appears in the middle of disorder (Serres, 1995: 109).

A ‘meeting’ between two or more traffic participants at the intersection occurs when each participant has recognized the others and acts with that knowledge, because not every relationship between two drivers on the street is essentially social (Dannefer, 1977:35). Actions were excluded from analysis if traffic participants had passed the crossroad without meeting other traffic participants. Such non-meeting situations were defined as natural interfoliations. Accordingly, not every traffic participant was involved in a social meeting with other participants at the place of observation, and that it was more or less ‘random’ who was caught in the net of my categorizations.

The traffic at the intersection Vasagatan and Victoriagatan was defined as complex, partly because participants themselves refer to it as ambiguous and even dangerous. It is one of the most frequently mentioned ‘problem’ places in discussions of Göteborg traffic (Jonasson, 1996). Other problems mentioned include the reluctance to yield to the right and yield to pedestrians on crosswalks. My impression from both systematic and participant observations in Göteborg is that participants in traffic sometimes yield to the right and stop at crosswalks, *but they do not do it as a rule and it is not something one can expect that all traffic participants do.*⁶ This means that there while there may be a formal “right” way to interact in the intersection, most traffic participants cannot rely on that knowledge because some participants might be at the place for the first time, or may not have understood how to act according to the present formal and visual traffic regulation.

Three Ways of Producing Continuity and Interruptions

The first observed action event, or situatedly improvised rule that is active in the production of space, is the rule of *continuity*. This rule means that a traffic participant who is believed to have a continual movement in space imposes the right to go first. Let us say that two traffic participants are headed towards the same spot in an intersection. If one of these two is incapable of being the first at the point where the meeting (or collision) will eventually occur, then it is assumed that he or she must slow down and let the traffic participant with *continuous* movement go first. In general, the experience and performance of flow or continuity in traffic has a higher priority than non-movement. Continuity is the fundamental condition under which traffic works and the whole idea of traveling depends on an expectation of continual movement from one place to another without unnecessary interruptions. More specifically, all traffic participants (including pedestrians) prefer continual movement to unexpected interruptions. *Therefore, it is inappropriate, in the production of traffic space, to interrupt a shared expectation of continual movement in space.*

Every traffic participant sooner or later has to stop because her or his continuity is interrupted. This interruption of continuity immediately gives the right of way to other traffic participants who are moving in different directions. It is not uncommon that an impenetrable chain of traffic participants is created, carrying participants who want to take advantage of their continuity. Participants can hurry forward in order to create this chain of

⁶ By the time of writing a new formal states that drivers must stop and yield for pedestrians.

continuity and create a linkage with those who already have entered the street or the crossing. Priority and expectation are socially constructed as cultural common sense but they still carry a crucial element of courtesy. Bicyclists take advantage of the courtesy that drivers are expected to show pedestrians (see Figure 1). In the particular cultural constellation of this study, the element of courtesy in relation to continuity might to some extent explain why pedestrians often stood and waited at a crosswalk for a seemingly endless chain of moving cars to pass by, which was common in Göteborg. Pedestrians could break the chain of cars and make them yield for them at the crosswalk if it were not for the fact that it is impolite and dangerous to do so. Even in places where drivers do yield to pedestrians, the same continuity rule can explain how pedestrians create these joint chains with reference to the relative politeness they can expect. This can for instance explain why it is impolite to break the continual movement of a *walking person*.

The situatedly improvised rule of continuity is intimately interwoven with physical and geographical navigation in space. It also connects the process of learning to improvise by situated practice and social relations that become inscribed in the creation of places.



Figure 1. Bicyclists and a pedestrian taking advantage of the courtesy expected of drivers (Photo: Mikael Jonasson).

There is an interface between the rule of continuity and the second act, which I interpret as the situatedly improvised rule of *competition*, in the sense that it is possible to

make exceptions from the first rule by hurrying ('competing') to reach the space where traffic participants meet. This is possible because social and situatedly improvised rules are complex, not absolute or definite (see Thrift 1999). By the maneuver of making an effort to be first at the meeting point, the traffic participant has signaled an intention to employ the rule of competition. This rule says that the traffic participant who first reaches the point where the meeting is to take place has won the right of way in this traffic space. Hydén (1997:117 referring to András Várhelyi), says that one of every six drivers in his study accelerated when nearing a crosswalk. However, Hydén explains this performance by suggesting that the drivers' intention is to hurt the pedestrians, which I find very unlikely.⁷ I would instead suggest that the particular performative action signals competition. The performance of acceleration is thus used as a way of distinctively indicating that the pedestrian is violating a social rule by disrupting the driver's continuity. The rule of competition reconstituted the symbolic place of the crosswalk and thus the one who arrived first at the crosswalk won the right of way. Situated rules are simultaneously improvised and created through the practice of traffic and this, in turn, creates specific places.⁸

Hence, the boundaries between the categories revolving around what is called politeness here are elastic and dynamic. The communication between participants must consider forgiveness and a negotiable space for mistakes, hesitations, inattentiveness, and even arrogance. Participants thus learn how to negotiate and improvise in practicing traffic communication. It can, for instance, be difficult to decide which of the traffic participants actually is performing an experience of the highest continuity or speed; or one of the participants might hesitate for some reason. It may even be acceptable to maneuver relatively aggressively in order to gain access to the space in question. Again, the right of way with reference to continuity has to be bodily negotiated and improvised within a cultural understanding of what the performance of traffic allows. Further, the boundaries between the categories are moveable since traffic participants are dependent on a continuity to be able to compete. Situated rules couple with each other because they are social. No social system is closed. There are always openings for flexibility, dynamism and change.

The situatedly improvised rule of competition is related to the rule of continuity in the sense that a person who competes is believed to have, or makes a claim on, a higher continuity than a second person arriving at a meeting place. This means that it is possible for the competitor to reinforce the sense of continual flow. In linguistic terms, continual flow can be seen as a rhetorical device that makes it possible for a competing participant to stretch the limits of politeness and thereby make an effort to be first at the crosswalk (see Figure 2). Another strategy can be to avoid interaction by compressing the distance in such a way that participants simply interfoliate and cross without negotiation

⁷ This conclusion is probably based on common presumptions about traffic, rather than empirical or theoretical knowledge.

⁸ I would say that social rules are not unreflective and cannot be reduced to routines. Instead they are reflected upon with our bodies by reactions and interpretations, whereas discursive reflections not necessarily have to be connected to bodily practice. An example of such bodily reflection is blushing as a reaction of shame. The distinction between discursive and bodily reflection depends on what status one is willing to give the tactile and the outspoken.

Other traffic participants often notice when someone uses the rule of competition because it creates an opportunity for people behind the competitor to get close and thereby create a chain of objects in movement, which is very difficult for crossing traffic to break.. If the competing participant is unsuccessful in reaching the meeting point first, the consequences could instead be congestion. The whole queue runs the risk of losing its continuity, something which crossing traffic in turn could take advantage of by creating a difficult-to-penetrate wall of moving objects.

Later in this article I will suggest that these rules are performed as situatedly ritualized social rules of correct behaviour, in the sense that they are repeated at the same place and through space. They are, at the same time, creative and always new and improvised each single time — *performative action is a tool by which humans create and sustain places.*



Figure 2. The rule of competition makes it possible to stretch the limits of politeness (Photo: Mikael Jonasson).

Thirdly, by distinctive *positioning* I mean that some groups of traffic participants have, or create, legitimacy and knowledge to act in more ways than other traffic participants do and through those actions they create collective discursive, bodily and symbolic images about themselves and their capability in traffic. This is perhaps the one type of performance in traffic that can truly be related to the issue of identity. The purpose of having or creating a legitimate, but yet an asymmetrical position, could be to perform an instrumental identity, or signal a preparedness to act more aggressively, in order to compete and use the elasticity of politeness with a successful outcome. Positioning provides for different types of identity in traffic. Taxi drivers, for example, are mentioned

as having their own laws and a different mentality and that "... they drive even more aggressively than ordinary drivers do" (Female police officer). A bus driver explains with irony how his own position in traffic works: "Most people have concluded that a bus is rather large" (Male bus driver).

An advantageous position in a hierarchy tends to be preferred because other participants are supposed to enact the deference implied in their relative position. Knowledge about these positions is iteratively performed and continuously negotiated and contested by all participants, as the following interview excerpt suggests:

M.J.: Can you use the fact that someone is hesitant?

Taxi 1: Yes of course ... like, when sort of, the give way to the right rule is not ... it is not followed here in Göteborg sort of, and you can use that, sort of (he he he) .. you see sort of, the private driver coming from the right and he is hesitant about where to drive and then the professional driver, sort of drive, he already knows by the look of his facial expression, or what to say, that he will stop... or sort of, you look how the driver behaves and then you drive, sort of say, before then...

(Interview with Taxi driver 1).

Some traffic participants create and sustain through their bodily and vehicular performance the image of themselves as fast, skillful drivers with control over difficult situations. There are several motives for creating that symbolic capital: a taxi must transport a customer to the airport, buses and trams have a schedule to follow, etc.⁹ In this process, identity plays an important role, but the most crucial variable is the actual performance of the traffic participant. Every role and identity has to be fulfilled with practices that are given meaning again and again.

Thus, identity and traffic management have almost the same goal to achieve some kind of order and control traffic situations that are characterized by a genuine uncertainty. But, neither identity, nor exercise of power can be a visible constant among traffic participants. If someone tried constantly to make use of power or persistently claim their position with help of their identity they would see themselves hurt sooner or later. Power is *one* of the variables available that can be used in the negotiation and improvisation of traffic interaction; identity is another. A third variable that I will try to argue here is the performance of nonverbal action which aims at constructing order, and at the same time is part of the human project of creating places and constructing spaces.

One way of discussing this ethnographic account is to frame it within the ways that human and social geography have embraced the term *practice*. Simonsen argues that taking a starting point in social practices is an approach that claims: "...nothing in the social world is prior to human practice, not consciousness, ideas or meaning; not structures or mechanisms; and not texts, discourses or networks" (2003: 157). Practice is also closely

⁹ Dannefer (1977:34) calls this phenomenon 'motion-effective' and says that it involves an identity-based interaction that influences vehicular movement. These types of encounters reveal a hierarchy of deference based on size of the opponent vehicle, aggression, prestige, and age/sex/dress or the like, that is, aspects irrespective of the vehicle.

related to order. From the perspective of traffic, it seems that it is through practice that order is negotiated. Order is not simply what the studied reality reveals to an outside observer. Structure and order is embedded in observing the world, which makes it difficult to “re-present” an ongoing reality as either ordered or chaotic (see non-representational thinking, Thrift, 1996). However, a pre-given notion of order is difficult to ignore, because it is implicit in the notion of viewing the world outside from an inside. Without any notions of how to order the world, it would blur into a chaotic mess.

It is between the perspective of order and disorder that the interest of space production and place creation is being made here. The production of new spaces in traffic is dependent on the existing order in which the negotiations of new types of practice take place. Thus, production and improvisation aiming at new ways of acting are informed by a notion of structural limitations (the practice of mundane everyday practices or the practice of laws). These limitations can be understood in terms of power. And at the same time it is possible to view order in terms of empowerment because it is difficult to violate a non-existing traffic rule. Traffic participants require knowledge of what is possible or impossible within a given structure. Therefore, it is difficult for an outside observer to construct a description of events in an observed phenomenon without using some kind of ordering framework. In that sense we are all “structuralists” (Soja, 1994:134). Structure or order is the most important *a priori* category of all categories within science. It is *the* scientific category because it is not possible to transform any legitimate knowledge without some kind of ordering.

Scientific structuring is important not only in a context where observations or interviews are being conducted. It is also obvious that in the *a posteriori* context, where social scientists use theoretical tropes such as “culture” or “place” to interpret and analyze the information they have gathered, ordering and configuring the way the observed world is being re-presented. Through analogy, replacement and/or translation, concepts such as “culture” and “place” are mapped onto the concept of “order”. This article tries to understand the process that foregoes this order, or the messy business involved in constructing order through negotiations and improvisation.

Order and Chaos

Order is manifested in solid, concrete “things” that exist outside our bodies in the form of infrastructural features such as pavements and roundabouts, and formal traffic rules. Neither Giddens nor Bourdieu (in Broady, 1990) defines structure as something beyond and isolated from practice; rather both have sought ways of connecting social structure with practice. Traffic rules are for instance part of one order among many. Other types of order include knowledge and experience of individual practices such as the three situatedly social rules that I discussed earlier, or they can be comprised of acceptance, resistance, ignorance or characterized by interpretation and misinterpretation of rules in everyday interaction. Order in traffic may also be constituted by discursive elements constantly reproduced by applied traffic safety research, traffic management, as well as by all other traffic participants. There is not one structure in traffic, but multiple structures, semi-structures, hierarchies, and connections. Furthermore, they are all active at the same time. These structures are sometimes merely threadlike connections and thus not always palpable and thus they can be difficult to detect, almost invisible. Order might thus be unstable, contestable, coexistent, multiple, and negotiable. Order may, in a pictorial or

cartographic sense, be placed in a foreground, in the way that formal traffic rules are presented in a traffic safety discourse. Structures may also be invisible and placed in a background as when they embody and contain power relations (Friedland and Boden, 1994:28).

Negotiating places and bringing order into place

Maneuvering in traffic is not all about compliance to formal traffic rules. Every participant who is involved in traffic simultaneously produces spaces and places as a social and physical project. It is what Amin (2002, in Massey, 2004:6) calls the “necessity of negotiating across and among difference the implacable spatial fact of shared turf”. In the dialectic between space and practice there exists both forces that adjust abilities and powers that enable certain practices. Differences in power between different groups in traffic are also spatially negotiated and constituted.

By considering the dynamic interrelated tension between order and chaos, we might also recognize that place has order in many *senses*. It has for instance order because all spatial locations of phenomena are produced by *practice*, and since practice is given meaning, it is also ordered by that meaning. This is why locations in principle can be explained in relation to meaning. Also, place has order because there are indeed spatial systems, sets of social phenomena in which spatial arrangements (that is, mutual and relative positioning rather than ‘absolute’ location) are part of the constitution of the system.

...There is an integral spatial coherence here, which constitutes the geographical distributions and the geographical form of the social relations. The spatial form was socially ‘planned’, in itself directly socially caused, that way. But there is also an element of ‘chaos’ which is intrinsic to the spatial... ...they are unintended consequences. Thus, the chaos of the spatial results from the happenstance juxtapositions, the accidental separations, the often paradoxical nature of the spatial arrangements which result from the operation of all these causalities. (Massey, 1994:266)

Independent of the outcome, chaos and order seem to co-exists in a dialectical way, choosing which one we emphasize depends on what context we are looking at. This means that order can be viewed as something continuously changing in course of practice. This might especially be true in face-to-face, or car-to-car relations, where order and identity are relatively unstable, constantly floating and moving in time-space.

So, instead of choosing either chaos or order as a departure for understanding relations and interactions that produce space, it might be possible to see order / chaos / agency as context-dependent, negotiable, and as a process of being in flow. The inseparable connection between place, culture and practice — the multiple and simultaneous ways in which they can be interpreted, and the continuous flow in meaning attached to them — indicates that they may be predefined in terms of their constant negotiative and constructive powers. Order embedded in the representation of practice, place and culture is at constant flow, in which “stand-ins” (symbols, markers, indicators, labels, and attributes) for that structure, also have to be negotiated, renegotiated and constructed through interpretation and intervention in the process of interpretation. Thus,

one way of understanding the observed practices at Vasagatan and Victoriagatan in Göteborg is as performative action.

Negotiating, performing and improvising order

Some caution might be addressed as to the use of the term “performative action”. It is perhaps important to recognize that this is a rather late construction of the term performativity, and that it has come to us from the Latin *perficere* and through philosophy, linguistics, postmodern thought and social science.¹⁰

Today, the concept is perhaps claimed to be useful in studies of the performance of identity in terms of speech or dramatic and expressive style, and thus not applicable to nonverbal practice. In the work of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler (1993), performativity has enabled powerful as well as power-filled appreciations of the ways in which identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes. One consequence of this appreciation has been a heightened willingness to credit the performative dimension in all ritual, ceremonial, and scripted behaviors. In geography, the idea of performativity points towards certain relational practices of interaction, which can be connected to space and identity (see Massey, 2004:1).

With risk of unjustly ignoring the above particular meaning of the concept “performativity”, I simply try to follow the Latin meaning that an action is being carried out and being produced. Instead of solely focusing upon issues of identity, which are significant, I try to focus on the particular point where geography and social theory intersect in terms of their significance in processes of the *mutual, collaborative and universal project of producing spaces and creating places*. Identity issues are one aspect in this universal prospect of creating and constructing places, but it is not the only way humans manoeuvre in traffic.

¹⁰ The concept “performative” is perhaps mostly discussed within philosophy in several contexts. Andersson (1975) mention for instance in jurisprudence where the term elucidate the notion of a contract, or in a business agreement as a “bargain”. Another definition of the performative is used to describe the certain utterances delivered by judges and other officials and that utterance has a certain “normpromulgating” effect (from Latin *perficere* = to carry out, finish, complete; to perfect, to cause, to make; a duty). In connection with religion the baptizing of a child in the “Name of the Father, and the son, and the Holy Ghost” is a performative utterance. Within grammar, the notion of performativity has been introduced in order to account for the deep structures of certain sentences, like “Go home!” Andersson (1975) see the term as a technical term of the philosophical or linguistic meta-language. As such it makes the term denote some linguistic phenomena that has some peculiar and interesting features. But, there is also a difference between semantics and pragmatics which brings us back to the textual problem, the formers interest lies in the relation between sentences and the latter in the relation between sentences and those who utter and interpret them (Recanati, 1987:5). In Loytard’s text *The Postmodern Condition* (1984) the term “performativity” mean an extreme of something like *efficiency* – postmodern representation as a form of capitalist efficiency. While, the deconstructive “performativity” seems to be characterized by the *dislinkage* precisely of cause and effect between the signifier and the world (from Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1995:2). De Man demonstrates that there is a radical estrangement between the meaning and the performance of any text. There is according to Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick (1995:3) an aberrant relation between the reference and performativity, or the torsion, the mutual perversion of reference and performativity.

The term “performative” is used here as a descriptive tool for understanding nonverbal traffic practices that produce spaces and creates places, not only a tool that describes how identities are performed. In that sense the concept produces some effects and perspectives on traffic practice that might otherwise go unnoticed.

In a geographical context the production of spaces and the creation of places occur through iterative, meaning laden and *significant* elements of practice that continuously produce new practice and meaning. This does not mean that the places that might seem to be already-made sites of practice, in this wider meaning, cannot be defined by the competence they leave behind them (houses, roads, roundabouts, and traffic lights). It just includes the fact that they can also be defined by the *attempts* that are made to construct them, the associations they are constructed on, the sanctions they get, the background in which they circulate, in short – all the performative actions they can show.¹¹ *Place and space are performed.*

In this view, traffic places are ideological constructions and bearers of a spatial-temporal ideology, which is interpreted, negotiated, accepted, ignored, unnoticed or resisted by traffic participants. Negotiation is thus not limited to interaction between people. Traffic participants must negotiate (with) all sorts of material and cultural representations as well as key indications in discourses since these representations act as moral agents with the mandate to act in place of humans and structures. That is why a police officer does not shout traffic rules out at every intersection. Instead traffic rules are embedded in and mapped onto different types of practices such as selective police interventions, traffic education, information through media, everyday talk and in traffic interaction. In that sense, important clues about how to act according to the formal or informal rules are produced at a particular place in traffic, and therefore these acts can in a way be said to be performative.

When the concept of performance is being squeezed into a context where order is in focus, it seems as if what is “carried out” is an improvised act within a fluid form that is constantly changing its conditions. This does not mean that all practices are performative. Only those actions that are *significant* in the process of creating places and spaces are performative. Significance in this case is dependent on the particular aim of the observer, and of course the qualities of and education of the observer. But, to interrogate these types of performative actions does not simply mean to observe the achievement of someone’s acts. It also involves examining the *effects* that they produce by being carried out.

Performative actions are situated practices or situated “engagement” (Pred, 1990:3). Performative actions are “situated” and “embodied” (Simonsen, 2003:157). Performative actions are continuously produced and reproduced, constituting the hub around which culture and meaning are attached. Place, space and culture are situated at the intersection of all performative actions in traffic. As such, these actions encapsulate the world and give us an opportunity to see the wholeness on which a social drama focuses in a concentrated and compressed way (Jennings, 1995:17). Performative actions are thus metonymic, in the sense that all types of significant micro-events in everyday life tell us something about our society and culture. Interrogated and unfolded, these performative

¹¹ This idea is taken from Latour (1998:5). One could say that Bourdieu’s cultural capital and habitus are expanded to include not only humans but also objects and institutions.

actions are connected in the form of paths of order or networks.¹² The character of these paths and patterns is a matter of construction by all actors involved in their constitution; they are laid out in practice.

Place, space, culture and practice are each constituted within, and constitute, a joint flow of movement. In this flow it is difficult to distinguish practice that is concrete such as physical work of engineering, from mental and philosophical work that create sites. Performative actions create sites that *fill the void that easily emerges between the physical, the mental, and the social sites*.¹³ The very momentary and smooth quality of these places indicates a structure that is in constant change through improvised actions within different forms. The performative action thus excludes the possibility of meaningless acts, routine activities or mechanically standardized procedures in traffic. *In traffic, your life is always at stake. Do you still believe that there are any standardized, empty, predictable and meaningless gestures?*

Performative actions do not confine themselves to one type of perspective on practice or one site at a time. Performative actions include several acts that are connected by the common task of creating places. Thus, traffic places are products of utopian vision, (mis)interpretation, contestation, resistance, ritual, struggle, power, and collaborative maneuver. The understanding of places as performative products rests, not on a theory of truth, but on theory as a set of contested localized, conjunctural knowledges, which have to be dealt with in a dialogical way (Moore, 1997: 89). Rather, instead of using spatial metaphors of struggle as mantras, the warnings of the fetishization of resistance, conflicts, opposing ideologies and differences are taken seriously. This means considering complexity, in terms of both collaborative acts undertaken in order to solve insufficiencies in the infrastructure of everyday life, and struggle and power over meaning and space in traffic.

Negotiating complexity is the composite that holds together differences, resistances, conflicts, and misunderstandings that would — fully displayed and played out — lead to repeated catastrophes. It is important to understand how the negotiation of complexity is articulated, because it is the capillary force that holds participants together in spite of their different identities, goals, knowledges, and resources. It lends a thought to the incredible fact that places are constructed as joint products — by placing the roundabouts, for example, or presenting a discussion about them at a conference in Linköping; as well as negotiating with insufficient information; by overlooking or repairing micro-social mistakes; by ignoring danger; by articulating identities; by swiftly shifting from formal to social traffic rules as a result of subtle movements; and by giving a description of the event in retrospect. However, the goal is also to recognize participants' resistance to the implicit or explicit hegemonic and homogenous domination of management and applied traffic safety research over interpretations of meaning in traffic.

¹² This operation is made without necessarily reducing culture to a subculture, it is rather seen as looking into the fibres of which culture is weaved.

¹³ The argument that social space fills the gap between mental and physical space is from Lefebvre (1992) *The Production of Space*.

Finally, the idea of performative action is permeated by a constructivist view of embodied practice and the production of sites.¹⁴ It shares a general epistemological view with constructivism in that it recognizes the fact that "One of the important developments in science studies has been the increased awareness that science inquiries are social and ideological constructions" (Hayles, 1993). Here, the places of knowledge production, include the management office, the conference on traffic safety in Aalborg in Denmark, as well as the streets of Göteborg and San Francisco. The production of knowledge is thus situated in far more places than one might expect. At the same time, constructivism does not entail the claim that everything in traffic is concretely socially constructed in the sense that things do not exist and are mere projections of the mind. Rather constructivism constitutes a possible way to create an understanding of the context in which traffic artifacts and discourses are made. This context is always social and it is in such social contexts that artifacts are produced, where meaning is created and where the motives behind that context are dressed in words and concrete.

The similarity between the situated performative practice perspective and this particular constructivist perspective is that they do not treat social phenomena solely as concrete, material entities — that is, as types of social facts. Collectivities are not seen as external to individuals, nor as the property of the former (Ritzer, 1975). Instead, traffic is treated as a very loose form of organization, or a hub, consisting of a set of groups who are simultaneously constructors and users of time, with different means and goals.¹⁵ Finally, where functionalists often study political, regional, or administrative dimensions, by interviewing the elite group assumed to be shaping and producing the reality on a management level, the constructivist and pluralist instead study these dimensions as a product of both people's actions and of elite decision-making.

Nonverbal acts are being carried out in conversations with bodies, symbols and vehicles.¹⁶ The reason for not discriminating between different forms of practice - for instance between physical constructions like roundabouts and meaning-filled gestures between bicyclists - is that they are all situated in some type of social relation. Whether the production of place and culture is articulated in a physical infrastructure, discourses about traffic constructed by all participants in traffic, or this text about traffic, these practices are socially embedded and situated. Traffic places are thus products of performative acts such as utopian visions, disappointments, (mis)interpretations, contestations, triumphs,

¹⁴ Knorr Cetina (1994:3) refers to three different types of constructivism within sociology today, except deconstructivism which she associated with postmodernism. Two of the types are relevant in this work. The first is the *social constructivism*, which arises from symbolic interactionism, "negotiationism" and Berger and Luckman's text *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). This types of constructivism wants to document the social origin of what is seen as "objective" social events and structures by pointing at actors interaction and their work with getting these events to happen, and meaning and definitions that fills events and situations. The main criticism has been that it excludes things and that it does not reflect over its own construction, as well as the use of social factors as tools in the work of construction.

¹⁵ The idea is originally from Putnam (1985:37).

¹⁶ See Jonasson (2000) also for an investigation of narratives and non-human actors in traffic.

unintended consequences, resistance, rituals, and collaborative/competitive manoeuvring acts.

The gap between “formal” and “informal” or preferably, *situatedly improvised structures*, produces a space that traffic management and formal regulation cannot reach. It is supposed to be this way, for humans can never be completely controlled. There will always have to be some space left over for humans to create roles, relations and hierarchies of their own. *Especially in traffic because traffic does not work due to rules, but due to participants’ will to make it work.*

Thus places are not only parts of a space-structure, or structured space, but also sites of continuous practice where the scene is not given in a structural sense, and where there is room for improvisation and negotiation between all structures.

To negotiate is to enter a situation or a terrain that has never been entered before; it is like orienting oneself on social terrain. Instead of drawing boundaries among different kinds of places — i.e., mythological, pragmatic, abstract, theoretical, conscious, unconscious — I would like to draw attention to the *possible* and the *ongoing* place. When the desire for structure is set aside, the negotiative and improvisational are set in the foreground and a new drama is acted out.

The morphology of culture

Morphology is a concept that has deliberately been drawn out of a natural science context in order to see what effects it produces when it is engaged in cultural issues. The morphology of culture is (re)presented through and by language, nonverbal actions, and physical artifacts (seen as situated discourse elements transcending mere text). By describing objects and events, by constructing things from ideas, and by iteratively acting (in a way that almost repeats itself), we explain how something works and why something has happened. We express feelings and beliefs, develop logical arguments, and convince others to act in a certain way — by arguing or by drawing on embodied examples of our own way of acting and telling others about our experiences. The structure of these accounts and other actions varies, but in most cases they are all linked to and *situated at particular places*.

Viewing culture or a structure in terms of a flow produces a certain effect when it comes to methodology. Investigating the morphology of culture or the change of structure involves a closer attention to these particular places where the meaning flow *takes a turn* or is *interrupted*. Places and spaces come to life and culture becomes visible when the taken-for-granted flow of values is *interrupted*, when rules are changing, when participants feel that rules are disconnected from actual practice, or norms are threatened, when or where order is at stake. *Undulations* in the morphology of culture and structure present as events that suddenly emerge in the taken-for-granted smooth surface-like everyday landscape. They consist of irregularities and actions or thoughts ideologically opposed to the rest of the flow.

The reason for not discriminating between different forms of practice — for instance between physical constructions like roundabouts and meaningful gestures between bicyclists — is that they are all situated in some type of social relation. Whether the production of place and culture is articulated in a physical infrastructure, discourses about traffic constructed by all participants in traffic, or this text about traffic, these practices are

socially embedded and situated. Traffic places are thus products of *performative acts* such as utopian visions, disappointments, (mis)interpretations, contestations, triumphs, unintended consequences, resistance, rituals, negotiations and collaborative/competitive maneuvering acts.

Traffic interaction as an improvisational drama

Performative actions are significant forms of situated practice for several reasons. They isolate particular objects of action, which carry meaning in a condensed way. Further, the significance carried in these actions alert to subtle elements that otherwise would have disappeared in the clutter of gestures, symbols and codes that continuous movement creates.¹⁷ Social drama is not to be mistaken for an elitist activity that is associated with theater. Social drama is a form of creative act that includes improvisation, while theater often is a finished product or a performance (see Jennings, 1995:8, and Goffman, 1969).

Traffic represents an entire scene where an interactive social drama is performed. Performative actions allow us to be participants and spectators at the same time: "...he who devises or creates or performs is also spectator of what he does; and he who beholds it is also active in the sense that he interprets the performance" (G. Lewis, 1980:38, in Jennings, 1995:16).

The interesting thing with performative action lies partly in this ambiguity of the active and passive roles for creator, performer and beholder. I argue that performative practice bears some kind of reflexive element. It does so because it obviously contains the seed of constant change of flow in meaning within action itself. In turn, this makes it possible to change both the form and content of performative action; although it might be difficult to fetter categorizations of action and meaning once and for all.

Although the drama that goes on in traffic is a nonverbal one, the most important link between the drama and the performative action is the movement in traffic.¹⁸

Words may be important elements of ritual performance, sometimes critically so. But while words may stand alone in myth unaccompanied by gesture, they are dependent on the directional movements that make up ritual. It is in this sense that ritual, full of spatial movement and gestural performance, could make the evolutionary transition to drama and theatre, based at first primarily on mime rather than on dialogue. (Parkin, 1992:17, in Jennings, 1995:16).

Improvising interruptions and continuity

Traffic interaction is a matter of improvisation in a repertoire of body/vehicle expressions by way of associations that aim to produce continuity or interruptions. In terms of presentational performance, traffic is the perpetual variation on the themes of continuity and interruption. What is interrupted is a continuous flow in culture, structure or

¹⁷ Originally, these aspects are said to be the function of the ritual, according to Lewis (1980:39, in Jennings, 1995:16-17). They are here seen as having the same function in performative actions.

¹⁸ This is only true as long as participants do not end up in some kind of dispute.

iterative practice. This view suggests that nonverbal acts in traffic constitute a limited and yet sophisticated language involving the coordinated use of mind, language and body in a fulfilling mode of being in the world. The per-form-ativity thus lies in the variation of elements in this nonverbal language. The thickness of information in any nonverbal act suggests that there is a repertoire of different ways of dealing with situations. For example, there is the thickness that Asplund (1987:12) observes in the greeting ceremony, which is dense and filled with social content. Although no words are uttered in this language, there is a type of “co-presence” present in the situation (see Boden & Molotch, 1994: 259). Co-presence is related to the intensity that Erwin Goffman called the “focused attention”, enabling communication to occur with no words whatsoever. It is what Asplund (1987: 30) elaborates and calls “responsorium”, which refers to the ongoing process involving two people in a behavior sequence in which each person alternates in being a genuine respondent to the other’s behavior, in an ongoing reciprocal exchange.¹⁹ This social responsive behavior is characterized by the ability to take over roles. A person can anticipate the behavior of his or her counterpart and perform that behavior in the counterpart’s place. One of the parts can also complete a behavior that the other part only has begun. In Asplund’s words (1987:17), the turning of one’s head would therefore be a denial of the other in the way that a person is deprived his capacity to recognize and affirm you. Eventually this denial can become what Asplund calls “asocial responsivity” (1987: 67). Even though one is capable of confirming the other, one chooses not to do so. This is the making/executing of micro power. The only difference is that communication in traffic often involves several people at the same time, which means that the “presence” involved is rather a type of simultaneous “presentational presence” or “presentational enactment” in a performative sense. Traffic participants present their intentions in terms of ignoring, subordination, domination, hesitation, negotiation, politeness, and so on. At the same time that they are performing their own intentions, they are also spectators of others’ presentations.

In a genuine communication there is always a genuine uncertainty. You or they show me what I have said and I show them what you and they have said. Before you have answered I can only have a hypothesis about what I have said, when you answer (Asplund, 1987: 45). A performative action, in this study, assumes a meaning that emerges out of the social situation, not stereotypes that follow a given order. *Presentational presence* and simultaneous respensoriums always suppose this possibility of improvising within the repertoire by way of associations. Scripts in the form of body and vehicle movements are thus “words” and means for improvisational negotiations. The scripts are used as an introduction and a formal way to begin a negotiation. If nothing else happens it has fulfilled its purpose. Furthermore, negotiations can start at one level and can then proceed to another level.

Most of the time we confirm each other’s hypotheses and cooperate with each other; this becomes apparent when we meet an asocial non-responding participant. A non-responding person does not cooperate. But non-response can also be a strategic move that

¹⁹ In opposite of what one could think, reciprocity has nothing to do with an economic transaction, where the right to go first is some kind of currency held, distributed and taken by negotiation. In Asplund’s study reciprocity in the greeting ceremony comes closer to what can be seen in the ritual of courtesy in traffic. Freely translated from Asplund (1987:30).

makes other participants uncertain of one's intentions and moves. Presentational presence or responsivity within a responsorium, in turn, best allows what Harold Garfinkel's (1967) terms "indexicality", that is the meaning of any detail that is used to inform or "index" every other detail by actors. Indexicality in traffic is important because it helps actors to handle the ambiguity and multiplicity of alternative ways of acting that are inherent in any traffic situation.

Nonverbal action is characterized by presentational presence and enactment; participants are simultaneously speaker and audience. This presence requires participants to consider the shared space and speed. It also requires them to generally abandon other activities, such as looking at people pacing the pavement, lighting cigarettes and speaking on cellular phones. The relative thickness of this kind of nonverbal action not only depends on the mutual display of meaning (Boden and Molotch, 1994:268), but also shows the relative attention that is necessary in any ritual or ceremonial performance. Presentational presence is an important element in performative action and it is found when we have some evidence that the other party has indeed made an effort to interact within the negotiable repertoire of body and vehicle talk.

It is precisely these efforts that can be altered and manipulated by participants who wish to change their position and ability to maneuver in traffic. By turning one's head away and continuing into an intersection, it might be possible to alter the attentiveness and presentational presence and in fact signal a lack of it in order to shift the responsibility of a situation's outcome to another party. The logic of inattentiveness can be summed as "I do not see you coming, but you see me and therefore you must stop and wait for me to cross". Presentational presence thus maximizes the opportunity to display an effort or lack of it and also to detect the same in others. This means that non-communication with the body or a vehicle is also filled with meaning. And so are hesitations.

In addition, the body and its extensions, such as a car, a bicycle or even a pedestrian's umbrella, can be effective and relevant means for communication in traffic. Bodily extensions and movements may communicate and signal all sorts of things: status, competence, vulnerability, strategic movement, gender, etc. A taxi driver can simulate or pretend to be making a fast maneuver by producing a short jump forward with his car. This move confuse others in a such a way that they do not think that the driver is multi-present – that he or she is unaware of others - and therefore they stop. The taxi driver can then use this opportunity to slip through. By instrumentally changing the exact timing and placement of vehicles, the taxi driver also manipulates the social commitment of co-presence and thereby alters the outcome of a situation.

However, as I have argued before (see Jonasson, 2000), the expert and management discourse on traffic is very often "biased" towards lack of collaboration, conflicting actions, struggling metaphors and risk behaviors. The observable timing and placement of participants and their vehicles in intersections show that most actions constitute collaborative movements that in turn reveal how profound and deep the trust is between humans. People interact and collaborate in traffic because it protects both themselves and others. Traffic participants anticipate the trajectories and intentions with such precision that they can predict not only a variety of plausible movements, but also the actual intended movement. Actions in traffic can be compared with the position of words and meanings in language, as well as the syncopation of jazz in which participants pace

each other's utterances on the beat and even half-beat to avoid awkwardness (Sudnow, 1979, in Boden and Molotch, 1994). Every traffic participant is heteroglossian and knows different languages that are appropriate to different places — freeways have their language and open, complex, regulated intersections have theirs.

As practices produce other practices and meanings simultaneously and in multiple ways through their situatedness in culture, space and place, it is also likely that traffic shapes social beings in yet unknown ways. Performative actions in modern traffic produce human beings capable of instantly making decisions and taking actions that can alter their well-being in a split second. These practices also add important qualities to *the relations between humans*. The fact that you trust another human beings closing in on you with their 1200 kilogram automobile on a near-collision course with yours, inevitably has to have profound implications for the glue that hold humans together.

Everyday life - complex and mundane, simultaneous difference and sameness

Thus, instead of using traffic metaphors of struggle as mantras, the warnings of fetishization of resistance, conflicts, opposing ideologies and differences are taken seriously. This means considering complexity, in terms of both collaborative acts undertaken in order to solve insufficiencies in the infrastructure of everyday life, and struggle and power over meaning and space in traffic. Complexity is the composite that holds together differences, resistances, conflicts, and misunderstandings that would, fully displayed and played out, lead to repeated catastrophes.

It also means that the conflict in between the lines is not the only target for investigation. Another is how the capillary force is constructed that holds participants together in spite of their different identities, goals, knowledges, and resources. It lends a thought to the incredible fact that places are constructed as joint products — by placing the roundabouts, by presenting a discussion about them at a conference in Linköping; by negotiating with insufficient information; by overlooking or repairing micro-social mistakes; by ignoring danger; by articulating identities; by swiftly shifting from formal to situatedly improvised traffic rules as a result of a subtle movement; and by giving a description of the event in retrospect. Finally, it recognizes participants' resistance against the implicit or explicit hegemonic and homogenous domination of management and applied traffic safety research over interpretations of meaning in traffic.

Although it is difficult to use the metaphors of system or structure when talking about traffic, it is almost impossible to avoid them. However, when change through practice is our focus, it might be more interesting to view traffic as a very loose form of organization, or a hub, consisting of a set of groups who are simultaneously constructors and users of time and place with different means and goals.

In this view of performative action, culture and meaning reveals structure at the same time as this structure is slightly changed. Performative action indicates important social actions that are involved in the creation of places. By taking part in these performative actions we are permitted to be simultaneously performers and beholders and thereby given access to an understanding of social and geographical phenomenon. In other words, taking part in the consumption and production of places is crucial in understanding the logics of everyday practice. In social life actual order is fickle and unstable - always contested, negotiated, resisted, mocked, ignored, forgotten or non-reflexively accepted.

Instead of picturing order and structures as solid, I have tried to imagine their fluidity, them being in constant flow and ongoing, and represented through multiple thematic stand-in markers that constantly change place. Fluid structures are always open for negotiation and challenge, although they might resist. Structures follow the path of practice and the opportunity to understand them is given by taking part in performative actions that are significant. What is significant? Well, it depends on the process in which an investigator interacts with their field and what questions they ask. If tensions between groups are of interest, there are certainly significant actions that produce and intersect at particular sites. If the creation of traffic places is viewed as joint product of all possible types of actors, perhaps a traffic light is a good starting point?

Conclusion

Mundane and seemingly routinized actions in traffic have at least three important consequences in this study. Firstly, they consist of human and artifactual practice that produces meaning and order for mobile subjects in space. Secondly, the practices involved in this production of meaning and order are part of the universal and eternal production of space and place with the help of bodies, symbols, discourses and artifacts. Thirdly, these space-producing practices can be studied in terms of a complex set of social and spatial abilities which in turn have situatedly performative and engaging powers. Although these practices involve different sites of *production*, all these practices *intersect*. Whether they are collaborative or competitive forces expressed in nonverbal gestures or discourses of traffic in everyday life, traffic safety research or management and engineering, they all involve spaces and places; they are practices that, literally, take place and construct space and place. The construction of culture, space and place is simultaneous, continuous and coexists with practices in and about traffic. The construction of spaces and places involves processes that are always in a state of change and are therefore in a constant unfinished state. The production of traffic space is dependent on what has been done before and what is possible to do. At the same time, its performative qualities lie in multiple, simultaneous interpretations and situatedly improvised actions.

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