

Shibuya

Within cities, it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.
–Italo Cavilini, *Invisible Cities*

If the European city is the site of a rational space based on Renaissance perspective than modern day Tokyo is where this rational space was blown to smithereens and replaced by a surreational or anti-perspectival space whose sources are to be found in the televisual expanses of post-Euclidean geometry not in the equilibrium of the humanist grid. In the former, one enters public spaces that unfold one after the other, always leading or directing – constructed it seems with the human body in mind. If one drifts through these spaces – in the tradition of the flaneur for example – it is a controlled drift, corporally defined and taking place within prescribed boundaries, reassuring intersections, squares, and focal points. The public spaces of Tokyo on the other hand inspire an entirely different sensation.



I am standing in Shibuya, staring across a vast expanse of people, all moving in different directions, at a building whose facade has just transformed itself from glass and steel into an immense electronic display of constantly changing scenes – at one moment it's yellow wildflowers bobbing in a lush field and the next an animated dinosaur several stories high lumbering from the edge of the building and across its facade until it disappears into the opposite corner. There is no discernible logic to the sequencing of images. Nor is there any cohesion between these displays and the numerous similar ones taking place on and above buildings in whatever direction I might look; buildings that are crowned with huge advertising billboards,

neon signs, company logos, and brand names – some in English most in Japanese. The sounds of jingles or hysterical sales pitches – I assume they're advertising something – come at me from



every direction. On the edge of the open space where I am standing I watch thousands of people, some milling about talking on cell phones hanging from their necks, others hurrying along, a few grasping shopping bags. There are people flirting and laughing and talking. Some stand in groups, others in pairs, and still others alone. Every age is represented and every style of dress from the most

conservative to the most outlandish. I stare at a young woman who stands nearly motionless within the throng. I can't figure out what she's doing. I think she might be selling or pitching something but if she is it's being done at a nearly subliminal level. Her long bleached hair is swept back from her face and falls midway down her back. She wears black platform shoes that add six inches to her height and long heavy white socks that she's pulled down to mid calf so that they bunch around her legs and over the tops of her shoes. Her bright yellow sleeveless dress hangs loosely and extends to the top of her thighs. She carries on a clear strap from her shoulder a large transparent purse that's filled with all kinds of brightly colored objects. Looking out into this scene, I am aware that I have never felt more alienated in my life. Nor, I realize, have I ever felt more transported by the dream – the dream city – that's unfolding in my imagination.

Why is this? I think it has something to do with how contemporary Tokyo feels more like a media environment than a solid city made out of steel, glass, and stone; and as such introduces an inescapable otherness into my personal space, which while liberating also contributes to the destruction of whatever illusions I may have had of myself as the center point on a neatly organized, rational grid. The order of the world decomposes into a palimpsest that relocates me at its periphery not its center. In this state I can never occupy anything other than the edge because the televisual is without center and exists instead as multiple planes that are constantly shifting, intersecting, and



folding in on one another and where proximity and distance are indistinguishable. This centerless space is furthermore a place of diminished gravity and it is its lack – this sense of boundlessness – that frees my imagination, allowing it to float and drift directionless and liberated rather than corralled by the extravagance that surrounds it. It releases in me an unsettling feeling of anxious euphoria.

