The archetypal road-myth: from the highway to the *Matrix*

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Abstract

The paper examines the persistence and permutations of the archetypal road myth. Its main motif is the traveler, who after getting in touch with the unknown in his wanderings, experiences a mythological and ontological shift. The genealogy of this kind of fables is correlated with spatial transformations of urban and rural America, through the theory of Michel de Certeau about the spatial interpretation of stories. The construction of highways and later on the Interstates network caused immense changes in the landscape, urban and rural forms and social practices. However, the archetypal road myth seems to persist and survive through these changes, adapting in these changes and mutating in the form of myths, screenplays and pulp fiction. Even nowadays, the construction of the information superhighways, which generate a new urban geography, causes a revival of this myth in a totally new context. The main question to be addressed is the work of this story in this transitional social and cultural context: why does it prove recurrent and what role does it play in the formation of social ethics and spatial perception.

1. Introduction

The road has always played a symbolic role in rural and industrial societies. It represents a frontier, engendering its own mythology in its promise of travel and knowledge for man.[1] Stories and legends of and about the road have always played part in the formation of the *imaginary* of oral and written traditions in Western societies;[2] burrowing deep into the collective unconscious, these fables of real and/or fictional events that happened on the road mutate into continually different shapes and stories as they are disseminated throughout temporal and spatial boundaries. These road legends originate from a recurrent archetype[3] staging and dramatizing the mythological and ontological shift of the traveler who transgresses the boundary separating the known from the unknown and comes into contact with something that is wholly *other* to him/her; in our case, it is the archetypal road myth of the vanishing hitch-hiker: a driver picks up a hitchhiker who

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[1] Frank Lloyd Wright in his book *The Disappearing City* argues that mankind is divided in two groups: the "radical" nomad or Wanderer (here, he will be mentioned as "Wisser") and the "static", conservative Cave-Dweller [Fishman, p.156]. In this paper, it is assumed that the road represents the challenge that motivates the nomad and is rejected by the Cave-Dweller.

[2] "Oral tradition refers to the process of word-of-mouth transmission by which verbal folklore is disseminated, person to person and generation to generation" [Brunwald, p.194]. Here, we refer to a special branch of oral tradition, urban myths. By written tradition, we refer to films (regarded as screenplays) and literature.

[3] The concept of "archetype" is used here to denote a widely-known story characterized by a repetition in its characteristics (the setting and resolution are predetermined) and a slight variation in its details; the concept of the "archetype" as used in this paper is devoid of the Jungian overtones commonly associated with the concept.

subsequently vanishes into thin air. The origin of the story of the vanishing hitchhiker can be traced all the way back to a passage in the *New Testament,* where the Apostle Philip has an encounter with an Ethiopian whom he picks up in his chariot; Philip goes on to baptize the Ethiopian and then, mysteriously, disappears (cf. New Testament, Acts 8: 26-39). This motif has been followed in almost every road myth, and the traveler has often represented a particular type of "Wisser": even if he/she has not yet found satisfying answers to his questions, he has certainly won the right to spin tales and narratives of strange and faraway places and transcendental experiences.

What about the highway? What kind of road myths has brought about *the age of the automobile*? In this paper, we will see how the construction of the road network transformed the American landscape and how this new road mythology became part of a greater genealogy of road mythologies. This mythology adapted the narrative pattern of the archetypal road myth to the new sprawling urbanised landscape. One of the most popular myths to emerge from this new urban mythology is the myth of "the vanishing hitchhiker" which appeared in various forms and across different genres and different media (most notably, in film and literature). In our discussion, we will see how the urban and spatial transformations caused by the construction of the Interstates system of freeways are correlated with a new kind of road myth fictionalizing abandoned highways. In this paper we seek to test the following hypothesis put forward by Gilles Deleuze: "technology is…social before it is technical".[4] We will seek to examine how the technological breakthroughs of the transport and telecommunications industries result in the mutation of archetypal myths, further cementing their historical currency and perpetuity. So if we are to take into account the rapidity of development and advances of information technology are we to surmise that we might be witnessing yet another mutation in the archetypal road myth?

2. Theoretical framework: spatial stories

As it will become apparent later on, stories like the archetypal road myth perpetuate through time adapting themselves to the transformations of space and our perceptions thereof. A question inevitably must be asked: What is the dialectic relationship between *stories* and *space*? Michel de Certeau in the chapter entitled "Spatial Stories" included in his pioneering examination of the quotidian, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* proposes the distinction between *space* and *place* as a means for the exploration of this dialectic relationship: *place* is the physical framework of human actions while *space* is correlated with man's perception and experience as they are molded by the encounter with place.[5] *Space* is the effect of those human operations (e.g. map-making) which orientate, situate and temporalise *place*.[6] What is the work of stories in the modulation of the spatial experience? De Certeau argues that "every story is a travel story – a spatial practice".[7] Stories act as protocols in that they facilitate exchange and interaction[8] in a specific

location[9] between autonomous agents. Stories must be seen as "treatments of space":[10] these stories do not center around a speaking, socially-specific subject but rather focus on the "anonymous and general subject of History".[11] De Certeau notes that stories "in reality, they organize walks. They make the journey, before or during the time the feet perform it".[12] These stories act as storages of genealogies of the imaginary of places and the miscellaneous legends about territories which serve to delimit frontiers ("*space is a practiced place*")[13]. All these stories map in a Foucauldian manner the complex "institutional ecologies"[14] which make up places, society at large and our perception of them. Stories found places by opening a "legitimate theater of practical actions".[15]

De Certeau argues that the actions described in stories of oral and written tradition usually precede social practices so as to open a space for them. They are actuated by the contradiction between the "frontier" and the "bridge",[16] a legitimate space and its alien exteriority. He concludes that stories are delinquent; they symbolize an interpretation of space rejected by the society with a view to limit social action within the socially accepted framework. They represent a "betrayal of an order, a disobedience of the law of place", in order to found this law in the first place. Brian Massumi in his discussion of one's rights and one's possible *modus vivendi* within a democratic regime states that "a body can join with others deemed to be of its kind in carving out a customized social space for itself. It need not accept an identity category as is—but it must accept identification. It need not accept a particular general idea— but it must accept the idea of the general in general. The only condition is that the body molarize".[17] That is to say, the only condition to live within a socially accepted framework is that one accepts the social constraints as narrated by the story and go along with the changes as they happen within these stories.

This theory will be put into question in the case of the road myth: the transformation of place will be linked with spatial changes, brought about through the transmission of stories that seem new, though they originate from recurrent archetypes. In the framework of this theory, the work of these stories will be examined.

3. Space, means and myths: American urban transformations and mythical genealogy

The transformation of the American landscape because of the construction of road network will be briefly in this context discussed, parallel to the examination of popular myths about these new means of transport. The question we have to ask is whether these

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[9] De Certeau notes that "everyday stories tell us what we can do in it [a place] and make out of it". (122)
[10] De Certeau, p.122.
[11] Foucault, p.16.
[12] De Certeau, p.116.
[13] Ibid., p.117.
[14] DeLanda, p.325.
[15] De Certeau, p.125.
[16] These are the two key notions in De Certeau's theory about the spatial interpretation of stories. The first represents the limits of legitimacy, the framework of predictable and safe social actions, though the second a means to transcendence, a mythological and ontological shift towards a metaphysical experience.
[17] Massumi, p.124.

myths determine a "frontier" and a "bridge" in order to found the new space of the highway.

3.1. Urban transformation of America due to the Interstates construction

In 1955, the American Congress voted for the funding of the "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways".[18] This was the most costly road network ever built. It comprises of 41.000 miles of new road infrastructure traversing the States and passing through the urban centers. Up until that point, America's road network comprised of highways which were blacktopped in the 30s during the "New Deal" policy of Theodore Roosevelt.[19] The construction of the Interstates commenced in 1957 and ended in the mid-80s. The construction of this road network served as part of the political propaganda of the time: the alleged purpose of the construction of the road network was the rapid evacuation of cities in the case of nuclear war and was promoted by the lobby of the automobile, tires and petroleum industries. The construction of the Interstates eventually brought about immense spatial and social changes, significantly boosting the national economy, especially the transport and construction sectors. New freeways contained urban sprawl, eventually creating a new residential environment called "suburbia" which was built exclusively in the zones surrounding them. In this new environment, the majority of the Americans in-migrated just in a few decades.[20] The social pressures for improvement of housing conditions were thus relieved through the function of liberal economy.

A new landscape came into being, one of low density housing areas for the middle and higher class, excluding any other land use and social class.[21] Commerce and employment was developed in the interchanges of the interstate system. New office buildings, malls, motels, chain restaurants were built in the periphery of cities, forming new urban centers. The traditional center lost its dominant role in the employment and the commercial sectors and in social life. The new polycentric development of the American city was thus initiated concurrently with the spread of new social practices. These practices, common in all parts of the continent, established a new social order and cohesion, in the process homogenizing the nation. These practices refer to habitation in suburbia and the use of the automobile as a means of transport, as a means of commuting for work and shopping in the new urban centers.

This interior immigration (immigration to the suburbs) resulted in the social and financial decline of many areas of the countryside. These were the places surrounding the older road network (the highways): rural areas, towns and off-road infrastructure like

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[18] For information concerning the Interstates' construction and their impacts in the American landscape and society see Transit Cooperative Research Program, Polster & Patton, p.48-53 and Hall 1998, p.831.

[19] See Olsen, p.6.

[20] During the fifties, it is estimated that 19 million people moved to the suburbs surrounding the six major cities [Hall 1997, p.294].

[21] Although a house in the suburbs was affordable for the white population (through low interest loans), it was just a distant dream for the majority of the population: "For the many who are excluded from suburban housing, camps and parks have been developed to shelter about a fifth of the national population in caravans and mobile and transportable houses"; "so, overall, America has a three-class housing system. On average the two disadvantaged classes – the campers and ghetto tenants – pay *more* for their housing over household life than the suburban home-owners do, and have fewer assets in the end" [Stretton, p.147, 156].

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motels, roadhouses, gas stations and so on and so forth. Towns, like Shamrock, Texas or Two Guns, Arizona, whose local economies totally depended on through-traffic were eventually abandoned.[22] The majority of the population gradually moved away from them visiting them occasionally only for recreational purposes.[23] These towns transformed into an unfamiliar environment in sharp contrast to the suburban milieu which became, in a manner reminding one of De Certeau's teachings, the theater stage of social conformity and the hive of social action.

3.2. The birth of the highway myth

Before the construction of the Interstates, another transport revolution had already contributed to the spread of new social practices, though it had not transformed place in such a large scale. In the 1920s, the ownership of a car became affordable for the majority of the Americans and consequently car ownership started rising dramatically.[24] The car substituted the cart and the dirt road was paved to become a highway. The archetypal road myth gradually mutated eventually transforming into the widely-known highway myth of the vanishing hitchhiker. This well-documented tale of "the vanishing hitchhiker",[25] started to spread and permute during the thirties. Its first traces were found in southern California, not accidentally the county of America with the highest rate of auto mobilization in this period. The repetitive motif of this myth is the following: a car driver travels at night in an unfamiliar place. He/she notices a hitchhiker and picks him up. The hitchhiker asks him to drop him off a few miles away. Before this happens, he disappears from the car. Later on, the driver finds out in some way that the hitchhiker was a dead person and realizes in horror that he met a ghost. This myth has been transmitted throughout U.S. territory following the construction of highways and the rise in automobile ownership, dividing itself in various subtypes.[26] The myth also became part of the cultural currency in popular fiction.

When the highway environment was abandoned, the highway myth had to adapt to the new social and spatial data. New stories emerged fictionalizing the "No-man's land" left behind as a result of technological and social progress. B-movies, pulp literature and oral tradition dramatized the former highway environment: ghost cities, abandoned gas stations and road houses represented mysterious scenery, fertile for the genealogy of a new mythology.

For example, the script of the film titled *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974; remade, 2003) is a story belonging to the so-called "splatter" sub-genre. The story revolves around a group of hippies who cross the state of Texas on their return from Mexico; they are forced to deviate from their original itinerary due to an unexpected incident: a lost little girl they meet in a deserted highway. They are then taken onto a dirt

[22] See Olsen, p.124, Polster & Patton, p.119.

[23] Olsen [*Ibid.*] in his documented travel through Route 66 in 2003, reports restoration works in abandoned motels and roadhouses, for the service of the famous road's new tourists.

[24] The price of the famous "Ford T" fell from $850 in 1908 to $295 in 1923 [Hall, p.413]. In 1915, there were 43.1 residents per automobile in the U.S.A., although in 1940, the same index rose up to 4.8 residents per automobile, see Bottles, table 2, p.93.

[25] See Brunvand 1981. Complementary sources about urban myths, Brunvand 1999, Genre.

[26] "A group of folk narrative texts with distinctively developed plots that still share basic plot features in common with other subtypes of a larger general pattern of narrative" [Brunwand 1981, p.195].

road that gets narrower and narrower as they drive and through a chain of gory events, they finally fall victims of a serial killer. What is noteworthy is that in the press this movie was promoted as having been "inspired by a true story".[27] Just like some urban myths, both movies in true Brothers Grimm-fashion fictionalized a true incident "clothing" it in narrative and then disseminating it in the form of a popular myth. The serial killer character of the movie was inspired by a real-life serial killer living in a small farming community of Plainfield, Wisconsin who was accused for the murder of two women in his hometown. However, it was never reported that this particular offender killed curious but naive travelers[28] (like the victims of the two films).

In a horror story by Stephen King, titled *You know they got a hell of band,* a young married couple gets lost on the road to Toketee Falls, Portland when they decide to exit the Interstate 58 in order to follow a more interesting route of highways. They find themselves in a crossroads not marked on the map. They choose a paved road that turns into a narrow dirt road crossing a dense forest. Just when they are persuaded to go back to the Interstate, they come across a picturesque little town and decide to stop for a soda and to buy a souvenir. They soon find out that this is a ghost city where dead rock stars live. The young married couple will be captured by the dead rock stars and will be condemned to watch the same concert every night together with other travelers who, like them, were punished to live this nightmare again and again for the rest of their lives.

Stories of this kind are based on the motif of the archetypal road myth; they act as cautionary tales with a simple enough message: the Interstate represents safety and enclosure in the social status quo, that is to say, a "theater" where safe and predictable social practices are prescribed to take place. On the other hand, the highway is represented as a ghostly, magical and dangerous place to be avoided. Traveling on the Interstate the traveler follows the prescribed itinerary of the majority. Sometimes, the traveler might deviate from the Interstate seduced by the mystery of "No-man's land". The highway represents the outside of the Interstate: it doubles as an "unformed element of forces".[29] It is the "truth" outside the confinements of society. The traveler seeks to find the "true" America as she is represented by places not marked on any map. The traveler commits *hubris* in his quest to taste of the forbidden fruit of knowledge and is subsequently punished for this. Thus, the traveler comes into contact with otherworldly states of being: the traveler is either chased by a madman, or a ghost or he visits an abandoned city shrouded in mystery on which a terrible curse has been bestowed. The traveler experiences the unexpected as he/she gets in touch with the unknown and faces the metaphysical. He/she is gifted or cursed to live a life-changing journey. If he is lucky enough to survive, he will have a great story to tell…

In this kind of stories, the Interstate represents the "frontier",[30] the legitimate American space, though on the other hand the exit from it represents the "bridge" to the unknown, to the abandoned place, an alien exteriority provoking transcendental social practice. What De Certeau argued about the use and function of stories (i.e. stories work

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[27] For more information on the remake of the movie please visit http://www.texaschainsawmovie.com/.

[28] This story is a synthesis of the "vanishing hitchhiker" motif and the true story of real life murderer Ed Gein.

[29] Deleuze, p.43.

[30] We refer to the symbols "frontier" and "bridge" of De Certeau's theory about the spatial interpretation of stories also discussed in paragraph 2 of this paper.

to prescribe accepted social practice within a certain framework and warn against any transgressions made) makes sense within the context of these contemporary folktales. These kinds of myths survive through spatial changes and continue to circulate. Their purpose is to entertain the need for mystery and a scary story while at the same time they challenge and generate "Wissers" and travelers. At the same time, they discourage people from social transgressions jeopardizing the stability of the socius.

4. Old myths for new means: *The Matrix*

From what we have said so far, we have seen how the transport means specific to the second half of the 20th century have inspired myths following certain archetypal motifs; myths which adapt themselves to the spatial transformations of their times. However, nowadays a new technological breakthrough is taking place. New means of telecommunication greatly reduce the need for travel (and by extension, the need for transport means); this reduced need for travel is in turn followed by the impact on the spatial imaginary. Will these changes bring about new stories? And will these stories follow the narrative pattern of "the archetypal road myth"? Have these changes already occurred?

4.1. The Interstates of Information and the "Metapolis" theory

History repeats itself. In the mid 90s, the American congress again voted for a new program of Interstates. This program did not refer to the construction of roads but to information superhighways.[31] The American politicians had realized that the physical means of transportation were deprived and limited economic activity. New means had to be invented, in order to boost economy in a totally new way. The technological advances in telecommunications incarnated in the invention and development of the World Wide Web made possible and affordable innovations (teleconferencing, tele-working etc) which worked towards the elimination of spatial distance in financial transactions. Through this technological revolution, a new economic and social geography of space is created throughout the U.S. and Europe as well. The concept of the "Metapolis"(literally, "post-city") as put forward by Francois Ascher goes a good way towards explaining the mutation of the myths surrounding the urban setting.

"Metapolis" is the new urban form comprising vast networks of cities and towns. The original metropolis now extends beyond its suburbs and its sphere of influences extends to financial activities, social practices and cultural symbolism of people living far beyond its centre. The concept of "commuting" now also includes the abstract notion of tele-commuting as well: a person can live thousands of miles away from New York (in a town of a New Urbanism movement like Seaside)[32] and still work in Manhattan (which works as that person's hub). Through the use of cellular phone networks and internet superhighways playing the role of "spokes" in a network of sparsely placed "hubs",

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[31] The program was called "Information Infrastructure Initiative", see. Polster & Patton, p. 54.
[32] "The town of Seaside is perhaps the most well-known icon of this movement" (New Urbanism). Developed according to a strict zoning/design code known as Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND), it has been a great success in real estate terms", Nezar.

people can actually partake in the life of the "metapolis" and influence its functions, without being physically present in it. However, in practical terms this means that it is getting more and more difficult to define the frontiers of this new urban form currently emerging.

Figure 1: The hubs and spokes of the "Metapolis"
[Source: Ascher F. 1995, p.36, elaborated by the authors]
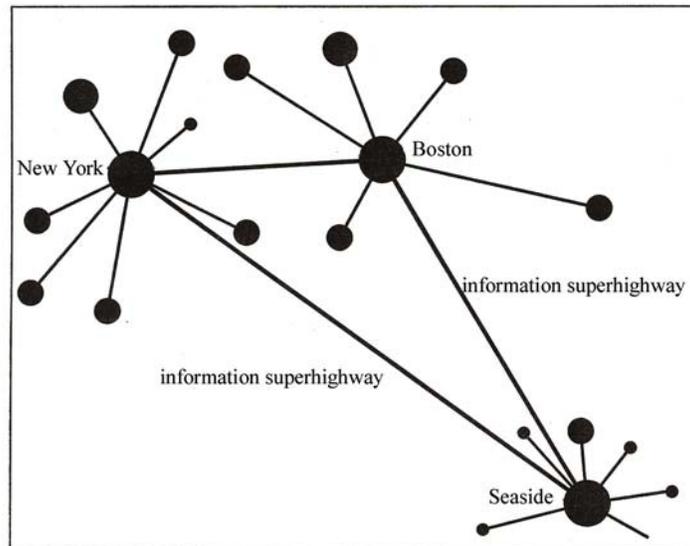
The new type of infrastructure connecting cities causes a "tunnel effect" just like their predecessors: the one using them does not bypass them in order to find out what lies between. They represent a denial of the space between the two hubs they unite. Inevitably, this space turns into the new "No Man's land". Is there any proof that story telling has adapted to this new spatial form?

Maybe there is. For this reason, let us now enter the *Matrix*.

4.2. Enter the *Matrix*

Within the fictional universe of the popular film *Matrix*, the main character, Thomas A. Anderson is a computer programmer who works in a software company by day. At night, he surfs in the Internet with the nickname "Neo". He wanders in the superhighways of information, searching for answers, just like the road travelers before him. Through these cyber quests and wanderings, he will get in touch with Morpheus, an enigmatic figure, an outlaw who will play the role of the "bridge". An ideal figure for the Information Age, a contemporary Unbelieving Thomas, Anderson does not initially believe in Morpheus and his theories. Morpheus goes on to show Anderson the way to bypass the legitimate framework of actions, to explore the "frontier" and find out what lies beneath. Through this procedure, Thomas A. Anderson will get in touch with the unknown and he will be subsumed into the identity of Neo who will then be ultimately subsumed into the identity of the "One". Through a series of metaphysical experiences, Anderson's *Weltanshaung* will collapse and nothing in his life as he knew it will remain the same.

However, over the course of the trilogy of the *Matrix* films it will be hinted that Anderson/Neo/The One is a recurrent "glitch" within the programming of the Matrix mainframe. The Matrix mainframe has dealt repeatedly with "glitches" like Anderson/Neo/The One. These programming "glitches" within the Matrix mainframe represent a fetishism for the *lost,* (vanished, we might say) object that is reality and meaning.[33] In these films, the contradiction between the real and the imaginary, the contradiction between the actual fact and the myth is effaced as "unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, or in the beyond, but in the *real's hallucinatory resemblance to itself*".[34] In *The Matrix* films, the vanishing hitchhiker figure is both Anderson/Neo/The One and the Matrix mainframe: both figures disappear into thin air once one or the other deviates from a set itinerary. The Matrix mainframe disappears from view since all of humanity is lost within an artificial reality outside normal human sensory range; a few select humans disappear from the Matrix mainframe's immediate sensory range once they break the artificial reality spell and start living outside the artificial wombs fashioning consensus reality for the rest of humanity. In both cases, we have to deal with an 'endocolonization' (much like the in-immigration of the second half of the 20th century) of the imaginary which creates social reality and a dissolution of the boundaries between *inside* and *outside*.[35]

It transpires that the recurrent archetype of the highway myth adapts itself in the new travelling habits brought about by the new technological means. The truth or the metaphysical experience continues to offer a promise to the "Wisser", who is courageous enough to deviate from the legitimate route. This route is no longer traced in the highway maps but in the communication network. The myth of the vanishing hitchhiker in the *Matrix* films can be seen as the dramatization of the function of the diagram as put forth by Gilles Deleuze: "…there is no diagram that does not also include, besides the points which it connects up, certain relatively free or unbound points, points of creativity, change and resistance, and it is perhaps with these that we ought to begin in order to understand the whole picture".[36] The archetypal road myth in the age of the World Wide Web acts as a social machine giving form and finalizing the functions of the wanderer in the information age. The archetypal road myth acts as a protocol of function, purpose and actions. The interesting thing is that within this protocological function there exists the possibility of resistive action. Where the vanishing hitchhiker in the beginning represented the fear of the unknown, this archetypal road myth in our age now represents virtually *everyone* living within the sprawling post-cities of hypermodernity. Anyone and

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[33] "From medium to medium, the real is volatilized, becoming an allegory of death. But it is also, in a sense, reinforced through its own destruction. It becomes *reality for its own sake*, the fetishism of the lost object: no longer the object of representation, but the ecstasy of denial and of its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal." Baudrillard, p.148.

[34] Baudrillard, ibid.

[35] Žižek notes: "…inside is always outside: with the progressive implantation and replacement of our internal organs, techno-computerized prostheses (bypasses, pacemakers…) function as an internal part of our 'living' organism; the colonization of the outer space thus reverts to the inside, into 'endocolonization', the technological colonization of our body itself. On the other hand, outside is always inside: when we are directly immersed in VR, we lose contact with reality— electro-waves bypass the interaction of external bodies and directly attack our senses: 'it is the eyeball that now englobes man's entire body'" (p.134).

[36] Deleuze, p.44.

everyone can disappear these days. One just has to *walk* out of the framework of the *social myth*.

5. Conclusions

The social theory of space[37] identifies a specific dialectic between space and society. Space is the product of a univocal procedure of social transformation. Through technological breakthrough, the pressure of economic interests and trusts, the political will for the fulfillment of social demands, space is molded as the ultimate social outcome. But, this means that the *planned* place reflects a *limited* space: as a social product, it generates a narrow framework of actions that can take place on it. But, in this way, there can be no dialectic between space and society. If place limits space, then it is a conservative means of ensuring the legitimate practices set by the social institution.

Figure 2: The social construction of territory

SOCIETY	SPACE
SPHERES	
Political	
Social	
Economic	CONSTITUTION
MECHANISMS	CONSTRAINT
Division of labor	MEDIATION
Authority relations	
Distributive groupings	SCALE
HIERARCHIES	
Vertical	
Horizontal	
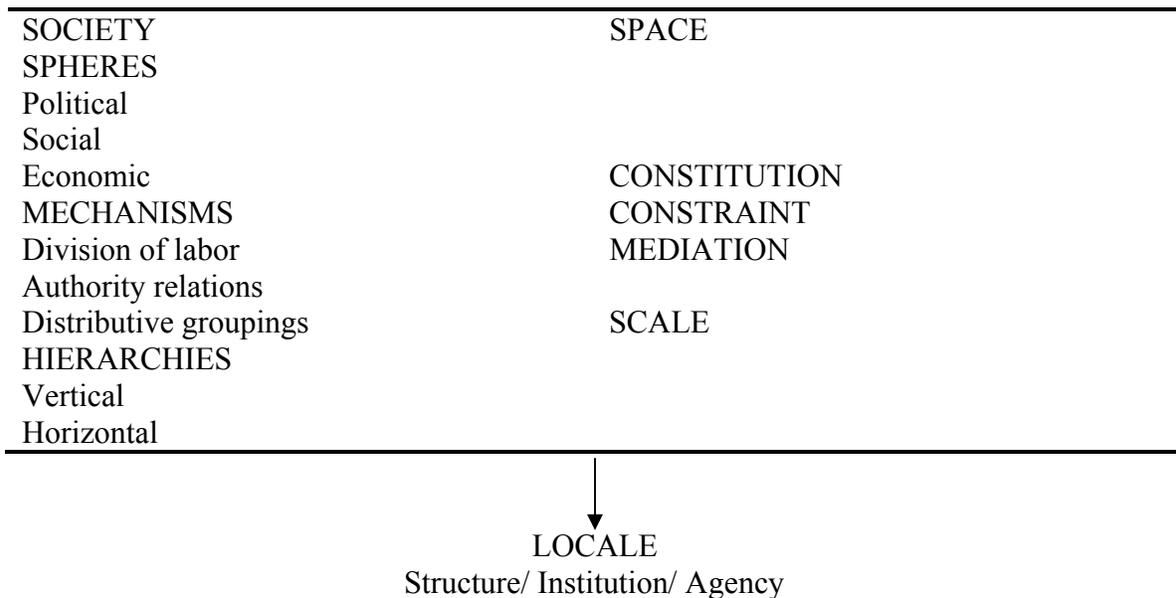
LOCALE
Structure/ Institution/ Agency
[Source: Wolsh J. Dear M. 1989 (edit.), p.12]

However, social theory recognizes a meditative role of space (see Figure 2) and this might be the work of stories, according to De Certeau's theory. Through the circulation of stories, spatial experiences which are "delinquent" become popular narratives which influence public opinion. These stories serve some kind of spatial ethics: one should not be seduced by "the bridge", in order to identify his "frontier". However, the story's true message is a challenge to question the social institution through narration and experience, through one's own "mythical shift". So, some stories like the "archetypal road myth" are recurrent because they are actually delinquent in a way that not many of us have the courage to realize.

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[37] See Wolsh & Dear M., Part I, p.1-18.

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