Week 3: Phenomenological Understandings

Michel de Certeau suggests that the city lacks a place, and it is the walking practices of the people that are shaping the city. I think there is a difference between saying that people’s walking practices shape the city and saying that there is a lack of place without the walking practices. I think that de Certeau a bit exaggerates the ability of people’s practices to create space. I understand what he means when he explains that the city is not like a text, we cannot only consider it from above, with the mere concept of it; that we have to look at the details, the tactics by which people use that space; then we can see how different the city is. I do agree with that, and I experience it whenever I feel for example how differently another person and I use the same space. However, I am not sure if I agree that the city is abstract without the walking practices (unless this is a play of the words space and place, as in the sense that he doesn’t see the city as a place because the place is, unlike the space, related to the tactics; but de Certeau does not differentiate between these two). As much as I agree that the city must be examined from the grounded point of view, through the people’s practices, I also believe that these practices are limited by the city’s materiality. We cannot pass through walls or jump over buildings. De Certeau is aware of this, but I his text gave me the impression that he overemphasized the people’s liberty in choosing their practices.

I liked that Schivelbusch acknowledges how a spatial transformation affects the bourgeois and the working class differently. This reminded me of the constraint that space puts on people. I am now excessively realizing that because I am in the procedures of applying to Shengen visa. It is the first time I am applying to a tourist visa which is not given upon-entry. I have heard a lot about the benefits of having a European or American passport, but now I am feeling on my skin what it means to be underprivileged. And that, is only because of the place where I was born. This pushes me to think at what extent do people’s activities determine place? Even now that airplane have shrunken the distance between countries, can these distances anytime be really shrunken?

I am not arguing here that space is a structure that dominates people. I do believe that people’s everyday practices, culture and language (as Basso’s ethnography illustrates) change the way we see and understand space. What I am arguing, however, is that we should not overemphasize the fact that people can manipulate space as they want. I think it is more fruitful to analyze what possibilities the structure of space offers people to enact their own practices and meanings which could vary and even challenge the given space.