The urban and the written in Lefebvre’s urban texts

Rebio Diaz Cardona

Introduction

Writing has an unstable place in Lefebvre’s work on space. Lefebvre acknowledges the importance of writing and symbolic representation in the urban process but is militantly cautious against the linguistic imperialism that had resulted from the French structuralism of the 1950s and 60s, of which the ‘city-as-text’ and ‘writing-the-city’ metaphors are frequently a proxy. Statements in his three main urban volumes, The Right to the City (RTC), The Urban Revolution (UR), and The Production of Space (POS), portray writing as relevant to how the city came into being, historically, but as never the whole story, and the semiotics of the city as interesting but ultimately misguided and lacking explanatory power. This is not surprising as the appeal of Lefebvre’s work comes partly from his way of directly engaging the intellectual landscape of his time, especially when he pushes against the vigorous reductionisms (economic, linguistic, psychoanalytic, urbanistic, informational) that mined it. In the case of the relation between city and writing, surveying his many references to writing in the three books reveals how the writing metaphor may have been more at the heart of Lefebvre’s view of the urban than Lefebvre explicitly states, and despite the frequently negative way in which writing is cast in his texts. Lefebvre’s own theoretical arsenal, however, specifically the notions of production of space and right to the city, can be used to explore the relationship between social space and writing and the status of writing in contemporary social space. In particular, one can ask, can the notion of production of space be extended to writing, perhaps by recasting written language as directly producing space? And, would it make sense to think of written language as an urban material implicitly included in the notion of the right to the city, texts as portions of space to which we have spatial rights?

Writing in The Right to the City

In ‘On urban form’, Section 12 of RTC, Lefebvre, seeking to clarify the meaning of urban, and having stated that the urban is a form, sets out to offer a theory of forms. To elucidate ‘the meaning of form’, ‘one will have to refer to a very general, very abstract theory, the theory of forms’, one which is ‘close to a philosophical theory of knowledge’ but is also very different, since ‘it designates its own historical and cultural conditions’ as well as ‘rests upon difficult
logico-mathematical considerations’ (1996: 133). The brief schematic exposition that then follows is rather abstract and hard to connect with other parts of his work. I am interested in it because of where it locates ‘written form’. Lefebvre had made his first frontal attempt at defining the urban a few pages before, in Section 11, titled ‘Around the critical point’:

The urban cannot be defined either as attached to a material morphology (on the ground, in the practico-material), or as being able to detach itself from it. It is not an intemporal essence, nor a system among other systems or above other systems. It is a mental and social form, that of simultaneity, of gathering, of convergence, of encounter (or rather, encounters). It is a quality born from quantities (space, objects, products). It is a difference, or rather, an ensemble of differences.

(LeFebvre 1996: 131)

And in the next paragraph:

Urban society, a collection of acts taking place in time, privileging a space (site, place) and privileged by it, in turn signifiers and signified, has a logic different from that of merchandise. It is another world. The urban is based on use value.

(LeFebvre 1996: 131)

The urban, it seems, is the utopian dimension of the city, the overcoming of fragmentation, homogenisation, and abstraction. But what type of status should it have? What, or where, is it? Reflection, he states:

can elaborate a scheme of forms. It is a sort of analytical grid to decipher the relations between the real and thought. This (provisional and modifiable) grid moves from the most abstract to the most concrete, and therefore from the least to the most immediate. Each form presents itself in its double existence as mental and social.

(1996: 135–136)

Lefebvre’s ‘grid’ lists and describes schematically eight forms, each one defined in two parts, ‘mentally’ and ‘socially’. The order (with keywords from Lefebvre’s descriptions) is as follows: 1) logical form (centred around the ‘principle of identity’); 2) mathematical form (‘identity and difference, equality in difference’); 3) form of language (‘coherence’, ‘cohesion’ of signification, meaning, messages); 4) form of exchange (centred around ‘equivalence’; 5) contractual form (centred around ‘reciprocity’); 6) ‘form of the practico-material object’ (involving ‘equilibrium’, ‘symmetry’); 7) ‘written form’ (involving ‘recurrence’, ‘fixation’); and finally, 8) ‘urban form’ (‘simultaneity’, ‘encounter’, ‘concentration’). All eight forms are defined and described in the space of two pages.

The order itself is intriguing and suggests at least three interesting things. First, it suggests that Lefebvre thought of writing (form seven) as different enough from language (form three) to assign them different places in his scheme. He could have reasonably grouped writing and language together as belonging in the same ‘form’, or list the forms consecutively, contiguous to each other. While the translation of ‘language’ is enigmatic, as it may refer to the French langue (a specific language) or langage (language in general), the distance between language and writing in the grid suggests that Lefebvre, at least at the time of writing RTC, saw writing as something relatively independent from language (or a language) and, given what he states about the sequencing of the forms, as more ‘concrete’ and ‘immediate’ than it.
Second, Lefebvre locates ‘written form’ (form seven) the closest to, and right before, urban form (form eight). This is intriguing especially because, as mentioned, Lefebvre has told us that the grid moves ‘from the most abstract to the most concrete, and therefore from the least to the most immediate’ (1996: 135), which would suggest that ‘written form’ is more concrete and immediate than ‘the form of the practico material object’ (form six) which precedes it.

Third, similarly, locating ‘written form’ in between ‘the form of the practico material object’ and ‘urban form’ could be taken to suggest that it is considered by Lefebvre as perhaps a means or a step in the urban’s ‘ascent to the concrete’. It is not entirely clear if Lefebvre is using the term ‘written form’ here to refer to written language in its restricted sense or writing in the metaphorical, writing-the-city, city-as-text sense that he attributes to others (and uses himself) throughout his urban texts. However, since Lefebvre uses the term ‘written form’ throughout the section, while he uses the terms ‘writing’ and ‘the written word’ mostly everywhere else, it seems safe to assume that he is referring to writing in the limited sense (again, as opposed to the metaphorical, ‘inscription in general’ sense that is still widely used in textualised portrayals of the city).

Lefebvre does not say it, but the placement suggests that the written is intimately linked to the urban; it could even be taken to imply that ‘written form’ offers itself as a kind of material support for ‘urban form’, as a form that announces the urban, and is at its service, literally laying the ground for the urban. But are we reading too much into this? We could, of course, simply take written form’s placement in the scheme, and the whole scheme for that matter, as the result of yet another of those creative eruptions that Neil Smith referred to in his heartening evocation of Lefebvre’s profuse output, in his foreword to UR (2003: xxii). After all, most references to writing in later work, and even in RTC, seem to take a more dismissive, or ambivalent tone, when not hostile. We could also, as we do with other passages, take his scheme of forms as highly suggestive, first, of tensions in Lefebvre’s own thinking, and second, of much of what the future of social space would bring as far as writing is concerned, and as it unfolds today.

Specifically, the scheme defines ‘written form’ in the following terms:

Mentally: recurrence, synchronic fixation of what has occurred over time going backwards and returning along a fixed becoming.

Socially: the accumulation in time on the basis of fixation and the conversation of what is acquired, the constraint of writing and writings, terror before the written and struggle of the spirit against the letter, the power of speech against the inscribed and the prescribed, the becoming against the immutable and the reified.

(1996: 137)

As is clear from this quote, it is not the case that Lefebvre portrays writing entirely in positive terms. For that matter his description seems more one-sidedly positive in the brief entries on ‘form of exchange’ (broadly focused on ‘equivalence’) and ‘contractual form’ (broadly focused on ‘reciprocity’), both of which, given their relation to the commodity form and to the law, one could have reasonably expected Lefebvre to portray a more two-sided, at least partly negative way. But is Lefebvre simply making a proto-historical point about writing as being a precondition for the emergence of cities and the urban? Is the placement in the sequence simply having to do with the notion that writing was invented after exchange value and contracts and practico-material objects like ‘houses, buildings, utensils, instruments’ were? Or, is writing the negation of negation, the negative moment of the dialectic against which the urban, as aufhebung, will rise? As mentioned, the ‘urban form’ section is very brief and schematic, and Lefebvre will not spend much time explaining his grid or, for that matter,
using it. His main purpose for including it, one could speculate, would have been to have a framework in which to encumber the urban at the top, as the most ‘concrete’ form (in the ‘synthesis of multiple determinations’ sense that this word has in Marxian thought), while at the same time providing the ensemble with a utopian, integrative dimension or orientation. Still, at the very least, this ordering suggests that Lefebvre: 1) considered writing important, 2) perhaps saw it as closer to urban form than any other form listed, and 3) considered it as more ‘concrete’ than any other form except for urban form itself. I take the ‘urban form’ section as strong evidence that Lefebvre, at least at the time of writing RTC, considered writing to be a fundamental ingredient in the road to the ‘urban’, one which performed crucial work for the urban, while at the same time he struggled with what the term writing had come to stand for in the French intellectual context of the time. In that context, his commitments to a form of dualism, in particular, his commitment to presenting the urban as aligned with lived experience, practice, and use value, led him to lump writing together with the bureaucratic, technocratic, formalistic, urbanistic, and ultimately statist ideologies he saw as enemies of the urban. In many places, mainly in POS, playing on old ‘phonocentric’ (Derrida 1998) clichés, Lefebvre casts writing as more dead than alive, as entangled with power, as a tool of domination, fragmentation, and abstraction, thus making it an easy opposite to lived experience, practice, use value, simultaneity, the encounter, the fete, the oeuvre, and everything that breathes life in the picture that his urban (as well as other) works trace. This made it harder to articulate a view of writing as one would expect from reading the ‘urban form’ section discussed above, writing understood in constructive terms, as a crucial ingredient in the production of urban simultaneity. In fact, when Lefebvre talks (briefly) about the role of writing, in the limited sense, in creating the city he is almost exclusively talking about the past, in particular what he calls the ‘political city’, which he broadly identifies with antiquity (Lefebvre 2003: 8–15). The political city precedes the ‘merchant city’ and the ‘industrial city’ in a sort of urban spatial version of the periodisation by mode of production. About it he states ‘the political city was populated primarily by priests, warriors, princes, “nobles”, and military leaders, but administrators and scribes were also present. The political city is inconceivable without writing: documents, laws, inventories, tax collection’ (2003: 8).

Lefebvre alludes to writing multiple times in RTC before the section on urban form, in particular in the three short sections between pages 101–117. In these, writing comes up mostly in the context of critical commentary on the promise and perils of the project of an ‘urban semiology’, something he will engage in frequently in subsequent work. The basic points are laid out in RTC and will not change much in UR or POS. In the section entitled ‘Continuities and discontinuities’, ‘destructurations and restructurations’ (1996: 107) and ‘general relations’ (1996: 108) are said to be ‘inscribed in the practico material, written in the urban text’ but coming from elsewhere: from history and becoming, ‘not from the supersensible, but from another level’. However, he cautions, one must not reduce city to text:

Yes the city can be read because it writes, because it was writing. However, it is not enough to examine this without recourse to context. To write on this writing or language, to elaborate a metalanguage of the city is not to know the city and the urban.

(1996:108)

Much is ‘below’ (‘daily life, immediate relations’) and ‘above’ (‘institutions, ideologies’) the text. ‘The city cannot therefore be considered a signifying system, determined and closed as a system’…. ‘Nonetheless the city has this singular capacity of appropriating all significations for saying them, for writing them (to stipulate and to “signify” them)’ (1996: 108). And so he states:
The urban and the written

‘Therefore the semiology of the city is of the greatest theoretical and practical interest. The city receives and emits messages’. Nevertheless, he continues,

it is not without the greatest reservation or without precautions that one can consider the city as a system, as a unique system of significations and meanings and therefore of values. Moreover, semiology does not exhaust the practical and ideological reality of the city. The theory of the city as a system of signification tends towards an ideology; it separates the urban from its morphological basis and from social practice, by reducing it to a ‘signifier-signified’ relation and by extrapolating from actually perceived significations. ‘This is not without a great naïveté.’

(1996: 114)

This mix of mild excitement and irritation or even hostility seems to persist throughout Lefebvre’s urban output. It seems clear that Lefebvre is using the term writing in two different senses: 1) in the more restrictive sense of the activities and objects associated with letters, books, documents, and scribes alluded to in the passage about the political city above, and 2) in the semiological, extended sense in which a city is viewed as a readable text, a surface on which history leaves its marks. We can reasonably infer that the writing that these references to urban semiology refer to, writing in the second, metaphorical, city-as-text sense, is not the same as the ‘written form’ that he refers to in the ‘On urban form’ section a few pages later or in the references to the political city from UR.

Writing in The Urban Revolution

In the UR, writing makes its entrance early on, with the reference, cited above, to the effect that the political city ‘is inconceivable without writing’: ‘It is completely given over to orders and decrees to power’ (2003: 6). And later… ‘The city had writing; it had secrets and powers, and clarified the opposition between urbanity (cultured) and rusticity (naïve and brutal)’ (2003: 12). Chapter 6, which has the same title as the section from RTC cited above, ‘On urban form’, does not feature a ‘scheme of forms’ or anything along its lines, and the term writing is used, as is more typical in Lefebvre, in its extended sense: ‘The city writes itself on its walls and in its streets. But that writing is never completed. The book never ends and contains many blank or torn pages. It is nothing but a draft, more a collection of scratches than writing’ (2003: 121).

Ultimately, Lefebvre reiterates his view of the semiology of the city as a case of ‘fragmentary science’, not necessarily false, but ultimately limited, and ideological insofar as it promotes a view of the social as a closed system, thus unintentionally promoting a passive, consumption-based view of the city and society, ‘a bureaucratic society of controlled consumption’ (2003: 163). As far as theorising the relationship between writing and the urban explicitly, UR does not add much to what we have seen in RTC. But some passages lend themselves to some theoretical exploration of that relationship. For example, a passage on the genesis of centrality, that toward which the urban (not a system and not an object, but a form) tends. Lefebvre states, ‘With the first gathering and collection of objects existing separately in nature, from the first cairn or pile of fruit, centrality came into being, and with it its virtual realization’ (2003: 123). Of course, one could raise the point that many species of nonhuman animals ‘gather’ as well, and yet we do not attribute any ‘urban’ implications to their gathering. Considered from the perspective of the relationship between writing and the urban, however, one can argue that writing, in the strict sense, can be seen precisely as fundamentally a gathering operation, and that the specific kind of gathering that writing enables (gathering of ‘speech’, meaning, ideas, stories, accounting
practices, captured, stored, and made retrievable by written texts) became a crucial infrastructure for the urban right from the start. This is what Lefebvre’s highlighting of writing (scribes, administrators, documents, inventories…) as an important ingredient of the ‘political city’, the birthplace of the urban, seems to imply.

Writing in *The Production of Space*

In *The Production of Space* (1991), writing (which unfortunately but perhaps understandably, Lefebvre usually conflates with semiology) also comes into play early on. In page 7, Lefebvre states that when codes worked up from literary texts are applied to space, we ‘reduce that space itself to the status of a message, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a reading’, and thus we ‘evade both history and practice’. The fact remains, however, that ‘an already produced space can be decoded, can be read. Such a space implies a process of signification’ (1991:17).

Discussing the ‘illusion of transparency’ that characterises those treatments of space that conflate mental space with social space, he alludes to the widespread ideology that sees language and communication as merely transpositions of space; space as becoming transparent when written and talked about.

Closely bound up with Western ‘culture’, this ideology stresses speech, and overemphasises the written word to the detriment of a social practice which it is indeed designated to conceal. The fetishism of the spoken word, or ideology of speech is reinforced by the fetishism and ideology of writing.

(1991:28)

Later, discussing the passivity into which technocratic society lulls its citizens, he talks about how perhaps

the place of social space as a whole has been usurped by a part of that space endowed with an illusory special status – namely, the part which is concerned with writing and imagery, underpinned by the written text (journalism, literature), and broadcast by the media; a part, in short, that amounts to abstraction wielding awesome reductionistic force vis-à-vis ‘lived’ experience.

(1991:52)

Here writing falls squarely on the opposite side of lived, concrete, practical experience. But if any doubts remain of the negative role that writing takes up in this account, one may consider this quote, which seems to obliquely make writing the opposite, even the enemy of space: ‘To underestimate, ignore and diminish space amounts to the overestimation of texts, written matter, and writing systems, along with the readable and the visible, to the point of assigning to these a monopoly on intelligibility’ (1991:62). Writing (or, rather, its privileging) is the reductionistic default from which space can save us, and one must assume, by reversal, an obstacle to understanding it. Later, in sections on the genesis of space the tone turns surprisingly more positive. But as is clear in his text, Lefebvre is now using writing as a guiding metaphor to refer broadly to material inscription in space, as he imagines distant historical or constituting processes, far from his belligerent present:

In the history of space as such, on the other hand, the historical and diachronic realms and the generative past are forever leaving their inscriptions upon the writing-tablet,
so to speak, of space. The uncertain traces left by events are not the only marks on (or in) space: society in its actuality also deposits its script, the result and product of social activities.

(1991: 110)

A few pages later is an evocative passage in which Lefebvre describes the emergence of social space through first inscriptions of human activity on the rhythms of nature:

Traversed now by pathways and patterned by networks, natural space changes: one might say that practical activity writes upon nature, albeit in a scrawling hand, and that this writing implies a particular representation of space. Places are marked, noted, named. Between them, within the ‘holes in the net’, are blank or marginal spaces.

(Lefebvre 1991: 117–118)

The writing metaphor, it seems, is just too convenient, or too tempting to resist, and becomes readily available as soon as one seeks to describe constituting processes of social space. An unavoidable metaphor, or at least a benign and forgivable one, so long as Lefebvre himself is the one using it. But do not get confused, a recomposed Lefebvre seemingly warns the reader, his use of the city-as-text metaphor does not make him a simple semiologist. Though used by semiologists, notions such as those of marks, marking, and traces do not actually originate with them. Anthropologists, among others, used them earlier:

It is reasonable to ask, however, whether one may properly speak of a production of space so long as marking and symbolization of this kind are the only way of relating to space. And the answer to this question has to be: not as yet… If and to the extent that production occurs, it will be restricted for a long time to marks, signs and symbols, and these will not significantly affect the material reality upon which they are imprinted.

(Lefebvre 1991: 141)

This can have two meanings: 1) marks or symbols are not more than a mere overlay, they do not fundamentally change what things are, or; 2) markings understood in the more material sense are so minute and superficial (physically, materially) that they don’t change material reality much, and so in order to have something we can call ‘the production of space’, more has to be created than mere markings and symbols. In either case, writing does not amount to the production of space. On the other hand, does it make sense to speak of a ‘reading’ of space? Lefebvre asks and replies, yes and no, and after some elaboration he concludes, ‘That space signifies is incontestable. But what it signifies is dos and don’ts – and this brings us back to power’ (1991: 142). And dismissively, in the following page:

The reading of space is thus merely a secondary and practically irrelevant upshot, a rather superfluous reward for the individual for blind, spontaneous and lived obedience…. This space was produced before being read; nor was it produced in order to be read and grasped, but rather in order to be lived by people with bodies and lives in their own particular urban context.

(1991: 143)

This sense in which (active) production is to lived what (passive) consumption is to read, permeates much of what Lefebvre has to say about semiology; its focus on signs and systems, as
opposed to people and practices, entails ‘the reduction of “reality” to the semiosphere’ (1991: 296) and ends up promoting abstraction and fragmentation, in knowledge and ultimately, when informing the practices of technocratic urbanism, in life. His discussion of abstract space, unsurprisingly, locates writing squarely on the side of the abstract:

This immense process starts out from physical truth (the presence of the body) and imposes the primacy of the written word, of plans, of the visual realm, and of a flattening tendency even within that realm itself. Abstract space thus simultaneously embraces the hypertrophied analytic intellect; the state and bureaucratic raison d’état; ‘pure’ knowledge; and the discourse of power.

(1991: 308)

Implications

Overall, even though the number of places in which Lefebvre refers to writing in RTC, UR, and POS are plenty, there are five main ways in which writing is presented: 1) ‘written form’ conceived as a surprisingly ‘concrete’ form, occupying the seventh spot in an enigmatic ‘scheme of forms’ that goes ‘from the most abstract to the most concrete’ and comprises eight forms, with ‘urban form’ in the eighth spot (as discussed in the section ‘On urban form’ in RTC); 2) written language or the written word briefly portrayed as a necessary ingredient in the historical emergence of the city (as alluded to in UR); 3) references to ‘reading the city’, ‘writing the city’, and ‘city as text’ metaphors; something that semiologists engage in and which Lefebvre occasionally lauds but mostly criticises (RTC, UR, and POS); 4) the ‘writing the city’ metaphor in a more positive light, as an inscriptive metaphor that Lefebvre himself uses to theorise the historical genesis, production, and transformation of social space (RTC, UR, and strongly in POS), and finally; 5) writing portrayed as being in the company of, intimately linked, or simply lumped together with, vision, power, patriarchic society, and as a tool or a process that promotes abstraction, domination, and fragmentation, thus running counter to speech, experience, history, life, time, and even space (POS).

There is also a certain amount of throwing around of the concept in broad, evocative fashion, casually lumping it together with other terms in ways that mobilise the concrete/abstract, use/exchange, lived/dead, spontaneous/constrained dualisms referred to above. Whenever Lefebvre is directly engaging in the critique of urbanistic ideology, technocratic power, passive consumer society, structuralist ideology, or information ideology, all seen by Lefebvre as forms of privileging or fetishising the abstract, writing is likely to receive a hit, either as a tool of domination and abstraction or as the wrong approach. It is frequently in those not uncommon ‘how should we go about this?’ passages, in which Lefebvre seems to make his search for models explicit, that recourse to writing occurs. Reluctantly at times, with no apologies at other times, he comes back to the writing metaphor, as if it were just too hard to avoid. Then reminds himself and us of what the main issue with all forms of ‘reading the city’, ‘writing-the-city’, ‘city-as-text’ tropes are: they cannot move beyond the descriptive level on to the explanatory, theoretical level. And insofar as they assume closed systems of signification, they share in the ideological, passive acceptance, celebration even, of things as they are, thus failing to make room for the possible and the utopian dimension. Lefebvre is at war with the idea of closed systems when applied to the social, so any attempt at viewing the city in semiological terms, as a closed system of signification, puts him on high alert against reification, neutralisation, abstraction, and the erasure of social practices. So important is this to Lefebvre that the very last thing he says in POS is that social space is anything but a system (1991: 423). The fire, however, is there from the start, hardly
concealed in those otherwise not very combative few pages of the ‘On urban form’ section of RTC discussed above:

[T]he constraint of writing and writings, terror before the written and struggle of the spirit against the letter, the power of speech against the inscribed and the prescribed, the becoming against the immutable and the reified.

(1996: 137)

What Lefebvre has to say about writing is better understood by reference to the context in which the urban works were written. Text-centred and writing-centred discourse had broad appeal at the time when Lefebvre started publishing his urban works. The author of Le langage et la société (1966) must have had a hard time garnering attention for his book, published the same year as Lacan’s Écrits and Foucault’s Les mots et les choses, just to be followed by three major works by Derrida the following year. Kofman and Lebas (1996) remind us that Lefebvre was ‘profoundly hostile to structuralist analyses’ (1996: 17). It is a lasting hostility, as the 1975 reissue of his 1971 book against structuralism, ‘L’idéologie structuraliste’ shows. In the preface Lefebvre states that as he saw structuralism become broadly rejected in 1975. His only regret was not having pressed his case harder (‘le seul regret de l’auteur de ce recueil, c’est de n’avoir pas mené plus loin et plus fortement encore la polemique’ 1975: 11). The year before the publication of RTC, Barthes (who Lefebvre praised at times), one of the major figures associated with structuralism and semiology, published a brief text, Semiology and the Urban (1967). In the short text, Barthes famously states that ‘the city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it’. Rarely cited, however, Barthes already poses the problem of the ‘language of the city’ metaphor in the lines that follow:

Still the problem is to bring an expression like ‘the language of the city’ out of the purely metaphorical stage. It is very easy metaphorically to speak of a language of the city as we speak of the language of the cinema or the language of flowers. The real scientific leap will be realized when we speak of a language of the city without metaphor.

(Barthes 1997: 168)

I am not about to advocate for a ‘scientific leap’ regarding the relationship between writing and the urban, but I think one can argue that the reading and writing the city metaphor may well operate as an ‘epistemological obstacle’ (in the sense of Bachelard, whom Lefebvre viewed favourably, and of Althusser, whom he did not) when it comes to studying the relationship between writing and the urban. In particular, without denying its value in guiding students of the city to raise interesting questions, the ‘city as text’ metaphor has at least one disadvantage, in that its use tends to obscure the question about the specific ways in which writing, in the strict sense, contributes to the production of space. This is something that Lefebvre did not explore in any sustained way. In fact, Lefebvre’s engagement with writing as a topic remains always very general. Lefebvre is clearly very interested in the structuralists and above all in countering their influence, from Levi-Strauss to Althusser.

But beyond that, a work like that of Annales School founder Lucien Febvre and H.J. Martin’s The Coming of the Book (1958), admired as a supreme example of historical scholarly work, and focusing on the spread and impact of printing and print culture in Europe between the 15th and 18th centuries, is not even mentioned in Lefebvre’s urban works. McLuhan, who popularised some of the ideas about the impact of writing and literacy on society that others like Innis
(2007) and Goody and Watts (1963) had explored (but had Lefebvre read them?), is mentioned
only in passing in POS (1991: 261, 286), and mostly in connection to the rise of a visual logic.
Because he is not engaging with it, Lefebvre is unable, for example, to attribute to written lan-
guage and print culture the constructive roles played in the creation of the public sphere, public
space, and modern nationhood that work by others like Habermas (1991), Anderson (1991), and
Warner (1990), will ascribe to it. Or in a darker light, he cannot clarify the specific complici-
ties of writing and literacy with power, domination, dispossession, marginalisation, extermina-
tion, and colonialism that de Certeau (1984) directly theorises and that Rama (1996), Mignolo
(1995), and others will carefully explore. Yet others, like Petrucci (1993) and Henkin (1998),
have focused on written texts with a historical focus on urban material culture, in ways that
align nicely, at least in principle, with the study and conceptualisation of the production of space
that Lefebvre inaugurated.

It would be anachronistic to blame Lefebvre for not having engaged with work published
after his death. But we ought to find it somewhat puzzling that Lefebvre all but ignores work
on writing, literacy, print, and print culture (including the reach of print matter into daily life
and the life of social institutions) that in retrospect would seem directly relevant to the study
of the production of space and could have reasonably raised Lefebvre’s interest and sparked his
theoretical imagination. This sort of, I dare say, ‘motivated forgetting’ fits well with, and may
simply be a by-product of Lefebvre’s unrelenting rejection of ‘the primacy of the written word’
and related theoretical positions, as described above. But it led Lefebvre to leave unexplored the
ways in which people use reading and writing, and text-supported practices more broadly, to do
much of what they do in the urban context, as well as the ways in which all kinds of institutions
in societies with writing are profoundly shaped by and imbricated with writing practices and
written matter. To use Lefebvre’s spatial triad, while Lefebvre seemed to have considered writ-
ing in terms of ‘spaces of representation’ (as he variously tried to answer the question, are space,
the city, society adequately conceived as text, written and read?), writing is also directly related
to urban life in terms of ‘spatial practices’ and ‘representational space’, so far as it has become
a material scaffold for all sorts of text-supported lived social practices. In this sense writing is
intimately implicated in all three dimensions of the triad, mental, social, and physical, as it sup-
ports the ontological, socio-spatial richness of society itself, ‘lived’ and ‘perceived’, and not only
‘conceived’. If, as Lefebvre states, ‘(social) space is a (social) product’ (1991: 26) and ‘[e]very soci-
city produces space, its own space’ (1991:31), then writing ought to be understood as one of the
means whereby society directly produces social space; literally, in other words, writing could be
understood as a form of direct spatialisation, and not only by virtue of its referring to space or
spatial processes (Diaz Cardona 2016).

In the years after Lefebvre’s death, the ‘writing the city’ metaphor and its variations have con-
tinued to be widely in use, and have even been extended into the digital realm, for example in
Thrift and French’s treatment of coding as writing in their discussion of the ‘automatic produc-
tion of space’ (Thrift and French 2002). But also, as suggested above, significant work has been
produced that can be seen as exploring the ways in which writing, in the more limited sense,
becomes one of the ways in which, to borrow Merrifield’s apt phrase ‘space gets actively produced’
(Merrifield 2006: 105). One could speculate on how Lefebvre himself would have reacted to the
socio-spatial life of writing in contemporary society, in particular, the ways in which this more
than five-thousand-year-old technology has been put to use, or made itself useful, in the context
of the so-called ‘digital age’. It is probably not completely unreasonable to imagine that the endur-
ing aptness of writing, and in particular its key role in enabling information and communication
technologies, to the extent that they are text-based, to operate widely, would not have escaped his
attention. And neither would the emergence of new kinds of text-based action from below, or the
way these support new forms of politically effervescent simultaneity. Perhaps it is not impossible that he would have changed his mind, or simply made up his mind, so far as writing is concerned, this old but ever new socio-spatial technology, a veritable people-space relations game changer, with stabilising and destabilising powers, actively and directly producing space, potentially contributing to abstract but also differential space, put to use by forces of domination and liberation, and perhaps deserving of inclusion in any meaningful list of rights to the urban and the city that may be compiled. Maybe he would even remember why, otherwise unexplainably, he decided to place writing high up there, underneath the urban, closest to the concrete, farthest from the abstract, in a ‘scheme of forms’ contained in a book on our right to the city some 50 years ago.

Conclusions

In conclusion, there are five principal ways in which references to writing work in Lefebvre’s main urban texts, briefly:

1) ‘Written form’ conceived (surprisingly, I have argued) as a highly concrete form in the enigmatic ‘scheme of forms’ (presented by Lefebvre in the ‘On urban form’ in RTC).
2) Writing briefly referred to as a necessary ingredient in the historical emergence of the city (as alluded to in UR).
3) The ‘reading the city’, ‘writing the city’, ‘city as text’ metaphors characteristic of the urban semiologies, of which Lefebvre sometimes approves and disapproves (in RTC, UR, and POS).
4) The ‘writing space’ metaphor as used by Lefebvre to theorise the historical genesis, production, and transformation of social space (RTC, UR, and more strongly in POS).
5) And finally, writing as loosely associated with vision, power, patriarchic society, and with the furthering of processes of reification, abstraction, domination, and fragmentation (in POS).

Lefebvre’s references to writing seem to fall primarily within one of the elements of the spatial triad, spaces of representation, or mental space, insofar as Lefebvre’s focus is most often on whether it makes sense to conceive of space as a written text. Alternatively, relations between writing and representations of space (physical, material, perceived space), and relations between writing and spatial practices or lived space are left largely unexplored. Although there was published and widely known work on writing that could have led to a consideration of writing from the point of view of spatial practices or of physical and material space, Lefebvre seems to have either not been aware of it or considered it not relevant to a theory of the production of space. I argued that his view of writing is significantly constrained by the polemical context of his writing, in which writing becomes a proxy for structuralism, to which Lefebvre is a declared enemy. This programmatic commitment has a simplifying effect on Lefebvre’s view of writing, pulling him, with few exceptions, to a negative portrayal of writing in relation to space.

Finally, there remains the possibility, however, of using Lefebvrian concepts to explore the life of writing and text-supported practices in the urban context and the ways in which these contribute to the production of urban space, adding to the socio-spatial and material richness of the urban. In particular, the persistent role of writing as a stable socio-technical support on which digital information and communication technologies seem to depend for their functioning, insofar as they continue to be heavily text-based, may prompt students of spatial theory to consider upgrading writing to a critical socio-spatial infrastructure, a crucial ingredient in the production of contemporary urban space.
References