

**The Disembodiment of Motion
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Let us delve into the perceptual sediments of a century of car-related routines. Under that accumulated alluvium, we find the strata of pedestrian locomotion, with which we will contrast railroad journeys. Up to the epoch of the first iron ways, around 1830, everybody was a hiker or traveled in coaches at walking or riding speed. Pedestrian was almost a synonym for “common man” and in many languages, “horse rider”—cavalier, Ritter, caballero, chevalier—was the first distinction from the common condition. Except for brief moments of gallop, the rider’s pace is twice or thrice faster than the walker’s. Let’s imagine that the speed of human locomotion, today, be within the range of the velocities of walking and of driving a bicycle. Such a narrow spectrum of possible speeds would not allow for essential differences of perceptual modalities to occur. The bicycle and the horse enhance or exacerbate perceptions, but they do not break the circle of the pedestrian condition. The rider, or the cyclist are immersed in nature’s materiality, even if they pierce the wind rasher than pedestrians.

The pedestrian’s is a condition of immersion and embodiment. The walker meets the sites of nature with his legs, his nose, his ears and all the pores of his skin. For him, there are smelly places, others are recalled for their unique rumor. Besides, places vary with the seasons and the hour of the day, constituting local “spimes” remembered by the walker’s body. The feeling of sweat in my armpits will always recall me that fountain under a Jura pine where, on a summer afternoon, we washed our skirts and let the sun dry our sweating chests. I can still name the friends who remember

that place, that day.

Through all of history, up to the modern epoch, the feet had defined the scale of inhabited places. The pedestrian condition common to all shaped common perceptions of natural sites and landscapes. The king, then, hardly traveled faster than his subjects and he perceived nature the way they did: by walking her or riding in her. For the best and the worst, neighbors truly dwelled in the same place, and every place engendered its peculiar perceptions and representations of the close and the far, this and the other world. Every inhabited site was, as E.V. Walter writes, “a unity of experiences organizing the mutual (...) influence of all beings within it.”¹ It was a stage on which reigned a particular unity of place, time and action. An intimate distance, which was felt in the legs, but was also evaluated in kinship or in intensity of friendship or enmity made every site distinct from the next and gave it, in Walter Benjamin’s words, its unique aura. Things, like places had, Benjamin writes, an aura of uniqueness: they were not reproducible. Except printed books, no object was an exact copy of another one, an even a book, in a given region, was generally unique, because the next copy was out of reach. In his essay on the village of Montaillou in the 13th century, Leroy Ladurie speaks of the man who possessed an exemplar of Ovide’s *Art of Loving* and was known round about for that.

Pedestrian locomotion is not a disembodied motion relating an abstract distance to an abstract time. It is not a scheduled forecast about my body’s location within one hour or one day, but an unpredictable event. The world’s center is always under the walker’s feet.

Far under the perceptual rubles of mechanized locomotion, we find a form of motion which does not fit our schedules, our maps, nor the internal arrow of whom who considers that time is the cost of an operation whose benefit is the attainment of valuable locations. Any activity that puts ends at the service of predetermined goals, Aristotle calls a motion. He opposed motion to action, an

¹ Eugen Victor Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment*, Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

activity which, like playing, sets its own goals and reveals the world in always new and unexpected ways. We have to contrast the perceptual habits gained in mechanical motion a form of motion which was both an action and an always surprising revelation of this world's matters.

The old philosophers who thought that motion is an actualization of substantial forms understood its nature differently—and perhaps more genuinely—than the modern scientists who draw its trajectories in coordinate space-time. For them, motion was an “actualization,” by which they meant the bringing into being of a potential existence. In order to see how right they were, and in what, we don't need to share their belief in predetermined and eternal potentialities or “forms.” It is sufficient to understand that motion—my body's and nature's—has the power to actualize existents into sensible beings by bringing them into my carnal presence. The walker's movements bring existents which were at best only potentially there—in thought or in memory—into the realm of his vision and in this the ancient philosophers were right: motion actualizes hitherto hidden possibilities of being.

Unlike modern scientists, who freeze motion in graphs, the medieval philosophers attempted to catch its actuality with words. They defined it as a *perfectio*, by which they meant the bringing forth of a substantial form and its completion. They recognized that the *via ad perfectionem* (the path to that perfection) could be studied as something different from the “perfectio” itself, but they resisted the temptation to take the path for the motion. They insisted that the essence of motion was actualization. Further, if I see “actualization” as the bringing into my presence of things hitherto only potentially existent for me, I come to understand that the medieval philosophers—the great Scholastics or “Schoolmen”—were also great walkers, for their philosophy fits the experience of him who knows nature by walking her.

Galileo studied abstract trajectories in space-time, not motion as that which brings potential

existence into sensible being. A theory of motion centered on trajectories and framed in an aprioristic space-time necessarily concentrates on repeatability and predictability. On the contrary, motion, experienced in the act of its completion, is never quite predictable because one does not know which hidden aspect of being, which “substantial form” it is going to bring into his presence. The “space” and “time” of actual motion, experienced in the flesh, is not the metric space-time of mathematics and physics. Embodied movement engenders its own “spime,” which is why it is so radically different from the motion of a mechanical contraption in the lab.

A philosophy of walking is a philosophy of vision and, conversely, the philosophers who start their inquiry by asking “what is there, there?” used to be walkers: were not Aristotle and his students called “the ones who walk about,” the “Peripatetics”? Through the middle ages, up to the beginning of modern times, philosophers who followed Aristotle’s example and commented on his works claimed that same name for themselves, signifying that walking is the complement of the philosopher’s vision. Did not Socrates himself initiate the dialogue with Phaedrus with the injunction: “Move forward”? They went out of the city, took a stroll, and while walking reflected on the spell cast by letters on sensible being.

The walker sees nature with his feet as well as by walking her with the feet of his eye: even in the darkest night, a special fatigue in the ankle allows him to “see” the steepness of a path. At dawn, he who wants to climb a mountain prepares himself by evaluating and feeling “in the calf of the eye” the distance to be covered.

The alphabet first engendered a realm which is open to the eye only. The man of letters sits behind a desk. While his eyes pour over the pages, he sometimes dreams that he’s left his body behind. What the mastery of the alphabet’s technique once allowed a well-trained minority—letting the eyes abandon the body—the technology of speed internalized into everybody’s perception.

Kinaesthesia

The walker's space is a manifold of actual and potential body sensations: not only the hill actually climbed is mirrored as fatigue in the walker's calves or the rider's loins, but distances to be covered are evaluated as potential sensations of effort. This sensation of movement or "kinaesthesia" (from Greek *kinein*, to move and *aesthesia*, sensation) is the reflection, in the walker's flesh, of nature's motive injunctions. As long as man was a pedestrian or horse rider, the perceived movement of things could be echoed in his entire body which was then, with all his senses—not just the eye—the sensorium of motion. Nature's movements were challenges to man's actions and claims for new gestures to be performed. This is how I understand the phenomenologists's intuition of an intentionality of nature.

Seeing Becomes "An Operation of Thought"

The ambiguity of speed—which can be experienced as a thrill or as unspeakable boredom, as the excitement of a departure from routines or as the most enslaving grind—lies in that dislocation of vision and bodily motion. In its "first-timeness," the kinetic experience could be a kind of premonition of that "systematic disarrangement of all the senses" which, after Rimbaud, was seen as a possible door to poetry for it shook the ground of common sense judgment. Yet it is a disarrangement or "dérèglement" only as long as it is experienced in a frame of pedestrian references. In that frame—as long as it holds and the body is not tamed—speed creates an illusory extension of the map of the "I can" and extends my motive projects. Then—as soon as I feel comfortable sitting quiet on my seat—a chasm is introduced between motion and vision, but speed still maintains me in an interesting state of giddiness. As long as the traveler is a transported pedestrian, motion is still substantial. Then, while nature's elementary angers seem more intense

and colorful, the body surreptitiously recedes from their reach. When the chasm becomes the rule, the interesting “*dérèglement*” ceases and the windshield becomes the frontier of a new covenant: inside, the internal swarming of bodily stuffs under the skin; outside, the unbearable lightness of things in motion. Speed breaks the overlapping of the visible world with my motor projects.

When speed imbues the space situated beyond vehicular enclosures—the environment—with never-ending motion, motion becomes a disembodied flux of forms. Bodily exposure to mechanical speed—the “kinetic experience”—dramatizes formal aspects of nature, like tectonic lines, orological textures and materializes geometries: straight lines, horizontal planes, intimations of sphericity beyond pedestrian horizons. The routinized experience of speed severs the imagination of matter from powers of judgment grounded in the overlapping of “what I see” with “what I can.” Like a dust, stuffs whose substantiality is not attested by intuitive judgments can stealthily cover the ground of synaesthetic perceptions and muddle judgments to come. It is then time to step out, extend your legs, shake off that unsubstantial powder and cleanse the eye of your feet from this cloud of dust.

If speed can extend its realm beyond all the limits of a pedestrian common sense, it becomes a reality-shaping experience. The ground of judgment is crushed, reality is molded in the new stuffs. Taking Greek etymology seriously, I call it a neo-plasm, a newly-cast matter. Unless we watch out, it will proliferate and pollute all the interstices between whatever synaesthetic harbors we have managed to keep. The neo-plasm is but a bad dream: it is matter in its absence, as only a numb, legless and handless no-body could possibly imagine it.