

Jean Robert

## **"Speed" as a state of altered perceptions**

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## **"Speed" as a state of altered perceptions**

Most of the experiences which are a trivial part of the condition of modern man have a recent history. I myself belong to the generation who still remembers a time when there was no television and I also recall the day when, for the first time, I climbed into a jet: this was in Luxembourg, and the first landing was in Reykjavik. As Iceland appeared between the clouds, like a green and white jewel on a blue mantle, the plane turned into a graceful curve that soon put the island out of sight. When it appeared again, in the windows of the opposite side, I jumped from my seat to follow the beautiful sight. The plane turned again, and the island changed sides once more. It was only after having run to and fro a couple of times that I became aware of the disapproving glances of the other passengers. What I read in their eyes is that one does not behave that way in a plane. I was a quick learner. I spent my next flight glued to my seat.

One does not have to reach very deeply into family records to find an aunt, a grandfather or a great-grandmother who recalled a somehow comparable experience of first-time contact with tools whose use has become routinary: Aunt Mary, who spoke into the ear piece during her first phone call, grandfather's tales about his first automobile travel to the South on unpaved roads where he met signs of disapproval by villagers, the stories he used to tell about his mother's memories of the first time she took a train. These are records of first-time experiences which must be carefully distinguished from the ensuing routines. Though they are experienced with the same tools, the initial excitement and the subsequent routine belong to different constellations of perception. First-timers are overwhelmed by a plethora of sensations which overflow the frame of their customary perceptions. Routinary users, in contrast, have acquired a new perceptual frame which selects some sensations and filters away others.

This essay tries to catch what happens to first-time perceptions when routine takes command.

Records of people who, around 1915 or 1920, traveled for the first time in an automobile, convey something of the special quality of my own first experience as a driver. "Speed", when experienced as frontal sight from a vehicle's windshield is a sudden surge, as if all the usual transitions of motion were abolished.

Proust has described that experience of the "sudden surge" in a text published under the title "Impressions de Route en Automobile" in *Le Figaro* of November 12, 1907:

I had asked the driver to stop for a while in front of the steeples of Saint-Etienne; but remembering how long it took us to get near to them, while from the beginning they looked so close, I pulled my watch from my pocket to see how many minutes it would still take us, when the automobile stopped me at their foot.

After having been for a long time unreachable by our straining machine, which seemed to skid on the road, always at the same distance from the steeples, it was only during the last seconds that speed, which had been totalized during all that time, became appreciable. And the giant

steeples threw themselves so rudely upon us that we just had time to stop before dashing ourselves against the porch.

When it becomes a routine, "speed" ceases to be the experience of the sudden surge of things abruptly flung in our path. The driver becomes a driver by acquiring a new sense of the sequence of events. Learning how to drive is learning how to focus on the free way, and not on the threatening masses of houses, trees or walls along the road. These become a flow of fleeting images at the side of one's visual field. Only a first-time passenger, or novice a driver can still perceive speed as a "sudden surge" or as the fear of being dashed against an obstacle, and this perception reveals how much he is still a pedestrian; for him, motion is not yet a flow of fleeting images, but still an encounter with solid things. In *Swann's Way*, Proust also wrote:

The "dépaysment" (uprootedness from one's place), the effect of strangeness due to speed allows a modification of the conditions of perception, of the categories of time and space; it helps to break these "aggregates of reasonings" out of which our perception is made, to desintellectualize this, in one word, to reencounter the freshness of sensation.

Actually, this text summarizes an expectation of sensory estrangement which was repeatedly expressed on the occasion of the arrival of the first trains, the automobile, and then the airplane. In the first decades of our century, at the time of the first automobiles, "speed" was the experience from which many poets expected to gain that "disarrangement of all the senses" which, for Rimbaud, was the condition of poetic creation.

In the "Manifesto of futuristic painters" that they wrote in 1910, Boccioni and five of his friends urged modern painters to paint what their eye saw, and not what their mind "knew". The surprise of things that, because of their unusual speed seemed to be irrupting from nowhere should lead painters "to put the spectator in the center of the picture" and "to force him to accept these new appearances." A bus, for instance, should be painted, not as a box into which people can climb, but as one of those "forces of a street" which Boccioni himself attempted to represent in a famous painting (see Asendorf, *op. cit. infra*, p. 160). Here is a sentence from the "manifesto":

The bus runs into the houses which it passes and the houses throw themselves against the bus to join themselves with it.

In 1912, only nine years after the Wright brothers had built the first motorized airplane and flew it over a distance of one mile, Marinetti, another Futurist, thought that the old world was crumbling and that a new world had to be built out of the vision gained by speed and altitude. He imagined himself riding an airplane through the sweeping plains of the sky:

It was in an airplane, seated on the gas tank, my belly heated by the pilot's head, that I suddenly felt the ridiculous inanity of the old syntax inherited from Homer. (Marinetti, *Le manifeste du futurisme*)

The words which come to the mind reading the Futurists is "exacerbation of sensations". The perception of speed in means newly experienced is a distortion of previous perceptions. A man who sits in a train, in a car or in a plane for the first time experiences an upsetting of his habitual sensations, not a functional perception eventually allowing him to drive the machine or at least to behave in front of the other passengers. The poetic touch in the first testimonies of vehicular speed is based upon this exacerbation of sensations. Christoph Asendorf speaks of the "new coordination of the senses" which, starting in the mid-19th century, allowed men to build a new vision of nature out of the visual sensations generated by speed. He writes:

The 19th century is permeated with strategies for the reorganization of new sensory perceptions. (Ströme und Strahlen. Das langsame Verschwinden der Materie um 1900, p. 122)

#### From the excitement of the "first time" to the tediousness of routine

Yet, as accustomance sets in, this reorganization of perceptions under the mediation of mechanical aids is a departure from the perceptual riches of the first-time experience. In order to become functional, the new coordination of the senses must tend toward a state of acquired selective insensibility. For instance, the kind of focusing vision which is required for driving a car is acquired by filtering away most of the profuse "first-time" sensations: houses generally do not "throw themselves" against trained drivers.

The artists who celebrated speed in the decades of the first cars and airplanes attempted to prolong or fix the surprise of the "first-time". They cultivated just those sensations which the training to vehicular locomotion tends to erode. Whatever new visions speed inspired to the artists, these were "disarrangements" of their pedestrian sensory memories, not functional, adaptive

In contrast, the man who hurries to work coordinates the speed of traffic, the distance to be covered, the reading of the gas gauge, the probability of a gas station in this area into a single web of meaning. For him, geography is reshaped by the "miles per gallon of gas ratio" that tells him which territory he controls with what he has in the tank. The idea that distances are covered at a given energy cost calculable in gallons of fuel introduces the logic of equivalence into the perception of the landscape. It is as if the distances between places were in a category with the liquid that fills the tank. The motor is the agent of a transaction in which, in exchange for gas, the landscape is swallowed up by the miles and left behind, sight after sight. In a subtle way, it is as if the common quality of being consumed and left behind gave a sort of co-substantiality to the fuel in the tank and the miles of landscape behind the windshield. Fuel is burnt liberating energy. The sight of the landscape disappears by absorbing that energy which, as any scientist will tell you, is now "bound" as residual energy - "high entropy" - in the very substance of nature.

### Discarded perceptions

I study what the habit of selecting sensory experiences and discarding most of them as irrelevant to orientation does to vision and perception. I nose around in the waste baskets of perception. I wonder about what becomes of smells and whispers, the touch of leaves, the salty taste of sweat when they are disposed of as the "rubbish of experience".

The walker draws a map of potential feelings and sensations which tells him what he can reach with the power of his feet. The driver's map is limited by what "he has in the tank". I see nature one way with my feet, very differently through the window of a machine whose radius of action is defined by gallons of gas.

What the driver "sees" in sites that his body will never meet are references structuring an itinerary. The sights framed by the windshield are not made of the same substance as the smelly mud that stuck to one's shoes. Though yellow as they ought to be, the strawstacks along the way are not made of the straw in which we played. The heath is not the one where we picked blue-berries. The glimpse of warren, bush, and marsh are fleeting images, easily discarded by a push on the gas pedal.

Vehicular locomotion leaves the body in command of only the instruments of driving: decisions about directions - right, left or straight ahead - are left to the hands, while the foot controls speed and stopping. Only the eye still knows the landscape, but it knows it through the commands of feet and hands on the instruments. Driving first deconstructs the unity of action of the senses and limbs; then, along with the acquisition of the necessary reflexes, it reconstructs their unity in a new guise. One can refuse to let this new "coordination of the senses" determine his vision of the world, but he must accept that he cannot behave in traffic if he does not let his perceptions be re-shaped by the driving instruments, the design of the highways and the rules of circulation.

Imagine an extreme situation, an "ideal type" with which real experience can be compared. Imagine a driver who had never been a walker, a man whose only vision is through a windshield. Like the figure of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, he would be re-born as a gigantic cockroach, except that his shell would be of steel and glass and his feet of rubber. His new body would be empty of the memories walked landscapes imprint in the hiker's flesh. For him, what others still call the landscape, would consist of weightless images. The windshield would sever the comfortable interior in which his body rests from an abstract outside that he would not call nature, not even landscape, but perhaps "the environment" -- that undefined and half-threatening extension surrounding his vehicular uterus. All his representations of the world would differ from the walker's, who knows that the places he meets with the power of his feet have an independent existence. This theoretical driver would construct his reality on an epistemological ground fitting his confinement in a wheeled box. The images through the windshield -- or better: on it -- would come and go depending upon his ability to make them appear and disappear through manipulating his instruments and following the map. The visible world, he would state, is

contingent on my technical skills. No wonder that such a man would not stop to assist a stranded traveler abandoned by the side of the road: a push on the gas pedal abolishes the disturbing image.

### The "lay vehicularization" of perception

When he steps into a vehicle, the walker ceases to be a walker in order to become a driver or passenger. However, no one is a "chemically pure" car driver or commuter. Memories of walked landscapes still mitigate the ultimate vehicularization of perception. Real men differ from the ideal driver in that they sometimes jump from one state to the other. At first, it appears that they have two interchangeable conditions: the pedestrian, in which they retain many traits of traditional man, and the vehicular condition, which is an unprecedented historical novelty. Closer observation however, reveals that the experience of being a driver, a passenger or a commuter is more than a parenthesis between two pedestrian experiences. Once he has framed nature with a windshield, the car driver never quite becomes a walker again. He now tends to see all landscapes through an imaginary shield, somewhat as compulsive photographers cannot help seeing you through an imaginary objective. His memories of driven landscapes silently shape his sensations when he walks. He focuses on time ahead as, on the highway, he focuses on the road signals: in one hour, he should be elsewhere. Driven away by an appointment he can't miss, he computes walking distances as if he would cover them with an imaginary vehicle, he tries to speed up, worries about the sweat that now covers his body.

Another symptom of the transposition of vehicular perceptions on pedestrian realities is the specialization of walkers into sub-species: some are called tourists and are recognizable by the cameras hanging from their neck; others, duly equipped with earphones, are called joggers; men and women too poor to afford transportation fares or rich enough to live close to where they work are officially described as practicing "transportation by foot"; the police keep an eye on loiterers, whom they check for their driving licence -- or, in its absence, their I.D. -- and then dictate a destination: "go home" or "come with us". He who still loiters and chats downtown generally speaks Spanish or has a dark skin. He who risks walking along the highways joining the City with its residential suburbs has often an apologizing sentence ready for the police : "I'm going for stamps; I live two blocks from the post office" or "my car is in the shop, so I walked to the supermarket." He who is seen walking in the street needs to be rehabilitated as a pedestrian commuter: he must prove that he uses his feet as others use wheels.

However, there can still be moments where the driver or the commuter can recover for a moment the surprise of a first-time vision. There are days when the freeway which joins the town where I live to the metropolis where I work is free from traffic jams and the bus seems to dance joyfully on the smoothly meandering road that climbs to the pass. Pines, cornfields, ranches along the road, people cleaning fields, the smoke of a charcoal furnace climbing in the dawn sky, the smell of fresh hay, the

pollen of the pines, flowers. Car stopped, along the road, men and women picking flowers. Sometimes, for brief moments, the tedious experience recovers its pristine freshness of impression.

At other times, just the opposite occurs and the commuter, for a moment does no longer know if he dreams or if he awakens to a nightmare made true. The wheels get clogged, flows congeal and the assumptions of traffic routines are briefly shaken as if by force of an epistemological subversion. For instance, the driver caught in a traffic jam may, for a while, forget about the power of gas to devour miles and see himself as Adam perhaps did: a fragile fleshy being, now caught in a horde of threatening insects. By empathy, he might suddenly see a human crowd, where only steel shells are visible. In a moment of hallucination, he could even imagine the never before seen: they all step out of their boxes and, as in a painting by Sydney Goodman, they walk nude on the asphalt. Macadam Adam: intimations of obscure or forgotten meanings sometimes overwhelm us in a flash. The flesh of tamed bodies pulsates again.

As the jam dissolves into a lazy flow, hands and feet reassume their function on the steering wheel and pedals. The acquired reflexes of daily routine take command again. Habit and the familiar daydream tame the strangeness of a moment.