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DRIVE IN CITY/(MEETING PEOPLE IS EASY)

“For the key to the visible city lies in the moving pageant or the procession: above all, in the great religious procession that winds about the streets and places before it finally debouches into the church or the cathedral for the ceremony its self.” Lewis Mumford ¹

¹ Lewis Mumford. *The City in History*. San Diego: CA, Harcourt, Inc, 1961, 277



I DRIVE

....and I enjoy driving, just as much as I enjoy biking, or walking. I don't just use this mode of transportation for its utilitarian comfort, I actually embrace it as an expression of what I still consider to be an important part of our modern lifestyle, the need for speed. Consider me a late futurist, but I always found Marinetti's epiphany after his near death experience to be immensely poetic. I don't however resonate with his own need for speed taken to the point of self-annihilation as much as I do with the sense of freedom that this new and undeveloped technology conveyed him. The car was a place of magic then, just as it is now.

Inside it, one is, as Iain Borden puts it, in the single most sophisticated space imaginable, commanding speed, moving in space while actually being immobile, listening to his own music –thus creating ambiance in a controlled climatic environment of his own choosing, constantly receiving reports and updates on luminous dashboards, speaking through the hands free mobile phone to people miles away, all while looking at the world outside, through the protective screens of the GPS augmented wind shield². The car is probably the best Swiss army knife we ever created. So I use it. I have to. I administer through time and space four different calendars and schedules, two different jobs and two preschoolers. Since I am forced to move quickly between these daily tasks (as many others are) I am somewhat conditioned to transform my driving into an art-form.

Perhaps even more than walking, or biking, urban driving implies a tactical reading of the city. One does not simply consider the shortest way but the

² Iain Borden. *Driving in Restless Cities* edited by Matthew Beaumont and Gregory Dart. London: Verso, 2010, 117



fastest. You cannot just move through space, you have to be aware of all its conditioning rules and flows, for in driving in the city, ideally, one navigates swiftly and safely through these conditions.

I read my city through my wind shield. Its contradictions, its poetry, its people, abstract, muted, without sounds or even odors, as in a flow of cinematic pictures. Fleeting instances devoid of depth and detail. Virtual representations of time and space, and then; a destination. And then another. The city seen. The city as vision.

But is this that I'm seeing lived space? Is this Lefebvre's third space, the space of social interactions, built through spatial practice? Is driving a spatial practice that builds SPACE. Am I actually building this space from behind the wheel, to quote Dave Gahan? Can there be life behind my windshield? Or is it just perceived space- the space of the routine, pure and simple physical space that I shouldn't really care that much about? There is no outside just the road from A to B, and the car - the ultimate "machine -body experience"³. And what if the outside world is both physically and ontologically worse than the inside of my car, for it belongs to no one, and is thus devoid of any representational qualities. But wait, there are representations in this space. There is structure in this map, for there are signs and there are rules. Go straight, take left, give way, and don't stop. This space was surely conceptualized by someone, by some urban planner, traffic engineer or other such type of technocrat, identifying what is lived and perceived with what is conceived. Surely he must know.

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"As urbanism destroys the cities, it recreates a pseudo-countryside devoid both of the natural relations of the traditional countryside and of the direct (and directly challenged) social relations of the historical city. "⁴

³ Ibid.117

⁴ Guy Debord. *Society of Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press, 98



My city is a drive in city. There is a saying here when one calls his friend for a meeting and it goes like this: Hey! Let's go in town. ...and then almost everybody drives there, as if it were a mall. I wish it were different but it really isn't.

My city is a garden city. It has a historic center and then it has its surrounding low density housing quarters. Its high density socialist blocks are even further away behind the garden city. And then there are the suburbs. The artificial paradises where all the good people now live: Debord's neo-peasantry enjoying their rural ideal of separation and isolation through technological and spectacular means of habitation.⁵

My city is a sprawl. And it is sprawling further, and further. For each house two cars. There is no point in denying this fact; the car with all its inherent problems concerning the environment, cost of dedicated infrastructure, and consumption of non-renewable resources (thank you Elon Musk for at least trying to fix that) is here to stay, whether we like it or not.

No matter how many readings of quality Danish urban theorists we acquire, no matter how many seminars we attend and certainly no matter how many critical texts we write on how cars are actually bad our cities, none of this will actually make this go away. Ok I might sound nihilistic, but just look at our politicians. They don't work for people but for their cars. And the people love it. Just ask them. Leave the circle of close friends, of architects and intellectuals and engage with "normal" people. You'd be surprised. I certainly was. I have since stopped speaking the subject with people outside my profession. It only dampens my spirit. I wish I could somehow escape this. But I can't... I have four different calendars and schedules, two different jobs and two preschoolers to take back and forth. I am part of the problem.

My city is a drive in city. When I drive I do so not because I like the experience of driving but because the city encourages me to do so through its size and

⁵ Ibid.98



structure, through its politics of space. Look at it. It's there just behind the screen.

So we drive, ceremoniously every day. We drive towards the city. We drive towards the mall- the other city within the city. We drive toward our jobs. It's a religious pageant that repeats it's self every day. Everyone hidden behind his own suit of armor, behind the wheel, in his own private artificial mobile paradise, driving. Each car, each brand, each model - a badge, worn to signal class affiliations: barons, lords, knights and serfs. They clarify who everyone is, who has right to pass, who can claim space (the sidewalk that is) and who cannot.

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"I saw the Procession pass along the street, people being arranged in rows, each man some distance from his neighbor, but the rows close behind the other. There were the Goldsmiths, the Painters, the Masons, The Broaderers, the Sculptors, the Joiners, the Carpenters, the Sailors, the Fisherman, the Butchers, the Latherers, the Cloth makers, the Bakers, the Tailors, the Cordwainers- indeed, workmen of all kinds, and many craftsmen and dealers who work for their livelihood. Likewise the shopkeepers and merchants and their assistants of all kinds were there. After these came the shooters with guns, bows, and crossbows, and the horsemen and foot soldiers also. Then followed the watch of the Lord Magistrates. Then came a fine troop all in red, nobly and splendidly clad. Before them, however went all the religious orders and the members of some foundations, very devoutly, all in their different robes." Albrecht Durer reporting on the great procession flowing through the streets of Antwerp „on a Sunday after Our Dear Lady's Assumption"⁶. He, himself was part of it, immersed in this celebration of the city its self. For what is such a religious pageant if not an affirmation of the citizenry, of all its parts and classes, of its creators? It is, if we accept Mumford's opinion on it, the best time to be a citizen. The late medieval town, autonomous and free from the

⁶ Lewis Mumford. *The City in History*. San Diego: CA, Harcourt,Inc, 1961, 278



caprices of kings and land gentry, not yet taken over by global trade and corporations, still creatively run by its guilds of craftsmen and its active citizenry for their community's own sole benefit. The ideal participatory community, perfectly balanced socially and economically building space incrementally, bottom up. This city is a continuous process, a tapestry as Mumford puts it, full of the details that everybody is sewing on it. For us... UTOPIA.

But that city mainly worked because it had tight knit communities. "(..)even at its widest, no medieval town usually extended more than half a mile from the center; that is, every necessary institution, every friend, relative associate, was in effect a close neighbour, within easy walking distance. So one was bound every day to encounter many people by coincidence whom one could not meet except pre-arrangement and effort in a bigger city"⁷

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Its early November, the first Sunday after the day of the dead, and the city center is filled by a different kind of procession: a protest. People are quietly remembering those who passed away in the fire that burned to the ground the Colectiv club in Bucharest, only a week before. I join them, I look at them, I see them up front, sitting in groups of 10 to 15 sometimes even larger. Over here my fellow architects. There, the artists. I see my students, there's at least 20 of them in one group, and then another even bigger. Engineers, teachers, and there... a group of doctors. In the center some anarchists are waving their black flags while quarreling with another political group whom they deem unfit to be in the square. There's almost 3000 people. Familiar faces, the creative city, its guilds, its silent creators, the citizens. UTOPIANS still believing in their own power to move things, to shape things.

It's all still and quiet but the energy in the air is overwhelming. All it needs is a spark. And then it starts moving. It leaves the square and starts marching,

⁷ Ibid. 313



through the city, through the neighborhoods, like a medieval pageant, calling to others. Soon there's 7000 people. Not much, but enough.

And there I was, meeting people by accident, people I've not met in years, old friends. We were all coming together, like never before, looking at each other, looking at the city. I don't think I've seen the city like that before. It was filled with the energy of the flow of the people meeting, with its sounds and colors, with its every detail. I'm shivering, and it's not even cold.

„Those who walked about the city on their daily business, who marched in a guild pageant or in a martial parade or who joined in a religious procession, underwent these esthetic experiences, and, in the very twisting and turning of the procession could as it were see themselves in advance as in a mirror, by observing the other parts of the procession: thus participant and spectator were one.”⁸

And then a government fell...

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It's early September and the city is filled with a different kind of procession. It's not one but many, moving in tandem, sometimes meeting, catching up to one another sometimes diverging. It's never ending. I'm caught up in it, moving slowly with my peers to the left and to the right. I'm looking at them though they don't see me. They are quiet, distant in their own little spaces. I wonder what they are thinking. What's that music that I hear from the Fiat to my right...? I know that tune: "At home he feels like a tourist, at home he feels like a tourist, he fills his head with culture, he gives himself an ulcer..." it's Gang of Four, that guy has good musical taste.

I look at the newly installed intelligent traffic light in front of us. It's stuck.

⁸ Ibid. 279



REFERENCES:

1. Beaumont. M. and Dart G *Restless Cities edited*. London: Verso, 2010
2. Debord. G. *Society of Spectacle*. London: Rebel Press
3. Lefebvre. H. *The Production of Space*, Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1991
4. Mumford. Lewis. *The City in History*. San Diego: CA, Harcourt, Inc, 1961