

# Culture and Mobility: An Introduction

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## We Are All in Motion

As British sociologists Mimi Sheller and John Urry have argued, “issues of movement, of too little movement or too much, or the wrong sort or at the wrong time, are central to many lives and many organizations. From SARS to train crashes, from airport expansion controversies to SMS (short message service) texting on the move, from congestion charging to global terrorism, from obesity caused by ‘fast food’ to oil wars in the Middle East, issues of ‘mobility’ are centre stage” (208). We are all on the move, or so it seems, and movement and mobility have become at once the most widespread and most important issues for social and political scientists, cultural geographers, ethnologists, cultural critics, historians, even social philosophers to look at. In fact, much of contemporary social science has been redirected from ‘static’ models of investigation to ‘mobile’ theoretical frameworks, from an emphasis on place and tradition to the foregrounding of complex, frequently interacting mobilities of people, goods, and ideas.

In a path-breaking, early contribution to what Sheller and Urry have called the ‘new mobility paradigm’ historian James Clifford posits traveling and movement as prime constituents of the formation of modern cultures at large. In his oft-quoted essay “Traveling Cultures” (1992) Clifford questions the traditional view of culture as a ‘rooted’ body that grows, lives, dies etc.; rather what drives the creative production of cultural identity are permanent displacement, interference, and interaction of people, spaces, and ideas. Cultures, according to Clifford, are essentially fluid and mobile and they thus necessitate a dynamic, mobility-oriented model of cultural behavior.

In a similar vein, sociologist Marc Augé has pointed out that modern cities are now analyzed best “by their capacity to import and export people, products, images and messages. Spatially, their importance can be measured by the quality and scale of the highway and rail networks linking them with their airports” (vii). Today’s cities are no longer defined by their specific location but by how efficiently they accommodate mobility, the movement to other places as well as between their various suburban fringes and downtown economic centers. In an increasingly globalized world where traditional frontiers between city and country, between the region and the metropolis, between suburban development and the inner city have become blurred, the emerging ‘third space’ of so-called regional or suburban cities feeds to an even greater extent on the mobility of people, goods, and services.

At the same time, personal computing has triggered new forms of travel and movement, allowing for an as yet unseen degree of mobility, both virtual and physical. Since smartphones have taken the computer to the streets, new ‘mobile’ forms of communication and interaction are evolving. Not only do most of us now go online everywhere, mobile computing devices provide the opportunity for 24/7 coordination of people and events thereby subverting the role of place as a

determining factor of human existence. Thanks to the new mobile communication technologies we can 'go places' even while standing in line at a ticket counter, waiting at a street light or being stuck in a traffic jam. We are all in motion, constantly.

### **Mobile Modernity**

If the speed and extent of human movement are now greater than before, modernity itself appears to be both a consequence and cause of a significant increase in mobility. In a recent essay titled "Mobilization of the Planet from the Spirit of Self-Intensification" (2006), German Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk and cultural critic Heidi Ziegler emphasize the power of mobility as an engine of modernization. Their analysis of the present is based on a philosophical kinetics that claims that 1) we are moving in a world that is itself moving; 2) that the self-movements of the world both include and affect the self-movements of each individual; and 3) that in modernity, the self-movements of the world originate from our self-movements, which are cumulatively added to world-movement. Hence modernity's kinetic nature can be defined as an aggregate of the dynamic initiatives accumulated over the past centuries. Likewise, Zygmunt Baumann defines modernity as quintessentially 'liquid,' that is, marked by the continuous movement of individual citizens and the permanent change of social structures. In contemporary societies, according to Baumann, individuals can shift from one social position to another, in a fluid manner.

Like modern nomads they change places, jobs, partners etc. easily or fluidly. Cut off from traditional networks of support such as families and long-term friendship modern citizens are bound to engage in provisional commitments and to frequently shift their political and ethical values. Not only are we all in motion, as Baumann's analysis of liquid modernity suggests, but so are our self-designated roles within society, our shifting private and public affiliations. Geographers, urbanists, and cultural critics who conceive of modern societies as determined by movement and constant change are legion (cf. Verstraete and Cresswell). Many argue that the mobility of individuals, goods, ideas, values, etc. may well have become the single most important factor in creating modern sensibilities: it paved the way for the shift from the local to the global, from place to space, from static, rural forms of life to the mobile lifestyles of what novelist Pico Iyer calls the 'global souls,' business travelers who travel constantly and who no longer know "where anyone is coming from ... and no one really knows where anyone is at" (51). There is little doubt that what the future of mankind shall look like depends to a great extent on how we negotiate the growing tension between mobility and stasis, between those who can turn movement and mobility into positive values and those who are left behind, grounded in places that have lost their capacity to engender meaningful human interaction and bonding, or those who are moving for the wrong reason, i.e. refugees, dissidents, itinerant workers, drug dealers, terrorists etc.

### **Transformative Mobilities**

Airports are interesting in this context because they represent both the promises of unlimited mobility and its frequent interruption, the freezing of movement while landing, interconnecting, or during preflight and checking-in periods. The latter we often experience as a significant slowing

down of our respective journeys, as moments of ambivalence that leave us annoyed, frustrated, puzzled. Moreover, modern airports resemble urban agglomerations in their own right: they have (or will soon) become, in John Kasarda's poignant phrasing, globally interconnected 'Aerotropoli.' As Kasarda explains in his opening contribution to the present collection of essays, rather than being merely transportation hubs located at the edges of major cities, airports increasingly spawn – often in close proximity to their runways – instant cities which in turn thrive on the staggering airbourne traffic of the mobile age. Airports are steadily growing in size and they wield increasing economic and political power: the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, as one of the biggest in the US, houses “a small universe of five terminals, a 36-hole golf course and 400,000 jobs within a 5-mile radius” (Iyer 2011: 46), and the constant expansion of Dulles International Airport, 25 miles outside of Washington, D.C., has made the neighboring Fairfax County wealthier than either Bangkok or New Dehli.

It remains unclear, however, whether Aerotropoli can indeed provide a template for the “way we'll live next” or whether, for better or worse, they remain unavoidable yet ambivalent spaces of transit, non-places that we have come to live with but do not embrace, in an emotionally or socially meaningful way. While modern architecture has opened up a multitude of new spaces by reorganizing the urban centers of nineteenth-century industrial cities, the postmodern transformation of place into cyberspace appears to have reduced architectural design and city planning to mere functions of global economic networks. For architect Martin Pawley, the arrival of the global city network marks a “catastrophic diminution of the cultural status of architecture” (39). Similar to the fate of painting at the hands of photography, and the fate of cinema at the hands of television and video, urban space has become “no more than the detritus of consumption [...]. In the new global system, the old static arts, literature, painting, music, sculpture and architecture, would have no place” (39).

To accommodate universal mobility at ever greater speeds poses significant challenges for urban planners and architects alike. If Kasarda is right that the future of urban planning holds only the limited choices of “Aerotropolis or bust,” what poses an equal challenge to human ingenuity and imagination is to envision rest zones or architectural ‘landing sites’ (Arakawa and Gins 150-63) where we occasionally come to a halt in order to regain a form of ‘meditative thinking,’ of ‘Gelassenheit’ as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger called it, vis-à-vis the overwhelming presence of mobility in modern societies (see Heidegger 1966; 1977).

Today many of us experience ‘immobility’ or even a mere slowing down of our sped-up, mobile lives as ominous; like Ryan Bingham, George Clooney's character in the 2009 movie *Up in the Air*, we are convinced that “the slower we move, the faster we die.” Yet mobility, though a crucial requirement in any modern environment, is neither a juggernaut nor a doctrine to which we must succumb with despair. As Ted Bishop's, François Specq's, and Phillip Vannini's contributions to this collection reveal, there's more than one monolithic culture of mobility. Rather, mobility has many facets and it need thus be framed in more than just positive or

negative terms. So, yes, we are all in motion, almost all of the time, yet as often the issue here is not to come to a complete standstill, but of finding the right speed, of what Bishop suggestively calls the “tempo giusto.”

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