

Modern(s) Walking: An Introduction

Klaus Benesch (LMU-Munich) and François Specq (ENS de Lyon – CNRS [IHRIM])

N'est-il pas réellement bien extraordinaire de voir que, depuis le temps où l'homme marche, personne ne se soit demandé pourquoi il marche, comment il marche, s'il peut mieux marcher, ce qu'il fait en marchant, s'il n'y aurait pas moyen d'imposer, de changer, d'analyser sa marche: questions qui tiennent à tous les systèmes philosophiques, psychologiques et politiques dont s'est occupé le monde?

Honoré de Balzac, *Théorie de la démarche* (1833)¹

If life is a journey through time and space, from early childhood to old age, and from our birthplace to the places where we seek employment, found families, or eventually retire to and pass away, much of that journey will be done on foot or, more precisely, by way of walking. Though rarely questioned as a form of universal movement, walking, as Balzac famously claimed, appears to be at the center of the human condition. An important cultural technique in its own right, walking allows us to interact with the environment in unique ways: through walking we acquire a sense of physical space and we learn how to measure distances, how to distinguish that which is far off from what is immediate and close-by. Put another way, walking defines our experience of self and of the world.

It also provides insight into the complex skein of human life itself. While walking mathematician William Rowan Hamilton finally thought of a formula for the analysis of three-dimensional space, and Karl Marx, perambulating with his son-in-law, Paul Lafargue, through London's Hampstead Heath Park, is said to have envisioned the entire economic system as outlined in the first volume of *Das Kapital*.² Moreover, writers, artists, and thinkers frequently embraced the slow motion of walking as a powerful tool to undo the limitations and self-alienation imposed by modern capitalist society.³ And where resistance to rampant capitalism has become either impossible or futile, as in Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* (2007), it is through walking that characters retrace the journey of mankind from its early tattered existence in the woods to the more refined stages of human interaction and bonding. If human life, then, has always also been a journey on foot, the history of that journey begins with man's (or woman's, for that matter) transformation from a crawling to a walking animal.

In the Beginning Was the Foot

The shift from quadrupedalism to an upright mode of movement, from crawling, jumping or galloping to walking, has been a crucial moment in the history of human culture. "The diminution of the olfactory stimuli," Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), "seems itself to be a consequence of man's raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait; this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provided feelings of shame in him" (qtd. in Solnit). Since by walking around the early upright men of central Africa, so-called *Homo erectus*, disclosed their reproductive organs, the ensuing feeling of shame and guilt, Freud seems to suggest, led to the veiling of the body and, eventually, to the establishing of social etiquette. It also led to a diminution of our sensual experience of the world, thereby instituting a rift between self and other, human and non-human. To have learned how to walk not only allowed early humans to extend their realm of action, from the rain forest to the savanna. Man's "raising from the ground" and its accompanying replacement of olfactory by mediated, i.e. cultural, experiences of the world marks the beginning of civilization itself. From now on, life has turned into a relentless

journey, to be human is to be *in motion*: in order to 'know' the world one has to leave home and hearth, and embark on an exploratory voyage to places elsewhere, unknown and far-off.

Whether the upright gait has been the sole driving force of civilization and the production of culture is, of course, debatable. There is little doubt, however, that walking has always been more than merely a well-coordinated movement of body parts. As an expression of the human will to explore, interact with, and ultimately transcend the limits of the physical environment, it has served as a motor of progress, a relentless force of change and transformation.

A key moment in the shift from sedentary to mobile forms of life, walking clearly resonates with the modern emphasis on a movement in space. Modern literature is replete with men (less frequently women) walking, with people in motion or in transition from country to city, from home to foreign land, from the well-known to the unknown, from departure to arrival. Quite frequently, its peripatetic characters are far from being goal-oriented, that is, they walk for the sake of walking, endlessly and excessively, in order to avoid being stationary, being fettered to place and time. Obsessive walkers abound in modern literature, and so does the notion that walking somehow captures the experience of being modern, that it somehow provides insight into the underpinnings of modern life itself.

Wanderlust and/in Modernity

Predicated on the human body and its finite power resources, the act of walking, however, always also involves a fundamental challenge inherent in modern existence, namely, the problem of how to negotiate, on the one hand, man's extension into space and, on the other, her being rooted in a particular time and place. If the former evokes modernity's mobile lifestyles, the latter relates to an inevitable human emplacement in the environment or, as Merleau-Ponty succinctly put it, to our being *there*.⁴ Walking thus encapsulates a fundamental paradox of modern life: the need to conjoin forms of being in-motion with a being-*there*, a being anchored in a particular place and time. Wary of unwonted consequences of mobility and speed, moderns often posit walking as an alternative mode of movement, one that engages both body and soul and, thereby, sublates the tensions inherent in modern society. To comprehend the complex, shifting role of mobility we also have to register its absence, that is, the self-imposed lack or restraint of constant movement. As various of the essays gathered in this volume emphasize, to not move or to slow down and walk, loiter, or ramble often coincides with antimodern sentiments and an encompassing antipathy towards modernity at large (see, for example, the contributions of Gross and Estes).

To alleviate the tensions between mobility and immobility, space and place, progress and stasis, the act of walking takes on particular importance. Significantly, if also somewhat paradoxically, walking has often come to signify a counter-space, a mode of mobile existence that frees the mind from the limitations of history and tradition, thereby empowering the autonomous subject and providing moments of epiphanic insight. Unimpeded by technology and the regulations and laws it necessitates, the act of walking allows to pay close attention to particular places and regions. In so doing walking lends itself readily to notions of rootedness, thereby defying unfettered rapid progress and cultural change.⁵ Moreover, as it slowly moves bodies through spaces walking allows for an encompassing experience, and it enables the individual to resist the demands of family, society, civilization. While walking body and mind join to interact with the environment, and to provide a panoply of ways—intellectual, emotional, bodily—to 'take in' and make sense of the world 'out there'. From the late eighteenth to the twenty first century walking repeatedly figured as an alternative mode of human existence, one that is outside of the restrictions and limitations of modern life as we know it.

"If you are prepared to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again," Thoreau writes in his essay "Walking," "if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk" ("Walking" 186). If walking has the power to liberate, for walkers less receptive to the idea of freedom, Thoreau seems to suggest, who have not yet severed ties with society, have not yet freed themselves from the constraints of the marketplace and the dictates of social conventions the benefits of walking will be limited. Yet those who do will benefit greatly! To transcend the social and economic conditions modern writers, artists, and thinkers often embarked on a journey on foot, a

journey by which they hoped to wed past and future, to acknowledge the rootedness of tradition while simultaneously exploring its limits and opening it up towards a malleable, uncertain future. To trace the trajectory and routes of these modern walkers, to follow their journeys through cities, into the wilderness, or across entire continents informs many—if not all—of the twenty essays collected in this volume. Whether they look at novelists, poets, painters, photographers, film makers, or simply at tourist walkers, all share an interest in moderns walking, and in the representation of their walks in the arts.

In *On Foot: A History of Walking* Joseph Amato reminds us that "the act of walking on foot is joined to a time, condition, society, and culture" (2). To take note of who walks, to what gender, age, ethnicity, and class the walker belongs, to take into account what he or she is wearing while walking, and to gauge the landscapes and distances the walker traverses cannot but shed light on a society as a whole, its tensions, attitudes, and the cultural myths on which it is predicated. As mentioned above this is particularly true for modern, technologically advanced societies where walking has ceased to be the obvious, primary means of movement. The walker who walks out of necessity, either for a lack of means or the absence of alternatives, is less prone to reflect upon why s/he walks than, say, the modern flâneur who, when roaming the city, embarks on a contemplative journey that provides revelatory experiences regarding self and society. Though walking, in one way or another, always has an effect on the walker, the contributors to this volume on modern(s) walking are particularly interested in those instances where walking has become topical, an "objet d'art," or the subject of study, of critical reflection and representation.

Modern(s) Walking: Who, Where, and Why?

While the notion of walking has been explored by a number of authors over the last three decades, the focus of this book is different, both in its scope and in its approach. The existing scholarship fundamentally falls into three types of approaches. Literary studies of walking, which initiated the scholarly interest in this theme in the 1990s, have mainly focused on a poetics of writing as part of a "Romantic tradition," from Wordsworth to the twentieth century (see especially Robinson, Jarvis, Gilbert). Cultural studies of walking rose to prominence in the 2000s, through books with a broader focus on the history and imagination of the act of walking (see especially Solnit, Amato, Nicholson, Gros). Nurturing both, influential essays by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Michel de Certeau have considered the topic from a more theoretical or philosophical perspective.

Even as it refers to those classic studies of walking, this volume has different emphases. As a collection of essays, it covers a wider array of authors and topics than more specialized studies, ranging as it does from eighteenth-century fiction writers and travelers to contemporary film, digital art, and artists' books. And it is concerned with a closer examination of texts and visual art than books with a broad historical, cultural, or theoretical orientation.

The essays gathered in section I focus on the different ways space is perceived, constructed and made meaningful through the act of walking. Whether in eighteenth-century narratives, nineteenth-century visions of *flânerie*, or contemporary poetry, walking proves to be deeply connected to different modes of creativity, in which the narrative, the poetical, and philosophical reflections mingle or alternate, but are integral parts of an aspirational and inspirational sense-making activity.

Section II, then, explores how the art of walking is a way of performing space, or a response to what might be described as the theatricality of even our most ordinary experience, not to mention the intricate staging of mobility through virtual spaces, which dramatizes the unstable nature of identities and topologies. Far from warranting any return to standard modes of self-definition, or from enacting any sublimation of tensions, walking here conveys the ambiguities of our being-in-the-world.

While walking is often seen as a healthy antidote to—or a way of balancing—the seemingly overbearing influence of speed in the modern world, the essays in section III consider how modern authors envision the intersections between walking and disease, madness, and violence. Far from revealing or restoring a sense of order and bodily connection, walking here is linked to the deconstruction of character and disruptive modes of being, in which the walker is, mentally if not physically, distanced from the world, and prone to fear or terror rather than to serene enlightenment. In

the end, however, this dissociative practice of walking may precisely fit the individual for the chaotic nature of the modern world.

Finally, the essays in section IV analyze how walking, in a number of works ranging from the nineteenth century to the contemporary period, is staged in relation to a number of historical and political issues. It revisits the politics of space and explores and redefines the connection between walking individuals and their communities. Walking is here inherently social and relational, albeit rendered in a mode that is not necessarily consensus-oriented, but rather attuned to dissent.

As the essays collected here demonstrate, walking, far from constituting a simplistic, naïve, or transparent cultural script, allows for complex visions and reinterpretations of man's relation to the modern world, and introduces us to a world of many different and changing realities.

¹ "Isn't it curious that ever since man has walked, no one has asked why he walks, or how, or if he could improve his walking, or what he does when he walks, whether one could not impose his walking, change or scrutinize it—issues that are integral to all the philosophical, psychological or political systems that have occupied the world?" (260; our translation).

² See Crowe, *A History of Vector Analysis*; and Solnit, *Wanderlust*.

³ For modernist Paul Klee, art alone offered a space for non-utilitarian thinking, a space, as he famously puts it in *Das pädagogische Skizzenbuch* (1925), closely associated with the activity of walking: "[wie] ein Spaziergang, um seiner selbst willen, ohne Ziel" (6) ["a walk for its own sake, without specific aim," (our translation)].

⁴ In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty claims that spatiality or human spatial existence is "the primary condition of all living perception" (109), and that our sense of being is therefore indelibly linked to the notion of being in space; put another way, being is always also a being *there*, a form of emplacement.

⁵ A case in point is Martin Heidegger's "The Pathway," which proffers a multi-layered, paradoxical notion of walking, oscillating between movement and stasis, between leaving home and its opposite, the intense involvement with places, roots, and the environment nearby. See Benesch, "Cultural Immobility: Thoreau, Heidegger, and the Modern Politics of Place."