

## UNNECESSARY WALKS

### WALKING ON OUR OWN TWO FEET

If our everyday mobility habits are clear means to an end (going from A to B), and if cars, bikes and public transportation are the main ‘vehicles’ facilitating those habits, how do we perceive walking? Is it an unavoidable task to get us where we need to go (car park, train station, tram stop) or is it a leisure activity to help us escape from the everyday? And while walking, are we thinking about ‘to-do’ lists and things we said and done, or are we paying attention to what is out there, what has changed and what still remains. Do we flirt with the unexpected or are we totally pre-occupied with pre-existing thoughts?

We have more or less figured out by now what walking does to our body, but what does it actually do to our mind; or better said with our mind?

A lot has been said about the walking-brain relation through the theories of evolution and some current debates on bipedalism\*. We know by now that walking came before thinking and making, and there are scientists who believe in the evolution of a ‘walking gene’ that allowed us to walk on our feet before everything else. Still scientific debates on the matter go strong and will most likely keep on going.

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\* Bipedalism is a form of terrestrial locomotion where an organism moves by means of its two rear limbs, or legs - wikipedia source.

There is a great documentary by the BBC that illustrates the complexity of the issue. It is titled *The Family That Walks On All Fours* and it revolves around a group of British scientists who investigate the reasons behind the unprecedented on-all-fours walking of four siblings in a Turkish village.

However, we are not scientists and to be quite frank, what we are predominantly interested in is to research the symbolic nature of walking, its narratological prospects and memory retrieving potentials.

### SUCCESSFUL WALKING?

There is certainly not a recipe for a successful walk, simply because there is no such thing as a successful walk. Walking is merely a tool, an everyday particle that under coincidental and highly subjective circumstances and – well, to honor all those ancestor strollers and psychogeographers – after some persistent doing it can register a unique, unsurpassed experience.

But it is certainly not a matter of getting it or making it – it is more an issue of getting into it. And that getting into is not a merely a simple thing to do. It might come unsolicited or with some work on our part but even when it actually happens, you might not be able to acknowledge what caused it or how to make it happen again. And the uniqueness of that momentum is what makes it special.

<http://nightwalkersexpodium.tumblr.com/>

We surely have all experienced it. Whether walking back from a first date (good or bad – regardless the outcome), after a great movie or concert, while marching with others on a protest or parading the streets for the victory of our favorite football team; whether walking home with our best friends after school or wandering alone in a city for the first time.

We all have at least one or two strolls to recall that in one way or another have registered in our memory as signifiers of a unique moment. And as memories are selective and subjective manifestations of our past, so is our perception of those walks.

But wouldn't it be cool to try for a minute to trace our lives through a succession of walks, from early childhood to adulthood?

And while most of us tend to revisit those moments in our heads, some of us look for means to revive them on the streets or even better to master simple strategies on maintaining an open eye for new adventures that might take place outdoors.

We, grand walking enthusiasts, practice walking as a trial and error. We seek for external stimuli to make our walking time worthwhile. We observe and we recall. We continue to walk from A to B but we often choose to consciously wander with no specific destination. We write the script as we go along and while performing it.

### LET'S GET INSPIRED

Sure we don't go out there blind. We start with a concept while still allowing ourselves to alter, subvert or even discard it in the process.

We could for example seek to trace our steps on a walk we did years ago, or choose to literally follow the footsteps of others.

There is a great history of walkers that chose to wander in places where others have lived, walked about or written of. Urban tourism has exploited that concept quite enough too, from street maps and tour guides to smart phone apps. Religion has done the same, with pilgrimage as the most striking example. And while pilgrimages are mainly related to specific routes, they are symbolic acts of wandering for the process of spiritual revelation.

We could devise maps of places we want to explore, set a route and follow it. Take for example Claire Wyckoff. She is the woman behind *Running Drawing*, a tumblr page with jogging-route drawings on google maps using Nike+. She leaves a trace on a map and renders it while jogging to reach a personally satisfactory image - a penis, a middle finger, an Atari 87' alien, etc.

Geoff Nicholson writes in *The Lost Art of Walking* how he chooses to walk the streets of Brooklyn after discovering the pattern of a martini glass on a city map of New York. It was the year 2001 and he had just walked out of a psychogeography festival to enter a bar for a quick martini. He clearly describes his disappointment regarding the walk – but then again smartphones, GPS apps and Nike+ had not yet been invented.

We could choose to visit all the playgrounds in the city or check where the furthest cigarette shop is and walk there

for a package of Red Marlboros (or any brand for that matter). We could choose to take the wrong metro home and walk additional distance to get back to our residence.

We choose to not measure distance in kilometers as most walkers do but in time. Then we subsequently get confronted with the worth doing/lost time dilemma. We are simply dictated by contemporary lifestyle to think like this. In contemporary society leisure is programmed, it has artificial boundaries (time and space ones) imposed by consumption patterns. We consume flows of information and while information is capital and time is value we guilt ourselves on wasting time. But in walking, the wasted time vs valuable experience opposition is a folly.

#### PURPOSELY VS UNNECESSARY WALKING

For matters of better understanding let's oversimplify things and divide walking into two main categories, purposely walking and – for a lack of a better term – unnecessary walking.

Purposely walking often comes out of necessity and – as mentioned in the beginning of this text – it functions as a mean to an end and it serves a tangible solid purpose; it gets us where we need to go. Unlike purposely walking, unnecessary walking is de-pragmatised, meaning it doesn't serve the stereotypical purpose conducts of our every day doing and it doesn't follow any time restrains. It is walking for the pleasure of walking and for the benefits that strolling, wandering and drifting brings. But although unnecessary, it is undeniably a meaningful act of placing ourselves in the world, and therefore understanding it a bit better.

It is a journey for the qualities a journey brings – like a tiny odyssey.

There is a knowledge generated through it. It is narrated in books and pems, illustrated by performers, visual artists, photographers and cinematographers but it cannot be conveyed in its totality but it cannot be conveyed in its totality. It is felt knowledge absorbed by all perceptive sensors (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands and feet) filtered by subjective mechanisms and embedded in our history of being in the world.

It is also bodily knowledge of our actuality in the place we occupy. While the world spins, and information runs in the speed of light, a walking body follows completely different rhythms. We are 'here' and there is so much our body can do to get us 'there'. It is a slow doing, an organic process. There's no coincidence that 'slow' as a term returns to architecture as a mean of constructing a more sustainable living environment (Slow Architecture).

Unnecessary walking is also empowering. Pop culture has explored and visualized empowerment through walking in music, videos and movies. Take for example Nancy Sinatra's *These Boots Are Made for Walkin'* or Young Johnny's *Walk the Line*. Think of more abstract references to walking like Nelson's *Everybody's Talkin'* from the *Midnight Cowboy* movie, Verve's *Bittersweet Symphony* video, Massive Attack's *Unfinished Sympathy*, PJ Harvey's *Good Fortune* or even Alanis Morissette's *You Learn* – where she passes by streets and people, jumps through obstacles, falls from a bridge and keeps on

going. *You Learn* is a praise of life and everyday experience through the symbolic act of walking. Music and films have shown us how to do it. They have been inspiring, self-related and motivational. No wonder we sometimes experience life as if playing in a movie or as directing a cool video for a song.

#### NIGHTWALKING

And then, there is us – NIGHTWALKERS – who choose to practice unnecessary walking predominantly at night. We do all of the above - follow the footsteps of others, escape traditional routes, design maps, build walking soundscapes – but we choose to do it in the dark. We choose to walk collectively but we are not interested in producing one common experience. Instead we create conditions, starting points and scripts for open-ended walking scenarios. Our strolling strategies are empirical and so are our observations of the inside, as well as the outside. They all constitute a work in progress.

And let's just say night has been good with us.

There is a great quote by Jorge Luis Borges about night walking. He says, “*I cannot walk through the suburbs in the solitude of the night without thinking that the night pleases us because it suppresses idle details, just as our memory does*”.

Indeed night is selective to what it brings to light. Streetlights, shadows, neon signs and light beams from passing cars, they all play a part in this selective process.

Along with the rest of the city's infrastructure, they are the protagonists of a script that is constantly re-written.

Rebecca Solnit, writes about nightwalking:

*‘There’s a way the artificial lights and natural darkness of nightwalks turn the day’s continuum into a theatre tableaux, vignettes, set pieces, and there’s always the unsettling pleasure of your shadow growing and shrinking as you move from streetlight to streetlight.’\**

Interpreting the cultural landscape at night is not as hard as it sounds. On the one hand we are confronted with what constitutes darkness, literally and symbolically.

Darkness in a mild sense symbolizes a pause; closed shops, curtains off in domestic interiors, lights off in bedroom windows. In its strongest gist, darkness epitomizes ‘the end’, whether that is the end of a working day, the end of being awake or even the absolute end a.k.a death.

On the other hand there are those – things and creatures – who exist and function in the dark; 24/7 client services, night-shops, dinners, night guards, club owners, drunks, prostitutes, criminals, insomniacs, spies, sleepwalkers, vampires, werewolves and the homeless.

One only has to bring those ‘two and two’ together in an attempt to make sense of the urban hours of darkness. It is a task of confronting with and relating to the leftovers of the everyday along with the main features and players of the nocturnal cosmos.



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\* Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, p.173 – Penguin Books, 2000