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Mobile Cultures

John Urry

Schivelbusch states that: 'For the twentieth century tourist, the world has become one large department store of countrysides and cities' (1986: 197). The scale of contemporary travelling around that department store is awesome. There are over 600 million international passenger arrivals each year (compared with 25m in 1950); at any one time 300,000 passengers are in flight above the US, equivalent to a substantial city; a half million new hotel rooms are built each year worldwide; there are 23m refugees across the globe; and there is one car for every 8.6 people worldwide (Kaplan 1996: 101; Makimoto and Manners 1997: chap 1).

International travel now accounts for over one-twelfth of world trade. It constitutes by far the largest movement of people across borders that has occurred in human history. International *and* domestic tourism together account for 10% of global employment and global GDP. And this affects everywhere; the World Tourism Organisation publishes tourism statistics for 200 countries. There is almost no country now which is not a sender and receiver of significant numbers of visitors. However, the flows of visitors are not even. Most occurs between advanced industrial societies and especially within western and southern Europe and within north America. These flows still account for about 80% of international travel; 25 years ago they accounted for 90% (see WTO 1997).

How has this come about? What has given especially contemporary western societies what we might call a 'compulsion to mobility'? I shall explore such issues through three questions:

1. What are the main ways in which people have begun to think about and to conceptualise the contemporary citizen as being 'on the move'?
2. What makes us travel? What draws us to other places?



3. How is it that not only people travel but also cultures travel?

1. What are the main ways in which people have begun to think about and to conceptualise the contemporary citizen as being 'on the move'?

First then, commentators often now refer to the nomadic quality of contemporary social life. Thus du Gay describes the significance of the Sony Walkman:

It is virtually an extension of the skin. It is fitted, moulded, like so much else in modern consumer culture, to the body itself ... It is designed for movement - for mobility, for people who are always out and about, for travelling light. It is part of the required equipment of the modern 'nomad' ... it is testimony to the high value which the culture of late-modernity places on mobility (1997: 23-4).

Deleuze and Guattari somewhat similarly elaborate on the implications of nomads, which they see as external to each state (1986: 49-53). Nomads characterise societies characterised 'de-territorialisation'. These societies are constituted by lines of flight rather than by points or nodes. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that: 'The nomad has no points, paths or land If the nomad can be called the Deterritorialized *par excellence*, it is precisely because there is no reterritorialization *afterwards* as with the migrant' (1986: 52). Such nomads present particular conflicts for states whose fundamental task is 'to striate the space over which it reigns ... not only to vanquish nomadism, but to control migrations and, more generally, to establish a zone of rights over an entire "exterior", over all the flows' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 59).

More generally, such nomadic deterritorialisation has been articulated as a way of challenging academic disciplines and hegemonic cultures, to 'marginalize the centre' and especially the masculinist, imperial, white and academic cultures of the 'west' (see Kaplan 1996: chap 2). Nomadism is associated with the notion that academic and political writing can itself be conceived of as a journey. In order to theorise one leaves home and travels. There is no 'home' or fixed point from which the theorist departs and then returns. The theorist is seen as travelling hopefully, neither being at home or away (see Clifford 1997).

Braidotti proposes a new 'interconnected nomadism' to develop multiple, transverse ways of thinking through the complex and diverse patterns of women's lives (1994). Feminists, she argues, should develop a nomadic consciousness. Braidotti notes that she has 'special affection for the places of transit that go with travelling: stations and airport lounges, trams, shuttle buses and check-in areas. In between zones where all ties are suspended and time stretched to a sort of continuous present' (1994: 18-9). Chambers refers to this as the *flâneur* becoming the *plâneur* (1990).

More generally Makimoto and Manners argue that we have entered a new nomadic age. Over the next decade, with digitisation, most of the facilities of home and the office will be carried around on the body or at least in a small bag, making those that can afford such objects 'geographically independent' (Makimoto and Manners 1997: 2). Such people will be 'free to live where they want and travel as much as they want' - they will be forced to consider whether they are settlers or really 'global nomads' (1997: 6).

Other commentators have however criticised these nomadic metaphors. Bauman dispenses with the nomadic metaphor on the grounds that actual desert nomads do in fact move from place to place in a strictly regular fashion (1993: 240). For Bauman, both the vagabond and the tourist are more plausible metaphors for post-modern times since they do not involve such regularised mobility. The vagabond, he says, is a pilgrim without a destination, a nomad without an itinerary; while the tourist 'pay[s] for their freedom; the right to disregard native concerns and feelings, the right to spin their own web of meanings ... The world is the tourist's oyster ... to be lived pleurably - and thus given meaning' (Bauman 1993: 241). Both vagabonds and tourists move through other people's spaces, they both involve the separation of physical closeness from moral proximity, and both set standards for happiness and the good life. For Bauman the good life has come to be thought of as somewhat akin to a 'continuous holiday' (1993: 243).

Feminists have criticised the masculinist character of many of these nomadic and travel metaphors since they suggest that there is ungrounded and unbounded movement; yet



clearly different people have very different access to being 'on the road', either literally or even metaphorically (Wolff 1993). Some have demonstrated the 'maleness' of many nomadic metaphors (Jokinen and Veijola 1997). It has been shown that certain male metaphors can be re-written or coded differently. If rather than nomad or tourist, they are re-coded as paparazzi, homeless drunk, sex-tourist and womaniser, then they lose the positive valuation that they have typically enjoyed within male-stream nomadic theory.

Finally, Morris has recommended the metaphor of the motel for the nature of contemporary mobile life (1988). The motel:

- possesses no real lobby,
- is tied into the network of highways,
- functions to relay people rather than to provide settings for coherent human subjects,
- is consecrated to circulation and movement, and
- demolishes the particular sense of place and locale

As she says motels 'memorialize only movement, speed, and perpetual circulation' (Morris 1988: 3); they 'can never be a true *place*' and each one is only distinguished from the other in 'a high-speed, *empiricist* flash' (1988: 5). The motel, like the airport transit lounge, represents neither arrival nor departure but what she refers to as the 'pause' (Morris 1988: 41; and see Clifford 1997).

2. What makes us travel? What draws us to other places?

In *The Tourist Gaze* I argued for the fundamentally visual nature of the tourism experience and of how changing tourism practices relate to transformations in how people gaze and in what people expect to gaze upon (Urry 1990). So the compulsion to mobility in a simple sense relates to the widespread importance of various tourist gazes.

But this emphasis upon the visual does not imply that such gazes are 'individual'. It was noted that how people gaze while away depend upon a variety of social discourses and practices including of course those of photography. More generally many of these gazes are discursively organised by professionals, including photographers, writers of travel books and guides, travel agents, hotel owners and designers, tour operators, travel programmes on TV, tourism development officers, architects and so on.

Furthermore, different gazes are authorised by different discourses. These include:

- education, as in the European Grand Tour
- health, as in much current tourism designed to 'restore' the individual to healthy functioning
- group solidarity, as in much Japanese tourism
- play, as in the case of what one could call liminal tourism

Such different discourses imply rather different socialities. In *The Tourist Gaze* a distinction is drawn between romantic and collective tourist gazes:

- In the former the emphasis is upon solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze. In such cases the tourist will expect to look at the object privately and other visitors intrude upon his or her consumption of the object. The romantic gaze lead to an endless quest for new objects of such a solitudinous gaze.
- The collective gaze by contrast involves conviviality. Other people are necessary to give atmosphere or a sense of carnival to the place. They indicate that this is the place to be and that one should not be elsewhere. Other tourists are necessary for the collective visual consumption of such places.

My main point here however is that the centrality of the gaze to the tourist experience mirrors more generally the privileging of the eye over the other senses. In the history of Western societies, sight has long been regarded as the noblest of the senses. It was viewed as the



most discriminating and reliable of the sensuous mediators between humans and their physical environment. This emphasis on the primacy of sight is found in both epistemology and in religious and other symbolisms (Macnaghten and Urry 1998: chap 4).

Moreover, it is the visual sense that enables possession and property, while that which we hear is already past and provides no property to be possessed (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 116). More generally the visual is the crucial sense enabling people to take possession, not only of other people, but also of diverse objects and environments, often at a distance. The visual sense enables the world of both people and objects to be controlled from afar, combining detachment and mastery (see Robins 1996: 20). It is by seeking distance that a proper 'view' is gained, abstracted from the hustle and bustle of everyday experience (see Hibbitts 1994: 293).

The importance of the visual sense of possession especially developed in the nineteenth century in Western Europe. Asylums, hospitals, schools and prisons were designed so that the authorities could visually survey their inmates through variants of the panoptic view. John Ruskin claimed that the 'greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something ... To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion' (quoted Hibbitts 1994: 257). Areas of wild, barren nature, which were once sources of terror and fear, were transformed into what Raymond Williams terms 'scenery, landscape, image, fresh air', places waiting for visual consumption by those visiting from places of industrial civilisation (1972: 160). Piers, promenades and beaches enabled the visual consumption of the sea. Beyond the cities then, the physical environment came to be understood as scenery, views, perceptual sensation and romanticised. Partly because of the writings of the romantics: 'Nature has largely to do with leisure and pleasure - tourism, spectacular entertainment, visual refreshment' (Green 1990: 6; see Macnaghten and Urry 1998: chap 6).

At the same time a 'separation of the senses' developed in the course of the nineteenth century, especially of the visual sense from touch, smell and hearing. The autonomization of sight through new constituting objects enabled the quantification and homogenization of visual experience. New objects of the visual began to circulate, including commodities, mirrors, plate-glass windows, photographs and postcards. These objects displayed a visual enchantment in which magic and spirituality were displaced by visual appearances and surface features, reflecting in the newly emergent cities, the mass of consumers passing by and narcissistically seeing themselves reflected or captured in the new visual technologies (see Slater 1995).

In this process photography has been enormously significant in democratising various kinds of human experience, particularly the mobilities of peoples and objects. As Barthes says, photography makes notable whatever is photographed (1981: 34). It also gives shape to the processes of travel so that one's journey consists of being taken from one 'good view' to capture on film, to a series of others (Urry 1990: 137-40). The objects then of cameras and films serve to constitute the nature of travel, as sites turn into sights, and have also helped to construct a twentieth century sense of what is worth going to 'sightsee' (see Crawshaw and Urry 1997). Gregory describes the 'kodakisation' of Egypt in the late nineteenth century (1998). Egypt became scripted as a place of constructed visibility, with multiple, enframed theatrical scenes set up for the edification, entertainment and visual consumption of 'European' visitors. This produced the 'new Egypt', of the Suez Canal, of 'Paris-on-the-Nile', of Thomas Cook and Sons, of a cleaned-up 'ancient Egypt', of the exotic oriental 'other' and of convenient vantage-points and viewing platforms.

Photography deploys particular aesthetics that excludes as much as it includes. It is, for example, very unusual to see postcards or tourist photographs of 'landscapes' of waste, disease, poverty, sewage and despoilation (Crawshaw and Urry 1997; Taylor, J. 1994; Parr 1995). Conceptions of landscape typically involve the notion of 'mastery' (Taylor, J. 1994: 38-9). The photographer, and then the viewer, are seen to be above and dominant over a static and subordinate landscape, which lies out beyond us inert and inviting our inspection. Such photographic practices thus demonstrate how the environment is to be viewed, dominated by humans and subject to their possessive mastery.



So far then I have talked of the dominance of the visual. However, the visual is often denigrated within discourses surrounding travel. In one sense we do live in a society of spectacle - there are many ways in which most environments have been transformed into diverse and collect-able spectacles (see Debord 1994). But simultaneously there is denigration of the mere sightseer or tourist to these often contrived environments (see Buzard 1993, on the history of those discourses organised around this tourist/traveller distinction). The person who only lets the sense of sight have free rein is ridiculed. Such sightseers are taken to be superficial in their appreciation of environments, peoples and places. Many people are often embarrassed about mere sightseeing. Sight is not seen as the noblest of the senses but as the most superficial, as getting in the way of real experiences that should involve other senses and necessitate longer periods of time in order to be immersed in the site/sight.

Wordsworth argued that the Lake District demands a different eye, one that is not threatened or frightened by the relatively wild and untamed nature. It requires 'a slow and gradual process of culture' (Wordsworth 1984: 193). Rather similarly Ruskin argued how the new sensibilities of the city undermine certain features of the imagination of artists and of their ability to wander over the mass of treasure stored in their memories (see Wheeler 1995). Particularly striking is the contrast between the painting and the photograph. The latter lacks the infinite richness and complexity of the painting. And more generally life in the nineteenth century city trained the eye to anticipate shock and hence destroyed the ability 'to attend to the infinite richness offered by art and nature alike' (cited Mallett 1995: 54; note incidentally similarities with Simmel's analysis of the blasé attitude). The city bombards the eye with advertisements and yet offers nothing to be really looked at. There is a poverty of the imagination of the city; and the starkest of contrasts between most urban buildings and the 'grace of nature'. Modern London according to Ruskin teaches the 'adoration of chaos', compared with how in the natural world the eye is in perfect repose in the midst of profusion (cited Mallett 1995: 57).

The critique of the sightseeing tourist is taken to the extreme in analysis of the 'hyper-real', those simulated designed places which have the appearance of being more 'real' than the original (Baudrillard 1981; Eco 1986). The sense of vision is reduced to a limited array of features, it is then exaggerated and it comes to dominate the other senses. Hyper-real places are characterised by surface which in no way responds to or welcomes the viewer. The sense of sight is seduced by the most immediate and visible aspects of the scene, such as the façades of Main Street in Disneyland.

3. How is it that not only people travel but also cultures travel?

I begin here with the introduction to Cora Kaplan's *Questions of Travel* (1996). Because of the location of Kaplan's extended 'family' across various continents, as well as some of it being scattered across the USA, travel was for her 'unavoidable, indisputable, and always necessary for family, love and friendship as well as work' (1996: ix). She says that she was 'born into a *culture* that took the national benefits of travel for granted' as well as presuming that 'US citizens [could] travel anywhere they pleased' (Kaplan 1996: ix). Elsewhere Prato and Trivero describe 'transport' becoming the primary activity of existence; it is no longer a metaphor of progress when it characterises how it is that households are organised (1985; and see Morris 1988: 43). If households are forever on the move then the distinction of home and away loses its organisational and ideological power. Cultures imply and necessitate diverse and extensive forms of mobility.

Also implicit in Kaplan is the idea that one is *entitled* to travel; that it should be an essential part of one's life and is a fundamental human right. Have cultures become so mobile that contemporary citizens (not just Americans!) should possess the rights to pass over and into other places and other cultures; and also do such mobile citizens have corresponding responsibilities to those places and cultures? Has the fact that in many cultures travelling appears to be 'always necessary' for family life, leisure and friendship, as well as for work and security, mean that contemporary citizenship includes the idea of rights and duties of mobility? Mobility has apparently become so much part of contemporary cultures.



I will briefly note some parallels between the travelling of peoples and of cultures. First, cultures do not exist in a pure state, hermetically sealed from each other, and possessing a clear and distinct essence. In particular, post-colonial cultures derive from and engender various kinds of mobility. Their cultures are necessarily impure, resulting from both the particular set of indigenous peoples the coloniser choose to administer as a single colonial territory; and from the flows of colonisers who passed through that 'society' over the colonial period (Gilroy 1993, on the Black Atlantic). Such cultures are impure and hybrid resulting in part from varied patterns of mobility; and as such they do not possess a culture so different from the kinds of culture that tourists consume and are produced and reproduced by virtue of their apparently different mobility.

Also the kinds of culture resulting from such mobilities are more fragmented, hybrid and disjointed than conventional accounts of say British or Dutch culture would once have recognised. These cultures, including their architectures, are impure and are being continuously re-invented. One consequence is that the 'culture' that gets produced and consumed by tourists may not be as artificial or contrived as once was thought. It may not merit the denigration that tourism and tourist architecture typically receives, since all cultures are inauthentic and contrived. Cultures get remade as a result of the flows of peoples and images across national borders, whether these involve colonialism, work-based migration, individual travel or mass tourism (Gilroy 1993).

Further, cultural participants do not simply, straightforwardly and unambiguously adopt a culture as such. Knowing a culture involves work, of memory, interpretation and reconstruction. And most significantly it often involves travel. Thus there were exceptional levels of mobility even in 'traditional India', such mobility being central to the maintenance of the diverse cultures of that very complex 'society' (Edensor 1998).

This culture-developing-and-sustaining-travel can take a number of different forms: travel to the culture's sacred sites (in the case of 'English culture', to Buckingham Palace, Anfield, Albert Hall); to the location of central written or visual texts (Westminster Abbey, the Lake District and the Lake Poets, Stratford-upon-Avon); to places where key events took place (Hastings, the Blitz, War of the Roses); to see particularly noteworthy individuals or their documentary record (the monarch, 'Shakespeare', the Beatles); and to view other cultures so as to reinforce one's own cultural attachments (rest of Europe, former colonies which demonstrate the apparently benign effects of Empire).

And in the case of many cultures, even that of well-established one such as the 'English', travel will entail the crossing of national frontiers. Indeed for some cultures the sacred places that have to be visited will be located in many different 'societies' and thus there will be even more work involved in reconstructing the sense of culture. The importance of such patterns of mobility across borders are most marked in the case of diasporic cultures that entail a reconceptualisation of the very sense of what is a social group's 'heritage'. Such diasporic cultures cannot persist without a very great deal of travel. The importance of such 'mobile practices' to the Chinese diaspora is very clearly shown by Ong and Nonini (1997).

It is because of this importance of travel to culture that Gilroy has elaborated another metaphor for thinking through the nature of travel and travel encounters. This is the metaphor of the ship that is a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion (Gilroy 1993: 4). This metaphor focuses attention on how in the development of the 'black Atlantic' culture, circulation, powerful images of the sea and the complex movements of artefacts and people (especially the slaves) were key components. Gilroy summarises the metaphor of the ship:

Ships were the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed spaces that they connected. Accordingly they need to be thought of as cultural and political units ... [ships] were ... a distinct mode of cultural production (1993: 16-7).

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