

## **Public and Private Moves**

### **Liminality and Habitus in Everyday Life**

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The present paper is a slightly re-written version of a short work commissioned by the Norwegian Council for Applied Social Research, (later fused into the Norwegian Research Council, *Norges forskningsråd*, NFR), a part of their Research program for public transport, 1991-94, now discontinued. Main reports from that project include *Can we support ourselves by driving to each other?* (1994) by the present author but above all *Trill rundt. Transport i hverdagslivet* (1999, trans. Roll all. Transportation in everyday life, Norwegian text), Dr.phil.-thesis by Olav Mjaatvedt, colleague and co-worker on the project.

#### **Radiant or Conduit?**

The first model I feel like relating to is Le Corbusier's (Jeanneret's) famous Radiant City, trying to suggest a contrast or alternative. Corbusier's city is essentially conceived as an ordered set of machines - with connotations from the period when machine production spelt Progress, period: At one "end" there is a home or

Dwelling Machine (*machine à habiter*), connected by as if spokes of a wheel, or rays of a sun, that is by the Transportation Machines of tubes, motorways, and motorcars, to the opposite "end" of central workshops and factories, or Machine-Making Machines. We're invited to see ourselves as bright little pulses of radiant light flashing happily to and fro in a system as brilliant and life-engendering as the sun itself. "Air, light, and sound for everybody", was one of le Corbusier's slogans - obviously at a time where "air" was not polluted, "sound" not noise, and "light" not threatening skin cancer.

My alternative model departs from the fact that present-day spokes or rays would seem to be as if closed or walled-in. Cities are moving and bustling more than ever, but more nearly in closed, inaccessible conduits (cf. my unpublished paper "The conduit city", Oslo 1990; *rørgatebyen* being a Norwegian equivalent).

This is obvious in the case of public transport, especially in the form of tube rides. But a little reflection will make us realise that a private-car motorway trip, despite giving more of a view, gives more of isolation as well: Individual bits of tube, as if cut up and equipped each with its own wheel quartet, producing a movement, true but of cacophonous (from Gk. *kakos*, evil) music. Walled-in on our ways we are, then, and at each end in sort of a "Non-Foucaultian Space", what I call the Ana-Panoptikon: In most dwellings, and many workshops (individual office work being only one example), we may feel certain that we can not be watched. Thus, for Foucault-Bentham's famous Panoptikon where "you may be watched at any moment without ever knowing when" we may substitute "rest assured that no one can see, hear or reach you, here" - a comfort, true until it starts to feel like an isolation, turned from "sweet solitariness" into "a place of mourning" (Dowland).

A nearly perfectly closed, or conduit, life results - one where surprises, chance encounters etc. are exceedingly rare: We all go our ways and rarely meet other than a few, only too familiar regulars. The

French have their saying *boulot, métro, dodo*, or "job, tube, cubby" in rough translation, a participants' unremitting quip. The supermarket, even for rush-hour shoppers, is only an apparent exception: Lots of others, yes but hardly one real role counterpart, most often only a short stint at the checkout facing the cashier or gate-keeper (cf. my paper "Super Market", Sosiologisk årbok 1996.1, Oslo). Miller's idea of "making love in supermarkets" (*A theory of shopping*, 1998) complements, it does not contradict that view. For according to Miller everyday shoppers keep thinking about how to best care for their families - not present during the shopping, though, and hence compensating for "the loss of face in focus".

## Conduits and Thresholds

Then, on second thought, I began to dislike aspects of this alternative, the conduit model: Reasonably well founded but nevertheless rather too gloomy, too much of a dystopia, just another near-doomsday view, and who'll listen to that ? Not that I discard it. I do maintain that the conduit model captures important aspects of its field admirably, enhancing notably the contrast to Corbusier, and thus widening the span or range of the field, allowing space for yet other models.

Suggesting another such myself, thanks are due to my students who drew my attention to the work of British anthropologist Victor Turner, more precisely his concept of *liminality*. Unrelated to psychological uses, Turner's originated as a generalisation of van Gennep's rites of passage-concept - a classic theme in anthropology, "the coming of age", marriage, funeral etc. and their celebrations. Widening the concept to less serene, festive or exceptional occasions, Turner still makes as a main point that rite-, stage-, or threshold-passing spells danger, anguish and hence that *community* tends to result as a cognitive defence: Facing uncertainty, group integration will increase - the while: Until the threshold's passed, at least, those braving the

pass will stick together.

I find little use for this latter, or communality part of Turner's theory but very much more for the rest, taking the liberty of generalising still further on it: Suitably stretched, contemporary city (or built environment) life may be seen as if teeming with little liminal zones, borders, or thresholds. A home, for instance, is divided in rooms by doors, each of them in its (most often) modest little way a limit or liminal zone (cf. Huxley's "nausea of the threshold" - we routinely assume but cannot really know what's meeting us on the other side). Most of these of course are not very significant, almost sub-liminal, or routinised out of all conscious action or reflection. Among the more nearly major limes are I suggest the bedside - the getting in and out of bed, sleep, love etc. - and of course, the main entrance door; arriving in and leaving one's home - an operation of considerable fuss even for many routine users.

Featherstone's use of liminal space in *Consumer culture and postmodernism* (1991) is distinct save for the choice of term: He thinks of liminality as something, or rather somewhere, exceptional: A carnival, brothel, hole-in-the-wall etc.; similar to Foucault's heterotopies (*Sosiologisk årbok* 1999.2), not mentioned by Featherstone. Here, something much less dramatic, rare or foreign is intended. We focus instead of little, routinised changes of everyday lives, an effort to de-routinise routine looking for sub-liminal, half forgotten sub-dramas, or micro-liminalities.

Some might be reluctant to accept or even try out or think through such a model. They might counter for example that passing in and out of one's dwelling, or car, or tram, is such a completely routine commonplace that they hardly notice the change, let alone feel any anguish, or transcending. I concede that my reading of Turner needs some modification, lest some think that all passing of limes produce fear, insecurity - and nothing else. Of course, finding oneself for the first time in a completely new place may induce pleasure, too - an

opportunity for unknown but welcome adventures: "Ah - Singapore, finally, dream come true !". Or an everyday version, pausing on your steps: "Ah - perfect day for doing the work I love" (some do, sometimes).

There is a limit, though, to the amount of change and not-knowing most of us are ready to accept without feeling some distress. Doubters are invited to perform a mental experiment, a re-run of your first visit by private car to a foreign city. Cities certainly are less than totally dissimilar but still, enough so as to produce some discomfort, and fairly regularly some frustration and aggression, too - besides, of course some adventurousness or happy expectations. But at the moment of first entry, you'll be faced with the tasks of finding your way to some known or unknown fixed point, typically a sight, a friend's house, a specific or just any hotel/restaurant etc. Your attention is claimed simultaneously at the wheel, on the street scene outside, on the city map - or oral advice - you must try to correlate each to each other.

This is micro-liminality in its most authentic, unvarnished (though not its most threatening) state: knowing not what's around any next corner. There may be landmarks but which is which? Even the famed Guide Michelin has only city maps, no vertical complements or profiles, a feature well-known to Norwegian off-coast fishermen, for whom regional handbooks of landsighting profiles with bearings indicated have been published. But returning to you and your car: Anyhow, you'd be faced with the task of constantly comparing map or profile to real but limited first view, all the while being pressed on to constant driving by native city traffic, possibly hooting and bleating at you, bloody hick that you act presently. A rare person it is indeed to keep his/her perfect calm under such circumstances.

There is such a thing as liminality, then, and degrees of it, strongly or less strongly felt.

Whether coupled with or independent of the conduit model, this yields a picture of contemporary everyday life as a continuing series of border-passings, one micro-liminal zone constantly coming after another: Bed, kitchen, entrance, stairs, outside, road, parking lot and car (or station, tram, bus, or tube), street, workshop etc. etc., finally in reverse order (as any good fugue). The Liminal City, then, or the city of a myriad borders.

When coupled with the conduit model, it becomes tube-nets with frequent valves, or relays/switches, in them.

Equipped, now, with these sets of concepts, we're in a position to state what I call the "liminality theorem":

Mass private car use tends to postpone, reduce or even abolish much of liminal behaviour in present society. It may even tend to blunt or atrophy the users' liminality-tackling sets of behaviours.

Quite a mouthful, some would say but rather well founded too once you think of it. The home entrance or main door is a major liminal post or zone; in-doors versus out-of-doors being a very notable and powerful contrast, despite all our routinising of it. Now if I go on driving a car immediately after leaving my gate, the contrast or liminality is thereby blanded, postponed, or less pronounced. An exit immediately followed by an entry - in "a room of your own" even if rolling - is obviously a reduced contrast; cars being consciously designed to suggest a cozy, domestic *accueil*, *Empfang* or entry.

For further substantiation I must draw here briefly on my *Can we support ourselves by driving to each other?* report (cf. above): I suggest a new functional unit of present-day society called if you

please, "skill on the spot"<sup>1</sup>, i.e. a unit combining home, transportation, and workplace. In an economists terms, it might be labour's reproductive, distributive, and productive phases respectively, viewed together as one single unit or process. Now, where in such a process does one's private car(s) belong ? A centerpiece, obviously but closest to work, or to home?

That depends. For those of us who drive company cars or the like - a minister, say, or a plumber - the car is more nearly a continuation of the workshop. But for most of us it's rather the other way around: Our cars are continuations of our homes, a mobile shell of privateness which we can bring along on the road to our jobs and other business.

Hence further, what I call the shortest possible definition of present-day private cars: They are mobile extensions of our homes. More precisely, since that's where in the homes they most nearly fit in:

A car is an entrance hall on wheels, equipped with a two-row seating group.

This incidentally accounts well for a novelty of latter years, the parking house, the in-door multi-storey car-park, a setting notable for its gloom and desolation even if new and in perfect repair; a perfect scene for crime-movie drug-dealing, or the final shootout: It is in essence a meta- or super-entrance hall, i.e. an entrance hall admitting only rolling entrance halls. Who'd want a house consisting of nothing but entrance halls ? And yet it is here, and in its way of considerably use.

The study of liminality in transportation is not only of theoretical interest. When linked to architecture, or to public relations work, it

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<sup>1</sup> Its obvious counterpart "care as you need it" must be left out here awaiting future discussion; my paper Renaissance for Gemeinschaft ? will go parts of the way for a start.

may suggest different ways of constructing in fact, or representing in texts or pictures, the different liminal fields or posts of our means of transportation. This suggests promising ways of linking basic research to practical product or field development.

Recently, after a brief discussion with Gothenburg colleague Oscar Juhlin, I have come close to reconsidering the liminality theorem, or at least to rephrasing it. Among Juhlin's well-established points is the fact that car-drivers are social actors too, even intensely so. And, as we agree, they/we transcend micro-limes, though while inside their/our cars, as much if not more than in pedestrian or indoor life. - My reply: As social, possibly yes, yet definitely a *distinct type* of social behaviour. Hence, even if both teach us lesson of how to tackle the transcending of (micro-)limes, the car-drivers' type may sharpen our capacity for dealing with traffic, other cars and their dimly seen drivers, yet tend to blunt or atrophy - the while - our capacity for dealing with crowds small or large: numerous, anonymous others, in their role as present, physical persons, on a tram or a sidewalk, say. Cars are made to relieve you of that. Again, "sweet solitarinesse" may turn into if not mourning, then at least clumsyness, shyness, and discomfort in actual face-to-face - as very distinct from windscreen to windscreen - social contacts.

## **Habitus and transcendence**

We owe the habitus concept as presently used to Pierre Bourdieu - "that promising new red claret vintage" in colleague Walter Korpi's words. The term derives originally from Latin *habeo, habere* - to have, keep or hold; hence habitus as participle-noun would mean having had, kept or held, or rather having been had, kept or held. Medieval uses apart, in present sociological use habitus denotes conducts which are routinised and internalised to an extent where they become as if an inextricable part of the actor's body - closely kept or



even keeping. We can see from the way a person carries himself, his bodily attitude, costume, props etc. whether for example (s)he is a worker or an office worker, rich or not so rich, confident or not etc.

Now, every evidence would suggest that most forms of our transport behaviours are in-corpore-ated in the manner suggested by the habitus concept. Both the habitual motorist and the tram-passenger, say, gets his/her habits under their skins, so to say, feeling discomfort should an occasional change of means of transport come about: car out of order, bus not coming. A slight but discernable feeling of hurt, of near-bodily deprivation, is not at all uncommon.

There might be some doubt whether transport behaviours patterns are separate, independent habitus<sup>2</sup> or not: Perhaps rather aspects of other, more general habitus; "new middle class", say of "affluent worker" etc. But that need not concern us here. Aspect or total, transport behaviours are to a very large extent habitual, incorporated, habitus, or fragments thereof.

Now further, habitus are by definition and acquisition difficult to change - in-grown habits, behaviour patterns bodily appropriated. People are proverbial for trying to flay their fox before catching him - but if acting the fox role themselves? How do you go about changing your own skin? Can we suggest models for how habitus change ?

Bourdieu offers but little help, insisting that habitus may and indeed should change but stressing most often their continuity. Extending on him then, we might suggest some different patterns of possible habitus, or habitus component, change:

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<sup>2</sup> The term is not standard English, I suggest following Latin grammar, in which habitus is both singular and plural; e.g. a worker's habitus, the habitus of different life-style patterns.

(1) The Course, or manifest conscious effort model, as in slimming or stop-smoking, or -drinking, courses. This involves fairly motivated actors trying to quit habits which they recognise as being bad for them but still hard to drop.

(2) The contesting public opinion drives model, where opposing factions organise on an issue; abortion say, or race, or religion. This too involves prolonged efforts, and struggles of varying forms and intensities - from profiling campaigns, election drives, to thirty years' wars say.

(3) The total conversion, or "seeing the light", "getting religion" model, where one actor typically stops short, after some decisive experience. In more secular terms, Bourdieu himself writes in the introduction to *Sur la télévision* (1996) that his argument is not meant as a charge or an attack on journalists but as tools for the work for those among them who want television to be an instrument for a more direct democracy, not deteriorating into a medium for symbolic oppression. So perhaps, critical reflexion rather than total conversion.

(4) Its collective counterpart, "the emperor's new clothes" model, where a larger group or the general public changes its view after some sort of crucial incident. The latter might be thought rare but instances of major importance still do occur, the events of 1989-91 in Eastern Europe being an obvious and much-commented on case. Less portentous but more closely studied is for example Patrick Dunleavy's thesis on the end of high-rise dwelling construction in Britain, which took place, it seems, in a matter of months in 1971 (cf. my review (Norw. text) "The error next time" in *Arkitektnytt* 1985).

Grouped together types 1-2 might be called "the hard, patient work change patterns", whereas types 3-4, "the abrupt change pattern", involves short-term conversion or transcending. The types occasionally do combine too - hard work giving way to conversions, for instance, or conversions fading or relapsing into the status quo

ante. In any case, studies of the patterns and processes currently going on in the various sectors of the transportation field, should provide suggestions bearing on strategies for all parties involved.

## **Final suggestions**

My concern in this brief paper has been with continuing concept development in sociological transportation research, focusing mainly on the liminality and habitus concepts. Before I end, I add some scant comments on other, as yet less general and final-form concepts which may yet be promises of tomorrow:

*Equivocality:* We said above that Mass Motoring Mobility does spell progress, some if not all of the way. At present however I think many will agree that displeasures and problems of motoring have gained attention. The Car is no longer our main symbol of progress, pure and simple. The entire phenomenon, the Car Culture, has to a notable extent become equivocal for all of us, all users. There are signs of change, from "I want my car in bed", to perhaps even "Cars ? not in our road, not inside my garden gate". The nuisance produced by the tremendously increasing numbers of cars of others, is presently being experienced by all, so that it's difficult to reject all feelings that perhaps even my own driving is part of the problem - of others, and myself. "Free riding", briefly, is becoming a hardly tenable position. The Car, our prized pride and possession, has become as if stained, equivocal, a problem, not progress like it was.

This derives, in sociological analysis, from the fact that the contesting interest groups, or independent opposing roles view, is becoming untenable. We're faced with role aspects rather, or the internalisation of conflict: we're all simultaneously or consecutively motorists, and pedestrians, and shoppers, and employees, and dwellers wanting quiet surroundings, etc. The conflicting interests, the pleasures and

discomforts, are to be found within each and every one of us, today's motoring every-men and -women.

*Man-Expanding Cars:* In a very literal sense, general car use does increase our carrying capacities. The moment it can be taken for granted that most shopping is done by motorists, the sellers can count on selling more, bulkier and weightier merchandise more easily than before. For instance: Woody Allen's surf-board in a Mall is a nuisance carrying around and he forgets it repeatedly. But in the end he does bring it home - in the family car. A delivery service of the sellers' would have had to take care of that only a decade ago. Second instance: Take note the next time you do some shopping without your car: How much can you really carry comfortably, for how long, in a bag ? 10 pound's a load and 20 a big bother. Chances are you either buy less, this once, or promise yourself to bring the car a next time, collecting the rest.

In general then: Car use boosts shopping volume. Finding ways around that main obstacle is a major issue to be tackled before Mass Motoring volume can really be expected to decrease: New forms of delivery services ? Or short-term car rentals ? Or tailor-made mini-bus, or maxi-taxi services ? All are being tried, with yet no clear winners.

*Motorists' philosophies:* In my possession are two books, one called *Cent voitures et sans regrets*, the other *Autos Graphie*. The daily and popular press is teeming with expanded and brief versions of car-users DIY-philosophies, offering a wealth of material for description and analysis, awaiting professional analysis: How does the average motorist construct his social world ? How might (s)he de- and re-construct it, if suitably induced ? Habitus - an inside view, in constancy and change.

Service distributions systems compared: A few years ago so-called "collective consumption" was a keyword of some renown in

sociology, later drowned in the wave of Thatcherism-Reaganism-Yuppieism and generally, peaking prosperity. With both the peak and some of these ideologies now past there might be a chance for this keyword's resurfacing. I think much could be gained, in theory and practice, from comparing the fairly abstract, general properties of such systems. A simple case in point: A water supply service provides some information simultaneously with its service, at each user's initiative: The moment you turn the tap, the water is there (or missing if out of order); the service and the information is one and the same. Whereas a tram system provides only at best a time-table for enquiring passengers. The real service and information passes only at intervals. For tram-drivers this lack has been remedied years ago, walkie-talkie or rather intercom systems are in general use. But for the public, passengers impatiently waiting at their stations, no: When will a loudspeaker, perhaps even intercom system arrive here, relieving us from waiting in the blue in the event of delays, derailings etc. Much more convenient than sending a car messenger around the net !

*Locomotive of the next Kondratieff:* Mass motoring certainly was among the main locomotives of the last Kondratieff, or the 40-60-year business cycle now slumping. If or when a new rise starts, I think it's not likely to have increased car production as a main force. True there may be untapped markets - Eastern Europe, South Asia - but as yet with no or little effective demand. More of a chance then for a TGV-ICE, or superfast trains, drive, which takes massive investment. A real locomotive "locomotive" then.

*Man-Environment concepts:* Behind many if not all these main and auxiliary concepts lie some ideas of conceptualising the interrelations between Man and his (mostly) Built or Processed Environment. One major divide is that between Actor-Directed vs. Process- or Product-Directed interrelations. I draw now for an ultimate time on the preceding report ("Can we ... ?", cf. above), expanding first on the classic view that Man is a Political Animal, i.e. an interdependent, a social animal. If so, then Man's numerous inventions, his Products or

Artefacts should be viewed as Political too, or more precisely, as social, interdependent, interrelated: Political things. For example, if two smiths cooperate in making a knife, or two journalists on a joint story, the product resulting will appear, visibly, present but mainly passive between them. The actors act and direct, their product result or is directed. As an opposing type consider Chaplin on the Modern Times assembly line: No co-actor and an absent or distant final product. Tools and machines has more or less taken over the active, forming and directing actor roles, with the human worker reduced to an operator, just another input, a vehicle run by the line. A nearly 180° turn, from Actor- to Process-directed work. Motorway driving most often is of the second, the process-directed type: We may believe otherwise but in fact it's the car, road, and traffic which decides where we turn, more than we, the drivers (cf. chap 7 in my *Other-Wise* 1997)

Not only roads and motorways but much of service-producing infrastructure, architecture and built environment have aspects of both types, actor - and process-directed. Typically, some activities are literally and purposely ruled out or nearly, entry/exit not by doors e.g. Still there tends to remain options for non-directed, even surprise or innovative action, somewhat modifying the directions of processes or artefact systems. Rob Shields' work *Places on the margin*, Routledge 1991 - with later developments in his and other's journal *Space & Culture* - and on shopping malls, all offer interesting suggestions, promising for a working-through of further examples, from transportation as well as from illuminative contrasting fields.