

1. Opinions

SOMEWHERE, SOFIA COPPOLA - THE CAR AS A SOCIAL MASK

September 2013

Hanja Maksim

We have chosen the film *Somewhere* not only for the variety of mobility-related concepts it addresses, but also for the fact that it explores and illustrates two major aspects of this domain that are central to the current interests in the social sciences in a particularly rich and relevant way: mobility as social change, and the question of speed as associated with the myth of the automobile, and its opposite — the slow.

“Cleo, I’m sorry I haven’t been there.”

Sofia Coppola, the daughter of Francis Ford Coppola, has directed *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Marie-Antoinette* (2006), *Somewhere* (2010) and most recently *The Bling Ring* (2013). Her films are characterized by recurring issues with regard to youth and adolescence, the transition to adulthood, and personal growth as a process driven either by sudden self-awareness or the questioning of protagonists. The themes addressed in her work aim to make us identify with the characters, their pasts and their (re)construction. *“I believe it’s a feeling we can all identify with: choosing who we want to be”*, Sofia Coppola on *Somewhere*.

Somewhere, film, United States, 2010, 93 minutes.



The film tells the story of a Hollywood actor whose daily life is gradually becoming routine and whose excesses are characteristic of his milieu. Johnny juggles casting calls, partying (alcohol, drugs and sexual exploits), his apartment in the legendary Chateau Marmont residence and his Ferrari. His social life, though quantitatively rich, is qualitatively nonexistent. This slow road to decadence and a daily life increasingly devoid of meaning is suddenly interrupted by the appearance of his daughter, for whom he unwittingly becomes responsible, instantly confronting him with a new role—that of father. Adapting to this new (and imposed) role takes time. It is the process of Johnny's social change that plays out in *Somewhere*.

Video

Social change at the heart of the plot:

In Coppola's film, the car is central to the plot because it plays a role; like the two main actors, it participates in the action, though itself not the focus of the film (which, as we know, is the instant social change Johnny is forced to undergo when his 11-year old daughter appears in his life). His realization of the need to make this change takes place in a strange scene in which he does doughnuts in his Ferrari. The long duration of this scene, which to the audience seems interminable, is confusing but in fact heralds the film's rhythm — a kind of warning device that invites us to focus on the character's emotions and feelings rather than the action, which is reduced to a strict minimum. The film ends with Johnny escorting his daughter back: the landscape again becomes barren, solitude reappears on the horizon and the urban setting vanishes. But the Ferrari's path this time is straight. His transformation is complete when, in the final scene, he abandons his car and continues on foot.

Abandoning his most prized possession - his status symbol - is also a way of abandoning this social mask he hid behind to save face during his gradual decline, which was interrupted by the sudden appearance of his daughter. In the final scene he no longer needs his car, which has become demystified: the car did not set him free...but its abandonment does. The scenes alternate between the protagonist's loneliness when playing the role of actor (even though he is surrounded by people) and the slow but solid construction of a relationship with his daughter. Driving in circles is thus an expression of his social mobility reduced to nothingness — a lifestyle that is difficult to break free of. For Johnny, the car serves two purposes: it is both a mark of his vertical mobility (to reach an enviable social status) and also a means of achieving horizontal mobility.

Social mobility * Exploring mobility involves taking a comprehensive approach to the phenomenon and considering its social and spatial expressions. * In the 1920s, with the work of Sorokin and the Chicago School, mobility was defined in terms of change and movement in physical space. * Like the works of Michel Bassand, mobility can be defined as all movement involving a change in the state of the actor or system concerned. By this definition, mobility has both spatial and social qualities, thus restoring its richness. (Mobile Lives Forum – Lexicon – Mobility, by Vincent Kaufmann). *Horizontal and vertical mobility* * In 1927, in his book *Social Mobility*, Sorokin defined vertical mobility as involving a change of position (upward or downward) on the socio-professional ladder, and horizontal mobility as referring to a change of status or category that involves no change in position on the social scale (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - Mobility, by Vincent Kaufmann: <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/mobilite-446>).

Mobility and immobility:

Even during the driving scenes, the script and plot still seem slow, possibly because the role change the actor undergoes is a process whose progress must be palpable. Many such slow scenes succeed one another and are expressed in different ways (i.e. the stopping or slowing of movement, conversations or noise). The stillness that prevails in these moments is also interrupted by the movement of the Ferrari. The music however (when there is any) is very slow and dialogue limited. The car - the symbol of speed - exists here in a slow environment. By contrast, Johnny's final trip happens quickly, and we the viewer change our point of view as we follow him.

Immobility and sedentarity * Mobility cannot be removed from its opposite — namely, the notion of immobility. It is relational, paradoxical, and thus always linked to its opposite: immobility (Albertsen and Diken, 2001; Beckmann, 2004). * The mobility of some usually relies on the immobility of others (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). * There is no acceleration without slowing down, no "liquification" without "solidification" (Bauman, 2000). * Thinking about mobility and its opposite, immobility, also means considering the entire system for managing places and their arrangement (Lévy, 2004; Larsen et al., 2006). * Sedentarity is the effect of emphasizing stability and social and spatial anchoring. In contemporary Western societies, sedentarity is a means of avoiding social and spatial change (Mobile Lives Forum – Lexicon – Sedentarity, by Vincent Kaufmann).

"The car as a tool for saving face":

If sociologists like Le Breton often use this expression, it is because the automobile allows us to maintain the appearance of a particular social status when other aspects of daily life deteriorate. Because the car may be the weapon of the poor, car owners do their best to maintain their vehicles at all costs. In *Somewhere*, Johnny's gradual fall is interrupted at regular intervals by the scenes of car mobility. He uses his sports car as a steadfast reflection of his lifestyle, a refuge and a symbol of his own world—all topics that have mobilized the scientific literature. Here, the car is never prevented from playing this role, as territories are defined by their optimal hospitality for this mode in particular.

The car as a social norm * The car is a social norm and, like all norms, it produces 'deviants.' While it is a tool of social distinction, one of the distinctive features of poverty is *not* having one, and thus it acts as a powerful social determinant. Having a car is a way of warding off exclusion and "saving face" (Le Breton, 2005). * The initial representation of the car during its democratization was that of the bourgeois dream of personal autonomy, and with it, the more the outside world is excluded, the more this dream seems to come true (Bull, 2004). *The car as a representation of the individual's inner world* * The car is the reflection of a lifestyle - an extension of the self - and is easily anthropomorphized: it is a place of emotion, a secure habitat, a domestic bubble (Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2007; Löfgren, 2008). *A territory's hosting potential/receptiveness* * Every territory has a specific field of possibilities to accommodate the projects of individual and collective actors. This is what we call an area's potential receptiveness (Mobile Lives Forum – Lexicon – An area's potential receptiveness, by Vincent Kaufmann).

The car as a non-human actor:

The combination of the features of a sports car with that of a human actor reflects a specific type of social being based on which certain authors have been able to identify the building blocks of a form of hybridity or, going one step further, the first part of the Latourian concept of non-human actors in travel and in the plot action. Therefore, as a permanent reflection of the privileged, mundane lifestyle of its owner, it also has an impact on the plot action, made all the more interesting by the fact that it is not the subject or purpose of the film. Finally, it also provides a support for the emotions of its owner, as well as his process of social change. Symbolically, we understand that this process ends when Johnny voices his regret at having been absent as a father. It is for this reason that he abandons his car and continues on foot.

The car as a social being

* From the connection between a car and driver is born a social being. It is a hybrid blend of human skill and human will that is associated with cars, roads or constructions, which lead to the notion of "car-driver" (Dant, 2004; Thrift, 2005).

The car as a non-human actor in travel

* The car is a non-human actor in that it is also involved in the action and has an impact on it (Latour, in: Dant, 2004).

What the film brings to the research: wandering and vain mobility:

Somewhere could potentially inspire research by its approach to individual mobility, which is rarely addressed in the research as it is here — in the form of wandering. It differs from strolling, walking or mobilities of discovery, which have no particular destination, by not only the absence of a destination altogether, but also an absence of meaning. Johnny lives this "bad mobile life" with great intensity, punctuated by circular, repetitive, frequent, polluting trips by car and plane for casting calls that, for him, have neither form nor meaning. However, and although the actor is unaware of it, this movement is rich in that it is an essential part of the long, slow process of social change that takes place over the course of the film. While the scientific literature emphasizes the obsolescence of the idea that travel is limited to getting from point A to point B, focusing increasingly on the activities and experiences that take place between the two, it does not cease just because of the latter's absence.

Strolling

* The stroller is able to experience the essence of a place and to take his or her time in doing so in order to focus on the pleasure of traveling, discovery and recreation (Montulet, 1998; Urry, 2007; Adey, 2010).

References :

Adey P. (2010), *Mobility*. Oxon: Routledge.

Albertsen N. & Diken B. (2001), *Mobility, Justification, and the City*. Department of Sociology, Lancaster University.

Bauman Z. (2000), *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beckmann J. (2004), *Mobility and Safety*. Theory, Culture & Society, Vol. 21, N° 4-5, 81-100 (2004).

Boltanski L., Chiapello E. (1999), *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* . Paris : Gallimard.

Bull M. (2004), *Automobility and the Power of Sound*. Theory, Culture & Society, Vol. 21, N°. 4-5, 243-259.

Dant T. (2004), *The Driver-Car*. Theory, Culture & Society, Vol. 21, No. 4-5, 61-79 (2004).

Larsen J., Urry J., Axhausen K. (2006), *Social networks and future mobilities* . Lancaster University, IVT, ETH.

Le Breton E. (2005), *Bouger pour s'en sortir. Mobilité quotidienne et intégration sociale* . Paris : Armand Colin.

Lévy J. (2004), *Modèle de mobilité, modèle d'urbanité*. In : Allemand et al., 'Les sens du mouvement', Paris : Belin.

Löfgren, O. (2008), *Motion and Emotion: Learning to be a Railway Traveller* . Mobilities, 3:3, 331-351.

Montulet B. (1998), *Les enjeux spatio-temporels du social* . Paris: L'Harmattan.

Sheller M. (2004), *Automotive Emotions – Feeling the car* . Theory, Culture & Society, Vol. 21, N° 4-5, 221-242.

Thrift N. (2005), *Driving in the City*. In: Featherstone M. et al., 'Automobilities', London : Sage.

Urry J. (2007), *Mobilities*. Oxford : Polity Press.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Other publications



Did Covid cause public transport to grind to a halt?

Annelise Avril, David Henny





Demobility. Back to the roots

Bruno Marzloff



Time, leisure and mobility

Benjamin Pradel

1 <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/mobilite-446>

2 <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/sedentarite-454>

3 <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/potentiel-daccueil-dun-territoire-554>