

Step by step : epilogue

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STEP BY STEP (EPILOGUE)

Christophe Girot

Standing on our hind legs and walking about has distinguished us from other earthly creatures throughout history, so what more is there to add to that? For a long time, walking was the only way to go for men and women on the move; from the earliest nomadic times in Africa thousands of years ago up to the dawn of industrialization, entire regions and continents were crossed, settled, and dwelled upon step by step. Long before that fateful turnaround in the age of industrialization, walking encompassed more than just human motion, it was also understood as an act of fate and choice. The notion of choice of path can be traced back to most early literature—from the epic of Gilgamesh, to the Bible and the Zhuang Zhou. Through pilgrimages in the Middle Ages, the way became the manifestation of a destiny chosen collectively, the mirror of an unfailing trust in God and the world. In the ritual pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela to pray on the tomb of the Apostle James, or in the Hajj to reach the holy Kaaba in Mecca, the shared path became the tangible proof of a collective faith.

When the Italian poet Petrarca ascended Mount Ventoux¹ in Provence of his own accord on April 23, 1336, he stoically claimed to be the first man since Antiquity to have climbed that mountain for a view (what a jerk!). On that day, Petrarca decided to set aside one thousand years of Christian dogma in just a few strides, by simply affirming his own ontology towards the world. In doing so, he revived a form of monism that would become one of the founding blocks of Renaissance thinking. Although he had brought along with him the book *Confessions* by Saint Augustine, it remained closed as he contemplated his boundless unity with the world. Through the monism that Petrarca professed, humanism was born, pointing towards an entirely new form of individuation, where the walking subject himself became the principal protagonist of a situation.

The myth of the enlightened walker became a recurrent theme with Romanticism. When Jean-Jacques Rousseau left the unfinished

¹ Francesco Petrarca, “The Ascent of Mount Ventoux,” in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. Ernst Cassirer et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

manuscript of *Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*² at the moment of his death in 1778, the promenade expressed for him a new level of self-cleansing introspection. His love of walking was related to a strong desire to escape from the scorn of society, to recover a more humble and balanced form of humanity through a pronounced admiration of nature. However, the theme of the promenade evolved rather differently throughout the following century, as it came to embody the kinesthetic experience of the nineteenth century city. The prose of Charles Baudelaire describes the hustle and bustle of Paris street culture in the Second Empire, through the eyes of the *flâneur*.³ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a *flâneur* is “a man who saunters around observing society.” In this instance, the promenade is no longer understood as a solitary act of melancholy in nature as expressed by Rousseau, but an active strolling with the urban crowd and observing, in which elegance and aesthetic discrimination become the paradigm of appreciation. Almost a century later at the Frankfurt School, the young Walter Benjamin revived the myth of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* in a vast allegoric fresco of Parisian life.⁴ Sauntering was understood as a way of seeing, reveling in, and understanding the epoch as a great transformer of human destiny. It is precisely the epistemological path borrowed by Benjamin—through the theme of the nineteenth-century *flâneur*—that works as a backdrop and helps him sharpen his criticism of contemporary modernity and capitalism. By juxtaposing the subjective notions of the *flâneur* with more universal notions about the modern city, Benjamin introduces the notion of relativity in the way a place is experienced.

In the early 1970s the Swiss sociologist Lucius Burckhardt established his “Spaziergangswissenschaft” (science of walking), which was meant to revolutionize our view of the city, question norms, and embrace an alternative political agenda. His many followers in Basel and elsewhere—including the Stalker Group in Italy—still profess

2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*, ed. Samuel S. de Sacy, Vol. 186. *Classique, Folio* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

3 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (originally published in *Le Figaro*, 1863; Reprint;

New York: Da Capo Press, 1964).

4 Walter Benjamin, “M [Der Flâneur],” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991), 524–69.

with great seriousness this approach to walking and commenting on the production of urban space. At the same time in history, and not without a tinge of irony, a bowler-hatted John Cleese invented the satirical Ministry of Silly Walks in a BBC program entitled *Monty Python's Flying Circus*.⁵ For John Cleese, the art of the walk itself mattered more than the path that was chosen. Thus “silly” walking became a strong moment of self-reflection and self-ridicule to the point of absurdity depending on the mood you were in. As anecdotic as the Silly Walks sketch may have been in the early 1970s, it may actually prove in hindsight to be far more symptomatic of our times than one may think.

What has happened to the meaning of walking since Petrarca's monist bravado on the Mont Ventoux? Medieval pedestrian scenes have disappeared from our view and most walkers have been replaced with standing or seated people moving fast in packed noisy machines. What is left of the modern walker? Some have been relegated to the gym where assiduous exercises await them on the treadmill. Countless “silly” walkers stand on treadmills in the gym, sweating it out, fulfilling step by step their daily calorie requirements. On and off their treadmills, ears plugged with earphones and eyes riveted on touch screens have come to replace the normal gaze of the *promeneur*. The irony is that we have become so immobile in this age of great mobility, that we now need these walking machines to insure our daily fitness requirements. As with John Cleese's comedy act, the subject is no longer the path itself, but the number of miles one performs each day dissected step by step, which Smartphones remind you of each day regardless of place. As if a large part of the walk itself had lost its substance, meaning, and purpose. Walking is now often devoid of context and just seems correlated to each individual's fitness record. The walk—or absence thereof—has become a statement about our present condition, a lens through which one immediately sees the absurdity we have generated. There are even website forums discussing in all earnestness the advantages of “outdoor” walking versus the fitness treadmill. The next logical

5 “Face the Press (or: Dinsdale),” Episode 14, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Directed by Ian MacNaughton

and John Howard Davies. Written by Monty Python. BBC, September 15, 1970.

step would be for us to evolve as “stepless” human beings, like the electric monopods that we see rolling through our cities each day.

We experience more of a disconnect today, between the way we see, move, and walk around the world with or without looking. At the turn of the millennium, I wrote a theoretical piece about “Movism,”⁶ in which I argued that a change in landscape perception had occurred through the accelerated motion of the subject in the twentieth century. Yet today the question of the subject is of another order and should therefore be addressed differently. By purporting that a disconnect in fact exists between our feet and our head, we should question more what we see through our feet. Let us jump off the treadmill to engage in silly or aimless walks. This would get us back on the path, and maybe even help us to stand up again step by step on our hind legs and take a look at the world we have made...

⁶ Christophe Girot, “Movism,” in *Cadrages I. The Active Gaze*, eds. Christophe Girot and Marc Schwarz (Zürich: gta Verlag, 2002).