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PLACES**

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Walking, Cadence and Urban Rhythms

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Abstract

This paper is the written version of a talk on the relationship between the cadence of walking and the rhythms of music, speech and thought. It is an effort to think through the phenomenological experience of walking and the ways that this experience is afforded by urban life and reflected in culture. In doing so, the paper offers a caution against the celebration of transhuman speed, while advocating for both social research and urban design that resonate with the rhythmic cadences of walking.

Introduction

This paper is an effort to explore the connection between thinking and walking, with a particular focus on the rhythm of walking. From monastic prayer walks to Aristotle in his agora, through transcendent aboriginal 'walkabouts' and into twenty-first century experiments in 'mobile methods', the act of walking has repeatedly been taken up as a means to exploring existential questions. In both Eastern philosophy's Buddhist meditation walks (*kinhin*) and their Western counterparts (see, for instance Rousseau, [1782] 2011; Nietzsche, [1908] 2009) entreaties to walk present

tags

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pedestrian motion as a route to enlightening introspection. Indeed, the philosophers clearly have a point. Many of us, in fact, when faced with a particularly stressful problem or the need for a creative solution, have stumbled upon the act of pacing as a means to locating a 'way out'. Pacing back and forth is a way of moving both through space, but also through one's own thoughts; connecting disparate ideas through motion. This works in terms of cohering images and narratives in one's own imagination, but also as a method for communicating ideas and stories to others.

The association between walking and the introspective pursuit of knowledge typified both philosophical and literary writing on walking for centuries. It is really only during the last century however, with the emergence of the modern city, that 'walking scholarship' developed a more 'outward' facing agenda. Typified by the *flânerie* of Walter Benjamin (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999) and, later, Michel de Certeau (1988), walking was re-framed as a quasi-political practice for both understanding and intervening in the relationship between modernity and the individual. Particularly in critical urbanism, walking was re-evaluated, not for what it told us about ourselves, but for what walking (as a research method) revealed about modern and explicitly urban forms of sociality. More recently, through work such as Kate Moles' reflections on the ambulatory threads that entwine place and identity together (Moles, 2008), or Tom Hall and Rob Smith's ethnography of mobile street patrols (Hall & Smith, 2013), Andrew

Clark's shoulder to shoulder interviews with young people (Clark in Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017) or Tim Edensor's circumambulations through industrial ruins (Edensor, 2005), walking as a practice for understanding late modernity has come to fruition. Through walking *alongside* others, we see better how vistas of both opportunity and risk are mapped out onto space. In tracing another's footsteps, we understand more fully the extent to which human relationships are made, not *in situ*, but rather, on the hoof. And through mobile methods we learn about the significance of various real and imagined barriers, walls, entrances and bridges, as well as how these relate to social structures.

I want to argue that both the introspective affordances of walking familiar to philosophers, and the more practical sociological understanding that emerges from walking-as-a-research-method, emerge out of walking's unique phenomenology. That is, they emerge from the specific ways in which we, as humans, generally experience walking. More precisely, I want to argue that walking's utility in the social sciences is directly related to the cadence of pedestrian movement. I say this because, if we listen closely, pedestrian cadences are precisely the rhythms at which a great many 'human' elements of our world are lived. From the metrical structure of the stories we orate (Couper-Kuhlen, 1993: 100–109) to the pulse of thoughts that drift through discursive consciousness, to the sequences of tasks we put together in any given day, more often than not, these phenomena unfold at a beat that matches the pulse of bi-pedal movement. Moving with, and paying special attention to, this pulse becomes a way of inhabiting and understanding it.

Walking through Acceleration

To say that walking pace is *the* pulse of modern urban living might seem counterintuitive; not least because so few would associate contemporary urbanity with the ambulatory pace of a pedestrian. The last century has, after all, seen humans moving ever faster both between, and within, cities. The 1900s were, remember, the century that saw humans exceeding the speed of sound in their transit between cities. More prosaically today, even with Concorde grounded, information flows through urban life at lightning speeds every single second of the day.

From the very start of this acceleration in transport and communication, futurists such as FT Marinetti openly embraced the 'grandeur of speed' and celebrated transcendence of yesterdays' merely human rhythm.

"Man began by despising the isochronal, cadenced rhythm, identical with the rhythm of his own stride, of great rivers [...] Man mastered horse, elephant and camel to display his divine authority through an increase in speed [...] From space man stole electricity and then the liquid fuels [...] [and] shaped the metals he had conquered and made flexible with fire. He thereby assembled an army of slaves, dangerous and hostile but sufficiently domesticated to carry him swiftly over the curves of the earth'.

The New Religion-Morality of Speed, F.T. Marinetti, 1916 9 in Flint and Marinetti, 1979: 94.

Today's twenty-first century futurists, accelerationists and rocketeers are no different to Marinetti in their fetishization of speed. For these 'heroic' visionaries the speeding up of urban rhythms via technology is both desirable and inevitable. Sure, they see the disasters immanent to an ever-accelerating life. For them, however, the

only way out is by getting *ahead* of disaster itself through more speed. This does not merely apply to entrepreneurial astro-speculators or philosophers of catastrophe. Any time spent around smart city evangelists reveals the extent to which many urban professionals also have bought into and promoted the vision of accelerated urban life. At the planning side of things, acceleration entails supplementing human deliberation with real-time algorithmic commands. In terms of the concrete city, acceleration means installing sensors and processors that decide what to do right there, right then while nudging transit speeds ever upwards both within and between cities, historically at the expense of the pedestrian.

Yet despite speed-of-light communication technologies and speed-of-sound transport, despite the abundance of pro-automobile, anti-pedestrian infrastructures, despite the fantasies of erstwhile futurists and their contemporary pretenders, a great deal of any city's most valuable activities *still take place at walking pace*. For instance, at either end of *any* journey, be it by car, plane, or train, for most of us there is still a walk to our final destination. But this literal walking is not all I mean to refer to. Even while travelling at supersonic speeds, or communicating in real time across the planet, or otherwise while sat motionless, our conscious experience often still unfolds *at walking pace*. The rhythm of the narratives we listen to on our podcasts, the beat of the music we listen to, the stories we tell each other and the thoughts that roll through our minds all, more often than not, unfurl with an ambulatory rhythm. Let me walk you through this point.

The speed of the average walker, it turns out, is around 5kmph... Although in an act of benevolence urban planners often assume an average walking pace of around 3.6kmph (Steiner & Association, 2006: 223). Despite this act of generosity toward the less mobile amongst us, there is still an obvious

assumption at the heart of this number; based, as it is, on a normative 'able' body. This is a problem insofar as we know that walking pace seems to vary – at the very least – from country to country. For instance, in a piece of comparative research into national paces-of-life (which supposedly measured average walking speeds) Brazil and Romania appear to be in the lower walking-speed leagues, while Ireland, Holland and Britain, on the other hand, are in the premier league of pacers (Levine & Norenzayan, 1999).

Taking the nations as units of analysis, however, is rarely ever a good idea. Not least, in this case, the figure likely obfuscates the internal differences within each nation; perhaps between country and city, between different cities. People in London, for instance, might walk faster than those in Loughborough. This would certainly be the prediction of one of the most firmly held tenets of pedestrian science; that pace seems to increase in correlation with increase in urban population sizes (H. Bornstein & Bornstein, 1976). The Bornsteins, in fact, drew on the work of sociologist Georg Simmel to explain these differences in pace, arguing that ultimately it was the increased sensory stimuli of populous cities that precipitated speedier walkers (H. Bornstein & Bornstein, 1976; M. H. Bornstein, 1979). But the correlation between pace of life and population size might also, quite plausibly, be attributed to the over-representation of fast walkers (i.e. young people) in large cities' populations (Wirtz & Ries, 1992).

The root of the slight-but-demonstrable differences between different cities' pedestrian speeds is an interesting question. That all having been said, the speed of the walker is far less interesting for this discussion than the cadence of the walker. The cadence of the walk is, of course, related to the speed of walking. But it is not reducible to it. On the contrary, individuals can walk with exactly the same cadence, and indeed often do, but achieve

different speeds depending on their height, weight and gait. An average speed cannot, therefore, be easily translated into an average pace. Calculating walking cadence requires a different methodology but it is not too hard and, as a consequence, we can apparently assert that – in lab settings – the ‘average person’s’ walking cadence has a modal range of between 110-120 steps per minute. Or 115 steps per minute if you prefer shorthand (Winter, 1991). It is *this* cadence, a pulse of 115 steps per minute, that I argue is so central to walking’s sociological significance, and connects walking-as-a-methods to cultural studies, to urbanism and to philosophy. 115 bpm is, roughly speaking, the aforementioned pulse at which a not insignificant portion of human life seems to unfold.

This point could be illustrated by a bit of a musical detour. Consider either of the following songs: *Young Hearts Run Free* by Candi Staton, Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel’s *White Lines*. If you can, imagine them both. You could, in fact, sequence these together quite neatly, with each track segueing into the next because each of these recordings unfolds at a pace of the average walker. 115 beats-per-minute (bpm). On the upper side of those tracks, at a pacier 120 bpm, you have Madonna’s *Like A Virgin*. More slowly at around 100 beats per minute, you have the throbbing strides of Abba’s *Dancing Queen*. Slower than that, dropping right down through hip-hop’s standard of between 85-100 bpm, you get to the mellifluous basslines of dub, which hover around 70-80 bpm.

Importantly, this range of beats-per-minute across popular music genres maps remarkably neatly onto human walking paces and their variation. For reference, dub soundtracks an infuriating dawdle at as few as 70 steps per minute, hip-hop a gentle stroll at around 85 steps per minute, straight-up walking to disco beats at around 115 steps per minute, and *really* walking at 120 steps per minute. This synchrony between walking and musical

rhythm is not merely confined to ‘modern’ music. A similar range of pulses can also be found in classical music. In classical music, the analogy with walking is in fact explicit. The phrase *andante* in musical notation literally means ‘at walking pace’. Slightly faster, *moderato*, is referred to by musicians as being more of a ‘march’. This is the beat range of not just Western music but, seemingly, the entirety of global music which, leaving aside the amphetamine horror of gabba-techno, generally falls within the narrow beat range of ‘between 83 and 140 bpm’ (Roeder & Tenzer, 2012: 91).

In his remarkable essay, *Architecture and the Senses*, Juhani Pallasmaa contends that “the timeless task of architecture is to create embodied and lived metaphors that concretize and structure our being in the world” (Pallasmaa, 2005: 73). As humanist architecture speaks to the rhythm of the body, so too does timeless music. In this respect, bodies do not just move to the beat dictated by their environment. The beat or our environment clearly moves to the body and synchronises with our existent gait. This is precisely because that which speaks most effectively to us pertains to the cadence of the human body and echoes the beat of human existence.

But this pulse of between 80 and 140 bpm is not simply a resonance between walking and music. It also reverberates through speech (in English at least). Of course, everyday speech, not unlike complex musical scores, has multiple rhythms pulsing throughout it. However, it is striking that when linguists analysed the gap between the main stress points in a sample piece of English speech, they found a rhythmic gap between stresses of an average of 0.58 seconds (Couper-Kuhlen, 1993: 106–108). Or in other words, the speech had an average cadence of around 103 beats per minute. Which is to say, the rhythm of human phenomenological experience, the pace of perception, as reflected in the music that speaks to us *and* the language we

use to communicate, falls within the normative cadence range of walking humans.

Beyond speech and music are a range of other pulses in the city which, perhaps unsurprisingly, also fall in step with city dwellers' bi-pedal beat. Even the most sophisticated 'smart city', a great number of the assorted beeps, buzzes and blinks of urban life in fact fall within the range of walking pace. The engaged tone on a phone line. The indicator lights on a car. The SMS bleeps on a mobile. The buzzer that alerts us to closing subway doors. The signal to cross at the crosswalk. Or the siren of reversing rubbish trucks. In the recordings I have gathered, all of these sound off somewhere between 110 and 125 bpm. This seems a sensible design feature given that these are the rhythms that seem proven to speak most effectively to us (London, 2012: 28).

Taking these observations about the synchrony between the audible rhythms of city life and the walking pace of city dwellers, we might understand walking-as-a-method as a means of *tuning in*. Not only does walking move the researcher's body along the threads that connect disparate elements of an urban assemblage. Walking allows the body to resonate with the natural frequencies of everyday life.

Yet, despite many of the more pro-social aspects of the city having evolved out of pedestrian activity, despite us being most at home just below 5kmph, 115 steps per minute, walking is rarely at the heart of any contemporary city's master plan. Moreover, it is also the case that, increasingly, the ability to walk and the benefit from the fruits of walking in a city are becoming a luxury as city centres become the preserve of wealthier residents, leaving suburban commuters in their cars. This is a shame not least because we know the riches that have historically come from walking, from tuning in to the city; the rich sociality that emerges from

spacing alongside another, the understanding of space that comes from stumbling through it, the flashes of inspiration that come from plodding one foot in front of another, the relief of walking our way out of a problem. Using walking as a sociological method has helped to reveal the affordances of human motion, and its social, cultural and ecological significance. And in doing so, hopefully, it has helped to build a case for cities in which 'rights to the city' are first and foremost, the rights to walk in the city.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that if we are to understand the relationship between philosophical enquiry, sociological research into cities and walking, we need to pay attention to the phenomenological experience of walking. In particular, we need to pay attention to the cadence of pedestrian movement. The cadence of human walking, I have suggested, resonates with the pulse of music, speech, thought and action, and may even structure it. This is one reason that walking is such a fruitful activity for understanding one another and the world we live in, as well as ourselves. Walking is a means of tuning in to the city and the world around us. This is also a reason to encourage the development of walkable cities, which can only be more sociable, empathetic and humane than the accelerated city.

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