

Article

Trafficking

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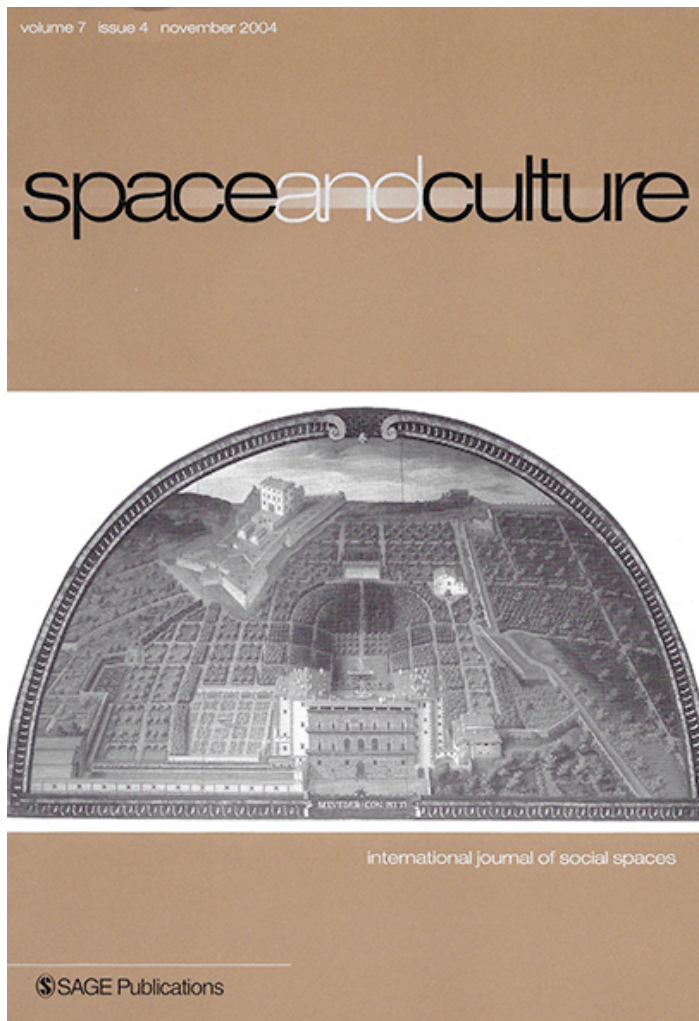
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Abstract

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ABSTRACT

In cities the world over we are able to determine stability in daily existence, to identify with our social spaces, because modes of transport have become essential components of subjective autonomy. But would it not be just as accurate to say that *in transit* modern life puts the self in abeyance? I argue that the ways we allow ourselves to be moved around in 'traffic space' creates a passivity that renders almost invisible the complex mechanics of movement, which we only become alert to at the moment of breakdown, precisely when they become a threat to autonomy. Our trafficking, I conclude, has an almost narcotic effect, rendering us immobile against the continual movements that constitute urban life, one that also magnifies out of all proportion the accidents or aberrations that sometimes disturb our traffic space, making it seem as if we may easily descend into an uncontrollable chaos.

Keywords: traffic; autonomy; passivity; movement; space

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THE INVISIBLE MACHINERY

Traffic, as we know, concerns movement. Because it concerns movement the relationship traffic mediates between self and space is one of dispersal, or transience. In other words, traffic might be better thought of as a kind of non-relation that in its mobility is always after some destination; a point where some, let us say, authentic relation is affirmed as the closure in the very opening of a space that our movement creates. Traffic thus postulates an existence that is caught between places, seemingly incomplete, and always subject to change. It exists, at times, in what one observer has termed the 'non-places' of contemporary society where we encounter an overlooked yet important part of modern experience in such 'dense networks of means of transport,' which propel us to the ends of the particular, to 'solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral' (Augé, 1995: 78).

The space of traffic might also be symbolic of the frailty of our expectations, which, within the context of the urban, are a kind of invisible social glue rendered effective by our trust in others. If taking a trip is almost to wager on these expectations, the question is then how we manage to forget this for most of the time; how, through force of habit, the movement of the self is pushed to the margins of our perceptual awareness – even as we move?

Some three and a half centuries ago the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes related the nature of movement to the human condition in general, but more particularly to social and political subjectivity (Hobbes, 1991). In Hobbes' conception of the individuated subject – *internal motion in matter* – experience was taken to revolve around a succession of desires and aversions that, in spatio-physical terms, would compel the individual to engage in specific external *movements* as a result of coming within physical proximity of others. After outlining the dangerous consequences of human motion continuing unhindered amongst individuals who would do almost anything to ensure their own safety and security, but who had been brought together in society, he reflected on the problem of what conditions might permit the accommodation of potentially conflicting movements to take place (Hobbes, 1991: 125). The solution he devised was an external and sovereign authority (much like contemporary legal authorities) onto which the control of movement would be, in effect, displaced. The hypothesized sovereign would then become a means of trafficking movement, and more significantly for our purposes, could represent also the formal and substantial embodiment of the disposal of certain doubts and uncertainties (over fear of life and limb, the dread of living through incommodious times, and so on).

But how does this conceptualization of subjectivity as a kind of controlled movement related to the condition we find ourselves in today? It is not immediately clear how Hobbes' ideas can relate to a quite distinctive contemporary understanding of space and traffic that has been conditioned by modernity; which is to say, by the existence of railways, automobiles and air travel. But, one way to see the link is to think about our place in the system of waste disposal: just as the flush of a toilet removes for each of us the question of what to do with our waste (it 'vanishes' to be taken care of by the invisible machinery of society) so the availability of some form of movement control (such as contemporary traffic technologies) erases the anxiety or insecurity we may feel when caught, in motion, between places.



1. Trafficking on Route 1, near Soquel, California, 2000 (John Scanlan)

Hobbes is perhaps an unusual point of departure in positing the causes of our experience of traffic as the merely instrumental means to an end, but the work of this thinker, who died several centuries ago, illuminates our speculations on why our trafficking – particularly the spaces between stations and the space of movement – can be so forgettable. Within the Hobbesian elaboration of materialist psychology we can glimpse how the subjective control of what he called ‘internal motions’ becomes, precisely because of the consequences of our objective social existence, the basis for social relationships, which first propel individual movement and then shunt it towards some rational convergence of interests. We might say, then, that in the relation of individual to world a certain element of passivity develops as a result of the displacement of obligations onto the hypothetical sovereign (which, in modern terms we read as the dispersed ‘machinery’ of society; the division of labour, knowledge, and other such convergences of interest). What relates to our contemporary understanding of how passage is mediated through space is

that the idea of motion itself implies the need for some control over space, simply because all movement *is* movement in space. Socialization, in effect, develops as a way of trafficking what Hobbes called our desires and aversions – the *drives* that bring us into contact with each other – and establishes the parameters of action, developing into a more or less closed causal domain in which our expectations are sustained.

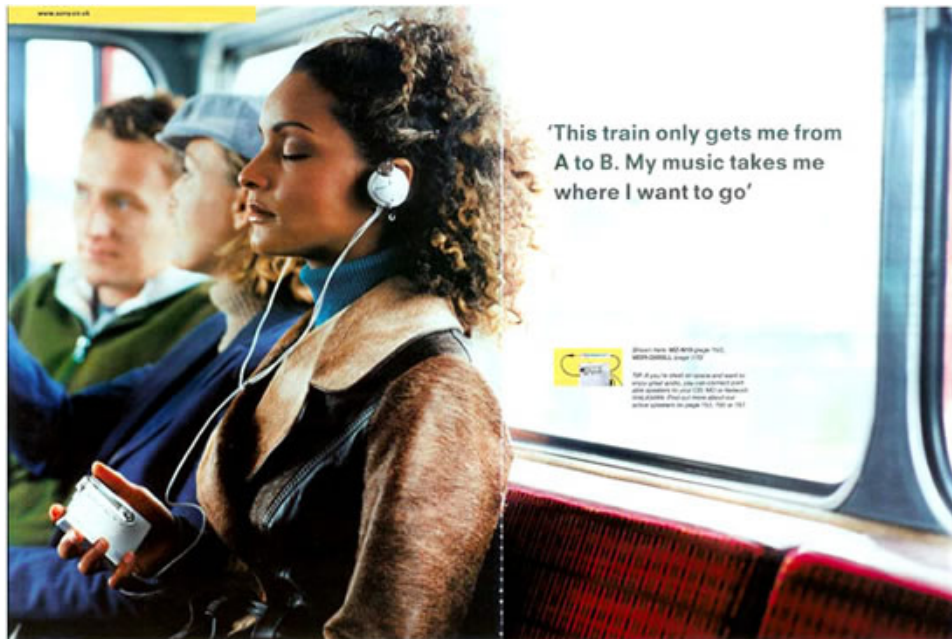
It was motion that provided the grounds for the Hobbesian rational binding of desire under the sovereign (both an attachment to security and the source of habit), an idea that signalled one of the earliest justifications for the substitution of seemingly unfettered freedom with some form of social contract (Hobbes, 1991: 147). Where this rational binding established the subject-object boundaries of Hobbesian political philosophy, it is curiously mirrored in contemporary urban society by our dependency on the reasonableness of the instrumental means of moving our bodies, our selves, around. In other words, the *rational* engenders a need for more of the same and freedom thus becomes at one with the trafficking of space. Such dependency not only puts to one side various doubts and uncertainties; it might also leave us in a slumber we are only awoken from when something apparently random, aberrant or accidental happens. As the increased anxiety over transport and travel since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 perhaps shows, we are now more aware than at any time in the recent past that when we travel we rely on the proper functioning of some invisible machinery.

It is perhaps timely, then, to look at the psychology of social expectations through the example of movement, and to consider how traffic technologies, on the one hand, enable us to shut ourselves off from the environment we move around in – yet, on the other, reveal with disproportionate effect that our trafficking conceals an alternative and uncontrollable teleology in which our everyday expectations are thrown back into the kind of doubt that impelled the creation of Hobbesian sovereign in the first place.

THE PASSENGER

Every morning at 08:05 a passenger train would leave Carstairs for Glasgow, its destination some thirty miles away in Central Scotland. Unusually, it was the only passenger train to begin its journey from this station, carrying the small number of commuters who lived in the town. The lack of frequency in this sparse schedule alone was the cause of a great deal of confusion, especially amongst train drivers for whom encounters with this particular route would be rare and, consequently, never fully solidified into the kind of habitual awareness that characterized the ease with which more familiar routes were undertaken. An equally notable consequence of these circumstances was the apparent conviction of passengers waiting at the first station stop down the line; that this train – the 08:05 – would first collect and then deposit them safely in the city and conveniently within reach of their final destinations.

The extent to which the passengers had come to rely on events following the prescribed course was evident in their own absent-mindedness. There was no need to fret over details like the arrival of the train (though it may occasionally run a few minutes late), and so people might stand around on the platform reading newspapers, talk with fellow passengers, or retreat into the enclosure of some small bubble of personal space entered through the invitation of a portable device (these days, perhaps, a cell phone – then, the Walkman). These are the facts. I was witness, indeed, to the minor eruptions that unsettled the placid expectations of the passengers on those rare occasions when the 08:05 from Carstairs would (from my position inside the clerk's office where I worked) mercilessly thunder through my station, the driver having no knowledge that this was a stop on his route. Sitting blankly in his cab, perhaps, he could have no regard either for the torrent of complaints that would, mere moments later, be volleyed across the tracks at me as I stood on the platform to shout across that yes, dear passengers *your* train just tore



2. Advert for a portable Sony Minidisc player, c. 2002

through this station and through your plans, and no, it would not be able to reverse and the only thing to do, therefore, was wait until the next one came along.

What such incidents speak of is the extent to which we – the urban dwellers, in particular – tacitly accept that normal social functioning rests on being able to dispel doubts about our movements beyond the spaces we may control. This acceptance is manifest in the external form of the structures, networks, and people who enable us to move around, yet who also easily blend into the background. It is the socially necessary reliance on numerous unknown or forgotten relationships with strangers that allows us to dispose of the uncertainties that arise any time we move from one space and into another. And like the attention we pay to the locomotion of the human body, we often only become fully conscious of movement within the urban environment when it breaks down, or if it encounters obstacles.

When our trafficking is interrupted what we are able to glimpse is the alternate, suppressed, network of causes in which we passengers are really caught (as op-

posed to the illusion that we control our movements – which in any case emanates from the same external source). It is then we become aware of the directing hand of invisible control, *just when it fails to control*. The curious thing, however, is that we manage to overcome the fact that we can so easily be returned to a condition where these causal expectations are shattered; so much so, in fact, that the fact of our social interconnectedness at such times comes as a shocking denial of self.

How do we passengers become so passive? One answer may be found in a well-known section of *Either/Or* ('On the Rotation of Crops'), where Søren Kierkegaard suggested that without the occasional replacement of daily experience the customary obligations and expectations that consequently develop as a part of normality come to constitute a kind of deadly continuity that 'like the wind and weather' moves us by some external force which, from the subjective perspective, at least, is 'completely indeterminable' (Kierkegaard, 2000: 59). Habit, in other words, makes us passive subjects. Yet routine and habit are more grounded in who we are than the arbitrary sway of natural forces might suggest. This is because the apparent continuity of the objective social world projects a psychological re-orientation of space and time; it consists in the adjustment of consciousness within the causal expectations of the environment. Thus, the *passivity* of the passenger in this traffic space develops through the interiorization of movement control ('let the train take the strain,' ran a 1990s advert for British Rail), and is further reinforced in the individual's occupancy of what – borrowing an idea from Harvie Ferguson – is a 'third space.' A space that is identifiable with neither subjective nor objective images of the individuated self, but that develops as a response to 'the continuous flux of subjectivity,' which in Ferguson's example threatens the image of the body as centred and immanently directed (Ferguson, 2000: 45). In the case of traffic space a similar response is the result of one's being caught in this non-identical flow of passage.

And so whilst the rationally directed traffic assumes a totalizing power that would dominate the ordering of space, the objective image of the city produced as a consequence remains essentially duplicitous in terms of how it relies on the visibility of masks and surfaces. In Geoff Ryman's amusing novel *253*, a passenger-by-passenger account of the thoughts of two hundred and fifty-three people aboard a London underground train, we see the extent to which we are, as Marshall Berman said of such situations, a 'multitude of solitudes' (Berman, 1983: 164). Thrown together in the passive domain of traffic space, the potential anxiety of being unable to identify with either subjective or objective images of who we are speaks of how we populate each others solitude, and is contained and appropriated within the notion of Ferguson's 'third space,' which develops as a response to the threat of existential dispersal (Ferguson, 2000: 45-46). In Ryman's tripartite characterization of the passengers on his fictional train, the last image seems to correspond to this third space (the other two offering more or less objective and subjective images). Thus, of passenger number eleven in the first car of the train ('Mr Douglas Higbee'), we learn the following:

Outward appearance [i.e., Objective]

Blandly British, about thirty, plump, moustache, no chin. Black trousers, huge winter coat, blue shirt collar. A large overnight case. Appears to be asleep, except that one eye is open.

Inside information [Subjective]

Mr Higbee is the bar piano player on a cross-Channel ferry. His bag contains a change of underwear, a top hat, and home-produced cassettes which he offers for sale at the top of his piano. No one ever buys them. Like Superman, his costume, a tuxedo, is under the ordinary coat.

What he is doing or thinking ['Third space']

He is trying to avoid having to talk to the ship's magician, Passenger 18, who is also in the same carriage. Douglas has nothing against the magician. They have to spend a lot of time in the same bar and cabin being professionally pleasant to each other. You hardly want to be pleasant all the way from Waterloo to Dover as well. Douglas finds it difficult to be pleasant. (Ryman, 1998: 24)

The conditions which permit one to occupy this traffic space, of course, rely on our passivity; on the conditions of social existence that belong to unseen or forgotten relationships. In terms of my own experience of the habits of the passenger, I was to become further removed from encounters with those angry individuals, rudely reminded of the interdependency of their lives by the simple mistake of an absent-minded train driver. I disappeared into the background – to the anonymity of the signal centre, with its instruments of motion control. In retrospect I had moved from the position of witness to a kind of Hobbesian chaos to the position of Hobbesian sovereignty. Within my limited domain of control (amounting only to a few miles, I admit) I operated the switches and levers of my equipment in an effort to ensure the traffic did not upset this third space of the passenger, and instead obeyed the rational order of the timetables and diagrams that allowed me to regulate the potential chaos.

THE VEHICLE

The objective topography of the city is not the object of any singular experience. Instead, its shape and form are the preserve of a privileged and disembodied observer (i.e., one who does not really exist) removed to a distance suitable enough to produce the scope of objectification for an entity the size of a city. Such an image of the city as a total entity is, then, clearly at some remove from the finely



3. Godfrey Reggio, *Koyaanisqatsi*

grained 'reality' of the city given content by subjective movements. Yet, it is the objective views that carry much weight, and that are omnipresent due to the representations of photography, maps and even 3D models (of the kind one might see in a tourist office). Particularly interesting versions of this kind of objectification might be observed in the cityscapes captured by use of the moving image, which correspondingly reveal the shifting surface of the urban topos. In Godfrey Reggio's 1983 documentary *Koyaanisqatsi*, a film that glories in the endless trafficking of urban movement within contemporary life, we gain an insight into a perspective that surpasses the abstraction of the map as representation of the city, one we may suggest that corresponds to the vision of an all-seeing God (or, indeed, the Hobbesian sovereign). What we notice is that because of the distance of the viewing eye (the camera) the motions observed from this perspective fail to register the insignificant and irregular deviations from the largely well-ordered norm, present-

ing an image of urban life under rational control, which for the most part corresponds to our expectations of movement (if not to our hopes of a smooth passage between stations). Yet, just as the appearance, expression and behaviour of fellow passengers on a journey might not indicate anything of real substance about them, so too, the God-like vision of urban movement is somewhat misleading – it is all surface and no depth. A particularly illuminating sequence in *Koyaanisqatsi* illustrates this by taking the viewer from the distantly observed topography of Los Angeles at night, dominated by the neon 'tubes' of flowing traffic that at various points stutters, stops, and then begins to move again, to the interior of a station, viewed as a container of anonymous bodies coming and going in all directions as if without aim, but always avoiding the obstacles formed by the movements of others; always with enough unconscious co-operation going on that such a throng never descends further into a disordered rabble. Visions like this one highlight the way in which the closer we are to such movements the more confusing they can seem to be, and the more the environment seems to exist simply as the vehicle for our unending movements.

A narrowing of perspective filters out the origins and destinations of our journeys, and casts the human traffic within a causal vacuum, as if – in confirmation of Kierkegaard's fears – blown around by the wind, or moved by some other unseen elemental force. Here the regularity of movement when distantly observed through the God's-eye lens of the filmmaker becomes, within the more focused perspective, the random movement of bodies within some temporary traffic space – and beyond this the 'third space' of unseen thoughts and guarded individuality.

In the relationship between these social atoms and society it is urban planning that has intervened – through its arrangement of spaces – as the mediator of spatial consciousness, if not source of the practical and unified image of the city as vehicle for our movements. Such an image is captured by our knowledge of the places, buildings and traffic schedules that all exist as points of identity within the fluidity

of urban motion. Such a knowledge may only comprise a part of the overall mosaic of images or knowledges that are found in a representation of objective totality, but it can be exchanged or shared, which is what happens when you take a train, a taxi, or ask for directions (Lynch, 1960: 46-48). Our capacity for combining information about time and space through the use of the experiences and knowledge of others has its objective counterpart in the public transport timetables, which on a far greater scale also strive for, and depend on, the real possibility of charting time over space. The discontinuity between subjective experience and objective image lies in the fact that where one may experience, as Christine Boyer noted, 'spatial interruptions, fractures, and lags' in the city as vehicle, these represent exceptions to the controllable motion that is suggested by the obstacle-less maps and sovereign transport schedules, which will declare themselves with all the certainty of fact (Boyer, 1994: 490-91). Whilst such exceptions to smooth and ordered functioning do not amount to the kind of chaos common to some nineteenth-century cities, the fact is that within the last century the spaces we move within, as Marshall Berman wrote, 'have been systematically designed and organized to ensure that collisions and confrontations will not take place' (Berman, 1983: 164). At this point we should note that different kinds of travel generate their own psychological responses. There are marked differences, for example, between the everyday experience of traffic as a passenger (where the responsibility for our movement is vested in others), and going *on the road* – which is to take a more active and directing role in movement.

In popular imagination the open road symbolizes something quite distinct from the kind of urban trafficking already considered; it promises the quick erasure of one's past – in 'hitting the road' one might get caught up in traffic, but as in the Ray Charles song ('hit the road, Jack, and don't you come back no more') a line may be drawn under experience in order to separate oneself from the deadly continuity Kierkegaard observed in habits and customs. A certain idealized vision of the

road, unsurprisingly, invests it with a 'libertarian ideal' of unfettered free movement (Williams, 2001). Thus, 'driving' – as opposed to travelling as a passenger – also describes voyages of discovery or possibly disorientation (consider the use of the word *trip* to describe the early experiments with the drug LSD) because the extension of a space beyond existing spatio-temporal conditions suggests a mode of transcendence. How often do we visualize a road *backwards* rather than think of 'the road' as the forward extension of a space that speaks of possibility? The question seems pointless because once on the road we are – because of the nature of things – always physically moving forward (even when in retreat), and the more refined the lines that draw us forward become the greater the trafficking that consciousness is subjected to. A road through open space symbolizes untrammelled freedom in one sense because it remains free from the lines within lines that characterize traffic control in the cities. Yet, because of the way that familiarity lapses into automatic behaviour, it is the ubiquitous traffic controls of the city and not possibilities of the open road that are filtered out of consciousness (the obligation to obey – to follow – of course, marks the development of habitual responses). The road less travelled contains novelty and is therefore usually more remarkable.

Traffic and directional signals of the kind we find wherever people are crowded together become at times almost invisible – which is surely one of the reasons why travellers at airports and stations are also subjected to continual reminders to obey commands that are already present as visual reminders everywhere ('don't park in the drop zone'; 'don't leave your luggage unattended'; 'stay clear of the end of the platform,' and so on). Other examples of our narrowed perception under conditions of familiarity are found where the slightest modification is made to routes that pass through a regulated environment. In France, as Marc Augé has written, the introduction of the roundabout (sometimes known as a 'traffic circle' or 'rotary') was the cause of the kind of mishaps that belie our urban blindness:

Incredulous drivers who refused to acknowledge roundabouts, or who couldn't believe their eyes, planted their vehicles in the central floral arrangement, or crashed them against statues or other artistic constructions supposedly decorating them (Augé, 2002: 293-295).

We understand in similar terms a short news report of 18 February 2001 in the London *Observer* that 'vandals caused traffic chaos in Totland, Isle of Wight, after they left eight road signs pointing the wrong way.' Such gestures, which hark after the spirit of the Situationist *détournement* (diversion) in their misappropriation of the symbols of the leisure economy, produce their own 'chaos' because of the disproportionate effect they can have; and perhaps because what is brought to our attention in being caught up in confusing scenarios are the aspects of social life that remain beyond our ability to anticipate or control (Sadler, 1998: 17).

THE FIX

Consider the justly famous diagrammatic map of London Underground. This map was designed by an engineer named Harry Beck in 1933, and presents a visual arrangement of its particulars in a way that sticks in the mind's eye – in the rather simple form, colour, and graphical arrangement of its features is displayed a well-ordered image of the city of London in which all its parts have been equally spaced for your convenience (or so it seems), as if a sovereign designer had actually rearranged the city as a model of harmony. This map brilliantly demonstrates the hope of order over the fragmented and disjunctive reality of London; a city of unexpected dead-ends, alluring avenues and hopeful trails that will magnetically pull one off-course (Sinclair and Atkins, 1990). It is, Adrian Forty suggests, somewhat duplicitous in its vision of good order:



4. Harry Beck with his London Underground map

For all its clarity, it is highly misleading; unlike the previous maps, which represented stations in their correct geographical positions, the new map not only reorganised the lines along horizontal, vertical or 45 degree axes, but also enlarged the distance between the stations in the central area, and reduced that between stations in the outer area ... by making the distance between the suburbs and the centre look so small [it] induced people to undertake journeys they might have otherwise hesitated to make (Forty, 1986: 237).

The map resembles an electrical circuit diagram, and looks very much like the displays that are found in the signal centres where rail traffic is controlled. Yet, however misleading it is, the image of this ordered space has become part of a common perception of London. Its success is found in the fact that the urban topography is thus refashioned as an *objectified* form that supports our movements, one that comes complete with temporary relations of identity (in the form of stations and interchanges) that substantiate our everyday causal expectations (meeting a friend; getting to work on time, and so on), and which carry forward the life of both individual and city. The London Underground map might stand as a metaphor for our optimistic perceptions of space and traffic, and reminds us that it was the planners of twentieth-century urban space who represented a kind of Modernism that appropriated some of the functions of a Hobbesian-style sovereign. These technocratic masters of space and motion, indeed, were 'scientists' of the human imagination, claiming to pursue a vision that had as a central aim the fashioning of human minds through the directing control of movement (Reiner, 1967: 232).

The success of transport authorities, planners, or designers in fashioning the imagination of the passenger is reflected in a corresponding lack of awareness about how easily things so constituted may break down, and this is summed up by our travel passivity. The unseen machinery of trafficking becomes invisible for the very good reason that it largely works in convincing us that our freedom is expressed through movement. As contemporary society strives harder to more efficiently organize movement, and gets better at doing it, the thought occurs that we become more habitual in our occupancy of traffic space. Perhaps, as Avital Ronell has suggested, the structure of modern life is actually narcotic, produces levels of addiction or dependence (Ronell, 1992).

As we retreat into the 'third space' we accept the trafficking of our movements, and so the habit develops. To use a drug analogy, traffic is a downer. Whilst apparently taking us on our various trips, it renders us largely immobile, leaves us insuf-

ficiently alert to our surroundings. It is for this reason – that we spend so much of our lives in transit – that the accidents and aberrations that occasionally trespass on our traffic space can become easily overstated. Because they seem to strip away this hope of order and return us to an almost Hobbesian chaos.

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