Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

ECHOES OF THE CITY: Walking

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, January 7th, 2015

The moving experience

Moving in the city, moving in autonomous fashion, not driving or being driven, but mostly **walking**: exposed to weather, to traffic, to others while being subject to topography and ground condition.

Walking produces a complete environmental experience from "sole to soul," albeit relative to gender, age, season, type of neighbourhood walked, etc.

For the observer, what is seen is a variety of pace and gait: the physical profile of human presence we tend to miss if we just look at faces, and the absence of which turns any street or public place into a rather desolate thing.

The type and degree of social and physical qualification of walking, from ***walking alone, to walking in a group, to being directed, etc.*** *will be our perspective on the moving-walking experience …*

Walking alone

Walking alone, in an otherwise empty environment, provides a clean slate sort of experience whereby anything can happen and anyone can suddenly appear.

It is a particular social-auditory experience whereby the only sound heard or produced is of one's footsteps, its possible echo or the particular crush of walking on snow.

I was walking in the opposite direction of the fellow, on the snow covered sidewalk, when deciding to capture his bent forward gait framed by the train track viaduct and the leaning tree, I took refuge under a doorway to take the photograph.

I don't think I could have done this if others were walking about, meaning their presence would have changed the very subject of the photo opportunity, as well as changing the context of photographing it … walking alone in a snowed under city seemed to me to represent the particular "aloneness" of the city dweller.

Walking with someone

Walking with someone provides an immediate focus of attention complementary to the general awareness of the surrounding environment.

I am situated inside a coffee shop and I could not hear the sound of the footsteps crunching the snow. I was focused on expressing the three modes of moving in the city in winter, bicycle-vehicle-feet, and on something that could allow me to provide a visual center to the image. Eventually, it was the white bag reflecting direct sunlight, like a tracer of the walkers movement.

Walking with another not only provides the walkers with an automatic co-presence experience but with all the possible outcomes issued from discussion or other situations such as: one walker needs to stop to warm up, the other needs to stop to get a quart of milk, both cannot pass the opportunity for a warming drink.

Walking with another may not get you there faster but it may get you further!

Walking in a group

Walking in a group that is consciously organized is not what I am talking about, given that such a group's aim is planned action in public, as in the case of a religious procession or a political manifestation or just adolescent mayhem…in ascending order of disorder!

I am more aware of walking **as a group** out of mutual acquaintance, such as students being released from class and walking to public transportation, or friends coming out of a sport event.

Such walking naturally has a way of occupying the full width of a sidewalk for some length, but since such linear grouping is really made up of pairs of walkers, one behind the other, it may move aside respectfully to allow walkers in the opposite direction to stay on the sidewalk and not be forced out on the street.

Such group walking understandably generates quite a bit of noise, talking and heckling loudly, under mutual stimulation, all in relative good spirit and under cover of sympathetic acceptance of such behaviour by the public … up to a certain threshold marked by violence, real or mock … the virtual power of a group.

Directed walking

Do you remember Flip Wilson's "walk-don't-walk" comedy routine, based on the essentially unpredictable frequency of the change in the lit message directing one to cross a street … or not do so?

It is that sense of unpredictability that turns the walkers into a “herd” rushing to make it across with all the funny turning-back-pirouettes of those who start too late and the sprint of those that almost don’t make it across before the signal changes.

Of course you must multiply this by two, for the crossing is two ways, with each “herd” combing itself into the one coming towards it.

Walking as fast as one can with eyes on the signal and on the oncoming rush while trying to sneak one’s body…not a bad subject for gags!

It is that sort of mechanical rush that catches some unaware and makes them look quite lost as to which way to run toward, or return to … a slightly comic situation if it were not for the car traffic waiting to jump in.

Add to that the buzzer that informs the blind of the proper moment to cross, add the motor or hand pushed wheelchairs and the required coordination of the signal perception with the controls of movements … add all this and what can be slightly funny can turn to a potentially dangerous situation.

Could that be why Flip Wilson gave up his Walk-don’t-walk routine in favour of his better known The-devil-made-me-do-it?

Discussion

Walking the city provides the walker, and the observer, with a wide and dynamic range of situations to experience the other in the city.

The circumstances behind the city’s anti loitering regulations have, by the same fact, rendered moving-walking obligatory, if not the normal way of moving in the city.

The opportunities for appreciation of people’s gait, pace and attitude involved in walking with and among others are multitude, as are the opportunities for reading people, behaviours and situations, and for interacting with others.

As carriers of echoes of the city, the walkers can be said to humanize its social environment and physical scale.

E. A. Poe is said to have written that one never knows which person walking by will come to represent humanity; it helps of course to be walking, or sitting at a café ogling the passers by!

Photos credit Maurice Amiel

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