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The Trail in the Mountains: For a Reanimated Image of the Body, the World and the Subject

Tristan Tassart

- 1 This article sketches a state of my doctoral research in architectural theory through which my practice of trail walking in the mountains and my profession as an architect leads to a critical reflection on the devitalization of the body and the subject by the modern city life, and aims at reinstalling the primacy of the subject in contact with his body and space, at the core of the understanding of the ideal and material world we wish to build, namely through the most powerful affirmation of the human subject, but in return its greatest source of subjugation: land use planning. Based on the phenomenological concepts of “One’s Own Body” and “intentionality” (Husserl, 1947/ Merleau-Ponty, 2005) and the reflection that nourishes my experience of the trail, This thesis work focuses on the notion of orientation and explores the hypothesis of an intentionality of the subject that would be similar to a spatial and existential trajectory enabling its self-orientation through the structural matrix of the “One’s Own Body”, towards the elucidation of a meaning that may come up simultaneously as grasping the globality of the world and the local emergence of its own singularity from inside this totality.
- 2 As an architect by trade, I nourish a critique of the urban environment that artificializes the subject's relationship to the world through the decline of its physical action. My reflection interrogates the finality of the subject's corporeal relationship with the world, independently of a utilitarian, technicized and normalized practice that the city promotes and advocates. For several years now, I have been doing mountain trail running, which consists of running medium and high mountain trails over distances of about 60 km ; my own practice, as well as the reflection and the collection of notes that it triggers, have gradually emerged as a field of study and a material for exploration to nourish an action-research aimed at installing the experience of bodily movement in the mountains as a key to understanding the process of individuation,

structuring and making sense of the relationships between subject and world, particularly through the phenomenon of orientation. Initially soliciting the theoretical framework of phenomenological philosophy through its concepts of “own body“, “intentionality“ and “topology“, I will then question the empirical field of directional vectors in the anti-gravity kinesthetic effort. My reflection takes for hypothesis a capacity of orientation of the subject in space which would be based beforehand on a capacity of orientation within his own body, his "One's Own Body" and his existence. The subject would thus direct his intentional movement within his “own body“, whose structural totality he /her wants to grasp while drawing his or her own subject trajectory. The benefit of a successful exploration and analysis of the subject's spatio-corporeal relations with the world would further feed the questioning of an urban thought that cannot deny the finality it aims at: bodies and subjects.

From the petrol engine to the essence of driveability, from daily life to the flow of life

- 3 Refuting the mechanistic pattern of a body-object, the phenomenological concept of the “One's Own Body“ takes for granted a body-subject whose intentions are rooted in a power of act of the body that is anchored in the very core of the consciousness as the originating structure of all experience and knowledge of the world' (Angelino, 2008: 167). The structuring presence of one's being, the “One's Own Body“, acts for the subject as a mere spontaneous knowledge of his body that informs, activates and guides his insertion into the world. “The ‘One's Own Body’ is in the world like the heart in the organism: it unceasingly keeps the spectacle of the visibility fully alive, animates it, nourishes it internally, forms a system with it“ (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 235). From a phenomenological point of view, “The structure of the world cannot be thought unless it refers to the structure of the human body, as the body as a totality of meaning systematically coherent in unity, is a structure that itself structures the world, and a function dispensing unity“ (Angelino, 2008: 170). From the child's first steps to the creation of cities, the “One's Own Body“ remains the foundation of the invention, construction and itinerancy of the human subject.
- 4 Nevertheless, the highly technical and hyper-connected city, arouses a disengagement of the body induced by the repetitiveness and automation of its movements, which both tend to make it a body standardized by the globalized city (Di Méo, 2009). By Administering a flat, orthonormal and conveyed logic of movement, the city channels our movements, “facilitates their orientation in space“ (Di Méo, 2009: 6), and often places very little stress on the balance and motor effort of the body, which “ceases to be an instrument for evaluating space“ (Simay, 2008: 20). The city affirms a relationship of control and subordination of man over the world, which in turn domesticizes his relationship to the world and to himself. In this respect, it seems necessary for the body to release from the grip of an urban technology which devitalizes its vocation to guide the human subject towards a quest for meaning and understanding, of which it is the key. The approach of rehabilitating an "inhabited" beyond the inhabited, rebuilding a link to the world beyond the constructed, conceiving the human subject outside the already designed spaces could thus be imagined. Extending the attention already paid to the trail as a stimulator of new territorial dynamics (Coulomb, 2014: 325) or of a “self-affirmation“ through individual performance (Bessy, 2002: 51), the mountain trail

could embody an experience that would allow us to revitalize or enhance the body in its role of constructing the human subject and to explore through this experience the finality of the subject's bodily relationship with the world.

The “proper body”, structural and topological and directional matrix of the subject and the world

- 5 In fact, through all the variations of a relief that escapes urban planning and the omnipresence of a powerful and spontaneous nature, the mountain deprograms a mechanical and utilitarian practice of the body and offers it a change of scenery conducive to reinterviewing its origins. The body running in the mountains, alone with its own technicality and gravity, opposes the voluminous and gravitational resistance of the world which seizes its motor effort and balance. The kinesthetic experience of the trail in the mountains exacerbates the relationship of the subject to his or her body, establishing a regime of intensification and accentuation of movement whose structuring principles and correlated issues appears more vividly to the consciousness. The Trailer unties agile and sinuous trajectories, tests the body, agitates it, twists it, stretches it, lifts it, carries it in all directions, and thus opens up a lived and living dimension of space, of the self, of the world, which affirms the quest for a meaning and an identity representing an alternative to the urban norm. The Trailer reintegrates the body as an organism of the inner, motor and spatial life of its subject. The mountain trail thus acts as an accelerator and sensory revealer, opening a path to an exploration of what constructs, directs and motivates the subject's spatial action, in which the notions of relationship to life, motor effort, gravity, directional variation, balance, distance and itinerary are strongly highlighted.
- 6 The study of these notions, in my approach, intends to explore conceptually then empirically, how they interact in a system of orientation of the subject whose “own body” would play as a structural and directional matrix in which the subject holds a movement of life which transforms him, reveals him and maintains a continuity of himself and his existence. I will articulate this reflection with three other phenomenological concepts: “the phenomenon of living movement” (Henry), “intentionality” (Husserl) and “topological space” (Merleau-Ponty).
- 7 “What makes there a directional orientation, an oriented structure of the perceptive field, [...] are not objective landmarks and objects of reference in the field, but a certain grip of my body on the world” (Angelino, 2008: 173). Orientation cannot be reduced either to a simple functional capacity of the subject to trace directions in order to reach a destination, or to a technique that calculates trajectories from fixed reference points. It is the prerequisite for any movement, which implies the articulation of a relationship to oneself and a relationship to the world, because it initiates and sustains a movement of the subject that is constantly situated and directed, from and by his or her body, towards and through the world. “Orientation in space is an act of the bodily subject that can pass from one spatial level to another” (Testu: 8), it is an internal, dynamic and active disposition of the subject open to all the paths of the world as so many openings of the meaning of his existence through the structure of the world. It is an act of omnidirectional presence of the subject to the world which makes, in every place, an implicit consciousness of the whole established from each of its parts, because “each of our 'physical movements' is in reality part of this total, omni-embracing movement

that we are - for our movements are essentially movements of the 'subjective body' or, at least, whose meaning bears the indelible mark of this body. In the same way, all data is part of an 'orientation' which, being of bodily essence, can be designated as movement". (Patočka, 1988: 46). Now, if "orientation is realized through the body" (Patočka, 1988: 30), it is the "own body", "a phenomenon in which the whole is anterior to the parts" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 116) and "operator of any synthesis-unity experienced" (Angelino, 2008: 176) which plays this role of internal system of reference premeditating the possibilities of the outside by structuring the ordering principles of movement. Through a "body as a structure which itself structures the lived world" (Angelino, 2008: 175), the subject finds anchorage and the power to move while maintaining a relationship with himself. Through his "own body", whatever his itinerary, the trailer is capable of synthesizing a lived form of his experience that echoes a globality of his being and mobilizes "a global act of the perceiving subject" (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 296). The itinerary of the Trailer is not a discontinuity of directional segments but articulates the chain of a /whose upcoming process intention propagates from link to link to form a continuity that makes sense, a totality that becomes a body. In this way, each place, each local movement, can be welcomed and inscribed within the global movement of its existence. The "One's Own Body" thus presents itself as an ontological structure that maps the possible life of the subject, a unified and diversified totality of the directional and existential deployments of his body and his being. Structure of action of the body, spatial structure and structure of the subject's quest for meaning are synchronized.

- 8 But in order to maintain a certain orientation of one's being in every place, the subject must be moved by an "intentionality" which directs his being towards a term and which makes "all consciousness is consciousness of something" (Husserl, 1947: 28). Intentionality", another major concept of phenomenology, qualifies this disposition of consciousness as an act of relation of the subject towards the world. Now, according to Merleau-Ponty (1942: 203), "Our intentions find in movements (of the body) their natural clothing or their incarnation". The subject's consciousness is motor intentionality whose structure of action is open to the structure of the world in which it aims at a content. If the concept of "One's Own Body" assumes a structuring function, "intentionality" thus highlights the directional choice of the subjective movement orienting itself within this structure towards an objective. But what intentionality are we talking about? Is it not this intention which, through all experience, always aims at a knowledge, a vow of meaning, the elucidation of a meaning that is grasped throughout the world? And how can we know the world if not by deciphering through all its diversity a global logic that structures and animates the living? "We can only apprehend reality through its manifestations, that is to say, when it changes" (Simondon, 1964: 151). Now, living things are born and grow by forming bodies that divide, multiply and distance themselves in space. By transforming itself, life forms and preserves itself, because "life is not 'is', it is happening and never ceases to happen" (Henry, 1966: 174). So how, in all this directional and changing abundance of life, can we untangle a global logic other than by trying to establish a schema of relations operating between the parts of this "whole", and by unravelling the thread that unifies the different states of transformation of this whole? And finally, how can we establish these relations other than through our own movement, which itself is relation, transformation, participation in the movement of meaning and life of the world? To move is to unify what distance separates, to connect and assemble poles into a body of

relations that makes a system, to transform oneself in order to explore the structural totality “of a conservation of being through becoming” (Simondon, 1964: 25).

- 9 But the subject's intention is not simply to be an observer ; if he wants to grasp the thread of the world's life, he has to direct and arrange it according to its value, to detach it formally from its structural background, he wants to extract from the fabric of the world the thread of a thought and an action that characterizes him. A subject only feels like a subject if it structures itself, thinks, and is animated by a life that is its own. This life which he made his is formed by a certain way of delimiting, appropriating, leading, orienting the general movement of life on his own account. “Is life myself or the self of life? “asks M. Henry before answering “both at the same time, ... the self of life is precisely where I am joined to me” (Henry, 2004: 220). Now, any structure is an arrangement of parts organizing forces or directions that meet at certain points, at poles. So if the “One’s Own Body” is a total internal structure, whose structure of the world is an external equivalence, the movement of the subject within this internal structure would be a movement whose singularity is revealed by a particular trajectory linking certain structural poles within the “proper body“, simultaneously with its spatial course. The subject is “a small world within the big one, and it is even because of its particularity that it is necessary to the whole and that it opens up to it” (Merleau-Ponty, 2005: 256). The trajectory of the subject, while revealing its singularity to itself from the structural totality of the “One’s Own Body“ and the world, highlights, by reciprocity, a part of the structure. It reveals itself as a complementary part of the whole, a part that is a whole to itself. “The self of life is the permanent inner possibility of myself“ (Henry, 2004: 220). The “proper body“ is then conceived as an internal structural, “transmutatory” and directional matrix of the living, within which the intentional movement of transformation of the subject is oriented, which wants to reveal the singularity of its trajectory, by making emerge from this matrix totality a partial and singular unit that is intentionally distinguished from the whole without separating from it. This unity, part of the whole, highlights, through a constellation of poles, a certain motif of the whole, a structural moment of this whole. The subject tells a local history of the world that contains a potential logic of its globality.
- 10 Here we are apparently facing a conceptual paradox which leads us to the conceptual problematization of an oriented movement whose trajectory is at once impulse, transformation and conservation of the subject's intention through spatial discontinuity, a movement in which each part would contain the information of the whole, without denying the integrity of each part. This questions the fact that the status of distance, without which no movement in space is possible, would adopt within consciousness a value that manages to distinguish without separating, to bring together what space divides, to link complementary polarities by making up relationships through a “proper body“ functioning as a topological space. The topological nature of this space is that of a “qualitative space“, to be understood as “an originally corporeal sense of space, as a polymorphic medium that is not a classical geometric space, but a space that is ordered according to topological relations independent of any metric, and where the primary logic is that of neighborhood, separation, encroachment or envelopment“ (Duportail, 2009: 53). In other words, this topological space is a unitary arrangement of relations that separate places whose

reciprocal situations obey “the qualitative laws of relations of places [...], apart from any relation of measure and magnitude” (Listing, 1847: 26).

- 11 The “One’s Own Body” is thus presented as the internal and intangible architecture of qualitative relations between the differentiated poles of the body within a spatiality freed from distance, constructing a “bodily schema as the space of the proper body, [...], the sensory-motor, spatial and temporal unity of the body, [...], the whole anterior to the parts, which ensures their coherence, all in the order of a synthesis in which each movement is coordinated with the whole of the movements” (Testu: 2, 3). The “topological body” is a feeling of the body which simultaneously dissociates the places and articulates their presence in the movement of a whole, a reticular space which engages a co-presence of the parts within a dynamic structural continuity, a kinetic space traversed by metamorphic itineraries which from pole to pole construct a systemic permanence. But this internal system, not closed in on itself, deploys the cohesion of its structure to the outside through a “system of equivalence between the inside and the outside” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 178). Thus, any movement of the body in the space of the outside, is realized by reciprocity to a movement tracing an itinerary within the total structural unity of the “proper body”, of which each part, each place, each link instantly recognizes its belonging to the totality of a chain of becoming. In his movements from one place to another, the individual thus leaves a place that is one part of himself to a place that is always another part of himself, each part being conscious of being part of a whole. The subject is animated by an internal movement directed from him to himself through the world.

A unified “homelessness” oriented by the anti-gravity effort of the living

- 12 So far, we have tried to conceptually define, through the phenomenological approach, the simultaneous orientation of the subject in the world and its existence. It is now important to explore the material transposition and empirical construction of orientation in the action of the subject in connection with his body. According to my hypothesis, this movement of orientation is connected to the itinerary of the anti-gravity motor effort which, from the feet, lifts and raises the body to the vertical equilibrium from which the whole life promised by the horizontal displacement unfolds. Gravity, like an arrow pointing to this unique meeting point of the body with the ground, roots the uniqueness of its presence in the world and reveals the singularity of the subject which opposes the motor intentionality of its vertical straightening. But while anchoring the subject in a single point of attachment, gravity stimulates in him a will to move horizontally, which then becomes a mobile anchoring force, a labile adherence, a stability of the “here” in movement towards the elsewhere: “this ‘self’, maintained and preserved in movement, is carried with it to which this movement is carried.” (Henry, 2015: 316). At any point of its mobility, the individual recognizes himself in the motor intentionality of his antigravity vertical effort. The complementary interplay of gravity and mobility sets up a vertical immanence of the subject at every point of his horizontal transcendence. Through the vector of his motor resistance, the subject's intentionality directs the living path of his being through the itinerary of his body, and in space, which is its external skeleton.

- 13 The effort raising the standing body, thus precedes any horizontal slide of this verticality which, once conquered, seems at each stride of the Trailer in need to regain the uprising impulse of its height. "Verticality is an internal, continuous process, it's going upwards, continuing to climb, to erect oneself." (Anderson, 2015: 16). What the subject grasps in verticality is not the material order of the object. Height, in him, does not measure a distance to be physically grasped, but opens up a momentum that wants to unfold, to stretch far beyond a man's height and that only the act of horizontal exploration can probe. "We need horizontality to know that we are vertical" (Junca, 2015: 16). Unlike plant growth, the human subject evolves and explores its verticality by moving forward. It is through horizontal displacement, digging a depth to the horizon, that verticality rises in an increase, ascends an amplitude of its own. "Verticality is above all a passage between different levels" (Magro, 2015: 16). The Trailer's course is formed by a succession of lifts, jumps, supports and bounces of the body which, from here to here, hoist and weave the rhythmic becoming of its verticality. Horizontality is the field of action of a diversified verticality of the subject, which from one point to another engages a differentiated repetition of itself, erecting an inner itinerancy. Through all its movements, this verticality remains internally centered on the right of the body. Anchored in its immanence and inseparable from itself, it can only distance itself from itself by analogy to the horizontal movement which appears as a spatialization of its value, a thickening of its depth, a crossing and migration out of itself through the distance travelled in space. Horizontality asserts itself in an external and topographical action, whereas verticality comes up as an internal and topological experience. By advancing horizontally, the trailer ascends vertically within himself. In other words, by advancing, the subject synchronizes a double movement, that of a verticalized body evolving horizontally in the global space of the world, and that of a vertical, internal and local force evolving within the totality of his body. Through the analogical interweaving of vertical immanence and horizontal transcendence of his being, the subject's consciousness founds a self-oriented movement, which from a vertical anchorage within itself moves towards and opens up to a horizontal exploration of itself, outside itself. In every place, the subject is thus situated within a globality to be traversed by itself, a globality which is the movement of a whole, a body in which the plural and living movement of the subject is founded, diversified, unified, oriented and progressed.
- 14 Therefore, the verticality of the subject is an inverted and reverse gravity whose path arranges and maintains the formal balance of the body. For if the motor effort propels the subject's movement against gravity, the notion of balance then intervenes as a cohesive weighting of these opposing forces, as a stable and permanent state is circulating through change. This function of balance and center of inertia remaining fixed in the transformation of movement is in my opinion anatomically carried by the central position of the human trunk, situated at the crossroads of the external limbs and the vertebral axis. The trunk in fact contains the seat of all the engineering of organic transformation which, from the ingested, drunk and breathed matter, generates and organizes all the forces perpetuating the subject's life movement. Yet the activity of this organic, self-organized life, without the subject's will, is hidden behind the opacity and compactness of a trunk whose flexibility is less eloquent than that of the other parts of the body. The trunk of his body remains for the subject an "unthought" of himself, unthought in which a powerful transmutation of his forces is nevertheless centralized, an inner crossroads metabolizing the action of the legs, the

grasping of the arms and the thinking of the skull, as if the external limbs of the body, by their movements, were acting outside on behalf of this closed interiority of the trunk. The trunk appears as the agent of transformation of the potentialities of the body and of the subject, the immobile and impenetrable Centre within which the organs orchestrate and balance all its movements, metacenter of the “topological own body”.

Conclusion

- 15 I will direct this reflection towards all the possibilities that the experience of the running body, in a mountain trail, leaves to be explored and whose investigative stake would allow us to understand how the “One’s Own Body” conducts the experience, constructs the meaning, scaffolds the ontological project of the subject and thus frames the real. The “topological body”, the internal substance of all lived experience, would thus guide all the subject’s actions and thoughts. The complementary interplay of gravity and anti-gravity motor effort constitutes the first line of reflection of a system of directional vectors orienting the intentionality of the subject. “Anatomy is destiny” (Freud, 1969: 121). Anatomy, especially that of the trunk, would constitute a second track. Indeed, it would embody the cartography of this “topological body” whose organs of the trunk would constitute the azimuthal points, the transmutation milestones, the articulatory nodes of a trajectory of transformation that man marks out and connects by forming a constellation of poles that crystallizes the singular figure of his subject. The “space spaces” (Heidegger, 2015: 41), organ organizes: the movements of the body and the subject resonate with a structural dimension of motifs whose organs constitute poles and milestones, orienting the subject within himself and in space. Any movement of the body would be constructed by reference to the internal architecture, intangible, indivisible, without distance and without scale of this “topological body” whose polymorphic and dynamic structure manages to orient all dimensions, all forms, and all spatial trajectories of the subject. This “topological body”, mediator of the real, ties the inside to the outside, by the transposition and spatialization of its structure which transforms the qualitative into the quantitative, the intensive into the extensive, the virtual into the dimensional, the closed into the open, the omnipresent into the directional, a topology into topography, the essence into existence. This structure acts outside according to instances (balance, tonus, laterality, symmetry, gravity, support, rhythm, horizontality, verticality, breathing, digestion etc.), strongly present in the experience of the mountain trail, of which it will be a question of grasping how they interact, synchronize and complement each other to constitute and singularize an orientation of the subject that forms the uniqueness of his being. This conception of space and the experience of reality, brought to light by the mountain trail, would reveal the importance for urban planning of echoing or not the leitmotifs of a “topological body” which remains for the human subject his only source of invention and inspiration. In this perspective, man’s conception of his own body and his subject is presented as the foundation, the trajectory and the intangible keystone of the subject-world edifice, which leads the human subject in the planning of life and the ecumene, because “the relationship of humans to the world [...] is [...] the condition of possibility of finding oneself” (Patocka, 1999: 49).

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