Reconsidering the categories of «Gaze» and «Gesture»: W.G. Sebald’s «Austerlitz» understood as an attempt to return to literature after cinema

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Abstract.
Using a variety of methods, among which comparative cultural anthropology and interdisciplinary research carried out across various disciplines, the author theorizes on the categories of "gaze" and "gesture" as applied to socio-economic and cultural history of Europe, with his research being based on the already classical socio-philosophical and economic study of these categories in their relation to the Paris of the XIX-th century offered by Walter Benjamin. In doing so, the author relies not only on scientific and philosophic approaches, but also on artistic intuition of writers (Sebald, Borges), which allows him to hypothesize that W.G. Sebald’s "Austerlitz" is a major and seminal work of literature driven by an attempt to return to the literary after experiencing the cinematic.

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Both “gesture” and “gaze” as categories of, simultaneously, mundane existence and philosophical reflection, first became overtly noticeable as the symptoms of some of the most important transformations in the society under high capitalism at the second half of the 19th century. The interior’s dwellers – the bourgeoisie of the 19th century – ‘had definitely lost its gestures’ [1] by the end of that century, and, therefore, refused to face reality, stubbornly resisting any attempts by this latter to enter their cushioned apartments [2]. It is precisely because of this that the mass literature of the period witnessed the rise of detective short stories and novels. The detective is someone who constantly searches for the clues to the traces of human beings and their actions in the world where ‘warmth is ebbing away from things’ [3]. As the gesture was vanishing from experience (understood here, of course, as W. Benjamin’s Erfahrung), countless attempts were being made to capture it. Among those latter one can recall, apart from detective stories and the creation of overtly interiorized apartments, the experiments by Eadweard Maybridge, the colossal efforts by Abi Warburg and Gilles de la Tourette [1] as well as the invention of the cinema.

The outside was, meanwhile, left to the flâneur, for whom the street was a form of the interieur. His ‘leisurely appearance as a personality is his protest against the division of labour which makes people into specialists. It is also his protest against their industriousness. Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. But this attitude did not prevail; Taylor, who popularized the watchword “Down with dawdling!” carried the day” [4].

For the flâneur, as well as for the detective, the gesture and the gaze constituted their main ethos: ‘On his peregrinations the man of the crowd lands at a late hour in a department store where there still are many customers. He moves about like someone who knows his way around the place. Were there multi-storied department stores in Poe’s day? No matter; Poe lets the restless man spend an ’hour and a half,
or thereabouts' in this bazaar. 'He entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and vacant stare’' [4].

In one of the short stories by Borges, *The Zahir*, we can find a remarkable passage, which is, perhaps, an unexpected encounter with the flâneur, although it is related to the Buenos Aires of the mid-20th century:

‘I went neither to the Basilica del Pilar that morning nor to the cemetery; I took a subway to Constitución Station and from Constitución to San Juan and Boedo. On an impulse, I got off at Urquiza; I walked toward the west and south; I turned left and right, with studied randomness, at several corners, and on a street that looked to me like all the others I went into the first tavern I came to, ordered a gin, and paid with the Zahir. I half closed my eyes behind the dark lenses of my spectacles, and managed not to see the numbers on the houses or the name of the street. That night, I took a sleeping pill and slept soundly’ [5].

The story’s protagonist’s desperate wandering all around Buenos Aires, caused by his insomnia and progressing infatuation with the Zahir, are clearly reminiscent of the situationists’ dérive being its negative anticipation containing the fetish and phantasmagoria of the commodity (namely, the Zahir) as its elusive center. One of the shrewd definitions of a drift fits perfectly the activities of the main hero, who is performing automatic writing under the impact of strong spirits, which is essentially an activity related to flânerie. Indeed, what can be noticed in the excerpt above are, first of all, the gaze ('from behind the dark lenses of spectacles') and the gait. The latter is never mentioned overtly, although it runs through the whole passage with the text becoming its imprint or affinity.

Neither the gaze, nor the gesture, however, can be considered to be merely random attributes of this or that person. Being instead the symptoms of the whole of society they conceal philosophical implications into which I am going to have a closer look. The gaze of the flâneur, and this is its most visible transformation, has been since the heyday of flânerie transformed into ‘the vision machine’ (Paul Virilio), the totality of the apparatuses of the control
society (one can remember, for instance, the omnipresent glances of surveillance cameras), having been alienated from the human being, but also – into the countless glances of mobile phones that are constantly taking pictures of the city and its urbanscapes. This activity is not perceived nowadays as a separate process of taking images of reality; instead, the city is becoming gradually dissolved in the media, losing its visible body and becoming a mixed reality environment, for these images now are the city, its irremovable and constituting part. The city, as well as politics according to an apt remark by Willem Flusser [6], lives in order to be turned into an image. Capitalism, thus, fulfilled the dreams of the Situationists who, in their reveries, were dreaming about the abolishment of the old division of time into working time, time for entertainment and spare time, having inverted all of these into the utopia of the cybercity, the city, however, still producing surplus value. Within this digital space, as it may seem, there is no room and no chance for the tangible, the gesture – only for the countless splinters into which the flaneur’s gaze had been scattered: ‘Cyberspace is a no-place that nothing physical can exist. This is an ultimate form of garbage/trash where no body can survive’ [7].

Psychogeography, thus, has turned into ‘the specter of a might-have-been future against the background of the past that had lost its sense’ [8]. Jacques Austerlitz, the protagonist of the novel Austerlitz (2001) by W.G. Sebald – one of the most important novels to understand the longings of the post-psychogeographical world, is none other than the flâneur’s melancholic descendant, wandering all around Europe to find the clues to his own past by means of questioning every architectural or aesthetical form he encounters. For Austerlitz, the assemblage of architectural edifices, mostly from the age of high capitalism of the 19th century, ever-transforming landscapes, in which culture and nature appear to be intertwined by means of dying and dilapidation of both the artificial and the natural, and reason’s everlasting yet unfulfilled dreams of total order and regulation are all able to answer the enigma of his biography:

‘And whenever I think of the museum in Terezín now, said
Austerlitz, I see the framed ground plan of the star-shaped fortifications, color-washed in soft tones of gray-brown for Maria Theresia, her Imperial Highness in Vienna who had commissioned it, and fitting neatly into the folds of the surrounding terrain, the model of a world made by reason and regulated in all conceivable respects’ [9].

In order to get these answers he must conform to one rule – to treat space the way people usually treat each other, that is, to establish an ethical relationship with the past, focusing not on the evident answers that culture usually readily provides us with, but on marginal details and hidden evidence. This, in turn, is a sign of the ongoing transformation of collective memory which, from some point in the recent past, seems to have become focused on the invisible as well as it had been previously focused on the visible. For Austerlitz the visible remains of older cultural landscapes or existing edifices are only a starting point from which he unfolds his historicizing gaze into history up to the point when he reaches the depths of time, when unpopulated and virtually untouched landscapes float to the surface of his memory, the latter being in this case to a lesser degree memory than imagination. This strict historical imagination allows him to envisage things that were, but it can also serve the goal of re-piecing together the existing fragments for the yet-to-be-achieved future. This dimension of flânerie of the 21st century is not fully evident in the text, however, so it will demand some efforts to disclose this strategy.

Given that in English, as well as in some other European languages, the meaning of the word gesture can be twofold (it can be either 'a movement that you make with your hands, your head or your face to show a particular meaning' or 'something that you do or say to show a particular feeling or intention' [10]), it seems that Austerlitz performs his gestures in both of these meanings (the connection between the two cannot be, of course, considered to be random). Historically, the gait, being 'one of the most common human gestures' [1], moved, after the loss of the gesture, into the realm of film: 'In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss. An age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed...
by them’ [1]. The camera absorbed the flâneur’s gaze and gestures and did not return them back. Since then human societies have undergone drastic changes in the second half of the 20th century and the question is, then, what happened to the gesture in the realm of the digital. Sebald’s novel can provide us with some draft answers.

Indeed, Austerlitz is a dedicated pedestrian, able to walk on foot for hours and hours, drifting all around Europe for years. Being an art historian with a specific interest in the history of fortification he knows far too well that culture has got bloody footsteps, as Heiner Müller once put it, and he makes this knowledge a cornerstone of his personal ethics. I suggest that Austerlitz not only sees things differently, but also moves literally in a different way the flâneur of the verge of the 19th and 20th centuries did. His gestures, being innervated with the ethics mentioned above, anticipate new and, hopefully, free gesticulation which will be marked with the abandonment of the previous fissure between the two meanings of the word gesture as well as with the complete abandonment of controlling and disciplinary ambitions; his bodily movements become a reflection and counterpart of his ethos.

Later on in the story the hero of The Zahir discovers a description of his madness in a book published in Wroclaw in the year 1899 (‘A short time later, in a bookshop on Calle Sarmiento, I exhumed a copy of Julius Barlach’s Urkunden zur Geschichte der Zahirsage (Breslau, 1899)’ [5]). Such a book, which, of course, had never existed, as is often the case with Borges’s imaginary bibliographies, could also have been published in Berlin, Paris or London, or several other cities. These cities, however, would have been not just random places; according to a different logic, that of a symptom, they represent those points where the veil of commodification bursts open and manifests itself in the most evident and clear form – that of a splinter, a detail by which the whole can be recognized.

Thus, in order to understand and connect the past and the present, W.G. Sebald’s “Austerlitz” might be read as a seminal work of literature driven by an attempt to return to the literary after experiencing the cinematic, a work of fiction
in the era of technical images (W.Flusser) and emerging newer forms and kinds of media.

Jacques Austerlitz, then— the protagonist of the above-quoted book by W.G. Sebald— is none other that the heir of flâneurs that inhabit pages by W. Benjamin and the XIX-th century writers that he commented on.

Benjamin, being one of the first truly urban thinkers of the 20th century, can be called so not only because his works were primarily focused on the attempts to rethink the city as a new natural condition of man, but also because all of his texts are to a certain extent isomorphic to the city’s topography and planning. One can find in his texts more obvious concepts, visible ones, related to the boulevards of Paris after the reconstruction by Haussmann; concepts half-drowned into the body of his thought, similar to the loggias of his Berlin childhood or the narrow streets of Marseilles; concepts that were left rather shapeless, akin to the hectic and chaotic urban life of the Moscow of the 1920s. The abovementioned four cities, and Naples, about which there is a separate piece of the thinker’s writing [3], are the most well-known locations pinned to the semi-transparent map of Benjamin’s ever-elusive urban experience. From this perspective, Belgium— to a Benjaminesque description of which a huge part of “Austerlitz” is dedicated— is a perfect fit into the imaginary geography of W. Benjamin’s works, the geography we might think of as his great project aimed at mapping the Modernity as such still continues, although perhaps carried out by other researchers and in a more tacit and subtle manner.

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