

What is a Path?

Forms of movement in a global world

1.

There is no path. For a path is never one. A path always already implies a ,where from‘ and a ,where to‘, a before and an after, the possibilities of turning around, getting lost or going astray. Figures such as the crossroads and the fork in the road are ineluctably part of the grammar of the path. Most importantly, however, there is a difference between the path as a given material track or groove and as the process of motion.

In the context of determination of kinesis in his *Physics*, Aristotle constructs a direct connection between the locomotion of an object and the path traversed by the object. This distinction suggests a dual focus: Either you focus on the path travelled, i.e. on the trajectory traversed by the body within a certain timespan, or you focus on the body in motion itself.

This alternative appears to suggest a distinction also outside the narrow field of physical motion which would describe two fundamental alternatives in the experience of a path which can be found already in the classical era: on the one hand Oedipus, who slays his father on the crossroads, on the other hand Ulysses, who carves out his trackless trajectories on the level surface of the sea.

In the hodology that we want to suggest here this corresponds to a typology of paths either as a ‘grooving’, as a system of pre-existing grooves, or as a form of motion. Two fundamental forms of narration seem to correspond to this typology: tragedy and novel. When Oedipus slays his father at the crossroads of two grooved paths, this encounter of two quarrelsome parties is already pre-determined by fate. One comes from the oracle in Delphi, which has foretold him exactly the fate that is about to be fulfilled, the other tries in vain to escape his fate by leaving what he believes is his parents‘ home in Korinthos. They meet at the crossroads, with all the well-known consequences. In this narrative the structure of fate and the structure of cross-roads are homologous. The cross-roads are at the same time a figure of ineluctability and the point of departure for the drama. There is no escape.

By contrast, all that Ulysses really wants is to go home to his wife. But due to Poseidon’s interventions he is again and again thrown to far-flung shores. His wanderings present themselves as a chain of stations which are traversed without inner coherence or higher necessity. The narrative does not provide us with a map of the navigated space; it is entirely devoted to the dimension of the diachronic. The connections emerge not as decisive or hesitant orientations in a certain direction at certain forks in the path but as unpredictable drifting from one place to the next. Neither of these models is limited to the field of literature; rather, we are convinced that to this day they represent fundamental ways of thinking about and experiencing paths.

The groove model can be seen as conservative and the motion model as progressive. This distinction seems to be profoundly linked to the *techniques* of locomotion. Forms of locomotion, such as walking, which require relatively few technical support devices (stick, hat, hypodemata: „He tied on his sandals...“) are always dependent on grooves: paths, canyons, crevices, ridges, channels, bridges, straits, viaducts, coastal lines, etc. By the same token groove-less forms of motion are always linked to technically more advanced vehicles: the horse Pegasus, the wings of Icarus, the ship of the Argonauts, the nomads‘ tent, the Oriental caravans.

Both the body-centred locomotion of walking and the vehicle-centred forms of locomotion are constituted at the boundary line between geographical conditions and their technical-cultural formations. The more technical the vehicle, the more the geographical space will be levelled, regardless of its „natural“ conditions. And, vice versa, the first things that a hiker in a mostly smooth and level space will look for are grooves, however minimal they may be (streams in a forest, footprints in the sand).

In his notion of paths Martin Heidegger built on the model of grooves. The notion of „forest paths“ [Holzwege] evokes a dense network of paths in the undergrowth, a labyrinth of forest and jungle that only experienced servants [Knechte] are able to traverse. In spite of the confusing complexity of the structure (for non-servants), we are essentially dealing with a nostalgic attachment to old forms of walking and to the grooved path. The aim of the hodological structures proposed here, however, is to counteract the technology blindness not only of Heidegger but also of various other cultural historical analyses that focus on walking, rambling etc. by emphasizing both aspects of „pathness“. The only places in which we still walk are cruise ships, train stations, airports, pedestrian zones, shopping malls and the parking spaces of motorway rest-stops. At most we walk on cross-trainers in the fitness studio in front of video projections of the last half-marathon. In George A. Romero's trail-blazing zombie movie *Dawn of the Dead* only the dead still walk, while the humanoid survivors use helicopters, cars and motorcycles. That is why the zombies prefer to lurk in gas stations in order then to pursue their victims, who are no longer used to walking, with incredible speed. A state of frantic stillness is characteristic of our era. While we used to say that those who return from a journey have a story to tell, today those who have stopped moving have the most stories to tell: The screen as a gateway to the world does not need to be traversed since it is itself a vehicle.

Against those who feel nostalgic about the loss of walking it must be said that from the period of early modernity on a motion-oriented understanding of paths begins to be spread. It is connected both with a qualitative transformation of notions of space and with a revolution in the technologies of locomotion. The source of these developments is to be found in the increased navigability of the world oceans as well as the emergence of a notion of space that is as universal as it is homogenous and infinite. One of the most important media as well as the paradigmatic machine for the levelling of space is the metric grid, from the revolution of cartography as a precondition for Columbus' voyage to the Cartesian coordinate system. Generally speaking there has been a transition from the classical notion of space as a container to the notion of space as infinite extension, from the local to the global. Step by step a change in transportation technologies can be observed: road construction, introduction of a network of postal stations and regular traffic by stage coach. The nautical machines of space levelling are complemented by new ones: The construction of a railroad network enables the experience of cutting through the traversed space without any resistance, an experience that is yet enhanced in aviation, let alone in the navigation through data streams.

We suggest the following analytical scheme for a motion-oriented analysis of paths in which we distinguish between three basic types of movement:

1. Progression: $A \rightarrow B$
2. Digression: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow \dots$
3. Transgression: $A \rightarrow \infty$

Example: A woman enters the street in order to buy a car. To that end she goes to a used-car salesman who conducts his business in the outskirts of town (progression). While she is on the

way it begins to rain so heavily that she seeks refuge in a cafe. There she runs into her ex-husband who has just split up with his girlfriend. They talk for a while until she finally steps outside to resume her journey. It is still raining. She therefore decides to take a bus. Only later does she realize that she got on the wrong bus. When she gets off, the bus has already left the town (digression). At that point the Buddha Maitreya appears to her in a golden halo and touches her with his umbrella (transgression).

Or: The people of Israel are enslaved in Egypt. Moses receives a command from God to lead the Israelites to Canaan. Following a number of signs and miracles they depart (progression). The Red Sea swallows Pharaoh's army, and they reach the desert. It is infinite and empty. They are thirsty. Moses strikes the side of a mountain with his staff, and water pours forth. They are hungry. Manna rains from the sky. Pestilence comes upon them, and Moses erects an iron snake. Those who have faith are healed. Moses leaves them and ascends the Tabor. They make a golden calf and pray to it as their idol. Thus they lose sight of their aim and wander around in the miserable desert for forty years (digression). All the while, however, Jehovah follows them in a pillar of fire and never leaves his people (transgression 1). Moses dies at the threshold to the Holy Land, and only his death makes the completion of the earthly progression possible (transgression 2).

These examples demonstrate that the three types of movement rarely occur on their own. Usually one will find a combination of two or all three types. Consider, for example, the discovery of protein synthesis as described by Hans-Jörg Rheinberger: A team of researchers in Boston was working on the analysis of cancer cells in the late 1940s. The internal logic of their experiments lead them to observe something which they had not been looking for: processes in the cell interior which would subsequently be explained as synthesis of proteins through the interplay of various cell organs and ribonucleic acid (combination of progression-digression-transgression). On the mountain Hiei near Kyoto one will find the monastery Enryaku-ji, whose monks are dedicated to walking meditation. One of the most difficult exercises is to walk in a circle that has been constructed specifically for that purpose for weeks without sleeping even a single second (from digression to transgression). Or learning a new piece of music: After days of hard work all of a sudden it seems to play itself (from progression to transgression). Or Michael Snow's „Wavelength“: Ever so slowly the camera zooms in on the photograph of the ocean surface on the wall of a room. As soon as the photograph fills the frame, the room suddenly changes: Now one finds oneself „inside“ the ocean landscape (from progression to transgression).

Pliny reports that the painter Protogenes tried in vain to paint the froth at the flews of a dog. But much as he tried he would always fail. In his anger and disappointment with this failure of his painterly skills he throws his rag at the painting. And before it has even reached the ground the froth at the dog's mouth has become so deceptively real that no one could have painted it better (from digression to progression). Someone has a vision of the Virgin Mary, enters a monastery and is told by the abbot to clean the monastery floors every day for the rest of his life (from transgression to digression). After 40 years Iggy Pop awakes from a drug trip. Then he makes a new album (from transgression to progression).

But what about circular movement? Has it not been the patron for the notion of perfection per se from classical antiquity to early modernity, as Blumenberg showed in his *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*? And does not Nietzsche return to the form of circular movement with his „most difficult thought“, the notion of Eternal Return? We have a dual answer: a simile and a formula. Let us take Nietzsche by his word: Nietzsche dies in 1900 and is immediately reborn in the year 1844. He lives exactly the same life and dies in 1900. Then he is reborn in

1844. And so forth ad infinitum. If we write this situation as a formula we can see that the apparently circular motion can be represented as a combination of Type 1 and Type 2 without any substantial priority, since it is the infinite periodic repetition of a finite digressive series – as a combination between Type 1 and Type 2 (a single life of Nietzsche from birth to death) – which brings only Type 2 into play (the series of Eternal Return):

$$A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow \dots$$

In addition Deleuze showed in *Difference and Repetition* that strictly speaking there is no repetition of the form $A \rightarrow A \rightarrow A \rightarrow \dots$, which would be homologous to a circular movement, since every repetition implies a difference that consists at least in the place of the repeated within the formula. Instead of writing A in different places we therefore write the formula of digression: $A \rightarrow B \rightarrow C \rightarrow D \rightarrow \dots$

It is worth noting that the combination of two or all three basic types does not imply any necessary order in the sense that everything would ultimately amount to transcendence. That would be a quasi-religious teleology, which would explain quite a few things but certainly not everything. Unlike the groove model of the path the „events“ which both internally structure the basic types of movement and link them in a chain are not given by the form of the grooves but rather occur as unpredictable facts. Only in retrospect when looking back on the „journey“ will these events have formed stations. The movement according to the pattern in Aristotle's *Physics* is a continuous process in which no moment of movement can be given priority over others. Accordingly the scissions in the movement types which we have represented are formed only by external events: beginning, end, lightning, thunder, and the sound of music. In Dante's *Divina Commedia* Ulysses, caught in the eighth circle of hell, tells the story of a bold journey which he set out on once again after his arrival back home in Ithaca: With a group of adventurous companions he went beyond the Pillars of Hercules, the boundary of the *oikoumene* in classical Antiquity, to be flung onto the pathless watery desert of the ocean. If that movement had been continued ad infinitum we would have had to doubt the completeness of our typology, but Ulysses and his men fail at the foot of the Purgatory Mountain and descend into hell. But what if by accident they had chosen their path such that the Purgatory Mountain had not blocked their way? Would they not have described a motion which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* call with full justification a „vanishing line“? And would we not have had to add a fourth type to our three types of movement, namely the form $A \rightarrow ?$ Perhaps. Unless every movement of escape leads to a transgression. But that remains to be demonstrated.

2.

As we have already indicated, both models of movement, i.e. that of the existing grooves and that of free forms of motion, imply specific aesthetics, and we had initially designated these as tragedy (for grooves) and epic (for free motion). Progress along a grooved or un-grooved path has always been one of the fundamental human experiences, and it has had its echoes in corresponding aesthetic forms: in the progress within the sequence of a narrative or from story to story as in Boccaccio's *Decameron* or in the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights*; in the progress of voices in a song, a fugue or a canon; in the sequence of scenes in a play or a movie; in the series of images in a predella, a cycle of frescoes or a comic strip. The experience of progression inseparably links the change in space to the passing of time and relates both to the progressing subject. It therefore always already creates an area of the proto-aesthetic, whose potentials may or may not be realized in artistic form.

The aesthetic potential of the un-grooved free motion, to which we had assigned the epic, consists in digression, delay, distraction, postponement, infinitization, in a progressive motion. Paradigms include Homer's *Ulysses* as well as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Schubert's late piano pieces. In these as well as in the rituals and penitences of many religions are contained all the possibilities of (aesthetic) transgression in digression. In Kant's *Critique of Judgement* the aesthetic experience consists in the free play of sensuality and reason as ever new concepts are brought to bear on sensual experience without any of them being able to lay claim to absolute and ultimate validity. Aesthetic enjoyment consists in the infinite digression of judgement. It would be wrong to say that the sense data in themselves already implied all possible rational judgements; instead, a space of possibilities is opened up, no more. Its boundaries are typically blurred. It is only in the digression that the possibilities of judgement are realized and it becomes clear what can and cannot be concrete possibilities of judgement.

A particular variety of aesthetic digression consists in blocking progression. Not digression or infinite progression are emphasized but rather cutting and blocking a movement so that it gets stuck and is forced to begin anew. Consider avant-garde techniques such as montage or collage, the voice of Samuel Beckett in *Worstward Ho* with its repeated attempts to start over, the cut-up lines in Franz Josey Czernin's sonnets, the micro-themes in late Beethoven, or Peter Kubelka's films. The proliferation of montage-like techniques in modernity may be connected to the increase in space-levelling machines. Various digressive divagations are becoming simpler and more commercial, for example in the form of troop movements, car journeys with and without family, air travel, cruises, adventure holidays and, not to be forgotten, since the 1950s also in the form of TV series, whose legacy as a temporal matrix of what is called „leisure time“ has now been taken over by the aimless vagaries of internet surfing. As affordable „cheap“ divagations are being made available and propagated to everyone by the leisure and pleasure industries, certain avant-gardes find themselves referred to counter-acting techniques of scansion, blockage, stoppage, caesuras, punctuation, *différance*. Often these effects are achieved exactly in a mimesis of space-levelling techniques. Michel Butor's real-time description of a train journey from Paris to Rome in *La Modification* may serve as an example.

3.

Anyone can embark on an aesthetic digression, always and at any time, even if it does not lead to a material manifestation as in the case of Xavier de Maistre, the 18-year-old officer in the French army who was placed on 14 days of house arrest in Turin and followed Sterne in writing his *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, a work which is as trivial as it is phantastic. Every prisoner can dream and tell or listen to stories, even if he is not exactly the Marquis de Sade or one of Jean Genet's lascivious imprisoned sailors. The question of proto-aesthetic movement in material space is, however, intimately linked to the problem of power. One always needs to ask: For whom and under what conditions is it possible, permitted or prohibited to change places? Not everyone is allowed to use the roads; refugees in Europe often have no more than the narrow spaces of their deportation cells; the conditions of access to space-levelling machines such as cars, planes or high-velocity trains are subject to economic parameters which are hugely unequal on a global scale. Perhaps we can follow Deleuze and Guattari in assuming for the field of the political an opposition between possibilities of movement and control over a territory.

At various times the right to move about was a privilege, at other times privilege consisted in the right to be sedentary and have control over an area. In each society the potentials for movement and the claims to power are assigned different social values and distributed differently. The Minoan palace era has different distribution patterns than the Early

Renaissance in Florence, the period of Stuart Restoration in England or present-day China with its armies of migrant workers. The emergence of early modern territorial power in the Holy Roman Empire and in the North Italian signories is crossed again and again by uncontrolled mass movements: pilgrimages, crusades, flagellants' movements. People left everything behind and emigrated. Officials had to take steps against them to contain the movement. This also formed the background for institutions such as the Venetian scuole: re-territorialization of escape movements in the form of processions. On the other hand the power of control in early modernity, unlike the eras of Genghis Khan or Karl the Great, was closely linked to places. Those who wished to be uncontested in their positions of power were not able to simply leave. Consider, for example, the strict rules regarding the serenissima of the Venetian Doges: only exceptionally was he allowed to leave the city. Another example are the great plagues: In his book *A Journal of the Plague Year* William Defoe describes the response of officials to an outbreak of the plague in London in 1665: While the court and everyone who could afford to do so left the city, the common people were locked in their homes and guarded. This zoning was meant to contain the epidemic. In *Madness and Civilization* Michel Foucault describes the extraordinary mobility of all kinds of outsiders, beggars, vagabonds and lunatics in the early modern era: They were excluded from the walled-in areas of cities and banned to the levelled spaces in the surroundings or simply sent to a different city, from which they would again be excluded and sent on. In this digressive motion Foucault sees an extraordinary freedom, which was gradually replaced by the containment milieus of baroque hospitals.

In our era of global levelling of space the system of movement regulation is reconfigured: On the one hand there are those who both have fixed property and are able to go everywhere (physically and virtually), i.e. those who act both as „autochthonous“ and as „world aggressive“, to use terms which with regards to partisans were still mutually exclusive for Carl Schmitt. On the other hand there are those who have nothing and cannot or must not leave their space. The conditions of access to the machines of space-levelling are extremely selective. As we know from countless stories and legends, in former times a traveller could easily pass himself off as someone else and would usually return as a different person. That was the aim with which one undertook the journey: to Mecca, to the Holy Land, the journeyman years, etc. Journey and transgression were interlinked. The specific dialectics of a present-day Japanese, European, or American is different: Only in virtual reality on the internet does he have a fluid identity, while usually stuck in front of the screen. Once he travels he is fixed to an unchangeable identity by the biometric marks in his passport. The body again comes into its „right“.

Only those who belong to a particular place, a particular state, a particular class, in other words, only those who have citizens' rights, can nowadays move with relative ease in global space. Otherwise they are refugees. In *Homo Sacer* Giorgio Agamben undertook a precise analysis of this connection, which has been characteristic of the modern era since the 19th century. Modern refugees are the antipodes of Foucault's wandering fools of early modernity. What they want is essentially as smooth a passage as possible from A to B. Due to the legal and economic restrictions they are subject to, however, they must embark on a lengthy, risky and expensive digression via containers, freight rooms, ports, inflatable dinghies, traffickers' caravans and refugee camps. What seemed prior to departure a relatively compact zone which one simply had to cross on the way to a new life becomes wider and produces unconceivable ramifications. The space of passage becomes a permanent waiting room, which represents the opposite of the space of aesthetic digression and which, once the destination has been reached, is often prolonged into slavery or months of deportation custody. Privileged people also know spaces of passage which restrict them in their possibilities of motion and impose on

them stoppages and micro-motions within a confined space. Marc Augé called them „non-spaces“: train stations, airports, border crossings, etc. They do, however, primarily function as valves which regulate access to machines of space-levelling, not as zones of permanent abode.

As citizen of the fictional Eastern European state of Krakozhia in Steven Spielberg's 2004 movie *The Terminal*, Tom Hank's character is stranded in John F. Kennedy airport, embodying a humoristic hybrid between refugee and passenger, who falls in love with the beautiful air hostess and like E.T. in the end returns home. The movie is based on the story of the Iranian Mehran Karimi Nasseri who for 18 years between 1988 and 2006 lived on the site of Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris as a stateless refugee under the name of „Sir Alfred Mehran“ before being taken to a hospital and later to a homeless shelter in Paris. It seems that the American citizenship which the producers of the Hollywood movie supposedly held out to him as a possibility came to nothing. From an article in *Die Zeit* in November 2003: „And love, Sir Alfred, was there anything in those long years? Paris, he says with a mysterious smile, Paris is a city without pleasure. And children? Did you not dream of having children? Children exist. You cannot dream them. Do you sometimes feel lonely, Sir Alfred? Yes, sometimes I do. But that is what I have my radio for. [...] For four years now I have been a winner. The Americans pay all my expenses. I am only waiting for the credit card. Then everything becomes easier. And the tape, Sir Alfred? Perhaps the tape was not allowed to run because the Americans would not allow it? Sir Alfred nods gladly, and his smile suddenly is no longer distant at all. Almost as if he was happy to hear a decent question at last. The TV people are making a movie about me, and I will travel to California. And then I try to get a passport in Canada or in the United States. No longer in Europe. Here everything is far too complicated“.

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