

Marc Desportes, *Paysages en mouvement: Transports et perception de l'espace XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005). 413 pp.

*By Marta Macedo**

“*Paysages et mouvement*” aims both at a scholarly public of historians of technology and a broader range of readers interested in mobility issues. It is a richly illustrated book which describes the transformations of the built environment of modernity taken from the point of view of the interactions between the *individual* and the *forms* he inhabits. Transportation, commonly understood by traditional historiography as one of the main agents of change of collective experience, should also be used – the author suggests – as a way to recognize the “spatial dimension of human existence” (p.13). The book is chronologically organized offering a classic sequential narrative that begins with the roads of the Enlightenment (1730-1770), follows with railways (1830-1860) and automobiles (1900-1920), and concludes with twentieth century high-ways (1920-1940). To present each subject the author built a rigid three block structure supported by extended bibliographical resources. The first block includes the genealogy of the transportation system and its economic, social and political context; the second depicts the system’s features and its influence on the forms of appropriating the physical environment; the third

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and final block uses traveller's experiences to show how changes in the ways of seeing defined new landscapes. The careful study of interdependencies, namely those between technology and culture, is one of the author's most cherished topics.

The new network of roads of the eighteenth century is presented as a coherent global project for the construction, integration and enhancement of the French territory. Following Desportes, the straight lines imposed on road design by the *Ponts et Chaussées* engineers, besides their clear esthetical and philosophical implications, made a crucial contribution together with the new means of transportation for improving travelling conditions. The increase in comfort allowed for new ways of appreciating the travel route directly connected to the emergence of a new artistic genre – the landscape painting – that, together with the diffusion of travel accounts, became a very influent way of educating the visual sense. For Desportes, the road landscape captured by the moving vision is a rich and complex discovery that calls upon the enlightened “traveller's sensibility”.

Concerning railways, the book advocates for understanding them as occupying the centre of a constellation of innovations developed to increase speed in an economical and safe way. Trains transformed travelling into an ingredient of everyday life collectively experienced, safeguarding class distinctions. Individuals were exposed to a new, many times traumatic, sensorial experience, with their bodies plunged into a material technical dimension. The transitory nature of reality revealed by speed shaped new ways of

perception. As photography compensated for the limitations of the human eye, fixing minimum details, impressionist painters exposed the fragility of vision and tried to capture the ephemeral. Desportes shows the resemblances between this “artificial landscape” and a moving panorama.

The twentieth century welcomed the automobile and the user was invited to take part in the action. The car invaded the urban space and immediately new conflicts arose among the many users of the streets. Technical improvements, norms, regulations, codes and signals came together to coordinate traffic and eliminate the frictions that obstructed the flow of cars in the city. In clear contrast with those trains limited to a specific technical space, the new vehicle allowed for a freedom of action that Desportes likes to call “automobility”. Cars are thus held responsible for a rediscovery of the countryside, at the same time that new motorized tools were colonizing the rural world. From inside the moving car the traveller was able to capture a succession of views at different angles. The low speeds of those glorious times also contributed to a new unity between man and its environment.

Things would definitely change with both the mass production of vehicles and the building of a specific infrastructure for car circulation – the highway. Highways may be seen as a hybrid device formed by the rules and technical elements of streets and the mono function of railways. In clear opposition to traditional roads, they were conceived as closed networks, a “set of isolated canals that may only open to the exterior by way of exchange devices” (p. 301). Their trajectory, slope, curves and connection points were desi-

igned by engineers using sophisticated calculation methods to ensure both speed and safety. And as in any organization abstractly conceived, signs became crucial elements for understanding the system internal rules. Travelling in highways is thus a deeply subjective experiment. While some drivers fight tediousness and the monotony of the standardized route, others feel attracted by the freedom offered by vertiginous speeds. Of course, once again, the highway landscape is highly artificial, dominated by the infrastructure and by the array of technical mediations.

The author uses his historical narrative as a tool to face contemporary controversial issues, namely urban planning and its obsession with enhancing circulation. He strongly criticizes a process by which cities have been transformed into fragile and discontinuous spaces and urban life has been reduced to the constantly repeated mental activity of decodifying. Trying to overcome the inherent limits of a decontextualized technical approach, Desportes puts forward a “counter-method” to design mobility infrastructures which respects the unity of each place and takes into consideration its multiple components and interrelations. To counter abstract attitudes towards places he recommends seeing such entities as thick and complex historical objects. Finally, and no less important, mobility projects should include anticipations of the future spatial experiences, both body and mental, of individuals.

As already stated, this is an ambitious book concerning potential audiences. The will to contribute to the formation of technical agents directly involved in planning doesn't compromise its historical aspirations. This was a well

succeeded strategy as demonstrated by the fact of the author, a *Ponts et Chaussées* engineer with a PhD on urbanism and a large background on planning, having been awarded the Jacques de Fouchier prize by the French Academy for the originality of the argument of the present work