

READING MOBILITY NARRATIVES

locality and motion in François Bon's *Paysage fer*

LENDO NARRATIVAS DA MOBILIDADE: LOCALIDADE E MOVIMENTO EM PAYSAGE FER, DE FRANÇOIS BON

Pascal Gin*
Carleton University

ABSTRACT

Mobilities have progressively emerged as a primary focus of enquiry for the critical understanding of global structures and processes. This increased awareness is without a doubt a direct measure of the many complexities contemporary mobilities compel us to unpack. While the connections between globalization and mobilities are by now well documented in a number of social and human sciences (namely sociology, cultural anthropology and human geography), less attention has been paid to the potential relevance of a literary inquiry into contemporary mobilities, particularly with respect to works closely attentive to local settings. Focused on François Bon's *Paysage fer* (2000), this essay aims precisely to interrogate how the text provides a particularly insightful mobility narrative that intersects with a range of critical issues and prompts a renewed understanding of the coextensive relation between locality and motion.

KEYWORDS

Mobility, locality, literary space

"AROUND THE BEND OF AN URBAN THREAD..."

As the tourist gaze sweeps over a peri-urban landscape (presumably populated by malls, access ramps and the likes), as it proceeds from narrative shifter to concept, it sequences a hybrid itinerary by mapping travel literature over the epistemic discourse of urban geographers: "Around the bend of an urban thread (...)." Borrowed from Marc Augé's *L'impossible voyage*,¹ this brief quote connects then two modes of writing space. The seamless crossover reaches of course beyond the mere rhetorical. As practiced by

* pascal_gin@carleton.ca

¹ All translations mine throughout this essay. (AUGÉ. *L'impossible voyage*. Le tourisme et ses images, p. 110).

Augé, it connects with a performative anthropology and ethnography *on the move*, bent on self-awareness, reflexively concerned with probing the conditions of knowing agency and focused accordingly on an epistemic presence resolutely situated within the experience under investigation. This sort of autobiographical looping effect that *thickens*² the description by mutually referencing the intimacy of experience and the objective abstraction of analysis is of course a well-documented method within the fields of anthropology and ethnography. Aside from the significant epistemological shift it is associated with, the literary thickening and participative engagement performed by Augé's textual mediation can also be traced to a sort of reverse migration. It displays an uncanny family resemblance not only with various literary traditions³ but more pointedly and closer to the immediacy of the literary present, with contemporary developments in the more experimental fringe of French literary production.

Authors such as François Bon, Annie Ernaux or Jean Rolin have contributed works that, although unmistakably autonomous from the academic norms and constraints of knowledge production, present strong analogies to the brand of ethnobiography⁴ associated with Augé's *Limpossible voyage*. To name but a few, texts such as Annie Ernaux's *Journal du Dehors*,⁵ Jean Rolin's *Terminal frigo*⁶ or François Bon's *Daewoo*⁷ practice a mode of literary engagement that is obsessively reference-oriented. Bent on writing experiential encounters with the real, narratively grounded in the figure of an autobiographical self in motion, they explicitly demonstrate, *en route* to the thick description they seem to be aiming for, a profound weariness of overwriting the real and correspondingly a retreat from fiction. Such an *écriture du réel*,⁸ documented from within the epistemic logic of literary metadiscourse as a form of *néoréalisme*,⁹ delineates three areas of convergence with a variety of scientific discourses focused on probing spatial milieus. First and foremost, these literary texts are fully immersed in contemporary landscapes of mass transportation, urban vagrancy, immigration routes, and postindustrial decay. Hence, a common range of phenomena linked to practices of mobility seems to equally motivate the literary impulse to write and the urge to know. Moreover, this recodification of literary realism also impacts the critical reflexivity displayed by the writing subject. Although they fully partake of a literary project emphasizing reference in the world, narrative figures in these texts are keenly aware both of the "constitutive excess of the real"¹⁰ and of the performative mediation of writing. The writer's documenting and pondering the writing process ("As I was finishing to write down this

² GEERTZ. *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*.

³ See, among others, ATKINSON. *The ethnographic imagination: textual constructions of reality*; and PRATT. *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation*.

⁴ POIRIER. Marc Augé, *ethnosociologue de lui-même*, p. 161.

⁵ ERNEAUX. *Journal du dehors*.

⁶ ROLIN. *Terminal frigo*.

⁷ BON. *Un fait divers*.

⁸ VIART; VERCIER. *La littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations*, p. 211.

⁹ BLANCKEMAN. *Le souci de société (sur quelques écritures néoréalistes)*, p. 26.

¹⁰ ŽIŽEK; DALY. *Conversations with Žižek*, p. 10.

very list in my notebook”,¹¹) and the academic’s commenting and anticipating the conditions of text production (“If I were to submit on time my paper on summer beaches”¹²) share in a common metatextual distancing. From objet to subject, the convergence extends finally outwards to a similar methodological shift targeted at “research methods [that] also need to be ‘on the move’”.¹³ Both sets of writers target experiences of mobility by engaging in the very process they set out to investigate and textualize. “Walking with (...) travelling with (...) keeping time-space diaries”¹⁴ become in a sense transient practices routinely shared across literary and scientific fields for the sake of probing a common condition.

This pattern of convergences does not in any way collapse the distinct discursive orders under which literary and scientific texts come to be produced, read and appraised. It nevertheless attests to the widening circulation, across a variety of symbolic fields, of a type of narrative account structurally, pragmatically, epistemologically involved with issues, and not simply topics, of mobility. Mirroring Michel de Certeau’s *récit d’espace*,¹⁵ the term *mobility narratives* attempts to broadly map out this network of textual overlaps. Approached from the limited perspective of a single literary case study, it is such a mobility narrative that I will be considering as I undertake to determine how a particular form of contemporary literature mediates our awareness – but may also further our understanding – of contemporary mobilities.

WRITING FROM THE TOPOS

The particular text I will be focusing on stems from the work of French writer François Bon, a central figure associated with the range of literary production that commonly falls under the fairly loose category of *extrême contemporain*. Published in 2000, the short text *Paysage Fer* belongs to a body of work that has already received considerable critical attention¹⁶ and encompasses various projects ranging from prison writing workshops and bible translation to biographies of cult rock-and-roll figures. Within the heterogeneous mix of literary experiments carried out by Bon, *Paysage fer* fits into a pattern of texts focusing a mobile gaze on peri-urban geography: postindustrial zones in economically disenfranchised northern France,¹⁷ a stretch of highway,¹⁸ personal trajectories of migration and urban mobility mapped over the news media coverage of a sensational crime.¹⁹ *Paysage fer* contributes to this series an autobiographical mobility

¹¹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 77.

¹² AUGÉ. *L'impossible voyage*. Le tourisme et ses images, p. 35.

¹³ URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 39.

¹⁴ URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 40.

¹⁵ De Certeau’s *récit d’espace* (DE CERTEAU. *L'invention du quotidien*, p. 170).

¹⁶ See in particular VIART; VRAY. *François Bon: éclats de réalité*.

¹⁷ BON. *Daewoo*.

¹⁸ BON. *Autoroute*.

¹⁹ BON. *Un fait divers*.

narrative that further emplots peripheral space, yet from the perspective of a quotidian train commute in provincial France. Industrial sites interspaced with shopping strips speed by on either side of the Paris-Nancy corridor as the narrator engages weekly with the practice of professional travel and the process of time “routinization”.²⁰

From George Simmel’s *The Alpine Journey* (1885) or Paul Virilio’s *L’horizon négatif* (1984) to W. Schilvelbusch’s full scale study on the *Railway Journey* (1986), scholarship on train travel offers a variety of possible approaches from which to consider a text such as Bon’s *Paysage fer*. To any reader remotely versed – to follow Soja (1989) – in the “reassertion of space in critical social theory”, the choice narrows considerably however as the narrative unfolds. The intertextual connection to Augé’s *surmodernité* can hardly be missed, to the point in fact that the very last lines exhaust as it were any alternative reading: “The new line, faster at last, will soon cut across in a straight line (...) no longer will we be prompted to observe that which is left behind. Nor maybe will we look again through a train window.”²¹ The emptying out of anthropologically relevant sites technologically performed by mass acceleration is of course intensely reminiscent of the transition from places to non-places analyzed a few years earlier in *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*: “Et le train naguère n’était pas si rapide (...)”²² Undeniably, this connection across texts holds the promise of strong interpretative closure. Bon’s narrative could as such be read as an attempt to *document* the last slower train ride before the switch to full velocity travel alluded to by Augé. Accounting for this convergence should not however amount to track hopping over the literary. As Marc Brosseau astutely commented,²³ the move from geography to literature is easily premised against a fallacy of equivocation that assigns to the text the dubious empirical status of quasi factual evidence. Other than sidestepping the discursive specificity of literary constructs, the leveling effect across text and geographical data feeds a form of rhetorical *projection* whereby fully developed models and explanations within the social sciences are merely further extended, reiterated, over the literary domain. Reading mobility narratives calls as such for a careful assessment of interpretative strategies involved with any literary shift in mobility studies. The question thus becomes how to approach the correspondence across these two texts without citing a particular piece of literature as evidence for the relevance and expendability of a particular epistemic model.

One approach might be to proceed from the very fact that some form of textual overlap actually occurs, but to locate the point of comparison away from the polarization enacted by anthropological discourse as a source of *explanans* to the literary text. What may become noticeable in so doing is the mobility enjoyed by the *topos* of localism in French social discourse, or what Bruno Latour refers to as “la souffrance spatiale des Français”.²⁴ As various conditions of late (or *high* or *super-*) modernity set in, the concern

²⁰ BAUMAN. *Liquid modernity*, p. 115.

²¹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 89.

²² AUGÉ. *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, p. 25.

²³ BROUSSEAU. *Des romans-géographes: essai*, p. 56.

²⁴ LATOUR. *La mondialisation fait-elle un monde habitable?*

with a much-shifted sense of local geography finds enunciation here and there, recurs across a narrator's comments and an anthropologist's statements and observations. The term "localism" is intended here to apply broadly to a range of concerns empirically focused on local space, yet prompted by the social reimagining of what locality stands for. It may certainly feed on a *pathos* of imagined nostalgia, but it can just as well point to the complexity and possibilities of unavoidably hybrid places expanding outward from their inner connexity. What matters is that the challenge for ascribing meaning to locality increasingly mobilizes discursive production and stands as an iterated feature of collective enunciation.

Thus situated within a collective body of privileged *topoi*, the *tertium comparationis* levels somewhat the playing field. The common threads running through Augé's and Bon's texts need not call for a mode of reading that subordinates literary expression to the explanatory insight of scientific reasoning. From "et le train naguère"²⁵ to "la nouvelle ligne de train",²⁶ the connection reaches beyond itself by pointing to the discursive availability of a recurring spatial anxiety affecting contemporary France. Certainly, invoking the wide societal contours of this range of phenomena might be seen as displacing further the lack of engagement with the literary, away from anthropological discourse, yet within the expanded limits of social discourse at large. To the contrary, it may be argued however that it provides us with more precise coordinates from which to begin tracing literary patterns of mobility in *Paysage fer*. Indeed, the question becomes how to situate this specific text in relation to the various forms and dominant positions encoding literary expressions of locality, that is, how the text writes and possibly departs from the *topos* of localism.

AN OFF-CENTER LITERARY POSITION

The broad strokes offered below sketch out patterns that must ultimately rely on the selected impressions of a professional reader. However tentative, they nevertheless point out marked disparities between spatial tropes of locality populating early 21st century French literature. A first observable literary trend amounts to writing locality by means of an open-ended expanded series. Particular places acquiring narrative relevance do so through a process of juxtaposition scaled to planispheric dimensions. A case at hand is to be found in Olivier Rolin's *Suite à l'Hôtel Crystal*,²⁷ a novel of sort where place-progression is ordered by a succession of hotel narratives located across global cities and secondary tourist destinations. Similarly, although stemming from a different literary tradition, locality in Claude Simon's *Le jardin des plantes*,²⁸ is enacted through the constant repositioning of the narrative figure, as it shifts along the nodal points of a literary world-tour. In both these examples, non-contiguous places are juxtaposed in

²⁵ AUGÉ. *Non-lieux*: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité, p. 125.

²⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 89.

²⁷ ROLIN. *Suite à l'Hôtel Crystal*.

²⁸ SIMON. *Le jardin des plantes*.

rapid sequences so as to frame the entire experience of being locally situated. Writing space projects the act of *moving away* into a dynamics of constant relocalization, displacing in the process locality from the ontology of departure points and rescaling it to the transient modality of shifting destinations, as though, to paraphrase Anthony Giddens, space were actually “pulled away from place”.²⁹

Concerns with locality write their way into contemporary French literature in yet another manner. Rather than unfolding multiple localities through a process of expansion, some narratives seem far more involved with a process of compression. To select but two examples, not quite chosen at random since both draw from the prestige of literary recognition (respectively a Goncourt and a Nobel prize), in novels such as J.M. G. Le Clézio’s *Révolutions*³⁰ and Marie NDaye’s *Trois femmes puissantes*,³¹ literary space appears less ambitious in its extension yet more connective. From Mauritius to the French Riviera, from Sénégal to Western France, it is written across diasporic itineraries that bring into contact and compress, in a complex experience of locality, cross-generational narratives, memory routes, imagined loci of belonging and the physical space of relocation. Localism grapples in this fashion with an over-densification rather than a thinning out of local settings and the modes of engagement they call forth. The movements of migration reverberate symbolically through the various anxieties of relocated subjects, that is, through socially patterned modes of imagination intimately woven, following Arjun Appadurai, into the fabric of contemporary local experience.³²

This dual form of expansion and compression – and the variations it most certainly allows – stakes a range of possibilities which, one may suggest, defines a dominant *chronotope* across contemporary literary production.³³ By this of course is to be understood, falling back on Bakhtin,³⁴ a certain modeling effect that binds the time-space coordinates of our global modernities to particular literary forms that provide them with narrative meaning and a sense of symbolic regularities. Increasingly, issues of locality have gained prominent literary recognition through narrative forms associated both with the globally expanded movement of transnational literature and the site specific localization found in diasporic writing. Fully engaged with the reassessment of what the immediacy of local settings may actually mean, these particular literary forms together with the co-extensive discourse of literary scholarship enjoy therefore a dominant position. They have progressively come to define a discursive center from which emanate

²⁹ GIDDENS. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, p. 16.

³⁰ LE CLÉZIO. *Révolutions*.

³¹ NDAYE. *Trois femmes puissantes*.

³² APPADURAI. *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization*, p. 31.

³³ And if the suggestion dares to reach beyond a strictly French corpus, it is essentially because locality written as an expanded list but especially as a site of diasporic interface has fast become a recurring – and as such standard – feature across many contemporary literatures, from the French capital written as a migrant city of flights in Santiago Gambao’s *El síndrome de Ulises* (2005) to the urban topography explored by German-Turkish authors or the urban literary sites associated with contemporary American *Mestiza* writers.

³⁴ BAKHTIN. *Esthétique et théorie du roman*.

expected sets of propositions, admissible themes and ideas, conditions of receivability and models of iterability.

It is set against this background that Bon's literary approach to locality stands out as noticeably different. If *Paysage fer* writes from the *topos* of localism, it does so from a much peripheral position. Bon's mobility narrative will strike most readers as an oddly local book, set within the margins of transnational and diasporic writing, at a distance from now well-established literary and discursive expectations. The departure from the expansion and compression models detailed above becomes most obvious when assessed spatially, using maps and trajectories to pinpoint the inward-looking focus in *Paysage fer*. To be sure, the semiotics of cartography and projections over a geometrical plane must at best be limited to locating an initial entry point. As Bon himself remarks,³⁵ the visual abstraction of maps holds little relevance for the task of mediating through a text the experiential quality of places.³⁶ Yet, as Franco Moretti puts it "you make a map of the book and everything changes (...) not of course, that the map is already an explanation ; but at least it shows us that there is something that needs to be explained (...)." ³⁷ Two things in fact.

All in all, the distance covered by this piece of French *néoréalisme* covers 352 kilometers, a stretch of railway line along a West to East corridor, between the capital Paris and the provincial prefecture city of Nancy. Limited in scope, the map we can trace falls back furthermore on a mode of semiotic projection that inscribes the space covered within a fairly territorially-bound mode of representation. Although the narrative considers at times places and spaces outside the geopolitical space-frame of the French Nation-State, they are few and apart, associated with the outside and as such clearly marked as heteroscopic to a French traveler's gaze. Finally, the orientation of the map itself shifts the French capital to the edge, away from a primary focus centrally targeted not at the symbolic centrality of the world city but towards the hinterland of a resolutely regional space. Overall then, the initial process of map reading *Paysage fer* yields limited distances, circumscribed territorial boundaries and strong regional markings

Drawing from what Michel Butor characterized as "l'espace parcouru",³⁸ *Paysage fer* may also be approached from the angle of trajectories. When applying this more kinesthetic treatment to literary space, one is struck by the lack of coincidence between the commuting itineraries associated with railway travel and the trajectories textually unfolded. Certainly, distance will be bridged time and time again as the commuter-narrator repeatedly reaches Nancy. However, the movement between departure and end points is not *written* in a straight line. The path detailed through narrative discourse routinely unmaps set diegetic sequences. From page 9 to 10, the trajectory connects six locations, backtracks a page later, expands eastward on page 12, projects beyond the tracks on page 13, de "l'autre côté de la ville". Bon's text sidesteps the route actually travelled as the anachronies of narrative time meet up and team up with anatomic

³⁵ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 28.

³⁶ Moreover, need we be reminded of de Certeau's warning concerning the trappings of graphically projecting the pragmatics of spatial agency? (DE CERTEAU. *L'invention du quotidien*. Arts de faire, p. 142).

³⁷ MORETTI. *Graphs, maps, trees: abstract models for a literary history*, p. 36, 39.

³⁸ BUTOR. *Essais sur le roman*, p. 57.

points of disjunction. As will become clearer, literary trajectories overwrite itineraries by pointing out how mass transportation impules a form of mobility that essentially erodes local settings through the hollowing effect of accelerated time.

If *Paysage fer* was previously shown to be countermapping locality away from planispheric extension, it appears now to be sketching movements that can scarcely be said to be intersecting the diasporic compression or transcultural densification of places. The process of map reading and tracing *Paysage fer* raises as a result two questions cursorily alluded to, that which in Moretti's words "needs to be explained". First, should we relate the particular concern with locality expressed through this literary form to a pattern of localism reasserting the central value of domestic places against the deterritorializing effects of contemporary mobilities? Second, if some sort of reactive discourse of reterritorialization is indeed at play, should we not assess more carefully the relevance of Bon's mobility narratives? I will be addressing both questions in what follows, arguing, as I proceed from one to the other, that it is this acutely localized perspective which in fact empowers the literary take on mobility issues.

LOCALITY AS AESTHETIC PRESENCE

Far from simply singling out a complex approach to writing contemporary space, the phrase "around the bend" might then call for a recursive reading attentive this time to the very localized contours being emphasized. Indeed, localism as a discourse bent on reasserting the ontological density of placeness – within a territorially bound spatial imaginery – may be connected, within limits, back to Augé's own anthropological writing. As John Tomlinson pointed out, the possibility of some *nostalgic* overtone attached to the *anthropos* quality of real places is at times perceivable in the French anthropologist's work.³⁹ The "charming little country road with scents of freshly cut grass"⁴⁰ does, occasionally, find its way onto the page.⁴¹

Beyond the mimesis of small scale cartographic reference, attachment to what may be referred to as the microlocal in *Paysage fer* is scalable across a range of sign-to-place qualitative relations. The semantic field of inhabited space deploys throughout the text clear markers (*région, pays, territoire*) binding the landscape to symbolic ownership. Consubstantiality between a collective self and particular traits of urban typography poignantly prompts a sense of belonging ("that which is us, so profoundly us"⁴²). Such deeply asserted intimacy is further relayed by anthropomorphic prosopographies ("the land

³⁹ TOMLISON. *Globalization and culture*, p. 109.

⁴⁰ AUGÉ. *L'impossible voyage*. Le tourisme et ses images, p. 72.

⁴¹ More pointedly, maybe, the very suspicion displayed towards certain inhospitable configurations of hypermodern space does fit within a French epistemic imaginary routinely othering America as the focus of oxymoric trope (Baudrillard's amusement camp, 1981) and other rhetoric of *excess* (de Certeau's Manhattan, 1990, p. 140). However limited in Augé's case – for even real places deploy self-projections and *dignified* image that shift the grounds of authenticity (AUGÉ. *Non-lieux*: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité, p. 124) – this particular strand of localism becomes fully palpable in Bon's writing.

⁴² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 18.

as human skin”⁴³) and a narrative imagination ceaselessly probing fugitive signs of local presence (“who comes here (...) On their way to do what (...) traces of those who live here (...)”⁴⁴). Conversely, the organic quality of local surroundings recedes under the continued aggression of encroaching commercial places and the intrusion of the hyper-real: “a wartish Disney complex”,⁴⁵ “the open sore of a supermarket.”⁴⁶ The narrator exercises rather openly an ideological function repeatedly undermining fleeting and substitutable elements that interfere with the temporal thickness of locality.

This overt concern with contemporary shifts eroding the established constituency of locality certainly does not cancel out elements and patterns of mobility in Bon’s *Paysage fer*. Rather, it refocuses somewhat the aesthetics of movement associated with this text. By moving off-track to a hotel destined for closure or a truckers’ stop lit up in the distance, the text asserts undoubtedly multiple local sites retrieved from the straight lines of access routes and assigned destinations bolted down by the mass transit system. But in so doing, as the narrator acts and writes while on the move, the text also performs presence by asserting locality as a form of aesthetic agency impacting the sites travelled through. The narrator figure performs a pragmatics of reappropriation, projecting as it were along the tracks the resistance of de Certeau’s *énonciations piétonnières*.⁴⁷

“Every Thursday, over the span of a winter”,⁴⁸ the narrator submits himself to the routinized pattern of long-distance commuting. Mobility stands accordingly for the immersive integration into a scheduled practice of collective passivity: “Tracts of time set aside from the rest of one’s life”,⁴⁹ on the go in the company of “all those getting on the train”,⁵⁰ “staying over, working away for two days at a time”.⁵¹ Yet, *Paysage fer* counteracts as much as it enacts the process of being moved along. Destination driven, the traveler-writer initiates resistance. He proceeds interestingly with a bachelardian move, nesting in “a makeshift set-up improvised with bags and pieces of clothing”. Far from disabling, this domestic inscription into the body of the moving train enables the writer to divert and reassign mobility. As a windowpane frames “volume”,⁵² as it opens up the visual experience, “wide as field”,⁵³ the train becomes a sign producing device in much the same way that Paul Virilio associates the automobile to a space-constructing apparatus.⁵⁴ From then on, motion becomes the prerogative of the writing traveler and a variety of literary dynamics take over.

⁴³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 41, 44, 80.

⁴⁵ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 22.

⁴⁷ DE CERTEAU, *L'invention du quotidien*. Arts de faire, p. 148.

⁴⁸ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 13.

⁴⁹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 79.

⁵⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 26.

⁵¹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 79.

⁵² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 68.

⁵³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 47.

⁵⁴ VIRILIO. *L'horizon négatif*: essai de dromoscopie.

Mobility stands first and foremost as the aesthetic impulse that projects affects of displacement into textual forms and literary effects.⁵⁵ Speed-born distortions occurring across the passenger's field of vision frustrate a scopic pulsion. They impede perceptual and cognitive "access",⁵⁶ prompt the compulsive observation that therein remains a "mystery"⁵⁷ to be probed, and ultimately set out the task of "building up the visible".⁵⁸ Yet, writing the landscape, in *Paysage fer*, is not an attempt to dominate this initial urge towards some comprehensive "picture that would hold broad and strong".⁵⁹ Rather, the impulsion to write sustains mobility through a paratactic approach that never achieves representation and constantly shifts modes of texting the travelling gaze. Writing on queue with the syncopated time of train travel⁶⁰ becomes the guiding principle for performing mobility. Repeatedly exhorted to aesthetics of urgency, the text must essentially "stick to thickening on the spot the visual experience".⁶¹ To this effect *Paysage fer* employs a variety of techniques, from unedited note-taking to seriation achieved through extremely rapid juxtaposition. Interestingly, expansion and compression, previously ruled out as means to reference geographical space, become here prominent textual processes explicitly commented upon by the narrator. To this serial "procédé d'expansion"⁶² and to the cumulative effect of densification through repetition, *Paysage fer* further adds a number of experiments seemingly aimed at gauging various sign-to-sign mobilities. Over a few paragraphs, a series of concepts ("circle (...) square (...) rectangle (...) oval"⁶³) provides the starting points for a series of descriptions expanding each time on the single abstract denotation, moving the text away from the approximating volume and places of the geometric figures. Across several pages, a game of word association provides the textual rule for narrating impressions of space. By means of a curiously analytic *écriture automatique*, "History (...) modernity (...) cognition (...) arrival"⁶⁴ act as shifters providing a tentative semantic template for relating at greater length the iterated experience of traveling through, stopping over (and in between), glimpsing the remains of historically dislocated spatial infrastructures or the contours of an industrial site.

Locality as aesthetic presence relates here to a well-worn literary posture. Bon's *figura* unmistakably fits the profile of the discerning traveler figure, the modern artist in motion ideally poised to critique the contemporary experience of modernity. Presence on location but also *in persona*, as the epistemic subject located within the very rhythms and movements he discriminates between. If, as a feature of social discourse, the marked attachment to the local is temporally predicated on the stability of what once was, the

⁵⁵ See also SHERINGHAM. *Paysage fer* et le travail du regard.

⁵⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 37.

⁵⁷ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 40.

⁵⁸ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 37.

⁵⁹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 39.

⁶⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 36.

⁶¹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 50.

⁶² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 11.

⁶³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 28.

⁶⁴ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 62-66.

aesthetics of mobility running through the text is equally indebted to an equally local literary past. Indeed, *Paysage fer*'s strong experimental qualities can hardly be assessed without reference to various strands of French literary modernism (and potentially beyond, depending on which markers one selects to stake out a possible transition to the French postmodern moment). If a Baudelarian figure shadows as it were the artist's gaze, the infratextual presence of George Perec's⁶⁵ oulipian spatial montage⁶⁶ is most certainly being felt, as is the heritage of the French New Novel and the challenges it took up in various formal ways against the relative stability (perceived as such) of previous literary narratives. All in all, the nostalgic concern for places locally grounded within a fairly circumscribed sense of belonging would, accordingly, find literary expression by calling upon and experimenting with an equally localized aesthetics and *capital lettré*. The conclusion to be drawn is then bound to weaken considerably the assessment of Bon's work as a mobility narrative closely associated with the dynamics of contemporary flux and motions.

Undoubtedly, equating *Paysage fer* with a text overdetermined with such a sense of the local is not without narrative cohesion. The peripheral positioning of Bon's work within the wider context of contemporary literary production concurs neatly with a political interpretation of the margins as reactionary zones where literary creations reassert territorial identity or revisit the spectral borders of the Nation. And to be fair, framing the discussion in these terms does not necessarily exhaust the literary relevance of mapping books such as *Paysage fer* over contemporary concerns with human migration, economic flows and a general condition of sustained mobility. Reading what would then amount to a sort of back-pedaling mobility narrative might provide insight into the ubiquity of mobility themes and the variety of literary engagements they motivate, even from within a territorially-conscious literary mindset.

A DISQUIETING PROXIMITY

There are reasons however – and strong reasons at that – to be weary of such an overlocalizing move, of its marked tendency to read over and write off expression of mobility in Bon's work. These reasons span in fact a spectrum of concerns, both textual and conceptual.

First, we should of course approach with extreme caution literary readings producing overly and overtly univocal *rewrites*.⁶⁷ Against the hubris of strong interpretative closure stand most obviously various hermeneutics, the polyvocality of modern literature, the notorious shapelessness or rather shape-shifting of the novel. As a matter of fact, the very tradition previously cited as evidence of Bon's literary localism is not without paradox. The critique of modernity that lays at the heart of various experimental projects associated with French modernism undeniably defines a repertoire and range of *habitus* that provide *l'homme de lettre* with clear affiliation and symbolic

⁶⁵ PEREC. *Espèces d'espaces*.

⁶⁶ An overt intertextual influence in Bon's *Daewoo* (BON. *Daewoo*, p. 225).

⁶⁷ LEFEVERE. *Why waste our time on rewrites?*

location. It is nevertheless intimately bound to an equally evident disjunction between literary practices and national metanarratives, feeding what Pascale Casanova defines as the cosmopolitan force beyond modernism.⁶⁸ Furthermore, however genuinely felt upon reading *Paysage fer*, the influence of the *Nouveau roman* must be strongly nuanced so as to accommodate an obvious contemporary pull. In Bon's writing and across *l'extrême contemporain* as a whole the practice of generational differentiation precludes in effect that sort of historiographic determinism. The distinction matters because cumulative attempts at a better definition of this literary movement repeatedly point out strong affinities with the day-to-day experience of mobilities rather than mere formal experimentation with textual composition. Critics routinely cite the resolutely outbound dynamics of narratives primarily moved by an "heteroscopic function",⁶⁹ aimed at reaching the real out there, set on following social experience as it moves about (or "circulates"⁷⁰) "in vivo". This movement-prone approach to writing the real extends in fact ontologically to an authorial and narrative presence no longer able to assert itself through the mastery of narrative discourse, at times dislodged from the comfort zone of a *doxa* he or she tracks down to particular sites of enunciations, follows through specific itineraries, probes at length.⁷¹ The location to artistic presence equation previously suggested ought as such to be revisited.

Moving beyond strictly literary objections, we also need to keep in mind the porous overlaying that makes up social discourse not as a whole – precisely – but as an aggregate of claims and predefined meaning structures competing for legitimacy. That a recurring value enunciated and reenunciated throughout the text echoes a certain form of localism does not in and of itself frame a discursive identity, whose complexity must be allowed to potentially extend to heterogeneous juxtaposition. Dwelling at leisure within the privileged sense of "immobility"⁷² afforded by the literary texts does not cancel out other value statements, emphasizing for instance the moving experience of movement: "and all that time as we move along, the cities' orange-tinged beauty against the disshelved background of the night."⁷³

The very fact that discursive patterns bring within reach of each other affects of mobility and the value discourse of locality suggests in turn issues of sound conceptualization. The attempt to subsume movements under localism as a dominant concern, form and discourse in the text arguably stems from a perceived opposition whose impact can in fact be felt throughout the fairly established topography and toponymy of literary studies. *Écritures migrantes*, diasporic writing and transnational literatures have come to define vast regions of transient textuality clearly distinct, at least in their institutional manifestations, from territorially-bound literatures and national cartographies. The mobility to locality distinction provides a series of structural topoi

⁶⁸ CASANOVA. *La république mondiale des lettres*, p. 119-178.

⁶⁹ BLANCKEMAN. *Objectif réel*, p. 224.

⁷⁰ BLANCKEMAN. *Le souci de société (sur quelques écritures néoréalistes)*, p. 26.

⁷¹ VIART. *Fiction en procès*, p. 291-294.

⁷² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 85.

⁷³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 80.

that potentially generate value hierarchies, pitting – yet again – the relevance of forwardness against the stale immobility of what lays static. I would conjecture that books such as *Paysage fer* introduce a disquieting proximity, a discomforting sense of copresence that easily triggers a doxic reflex, the reassertion of opposites.

A variety of epistemic discourses fully equip us however to engage critically with the perceived inconsistency of this local-yet-mobile piece of writing. Cultural anthropology, human geography and the sociology of globalization have argued in a variety of ways for a processual understanding of locality drawing on particular patterns of mobility. One may turn in this regard to the assessment of local border places as sites of ceaseless cultural transactions⁷⁴ or to Peter Adey's literature overview of place as performance,⁷⁵ rather than a quality of place. It is however Bruno Latour's analysis of the local to global relationship⁷⁶ that may hold the most pointed suggestion for rereading *Paysage fer* in such a way as to "flatten out"⁷⁷ the opposition. This leveling approach involves seizing on the distance opened up by the conceptual antinomy and examining the transactions actually occurring across the spatial tracts under investigation. This hypothesis amounts to *tracing* on site existing connections and transformations so as to better grasp how a location is designed from within by the "circulation"⁷⁸ and "movements"⁷⁹ it affords, the particular traffic they enable. Accordingly, the deep and genuinely felt involvement with locality in *Paysage fer*, as it is relayed and amplified by an acutely "transitive" mode of writing,⁸⁰ may just provide the means for a discerning literary take on the mobility patterns that make up this very locality.

MOBILITY: A TRANSITIVE READING

As was pointed out earlier, to collapse the concern with the real in *Paysage fer* onto an overarching assertion of locality reads somewhat contrary to current literary scholarship devoted to French neo-realism. "Comprendre le réel sans le totaliser",⁸¹ *framing an understanding without striving for the whole* would appear at odds with an overall emphasis singling out as a matter of principle privileged sites of belonging. Bon's text itself suggests a looser, more diffuse compulsion to write the real. The *realias* range in fact far and wide, from the "singular" fragmentary detail of three propped up rocks⁸² to compositional series suggesting "surging worlds" as the tracks twist and turn ("woods, bush, a tilled field, empty roads, utility pole"⁸³). And on many occasions, textual

⁷⁴ CLIFFORD. *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century*.

⁷⁵ ADEY. *Mobility*, p. 76.

⁷⁶ LATOUR. *Changer de société*. Refaire de la sociologie, p. 241-251.

⁷⁷ LATOUR. *Changer de société*. Refaire de la sociologie, p. 250.

⁷⁸ LATOUR. *Changer de société*. Refaire de la sociologie, p. 287.

⁷⁹ LATOUR. *Changer de société*. Refaire de la sociologie, p. 300.

⁸⁰ VIART. *Fiction en procès*, p. 289.

⁸¹ BLANCKEMAN. *Les fictions singulières: étude sur le roman français contemporain*, p. 20

⁸² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 39.

⁸³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 80.

attention is in fact commanded by “self-sufficient objects”, the thing-in-itself.⁸⁴ What do we read, then, when the text targets transitively “the saturated and profuse quality of a detail”,⁸⁵ “a half-open sliding door within an anodized aluminum frame. Grey”?⁸⁶ I will be suggesting that by taking the time to gauge referential thickness in Bon’s text, three mobility features become increasingly apparent.

First, extension scaled to ubiquitous presence. Indeed, the narrator repeatedly accounts for the many relays which together constitute a topography specific to train travel: train stations of course, but also high-speed lines, warehouses, switching stations, marshalling yards built on a city scale, bridges, crossings and signal installations, junkyard and heap of derelict cars, maintenance yard alongside subsidiary lines, platforms and billboards representing the placement of cars for incoming trains. The text appears here to document the omnipresence of mobility as structure. *Writing against* certainly occurs since the traveler opposes the emptying of in-between places performed by the from-to commuting motion. Yet, the locality that emerges is populated by mobility fixtures, build through and through for the purpose of sustaining and maintaining movement. Writing space points here to the infrastructural materiality of mobility. To be sure, it has certainly been noted elsewhere – by other textual means – either as “moorings” that “are often as important as mobilities”⁸⁷ or as a *liaison* feature that requires to think anew the “interior-exterior divisions” framing urban understanding.⁸⁸ What *Paysage fer* most obviously brings to this intertext however is the obsessive sequencing of descriptive discourse, the referential density that saturates literary space as the writer’s gaze assesses locality-to-mobility proportions, “the marshalling yard as wide as a city”.⁸⁹

If extension yields form, this form gains figurative contours as a mobility-world. This cosmos-effect can be cited as another marked trait of mobility in *Paysage fer*. The topographia is achieved in a number of ways. It takes shapes through time, by indexing specific locations to a temporal dimension invariably spelled out in the mobility sequence – rather than the calendric diachrony – of printed schedules, displayed arrival times and departure announcements. It is further expanded by providing the extended trainscape with anthropogenic functions and qualities mirroring life processes and social conditions (the scrapyards as a mortuary, periurban stigmas attached to the flank and speed of decommissioned suburban trains⁹⁰). It gains reflexive duplication when this mobility-made-world is associated with the semiosis of self-representation (through pictograms of train composition, maps detailing train routes, public narratives of transfer points and delays). In a sense, the text is ceaselessly attentive to the compositional details of what John Urry describes as “mobility systems”:⁹¹ self-regulating networks

⁸⁴ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 32.

⁸⁵ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 28.

⁸⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 49.

⁸⁷ CRESSWELL. *Towards a politics of mobility*, p. 159.

⁸⁸ AUGÉ. *Pour une anthropologie de la mobilité*, p. 29.

⁸⁹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 21.

⁹⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 75, 36.

⁹¹ URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 51-54.

whose various functions (transportation, maintenance, representation) are monitored through a variety of nodal sites; spatial networks along which mobilities are inputted and outputted, regulated and maintained (freight, mail, passengers, light signals, digital data and audio announcements). Yet, the main literary refraction of Urry's sociology of mobility lies elsewhere. Expanded as it is through a networked space of multiple locations, the mobility apparatus of train travel evinces at times the very possibility of a uniquely human spatial agency. It confronts the traveller with the contained condition of moving through a "posthuman geography":⁹² "Handled like a matchstick (...) transported in this and that direction by the flick of a finger and us inside";⁹³ "the cement plant, stretched out as a world across the sky (...) the whole length of the train as yet another duct (...) the material it carries, us inside".⁹⁴ At such junctures, local settings and presence lend themselves to curious overlaps that refer at once to "living after the end nature"⁹⁵ – that is, to a present when "few aspects of surrounding material environment haven't been in some way affected by human intervention"⁹⁶ – and to the self-effacement of an exclusively human relation to space: "(...) as if human presence was here never to be seen."⁹⁷

Not surprisingly, this *worldling* effect of mobility in *Paysage fer* bears the marks of a late form of realism particularly leery of any attempt at an overly comprehensive mimesis. Mobility diffraction is indeed another marked feature of Bon's transitive writing. Beyond the single expansion of the *railscape*, the text is painstakingly attentive to multiple worlds of entangled mobilities. As the narrator-passenger is carried by the motion that moves him away from the Parisian capital, his path intersects at regular intervals with other means of moving "humans" and "non humans" around, to borrow Latour's terminology. These overlaps across a variety of other mobility systems recur throughout the text. They range from the automotive network of local roads, tolls, highways, underpass; they connect with an industrial system of conveying belts, truck-docking stations and silos; but they also include the transit routes of temporary shelters ranging from reconverted trucks, Roms' caravans, hotel chains and corporate lodgings, as well the cultural paths cut by books,⁹⁸ travelling fairs⁹⁹ and a popular song.¹⁰⁰ What matters here, beyond the further extension and densification of all things mobile, is what occurs at some of the connecting sites between various mobility systems. As they multiply and populate the text, these other forms of mobility do not only account for an incremental furthering of movements, for the potential to link up, but rather they point with regular

⁹² URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 44-45.

⁹³ URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 26.

⁹⁴ URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 52.

⁹⁵ GIDDENS. *Runaway world: how globalization is reshaping our lives*, p. 27.

⁹⁶ GIDDENS. *Runaway world: how globalization is reshaping our lives*, p. 27.

⁹⁷ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 36.

⁹⁸ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 46.

⁹⁹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 25.

consistency to diverging mode of constructing places through mobility. The individuated power of “automobility”¹⁰¹ affords an accessibility and mode of presence in space that potentially outcompetes train mobility and the sense of place it creates.¹⁰² The odd pedestrian journey witnessed along a local road seems rather out of place, almost anomalous within the speed oriented-transport geography of the road system, “an empty mile ahead, an empty mile behind”.¹⁰³ The processing transformative logic of industrial sites – which connect animal freight, sorting yards, slaughter plant, truck docking station¹⁰⁴ – seems to undergo some sort of reversal within the object-focused logic of consumer sites, as evidenced by a “Saturday’s trip top the supermarket”.¹⁰⁵ Mobility is there exercised by the shopper within the wide expanse of space, “a complete isle”,¹⁰⁶ housing seemingly autotelic objects: heavy bags of colourful dog food nevertheless processed in the very plant the train sped by.¹⁰⁷ Mobility studies have of course been aware of such “asynchronic disruptions”¹⁰⁸ as they affect structurally differentiated practices of mobility. *Paysage fer*’s genuine contribution in this regard stands as the meshing of textual polyphonies with the diverse range of movements patterning a given locality. Far from falling back on the “idem-identity”¹⁰⁹ of static permanence in time, location is written with an acute synchronic alertness to the transformative interplay of multiple mobilities. Put another way, the keen literary focus on individuated experience benefits, in *Paysage fer*, the thickening of place as a specific, equally individuated mobility context or situation that demands to be unpacked if we are to gain access to what places actually are.

MOBILITY: A NARRATIVE READING

...or actually do. For performance is yet another prominent characteristics of the mobility to locality relation traced by *Paysage fer*. Because this last feature shifts the focus on the realm of action, it calls however for a different rereading of Bon’s text. Literary realism as it is practiced by François Bon led us, in what precedes, to reach beyond the aesthetics presence of the artist. Prompted by what is visible but requires to be born, shaped, “built up”¹¹⁰ in writing, the “call of the real”¹¹¹ yielded in turn, unexpectedly, the layered presence of mobility across an acutely local landscape. Not

¹⁰¹ See CRESSWELL. *On the move: mobility in the modern western world*, p. 260.

¹⁰² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 34, 36.

¹⁰³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 45.

¹⁰⁴ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 64.

¹⁰⁵ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁷ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 65.

¹⁰⁸ EDENSOR. *Commuter: mobility, rhythm and commuting*, p. 196.

¹⁰⁹ RICCEUR. *Soi-même comme un autre*.

¹¹⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 37.

¹¹¹ FOREST. *Le roman, le réel: un roman, est-il encore possible?*, p. 1.

simply as a self-referential textual structure patterned by particular sequence of descriptive discourse, but as a world-text providing points of interpretative reference for engaging with the real. By following the world-oriented transitive slant of Bon's writing, the previous transitive reading responds in a sense to a further threat of disengagement pointed out by Marc Brosseau when it comes to relating geographical discourse to literature, namely, the marked literary tendency to appropriate space in the novel (or other literary genres) as a category strictly "internal"¹¹² to, and relevant as, literary form. Yet, by expanding beyond what mobility features actually are to probe how they may in fact *behave*, *Paysage fer* reasserts in a way its many "annotations"¹¹³ and lists as textual features framing narrative coherence, providing meaning to the sequential unfolding of events, actions, transformations linked to mobility. Paul Ricœur pointedly remarked that a form of narrative intelligence is achieved in literature by experimenting with the many modes of interactions that conjointly provide some form of cohesion to a self's life narrative.¹¹⁴ Along similar lines, one may suggest that *Paysage fer* does not simply itemize mobility features that are revealed to be part and parcel of local environments, but that the text sets them in motion to trace the possible patterns of meaning they afford our sense of agency. Localized fixtures of mobility, mobility systems and entangled mobility contexts bind us in *Paysage fer* to a *social life of things*,¹¹⁵ that prompts a narrative reading.

First, in addition to their marked presence across the provincial landscape, mobilities are shown to be shaping local space. They become as such place-marking and at times place-making apparatus. Town after town, the very urban layout of local places bears indeed the imprint of train mobility: the repeated triadic frontal display of station-hotel-café, the street perpendicular to the railway installations that orders as a main axis the downtown street patterns.¹¹⁶ Perceived from a moving train, the urban landscape itself bears witness as a whole to this constitutive role of transport installations. The city expands beyond city limits proper to coincide with the many facilities – "warehouses, grain silos, schools"¹¹⁷ – that sustain a continuous flow of goods and people alike, and in so doing bleeds the urban space across the 352 km-travel span. This mobility-induced redefinition of cities as spread out locations is noticeable at will, "everywhere the same fabric woven (...) between rails and trucks".¹¹⁸ Yet, disparities occur within this overall pattern, as different mobilities bring forth differentiated local structures. The movement of waste triggers the peripheral expansion of a landfill displaced from the urban site of production.¹¹⁹ Densification of mobility sites and infrastructures props up an entrenched hierarchy between

¹¹² BROSSEAU. *Des romans-géographes*: essai, p. 79.

¹¹³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 12.

¹¹⁴ RICŒUR, *Soi-même comme un autre*, p. 187-193.

¹¹⁵ APPADURAI, *The social life of things*: commodities in cultural perspective.

¹¹⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 37.

¹¹⁸ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 37.

¹¹⁹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 45.

the “stacked up” installations¹²⁰ of the capital and the thinned out or “defiantly walled in”¹²¹ topography of provincial regions. Territorial state presence reaching across distances carries forward a standardization of public space by duplicating the uniformity of school architecture, fully recognizable in every city.¹²²

These commonalities and points of departure bring into sharp focus a shifted literary concern. Here, *Paysage fer* moves as it were beyond the dynamics of entangled mobilities to confront head on the politics of potentially conflicting yet coexisting means of creating various senses of place. To go back to train mobility, it produces places first and foremost because it performs them as destinations. It provides them with the functionality of a nodal point alongside mobility routes, routes which themselves codify space for social use (working, going home, visiting). It names them or rather renames them from within the pragmatics of transportation as sites that can motivate, and sustain movement. By means of schedules, audio announcements, printed itineraries and system-specific maps, it provides them with implicit narrative of collective relevance: these are the places that people actually get to, they are plausible locations one might proceed to. Symbolically speaking, the place-making ability of rail mobility extends in fact beyond location and frames the anticipation of a perceived territory, each name providing figurative coordinates for an imagined whole or region, plausible and possible *transfer points* regardless of whether the traveler will ever actualize them as such. But conversely, this power to bring elements of space into imagined or experienced existence as locations, this power to name through mobility is also exercised as a means to refuse place-status. Mobility can create the perception of areas that fall outside the mobility logic of destinations, a type of space that offers no resistance to the technology of time: untold, unnamed, unseen because sped through along a high velocity corridor. *Paysage fer* is most certainly attentive to such voided-out tracts of space or what Marc Augé refers to as blanks spaces, borrowing the concept from French geographer Phillipe Vasset.¹²³ But, interestingly, the text is even more aware of outpaced locations, places emptied out of the very mobility that once sustained and defined them: an abandoned warehouse, some derelict factories, a still swing set in a vacated residential complex, buffers standing idle at the end of idle line. These become as a matter of fact privileged sites, the very *steelscape* of *Paysage fer*.

As such, the text does not simply come across historically differentiated mobilities. It provides a narrative account of diachronic displacement whereby new forms of mobilities outperform previous ones and dislocate the type of places they had come to define and that once mattered. This narrative of mobility substitution¹²⁴ plays out extensively in *Paysage fer*. As mobilities appear to move towards a state of increased fluidity, portable factories, a proliferation of undifferentiated shopping complexes,

¹²⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 49.

¹²¹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 21.

¹²² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 32.

¹²³ VASSET. *Un livre blanc: récit avec cartes*.

¹²⁴ See ADEY (*Mobility*, p. 211) for an overview of substitution processes as they relate more specifically to technological enhancement.

standardized leisure and tourism installations are shown time and again to be displacing the transit sites associated with previous industrial, commercial, mass transportation-oriented mobilities. *Paysage fer*, as the title suggests, takes side with this displaced, out-powered mobility landscape. As the train speeds away towards locations of contemporary relevance, the text retrieves sites of previous, exhausted mobilities. An empty house built within direct proximity of the tracks,¹²⁵ the pointless network of rows and alleys between abandoned gardening plots dotting old industrial quarters,¹²⁶ familiar names pointing along the tracks to the fixtures and features of a time-weathered local economy,¹²⁷ a run-down and deserted factory adjacent to the masters' quarters,¹²⁸ "as though death struck suddenly".¹²⁹ Repeatedly commented upon, the passing does not fall back on some *naïve*, curiously idealized proletarian past. What draws the text to this spectral system of mobilities-gone-by is the interconnected quality of the sites, how the material make-up of mobility devices and structures once defined intimate contexts for lived interaction, how it closely overlapped "human action and labour".¹³⁰ In contrast, new mobility sites are written as failing to afford this range of connective movements. Factories routinely disembled patterns of transit by conforming to the market-driven logic of labour cost fluctuation. Movable, freely transposable and transportable, they equate mobility with the fluid power of the "absentee landlord".¹³¹ The evading path cut by "Tréfileurope's anonymous masters" is mirrored by the discursive dislocation performed by hotel chains branded and rebranded at will. "Hotel One plus One, Quick Palace and First Class"¹³² unname local places of transit through a process of simulated enunciation. Stemming from nowhere, such toponymic simulacrum are further echoed by perpetually renewed advertisements lining up along the roads the new cheap offerings of low budget consumerism.¹³³ These dynamics of vanishing points shrink perceptions of habitable space in much the same way that diverted high-speed lines revert observable space to the quasi virginal state of a strictly natural landscape.¹³⁴

Certainly, the narrative progression of historical corrosion locates squarely *Paysage fer* within a well-patterned critique of globalization that resonates, in contemporary France and beyond, as an iterated form of social discourse. It is essential however to reemphasize that this process of substitution takes as points of narrative departure situations of mobility that enabled rather than avoided altogether engagement with motion and transit. Narrative emplotment targets precisely a threatened form of agency. This concern over the means to sustain an ongoing engagement with mobility is

¹²⁵ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 51.

¹²⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 10.

¹²⁷ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 39.

¹²⁸ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 30.

¹²⁹ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 30.

¹³⁰ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 88.

¹³¹ BAUMAN. *Liquid modernity*, p. 13.

¹³² BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 31.

¹³³ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 39.

¹³⁴ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 18.

particularly discernable within another narrative at work throughout *Paysage fer*. In this text, the ricœurian *intertwinement* previously alluded to analogically applies to the intricate patterning of material mobility contexts and the range of mobilities exercised by the self. Yet, the self does not necessarily refer here to the disembodied abstraction of some indeterminate historical figure. A self-narrative of mobility intimately connects with the narrative voice itself. As a dominant spatial feature in *Paysage fer*, the focus on industrial sites can be accounted for in several ways. It stems both from a neorealist writing technic tuned to the scopic repetitions across the travelling window frame and from a narrative template that seeks to provide a sense of historical ordering for differentiated mobility landscapes. But it also originates within the narrator's own life trajectories and the self-narrative of mobility that details them. As factory names briefly splash across the train window, they prompt reminisced associations with other places, various forms of mobility engagement that temporarily yield, across a few pages, autobiographical introspection rather than a transitive impulsion to write the real. What exactly occurs, then, when this kind of human geography thickens?

Well, it essentially bears witness to the narrator's *bildung* as a young adult learning to navigate, manage, piggy-back on an increasing number of mobilities.¹³⁵ Professional training in France initiates a cross-border train travel to a cooperative placement in a German factory. Physical movement outside the national territory connects with an apprenticeship in international trade as the coop student progressively makes sense of various supply-and-demand triangulations, sorting pattern of orders between Germany, Cuba, Japan. This rudimentary socioeconomic insertion will eventually lead to the routinized mobility of contractual employment as a nuclear technician. The narrative further details the mastering and the fading away through habit of the original "adventure"¹³⁶ of plane travel. The associations that bring together, through mobility, things and subject, reach as a matter of fact a variety of cultural transits. The trip to the German industrial heartland will cross the mobility routes of literary objects, as the traveler goes side-tripping, away from the train hub in Paris, through the cultural network of Parisian streets and bookstores, where the author-to-be purchases his first copy of Kafka's *Castle*. Salary gained through employment and socioprofessional mobility will be converted into the mobility of cultural markers and icons as the young technician, future biographer of the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, brings back from Germany a copy of a Rickenbacker guitar. And of course, the displacement to Germany, however temporary, will bring about a number of shifted cultural perceptions.

All in all, as neorealism in *Paysage fer* turns onto itself to briefly unfold as a life-narrative, it sequences a progressive initiation into a variety of mobility situations. It is at this late juncture in the analysis that the early suggestion framed in terms of a mobility narrative gains full relevance and may be more fully developed into a comprehensive conclusion. Issues and features of mobility are not only coextensive to the local setting mapped out by the text, not only do they play a constitutive role in shaping places of local relevance, they ultimately reach to a sense of self, to life patterns and sets of

¹³⁵ BON. *Paysage fer*, p 52-57.

¹³⁶ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 53.

expectations defined in part by the very practice of mastering a range of motions. From writing the real to writing the self, the contrasted readings of *Paysage fer* bring out a deeply integrated presence of movements and flows within the fabric of experience. Singling out this progression matters tremendously for assessing the kind of societal imaginery produced by a text such a *Paysage fer*, however microlocal and seemingly far removed from transnational concerns. In a sense, narrative meaning becomes scalable to a form of rhetorical positioning in the figure of the mobile subject who, trip after trip and across various locations, learns to develop a bond of intimacy with the local piece of machinery he comes to operate.¹³⁷ Well versed as it is in the practice of homing mobilities, this figure clearly benefits from an *ethos* of mobility engagement. Rather than fitting the discursive profile of a *mobility-phobia* associated with an exclusively anti-global stance, the narrative construction of the self points with further clarity to an overarching cultural concern for the means of making sense, through life pattern and trajectories, of a growing disengagement from the opportunities afforded by new patterns of intensified mobilities.

BENDING THE LITERARY THREADS

In his landmark study on actor-network theory, French sociologist Bruno Latour relies repeatedly on the distinction between what he terms “intermediaries” and “mediators”.¹³⁸ While the former act as a vehicle, a go-between, a mere conductive thread for an entity they simply transport or transmit without modifying it in any way, the latter intervene in the act of transmitting, they add a transformation to the objects, signs, ideas that passes through them and which, in the process of transmission, undergo various forms of alteration. Not surprisingly, the distinction bears strong affinities with a variety of methodological concerns raised by the handling of literary texts, from the awareness of *rewriting* processes indexing literary criticism on field specific dominant values¹³⁹ to the hermeneutics of appropriation *mediating* between a textual and a reader’s world.¹⁴⁰ Tracing literary threads necessarily involves its fair share of shaping and bending, routing and channeling, a mobility practice of sort that does call for some scrutiny. Three concluding remarks may help to assess, in this regard, the process of bending *Paysage fer*’s literary threads.

First, the previous analysis point to an overall concern that pulls the literary reading of Bon’s work in the direction of a targeted issue in the sociology of mobility, namely that of *motility*.¹⁴¹ The concept was precisely put forward to zero in on the transformation of mobility potentials into actualized patterns of behaviour by means of “access”, “competence”, “appropriation”. Whether we agree or not with John Urry that accruing

¹³⁷ BON. *Paysage fer*, p. 53.

¹³⁸ LATOUR. *Changer de société*. Refaire de la sociologie, p. 84-89.

¹³⁹ LEFEVERE, Why waste our time on rewrites?

¹⁴⁰ RICCEUR. Qu’est-ce qu’un texte?

¹⁴¹ KAUFMANN. *Re-thinking mobility*: contemporary sociology.

mobility capital has become a dominant norm for social positioning,¹⁴² partaking of mobilities has always been and is probably increasingly a dominant form of agency in many life trajectories. The question then becomes what opportunities does a given mobility context affords us for acquiring the necessary competence to participate in, to associate with the many movements and motions that structure contemporary worlds. In a sense, it may be argued that it is the traces of such increased means to engage more fully with mobilities that the text seeks in the remains of previous mobility contexts, rather than simply displacing the anxieties of the present in some nostalgic fetish of the local past. This particular focus on individuals “leaving traces of their selves in space”¹⁴³ matters because it significantly shifts the reading of Bon’s work away from an all too expected, ready-at-hand critical account. Undoubtedly, the narrative form in *Paysage fer* may be said to draw upon the well-worn literary figure of the *problematic individual*, anachronically outfitted, periodically ill-fitted to embrace social change. Yet, we move nonetheless beyond a metanarrative of post-traditional disenchantment. As John Tomlinson remarked, the “experience of ‘displacement’ in modernity is not one of alienation, but one of ambivalence”.¹⁴⁴ Rather than comforting the *pathos* of a pre-modern or rather early-modern localism – by melancholically securing ontological security through the “myth” of local immobility¹⁴⁵ –, Bon’s text shows indeed stronger affinities with Anthony Giddens’s analysis of anxieties, dilemmas and pathologies plaguing the “project of the self” when confronting “the juggernaut like nature of modernity”.¹⁴⁶ However literary in Bon’s case, self-narratives also ought to be considered as a form of social practice responding to the “shifting experience of everyday life”.¹⁴⁷ As such, the concern with maintaining “an autonomy of action” from within the very “dynamism of modernity”¹⁴⁸ provides a plausible template for further assessing Bon’s narratives of mobility.

The second concluding remark hinges on the obvious sociological bend validated by the mobility-to-motility and alienation-to-anxiety transitions. To squarely locate the frame of understanding within the social sciences might indeed prove slightly perplexing for a literary approach initially weary of simply seizing on the literary text for the purpose of reiterating what may have already been learned from an anthropology of “non-places”. However, one may fully stand by the importance of relating literary texts to social imagineries at large without scaling down the former to the status of a further evidential *datum*. By virtue of its functional indeterminacy, Bon’s text eludes most obviously the epistemic logic of truth-value driven scientific statements. *Paysage fer* is at once engaged with ideological positioning across various social rhetorics of localism and globalism and concerned with the pragmatics of performing in writing resistance to mass transit. The text indiscriminately

¹⁴² URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 195-203.

¹⁴³ URRY. *Mobilities*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁴ TOMLINSON. *Globalization and culture*, p. 107.

¹⁴⁵ TOMLINSON. *Globalization and culture*, p. 128.

¹⁴⁶ GIDDENS. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, p. 184.

¹⁴⁷ GIDDENS. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, p. 186.

¹⁴⁸ GIDDENS. *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age*, p. 192-193.

shifts self-narratives and historical *récit*, while sustaining all along a creative tension between a hyper-transitive aesthetics of new realism and a metatextual awareness acknowledging the shortcomings of the writing process. Yet, it is from within this very indeterminacy and through the complex connexity it yields, that the literary text contributes a productive form of understanding. In particular, it points to localities as intricate mobility contexts where action and performance respond to various time-geographies and competing spatial discourses. In so doing, Bon's work touches upon the potentially overlooked relevance of historical approaches to the study of mobilities. For surely, however legitimate may be the claim that we are living through an epochal shift with respect to mobilities, that they are the very stuff of the here and now, we must be able to grasp why a particular shift in mobility patterns becomes such a decisive societal issue within a particular historical context, what changes it effectively brought about, and consequently what local affects, ideological response, geosocial imaginaries it prompts. It is by charting narratives as much as aesthetic paths through that range of concerns, that *Paysage fer* leads the anthropological discourse of non-places along further bends, displaying all the while the "matricial" quality¹⁴⁹ of literary space when it comes to thickening our understanding of a radically shifted, plurivocal sense of place.¹⁵⁰

In light of what precedes, it might be appropriate to reassert as a last remark how going local has proved a lucrative wager, at least in Bon's case, for assessing the interface between a variety of contemporary flows and contemporary literary production. Arguably, the peripheral bias strategically admitted at the outset of this study eventually gained some measure of legitimacy. Limiting the canon to acutely visible signs of literary mobility, from migration to transnationalism, might in fact prove self-defeating if we are to grasp how lived patterns of "flows and disjunctures"¹⁵¹ prompt a literary imagination engaged with "world localities"¹⁵² in the "broader sense of localities with a dual nature that are open to the world"¹⁵³ where "everything that is fragile or catastrophic at the global level will thus be present in every corner of the globe as a local conditions, as a consciousness, and as a spur to counter-action".¹⁵⁴ Yet, it is equally essential to emphasize that this insistence on inclusion within the range of literary texts motivating global scholarship does not simply amount to a strategy of reading back from the margins. It hints, rather, at the wealth of opportunities for comparative approaches situating the narrative imagination of mobilities across a wider variety of resolutely local literary sites.¹⁵⁵ Around the bend of further literary threads...



¹⁴⁹ WESTPHAL. *La géocritique: réel, fiction, espace*, p. 62.

¹⁵⁰ Interestingly, the temporal dimension becomes a leading concern of Augé's in his *Pour une anthropologie de la mobilité*.

¹⁵¹ APPADURAI. *Modernity at large*.

¹⁵² BECK; WILLMS. *Conversations with Ulrich Beck*, p. 200.

¹⁵³ BECK; WILLMS. *Conversations with Ulrich Beck*, p. 200.

¹⁵⁴ BECK; WILLMS. *Conversations with Ulrich Beck*, p. 200.

¹⁵⁵ In this respect, the critical issue of mobility as cultural performance in *Paysage fer* suggests obvious zones of contrasted overlap with the tradition of diasporic writing. To take but a single example, Hiromi Goto's justifiably acclaimed *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994) offers striking similarities with the employment of mobility in Bon's text. As a departure from the established inter-generational genre, the novel experiments with various processes of intensified cultural mobility turning on its heads the typecast figure of the monocultural, monolingual first generation elderly migrant. From colloquial English

RESUMO

O tema das mobilidades tem se manifestado cada vez mais como um foco principal de questionamento para o entendimento crítico das estruturas e processos globais. Essa conscientização é sem dúvida um resultado direto das complexidades que as mobilidades contemporâneas nos instigam a investigar. Enquanto as conexões entre globalização e mobilidades já estão bem documentadas em algumas ciências sociais e humanas (especialmente a sociologia, a antropologia e a geografia humana), menos atenção tem sido dedicada à potencial relevância de uma investigação literária das mobilidades globais, particularmente no que diz respeito a trabalhos estreitamente ligados a contextos locais. Focalizado no livro de François Bon *Paysage fer* (2000), o ensaio pretende analisar como o texto logra fornecer uma visada particularmente aguda da mobilidade narrativa que se conecta com um conjunto de ensaios críticos e promove uma compreensão renovada da relação entre localidade e mobilidade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Mobilidade, localidade, espaço literário

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expletives to a roadsters' lifestyle, from contested gendered sexuality to acting out the iconic part of a stamper in Western Canada, an hyperfictional octogenarian fully domesticates the context of migration through and exponential and unchallenged pattern of cultural agency. The narrative of cultural mastery and total belonging constructed in Goto's novel thus equally points to a range of affects, perceived lacks, and desires closely connected to the nagging issue of presence in transit and the experiences of contemporary mobilities.

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