ON MY WAY

by Martin Imler

ON MY WAY

I get into my car and leave Rue de la Croix-Nivert heading Rue Lecourbe. The traffic is smooth; it's mid-afternoon, people are still at work. I crack open my window because my car has been in the sun all day. I arrive at the intersection Place Balard of Boulevard Victor, turn right to join the ring road, but a car blocks my way. I brake suddenly, the driver had forgotten to signal, he honks and insults me. I gesture an apologetic sign, close the window, and accelerate towards the ring road before reaching the A4.

I'm on my way to Metz[1]. I have to go there because I have an early appointment with a customer tomorrow. I

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[1] Metz is a city in northeast France located at the confluence of the Moselle and the Seille rivers

checked the train tickets but they were too expensive, and luckily there are no planes going from Paris to Metz, so I took the car. The asphalt unfolds for miles. To the right I see well-trimmed trees, an exit appears and a part of the asphalt makes a steep bend and then it's gone. Quickly the trees return along the road, and a new part of asphalt join the one I drive on, bringing with it new drivers. From time to time, a concrete structure disturbs the vision of the infinite lines left by planes in the sky. A church tower seems static in the distance, while staring at it, I feel immobile, as if our movement was synchronized.

I take a break at a gas station, around me I see fields, probably grains, or potatoes. I can't tell from this distance, I wouldn't know even if I was closer to those parallel furrows. I pay for the gas, a coffee, a pack of biscuits and buy a postcard of the Marne Valley with its champagne vineyards, depicting a late autumn afternoon when the lights enhance the reddish tones of the leaves. I get back in the car and drive. I look to my left and the bell tower has disappeared. It is 7pm and the shadows have lengthened, the orange light of the sun is now collapsing on the fields. It's just like that painting from Corot, the blurred trees racing in the opposite direction merge with the orange clouds called « Sunset after the storm ». The weather has been pretty sunny today. I hear an elusive sound as I pass under a bridge and look in my right wing

mirror, a train just passed over me and crosses the fields, but I can't distinguish it clearly anymore. The fields and the train share the same dark color as the sky, the horizon disappears and only the light coming out of the windows casts rectangles that I follow as if they were flying above the ground. I assume train passengers are heading to the south and I imagine the excitement of their arrival, wishing mine was closer. A panel announces that I still have 78km to go, the GPS shows a white grid on the right of the screen, it might be a small town with a train station. Over my right wing-mirror I see a sign asking to pay attention to the local fauna crossing the highway. I have never seen any animals crossing these specific bridges, under which I'll be passing in a kilometre. I used to play that game with my grandma during trips, « Who spot it first? ». My brother and I would have to spot a green car, an ambulance or whatever it was. I would often lose, and the game ended with us searching for animals while never seeing anything. There had be some wild boars or roes, otherwise the farmers wouldn't complain about their fields being attacked, but I haven't seen any while passing under the bridge. Night has come, further to my left I see a flashing light. After a while I distinguish a wind turbine. I turn up the music.

Other signs indicate my proximity to historic places, the Maginot Line[1] or Stanislas Square. Simultaneously I am

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[1] The Maginot Line is a libe of concrete fortifications, obstacles and weapon installations built by France in the 1930s to deter invasion by Nazi Germany

frustrated by the linearity of my journey, and excited by all the possibilities brought by the panels. I could have used probably around 50 exits since I got on the highway, but the GPS only indicates the next one.
I park my car at number 22 Rue Charles de Gaulle, time has flown and I have reached my destination.

Once I parked in front of the hotel, I stayed for a while in the car. I was listening to a radio programme in which ecologists, farmers and politicians were invited to debate the creation of a new highway between Castres and Toulouse in the south of France[1]. The politicians invited were defending the highway as an infrastructure needed in order to bring the agglomeration of Castres to be more attractive economically; we could reach Toulouse 10mn faster with this new highway. They compared it to an internet network as a need to open up this territory[2]. In opposition, ecologists and farmers criticised this project for destroying natural protected areas, reducing agricultural lands and centralising the economic activities in Toulouse, instead of spreading them over the region to avoid the daily travel and the pollution. I couldn't imagine that such a project would represent this many issues, while I didn't even have an opinion about it. To me, the countryside I was crossing was a stage setting, the fantasy of a city dweller, it was here, it is here, and

[1] Toulouse-Castres: the highway of discord, France Culture, 20th April 2023
[2] Benjamin Bayart Co-founder of «la Quadrature du Net», The highway (3/5): Caution, alternate route, 8th October 2014

it will remain such. I had no particular interest in it, but it seems being aware of my environment is necessary to reflect politically on this debate, so maybe it was time to quit this illusion[1].

I picked up the keys to my room and I decided, after emptying my luggage, to try to remember what I had crossed on my way here. I took the postcard I bought and started writing, or at least tried to. I couldn't really remember or write anything specific. I wanted to send this postcard to my grand-pa, I wrote about memories of car rides with him, my grandma and my twin, the games we played, the gas station in which we used to stop... I flipped the postcard to see the picture on the back and try to get inspired by it, but I couldn't remember these vineyards. Actually, I don't think I passed by this area, I obviously know I was not focusing on what I was passing by, but I think I would remember such a nice landscape. I checked online the itinerary I'd used, and in fact the closest I got from the Marne Valley was actually 10 kilometres north. Now aware of my disconnection to the space I had gone through and my ignorance to the impact the infrastructure I was using had on it, I wondered: How had I experienced space through high-speed? And in the continuity of the podcast I had listened to, was it having an impact on it?

[1] «(...)The countryside is an illusion, it doesn't exist(...)», PEREC, G. (2000) Especes d'espaces. Paris, France: Galilee. p.135

I finished writing the postcard and put it in an envelope to send it the next day.

12/04/2023

Dear Grand-pa,
I drove to Metz this afternoon, it is an amazing route, Champagne-Ardennes and Lorraine are beautiful regions. I think you did your military service there right? I guess you enjoyed it :) While driving I saw a lot of kids sleeping against the back windows of cars, it reminded me of the car rides to Saint-Martin with you and Grand-ma. Do you know if the gas station where we would eat apple pie still exists ? I hope to see you soon !
Martin

Dear Grand-pa,   12/04/2023

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you did your military service there right? I guess you enjoyed
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I hope to see you soon!

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The next day, I woke up around 7am, my appointment was at 9am so I had time to read the postcard again. The night didn't help to remember. Tired from the trip and already thinking about having to drive back in the afternoon made me fall deeply asleep, and I couldn't remember myself dreaming of anything. As I was reading what I had written, I got stuck on the first sentence, « (...) Champagne-Ardennes and Lorraine are beautiful regions. ». Usually I wouldn't have considered this detail, it was the kind of text and words I would use automatically, because the purpose was more to create contact with my grand-parents than to actually describe precisely where I was. In the last few years I have been travelling a lot for work which didn't leave much time to see them. Using the word beautiful was then also a way to express that I was having a nice time, that they shouldn't worry about myself, and spread positivity while they would read to avoid a drama at the next family gathering.

However, if I wanted to forget about the illusion[1] of the beautiful countryside, I should watch my words. The use of this word was already raising many questions: Was beauty an end in itself ? Why could I not remember the landscape I had for sure seen as beautiful ? If the landscape was beautiful, was it a logical consequence to qualify the territory as such ? Could I make a difference

[1] cf p.8

between Lorraine's territory and Champagne-Ardennes' one ?

I couldn't start with these thoughts, the hotel was cheap but far from my appointment. It was 8:23am and I had to go back in the car, in order to be there on time.

Natural speed

If I was thinking about my first way of experiencing space, I would think about walking, the first human pace, a natural one. Walking is the first and oldest way to travel, to go from one place to another. Walking involves the observation of landscape as the first step to discover land. In order to travel - long before the democratisation of the motor car and the industrial revolution - you had to observe the landscape, because that's how one would see obstacles, relief, watercourses and more. The landscape is necessary for walkers. Its definition is the etymological one, -*scape*, what I can see. Landscape, what I can see from the land. This definition implies the landscape as being different from the land, it is only what I can see from it, meaning that there's a part that I cannot see. The landscape folds the land, and between the folds lies the unknown. However through walking the landscape would disappear after looking at it, one would walk through it and undo the crease. I would discover the unknown simultaneously by observing it and practicing it. Each step, I measure it, connect my body to it, and understand its specificities. Walking enables me to make from every piece of

land a unique one in the way I am going across it, anchoring my body in it[1]. I will, make it my own, appropriate it, thus make it my territory.

Slowly, the ways of travelling have accelerated, humans tamed the horse, the elephant, and other animals helping us to travel faster and further while being able to rest. The wind is used to travel on the sea, the wheel allows to be carried and transport merchandise. Finally, a road network has developed in order to help travellers find their way in the landscape.

Artificial speed

In the 19th century, speed accelerated considerably. Thanks to the first steam engine developed in the end of the 18th century, the locomotive appeared in the first half of the 19th century. This innovation was welcomed with fascination, it was a symbol of modernity. Many artists had found excitement in what was seen as a progress, and in the human ability to develop such technology. In 1844, Joseph Mallard William Turner illustrated this arrival in a painting *Rain, Steam and Speed- The Great Western Railway*. It depicts a hare trying to escape from the

[1] Lèbre, J. (2011) Vitesses. Paris: Hermann. p.78

ferocious locomotive chasing it, natural speed was chased by artificial speed, and there was no doubt that the hare would get caught. It is a new way of travelling for individuals who discover high-speed. The acceleration of the landscape was frightening for many, and the machine was worrying. The blurriness of the painting illustrates this change in the perception of the landscape. Tommaso Meldolesi who researches through the literature of the 19th century[1], how the first experience of the train was for travellers, describes this duality between the fascination for the machine, and the frightening experience that it was to not be in continuity with your environment[2]. The train seemed to inexorably carry the travelers along, and the great moving scenes that undulate behind the compartment window seem distant, inaccessible. However, step by step it becomes a habit to use the train and confidence in trust grew. It was also seen as confort, human intelligence had created the machine and humans could now rest[3]. The passenger would only be carried by the motorised vehicles, and technologies continued to develop, in the comfort of progress. It had become natural to use artificial speed.

[1] Meldolesi Tommaso. Une transformation pour l'avenir : le chemin de fer. In: Concepts, cultures et progrès scientifiques et techniques. Actes du 131, pp. 113-118.
[2] M.Desportes, Paysage en mouvement, Paris: Gallimard, 2005, p.151
[3] Alphonse De Lamartine , Speech by Alphonse De Lamartine on the railways bill, Paris, Duverger, 1838.

«Man tamed horses, dogs and elephants to assert his authority and increase his speed... Man forced metals, made flexible by fire, to join forces with fuels and electricity...»[1]

It is during the 20th century, that artificial speed, indefinitely got embedded in our habits and ways of living, notably through the car, becoming a tool to reach individual freedom. It is what allowed me to not pay an expensive train fee and still reach my destination.

Non-place

What I had actually experienced on my way to Metz was the highway. This infrastructure was developed for the deployment of speed. I had entered through the Parisian ring by passing the tollbooth and I had left the same way in Metz. What is the highway for a place?
It feels like an artificial place, one over the land, making it inaccessible. On my right and my left, a range of trees or a barrier would enclose me in the highway.

[1] Manifesto republished in Futurisme. Manifestes, Proclamations, Documents, L'Âge d'homme, 1973, p.85-86.
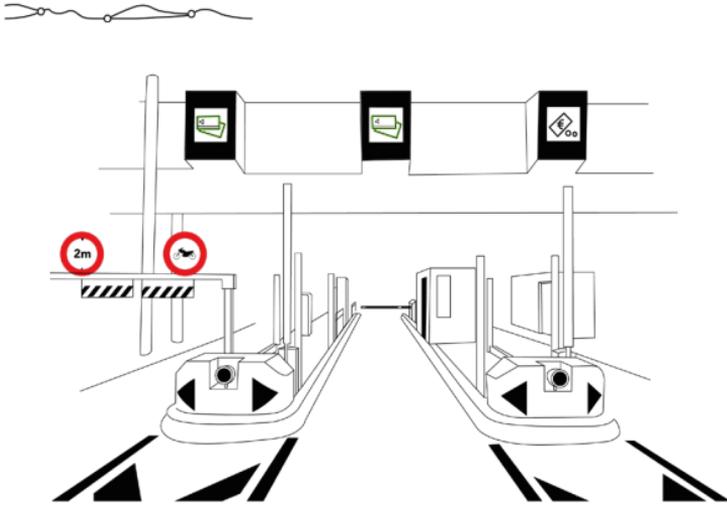
«The engineers behind the design and development of the highway, a veritable institution, have done their utmost to keep out of the driver's way not only any obstacles that might impede speed, but also anything that might distract the driver from concentrating on the asphalt strip, This continuity ends up encompassing, after thirty, forty or sixty minutes of constant speed, not only the wheels of the vehicle illusorily controlled by the human being at the wheel, but also the steering wheel and the hands and reflexes of this human being, who, whether consciously or not, thus joins the great impersonal totality sought by all religions.»[1]

[1] Carol, D. and Julio, C. (1983) p.22, in Les autonautes de la Cosmoroute. Gallimard.

To enclose one's self is a need and the consequence of speed I have to focus only on the highway and on my destination in order to not put myself or others in danger. To avoid an accident the deal is: in order to go fast, the highway must be the only thing on one's mind. This enclosure becomes social, the highway is for sure not a meeting place. My direction may differ on the interchange, I would still not encounter anyone. Whereas I remember the crossroad from last morning, where I had a disagreement, and so communication, with a man across our cars.

I enjoy that loneliness, a moment alone in the machine. I feel a bliss at the thought of my body capable of covering such a distance enclosed in this cabin that swallows the asphalt. A feeling of fulfilment, to sense my body being carried at such speed, surpassing by far the physical limits of natural movement. This place is nothing, there is no history, no specific identity, a *non-place*[1]. Similarly to a roller coaster, I bought my ticket at the tollbooth, and now I could experience this high speed. I was nowhere, yet part of movement, and there was no reason to question for more.

As a child, I remember during the journeys, by train or car, that the only time I would ask my

[1] Marc Augé, Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmo-dernité, La Librairie du XXe siècle, Seuil, p. 100.

parents about our location and try to situate myself, was when we were actually slowing down, as if unconsciously I knew that through speed it did not make sense to ask.

Meanwhile, in the train it was when it stopped for unexpected reasons during a trip (power failure, traffic control, accident…). I would stop playing, reading or whatever I was doing and look outside the window, ask my parents about our location. Often I wasn't speaking loud enough, the angry other passengers covered my voice with invectives towards the train companies, SNCF, DeutschBahn… As if there was a denial towards immobility.

After a while, I would ask again.

I remember on the highway asking the same question when I was waking up from a nap almost magically when there was a traffic jam, when we were slowing down.

«Dad, Mom, where are we?»
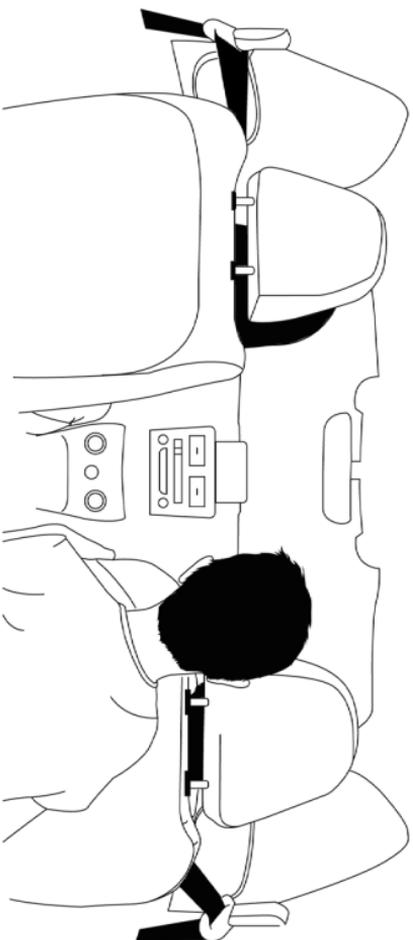
«We left Paris an hour and a half ago, so we can't be far from Lille, darling. Two hours away from Amsterdam.»

A smooth globe

Before answering, my parents often sighed and then looked at their watch, phone, or navigation system. Their answer said nothing about where I was, it was only in relation to my departure or my arrival. I always thought that they were sighing because they were pissed to hear this same question from me and my brothers, but maybe they were sighing because they couldn't answer.

This way of situating oneself was the result of a relation:

$$T_{(Time)} = S_{(Speed)} \: / \: D_{(Distance)}$$

The highway created a new reference frame, which allowed to determine a set distance between my departure and my arrival. To guarantee continuous speed, thus a frozen arrival time. I didn't know what there was between my departure and my destination but time. The highway was developed by ignoring all the topographical, geographical elements from the land, the ancient obstacles from the walkers were not anymore. Mountains are passed through tunnels, rivers through bridges,

valleys through viaduct. Therefore, the Earth is no longer made up of different areas singularised by a way of practicing them. Now, there is mostly the highway to practise the Earth has become a smooth globe, « a homogeneous environment for rapid travel »[1].

By operating from a sky view, the GPS enhances this perception. The satellites made the horizon disappear and the landscape with it. The GPS uses a grid with longitudinal and latitudinal lines evoking the idea of a mesh around the globe, canceling out any topography. The system locates me by coordinates somewhere on this reference frame, but in no way does it inform me about the geography. Railways and highways have become the «physical»

[1] Jérôme, L. (2011) 'Entraînement', in Vitesses. Paris: Hermann, p.20.

implementation of this mesh. There are no paths, they are axes. Just as the axes of the geographical coordinates, the rail and highway infrastructures impose their law on the topographical relief. Because what is an axis if not a straight line? And what must a straight line be if not be straight, not to deviate and to reach the next point as fast as possible. My perception of the world would solely be based on the speed at which I travel through it. Therefore my perception depends on the high-speed infrastructure built around me. This is how I could perceive France :
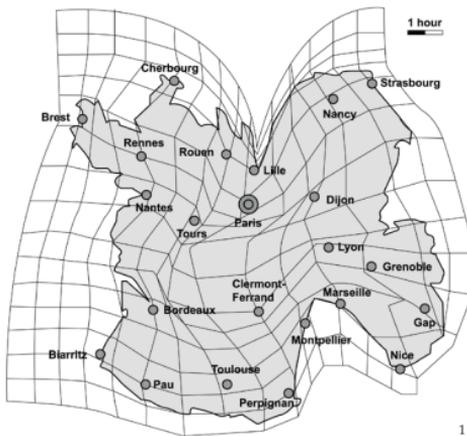
[1] Map of France according to SNCF (2001), map showing the distance between cities by rail network in time

This distortion was called *dromoscopic pollution*[1] by contemporary philosopher Paul Virilio, which shrinks the world by speeding up movement. He sought after demonstrating the danger of speed in the development of contemporary societies. According to Virilio, speed is a danger that would make us live in a «general accidentality»[1]. The philosopher's thoughts are introduced by contemporary philosopher Jérôme Lèbre, in his book Vitesses (2011), through the expression «we run a risk»[2]. Indeed, we use this sentence to express a danger, Lèbre points that while running we don't run a true risk, as it is a natural human pace, you produce your experience of speed. The danger, according to him and Virilio is the immobility in movement, this insensitivity to speed, turns into a danger. One of the most important texts in his thinking is the Austrian-German philosopher and mathematician Edmund Husserl's « The planet does not move »(1934)[3]. In this text, he marks the difference between the Earth of science and the Earth-ground. While astronomy and physics make the Earth a planet in motion, the structure of our perception implies our mobility as physical beings, finding their place on a stable and immobile ground. My displacement is based on the immobility of the

[1] Paul Virilio, Vitesse et Politique, Paris, Galillée, 1977, p.147
[2] Jérôme, L. (2011) 'Entraînement', in Vitesses. Paris: Hermann, p.15
[3] The Planet does not move, translation by Didier Franck, Dominique Pradelle, Jean-François Lavigne, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1989.

ground, of the Earth-ground, and so the constitution of my experience of the Earth, made up of different places, implies the temporality of my displacement, of my walking, through which I gradually discover the world. At the end of his analysis, Husserl wonders: «But now, does being mechanically moved in space (being-conducted, being-drawn) do nothing for constitution ?». It's a question that leaves little doubt as to its answer, because if my experience is constituted by my body moving on a motionless ground, then any movement that is improper for my body, and imposed on it, will result in a distortion of my perception.
I was experiencing it.

Through the window

My parents' answer didn't satisfy me, they were persuaded that I wanted to ask them:

«*When are we there ?*»

It was not my question, I wanted to know where we were situated. So meanwhile the machine was starting again I would look through the window
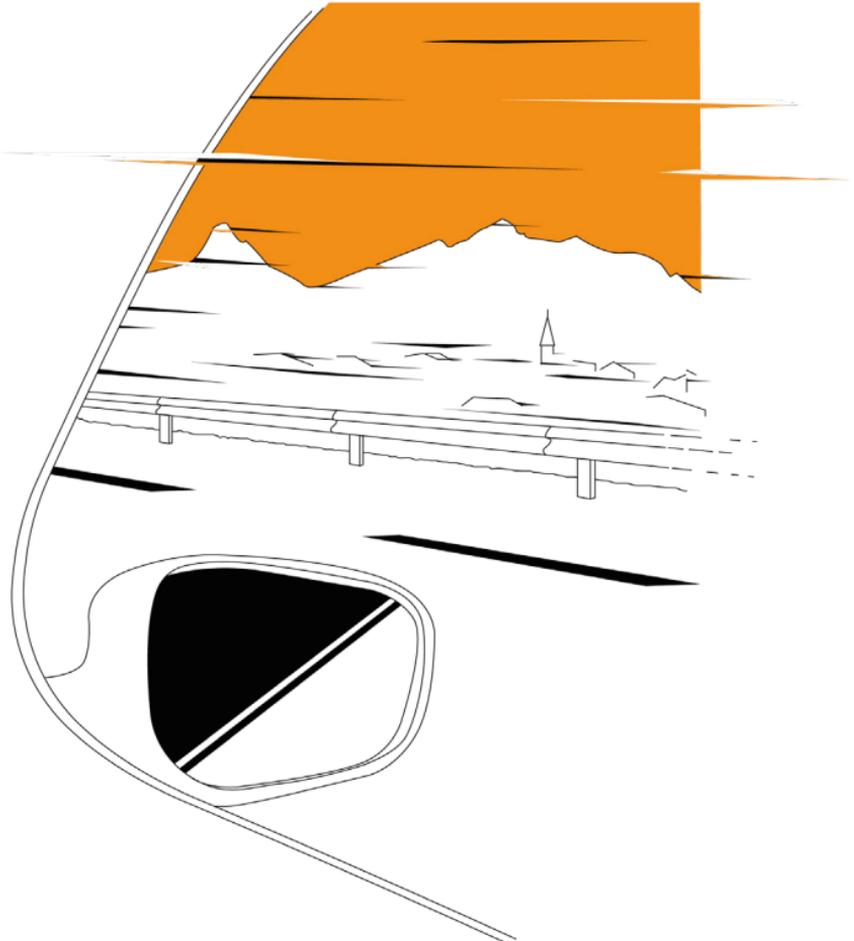
trying to capture a bit of what I was going through. While accelerating it felt like my environment was accelerating the other way, making my vision blurred and unable to grasp what my window framed.

On my way to Metz, I had the same feeling, the images were passing fast in front of the window, I wasn't able to process them, I didn't have the ocular time. What was left were some shapes that I could capture in the stormlike environment. Shapes to the horizon, anchored and stable even in the car's movement. It was not physical objects evolving in an environment, only shapes and colours. There was no mountain to be seen but a discontinued line, no steeple but a triangle, no reflection of the sun in the clouds but orange hues. As if on my right and my left, there was a flat surface. Those shapes, maybe because nature hates emptiness, were not staying isolated for long. They reminded me of memories, and through them I was building new images, a new landscape. The orange light reminded me of a painting from Jean-Baptiste Corot, the triangle reminded me of that church in which my grand-ma dragged me in on Sunday morning, and the discontinued line of the mountains reminded me of the impressive alpine mountains. I was picturing

myself through the moving images of the window. I was in my thoughts. As a child I would fall asleep against the window.

I was *artialising*[1], as philosopher Alain Roger would say, to make nature and my environment beautiful through artistic and personal references. Perhaps that's why I saw the countryside as a space that didn't change, because I watched it through personal references, which made the environment I was going through similar to the one before and the one after. Speed through the highway has made the land a smooth surface, cutting me from my environment and without being able to have a visual experience of it.

[1] Alain Roger, Court Traité du paysage, Paris, Gallimard, 1997
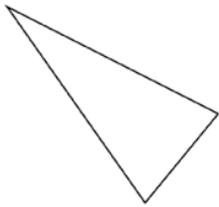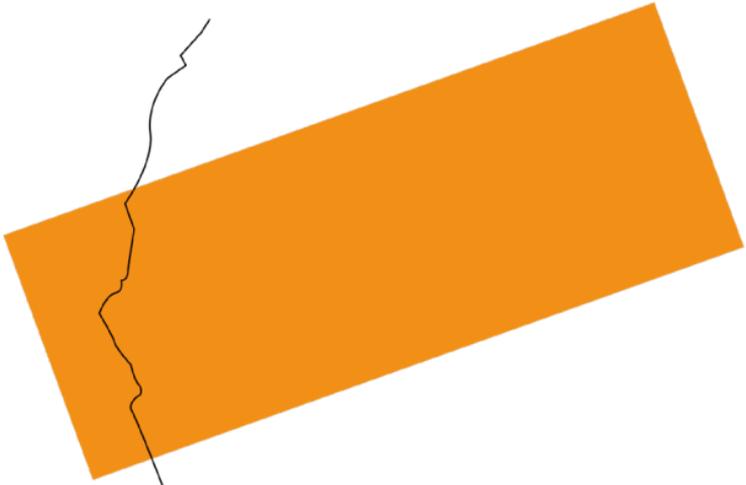
Panels and gas stations

In order to situate myself, I was left with what the highway and my car accepted to communicate. Since my departure from Paris, I saw numerous panels, mostly announcing cities. *Charleville-Mézières, Thionville, Strasbourg, Château-Thierry, Nancy, Verdun, Saint-Dizier, Meaux.* They all seem the same, same font, same size, same graphic charter. The only thing changing was the colour, switching from green to white and more. The colour corresponds to the kind of road network one uses to reach them, I assume blue was for highways. It
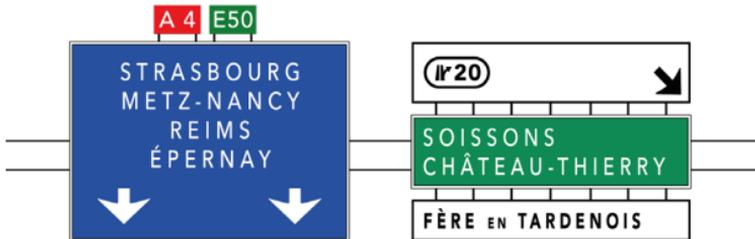
was not places I was going through, but one I could make a destination of. If the panel was to be seen it meant I wasn't there yet, and if it disappeared I had already passed it. Some panels display the distance separating me from those places, 39, 132, or even 339 km. I was not a traveller anymore roaming and experiencing places, but rather a passenger defined by my destination[1]. The only places I could see around me were shown on my navigation system. Dense overlapping lines allowed me to identify a street network. However nothing I could visually relate to. Through the panels I could only know I was in France, as I grew up next to the German border,
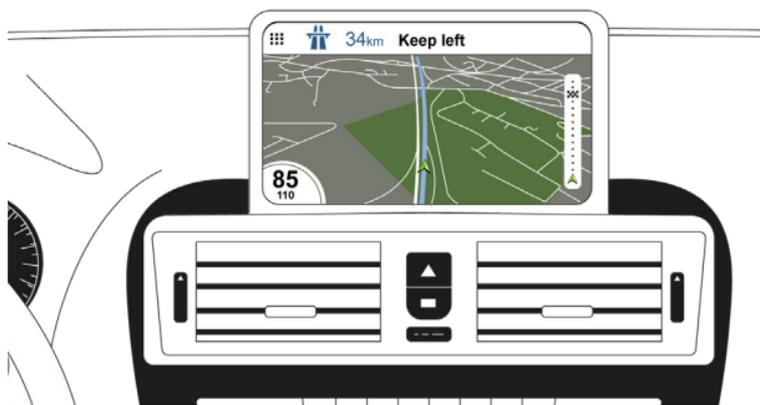
[1] Marc Augé, Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmo-dernité, La Librairie du XXe siècle, Seuil

where they have another graphic charter. This way of representing information on panels reminds me of the work of Jacques Bertin, a 20th century geographer. In the book «Semiology of graphics»[1], he revolutionised cartography by synthesising the principles of graphic communications, which still play an important role in the theory of information design. Bertin's aim was to make the understanding of a map efficient by simplifying it. It seemed that his theory had found its way into the real world, and everything was simplified by the use of simple colors and similar typography. The « eastern highway » was synthesised as the « A4 » with a red colour, the same graphic charter could be found on a map. And the colors of the signs would make it possible to follow the routes also on a map if necessary. This way of communicating served a safety purpose, to assimilate information quickly without putting oneself in danger.

After an hour of driving, a panel announces the Champagne-Ardennes region. The regional or départemental[2] panels were also similar from each other, blue with a yellow font and outline. This clue was more precise, it situated me in a territory and I was often reminded of. As I passed the panel the radio started to crackle, the frequency had changed.

[1] Bertin, J. and Berg, W.J. (2011) Semiology of graphics: Diagrams, networks, maps. Redlands, CA: Esri Press.
[2] Département: An administrative unit based on a division dating from the Revolutionary period. Most are named after rivers or mountains.
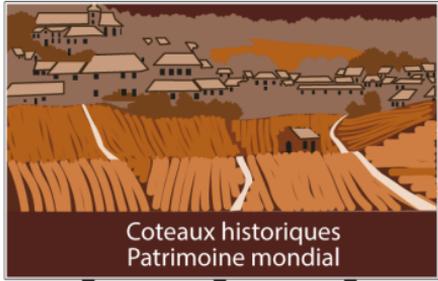
Région
Champagne-Ardennes

A kilometer later, a voice could finally be heard, the jingle of the local radio welcomed me:

«Welcome to ChampagneFM !»

The plate number of cars also changed, enhancing the notion of territory. When the same plate number recurrently appears, I imagine being in the corresponding territory. I gathered from this territory letters, numbers and a radio jingle, yet I couldn't experience it visually and I felt like situating myself in an abstraction.

Then orange-brownish signs appeared on the highway, with the illustration of a landscape, a sign of cultural and touristic interest. The landscape was removed from its environment, and by fixing it to a panel, I was finally able to acknowledge it. It was a graphic illustration that seemed, with the use of those colours, to be from the past. There is often a castle, a

Coteaux historiques
Patrimoine mondial

building, or a specific agricultural cultivation from the region, never far off. Those panels follow a strict regulation, they have to indicate a place no further than 30km away. I could finally connect a visual to the territory, feeding the frustration to a driver who wanted to see more. This frustration disappeared at the gas stations. They are often named after the territory you are in. They are temples of the territory, a condensed summary of what you cannot see or experience. They advertised a specific craft, culture and traditions. At the cafeteria you can eat the specific dish from the region with the local drink and while having coffee you can wander between the section of the souvenir shop. The choice can be hard to make between the magnets and the cups, both illustrating the specific architectural building with the name of the region in a huge font. After choosing you can go to the checkout. While waiting in line, you can turn the revolving postcard stand and choose one to share your trip and the landscape carefully shown on it.
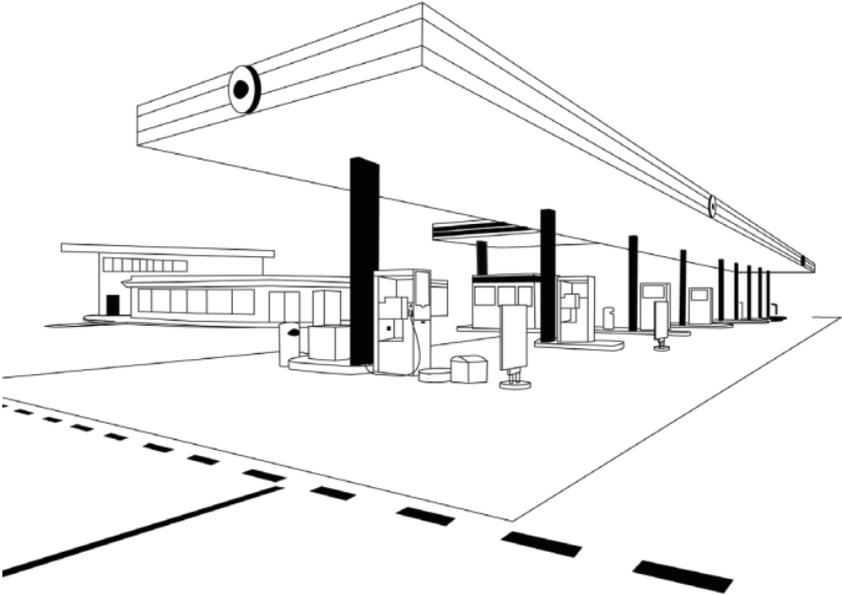
The postcard

The postcard was the only thing remaining from my trip, showing a landscape that would be the only mark of my passage in this region. There is a change in the meaning of the word landscape, far away from the creases the walker undid. The landscape on the postcard doesn't allow me to browse through it, and the landscape becomes an end by itself. Detached from its environment there is no unknown to discover, but a landscape to idolise, what has been culturally instituted represents an environment which surrounds one's self[1]. The fragment was whole. I believed in this landscape as it was the only visual experience the highway dared to share with me, excluding the abstract panels.
It is this landscape I brought with me and I could finally understand what made me write that text to my grandfather. I thought the beauty belonged to the territory, which in retrospect was a stranger to me, the beauty was from the experience of the highway. The strange and pleasant feeling of being pulled by the force of the car, the memories of car rides with my grand-parents, the biscuits I had at the gas station and many more. That's what characterised the territory and the landscape on the back of this

[1] Cauquelin, A. (2000) 'Le paysage par la fenêtre', in L'invention du paysage. Universitaires de France. Paris, France: PUF, p. p.103-109.

postcard, the only visual I had left allowing me to illustrate this melancholy and beauty.

DEAR. GRAND-PA,   12/04/2023

I DROVE TO METZ THIS AFTERNOON, IT IS AN AMAZING ROUTE,
CHAMPAGNE-ARDENNES AND LORRAINE ARE BEAUTIFUL REGIONS. I THINK
YOU DID YOUR MILITARY SERVICE THERE RIGHT? I GUESS YOU ENJOYED
IT :) WHILE DRIVING I SAW A LOT OF KIDS SLEEPING AGAINST THE
BACK WINDOWS OF CARS, IT REMINDED ME OF THE CAR RIDES TO
SAINT-MARTIN WITH YOU AND GRAND-MA. DO YOU KNOW IF THE
GAS STATIONS WHERE WE WOULD EAT APPLE PIE STILL EXISTS?
I HOPE TO SEE YOU SOON!

MARTIN

12/04/2023

Dear Grand-pa,
I drove to Metz this afternoon, it is an amazing route, Champagne-Ardennes and Lorraine are beautiful regions. I think you did your military service there right? I guess you enjoyed it :) While driving I saw a lot of kids sleeping against the back windows of cars, it reminded me of the car rides to Saint-Martin with you and Grand-ma. Do you know if the gas station where we would eat apple pie still exists ? I hope to see you soon !
Martin

Street names

In a way, these signs and landscapes reminded me of street names: this arbitrary way of designating places, without really specifying what they were, or what was in them. The name of the territory and the landscapes floated above this geographical area to which I didn't have access.

I don't like street names. It's always a very abstract designation, and as someone who walks a lot, I've always hated following street names on an itinerary. So when I have to go somewhere new, I try to memorise the route, remembering when to turn: first to the left, second on the right… I prefer to pay attention and tell myself that I'm not turning into a certain street, but rather into the pharmacy at the corner with the lancet windows above, or that I don't remember this street name, but that I've passed a narrow street where there wasn't a place to park, and little room on the pavements to walk, and so on. These streets are often named after old activities linked to the area, or sometimes historical figures. I like these names to get lost in what they stand for and how I use them. So that my friends and I would meet at "JJ" (Jean Jaurès[1] Square), the politician would get lost in the square to which his

[1] Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) was a French Socialist leader.

name was given as the meeting place, the square near the tramway, a place on the way to school. This place was becoming other through my practice.

On the highway, I couldn't get rid of this landscape or this name, I couldn't travel through this territory, so I had to accept these signs and these imposed images. But wasn't experiencing the territory in such a way, solely through clues, through its markers, announcing its disappearance?

From the territory to the network

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*:

> **territory** - noun
> (plural territories)
> [countable, uncountable] land that is under the control of a particular country or political leader

According to this definition territories still exist. The borders were shown through the line I was crossing on the GPS, the panels were showing my entrance and my exit, and local authorities were ruling it. But the territory is first and foremost «a space delimited

by life»[1]. This is how 20th century philosophers Guattari and Deleuze define it:

> «*A territory is a geographical space internalized by an individual and/or a human group.*»[2]

The two philosophers develop this definition by linking it to animal practices, which «make» their territory by drawing customary lines, discerning zones of habitat, shelter, hunting areas, food reserves and reproduction, *territorialising* as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari would say[3]. The term *territorialise* implies an internalisation of the land through its practice. Internalised, means intimately known by the individual and/or the group, and shared between them. The question of border then comes as a much fuzzier and shifting notion than as presented on the GPS or set by the panels. It is constantly being debated, and can be pushed back depending on our knowledge and exploration of geography, «nothing singularises a phenomenon more than its transformation, becoming other»[4]. It was by walking the streets that I shed its name and made it my territory, that I made it «become other». Therefore if there is a territory, there

[1] Godin, Christian. « Fin du territoire ou nouveaux territoires ? », Cités, vol. 60, no. 4, 2014, pp. 149-157.
[2] Antonioli, Manola. « 7 : Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari : pour une géo-philosophie », Thierry Paquot éd., La Découverte, 2009, pp. 117-137.
[3-4] Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (2009) A thousand plateaus: Rhizomes. Berkeley, CA, USA: Venus Pencils.

is an appropriation and an authority, like the Oxford Dictionary defines it, but there can be no appropriation without specific signs that express this appropriation while realising it- these are the two correlative aspects of this act: «marking one's territory»[1].

This definition implies the habitat, the continuous presence of a group of humans on that territory, singularising it by their way of living in it, but the continuous presence of a group of individuals on a territory is not in the lifestyles anymore.

> *«Territory no longer corresponds to the living environment of a community, because lifestyles are no longer organised around proximity, but rather around mobility. As a result, in increasingly fluid and complex societies, it is no longer possible to create social ties and identity solely on the basis of territory, locality or proximity»[2]*

The postcard was the mark of my only occasional and brief presence, a souvenir I had to take with me since I was leaving the territory. I was always on the move, it was no longer possible for me to territorialise, I wasn't internalising the land, in fact,

[1] Godin, Christian. « Fin du territoire ou nouveaux territoires ? », Cités, vol. 60, no. 4, 2014, pp. 149-157.
[2] Marie-Christine Jaillet, « Contre le territoire, la 'bonne distance' », in M. Vanier (dir.), Territoires, territorialité, territorialisation. Controverses et perspectives, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009.

it was the opposite of what the highway wanted, by cutting me off the geography. In the car, like the thousands of people with me on the highway, I was the symbol of this change. We were not organising our lifestyle around territory but around reversible mobility and network. I was never there, but always on my way.

Territory

Network
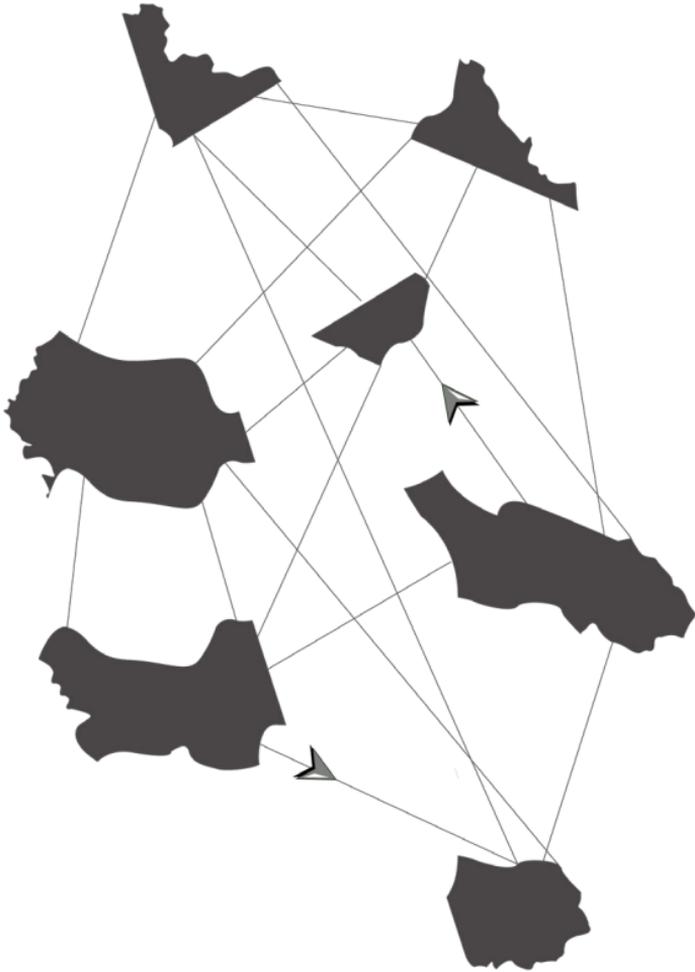
Tourism and identity

If the territory was disappearing because of this way of life, why was it presented to me as still existing, and what interest could it serve ?

At first, there seemed to be an interest for tourism, as the name of these orange and brown panels, the cultural and tourist interest panels, indicates: they were there to communicate a culture to the tourists. Continuing to communicate a specific way of living in an area meant making it unique and therefore more attractive. Tourism plays a very important role in the development of a territory, and the postcards are intended for this purpose, with the aim of sharing with others the beauty of this territory and making them want to come here too. In a system in which the creation of a proximity identity is more and more complex due to the development of a larger global network, the local characteristics become only a spectacle for those passing by, or a way of attracting tourists by fantasising a past.

What I was seeing at the gas stations was only the vestige of a previous appropriation of that land and of the way we lived in it, and the landscape was becoming a monument. It appeared to me as a spectacle. It was the symbol of the *Supermodernity*[1]

[1] Marc Augé, Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité, La Librairie du XXe siècle, Seuil.

described by Augé:

> *«What the spectator contemplates of modernity is the interweaving of the old and the new. Supermodernity, on the other hand, turns the old (history) into a specific spectacle- as it does all the exoticisms and local particularisms.»[1]*

Secondly, by looking at place names, and street names in particular, since the panels and landscape reminded me of that, we can see that they play a very important role in the construction of a common identity.

The aim to strengthen a common identity is to build a nation (a large body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular country or territory) in order to maintain a state sovereignty over the population. In France the creation of the state and so of the French territory preceded the one of the nation. Authorities, then, made use of different tools to deal with this major issue. Street names were one of them. During the large urban evolutions of the 17th century, the choice was made to name streets after French personalities or significant events of French history, or at least

[1] Marc Augé, Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmo-dernité, La Librairie du XXe siècle, Seuil.

perceived as such by the authorities.

If the territory in the sense of Guattari and Deleuze disappears, it still remains an area of power and authority, and can therefore be seen as a political will aimed at legitimising the exercise of power over a united population by communicating a common way of inhabiting this territory.

Landscape as a monument

What are the harmful effects in advertising a way of living on a territory that does not exist anymore?

What seems problematic is to continue advertising a certain way to live on a piece of land that is evolving, mostly due to the climate crisis. Instead of accepting its evolution and adapting our way of living on this territory, we seek to change geography in order to make it still correspond to what we communicate about the territory, through the landscape. By not undoing the crease of the landscape anymore, it feels like our environment has only become a graphic pomp. We're no longer interested in geography because we've got rid of its limits, as my experience of the highway symbolised, but it's only

an aesthetic and symbolic interest that matters. The landscape is a monument, and it should remain so because it is considered beautiful and symbolises the culture of the territory.

Research conducted by geographer Carole Pouliquen illustrates this point[1]. In three tourist locations that she analysed, there was a desire to 'preserve' the landscape. To do so, one of the operations is to plant tree species from the south in regions further north in anticipation of climate change, with the aim of «preserving a wooded landscape». While the shape of one tree may be similar to another, its specific characteristics inevitably have an impact on the environment, implying a change in geography and an adaptation of ecosystems and, more broadly, our lifestyles. In the end, this attempt at «preservation» often puts ecosystems in danger.

To some extent, this *monumentalisation* also has detrimental effects on the implantation of renewable energy infrastructures such as solar panels or wind turbines. Public authorities are facing an important reluctance from the population, which considers them as a deterioration of a «heritage». Public authorities then seek to create narratives to justify their appearances in a landscape, to create

[1] Caroline Pouliquen, Le développement du tourisme dans les espaces de nature protégés européens, doctoral thesis, University of Angers, 2014
[2] Territorial management of the Marne département

a «natural» evolution. In an interview with a DDT[2] (Territorial management of the Marne) employee from the Marne county, conducted for the project Voir du pays (2023)[1], she compared and legitimised the appearance of wind turbines in the landscape as reminiscent of windmills, once again highlighting the importance of the landscape as a monument, even in an urgent context where the installation of renewable energy infrastructures is necessary for the energy transition.

Reconnection with geography seems therefore necessary in order to accept the changes in the landscape by undoing its creases and thus reclaiming the geography and adapting ourselves to it. Continuing to consume the landscape as a spectacle would take us further and further away from its origin, the land[2].

Network and reversible mobility

What are the wider harmful effects of the network and reversible mobility?

Reversible mobility is the ability to travel fast, far, often, and return to the point of departure easily[3].

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[1] Interview for: Voir du pays, Martin Imler, video project, 2023.
[2] DEBORD, G. (2024) Society of the spectacle. S.l.: PM PR.
[3] Landriève, S., Kaufmann, V. and Gay, C. (2021) Pour en finir avec la vitesse. La tour d'Aigues, France: Editions de l'Aube. p.7

Artificial speed and the infrastructure allowing its deployment, have made reversible mobility the basis of our ways of living, it becomes necessary and encouraged.

In 2003, a brochure published by the IVM (Institute for the City in Motion) described the right to mobility as a generic right, «i.e. as a necessary condition for access to other rights - work, housing, education, health, etc.»[1]. This right takes its meaning from a whole range of new practices requiring «spatial mobility», which is seen as essential for «social mobility»: for emancipation, self-fulfilment and, therefore, for building oneself as an individual. Mobility leads to employability[2], therefore many social initiatives have been created by private or public actors to promote it. Today, mobility is essential because the system centres economic attraction in the major urban areas. This is illustrated by the presence on highway signs indicating the towns of Lyon, Marseille or Paris, even 300km away and shows the normalisation of long-distance travel in our daily lives. In France, people travel 60 kilometres a day, compared to 4 kilometres before the industrial revolution[3] and reversible mobility has therefore broken down the territory through the network. If this way of living

[1] Marchal, Hervé, et Jean-Marc Stébé. « Chapitre V. La mobilité comme droit fondamental », , Les grandes questions sur la ville et l'urbain. Presses Universitaires de France, 2014, pp. 155-157.
[2-3] Landriève, S., Kaufmann, V. and Gay, C. (2021) Pour en finir avec la vitesse. La tour d'Aigues, France: Editions de l'Aube. p.42

has fulfilled the dreams of freedom, discovery and travels, to a certain part of the population. Nowadays we must question the future and limits of this lifestyle. Synonymous with «freedom», reversible mobility has gradually become a norm, then a social injunction, causing fatigue, stress and social inequalities linked to its access. In the current climate crisis, the augmentation of travel in everyday life brings more and more carbon emission. The problem linked to the climate crisis is not only about the CO_2 emissions, to which a solutionist ideology could answer, but also about how this way of living has cut us off from our natural environment.

Firstly physically, indeed the reversible mobility has brought the artificialisation[1] of lands around cities due to their metropolisation, and also through the network, the highway being its symbol. This artificialisation[2] endangers our environment by making it more fragile. This distance taken from our environment is also within our perception of it, thus my journey was the symbol of it. Today, globalisation and technical advances for high-speed mobility have smoothed out lifestyles, making the lifestyles similar anywhere, making us perceive the Earth as a smooth globe, another reference frame,

[1-2] Transformation of a soil of agricultural, natural or forestry character by management actions, which may result in its total or partial waterproofing. This change in land use, which is usually irreversible, has consequences which can be detrimental to the environment and agricultural production.- Definition- National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies.

but it seems necessary to reconnect to the Earth, made up of different places, in order to be able to answer to the question once again: "Why here and not elsewhere ?"[1] marking our connection to our environment.

Slowing down

It seems essential to slow down and take the time to undo the creases of the landscape again in order to understand the specificities of the land. A relationship with our environment based on practice rather than contemplation.
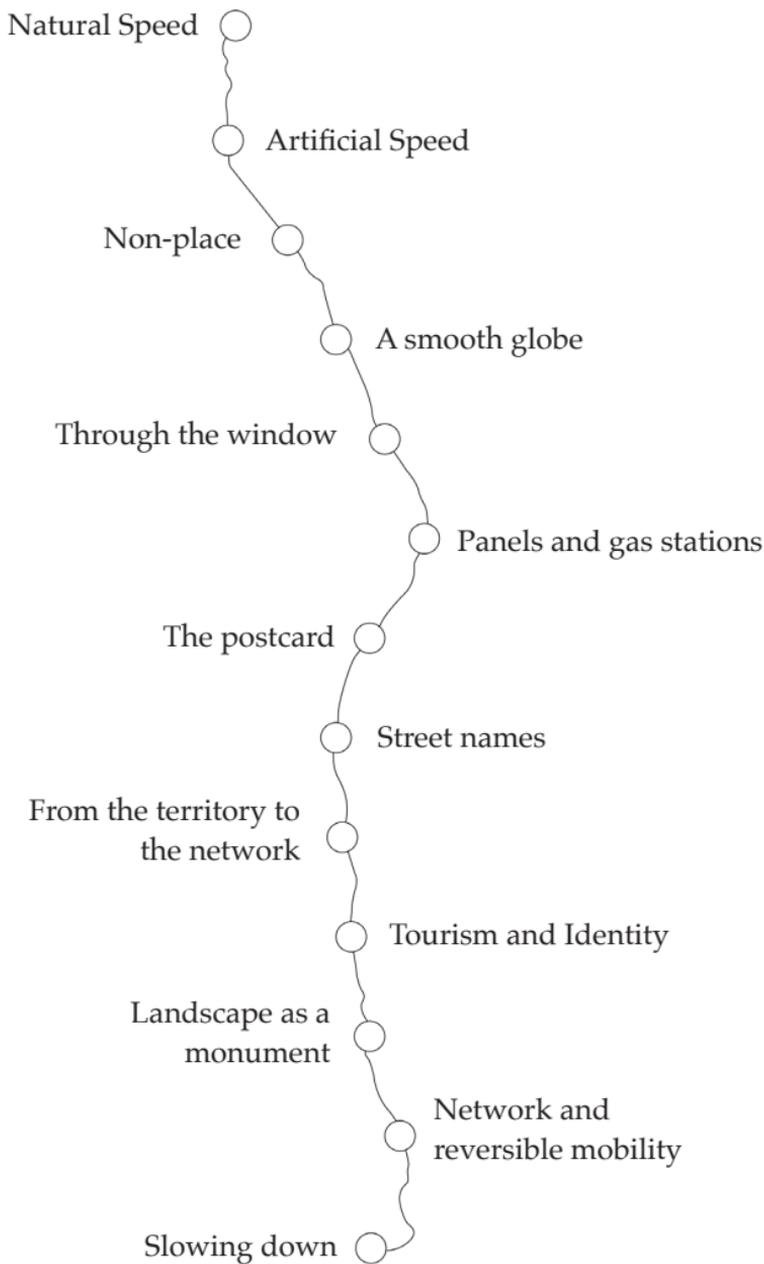
Slowing down to prevent the accident promised by Virilio, one that separates human and geography, similarly to the interchange, where there is no communication and crossed paths. So it's a return to the crossroads, an obstacle to speed, but one that implies a study of one's environment, an understanding of it in order to reappropriate it[2] and *territorialise* it.

Slowing down means no longer having to simplify our display, or the need for instant information, to avoid an accident on the highway. It means avoiding an accident by accepting the complexity of our

[1] Quote from Xavier de PLANHOL, geographer, specialist in the Islamic world
[2] Pierre Sansot, «Du bon usage de la lenteur», Petite Bibliothèque, 2004, Paris

environment. It means including our environment in our lifestyles and not creating systems that create new frames of reference other than the natural terrestrial one.

Natural Speed

Artificial Speed

Non-place

A smooth globe

Through the window

Panels and gas stations

The postcard

Street names

From the territory to
the network

Tourism and Identity

Landscape as a
monument

Network and
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