

SOMEWHERE, SOFIA COPPOLA - THE CAR AS A SOCIAL MASK

Soumis par admin le Mon, 07/16/2018 - 15:59

Auteur(s) (texte brut)

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Chapô

We have chosen the film *Somewhere* not only for the variety of mobility-related concepts it addresses, but also for the way it addresses them in this domain that are central to the current interests in the social sciences in a particularly rich and relevant way: mobility and its opposite, associated with the myth of the automobile, and its opposite — the slow.

Présentation longue

“Cleo, I’m sorry I haven’t been there.” Sofia Coppola, the daughter of Francis Ford Coppola, has directed several films (1999), *Lost in Translation* (2003), *Marie-Antoinette* (2006), *Somewhere* (2010)

Her films are characterized by recurring issues with regard to youth and adolescence, the transition to adulthood, and the search for identity and awareness or the questioning of protagonists. The themes addressed in her work aim to make us identify with the characters and their (re)construction.

“I believe it’s a feeling we can all identify with: choosing who we want to be” — Sofia Coppola, *Somewhere*.

Somewhere, film, United States, 2010, 93 minutes.

The film tells the story of a Hollywood actor whose daily life is gradually becoming routine and monotonous. Johnny juggles casting calls, partying (alcohol, drugs and sexual exploits), his apartment in the legendary Chateau Marmont, which is quantitatively rich, is qualitatively nonexistent. This slow road to decadence and a daily life increasingly devoid of meaning leads to a crisis for his daughter, for whom he unwittingly becomes responsible, instantly confronting him with a new role—that of father. A crisis in the process of Johnny’s social change that plays out in *Somewhere*.

[Video](https://www.letfilm.com/#/videos/extrait-1-vost)

change at the heart of the plot: In Coppola’s film, the car is central to the plot because it plays a role, though itself not the focus of the film (which, as we know, is the instant social change Johnny is forced to undergo when he realizes the need to make this change takes place in a strange scene in which he does doughnuts in his Ferrari. This scene, which seems interminable, is confusing but in fact heralds the film’s rhythm — a kind of warning device that invites us to focus on the action, which is reduced to a strict minimum. The film ends with Johnny escorting his daughter back: the landscape and the urban setting vanishes. But the Ferrari’s path this time is straight. His transformation is complete when, in the final scene, he abandons his most prized possession - his status symbol - is also a way of abandoning this social mask which was interrupted by the sudden appearance of his daughter. In the final scene he no longer needs his car, which highlights the role its abandonment does. The scenes alternate between the protagonist’s loneliness when playing the role of actor (even though he is in the construction of a relationship with his daughter. Driving in circles is thus an expression of his social mobility reduced to a minimum. For Johnny, the car serves two purposes: it is both a mark of his vertical mobility (to reach an enviable social status) and a symbol of his horizontal mobility.

* Exploring mobility involves taking a complex look at its social and spatial expressions.

* In the 1920s, with the work of Sorokin and the Chicago School, mobility was defined as movement in space.

* Like the works of Michel Bassand, mobility can be defined as all movement involving a change in the position of the individual. In this definition, mobility has both spatial and social qualities, thus restoring its richness.

<https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/mobilite-446>

Horizontal and vertical mobility (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - Mobility, by Vincent Kaufmann).

Sorokin defined vertical mobility as involving a change of position (upward or downward) on the socio-professional ladder, while horizontal mobility is a status or category that involves no change in position on the social scale (Mobile Lives Forum - Lexicon - Mobility, by Vincent Kaufmann).

immobility: Even during the driving scenes, the script and plot still seem slow, possibly because the pace of the film is so slow that progress must be palpable. Many such slow scenes succeed one another and are expressed in different ways (i.e. the stillness that prevails in these moments is also interrupted by the movement of the Ferrari. The music however (which is slow) - the car - the symbol of speed - exists here in a slow environment. By contrast, Johnny’s final trip happens quickly, and we see him.

Immobility and sedentarity

* Mobility cannot be removed from its context: it is relational, paradoxical, and thus always linked to its opposite: immobility (Albertsen and Diken, 2001; Beckmann, 2006)

immobility of others (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999).</p><p>* There is no acceleration without slowing down, no “liquification” without “solidification” (Bauman, 2000).</p><p>* Thinking about mobility and its opposite, immobility, also means considering the entire system for managing places and their arrangement (Lévy, 2004; Larsen et al., 2006).</p><p>* Sedentarity is the effect of emphasizing stability and social and spatial anchoring. In contemporary Western societies, sedentarity is a means of avoiding social and spatial change (Mobile Lives Forum – Lexicon – Sedentarity, by Vincent Kaufmann).</p></div><div><p class="timeless">“The car as a tool for saving face”:</p><p class="timeless">If sociologists like Le Breton often use this expression, it is because the automobile allows us to maintain the appearance of a particular social status when other aspects of daily life deteriorate. Because the car may be the weapon of the poor, car owners do their best to maintain their vehicles at all costs. In Somewhere, Johnny’s gradual fall is interrupted at regular intervals by the scenes of car mobility. He uses his sports car as a steadfast reflection of his lifestyle, a refuge and a symbol of his own world—all topics that have mobilized the scientific literature. Here, the car is never prevented from playing this role, as territories are defined by their optimal hospitality for this mode in particular.</p></div><div><p class="timeless">The car as a social norm</p><p>* The car is a social norm and, like all norms, it produces ‘deviants.’ While it is a tool of social distinction, one of the distinctive features of poverty is not having one, and thus it acts as a powerful social determinant. Having a car is a way of warding off exclusion and “saving face” (Le Breton, 2005).</p><p>* The initial representation of the car during its democratization was that of the bourgeois dream of personal autonomy, and with it, the more the outside world is excluded, the more this dream seems to come true (Bull, 2004).</p><p>The car as a representation of the individual’s inner world</p><p>* The car is the reflection of a lifestyle - an extension of the self - and is easily anthropomorphized: it is a place of emotion, a secure habitat, a domestic bubble (Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2007; Löfgren, 2008).</p><p>A territory’s hosting potential/receptiveness</p><p>* Every territory has a specific field of possibilities to accommodate the projects of individual and collective actors. This is what we call an area’s potential receptiveness (Mobile Lives Forum – Lexicon – An area’s potential receptiveness, by Vincent Kaufmann).</p></div><div><p class="timeless">The car as a non-human actor:</p><p class="timeless">The combination of the features of a sports car with that of a human actor reflects a specific type of social being based on which certain authors have been able to identify the building blocks of a form of hybridity or, going one step further, the first part of the Latourian concept of non-human actors in travel and in the plot action. Therefore, as a permanent reflection of the privileged, mundane lifestyle of its owner, it also has an impact on the plot action, made all the more interesting by the fact that it is not the subject or purpose of the film. Finally, it also provides a support for the emotions of its owner, as well as his process of social change. Symbolically, we understand that this process ends when Johnny voices his regret at having been absent as a father. It is for this reason that he abandons his car and continues on foot.</p></div><div><p class="timeless">The car as a social being</p><p class="timeless">* From the connection between a car and driver is born a social being. It is a hybrid blend of human skill and human will that is associated with cars, roads or constructions, which lead to the notion of “car-driver” (Dant, 2004; Thrift, 2005).</p></div><div><div><p class="timeless" align="left">The car as a non-human actor in travel</p><p class="timeless">* The car is a non-human actor in that it is also involved in the action and has an impact on it (Latour, in: Dant, 2004).</p></div></div><p class="timeless">What the film brings to the research: wandering and vain mobility:</p><p class="timeless">Somewhere could potentially inspire research by its approach to individual mobility, which is rarely addressed in the research as it is here — in the form of wandering. It differs from strolling, walking or mobilities of discovery, which have no particular destination, by not only the absence of a destination altogether, but also an absence of meaning. Johnny lives this “bad mobile life” with great intensity, punctuated by circular, repetitive, frequent, polluting trips by car and plane for casting calls that, for him, have neither form nor meaning. However, and although the actor is unaware of it, this movement is rich in that it is an essential part of the long, slow process of social change that takes place over the course of the film. While the scientific literature emphasizes the obsolescence of the idea that travel is limited to getting from point A to point B, focusing increasingly on the activities and experiences that take place between the two, it does not cease just because of the latter’s

absence.

Strolling

* The stroller is able to experience the essence of a place and to take his or her time in doing so in order to focus on the pleasure of traveling, discovery and recreation (Montulet, 1998; Urry, 2007; Adey, 2010).

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Date de publication

September 2013

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