



MOBILITY AND ART  
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I was born in Sofia and studied modern and contemporary history at the University of Sofia (M.A. 1992), the Central European University in Budapest (M.A. 1995), and the University of Cambridge (M.Phil. 1997; Ph.D., 2001). Since 2000 I have taught in the Department of Cultural Studies and the Department of European Studies at the Faculty of Philosophy and at the Department of Modern and Contemporary History at the Faculty of History of the University of Sofia. My research interests are in the field of the social and cultural history of communism, the social history of language, as well as of consumption, travel and migration in socialist Bulgaria. I have written articles on the symbolic geography of language, sounds and noise in socialist Bulgaria and on post-1989 Bulgarian migrations. For the academic year 2004/05 I will be a Fellow at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Sofia and will research practices of internal exile and ascribed residence as control and management of the movement of people. – Address: j.k. Strelbishte, bl. 21, ap. 9, 1408 Sofia, Bulgaria.

As a member of the Cultural Mobility group, I spent my year at the Wiko thinking about movement from a variety of angles and perspectives. I was used to reflecting on the movement of people (tourism in socialist Bulgaria) and the movement of objects (the import of Western goods in a socialist economy) and was broadly aware of the lines of thought connecting movement with migration, travel and consumption. An entirely new way of exploring mobility which I discovered while at the Wiko was the domain of movement and art and the aesthetic dimension of mobility. For a historian interested in the social history of communism, approaching movement from the field of art was quite unexpected yet profoundly stimulating and beneficial. My scholarly fascination with investigating the social implications of

mobile bodies and products developed into a more complex experience of reading about movement from diverse points of view and, further, to watching how movement was painted in museums and staged in exhibition halls both in and outside of Germany.

The first impulse came from discussions about representations of movement in Renaissance paintings, from the meaning of moving figures in Bosch and Bruegel to the influence of Greek art on Botticelli in depicting movement through floating tissues, veils and hair. While Bruegel used a series of flashes, frozen gestures and postures, Botticelli embraced the challenge of representing motion by painting the resistance of material and bodily surfaces to displacement of any kind – i. e. caused by the wind, a march, or a dance.

The inspiration I took in exploring other techniques of representing movement led me to rediscover the early Paul Klee, in the substantial Klee collection of the Sammlung Berggruen in Berlin. Klee faced a bigger challenge than his Renaissance predecessors, for he struggled to represent not only movement, but patterned, directed movement, meaning rhythm, which is neither simple sequence, a patternless recurrence in time, or overdetailed repetition suffering from excess of accent. Conceiving rhythm as the essence of both movement and music, he tried to visualise them, as in “Dreitakt” (1919). Klee’s endeavour to represent rhythmic configurations resulted in a complex theory that fused colour, form and rhythm – and in a range of paintings entitled “Fugue in Red”, “Rhythmical”, “In Bach’s Style”, etc.

Looking further for techniques of representing movement in 20<sup>th</sup>-century art inevitably led me to discovering artists who not only wished to document and register movement, but also to realise it. Many contemporary artists, like representatives of the kinetic art of the 1950s and 1960s as well as their early precursors of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, emphasised not so much reproducing movement, but on making it visible, by creating art that moved. Drawing heavily on the ideas of futurism, kinetic artists saw movement itself as a source of artistic value, thereby turning mechanics into art. Hailing physical motion and its agents – wind, light, gravity – kinetic artists acclaimed the new industrial technologies, investing science with utopian social-transformative power. Among the founding fathers were Laszlo Moholy-Nagy with his “Licht-Raum-Modulator”, Alexander Calder with his mobiles, and avant-garde Russian sculptors and architects Antoine Pevsner and Naum Gabo, the latter featuring prominently at the exhibition “Russians in Berlin” of the Berlinische Galerie in the fall of 2003.

One of the best places to contemplate kinetic art in the first part of 2004 was the Atomium monument in Brussels, itself a steel embodiment of the faith of late 1950s sculptors

and architects in the might of new technology and scientific progress. The exhibition “In balance and in movement” showed the work of several artists preoccupied with the solidity of surfaces and the cadence and pulse of movement. The sensation of movement was achieved with the help of two techniques. In the first case, art products – mobile objects and automata – literally, physically moved, either powered by the air or a hidden electrical motor (the vibratiles of Pol Bury, the machine sculptures of Jean Tinguely). In the second, the sense of motion was arrived at either through the movement of the spectator in front of an immobile piece of art or through the illusion that the work of art was in motion (Yaacov Agam, Jesus-Rafael Soto).

The so called OpArt – or optical illusion – produced the appearance of movement and a semblance of mobility by actively involving the viewer in the artistic process. The spectator was either displaced – asked to move around a stable and solid piece of art, whose elements looked different depending on his/her location – or his/her eyes were “cheated”, “tricked”, as it were, by the use of a myriad of optical devices, reflective materials and transparent surfaces that intensified, magnified or minimised a perceived, “virtual” motion. Emphasis on the perception of movement rather than the physical movement of an artistic product meant an increased interest in the mechanisms of control of static images as well as in virtual movement, “which always exist in tension with factual immobility”, according to William Seitz (*The Responsive Eye*, 1966).

Although at first glance there may not be too palpable a relation between a sudden engagement with movement in art and the longer-term pursuits of a social historian of communist Bulgaria, thinking about mobility through art did have a direct bearing on my scholarly endeavours. Seeing mobility through art compelled me to pay more attention to different techniques of representing movement and to incorporate them both in my teaching and research.

It now seems to me insufficient just to teach students Michel de Certeau’s paradigmatic text on movement in the city, “Marches dans la ville” (in his *L’Invention du Quotidien, Arts de faire*) or Walter Benjamin’s writings on the flaneur. In my course on Cultural Mobility that I designed for the next academic year, I included them together with a video colloquium, documenting how contemporary performance artists experience walking in the city nowadays and around the world. Adding the theme of rhythm as well as the figure of the flaneur-archivist, the video colloquium not only shows movement as a speculative artistic tool, but also visualises the very practices of movement in an urban environment. Although I have used films in my teaching for a while before coming to the Wiko, in this

new academic year assigning films to my students will have a deeper reason than mere illustration.

Then, reading about and seeing the products of avant-garde Russian and early Soviet artists turned my attention to socialist art as legitimating the utopian dreams of the political establishment. Whereas in general this is a topic quite well researched, the aesthetics of movement in particular has attracted less interest. Art in motion gave sensory form to ideological imperatives and a new experience of time – revolutionary time in the USSR and elsewhere. Fantasies of physical motion and movement through space were rendered as temporal movement that fit the trajectory of communist history and progress.

Seeing how movement was represented in art made me think of some parallels in the research on movement in the social sciences. Painting movement through the resistance of the material surface can be thought of as analogous to the description of movement of people and objects as crossing or transgressing closed and well-guarded borders. Depicting patterned, directed movement and rhythm could be matched by the effort to trace and delineate big migration waves and flows. The transformation of a work of art depending on the location of the responsive eye of the moving spectator may correspond to the practice of writing memoirs when a traveller casts a different glance on an already past experience. The technique of collage is similar to the process whereby various cultural artifacts are reconceptualised in a novel manner in a new context. And last but not least, the individual contributions of all members of the Cultural Mobility group to our common volume can be seen in a new light if conceived as different techniques of representing movement.