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Hitchhiking and the Production of Haptic Knowledge

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Abstract: Overall, the cultural and artistic practices that continue to surround hitchhiking subcultures are largely untapped by serious scholastic research. This paper, deliberately non-linear, explores the haptic dimensions of hitchhiking. We use this mode of travel to make certain observations about our late-modern, or cosmopolitan age, as well as about some of the subcultures surrounding adventurous, competitive, and alternative transport. The piece is grounded in a form of duo-auto-ethnography, inspired by the experiences of two authors who are well-versed in this practice, but who have still not met in person. The paper argues that one of the main lessons to arise from the era of mass hitchhiking during the mid-twentieth century is that the types of sensory knowledge acquired and passed on by hitchhikers themselves are unique in their spatio-temporal potential for being imaginatively transformed into tools for shaping wider socio-political projects.

Keywords: auto-ethnography; experimental phenomenology; haptic knowledge; hitchhiking; transport/travel

1. Introduction—Taking Different Roads

> Here, sir, I'm explaining something
> very important to you and very dear to me,
> so I'm pulling it out of my heart, sir, with these very hands.
> (Wilson 2002, p. 29).

In *24 Hour Party People*, TV presenter and record producer Tony Wilson (2002) wrote a passage that deals with the trials and tribulations of hitchhiking. This memoir of sorts is not about travel. Rather, it is about how Manchester's alternative music scene during the 1980s and 1990s gave birth to rave dance culture. Despite his humorous Murphy's law-type description, his account nonetheless celebrates hitching as a stop-gap solution to being stranded. Both the quotation above and the one that follows suit our purposes here because of the significant emphasis that he places on hands as prehensile, multi-fingered appendages. His anecdote is of a real journey that he spontaneously took when his car broke down on his way to do an important interview with Thatcher's Chief Minister Sir Keith Joseph MP for the show '*World in Action*'. Switching between the first and the third person, his own words read as follows:

Wilson ran back to the Peugeot, turned the key. Turned the key again. Turned the key again. It wouldn't fucking start. Annoying when your car coughs at you. In this case the moment was perhaps beyond bearing. Just too fucking much. Flooded. Immovable.

Think John Cleese. Think Austin Allegro. Think flailing that fucking inert piece of metal with a large branch.

Think quickly.

Wilson grabbed his raincoat. Did I tell you it was raining? It had stopped snowing. Hey! It was pissing down instead.

Grab raincoat and briefcase of papers and run to the motorway entrance.

And stick out thumb.

Only forty five miles to go.

check for updates

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1.05 p.m. The good news: barrister en route from Newport Pagnell to the capital in his Deux Cheveux stops, picks up Wilson and is so taken with his hard luck story he takes him all the way to Whitehall.

Bad news: this escargot-esque piece of French auto culture memorializes a time before Parc Asterix and Richard Rogers. It goes hand-in-hand with that other folded metal construction that allowed French males to piss in the street. That lunchtime the little Citroën might as well have gone hand-in-hand with a fucking pissoir, 'cause it could only do forty miles an hour. The windscreen wiper had decided to go extinct and Wilson was forced to spend the next hour with his hand outside the car operating said wiper. Maybe that's why the guy stopped (Wilson 2002, p. 131).

As this incident reveals, to hitchhike is to travel in someone else's vehicle by soliciting the lift via a hand gesture, written sign, or by directly asking a driver at a roadside service area such as a café or petrol station. Accepting this request is usually voluntary, although some token demand for money or with driving assistance may be made. To some extent, hitchhiking certainly depends on luck. Our point here, however, is that skill is much more important than chance for the successful pursuit of this practice. Above anything else, it requires the traveler's persistence and the repeated immersion of their body into the familiar and unfamiliar 'scapes' of automobile interiors and road infrastructures. As a system, the practice is based upon the generosity and trust of vehicle owners. This paper seeks to unpack the ways in which this mode of transportation is part of a haptic form of knowledge production. Haptic knowledge, let us remind ourselves, is gathered through touch and the totality of our corporeal bodily senses (Ingold 2011). As an experiential type of knowledge, it is fluid, adaptable, connected to identity, and occasionally subversive. As such, we intend this essay to be an impressionistic thought piece on the phenomenological facets involved in thumbing rides from strangers.

This paper thus serves as a non-linear, duo-auto-ethnographic account of the social and conceptual significances of hitchhiking. The media sociologist Ehn (2011) talks of the significance of do-it-yourself approaches for auto-ethnography. And in their contribution of a special journal issue on the future of auto-biographical studies, Hernandez et al. (2017) write not just as co-authors, but as a team to produce an increasingly sought-after form of collaborative auto-ethnography. Their essay singles out such an approach as 'an important addition to the field of self-narrative research as well as about the inherent challenges of this kind of inquiry' (Hernandez et al. 2017, p. 251). Such reflections on collaboration and DIY are most apt in relation to hitchhiking. When combined with the methodological implications of Ehn and Löfgren's *The Secret World of Doing Nothing* (Ehn and Löfgren 2010), they allude to fascinating insights for a type of travel that involves 'manual' labor (with the hand), where time is measurable in waiting, but not paid for directly by more conventional commodity sources.[1]

Now, duo-auto-ethnography, in our case, means an indirect form of collaboration, since we have both published a range of essays on various aspects of hitchhiking. We have even reviewed each other's work (Purkis 2023; Laviolette 2024a). Moreover, we have both hitchhiked considerably around Britain and continental Europe, but not together. In fact, we have not yet even had the opportunity of meeting face-to-face, despite sharing several key ethnographic research participants. This means we present particular kinds of experiences, but only the analysis is collaborative, not the actual participation. Personally, we also share a love of music and certain privileges in being white males with tertiary educations in the UK. Hence, although it would not quite be fair to accuse us of being champagne socialists, we are clearly part (although in our ways, marginally) of an intellectual, left-leaning elite. Both of us ascribe to a certain 'armchair anarchism' and various eco-political forms of activism. What such biographical details mean in terms of our ethnographic research and analysis would warrant a reflexively contextualized paper of its own. Suffice to say here, however, that we are quite some distance away from positivistic or causal forms of interpretation and explanation. Relativistically like-minded, we both enjoy experimenting with alternative and/or non-conformist types of data collection, prose styles, narrative

structures, and visual depictions (Croft 2018). And many of our theoretical 'canons' are on the existential end of the philosophical spectrum.

So much for methodology. Yet, in terms of the actual practice of thumbing rides, the English journalist Tony Hawks probably 'defines' the practice of hitchhiking better than anyone by deliberately choosing not to give an explicit definition. Instead, he captures its essence with the following statement. It is one of the many poignant reflections that he devises about hitchhiking after making a bet to travel around Ireland with a small fridge within a month—a bet which he managed to win and then turn into a bestselling book which then got produced as a film in 2010.

> 'One guy, seeing that I was hungry, insisted on buying me a huge lunch and when I thanked him for his kindness, he simply said, 'Pass it on.' I liked this selfless concept—repay me by rewarding someone else entirely with a generous dollop of goodwill' (Tony Hawks 1998, p. 31).

Our goal, in tandem with the erratic form of hitchhiking itself, is to experimentally investigate a set of conceptual and embodied themes related to this practice. This tactic, certainly playful at times, is in keeping with the style of an extended exchange between ourselves as authors on how we perceive the significances of non-orthodox modes of travel. The themes in question are manifold. Amongst others, they include adventure, alienability, creativity, gender, mobility, placelessness, risk planning, reciprocity, *sousveillance*[2], subversion, trust and technology, and time and patience/waiting—to name over a dozen of the more prominent ones.[3]

2. Coming to Our Political Senses

The act of hitching lifts comes to each generation with a different set of sensory expectations, inextricably formed by the socio-political environment in which they find themselves (Figure 1). We would suggest that its very liminality, along with the conventional modalities and economies of travel, frequently in opposition to social norms (and occasionally the law), brings an experiential intensity which is compelling and from which all kinds of cultural practices, art, and observations follow. Whilst hitchhiking, one is uniquely in between many things (Andrews and Roberts 2012); exposed to both climatic elements and the complex socio-cultural combination of drivers, community, values, and whatever unscripted conversations might unfold. The negotiation of these highly changeable and random sets of circumstances in order to secure (and maintain) a ride has been widely considered within hitchhiking communities as akin to an art and/or a science. Although the tactics and semiotics of hitchhiking have been debated as far back as the 1930s, when college students and hobos found themselves on the roadsides with their different approaches to securing a lift (Schlebecker 1958), it was not until the era of counter-cultural hitchhiker's guides (Welsh 1971) that we saw attempts to quantify this in a more systematic and scholarly way.

For a while, academic funding provided for young hitchhiker-cum-academics to spend time both on curbsides and in libraries pondering such variables as hitchhiker attire and demeanor, the use of eye contact or other forms of non-verbal interaction, and how they positioned themselves for a driver to be able to stop for them (Crassweller et al. 1972; Snyder et al. 1974). This brief flurry of research was mostly confined to psychology journals, although there were some useful sociological contributions from Cohen (1973, p. 89) on what he called 'backpacker-drifters', who sought self-actualization by being 'nomads from affluence'.

With the exceptions of Franzoi's (1985) study on the psychology of long-distance hitchhikers using the Myers Briggs index, as well as Smith and Chesters' (2001) look at how hitching might be framed in terms of risk and the need for safe sustainable travel, there has been a surprising 'dearth of research' on hitchhiking (Wechner 2002). This hiatus until the late 2000s might be attributed to both the decline in hitchhiking (especially in Western nations) and also the steady corporatization of the higher education sector during the era of neo-liberal economics.[4] Subsequent work has taken the form of retrospective cultural studies assessments (Packer 2008; Reid 2020) or feminist historiography (Mahood

2014, 2019) on hitchhikers, including how they have been framed by dominant media discourses and the form of resistances or alternative identities that emerged against them. By contrast, very little serious work has been done to re-examine how hitchhiking culture might be reframed as environmental discourse to alleviate highway gridlock and enhance social wellbeing beyond the formalized lift shares outside a number of American cities. In the wake of superstorm Sandy, during November 2012, cultural theorist Ginger Strand wrote in the *New York Times* that the country should relearn how to hitchhike, arguing that sharing the road could be done not just in an emergency, but because the freedoms which the interstates had promised now seemed empty and allegorical of wider social alienation.

Figure 1. Glastonbury Festival 1971 © Ron Reid Estate, (photo in Reid 2021, p. 1). Courtesy www.akehurstcreativemanagement.com (accessed on 2 September 2024).

It is into this gap that we (as scholars of the art of the thumb and cardboard sign) feel motivated to comment upon how/why the meaning and memory of curbside-spent time can speak to us in an age of ecological extinction and civilizational collapse. In short, we aim to use the haptic knowledges acquired whilst hitchhiking to contribute an understanding of how to 'build a paradise in the midst of hell' in the spirit of Solnit's (2010) book, which documents humanity's regular ability to slip into self-organizing mutual aid mode when (avoidable) economic and political crises occur. We do not, therefore, regard hitchhiking as some quaint 'rite of passage' with which society indulges its youth to go through. Nor do we see the art it has produced as indicative of either fringe aesthetics or as anecdotal and nostalgic for more innocent times. Rather, we would assert that there are lessons to be learned from the era of mass hitchhiking during the mid-twentieth century; indeed, the more progressive definitions of nostalgia (Davis 1979) suggest that it is a useful critical tool for understanding absences within the individual, and by extension, the socio-cultural. There is then a place for the kinds of sensory knowledge acquired and passed on by hitchhikers themselves through their cultural and artistic practices to be utilized imaginatively on a wider level of policy and social bonding.

In this context, it is noteworthy that in and across many countries and contexts, governments have assisted their populations (albeit briefly) to take to the road for reasons of resource-saving during wartime or fuel crises (USA, during the 1973 OPEC crisis; post Cold War Cuba in 1990), to rediscover national identity (Poland from the 1950s—see Keck-Szajbel 2013; Zylinski 2016), or to broaden the minds of the young (Canada during the Pierre Trudeau era—see Mahood 2019). This has been normalized through communications, which at the very least reveal the diffusion into wider society of values and aesthetics that governments rarely formalize: the realities of self-organization, not-for-profit economics,

forms of mobility without its surveillance, and the de-centering of the 'car-driver' hybrid identities which exponential automobile ownership has created (Sheller 2004).

The haptic knowledges that are experienced, learned, and passed on are therefore multifaceted yet varied in terms of their effects on different agencies. From a seasoned hitchhiker's point of view, this suggests that although we might make a priori assumptions that human beings are capable of mutual aid and cooperation, road history suggests governments can swiftly discourage the practice, depicting roadside solicitations as solely the preserve of the mad and the bad. For this reason, we find it pertinent that the era of mass hitchhiking between 1950 and 1980 produced a distinctive 'structure of feeling' centered on the social value of shared transport, which extended from the do-it-yourself guidebooks, to transport theorists modeling how hitchhiking might fit into the existing transit systems (Dallmeyer 1975), to the California police conducting studies into its potential negative impact in anticipation of its continued numerical growth. That so comprehensive a series of converging practices and discourses could fade enough for Packer (2008, p. 91) to argue that by 1990 that everyone (in America) knew that hitchhiking had disappeared and 'we all know why it is avoided', underscores the amount of interactive work and cultural capacity which is involved in producing *autostop* knowledge.

This invites us, as long-time hitchhikers and researchers, to render our own practices strange; to understand why the phenomenology of the curbside can be as uncertain as a lift in the cold winter rain. In this sense, our phenomenological approach follows in the vein of an old Maussian tradition by being both exploratory/creative and indicative of various types of enskillment—bodily knowledge learnt through repeated practical action, failures, and successes. That is, corporeal knowledges that arise out of fears and frustrations, as well as the joys and satisfactions of attaining a certain mastery through doing (Mauss 1936). We would thus like to playfully bring you along for the ride, too, as we tour the gritty gravel road-scapes, *flâneur* around the harshly lit hallways of motorway non-places (Augé 1995), crane our necks to see hitchhiker graffiti, or go off-ramp to survey a fine collection of hitchhiker statues—whose materiality evokes an 'archaeology' of mobile knowledges that does not confine itself to the pavement's edge. There will be a homology between our joint authorial observations and favored conceptual stopping-off points, and the jerkiness of our hikes and flights of conversational fantasy.

Hitchhiking savors the journey as an end in itself—indeed, it is the only form of contemporary transport where verbal interaction is required—a quality which challenges forms of rationality that focus on linearity, cause, effect, and observable outcome. The self-produced, self-organizing, and stochastic nature of how we signal, converse, and pass on our hitchhiking knowledge encourages us to move beyond the instrumentalist approach to travel. This diffusion permits us to focus on the emergence of new forms of aesthetics and community in the interstices of dominant discourses of mobility and consumption. Profoundly animal and multi-sensational in its mode of engagement with the landscapes through which we move, this connectedness to deep time can inspire the emergence of values and ways of communicating befitting of an era of ecological responsibility. Mutual aid transport, we would suggest, is as transcendental in its possibilities as a century ago at the dawn of the motor age. Accordingly, we would like to echo the sentiments of 'The Drifter', the anonymous journalist whose article in *The Nation* in September 1923 first used the words 'hitch-hiker', in the hopes that our humble travelogue of hitcher hapticity also constitutes a 'romantic, gallant and even brilliant adventure'[5].

3. Generations with Time on Their Hands

One's first hitchhike is often a moment of profound revelation. For all of the potential advice which might be available to the current generation of digital nomads and natives—for example, the connection to previous generations of hitchhikers through portals such as hitchwiki.org—it is nevertheless a lonely uncanny moment. Standing and signaling with a thumb, palm, or sign—'intentional hitchhiking'[6] rather than rambling along the highway hoping for a horse and cart or a farm truck to stop—is to be suddenly immersed in a

relatively recent sign system linked to road architecture and controlled traffic flows. One notices its distinctive materiality as much as one remembers the first rides, the conversations and nuances of mood, the early mistakes, and the moments of pure joy. The simple act of choosing a spot to signal requires a distinctive form of acclimatization and adaptability as the world shrinks to a few meters of highway. Many questions are condensed into such a moment: where does one stand based on lines of driver sight; how fast is the traffic going; what obstacles prevent the driver stopping (or alternatively, splashing or clipping you!); what pose and facial expression should one adopt?

The description of this stationary intensity was captured by mid-twentieth century poetry even more than in the hitchhiking song, which tended to focus on moments of social or sexual liberation and often more of a metaphor than an allegory for ways of being. Here's the American poet Robert Duncan in meditative mode in 'Come, Let Me Free Myself' (Duncan 1964): '*I am on the road, by the road/ hitch-hiking. And how, from one side/ how glad I am no one has come along/ For I am at a station/ I am at home/in the sun. Not waiting, but standing here.*'

Such meditative moments will be familiar to those who have experienced the changed temporal rhythms of a hitchhiking journey; indeed, most longer trips which comprise a series of rides will seem to slip outside of the daily modalities of 'clock time', with all of its calculations and assumed goals or destinations. Letting go of these preconceived notions and embracing the random flow of 'hitching time' positions us differently in the world, enabling other more critical senses to kick in. John Newlove's elemental contributions in Douglas Fetherling's 1968 collection *Thumbprints* juxtapose the beauties of waiting in wild places with the pain of oil slicks, discarded hub caps, shards of glass, and angry tire burns. We find him resting his thumb at the summit of 'Rogers Pass' (between Alberta and British Columbia), watching the hawks and eagles wheel above him, surprised 'by the purple sexuality of a roadside flowery weed', yet horrified that he does not know the names of one of the animals 'dead on the roadway, its paws extended in the air, worn-out attitude of prayer' ('The Well-travelled Roadway'). Newlove's observations on the mood of his long hitchhikes on the big roads of Canada are echoed in the later journeys of Stephen Wing, whose touching *Crossing the Expressway* (Wing 2001) puts our impact on the landscape in deep time. He wakes by a desert roadside in 'Past the Mesas', reflecting that 'once an ocean passed this way', and as his eyes jump from one driver to the next in 'The Legion of Daydreamers', he speculates as to whether he should spurn short rides because the air is thick with '*the carbon/ of creatures who ruled and died: we live by/ breathing the smoke of our precursors.*'[7]

Traveling slower can empower us to preempt future harmful actions, or at least to bear witness to the injustices or ecological damage around us. The hitchhiker is situated as a participant in these impacts yet also an ambassador of other times and places, a counselor and carrier of unquantifiable social gifts. The cognitive dissonance has sometimes proved to be too much—John Francis' *Planet Walker* (Francis 2008) reveal a man so horrified by seeing the effects of an oil spill in San Francisco Bay that he abandoned even his hitchhiking, took a vow of silence, and spent years walking back and forth across the continent connecting with communities and founding ecological projects as a way of paying forward into the future by impacting less in the present.

We would suggest that hitchhiking journeys offer a way of relating to the landscape akin to that of indigenous song lines. These 'thumb lines' are ways of intersecting with geography and social history, counter-observational forms based on the 'manufactured vulnerability' akin to protest actions where one puts one's body in the line of fire as a way of 'bearing witness' to injustice. Alternatively, we may think of this as *sousveillance,* where the roadside traveler inverts the gaze of the corporate state, not only as a necessary position to 'render power visible' (Melucci 1989, p. 76), but to historicize the multiple discourses which comprise the self-identity of the contemporary motorist.

As a modern mediator of accelerated movement, the automobile holds a primary place among the artefacts that have significantly transformed society in the 20th and 21st

centuries. So much so that it has become a truism to scrutinize the psycho-social processes which lie at the heart of explaining why the car is 'one of the most significant objects of the age in which we live' (Marsh and Collett 1986, p. 4). Arguably, some authors have even suggested that car-oriented transport has predominantly altered our perception of place and replaced it with a rootless or placeless space—Augé's (1995) archetypal non-place. The car is now the instrument through which 'westerners' express most of the social bonds linking them to their institutions and to each other. Clear boundaries and centers of exurban–suburban landscapes have consequently disappeared. The claim would thus be about automobility contributing to the de-humanization of the landscape and to the de-authentication of sensorial experience (Strand 2012; Williams 1991).

Concurrent with the extensive literature on automobility and its negative effects on ecology, social relationships, and the psyche, has been the emergence of social initiatives and travel trends which appear to offer a counter-aesthetic and liminal hapticity. In keeping with the sociological tradition critiquing travel and tourism as a form of ahistorical managed spectacle (Urry 1990; Andrews 2005) bereft of cultural authenticity, we note the rise of *Autostop* clubs, hitchhiker gatherings, and multi-day hitchhiking competitions predominantly in Europe and the Russian Confederation, but also in parts of North and South America. Often based on specific transport histories or social movement cultures—Argentina Autostop Association emerged in the wake of the economic collapse of 2000 and initiatives in mutual aid—these disparate traditions have become commonly aligned through interactive and participatory digital platforms, with extensive exchanging of road information, hitchhiking etiquette, and advice. Not only do these attempt to 'pass on' the social and ecological benefits of shared travel as a form of gift economy, but they might also be understood as moments of 'dividuation'—emergences of more self-determined notions of identity suggestive of the concept of Ubuntu or 'I am because we are'. This indigenous philosophy rooted in forms of association prior to the imposition of colonialist and capitalist modes of control links the idea of travel as a form of community with the elision of the boundaries between individual and group needs.

Here, the long-standing tradition of *autostop* in former communist countries is a useful reference point, eschewing the Western notion of hitchhiking as an individualist battle of who has the most adaptive slip-road semiotics to survive the blast of the vehicle back drafts and get a quick lift. Members of clubs such as the Academy of Free Travel, formed by Anton Krotov (2014) (the public face of Russian hitchhiking) in 1995, are required to be representatives and researchers in their expeditions and outreach work to promote *autostop*. Writing on the attitudinal shifts within post-communist youth, Zuev (2008) senses an innocence in the outlook and rationale of those crossing political boundaries for the first time. Clubs such as the Academy of Free Travel channel the organized practice of 'wild turizm' (in effect hiking and hosteling for educational purposes during the Lenin years) with the spirit of 1960s hippie counter-cultural experimentation. We see this in the best-selling hitchhiking guide *The Practise of Free Travel*, where Krotov instructs club members to think of travel as a social exchange (not a 'freebie') and to use the experience of conducting journeys without money ('halyava') as an opportunity for scientific research (members are expected to report back).

The relative authenticity of relying on mutual aid on the road and for lodgings (through 'couch surfing') provides a 'missing (sociological) link' between the rejection of car culture and the hybrid identity of the 'car-driver' construct and the evolutionary specificity of this moment of homo sapiens' mobility across deep time terrain. As the founder of the St. Petersbourg Autostop League, Alexej Vorov observes that when hitchhiking in sub zero conditions, it is important not to run to vehicles which stop, as it is possible for one's breath and lungs to be suddenly frozen (Voswinkel 2010). This attentiveness to the ecological realities beyond the brief time which humanity has spent encasing itself in the alloy of protective and personalized moving objects returns us to the cultural significance of the hitchhiker's hail to the passing world.

4. Taking Marx and Engels up the M1

Sentient animals move around in spaces that are external to them. It is here that their very sentience is objectified. In so doing, their bodies themselves are changed. That this allows for actual physical alterations can be more fully grasped once we look for a moment at graphic instances of bodily re-creation. Indeed, inspired by a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, the anthropologist and poet Michael Jackson reminded us, already just over four decades ago now: 'any notion of the body as an instrument of mind or of society is absurd' (Jackson 1983, p. 329). Along these lines, the essay on humans evolving from apes into *homo sapiens* by Engels (1977) is one of the more striking formulations for understanding how embodied knowledge and the physical world impact each other as a two-way process. Some of the arguments he makes are now understood to be much less contestable than was previously thought, whilst other points are perhaps now seen as quite far-fetched. Engel's hypothesis that the central location for the transition from ape to human had been in the evolution of the hand, the organ of making, rather than in the cranium, the structure for storing the organ of thought, has—after much debate—been confirmed by paleontological discoveries. Gould (1979), for example, has pointed out that the scientific hunt for the 'missing link' has for years been subverted by seeking the answer in the wrong body part (the skull instead of the hand), an error itself grounded in a flawed ontology that foregrounds human intellect over human creation—humans as makers and workers have never been as sexy as pondering the development of our cognitive abilities.

But Engels' reasoning was most apt in outlining the idea that those cognitive developments would not have been so game-changing in a being that was not able to fashion the material world into reusable tools, protective clothing, domestic shelter, mindful gadgets, symbolic ornaments, and playful puzzles. Engels further introduces the notion that hands themselves are artefacts. Gradually modified through their own activities in altering the external world, hands are both cultural things and natural appendages. In his words:

> 'before the first flint was fashioned into a knife by human hands, a period of time must have elapsed in comparison with which the historical time known to us appears insignificant. . . Thus the hand is not only the organ of labour, *it is also the product of labour*". Labour adaptation to ever new operations, the inheritance of muscles, ligaments, and, over longer periods of time, bones that had undergone special development and the ever-renewed employment of this inherited finesse in new, more and more complicated operations, have given the human hand the high degree of perfection' (Engels 1977, p. 359).

Engels does go on to make analogous claims about language and the steady refinement of the senses. Nonetheless, it is to our hands, the immediate agents of making—themselves remade—that remain the central focus of his thesis. The internal delicacies of hands are externalized not only in the complexities and intricacies of the highbrow artworks that he cites, but also in the intricacies of finger movements stored in ordinary pieces of lace. As Elaine Scarry notes, the hand 'has been, through long engagement with the resistant surfaces of the world, itself woven into an intricate weave of tendons, ligaments, muscles and bones' (Scarry 1985, p. 253). One may of course now undermine the strength of Engels' observations by pointing out how his phrasing is indicative of a non-existent evolutionary mechanism that would allow such alterations to flesh and bone acquired during an individual's lifetime to be directly passed on to descendants. This has indeed been discredited. But the lessons learnt from his musings over the dialectical relationship that connects together hands, the mind, and the environment are worth remembering. Moreover, hands can be repaired and redesigned through artefacts that extend or protect them.

We would propose that the movement of hitchhikers through the world and the plethora of experimental art which has emerged from their negotiation with culture and environment is an evocation of a phenomenology without the trajectory of normative constructs of mobility in the motor age and 'progress' more generally. If tool use is premised upon the values of the society which opts to apply them, then the hitchhiker's thumb

signals both a riposte to those who have actively encouraged populations to give up their omnibuses, bicycles, horse and carts, and open streets to embrace a more individualistic means of consuming space and time, and a different way of seeing.

This starts from the curbside with the gaze of the hitchhiker and their immediate appreciation of marginality in an entirely artificial (and often hazardous) material environment. The hitchhiker is required to interpret the horizon from a fixed position whilst calculating sequences of potential movement yet to happen, which are without normative motor age measurements of likely travel hours. This, in turn, is influenced by evaluating the relative number of likely lifts, time of day, weather, presence of other hitchhikers, stationary vehicles, or road furniture.

Making these decisions requires the processing of a multiplicity of sensory stimuli based on an elision between the boundaries of self and the environment and forms of knowledge which are more intuitive and non-rational in terms of causation. The hitchhiker's mobility across the landscape whilst normatively perceived as slow and unreliable—carried along in a stop start series of rides and waits—may simply be a mode of travel which is more engaged with the senses at a full body level, creating new forms of perceptual wisdom. Certainly, the authors' multi-decade acquired knowledge suggests that what we have called this 'hitching time' not only *feels different* from any other journey but that it comprises a 'flow state'.

Commonly associated with the peak performance of athletes or dancers and the ability to focus in a heightened form of full body alertness, it is a moment of true presence of mind, of being part of something greater even as one is concentrating on the particular. Responses and reflexes are anticipatory, relaxed in their accumulated experiences, caught in the intensity and ease of being in oneself and in the world at the same time, being in a state of processing. From a travel point of view, there is a connection with the old adage—often attributed to Lao Tzu—that it is the journey, not the destination, which is the true objective of any kind of journey—be it a pilgrimage, or just walking to the shops. Despite the apparent random nature of 'hitching time', many hitchhikers keep diaries and make calculations about the likely duration of a journey based on all of these variables.

Once picked up, the experience of shifting from the roadside to the car's inside reveals a unique angle on how the hitcher sees and feels the world. Suddenly, they are less focused on the horizon, the world out there. Instead, sight and sound, smell and tact, are thrust into the confined space of someone else's vehicle, in close quarters with another's presence. The solitude is broken, and the continued benefit of a free ride depends on quickly grasping and respecting the driver's rules. The hitcher's image of solitude weakens as the image of the street or motorway, with its oases of rest and lifts, strengthens.

Hitchers also differ from the average motorist because they might ride in several types of vehicles during their journey and their conditions as passengers will equally vary. This guarantees them exposure to different outlooks during the voyage, as well as to various socio-cultural settings. At certain times, they will be sitting eight feet off the ground in the front of a lorry. At others, they will be sat in the cargo section of a pick-up truck, the leather seat of a Mercedes convertible, or the floor of a Volkswagen campervan. Additionally, each situation is an exposure to different class, gender, and ethnic issues.

The sensory engagement which one feels through bodily immersion in the micro geographies of another's lives—from their personal habits such as the choice of music played in their vehicle to their concerns about paying the rent or the hours they spend driving to provide for their families—places the hitchhiker into a situation where the artificiality of borders and nation state becomes apparent. It is a common observation amongst regular long-distance hitchhikers and independent travelers—and central to the aforementioned philosophies of organizations such as the Academy of Free Travel—that there is a subversive innocence in connecting with fellow human beings from different cultures which offers hope for the survival of the species. Such is the power of those feelings that many are moved to contrive artificial experiments in human connectedness

and cooperation—and hitchhiking history is replete with publicity capturing examples of this.

5. Non-Human Hitchers and Necro-Politics

On Friday 2 September 2022, a couple of days after the world heard the news of Mihail Gorbachev's death, anthropologists JS Marcoux and PL drove from Montreal to Ottawa in Marcoux's car.[8] Their destination was the National Science and Technology Museum, the cost of entry of which is $16 for adults. Their objective, once there, was simple: to see the auto-icon display for the infamous AI traveler hitchBOT. This former 'car passenger' hitchhiker sits in a poorly lit corner of a central wall cabinet, semi-obscured by a suspension beam. This location is near an open lecture theatre, behind the Great Outdoors section of the museum (Figure 2).

Figure 2. hitchBOT. Ottawa, Science and Technology Museum (summer 2022, photo by PL).

Upon arrival, JS coaxed PL into contacting a curator in order to find out more information about this now inert robotic artefact. The reception desk clerk acquiesced, calling a tour guide. PL explained that he had been in contact with the creators of this little droid. The tour guide then explained that there have been attempts with the display to make hitchBOT interactive, as it was when traveling long distances to learn about how humans engage with responsive automatons. But she then added that it learnt some 'bad words' and thus was no longer a 'child friendly' exhibit piece. For JS, this was the ethnographic gem of the day—a commentary that was indicative of Canada's political correctness culture, as well as museum practice, more generally.

From then on, several jokes about mechanical censorship became the norm on the day of their pilgrimage to the resting place of this auto-icon. In the last couple of years of his 'utilitarian' life, the political philosopher Bentham (1831) played around with ideas for how human corpses could best serve the processes of non-theological scientific development. In addition to his mantra that cadavers should be readily available for medical research, he also advocated that the traditional 'morbid' graveyard be replaced with rows of mausoleums built with the intention of exhibiting taxidermized humans. The intention was educational, as well as ideological, since Bentham believed that the long-term effects of expose to such auto-icons would provide a means of countering pessimistic Victorian attitudes towards death. Some might find that Gunther von Hagens' plastination process, as seen

in the numerous incantations of his globally popular Body Worlds exhibition, provides a (post)modern day adaptation of Bentham's principles (Walter 2004).

Now, during the time when it was accessible to the public without the confines of a plexi-glass casing, many visitors adorned hitchBOT with scribbled tags, or bracelets and stickers. A panic button and a feathered native American headdress are also apparent—the former an ironic reminder of the ultimate fate of this Hoover-esque droid. Other than a short 300-word description plaque, in both French and English, which indicates some basic information about the project, there is nothing else. There are no photo records of its trips on display, nor are there any videos or accompanying objects to contextualize its significance as a mobile and interactive art and science experiment into the human psyche. As the tour guide explains, passing visitors either know the story or they do not, but it is not here that they will learn anything about its role in 2014 to randomly interact with curious travelers by hitchhiking. Indeed, for those in the know, hitchBOT traveled the entire length of Canada, as well as much of Europe, completely on its own via the generosity of curious drivers.

HitchBOT was created in 2013, made by a pair of academics based in two universities in Ontario, Zeller and Smith (2017). It was built as an interactive AI robot, programmed to communicate with people. Since its inception, hitchBOT has always been described in gender-neutral terms—it is not a he nor a she. As a mobile lab experiment, it was created to gauge how people perceive AI. Its main purpose was to revert the expected question 'can humans trust robots?' and instead ask a less intuitive question 'can robots trust the species that made them'? The violent demise of this experimental droid certainly provided the answer 'no', since hitchBOT had a relatively short life, being vandalized to the point of inoperability at a petrol station on the outskirts of Philadelphia in 2015, days after beginning an attempt to cross the USA. The original prototype of this post-modern R2D2 is now on display in Ottawa's Science and Technology Museum—an auto-icon of sorts in a mechanical age post-(re)production. In the other-than-human world of ethics, video surveillance, and hyper-media reportage, what De Cesari (2021, p. 344) refers to within the European context as 'scandelous necropolitics', this international public experiment's auto-BOT-graphy is certainly complex. Indeed, hitchBOT allowed for discussions on such notions as mobility privilege, racism, and species xenophobia (Laviolette 2024b).

Now, in terms of the phenomenological context of all this, let us turn to the work of the social theorist Chris Tilley. In 2019, he edited an interesting collection of essays entitled *London's Urban Landscape* (Tilley 2019). In addition to his lengthy introduction to the book, he also writes a chapter about Holland Park—beyond the most western edge of Hyde Park, bordering Palace Gardens and Palace Gardens Terrace, a set of roads that house a number of Embassies, including the ones representing Russia, Romania, Norway, Nepal, Lebanon, and Israel. In his astute critique of corporate neo-liberalism, one can sense that Tilley was rather disgusted by the veneer of nature which Holland Park purports to convey under the guise of a green metropolitan oasis. His phenomenological analysis is indeed rigorously ethnographic, but the text also appears to be one of his most autobiographical. Now, there's much to admire in both the prose of the piece, as well as the merging of interview data with a socio-material analysis and fieldwork photographs. In terms of the latter, Tilley included a staged selfie of himself 'interviewing' a man of roughly the same height. He's of a rather larger build and appears to be a laborer, or maybe a park groundsman. This painted bronze statue was made in 1998 and is called 'Walking Man'. It is the work of the British artist Sean Henry. The symmetry of the image is more to do with the similarities between Henry and Tilley—artist/ethnographer—than between author/interrogator and subject matter, though there are some quite obvious shared features. The anonymity and everydayness of Henry's 'Walking Man' is one of the more overt manifestations to go against Tilley's thesis that the park is an elite landscape serving the needs of the privileged, perhaps even at the taxpayers' expense. Regardless, the point here is that this laborer, frozen in time and set in Britain's sprawling urban capital, was a non-human participant in Tilley's research.

'Walking Man' could be confused with another polychromatic sculpture made by John Seward Johnson II, who has a similar everyday life of an ordinary man statue, this one called 'Taxi!' on the embankment of the city, near Blackfriars station (Figure 3). Placed there in 2014, he was in fact sculpted in 1983, originally standing on Park Avenue and 47th Street in New York. And originally, he was also completely painted. Here, we can make a detour to our research on hitchhiking, since Seward Johnson has another passenger waiting for a lift in Long Island, New York, on the site of Hofstra University. Rather than a businessman trying to hail a cab, this one is a student or lecturer hitchhiking to Boston. His twin seems to be trying to get to (or 'advertising' the direction toward) the Grounds for Sculpture Park in Hamilton, New Jersey. Johnson was already famous for creating these *trompe l'oeil* pieces (literally 'to fool the eye') back in the 1960s. He died in 2020 and was the grandson of the founder of Johnson & Johnson, the multi-national shampoo and pharmaceutical company. Grounds for Sculpture is an outdoor museum-like theme park that showcases hundreds of sculptures, many of his own, which Seward Johnson helped establish in 1992.

Figure 3. Taxi sculpture by JS Johnson II. Embankment, London (spring 2024, photo by PL).

6. 'Passing It Along'

Hitchhiking out of the Scottish Cairngorm mountains in the winter of 2024—a massif notorious for bad weather conditions and a place close to the hearts of both authors in their

earlier hitch and hiking adventures—JP's son, excitedly, relayed news down the phone of the ease, swiftness, and generosity of the lifts he had secured: 'It's just so obvious isn't it, Dad?'

In the pre-Internet era, it was possible to say with certainty that generations of hitchhikers have passed on their sensation-driven stories of the roadside to their children first as poignant tall tales of adventure, replete with scrapes and drenchings, and secondly as a process of becoming—of people transformed. The proliferation of hitchhiking memoirs, sometimes self-published, is testimony to the power of years (sometimes decades) spent immersed in an apparently parallel universe whose cooperative potential continues to emerge.

Often, the withdrawal of one's thumb from the highway in 'retirement' leads to a kind of melancholy, rooted not just in the passing of personal time but the realities of having to spend time in formal economic and political structures and expectations, whose values seem a long way from the mutual aid of the road. This has been especially true during the period of neo-liberalism, when the capacity of hitchhiking to pass from generation to generation seemed diminished as ex-hitchers found fewer souls gracing the slip roads as they sought to repay their own gift economy debts. Writing about the failure to transmit enthusiasm to one of their student-age family members that hitchhiking might be a transport option, Smith and Chesters (2001, p. 65) note the realities: 'It's not like that, Dad!'

Causality and influence during the digital era are less obvious and perhaps wider in the diffusion of hitchhiking knowledge. Online discussion platforms, often youth-based leisure and culture-orientated such as reddit.com, frequently play host to multi-generational sharing, with many prime movers in the hitchhiking community well into middle-age and often able to pass on decades of road experience. Additionally, many rideshare apps or forms of carpooling extend the range of self-organized and social forms of sharing on a spectrum between pure hitchhiking and the monetized transport sector. The drop in taking up a driving license amongst the young (able to access more flexible mobility options) within the UK (Dant 2014) and a number of European countries is thought to be connected with increasing environmental awareness, but it is unclear whether this is an identifiable trend or there is a clear correlation with reduced interest in automobile ownership as important to personal identity.

As both hitchhikers and researchers, we note the changing narratives within which hitchhiking has been framed depending on the sociological circumstances within which it takes place (or is encouraged to take place).[9] In the ongoing current collapse of the climate and ecological foundations on which human survival depends, the famous *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* 1979 (Adams 1979) maxim 'Don't Panic' would appear to be an opportunity to look for hopeful signs of the emergence of a transport hapticity attuned to shared low-impact travel with hitchhiking as an allegorical focal point. Writing in the publication *Outside*, the American travel writer Vanderbilt (2022) noted the close overlap between the climbing communities, environmentalists, and hitchhiking, through the naturalistic impulse for mutual aid in situations of potential danger. However, as we stated at the beginning, the cultural capacity for hitchhiking as a legitimate transport option to be 'passed on' is contingent on multiple factors and is therefore less predictable.

7. Concluding Remarks

Trends in work and leisure suggest an openness to wider adaptive capabilities which emphasize quality of life and human connectivity: the rise of 'slow' and 'intimate' forms of travel such as the phenomenon of 'couchsurfing' (O'Regan 2012; Bialski 2012); career gap years and digital nomadism; the rise in women's solo travel (Bradt 2024); an expanding charity sector competing for fund-raising stories; and popular television such as the BBC's *Race Across the World*. All of these may contribute to decentering the classic depiction of hitchhiking as the preserve of youth.

The diffusion of hitchhiking knowledge takes on many other forms too, whether materially manifested through artistic endeavors such as hitchBOT or 'Walking Man', via

self-organizing intentional communities such as Slab City in Nevada (featured in the film *Into the Wild*), and more comedic interventions in culture such as Tony Hawks and the work of Douglas Adams. In making some closing observations about the sensory experiences of hitchhiking, we feel that it is worth revisiting some of the philosophical themes of the latter's set of books—which have influenced both authors in their writings, book cover designs, and seen one of us dress up as the character Arthur Dent (dressing gown, towel, slippers and all).

Adams' books, radio, and television series emerged in the early 1980s and developed cult status for its surreal tale of an unassuming Englishman standing up to the despoiling of the countryside by road building before being whisked off on a galactic hitchhiking adventure as the Earth is destroyed to make way for a hyperspace bypass by the intransigent bureaucratic Vogons. The first book, conceived by the author whilst on his own hitchhiking adventures some years before, is loved for its quirky characters and an apparent randomness of events. The style of prose is often assumed to be synonymous with a kind of innocent amateurism of how one carries oneself in the world or learns a new trade or skill. Yet behind its satire of many aspects of modernity, consumer culture, and the search for the answer to 'life, the universe and everything', is a critique of anthropocentrism and an implicit call for a more holistic and interconnected philosophy of living.[10]

HHGG also embraces many aspects of the then emerging scientific paradigms of chaos and complexity theory, which reveal a self-organizing order of matter and energy underpinning and written into the fabric of the living world. Randomness is a key component of keeping the evolution and momentum of these processes flowing, to such an extent that the word hitchhiker has become ubiquitous in the language used to describe the behavior and nature of genes (Gintis 2003). The measurement of specific processes is often problematic because of the difficulties of observing both positionality and momentum and also because the act of observing is itself not value-free. Cause and effect appear blurred, non-linear, and outside of assumed models of rationality.

The zany humor of *HHGG* both enchants us in its imaginative possibilities and reminds us of the uniqueness of our lives and our impact on the biosphere. Whilst working on the final edits of his monograph *Driving with Strangers* in the summer of 2021, JP was struck by the horrible irony of the juxtaposition of the cover image of a thumb against a burning sky with the real-life immolation of a small town named Lytton in British Columbia, from which residents had to scramble to leave in the space of minutes. If the theme of Douglas Adams' books is that our lives on Earth are experiments in humility, then those contemporary hitchhikers who have tapped into the experiences of prior generations and channeled their tactics and learning (sometimes in outlandish costumes, wielding huge foam thumbs for charity) might be thought of a modern form of shaman. Embodiments of our most respectful and cooperative selves, they carry the knowledge of the human tribe into an uncertain ecological future into which we must travel together.

Experienced hitchhikers implicitly recognize this in terms of 'hitching time'. Through such time, there is an unfolding of other phenomena such as synchronicity, the apparent creation of 'luck', and the sense of 'road karma', where good deeds are repaid, or where long waits are 'balanced' by subsequent long lifts.[11] Such a position de-centers the anthropocentric assumptions of phenomenology, to see humans and landscapes as a single system in a state of flux, one comprising a multitude of worldviews unified into a synergism or *Gestalt* via common experiences, intentions, and reactions. Conceptually, we can therefore surmise that hitchhikers are travelers who quite literally have time on their hands. And through the haptic/tacit processes of learning, as well as teaching/passing on this activity, they are both literally and figuratively grasping experience, handling knowledge, making stories, and manipulating the spatio-temporal fabric of reality.

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Notes

1 This might sound familiar to those familiar with Robert Stebbins' arguments in *Serious Leisure* (Stebbins 2006). And it is an approach that Martínez and Laviolette (2024) have recently explored in terms of the relationship between socio-spatial hacking and *autostop* travel.

2 The meaning of the term '*sousveillance*' is the same as its direct translation, which is simply 'surveillance from below'. What this means in practice is to return the forms of monitoring the public and the gaze of institutions of power back toward the State or other systems of observation put in place by corporations, security companies, law enforcement agencies, and so on.

3 It should also be pointed out that one of the roads-not-taken in this paper is 'trade-plating' (see Carver 2013), which is the profession of picking up a vehicle from one dealership and driving it to a different location, whilst returning home without using public transport. Instead, the driver-cum-traveler uses the dealer's pre-sale registration plates as a sign for soliciting lifts. Some might wish to quibble over definitions as to whether this is a misgiving, since both practices do share some features in common. Ethnographically, however, the self-ascribed identities of both these categories of travelers appears so distinct from each other that it seems justified to omit trades-platers here and instead call for a distinct study on this phenomenon. A subsequent comparison of the respective findings would quickly demonstrate whether or not this is a correct assertion.

4 We will not address the arguments for hitchhiking's decline here, but draw your attention to our monographs *Hitchhiking: Cultural inroads* (Laviolette 2020) and *Driving with strangers: What hitchhiking tells us about humanity* (Purkis 2022), which examine shifts in vehicle ownership, public transport policy, media representations, and the capacity of each generation to pass on the relevant knowledge. The point about the validity of certain types of academic research in the neo-liberal era is commented upon in the aforementioned Smith and Chesters article.

5 Original pagination unknown. Full text scanned (Drifter 1923).

6 In his book *Derelict Days* (Thomas 2004), Irv Thomas sets out the difference between roadside rambling and lift giving in the pre motor age and the visualization of the crossing of distance through signaling from a stationary position by the highway.

7 Poems from: (Wing 2001, pp. 57, 84); John Newlove, 'Roger's Pass' and 'Well travelled country' in (Fetherling 1970, pp. 20–23).

8 Ever the hitchhiker, Laviolette has never taken a driver's licence test and thus does not drive.

9 For a useful media text-based analysis of mid-twentieth century discourses covering such themes as 'Civic Samaritan', 'Romance of the Road', the 'Homicidal Hitcher', and 'Asking for it', see Packer (2008, pp. 77–110).

10 Adams went on to utilize ideas from particle physics in subsequent novels such as *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* (Adams 1987) and expressed his concern for the environment in *Last Chance to See* (Adams and Carwardine 1990).

11 All these aspects also exist in the world of *HHGG*, which suggests that Adams was evoking a view of travel eliding human cognition and the wider ecosystem.

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