

Domestic journeys: The importance of micro-moves

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Getting ready for take-off

“Travelling north from the chair I encounter my bed...” The narrator on the move is the young officer Xavier de Maistre, who on carnival night in Turin 1790 was sentenced to several weeks of room arrest after a duel. When he is allowed out again he carries a manuscript with him, his “Voyages de ma chambre” (Xavier 1994). He spent the days travelling around his room, daydreaming and observing his everyday movements with new eyes. Sometimes he ritualizes small moves by putting on his travel boots and coat.

Xavier de Maistre’s little book reminds us that we often get trapped in the narratives of Grand travel and mobility, overlooking the seemingly insignificant movements, routines and rituals that set the ground for more spectacular journeys. The importance to be on the move became a credo of modernity early on: never allow yourself to get stuck or left behind. This also led to a celebration of forward movement, of eyes fixed on the horizon. However, many moves are so small and routinized that they remain unnoticed or are seen as unimportant, but on a closer look they turn out to harbour important issues. Johanna Rolshoven has consistently stressed the need to look at these mundane aspects that have often been neglected in mobility studies. In her pioneering work with the journal *Mobile Culture Studies*, Rolshoven has emphasized the need to look at processes of kinesis as well as stasis. Mobility is not only about advancing, it includes strategies of retreating or maintaining the status quo. Being on the move can be a way of keeping things as they are. Following Rolshoven, I will here take mobility back into the home.

In interviewing people for a project on routines (Ehn & Löfgren 2010), we found that people often started by talking about their morning habits. This was not only because it felt like a natural narrative start. Morning routines are about staggering from sleep to waking and getting body and mind ready for the outside world. Mornings are vulnerable times and routines become an important survival strategy; a number of small tasks have to be coordinated, sequenced or multi-tasked. Getting ready to move and to prepare yourself for another day calls for gathering energy and some focus.

Several researchers have pointed to the strong charge in the ingrained habits of everyday mornings. The French sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann (1997, 19) talks about the “morning dance” of going through all the necessary preparations for taking off out into the world. Body and mind are constantly working and it is often the hands which lead the way: reaching for the bar of soap in the shower, pouring coffee while turning the pages of the morning paper, rummaging through the drawers for a missing sock.

What is so loaded about morning routines? asks the sociologist Christina Nippert-Eng in her interview study of how Americans organize their lives between home and work. In getting ready for a new working day, routines may work as a warming up, she says. They make the shifts between the daily moves between home and work easier. The mindless activities prepare us for the mindful ones (Nippert-Eng 1995, 113ff.). For some this passage is always demanding and calls for small tricks of mental reframing.

Mornings are also about the coordination of micro-moves under time pressures. Sometimes mornings are described as effortless, taking an almost sleep-walking body through many tasks thanks to a perfectly working autopilot. However, running out of time also calls for sudden improvisation, and in skipping some routines or making shortcuts a strongly interwoven patchwork of routines is destabilized.

In many households, morning routines depend on precise and accurate timing. The minutes between getting up and leaving home are filled by a sequence of practices, each of which can take only so long. Any deviation, dallying over breakfast or getting up late throws the schedule out of kilter. (Shove et al 2012, 106)

Thus, some mornings turn chaotic or become full of tensions. Synchronization between household members fails, priorities clash; there are angry knocks on the bathroom door, heated arguments about who should take the dog out, and the kitchen table is left a mess for the person who comes last to breakfast. There are frantic searches for the cell phone charger or that lost memo from work. This is where the system breaks down. Morning routines are not just pre-choreographed but danced, with constant improvisations.

If you want to study how micro-moves are embodied in routines and rituals, mornings are therefore not a bad place to start. The word “routine” is originally French for “small path”, and it is this making of morning paths that interests me. In the following I will explore how moves, affect, sensations and stuff interact in the making and unmaking of routines, and I begin by going through some of the stations of the morning journey.

Getting out of bed

The first morning move is surrounded by much folklore. How do we make sure we get out of bed on the right side and not the wrong side? One wrong move and the rest of the day will be spoiled by a black mood and clumsy movements; you can't find the right T-shirt, the toaster burns the toast, the car keys are missing. This piece of folk belief does carry an element of truth. It matters how people start their morning programme; it is important that moves are synchronized and coordinated

and the autopilot is working. “The first thing you do can influence the rest of the day”, says the main character in Nicholson Baker’s short novel, *A Box of Matches* (2003), about a man and his morning habits.

Morning time means quick moves from station to station, with changing micro-climates. There is the sensual and meditative mood of shaving or putting on make-up in front of the mirror that offers a chance to contemplate what kind of day lies ahead. “Those ten minutes in front of the mirror are the most important moment of the day”, says one woman. While hands rummage through the make-up bag and she chooses a lipstick colour, she carries on with an inner dialogue between herself and the changing image in the mirror. Deft micro-moves are combined with fast mind-travel.

Standing in front of the closet choosing clothes may also provide quick journeys into the future. Judith Williamson (1987, 91) poses a morning question familiar to many:

When I rummage through my wardrobe in the morning I am not merely faced with a choice of what to wear. I am faced with a choice of images: the difference between a smart suit and a pair of overalls, a leather skirt and a cotton dress, is not just one of fabric and style, but one of identity. You know perfectly well that you will be seen differently for the whole day...

What kind of person would I like to be today? There is a quick dress rehearsal of things to come; then off into the kitchen. What is the prevailing mood here today? Other household members may be present, but mentally some are already at work. Good and bad moods confront each other, and my happy expectations for the day are disturbed by the irritated body language or bad morning mood of someone else at the table.

Senses on the move

George Downing has discussed the importance of looking at what he calls micro-practices in order to understand the relations between affect, emotion and movement (2000, VII). He is thinking about the capacity to sense a feeling, letting it evolve or change, using it as a lens to explore a situation and maybe later putting it into words. Downing points to the importance of affects to create movement, that they have a potential for change. A sudden feeling may stop an activity, signal a change, create a new focus – it puts us in a state of “action readiness”. Affect may thus be momentary or fleeting, which may develop into a more long-lived emotion as affects are verbalized and culturally interpreted (see the discussion in Frykman & Frykman 2016, 16ff; and Wetherell 2012, 120ff).

Morning activities are saturated by affects, which usually start as something unconscious and pre-discursive. It can be a tingling sensation, a sudden itch or a vague sense of foreboding. Legs get restless, muscles contract, a sense of unease makes the body want to shift positions. All of a sudden there is a need to move somewhere else, either mentally or physically. Affects takes shape, create

rhythms, timings, vibrancy or energy. Strong affects contain a strong push to do something, to move away or move closer, as Wetherell (2012, 29) has put it.

Mornings are full of such processes. It could be some diffuse anxiety about the day ahead, a nervous energy seeking for an outlet. It takes a quick move out of bed (on the right side), or an extra minute in the shower to handle that. It can be a sudden feeling of enthusiasm, which starts to overflow and create new mobilities of ideas, objects and people (see Hui 2014, 179). Affects flow between the rooms and turn into building materials of moods and quick changes in atmosphere – around the kitchen table, for example (see the discussion in Löfgren 2014).

Affects thus create a constant traffic of movements and sensations between bodies, minds and the material environment. Sounds, smells, light and tastes flow through the morning. The sensory tools of the body are sent out on quick journeys and return with impacts: the protective warmth of the bed against the cool hardness of the floor, the invigorating smell of coffee travelling through the house, the inviting softness of the sofa, the reassuring and comforting flow of hot water in the shower, combined with the pulsating rhythm of the tumble dryer in the corner. The angry red blips of gadgets demanding to be charged in the kitchen dusk, and the ways in which the first rays of the morning sun travel through the rooms, changing the atmosphere.

The different senses combine to handle tasks and moves. The eyes listen carefully, the hands see in the dark, and there is a bitter feeling in the mouth when waking up after a bad dream. Of special importance here are the kinesthetic and haptic dimensions, coordinating impressions and body moves, registering textures, vibrations, temperature, pressure or resistance. Touching and being touched as one navigates through the morning world.

Stuff on the move

It is not only morning people who are on the move, objects are moving, too, as co-actors. Already, the night before, some things have been moved into position to facilitate the morning rush. The bag with gym clothes is placed next to the door, the books for the office are stacked at the end of the stairs, the post-it message is on the fridge door.

In their book *Home Rules*, Wood and Beck (1994) study the uses of domestic space in a family over several years and map all the rituals and rules surrounding the use of the living room especially. They point out that a domestic object pulsates with an attractive force, shaping the uses of everyday space. With the morning paper in hand the person is sucked down into the couch and the table is just waiting for the coffee cup. There are forces of push and pull in the way affect and things come together. Some objects are unimportant for morning routines, others are central, offering crucial affordances for activities. If such objects choose to make trouble or breakdown, irritation and frustration grows, or as Jojada Verrips once put it: “The damn thing didn’t want to do what I wanted” (1994). Mornings have a material infrastructure that becomes visible when routines are stalled.

Affect and materiality are thus intertwined. Affects stick to certain objects, communicating comfort, guilt or irritation. They charge material objects as well as

morning activities: this toaster is hopeless! And what are these towels doing on the bathroom floor!

The Swedish psychologist Björn Wrangsjö (2011) has made a playful take on materialized feelings. He writes a travel narrative of making home visits to a number of emotions. Entering the houses of characters like *Bitterness*, *Anger* and *Happiness*, he observes their choice of furniture, the layout of the rooms, the uses of lighting and the prevailing mood. In the living room of *Sadness*, the heavy purple window curtains keep the light out, dust gathers in the corners and the air is stale. The visitor asks *Envy* why there are so few pieces of furniture in his house and *Envy* replies that he is always on the move, good at appearing when not expected and then moving on again. *Guilt* and *Shame* have decided to share a house, but *Shame* feels most comfortable down in the basement.

In the 17th century, artists fantasized about emotional landscapes in which feelings were materialized in other ways. They mapped fictional worlds such as the sea of boredom, the island of happiness, the dark woods of despair, the road of hope (see Bruno 2002, 205 ff). Such maps can also be drawn of contemporary homes. Where, why and how do we find the flows of affect and changing moods in a home – and how do they evolve with the rhythms of day and night, workdays and weekends? Feelings are usually on the move, changing shapes and directions, and finding new moorings or hiding places. Check the atmosphere or mood of the bedroom, the bathroom or the kitchen in the morning. Where do irritations gather? What are the spaces for daydreaming or blissful relaxation, moments of happy togetherness or a creeping feeling of boredom (another hopeless day)?

Domestic journeys depend on a material infrastructure, as small paths are created and objects work like props or fields of gravity, directing moves, attentions and affect in certain directions. How does the sofa or the kitchen table help to organize body and mind, attention and interaction?

Routines and rituals

Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm, as Henri Lefebvre (2004, 15) has written. Mornings are heavily dependent on rhythms. In many households people have different timetables, organized by the times they need to get up and when they have to be out of the house. There is a constant synchronization of such schedules and tempos, and also of priorities. Who occupies the shower first? Who just grabs something in the kitchen, and who can afford to sit down and leisurely enjoy the morning paper? What is the level of stress? Members of some households might choose to get up much earlier in order to have the place to themselves.

David Seamon (1980) coined the phrase “place ballets” for the habitual manoeuvres that people make in and around familiar places as part of their daily routines and individual encounters. Morning rhythms have changing durations, tempo and pace, alternating between accelerating, slowing down or coming to a standstill (Edensor 2014, 163).

For many, the morning routines become co-dependent and intertwined, they have to be performed in a certain order or carried out with multitasking skills.

Breakfast turns into an event in which reading the morning paper has to be combined with some toast and marmalade and the favourite radio channel on. Some morning activities are so important that they are cemented into important habits, which cannot just be skipped or overlooked. In this process they may also become ritualized and thereby acquiring a moral or emotional charge. In a way, many of these quick steps are like small *rites de passage*, signalling transformations or situations of inclusion or exclusion, togetherness or privacy.

In Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Here I Am* from 2016, we follow the couple Julia and Jacob. When Julia and Jacob got married they created new routines: "Everything seemed to move toward ritual." (Foer 2016, 12). Morning routines were an important part of this construction work, a web of mundane tasks and rituals, which bind the couple together. Step by step they turn into a domestic world of invisible habits. Such routines may take the shape of small gestures and tasks that show caring. As Julia and Jacob get ready to go out into the world, their preparations are full of such micro-rituals of reassurance and love. It is a choreography of trust and coordination. Julia takes a shower first, while Jacob puts the breakfast on the table. She always pours the first cup of coffee for him, he gets the morning paper and gives her the part he knows she wants to start with. She gives him a kiss, as he leaves the house.

But gradually, the morning routines start to change. Foer depicts how Julia's and Jacob's marriage begins to erode by focusing on all these seemingly unimportant changes: "Time passed, the world exerted itself, and Jacob and Julia began to forget to do things on purpose." The cherished routines and rituals were all still there, but slowly "the inside of life became far smaller than the outside, creating a cavity, an emptiness." (Foer 2016, 15) Julia forgets to pour him coffee and Jacob starts to pick his own favourite part of the newspaper first. And that morning kiss? Maybe it can wait until tomorrow. Small, unconscious transformations that signal a major change. It is in the dismantling of small routines that the breakdown of their marriage is taking place. The habits of the partner, which once seemed so charming, begin to get irritating. The cherished ritual movements slowly turn into mere mechanical reflexes. The eroding routines signal a new but still invisible journey: that of breaking up, dismantling a home. It is a changing flow of energy that Foer depicts.

What is actually changing when everyday activities, routines, thoughts and rituals slowly change? Are they strengthened or emptied or hollowed out, losing their original meaning or function? People seem to be going through the same motions, but something is happening.

Moving bodies, roaming minds

So what kinds of journeys are we dealing with here? Returning to Johanna Rols-hoven and her search for entrances and spaces neglected in mobility studies, we need to explore the micro-physics of movement, which includes processes of friction, stasis and inertia. Movement is always dependent on friction, friction between people and things, between body and mind. The grinding of mobilities or immobilities up against each other or against materialities produces heat, points of

contestation or emotionalisation. “Friction makes things happen”, as Tim Cresswell (2014, 114) has said. Mornings offer rich opportunities for studying this – the vegetative lingering in bed for another five minutes, the meditative stillness in the shower or the séance in front of the bathroom mirror. Such moments of non-movement produce rich opportunities for daydreaming. The body rests and thus helps the mind to travel. Stasis and movement work together. In other situations, movements are out of synch, the stressed body cannot coordinate moves, feelings and objects. Morning activities are framed by the constricted spaces, time limits and everyday repetitions. There is an intensity of the mundane at work here as well the immensity of the roaming mind, travelling in and out of the home.

In what ways are mornings special? Using Raymond Williams’ (1977) classic concept of “structures of feeling”, it could be argued that specific times create specific patterns of moods, affect and emotions. Compare morning routines with the evening rituals of “reclaiming the home”. People kick off their shoes, sink into the sofa; there is a reversal of morning tasks. Domestic mornings and evenings have different micro-climates and rhythms. In the morning, routines are directed forward and feelings of anticipation dominate, while with night comes the time for closure and looking back on another workday.

Let me just give two examples of evening rituals, both of which are strongly gendered in this case. Firstly, in a study of domestic atmospheres, Sarah Pink and Kerstin Leder Mackley (2016) have described the evening round of a man who walks around the house when everyone else has gone to bed. He makes sure the lights and electronic devices are off, he regulates the thermostat and keeps a searching eye out for anything out of the ordinary. It is his responsibility and his delight, but it also gives him a feeling of being in control; he is a real *pater familias*. Secondly, in a biographical novel based upon the housewife life of her grandmother from the 1930s to the 1970s, the Swedish author Kristina Sandberg gives a fascinating and detailed ethnography of a myriad of small household chores. Her grandmother Maj’s tasks are constantly intertwined with forbidden thoughts, with feelings of anxiety, boredom or longing for another life. Vacuuming, dusting, mending and fixing create an endless cycle of reproducing the home, but in her daydreaming she journeys out into the world and the traditional domestic ideals are tested and sometimes contested. Maj constantly measures herself; does she come up to standard as a housewife? But she is never good enough. After a long day, she finishes off in the kitchen. The others have gone to bed. She takes a last look at the shining sink and the spotless kitchen, surveys the meticulous order of the living room. Sinking down into the sofa in the stillness of the evening, she treats herself to a small brandy and there is a temporary feeling of bliss. At last her home is in perfect order, but there is the nagging awareness that tomorrow this maintenance work starts all over again and it is work that usually goes unnoticed and unappreciated by the rest of the family (Sandberg 2014).

Such rituals of closing down the home and finishing an ordinary day can be contrasted to the morning dances and their different moods and modes. In a similar manner the invisibility of the habitual can be studied in situations when routines breakdown or are abandoned. For people out of work or on sick leave, the question

can be: should I even get out of bed? Can I spend hours in my dressing gown sitting at the breakfast table or just pottering about? Routines that earlier seemed natural and unproblematic now present challenging decisions.

Ordinary mornings contain a heavily charged set of micro-moves, the time pressure calls for ardent coordination, synchronization and multi-tasking. Patchworks of practices are stitched together. Affect and emotions charge these seemingly trivial activities. Some minor tasks become important rituals, necessary for starting a new day. Routines sink into the body and many of them cannot be questioned, they have become “just me”. This gives them power, while questions about priorities, hierarchy and control lurk behind and may turn into heated morning arguments. The hidden moral economy of the household surfaces in such emotional situations. Why isn't there any coffee left for me? And why should I be the one who takes the dog out again?

The emotional charges of micro-moves may vary, but it is good to remember that words that capture feelings often contain movement. The vernacular uses of “feeling” have a number of dimensions, sliding from physical to mental experiences (search, being aware of, touching or being touched). Affect comes from the Latin *ad fecio* (to do something, to influence), emotion from the Latin *emovio* (move out). There are explorative connotations in all three.

I began with the domestic travels of Xavier de Maistre. Let me end with Meg Logan, a middle-aged American with serious agoraphobia. Meg's everyday life and strategies have been explored by the ethnographers Lisa Capps and Elinor Ochs (1995). She has been staying at home for six years, with only short forays into the neighbourhood. Her agoraphobia is a fear of being any place where she might feel alone and vulnerable and be open to strong anxiety and panic attacks. Home becomes the protective safe haven. There are two needlepoint plaques in the hallway of her house: “Home is where the heart is” and “The home of a friend is never far away.” But home is not a safe haven at all. In her favourite sofa, where Meg spends a lot of time, she is constantly confronted with fears and anxieties. Her mind keeps travelling in time and space, making her remember disastrous expeditions outside the home or all the different sorts of dangers that may be lurking out there. A rising feeling of a new panic attack, or just vague but troubling sensations of anxiety invade the living room. She is immobilised, but her mind is constantly on the move.

Meg's situation reminds us that there is nothing like a home life sheltered from the outside world. Home is the platform where we learn to handle the world and prepare ourselves for taking it on. Morning routines are about that. Micro-moves handle the tensions between inside and outside, home and away, me and the world, making connections or creating boundaries. Through movements the home is made and remade every morning.

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