

# **Seen from a Motorcycle: *Hypomnemata* by Robert Pirsig's from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance***

## **Abstract**

On the 50th anniversary of the publication of Robert Pirsig's celebrated *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (ZAMM), I propose a rereading of the book, dwelling on certain passages of the book that – despite the scant attention paid to them by the author and his many reviewers – prove useful in reflecting on the ways in which motorcycle riding can bring us closer to forms of sensory experience with the world around us.

In his less elaborate passages, ZAMM shows us how the act of seeing while riding a motorcycle coincides with a performative act. Seeing things as “pure seeing” is useful for suspending our innate habit of filtering the vision of things through the intellect. I therefore re-read ZAMM as a *ὑπομνήματα* (*hypomnemata*): as a material memory of things seen, perceived and thought while riding a motorcycle, offering them as an accumulated treasure for re-reading and subsequent meditation. It is a matter of constructing a practice of “disparate vision”: a way of combining the objectivity of the “already seen” with the subjectivity of the experiences that are produced and the particularity of the circumstances that determine them.

## **Foreword**

This year celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of what can be considered the most famous book with a motorcycle as its topic (and co-protagonist): *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (ZAMM) by Robert Pirsig (1974). Since 1982, the year of publication of its Italian translation, I believe I have read the book in question at least five or six times. If it is true, as Nabokov (1980) writes, that: «you cannot read a book, you can only reread it», it is equally true that with each rereading: «you do not see more in the book than you did before. You see more in you than there was before» (Fadiman, 1957). In my case, the re-readings cover a span of more than forty years that correspond to a significant period of my life from youth to adulthood. Years in which there was always one (or more) motorcycles waiting for me in my garage. However, I must confess that in all these re-readings I have never been able to get passionate about the vaguely New Age-like philosophical lucubrations on the metaphysics of quality that permeated pages and pages of Pirsig's book. On the one hand, I ended up implicitly siding with the majority of academic philosophers who basically ignored the book or, at most, downgraded it to the level of companion book to the works of Paulo Coelho or Richard Bach. On a purely personal level, then, I have never been able to overcome my idiosyncrasy towards the narrator's know-it-all tone, both in his dealings with John Sutherland, guilty of disliking mechanical rationality (and not personally caring for the maintenance of his motorcycle), and in his inability to establish an emotional relationship with his son Chris. In another respect, however, the

book immediately fascinated me with its ability to transcend the narrow limits of the travelogue. Then – rereading after rereading – ZAMM produced in me a certain aptitude for stimulating original and insightful reflections on being not only “on the road” but “into the space” riding a motorcycle. These are reflections of which Pirsig does not seem to be fully aware or interested in developing, but which, in my case, after decades of riding a motorcycle, have led me to understand how motorcycle riding can bring us closer to forms of sensory experience with the world around us.

So, while Pirsig (1984, p. 7) suggested that the sense and purpose of ZAMM was that of a Chautauqua aimed at digging deep into the dichotomy between classical and romantic rationality, to free it from the «debris of thoughts grown stale and platitudes too often repeated», I ended up, instead, to preserve ZAMM as a ὑπομνήματα (*hypomnemata*) or as a «notebooks [...] on important subjects which must be reread from time to time in order to reactualize what they contain» (Foucault, 1994, p. 101).

Writing about ZAMM corresponds to putting into a “body” everything that, over time, its reading has produced. It is a body that, in accordance with Foucault (*ibid.*, p. 213), «is not a body of doctrine, but – more immediately –, my own body». Annotating some of Pirsig’s fragments, my body has appropriated them and made them its own through carnal experience. ZAMM’s re-readings have therefore produced the effect of transforming the things seen and recounted by Pirsig «into tissue and blood (*in vires et in sanguinem*)» (*ibid.*).

## 1.

As early as the first pages of ZAMM, Robert Pirsig (1984, p. 4) is very precise about the meaning and implications of motorcycle riding:

«you see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you’re always in a compartment, and because you’re used to it you don’t realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You’re a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You’re completely in contact with it all. You’re in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on, it’s right there, so blurred you can’t focus on it, yet you can put your foot down and touch it anytime, and the whole thing, the whole experience, is never removed from immediate consciousness».

In these few lines, Pirsig effectively clarifies a couple of fundamental issues that form part of what one might call the “embodied knowledge” of every motorcyclist. I will briefly summarise these below, and then develop these further.

First issue: travelling on a motorcycle is completely different from travelling in a car. This difference, according to Pirsig, is primarily a matter of framing, from which derives a profound distinction of roles. Unlike the (potential) breadth of vision offered to motorcycle riders, the windscreen of a car is an imposed

frame that atrophies the driver's cone of vision. Framing determines not only the condition of the driver – enclosed within a passenger compartment (unless driving a convertible), in the case of a car driver, free in space astride a two-wheeled mechanical device, in the case of a motorcyclist – but also his different being in space. Pirsig writes this openly, using the concept of the scene as a theatrical metaphor to distinguish the kinaesthetic experience of driving a car from that of riding a motorcycle: «[in a car] you're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame [...on a motorcycle] you're in the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming» (*ibid.*).

Second issue: riding a motorcycle is an experience, that is never removed from immediate consciousness. Already in the opening pages of *ZAAM*, Pirsig shows himself to be fully aware that what one perceives while riding a motorcycle transcends the forms of knowledge of the world acquired through the usual intellectual activities. Through the motorcyclist's body, the process of seeing is freed from contextual knowledge and leads us to see what we see rather than what we (already) know (or think we know). Motorcycling involves a substantial reorientation of the sensory experience of time and space. The senses, intellect, meanings, creativity and, last but not least, the motorcyclist's body are potentially reconfigured and operate as a metronome attentive to the rhythms around him. The act of seeing on a motorcycle is a performative act: seeing things as pure seeing could prove useful in producing appropriate tropes to decipher contemporaneity, suspending the innate habit of filtering the vision of things through the intellect.

Both issues deserve to be explored in depth.

## 2.

Pirsig's criticism of car driving coincides with the idea – which is also widespread – that, in most cases, when we get behind the wheel of a car, our mind turns into a kind of black box whose internal operations are irrelevant because what counts is the conditioning that is generated between environmental stimuli and the driver's responses. In this respect, car driving is a behavioural act and the equivalence proposed by Pirsig between standing in front of the car windscreen and standing in front of the TV (or a smartphone screen, we would say today), takes us straight into the realm of boredom and alienation. In an interesting essay, Andrew Dawson (2016) lays the theoretical foundations of the representation of sensory disengagement in motoring by linking it to post-war Marxian thought in its critique of capitalist modernity and concern with alienation and abstraction. So wrote Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 313), one of the most influential and original Marxist thinkers:

«the person who drives around and knows only how to drive a car – all contribute in their way to mutilation of a space which is everywhere sliced up [...] The driver is concerned only with steering himself to his destination, and in looking about sees only what he needs to see for that purpose; he thus perceives only his route, which has been materialized, mechanized and technicized, and he sees it from one angle only that of its functionality, speed, readability, facility».

As I will try to briefly demonstrate below, I am not so convinced that driving a car inevitably amounts to an alienating experience. However, since it is not the car and automobile driving that are the topics I will be dealing with in this essay, I will use them in comparison with motorcycle and motorcyclist driving.

On the one hand, the point I am concerned here is to take the most beaten-down research approaches to car driving in order to bring out similarly traditional approaches to motorcycle driving and to emphasise how a very stereotypical idea of ‘motorcycle riding’ ends up conditioning common opinions and focusing the body of scientific studies on the subject. It does not take long, in fact, to realise that the scientific landscape with regard to motorcycle riding focuses mainly on three strands of research. In a perhaps somewhat manichean way I would summarise them as follows.

The first approach is variously associated with risk issues. It is well known that motorcycle accidents are much higher in percentage terms than car accidents, and the motorcyclist’s body is more vulnerable than that of the car driver. Pinch and Reimer (2012) cite a 2009 report by the Department of Transport, according to which, in the UK, motorcyclists are 46 times more likely to be killed or seriously injured per kilometre travelled than car drivers. The second approach has a socio-ethnographic matrix and deals with issues of identity and (sub)culture, focusing on questions of self-representation, the formation of distinctive motorcycling communities (think of the various chapters of HOGs that have sprung up in the wake of Sonny Barger’s stories or films such as *The Wild One* or the GS-beemers, and the iconic image offered by Evans and Boorman in *Long Way Round*) and consumption.. In this approach, the available material and possible perspectives of study are very broad: the reference to the ‘classic’ *Hogs, Blogs, Leathers and Lattes* by William Thompson (2012) is the essential starting point for anyone wishing to approach the topic. The third approach considers motorcycles and motorcyclists in terms of mobility. In this case, the reference is John Urry’s seminal study (2007), which captured the bursting of the mobility issue at the centre of numerous academic and political agendas. In the case of the motorcycle, its manoeuvrability and flexibility (in comparison to the car) together with its relative cheapness of use (in the case of small engines and scooters), are characteristics that make it a case study of particular interest in the context of the historical and geographical – uneven (Harvey, 1991) – development of the various national systems and the mobility systems associated with them. This approach, too, offers different research perspectives, ranging from postcolonial studies interested in considering the importance of the motorcycle for commercial and public service activities, especially on the Asian continent and in Latin America; to the “choreographies of the road“ (Sheller, 2007) observable in congested cities, where the practices of motorcyclists (such as jumping queues, filtering between slow or stationary cars, or invading the lane of oncoming traffic), may be perceived (by car drivers) as particularly annoying and transgressive acts.

From the first approach emerge the stereotypical images of the motorcycle as a dangerous vehicle and of the motorcyclist as a reckless, daredevil and certainly prone to conscious high-risk practices. The second approach articulates the profile of the contemporary motorcyclist as being caught between the authenticity of motorcycle subcultures (in the sense of an object of cultural identification) and the domestication brought about by marketing and commercial strategies who mainly interpret the motorbike as a commodity dedicated

to leisure (Boni, 2020, p. 107). The third approach assimilates the motorcycle as a mobile device functional to alternative strategies of movement in which the motorcyclist juggles daily journeys on congested, polluted and dangerous Asian roads on small, often overloaded motorcycles, or – in the case of many European cities – on unbearable scooters driven by post-yuppies with anti-cold blankets on their legs and the must-have Akrapovic exhaust, zigzagging through urban traffic.

Since this mainstream, I became convinced that there is a lack of useful work (research, experiments, reflections) to clarify a point of not secondary importance: what do we see when we ride our motorcycle? And – correlatively – how does riding the motorcycle contribute to producing the landscape we see? Can we consider peripheral vision not exclusively as a complement to fixed vision («go where you look»), but as a receptor of stimuli about the surrounding space (the sensory product of «you're in the scene» mentioned by Pirsig)? If we exclude both behavioural studies devoted to safety and motorcycle travelogues, we immediately realise the shortage of studies on the subject. On the one hand, behavioural studies consider peripheral vision as a part of vision outside the main focus of gaze (essential to perceive what is happening around us without turning one's head) and the loss of peripheral vision as a dangerous syndrome called “tunnel vision”, responsible for fatal driving errors. On the other hand, motorcycling carnet de voyage – such as Ted Simon's *Jupiter's Travels*, or Theresa Wallach's *The Rugged Road*, or the ubiquitous *The Motorcycle Diaries* of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara just to name a few, the list could be endless –, come closer to the goal: in most cases, they are visual and literary accounts of subjective explorations that oscillate between journalism, geography, humanities, poetry and intimate diaries. However, both lack a reflexive approach. To put it in a “Pirsig way”: «how can I describe the way in which riding a motorcycle influences what I see?». And: «what is the material product of this vision? What does this vision add (or subtract, or modify) to what I know (or I think I know)?». If these are the questions, then some studies and research in the automobile field may tell us something that constitutes a useful starting point.

Firstly, they contradict the fixed assumption that the driver of a car invariably coincides with a passive spectator sitting in front of a screen-windshield on which a boring movie is projected. According to Borden (2013), car driving makes us aware of the pure sensory experience of the encounter with the world surrounding us. Seen from a car, objects appear in a different way and what was previously familiar becomes strange. In other words, trees, buildings, other vehicles, etc., appear different from the car than they do from the roadside: in particular, the landscape takes on «the appearance of a “purposeless beauty,” whereby objects are divorced from their original context or function, and so appear as items of non-contextual contemplation» (*ibid.*). On this point, some architects, urban planners and filmmakers have taken important steps.

The pioneering work of Appleyard, Lynch and Myer (1964), entitled *View from the Road*, paved the way for the idea that perception from the windscreen of an automobile may be worthy of further study in the field of environmental perception studies. For example, the three authors argued that highways could be a potential observation point for the American urban landscape (Colonnese, Rosa, 2021). A few years later, Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour (1972) in *Learning from Las Vegas*, describe the Sin City as seen through

the windshield of their car, as «a new landscape of large spaces, high speeds and complex programmes [in which] styles and signs create connections between many elements, distant from each other and seen quickly». The landscape of Las Vegas is a product of the contradictions brought about by people driving through it and perceiving it in a way distorted by speed that – nevertheless – accentuates its symbolic value. In this respect, Las Vegas is both the product of what is seen through a car windshield and what is produced in order to be seen through a car windshield. A year earlier, so wrote Reyner Banham (1971, p. 23) about Los Angeles: «one can most properly begin by learning the local language; and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement. Mobility outweighs monumentality there to a unique degree [...] So, like earlier generations of English intellectuals who taught themselves Italian in order to read Dante in the original, I learned to drive in order to read Los Angeles in the original». In *AS in DS: An Eye on the Road* (1983), Alison Smithson describes the new sensibility resulting from seeing the landscape in motion, and argues that «the passenger view from the front seat of a car in the early seventies was worth recording». For Smithson, one of the merits of travelling in a Citroën DS Safari – «a cell of perfected technology» (*ibid.*, p. 111) – is «a change of perception, possibly bringing with the beginning of an ability to distinguish between the inherited way of seeing and a fresh recognition of the nature of what we see» (*ibid.*, p. 47).

Filmmakers constitute another category of “reflexive observers” of being on the move in the landscape. For Gilles Deleuze (1983), great filmmakers could have been compared not only to painters, architects, musicians, but also to thinkers. Read from a road-movie perspective, Pirsig’s journey from Minneapolis to San Francisco, through the network of back roads that characterised the American landscape of the 1970s, has many aspects in common with the journey from Cleveland to Florida, described in the third chapter of Jim Jarmusch’s movie *Stranger than Paradise* (1984). Both are dotted with motels, car parks and gas stations that depict a rather dull landscape: as claustrophobic as it is banal. They both share the visions of the *New Topographics* (Jenkins, 1975) who, in 1975 – a year after the publication of ZAMM – in an exhibition at the George Eastman Museum in Rochester, subverted the conventional rules of American landscape photography and portrayed the by-products of post-war suburban sprawl: motorways, gas stations, industrial parks and tract houses. Jarmusch’s film effectively transposes Pirsig’s motorcycle vision into images: in *Stranger than Paradise*, every shot focuses on a motel, a car park or a service station and contains no movement other than that of the protagonists’ vehicle moving along the road. Both Pirsig and Jarmusch put at work Bergson’s first thesis on movement, as offered by Deleuze (1983): «movement is not confused with traversed space. Travelled space is past, movement is present, it is the act of travelling. Travelled space is divisible, and is even infinitely divisible, whereas movement is indivisible, or does not divide without changing its nature with each division [...] travelled spaces all belong to one and the same homogeneous space, whereas movements are heterogeneous, irreducible to each other». If we share this thesis, then it is possible that the moving view of the contemporary landscape will lead us to a better understanding of how our ways of seeing are conceptualised through the condition of mobility produced by travelling in a motorised vehicle. The experience of post-industrial sprawl that envelops Pirsig’s drift should not be

underestimated: to be conceptualised properly it requires to be seen in motion because it exists as an almost exclusive function of movement.

Now, if Allison (1983, p. 111) notes that moving through road space with a *Déesse*, a «room on wheels [...] a cell of perfected technology (*ibid.*)», contributes to the enrichment of the understanding of the surrounding space, and while we have tried to distract from the fact that automobile driving does not necessarily coincide with a perceptual and cognitive alienation, it is equally true that the car – precisely because of its being a “cell” (of technology) in continuous evolution – has progressively immobilised and neutralised the body of the driver, fostering the dissociation between the space of the passenger compartment and the space outside. In other words, the position of the body in the car corresponds to a profound effect on the quantity and quality of visual perception of interior and exterior space. It may seem obvious to state that what is seen and felt through the body when driving a motorcycle is profoundly different from what is seen and felt when driving a car: however, it is from this difference that automobility and motomobility, after sharing a common trait, diverge significantly.

### 3.

If we accept the idea that riding a motorcycle corresponds to an experience that produces an immediate – in the literal sense of “unmediated” – awareness of the external world, then, as we find it necessary to delve into the scope of this cognitive immediacy, we also quickly realise the difficulties inherent in this intention. One possible starting point might be to consider the motorcycling experience as a complex rhythmic practice that holds together (and gives particular meaning to) the rhythms of the motorcyclist’s body and the rhythms of the outside world. Another motorcycling writer<sup>1</sup>, John Berger (2018, pos. 600, Kindle edition), in reaffirming the otherness of the motorcycle to the automobile, considers that if a motorcycle is ridden with the eyes, the wrists and the tilt of the body, it is the eyes that are the most important organ of the three: «the motorcycle follows and veers towards whatever it [the eyes] fixate on. It follows your gaze, not your ideas. It is impossible for a driver of a four-wheeled vehicle to imagine this». To reiterate the concept, in *Bento’s Sketchbook*, Berger (2011, p. 112) quotes Proposition 29 of Spinoza’s *Ethics*:

«I say expressly that the mind has no adequate but only confused knowledge of itself, of its body, and of external bodies, when it perceives a thing in the common order of nature, that is, whenever it is determined externally, that is by fortuitous circumstances, to contemplate this or that, and not when it is determined internally, that is, by the fact that it regards many things at once, to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions one to another».

Berger’s (2018) motorcycle accounts are similar to Pirsig’s: «except for the protective equipment you wear, there is nothing between you and the rest of the world. The air and the wind press directly on you. You

<sup>1</sup> In fact, the category of (influential) motorcycling writers potentially capable of reflecting in an original way on the various phenomenologies of motorcycle riding could surely also include the geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1909-1996), the sociologist Charles Wright Mills (1916-1962) and the neurologist Oliver Sacks (1933-2015), all of whom were passionate BMW motorcycle riders. It is a pity that none of them found the time or interest to enrich this literary genre. For insights, see Adams (2020); Hayden (2006); Sacks (2015); Swados (1963).

are in the space in which you are travelling». Merryfield (2018), in capturing such similarities, argues that Berger and Pirsig were men of the same generation (1926 the former, 1928, the latter), and used the motorcycle figuratively to see and understand the world. Both, in fact, proceed from a particular attitude capable of transforming “the one who looks” into “the one who sees” and (therefore) understands. This point is of fundamental importance in both Pirsig and Berger, because it reveals the profound differences between looking and seeing. The act of looking is, by its very nature, not conclusive. We can, in fact, look at something or someone (an object or a subject) for an infinite amount of time without reaching a conclusion. The act of looking does not necessarily imply superficiality or lack of attention, but generally does not produce effects if the object observed is not “really seen”. Looking is therefore a necessary but not sufficient condition for understanding. Going beyond mere observation requires a qualitative leap that directly involves the consciousness of the observing subject. The one who remains in the observational sphere of looking, is not implicated in the observed subject, but remains outside of it, in a position of detachment: he/she possibly observes, evaluates, examines, controls. He/she who, by making the qualitative leap (activating an awareness), however manages to see: comes out of his/her own observational sphere and enters directly into that of the observed subject to the point of understanding it. We could therefore consider that, in the moment in which the observed object is “seen”, the observing subject becomes responsible for the understanding acquired. From Berger we learn that it is through the act of seeing that we determine our place within the world around us.

Considered in this way, the act of seeing presents itself as a practice involving the whole body with its senses: «perception is visual, but also tactile and rhythmic. Often your body knows before your mind» (Berger, 2018, translated by me). Following Berger, seeing means making oneself passive, forgetting one’s own knowledge, in order to reshape it in sensory interpretation. In this way, the act of seeing is related to the act of listening: listening first to one’s own body, understanding its rhythms, in order to be able to appreciate external rhythms. In a different vein, Pirsig (1984, p. 253) thinks along the same lines: «any intellectually conceived object is always in the past and therefore unreal. Reality is always the moment of vision before the intellectualisation takes place. There is no other reality».

At this point, it is interesting to consider that both writers were riding Honda motorcycles: a powerful 1997 Blackbird CBR 1100 for Berger, a more modest 1964 Superhawk 305 for Pirsig. Curiously enough, both models refer to bird species: animals that – as is well known – are known for their exceptional visual qualities. Furthermore, we can assume that, due to the (relatively) different performance demands of their respective motorcycles, the two writers see different things and situations. However, I believe it is not just a question of *flogging vs. flow*, but of specific attitudes to motorcycle riding.

Berger favours a proprioceptive approach in his accounts (Sherrington, 1906), which can be simply described here as a practice of sensory recognition produced through the combination of the effects of muscle tension and the relative position of the motorcyclist’s limbs and the characteristics of the road he is riding on. Berger (2018, translated by me) writes:

«being on two wheels and not four, you are much more in contact with the ground. Not necessarily closer. Many cars are lower than motorcycles. When I say “in contact”, I mean that the relationship of intimacy is greater».

Proprioception – also called “sixth sense” – in this case coincides with «a total-body experience, and requires all our extremities and mental faculties to work seamlessly with the machine» (Cole, 2017, see also Owton, 2022). This means that between the personal space represented by the motorcyclist’s body, and the extra-personal space, which is the area all around him and which he can feel and see, there is a third space, the “reaching space”, which comprises the area in which the motorcyclist can reach an object by moving his body in accordance with the motorcycle. This space is the «peripersonal space» (*ibid.*). This indicates that the construction of our physical self is extremely mouldable and can expand to incorporate a mechanical device:

«rider and two-wheeled vehicle form a single unit, whose inner disposition, whose capacity for self-adjustment, relates to the principle of inertia in physics [...] the driver relies on the goal of staying on the road, and this implies a special physical bond with the road [...] driving becomes a *pas de deux*. Driver and road are dance partners» (Berger, 2018, translated by me).

Berger’s reading is undoubtedly a pleasure, but – particularly in the essay dedicated to Spinoza in which the writer draws a parallel between riding a motorcycle and telescopic vision –, he does not withdraw us from the motorcycle mantra «go where you look» and the consequences of the tunnel effect, even if declined in a not entirely fatal sense: «on a motorcycle, if you want to go on living, you don’t think of anything else but what is there» (*ibid.*, translated by me). Berger writes:

«when you stop looking through a telescope, even if you are looking at a coastline or a fixed star, when you stop looking through the lens you have the impression that your vision slows down. In the tunnel of speed there is also a kind of silence, and when you get off the bike or take your eye off the eyepiece, the repetitive, slow sounds of everyday life reappear, and that silence fades away» (*ibid.*, translated by me).

We would therefore be led to believe that Berger’s peripersonal space is the result of the integration of tactile and visual information from the body with the space immediately surrounding it, which – in the scientific terms of the psychophysics of vision – is predominantly the product of the rider’s central vision. Spinoza’s metaphor of the telescope is, in this regard, quite explicit and convincing. It is, therefore, a space that coincides with a relatively restricted area that is a function of the immediate evaluation of situations and the decision-making process concerning motorcycle riding.

The difference between Berger and Pirsig lies in the separation between «the repetitive, slow sounds of everyday life», which in Berger reappear once he gets off the motorcycle, whereas for Pirsig are a constitutive part of riding. This is a not insignificant difference. In Pirsig, the peripheral vision is – in apparent contradiction to the psychophysics of vision – full of information about the everyday life that the

author goes through on his motorcycle. The divide of peripersonal space is particularly evident around the idea about the road that each of the two authors has in mind. For Berger (2018, translated by me):

«when riding a motorcycle, the focal distance of the rider's gaze continually adapts so as to observe as much as possible [...] And so he inevitably notices how a road controls, allows, dominates, presents in its own way the multiplicity of given variants. The way is determined partly by the terrain, partly by the traffic that the road supports, but also by something else. Something that [...] is felt as the personality of the road. And the moment you perceive it, the road becomes a companion [...] The contours on a map, rivers, roads, mountain ranges begin to create a metaphor with the body of the motorcyclist and the motorcycle. In a strange way you become the journey you have made, until the next one. You eat it and shit it; it goes through you».

According to Pirsig (1984, pp. 4-5):

«secondary roads are preferred [...] Roads with little traffic are more enjoyable, as well as safer. Roads free of drive-ins and billboards are better [...] these roads are truly different from the main ones. The whole pace of life and personality of the people who live along them are different [...] I've wondered why it took us so long to catch on. We saw it and yet we didn't see it. Or rather we were trained not to see it».

For Berger, reports from motorcycling tend towards forms of kinaesthetic coordination between the rider and the road, in which a kind of trance-like state prevails. Berger's body is similar to that of a dancer who experiences the functional qualities of his movement in a proprioceptive manner (Montero, 2006), as if the distinction between bodily sensation and what is perceived dissolves: «after a few hours of driving through the countryside, you have the impression that you have left behind you not only the towns and villages you have passed through. You have left behind certain familiar constraints. You feel less earthbound than when you set out on your journey» (Berger, 2018, translated by me). Pirsig's impressions, on the other hand, are more akin to motorcycling drifts, forms of estrangement (*detournement*) in which the author describes the psychogeographical effects induced by the environments he travels through and the way he travels through them. Following Debord (1956), it is «a playful-constructive attitude, which opposes it to the classical notions of travel [...] One or more people renounce, for a more or less long period of time, the reasons for moving and acting that are generally their habituals [...] in order to let themselves go to the solicitations of the terrain and of the encounters that correspond to it». Making this attitude his own, Pirsig's gaze wanders between the observation of the rhythms of the street and the critique of American society: the succession of alternations, repetitions, differences, leads the author of ZAAM to “let himself go”, to use his body like a metronome that «[in order] to grasp a rhythm it is necessary to have been grasped by it; one must let oneself go, give oneself over, abandon oneself to its duration», (Lefebvre, 2004, p. 27). Of course, the secondary roads – such as the winding mountain passes – are a motorcyclist's delight, but Pirsig, unlike Berger's almost ballistic precision, does not dwell much on this point: «the roads winding through the hills are long, but on a motorcycle they are much nicer, you lean into bends without crashing into the walls of a cockpit».

Pirsig (1984, p. 6) is more interested in capturing « the whole pace of life and personality of the people who live along [these roads] are different. They're not going anywhere. They're not too busy to be courteous».

At first thought, this difference could be dismissed as a normal consequence between the gaze of a fast biker and that of a tourer: it is the gait – the correlative narrowing of the visual tunnel and the sharpening of selective attention – that makes the difference. In fact, it is not just two different styles of riding a motorcycle, but two different ways of perceiving the world in order to know oneself better. Here, Pirsig surprises us with his sensory lucidity and introspective ability to creatively process the details of everyday life as seen from the motorcycle saddle.

#### 4.

A few pages after explaining how he learnt many things from travelling by motorcycle, Pirsig (*ibid.*, p. 7) observes:

«unless you're fond of hollering you don't make great conversations on a running cycle. Instead you spend your time being aware of things and meditating on them. On sights and sounds, on the mood of the weather and things remembered, on the machine and the countryside you're in, thinking about things at great leisure and length without being hurried and without feeling you're losing time».

It is a particular state of mind that suggests to the author of ZAMM to make clear, for the benefit of the reader, the purpose of the book: «to use the time to talk in some depth about things that seem important» (*ibid.*). In Pirsig's intentions, the book's purpose is inspired by the old Chautauqua: «the traveling tent-show [...] that used to move across America, this America, the one that we are now in», because the goal is «to edify and entertain, improve the mind and bring culture and enlightenment to the ears and thoughts of the hearer» (*ibid.*).

Pirsig (*ibid.*) proposes a possible outcome between «the running cycle and spending your time being aware of things and meditating on them»: ZAMM will have the content and purpose of a Chautauqua in which the author has no intention of «to cut any new channels of consciousness but simply dig deeper into old ones that have become silted in with the debris of thoughts grown stale and platitudes too often repeated» (*ibid.*). From that point on, ZAMM turns into Phaedrus' tormented intellectual workout grappling with the metaphysics of quality. Fortunately – at least for those who, like me, have not been particularly interested in reading ZAMM as a philosophical treatise – Pirsig punctuates the book with notations on details observed during the journey. Now, if one pays attention to the fact that in 1967, the year of the journey described in ZAMM, Pirsig had spent the previous three years undergoing treatment in various psychiatric clinics (where he was first diagnosed with a severe nervous breakdown and then schizophrenia) and that the writer declared on several occasions that the process of writing the book had been a way of making peace with himself after years of psychiatric treatment, then it is of some interest to consider how some of the notations in the book testify to the evolution of a path of self-care in which being on a motorcycle was a therapeutic ingredient.

Understood in this way, the meaning of ZAMM is realised through a form of self-writing produced between «running cycle and spending your time being aware of things and meditating on them» (ibid.). ZAMM can therefore be regarded as a ὑπομνήματα (*hypomnemata*) or, as Foucault (1994, p. 209) argues: «an instrument for practising the Greek concept of ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ (*epimeleia heautou*: care of the self)».

It should be specified that the *hypomnemata* are not intimate diaries and do not constitute a ‘narrative of the self’. They do not seek a purifying or salvific purpose and their intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden: «on the contrary, the [purpose of] *hypomnemata* [is] to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self» (ibid., pp. 210-211, emphasis added).

Pirsig’s narrative/*hypomnemata* indicates that the journey recorded in the pages of the book is not a traditional travelogue, but a narrative that deviates and meanders off the beaten track, to combine various aspects of the road, self and thought. Thus, in the intervals ZAMM allows himself between long, elaborate meditations on the MOQ, Pirsig notes elements that are habitually relegated to the margins of motorcycle narratives – everyday people seen along the road, disparate minutiae scattered across the vernacular American landscape. The secondary roads travelled by Pirsig, are not so much the streets that run more or less parallel to the main arteries, but represent above all the will to go against the flow, in the opposite direction to the main current (the analogue of the *contre-allée*, described by Malabou, Derrida, 2004).

In the following concluding part of this essay, I would like to discuss some aspects of this type of movement – which is at the same time a counter-movement: going against the traditional paths of motorcycle literature – and can be traced back to perception, travel and identity.

## 5.

Let us go back – once again – to the opening pages of ZAMM. Here we can find an interesting annotation by Pirsig (1984, pp. 8-9) regarding an exchange of perceptions with Sylvia Sutherland:

«After a while Sylvia sits down on the wooden picnic bench and straightens out her legs, lifting one at a time slowly without looking up. Long silences mean gloom for her, and I comment on it. She looks up and then looks down again. “It was all those people in the cars coming the other way,” she says. “The first one looked so sad. And then the next one looked exactly the same way, and then the next one and the next one, they were all the same.”

“They were just commuting to work.”

She perceives well but there was nothing unnatural about it. “Well, you know, work,” I repeat. “Monday morning. Half asleep. Who goes to work Monday morning with a grin?”» (pp. 8-9)

“It’s just that they looked so lost,” she says. “Like they were all dead. Like a funeral procession.” Then she puts both feet down and leaves them there.

I see what she is saying, but logically it doesn’t go anywhere. You work to live and that’s what they are doing. “I was watching swamps,” I say».

Considered from a comparative perspective, it is really interesting to note how – more than three hundred pages later, now nearing the end of the journey – Pirsig (*ibid*, p. 344) notes this perception:

«I watch the cars go by for a while on the highway. Something lonely about them. Not lonely...worse. Nothing. Like the attendant's expression when he filled the tank. Nothing. A nothing curb, by some nothing gravel, at a nothing intersection, going nowhere.

Something about the car drivers too. They look just like the gasoline attendant, staring straight ahead in some private trance of their own. I haven't seen that since -- since Sylvia noticed it the first day. They all look like they're in a funeral procession.

Once in a while one gives a quick glance and then looks away expressionlessly, as if minding his own business, as if embarrassed that we might have noticed he was looking at us. I see it now because we've been away from it for a long time. The driving is different too. The cars seem to be moving at a steady maximum speed for in-town driving, as though they want to get somewhere, as though what's here right now is just something to get through. The drivers seem to be thinking about where they want to be rather than where they are.

I know what it is! We've arrived at the West Coast! We're all strangers again! Folks, I just forgo the biggest gumption trap of all. The funeral procession! The one everybody's in, this hyped-up, fuck-you, supermodern, ego style of life that thinks it owns this country».

This comparison shows how ZAMM's writing is imbued with Pirsig's desire to go against the flow: in the opposite direction to the idea of a traditional journey. In this respect, ZAMM promotes an alternative way of perceiving reality, which is made possible, from the very beginning, through motorcycle travel. By privileging the faculty of seeing, ZAMM promotes new ways of interacting with the world around us. Along its pages, the emphasis gradually shifts from the conventional pleasures of motorcycling to active and conscious perception.

Pirsig progressively moves away from contemplation, and from the sublimities that decades and thousands of motorcyclists have (often pedantically) interpreted over and over again. ZAMM's reading reveals that mobility may coincide not with going to new and spectacular or picturesque places, but in seeing the ordinary landscape in a new fashion.

Even riding a modest Honda Super Hawk, Pirsig seems to realise he is moving too fast to dwell on the pleasures of traditional landscape features. In the (rare) passages of ZAMM that are free of the burden of Phaedrus and given over to travel, Pirsig gradually abandons the traditional way of seeing and experiencing the world and establishes an intimacy with a new kind of landscape. In practice, Pirsig perceives and describes a landscape that has more than an analogy with the abstract landscape, proposed almost twenty years before the writing of ZAMM, by geographer John Brinckerhoff Jackson (1957-1958) in "The Abstract World of the Hot-Rodder". In his essay, Jackson describes the hot-rodder as a representative of American culture attracted to the open road. For the hot-rodder, the landscape of reference is not the picturesque countryside, but the streetscape of the United States, from garages to highways. Jackson describes the hot-rodder as an individual who seeks a new engagement with the landscape, constructed not through the slowness of pedestrian contemplation, but through the speed that is the variable from which the hot-rodder's

particular relationship with the landscape originates. It is a report that rearticulates the idea of travel by combining the pleasure of mobility with the everyday and (seemingly) insignificant scenes of mid-century America.

In the passages devoted to the abstract landscape, Pirsig's writing approaches the insights of artists who have encouraged us to consider the changing concepts of space, matter and movement with greater attention and sensitivity. Like the one recounted by artist Tony Smith (Wagstaff, 1966) who, one night in 1951, drove a car with three Cooper Union students and travelled a stretch of the New Jersey Turnpike, not yet open to traffic. For Smith, the journey – made without streetlights, road signs or guardrails – challenged conventional categories of artistic practice and raised questions about the division between art and everyday events, and had revelatory consequences for the artist:

«the road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art» (*ibid.*)

For Smith, this was a reality that could not be described but was something to be experienced: «the experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognised» (*ibid.*). Similarly to Smith, in ZAMM, Pirsig (1984, p. 53) abandons the traditional perspective of the motorcycle tourer to become an active participant moving rapidly towards a constantly shifting, changing and abstract horizon:

«a change has taken place and I don't know quite what it is. The streets of this town are broad, much broader than they need be, and there is a pallor of dust in the air. Empty lots here and there between the buildings have weeds growing in them. The sheet metal equipment sheds and water tower are like those of previous towns but more spread out. Everything is more run-down and mechanical- looking, and sort of randomly located. Gradually I see what it is. Nobody is concerned anymore about tidily conserving space. The land isn't valuable anymore. We are in a Western town».

Pirsig's abstract landscape is not generated through the disappearance of trees, grasslands, blackbirds or the retreat of nature in general. It is the product of the progressive reduction of the real to a surface existing in space and endowed with few notable qualities. It coincides, rather, with «the flatness of a mirror, of an image, of pure spectacle under an absolutely cold gaze» (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 287). It is a landscape produced in terms of the perception of a body in motion, endowed with both a common sense – that is, the ability to interpret the codes of everything on the roadside – and a single organ, the eye, which governs both movement and interpretation. Thus produced, the landscape is transformed into a surface.

Henri Lefebvre (*ibid.*, p. 313), in the same year as the publication of ZAMM, offers us an effective interpretative key to Pirsig's notations: «this abstract space eventually becomes the simulacrum of a full space (of that space which was formerly full in nature and in history). Travelling [...] becomes an actually experienced, gestural simulation of the formerly [...] movement amongst concrete existences». Following

Lefebvre (*ibid.*, p. 306), the key point is that abstract space cannot be conceived in the abstract. It has a content, but this content is such that it can only be grasped through specific practices. One of these is certainly riding a motorcycle. The great value of ZAMM is that it is punctuated with notations that refer to such practices. In some cases, these are practices that recall the notion of drift, present, with different implications (but with comparable effects), in both Guy Debord's (1956) and Jacques Derrida's (1999) thought:

«we're living in topsy-turvy times, and I think that what causes the topsy-turvy feeling is inadequacy of old forms of thought to deal with new experiences. I've heard it said that the only real learning results from hang-ups, where instead of expanding the branches of what you already know, you have to stop and drift laterally for a while until you come across something that allows you to expand the roots of what you already know» (Malabou, Derrida, 1999, p. 172).

Elsewhere, it is a matter of practices, on which we have already dwelt earlier in this essay, that affirm the primacy of vision over conceptualisation:

«reality is always the moment of vision before the intellectualization takes place. There is no other reality» (Pirsig, 1984, p. 253).

Almost in closing, Pirsig (*ibid.*, pp. 403-404) describes a landscape on the basis of what he perceives. It is a space that has nothing simple about it: it is not transparent and cannot be immediately reduced to a logic or a form of rationality:

«the city closes in on him now, and in his strange perspective it becomes the antithesis of what he believes. The citadel not of Quality, the citadel of form and substance. Substance in the form of steel sheets and girders, substance in the form of concrete piers and roads, in the form of brick, of asphalt, of auto parts, old radios, and rails, dead carcasses of animals that once grazed the prairies. Form and substance without Quality. That is the soul of this place. Blind, huge, sinister and inhuman: seen by the light of fire flaring upward in the night from the blast furnaces in the south, through heavy coal smoke deeper and denser into the neon of BEER and PIZZA and LAUNDROMAT signs and unknown and meaningless signs along meaningless straight streets going off into other straight streets forever [...] He can never see anything through the concrete and brick and neon but he knows that buried within it are grotesque, twisted souls forever trying the manners that will convince themselves they possess Quality, learning strange poses of style and glamour vended by dream magazines and other mass media, and paid for by the vendors of substance [...] God, there is nothing here but dead neon and cement and brick».

The city landscape traversed by Pirsig is made up of form and substance, but at the same time masks what it contains. On the one hand, it contains representations derived from an established order: localised orders and hierarchically arranged places, roles and values linked to particular places. On the other hand, it contains specific imaginary elements: images of fantasy, representations that seem to arise from "elsewhere". The landscape traversed by Pirsig effectively alternates between an abstract and repressive space in which the inhabitants no longer relate to their nature, but only to the things linked to signs, and a space of

representation which - through Pirsig's references to people's souls - re-proposes Marx's famous aphorism quoted by Debord (1956) in la "Théorie de la derive": «men can see nothing around them that is not their own face: everything speaks to them about themselves. Even their landscape has a soul».

Where do these visions of Pirsig's take us?

In spite of (or, rather, because of) their negativity, they lead us to a new way of considering space. Pirsig shows us how being on a motorcycle offers us alternative viewpoints and, in the most favourable cases, may coincide with an "act of seeing" in which speed fixes – as in a still image – space and time in an experiential landscape (Hutch, 2007). In these suspensions, the value of ZAMM's writing as *hypomnemata* lies not only in the author's dwelling on abstract space and its homogeneity (as effectively described by Brickerhoff Jackson, see above), but in his ability to transcend it through writing, accentuating the differences and restoring a depth to the functions, things and moments of everyday life. In a word: everything that abstract space flattens. In this respect, certain passages in ZAMM represent both a personal exercise of self-care (ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ, as we noted earlier, see *supra*), and an art of "disparate vision", or more precisely, a way of combining the objectivity of the "already seen" with the subjectivity of the experiences that are produced and with the particularity of the circumstances that determine them.

Approached in this way, reading ZAMM as a *hypomnemata* constitutes a material memory of things seen, perceived and thought while riding a motorcycle, offering them as an accumulated treasure for re-reading and subsequent meditation. Pirsig's writing offers (parsimoniously) the motorcyclist the stimuli to elaborate richer visual practices and reflections on the topics and means of realising that the motorbike seat represents a privileged vantage point for understanding how what flows around him is ordered by something from elsewhere and how this something is nourished through the manipulation of his body and his living times and spaces.

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