

On Doing Being a Stranger: The Practical Constitution of Civil Inattention

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1. INTRODUCTION

When two pedestrians, not acquainted with each other, meet on a sidewalk, they display a behavioral pattern, which Erving Goffman in his “Behavior in public places” (1963: 84) has described as follows: After a quick but open glance at a proper distance, the participants’ looks are lowered for each other, and raised again only at the moment of passing. The gazes in close proximity gain their typical quality from a double avoidance: They should neither signal a “recognition”, promising an openness for contact, nor should they be full of distrust and hatred. Goffman called this visual pattern “*civil inattention*,” a display of disinterestedness without disregard; one could also say: a competence to refuse relations without creating non-persons.

“Civil inattention” is one of the catchy wordings of Goffman’s which are highly quoted, but which also tend to be underestimated in their theoretical relevance. In this article I will treat Goffman’s subtle observation of a small interactive phenomenon as a contribution to the sociology of the stranger. Strangeness is a social relation which can be distinguished from both the dense social bonds between couples, families, friends and enemies, and from the function specific formal and informal links in organisations and networks. Classical sociology since Simmel (1908), Park (1928) and Schütz (1944) has treated the stranger as a *marginal figure* in a collective, which gives rise to distrust and disorder (see also Bauman, 1991), but also to cultural innovation. Goffman’s contribution is different from that in two respects: First, he adds a certain type of strangeness, which differs from the problematic relations in closed communities, classical sociology has focused: namely strangeness as *normalized non-relation*, vitally needed in urbanized mass societies for the endless occurrence of encounters between people in public. The interactional pattern of civil inattention is related to a chronic problem of co-presence in public settings: the problem of staying unknown to each other. Staying unknown is an inconspicuous and casual aspect of strangeness, not yet condensed to the social type, “the stranger.”

Secondly, I read Goffman's little observation as suggesting a question rarely asked by the sociology of the stranger: What is the "*practice* of strangeness"? Goffman seems to introduce civil inattention as a behavioral pattern, simply required by norms of courtesy. But he could also be read as depicting not only a polite stance needed for encounters "between strangers", but a practice needed *to keep up strangeness*. The main question of this article is: How is civil inattention *accomplished* in practice? How are social non-relations, which are a typical, if not the dominant form of encounter in urbanized mass societies, performed micro-socially? How are they stabilized? What is the social orderliness of "asocial" relations?

These questions shall not be treated in an abstract way, or by using a number of empirical illustrations, but with full focus on one specific empirical case. Empirically, this article is a sociology of elevator riding.¹ Elevator riding?! One might ask what the "events" in an elevator have to offer to sociology? They are characterized not only by an overwhelming mundanity but also by a specific boredom: Nothing interesting seems to happen in an elevator, at least nothing "social." On the other hand, there are two well known studies in sociology which pointed to an immense work invested into such "eventlessness". One of them is Harvey Sacks' famous lecture "On doing being ordinary" which asked how dramatic events are normalised in story telling: "no matter what happens, pretty much everybody is engaged in finding only how it is that what is going on is usual, with every effort possible. And it is really remarkable to see people's efforts to achieve the 'nothing happened' sense of really catastrophic events." (1984: 419). While Sacks was asking for the retrospective normalisation of events in narratives for people absent from these events, Goffman's study on "normal appearances" (1971: 314) investigated the silent displays of ordinariness of people immediately present to each other. In public settings people routinely create an environment in which they actively care for the absence of "alarm signals" by making themselves inconspicuous, even uninteresting. In opposition to Meads concept of "significant others" Goffman showed how we have to present ourselves in order to go *unnoticed* by others. Our public self as "normal people" is constituted by our running attempts to be a *nobody* in the eyes of others: To be disregarded means to be trustworthy.

So we have some good reasons to find noneventfull social situations sociologically interesting. If as participants we have the impression that "nothing happens" in elevators, we as sociologists may ask how the practice of elevator riding systematically creates this impression. What has to be *done* for nothing to happen? How do elevator riders accomplish "doing nothing"? How do they accomplish "doing nothing" to each other? And how do they manage to have "nothing to do" with each other?

But elevators do even more than offering a general challenge to investigate the social constitution of an asocial space, they offer a specific research opportunity for the investigation of civil inattention. Elevators put casual encounters between

strangers into slow motion. Elevators delay the release from mutual observation and extend the phenomenon of civil inattention, thus making it observable in a state of “crisis”. Thus elevators promise to decompose our phenomenon into its constitutional parts and to unfold the interaction structural problems culminating in the behavioral pattern of civil inattention. In this sense this article is less a sociology *of* elevators than a sociology *with* elevators. I used this artifact as a sociological research instrument or “social laboratory” (Park), which—like the telephone or the internet—allows for specific interactional analyses, because it varies basic parameters constituting a social situation: presence and reciprocal perception. My research strategy consisted of, first, using an artifact which turns one second into 20 seconds, and, secondly, turning these 20 seconds into 20 pages (demanding now approximately two hours of your time, dear reader), striving for a “hyper-realist” manipulation of the temporal structure of real time events.

On the other hand a disclaimer has to be made with respect to the detail achieved: I will *not* cover the huge empirical variety of “behavior in elevators” with its multiple cultural, architectural and technical constraints. This variety would be descriptively inexhaustible. One could investigate behavior in elevators to differentiate among large cultural units, differences of mentality between Europe, Asia, and the U.S. (Watson, 1970), or between countries (Caesar, 2000) and smaller locales.² One could also differentiate individual members of social collectives like men and women, young and old. Finally, one could investigate behavior in elevators ethnographically, i.e. analyse it as an exemplary situation of a specific type of *locality*: part of the social life of an office building, an apartment house, a hotel, a clinic and so on, where certain people meet in certain types of elevators. With respect to this empirical variety, I will have to make a compromise: I will refer to a mere standard case, matching our expectation that looking for “the elevator” mostly means finding a faceless “*non-lieu*” in the sense of Marc Augé (1992):³ an optically closed cage for 6 to 10 inmates, with automatic doors and aluminum walls, going through a vertical tunnel in a public building, i.e. a place where *strangers* come together.⁴

So my analytic interest is not ethnographic. I will look for structural problems of interactions which culminate in elevators, but which are neither limited to elevators nor present in all of them. Nevertheless there is an empirical specificity of our “laboratory” which has to be taken into account: The materiality of elevators and the limits it sets to human actors is profoundly different from those of a sidewalk people move on. So if, on the one hand, I want to exploit the heuristics of classical ethnomethodology that social facts are “accomplished” by human actors (Garfinkel, 1967); on the other hand we have to face its clear limits in a case, where the “doings” are not human alone, but involve other participants: In an elevator the energy of human subjects seems to be focused on “*patience*” (the inhibition of action), while human agency seems to pass over to technical artifacts and civilized bodies. We will have to look at, when and how exactly this material

ecology of artifacts and bodies is inserted into the nooks and crannies of the interaction order.⁵

In methodological respect the sociological use of elevators forces us into an experiment on ourselves which blurs the distinction between subject and object of research in two ways. First, elevator riders are prototypical “participant observers” themselves: They focus on the local happenings, in which they unavoidably take part, at the same time constantly trying to dissociate themselves from this involvement. The sociological observer has to adapt to a social setting which itself is constituted by relations of mutual observation. Secondly, observation under the constraints of a physical and social limitation of the optical sense necessarily turns into “self observation,” i.e. something which is hardly done with one’s eyes: Many of the proxemic phenomena, corporeal sensations, and interactional patterns, which grow in the “sociotope” of the elevator, could also be noted by a blind observer.⁶

Our subject suggests a “vertical” organization of the text. Following the chronology of the practice we will start by deciding to take the elevator (3.), step in (4.), look for a place (5.), arrest our gazes (6.), exchange some words (7.), step out (8.), and then, hopefully, enjoy an analytic panorama view on the accomplishment of civil inattention (9.). We will see that this small social practice involves more than Goffman’s inconspicuous appearances or Sacks’ normalcy of events: The doing of nothing requires the vanishing of actors. But before we step into the elevator and go on, we go back in time for a moment to sketch the historical genealogy of our research instrument: How did the elevator gain the technical form which we now take for granted? And how was it implemented in urban landscapes, mentalities, and interaction patterns, which were not yet prepared for elevators?

2. A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ELEVATOR

Histories of the elevator (e.g. Simmen and Drepper, 1984) attribute the birth of this technology to a French invention: *la chaise volante*, first realized in 1680 in Paris. The “flying chair” was a construction fixed between walls which, assisted by counterweights, allowed distinguished persons to change floors without the efforts of walking. This lifting machine was quite a common luxury object in aristocratic houses of the 18th century.

The 19th century reinvented the elevator as an effective means of transportation, through the addition of the cage in the mining-industry and the goods lift in English factories (since 1830). Three crucial innovations turned these industrially used lifts into public elevators for everyone: the automatic emergency brake (1853, from the U.S.), the electric drive (1880), and the rope pulley transmission (1877, both coming from Germany).

The implementation of the new technology had to face different architectural and cultural conditions in Europe and the United States. In the old world the

elevator had to be fitted into buildings which had imposing staircases, and which were constructed under the rule that churches and city halls should be the highest buildings in town. In the States, however, the elevator was the decisive innovation in the design of skyscrapers (“elevator buildings”) which dramatically changed cityscapes and allowed for a profitable exploitation of limited urban spaces. In Europe elevators were publicized for the *comfort* they offered to exhausted city-dwellers, in the States they were praised for the *speed* of crossing buildings made for money making. Employees should spend their time working, not walking (Hartwig, 1994: 47).

Another cultural context seems to be responsible for the preferred transmission system: For a long time Europeans stuck to the older hydraulic drives, although they had a considerable risk of “falling up”, i.e. of colliding with the ceiling. (A quite common accident at that time.) But Europeans were more afraid of falling down: The “tearing rope” got its meaning from numerous accidents in underground mining (Simmen and Drepper, 1984: 102). In the States, however, where surface mining was the rule, the rope served primarily as lasso or as instrument of executions. And the tearing rope gave freedom, either to an animal or to a criminal, who by verdict of an higher will was discharged from being guilty. Therefore, Simmen and Drepper suggest, the rope pulley transmission was invented in Europe, but was first disseminated in the States.

Another reason of distrust originated in what New Yorkers of the 1890s called “elevator sickness.” Similar to the difficulties with which the body adapted to the railway (Schivelbusch, 1977), people assumed that a speed above 3meters/second carries considerable health risks. Certain parts of the body would be less accelerated than others, and pressing one’s head and shoulders against the walls of the cage was recommended to prevent against sickness and debility (Simmen/Drepper, 1984: 116).

There were at least three measures helping the elevator to be culturally accepted. The first was its staging as a public event, a sensation. The automatic emergency brake, independent from human speed of reaction, was publicly demonstrated in dramatic self-experiments by its inventor E.G.Otis. Afterwards lay people were invited to join the scientific hero.

Secondly, cage designers borrowed many constructive and aesthetic features from well known means of transportation: coaches, train compartments, and ship cabins. Lift cages were well furnished rooms with glass windows, carpets, sofa, mirrors, wooden paneling, and chandelier. Their comfort invited sociability: Sofa or bench are good for taking place, but better for offering place. Glass windows are good for looking at staircases, but better for the opportunity of being seen by others.⁷

A third important means for the cultural implementation of elevators was the translating figure of the liftboy. He was told the destination, he closed the doors, steered for a floor by handwheel, “landed” the cage on the exact altitude, and gave instructions for use: “Please watch your steps.”

All of these functions were—one after the other—“transcribed” into (Latour, 1988: 306) an automaton: steering by electric buttons and steering software, precise landing by fine adjustment motors, the supervision of entrance by selenium cells and automatic doors, the emergency management by telephone. Finally, operating instructions were installed, which removed the threatening autonomy of the driverless elevator, and standardized its use. But they couldn’t replace the *social* safety functions of the liftboy: In the driverless elevator criminality risks emerged, which form the horizon of visual control patterns (which will engage our attention later in this article).

The modern shape of the elevator is the result of diverse measures of technical safety: Automatic doors and the enclosure of the elevator in a shaft were established to prevent a type of accident which became the most frequent after the technical timidity of passengers was replaced by technical curiosity: the squashing of hands, feet etc. following from forward looks into the shaft, cage touching from the staircase, or sporty jumping in and out. For reasons of safety elevator technology and elevator rider were separated from each other like humans and wild animals in the zoo.⁸

The further development of the artifact added a haptic separation to the optical one. The optical closure of the cage made it impossible to perceive one’s locomotion by eye; electronic acceleration programs made it difficult to perceive one’s locomotion by one’s sense of equilibrium (which has certain advantages for the stomach). Elevator riding has become so soft that vertical movement has been turned into an abstract experience. The passenger is disoriented in time and space.⁹ Like the railway, the elevator opened up new spaces and at the same time eliminated the old inter-spaces which could still be experienced on the staircase. On the one hand, it created an abstract indoor-mobility from the basement to the pinnacle of a building (Sennett, 1994); on the other, it allowed a new experience of the city as a whole: by looking from a central perspective on its individual “skyline.”

We can draw two conclusions of our short history of the elevator: First, the genealogy of this artifact has reconfigured the elevator rider. The customer of a service and the passenger of a chauffeur is replaced by the *user* of an automaton who competes with other users for the optimal (that is exclusive) use of the machine. The user also replaces the sociable traveller looking at imposing staircases, and (s)he finally displaces the risky test pilot, playing with the artifact. The “user” is the human counterpart of the foolproof elevator.

Secondly, the history of the elevator has established an everyday *practice* of “elevating.” On the one hand, it consists of a technical conditioning of activities through the artifact: multiple adaptations of behavior, perception and body to the sociotechnical “scripts” (Akrich, 1992: 208) in its material structure. On the other hand, the practice of elevating consists of a more or less disciplined or inventive handling of the artifact by users, who either constitute the artifact *as elevator* (by the way of conventionalized usage) or “abuse” it, e.g. as garbage can, toy, canvas

for graffiti, dressing room, scene of a crime, sports equipment (Kayes, 1979) or research instrument.¹⁰

3. TAKING THE ELEVATOR: RATIONAL CHOICE AS FOLK THEORY

The history of the elevator has constituted an individualized subject which has to be taken into account somehow, even in an approach focussing on the interaction order. One can encounter this strong subject, when *asking* users about the activities needed to use an elevator. Participants narratives focus around their *decisions* to take a lift (or to prefer the stairs). “*Rational choice*” is the dominant folk theory of elevator riding.¹¹

Listening to the “good reasons” given by participants for taking an elevator, we end up with a list of factors calculated in a decision between lift and stairs: the length of the distance, one’s physical constitution, the question of up or down, the reliability of the elevator and the fellow-passengers, the travel comfort, which depends on the number of fellows, and above all: the criterion of time investment. Saving time with an elevator seems difficult, because this vehicle has no fixed times of arrival and stops. But both are important for members’ calculation of optimal usage: The “winner” catches the lift at the last moment and rides without interruption, the “loser” misses the lift for a second and has to wait for an indetermined time. Waiting for a lift means calculating indicators of arrival: optical or acoustical signs in the staircase, or—if missing or out of order—the time in the daily rhythms of a building (e.g. rush hours), the number of people already waiting, or just one’s own time of waiting.

It’s not accidental that we find a decision theory of elevating highly plausible. We have seen that the history of the artifact configured an egocentric user. Like other automatic means of transportation the elevator needs a determined subject: no chat on the staircase, no lingering or hesitation, and no easy turning back. Who takes the elevator, should know his or her destination before taking it. Thus it is not astonishing that means of transportation can be correlated quite easily with ends of actors. These artifacts seem to have partly *incorporated* a specific action theory: They are calculable aids offering options to bold maximizers of benefit with clear preferences and tight time budgets. Such artifacts are anthropologically flattering and comply with a “heroic” theory of action.

Therefore the folk theory of elevator riding is not simply “wrong”. On the other hand, if we look at the actual practices of elevating we discover two limits of participants’ decision theory. First, if we don’t rely on participants’ reconstructions of their decisions, but make in situ observations of decision making, we discover that practiced rationality often involves a collective, not an individual calculation: Members stop waiting for the elevator when others do, or they stay wondering whether this is reasonable. Peoples’ decision about the rationality of waiting time is dependent on what others *present* as “rational” to them. Furthermore,

there are moments within the decision making process which seem considerably far from a normative ideal of “rational behavior”, esp. when users start to enchant the artifact into an autonomous actor. This happens quite frequently, e.g., when users calculate the rationality of waiting by measuring their own waiting time. There are different folkloristic assumptions, uttered in front of a closed door without knowing its opening time. One is: “I have been waiting for so long, that now I will also wait until it comes.” This maxim is still quite compatible with “rational choice”: The user tries to avoid breaking off his or her investment of time. There should have been no waste of waiting. But in another maxim there is already an element of dubious interaction: “If it hasn’t arrived until now, it will last even longer.” Such an assumption attributes an individual peculiarity to the elevator, often leading to a renunciation of it. Even more personalizing is the maxim: “If I leave now, it will certainly come.” It is attributing a kind of malicious joy or an obstinate refusal to the elevator and it leads users either to a hesitating turn to the staircase or to a suspicious repetition of button pushing, vacillating between whether to attribute the delay to themselves (“human failure”) or to the elevator (“technical failure”). The hesitation and quarelling implies a moment of magic: a communication with things, animated to non-human actors, who refuse to be simply “used” in a means-end calculation.¹²

From these observations we can derive a first lesson about the sociological character of elevators. Individual users seem to be chronically disappointed in trying to rationally choose the elevator, because their egocentric calculation of use is always crossed (and “falsified”) by the unpredictable moves of others: Their mobility plans are permanently inscribed into the behavior of the artifact. Without driver and time table the elevator stimulates a running competition between actors lacking sovereignty. An elevator is not an “automobile”, neither in the sense of a vehicle driven by an autonomous subject, nor in the sense of an automaton simply driving itself. Rather it is the paradigm of a “heteromobile,” mixing up the diverging mobility decisions of different people with the electronic program of a mobility machine.

A second, more obvious, limitation of a decision theory is its scope in describing practices of elevator riding. If users relied exclusively on a sociology where sociality takes place in their heads, they would be left in the dark as to what to do with their bodies. On the one hand, it is obvious that artifacts developed for the specific purpose of overcoming bodily limits of mobility invite such a sociology. On the other hand, it doesn’t help make sense of the consequence of most means of transportation for our bodies: that enhanced mobility from the perspective of the automobile body means enhanced *immobility*. This becomes immediately clear when we start our journey. Once the decision has been made, our theories of choice let us down. They remain standing safe before the door whereas we inside are assailed by the impression that the closing door marks a radical reversal of the distribution of activity and passivity. Pushing the button we “delegate” (Latour, 1992) a part of our agency to an automaton which not only releases us from

climbing the stairs but also deprives us of many aspects of “autonomous action”. Focussing decisions, the elevator appears as an asocial means to an end; looking at its actual workings it subverts our decision-theoretical inclinations. If we step into an elevator, sociologically and practically, we better step out of this approach.

4. STEPPING IN: ENTERING A HETEROMOBILE

But how, exactly, shall we step into an elevator? This practical problem has two aspects: First, it is a question of entering a vehicle with automatic doors, which requires a precise timing, an adjustment of the motoricity of the body to the motoricity of the automaton. In the terms of Marcel Mauss (1950), a certain technique of the body is required, but it is one in need of *amalgamation* with what he called instrumental technique. Secondly, the problem of coming in is a question of the “turns” (Goffman, 1971: 59) of people getting on.¹³ This problem is solved by means of three main traffic rules: At first, those getting out have priority over getting in. This has consequences: Waiting for an elevator placed people in a formation, aligning itself when a bell (for instance) announces the arrival of the cage. A stream of people getting out segments this formation and can alter the strategic positions people took for their entrance. Secondly, there is a ban on passing: “one after the other,” which is often realized in a kind of “zipper-procedure” (one left, one right). When, finally, scarcity of space occurs, a third rule is mobilized: the priority of the “longer waiting.” With the time of waiting people seem to acquire a title for entrance which is mostly indicated nonverbally, simply by one’s placement close to the door. In this sense we find a rudimentary queue in front of elevators.

If there is no risk of losing one’s title, the priority of entrance is often transferred to others, preferably people who are discriminated as users by the very functioning of the artifact: children and small people (by the installation of the buttons), people with full hands (by the demand to press buttons), seniors (by the speed of automatic doors), and parents with strollers (by the space calculated for one passenger). Thus social niceties can be regarded as interactive compensations of discriminating elements of the ideal user inscribed into the artifact.¹⁴

On the other hand, priority conflicts can also occur, especially if someone enters as a “hitchhiker”: *A is already “in,” B hurries to get in too, and interrupts the door closer for C, who again delays the departure for D. A—in answer to this chain of niceties: “Now it’s enough.”*

People in an elevator experience a quick reversal of roles: In a second they are turned from outsiders to inmates with equal rights. But in the moment of entering their claims are somehow smaller than those of the first ascender: They are only “assistant drivers.”

The basic rules of entrance and the occasional priority conflicts revolve around an important good: saving time. Therefore the primary *moral* topic of elevating is

how people deal with the time resources of others. An example: *A latecomer who is successful in opening the already closed door once more, steps into the cage as if expecting punishment: hasty and ducking her head between her shoulders. She knows to be guilty for stealing time.*

The topic of competing for time can also lead to stronger differentiations of the inmates: occasional typifications of elevator riders, separating e.g., short distance travelers into legitimate (“handicapped”) and illegitimate (“slowpoke”). (I shall come back to this later).

5. PLACEMENT: THE STANDING ORDER

The turns of entrance also determine the sequence in which people can choose their place: The first has free choice, but later passengers can only choose from the rest and will not try to ask for a change of place. So the patterns of distribution emerging depend on the selection of the first user, which are followed by others as moves in chess are limited by earlier moves. All the proxemic moves are done within the limits of a cage-like architecture which defines from the beginning where is “front” and “back,” how much space can be claimed, and which places are “out of question.”

A single user can choose his/her place on the basis of simple egocentric criteria (as it is expected in our folk theory): A place near to the door makes ways shorter, to lean against a wall offers comfort, places in the back give a view of the floor indicator. But in most cases the single user has to anticipate what the others will do, which alters the meaning of criteria: Places in the back allow for the best visual control of the entrance; walls offer backing, protect from some views, and mark at least one side of a territory; places at the door ensure the exit for short distance travellers,¹⁵ otherwise they are avoided, the same as places in the middle, since they are in the way of people going in and out, and of gazes directed towards the door. So an elevator fills up mostly from its back and the margins.

Remarkable is the timing: Places in this pedestrian precinct are mostly not vacated with the arrival of others, but reserved “prophylactically.” Hence the leading criterion of choosing places seems to be the distinction between permanent and unsafe positions. Choosing places is less determined by the obligation to leave space to others, than by protecting one’s own “personal space” (Goffman, 1971: 53): People are trying to avoid putting themselves in a position where they could be addressed or even touched by others.

This becomes more apparent if we look at the placement of further entering people: They neglect the criteria of egocentric choice in favor of a rule of “keeping (maximal) distance.”¹⁶ The consequence is that the most frequent position of first ascenders is at the back corners, the most probable of a following person is diagonally opposed (i.e. often in the area of entrance). It is very unlikely that s(he) joins the first ascender at his/her wall or that s(he) faces him/her directly “without necessity”: Elevator riders prefer a zigzag arrangement.

The rule of distance-keeping means for third and fourth ascenders a rule of equidistance: Uneven distances are avoided as possible “tie signs” (Goffman, 1971: 251). This leads to a typical geometry of bodies: Three passengers form a kind of triangle, four an approximate square etc. These basic proxemic patterns are modified by several factors: by the interior installations of the cage (“use-spaces” at the door and at the buttons are left free), by territorial marks of individual passengers (who claim more or less room by their posture), by presenting and acknowledging “togetherings” (Ryave and Schenkein, 1974: 269)—Goffman (1971: 40) speaks of “withs”: individuals composed of several persons—, and by different relations of postures allowing for equivalents of distance keeping: One can stand nearer to others, if one turns away torso or face; one can face others, if one strictly turns off one’s gaze.

When a place is taken and the elevator starts, people “collect themselves” by focussing on the “take off”: a “breath taking” event of now uncontrollable movement. As soon as the elevator moves a standstill of all human movement occurs: *rien ne va plus*. The body is parked—like a car on a ferry—and it is (as we will see) as if it is left for the period of travel.

In this motionless tableau the bodies are kept in an ambivalent tension between turning to or away from others: On the one hand, one doesn’t face others, on the other, one doesn’t turn one’s back on others.¹⁷ People make, so to speak, a “half-turn” towards others, facing and avoiding each other by their body alignments. They don’t have “relations,” but angles. The body is balanced between two opposite cultural meanings of its back: as “cold shoulder,” refusing one’s recognition of others, and as vulnerable “neck” which others are staring at and breathing down.

This rigid standing order relaxes at every stop of the vehicle, giving way to a specific mode of locomotion: “moving over”—a minimalist form of mobility denying itself. One moves so inconspicuously as if one remained standing, or one only makes a gesture of making space as if one had moved away. There are two variants of moving over: the making way for entering and leaving people and the moving apart of passengers when the elevator empties. Both variants require both a skill of maneuvering without touch and, again, a specific timing: Proxemic claims of others are anticipated. As soon as the elevator puts on the brakes, the moving over starts. If it would only happen after the entering, it would make apparent a “lack of space”. Put first, it maintains the fiction of “enough space for all present” which implies that people have nothing to do with each other because there is no need to re-act to others’ physical presence.

Moving apart passengers separate from each other.¹⁸ But they don’t return to the original (maximum) distance, and they don’t turn away immediately, but with a slight delay—as if they were in no hurry about it. Returning to maximal distance at once would not only “keep one’s distance” but dissociate from others. It seems that one cannot simply step back from others without treading on their toes.

Let’s draw an interim conclusion: The proxemic order of elevator riding is not so much about the space bodies need, but about the multiple spaces bodies need

to house persons. Placement practices bring these cultural units into an ambivalent relation: On the one hand, elevator riders avoid micro-ecological signs of human association; the standing order allows them individuality. On the other hand, through minimal facing, they take care for the contingency that they would have to actualize the virtual community, e.g., if in the rhythmic change of movements between humans and machine, the elevator misses its entry and gets stuck.

6. GLANCES: THE VISUAL ORDER

But the proxemics of bodies does not seem to be the biggest practical problem of elevator riding. Nothing needs so much space in elevators as looks. Just where shall one deposit them? At the floor, the ceiling, the tip of one's toes, fingernails or bag? In the elevator looks become an object, something that needs place instead of placing other objects. The more the eye is frustrated as sensory organ (i.e. in its capacity of experiencing) by the elevator's architecture, the more it is focussed on its communicative function (looking)—but mostly without a corresponding communication need. What for the seeing is an extreme lack of panorama, is for the looks a lack of space to run about in. They remain in a wary attentiveness that tries not to attract attention to itself.

Under these conditions the central problem is eye contact. Whereas at other places it is the essence of reciprocity (Simmel, 1992: 723) and good social life (e.g., in intimate relationships), eye contact in elevators is something like two speakers talking at the same time: a case of collision.¹⁹ To prevent this, there is a cultural pilot system for the navigation of looks. It has two components. The first has to do with the organization of space: As we have seen, users avoid places facing each other, and they also collectively direct their eyes towards the door. Furthermore elevator riders set up *flight paths* for their looks, which allow them to pass each other. The course of these paths depends on persons' height above ground, but they are also mobile, vertically and horizontally: They can be raised and lowered and turned laterally.

But this proxemic component is not sufficient, for it is largely looks which attract other looks—a visual magnetism. So one needs, secondly, techniques of avoiding *simultaneous* looking. Looks can be sequenced easily if they are inserted into the operations of using the elevator: Everybody entering the uneventful space of an elevator is an eye-catcher for all inmates, and will mostly agree to arrest their eyes by “withdrawing” his/her own looks: S(he) grants them a “license to glance.” It seems there is another rule of priority: inmates first. But while looking around for a place, entering persons can also try to catch a fleeting glimpse of the fellow passengers. In any case they offer an opportunity for glancing, when they push the buttons, but they can also be sure that the others will withdraw their looks from them, as soon as they leave the pedestrian precinct (the middle) and

raise their looks at their place, eventually catching a glimpse of the others trying to catch a glimpse of them.

Outside the operations of using the elevator the “turn-taking” of looks is hardly organizable without collisions. But there are some other techniques of sequencing: One can embed a short size-up of others in a seemingly unintentionally wandering look: “doing glances in the course of ‘scans’”.²⁰ One can also split a look into two sequences, a first from the corner of one’s eye, looking for chances to glance at others, and a second, longer look, following the first (until it is discovered and chased by others). Or one can, raising one’s glance, also raise an explicit claim on visual control (a “turn-entry-technique”), and, lowering one’s glance (“turn-exit”) cede the opportunity to others. Whole relays of glances can be organized in this way. In the case of collision—when people’s eyes suddenly meet from a short distance—users not only look away, but they turn away their whole face, denying any kind of interest.²¹

The functioning of this pilot system of narrow spatial paths and tiny time slots depends on a limited number of passengers. It breaks down if the elevator is overcrowded. Overcrowding essentially consists in the problem that latecomers, through lack of space, cannot turn their body and their looks after entering. This leads to an intense two-way traffic: Directions and sequences of looks get out of order. Additionally, the floor as a potential eye-catcher disappears from sight. There are only these other bodies, centimeters before one’s eyes. If I am taller, the others come up to my neck; if I am smaller they splash over me. This is hardly bearable, not only because it is threatening one’s physical integrity, but because the unavoidable sight of others confronts one with the *own* situation. It is as if one were forced to look into a mirror together.

At the latest with this narrowing of the visual field looks in the elevator become desperate for a resting place. In this situation most elevators catch the wandering eyes with a special equipment: the floor indicator on top of the entrance. Here, the looks hang as if on the only coat-peg left.

The gaze at the floor indicator is a complex phenomenon which runs through several stages when the elevator fills up. For the single traveller the floor indicator offers a technical substitute for monitoring the locomotion by his/her own senses. If there is one fellow passenger, gazing at the floor indicator can demonstrate that one is “waiting” and not hanging around (e.g., staring at one’s feet impassively). Gazing at the indicator, like looking at one’s watch (e.g., at bus stops), signal an incongruence of inner and outer time (here: dictated by the automaton). The gaze marks a period of time, a limitation of the standstill to only temporary inactivity. At the same time it also dissociates the looker from this place: The gaze is—like that of a prisoner through the barred window—directed to an elsewhere: One has no business to be *here*, one is only *en route*.

If the elevator goes on filling up, it becomes more urgent to negate a relation to fellow passengers. On the one hand, looking at the floor indicator has less and less alternatives; on the other it gets caught in a paradox: Gazes trying to avoid

meeting *each other*, start to meet in a shared *focus*.²² The “intended meaning” of the indicator gaze—to be a signal of waiting and keeping distance—is subverted as its use by more and more persons sums up to the visual pattern of an audience sharing the same orientation. On the one hand, the floor indicator becomes the only residual happening which can arrest the attention fleeing to others’ faces. On the other hand, putting the indicator in the limelight of more and more viewers throws into sharp relief the discrepancy between collective attentiveness and the entertainment value of the event: It is even more boring than an aquarium.

So there is an unintended collectivizing effect of individualizing glances. If the elevator is further filling up, the passengers try to counter this effect by performing the indicator glance the more intensely as lonely and rational information behavior. They *study* the floor indicator, as if they were strongly involved in a business of looking, which is out of all proportion to the actual informational need of elevator use. In a joint attempt, the participants show that by way of a scrupulous control of the floor indicator they must prepare their “timely” exit. The concerted glances communicate a serious priority, which the egocentric use of elevators should have over the social dimension of being together. The individualism of rational actors is *enacted interactively*.

Looking back to our short history of the artifact, the gaze at the floor indicator appears as an integral part of a specific locomotion technology. Georg Simmel (1908/1992: 727) stated that city-dwellers at the beginning of the 20th century learned to stand looking at each other for long periods without talking only in trains and trams. The elevator, which was implemented nearly at the same time, demands even more eye-discipline: not only silent gaze, but the competence of not looking at one another. Just as the railway required passengers to develop a “panorama gaze” (Schivelbusch, 1986), roaming afield to be able to comprehend a rapidly moving landscape, the elevator is a vehicle for the acquisition of a new form of urban perception: It promotes the development of a short-sighted *cage gaze*, neither seeing nor communicating. It has become part of our urban “coolness”.

7. TALKING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

While disengagement from mutual sight might be successful with some effort, the ear has no chance of turning away: It is “damned to take everything coming close to it” (Simmel, 1908/1992: 730). One is unavoidably “within hearing.” For verbal exchanges in the elevator, this implies a far-reaching order of silence.²³ At first, in the elevator both rules are in force, which Goffman (1971: 64) identified as basic components of “conversational preserves” in public spaces: the right not to be bothered by interference or listening to another person, and the right not to be involved in a conversation by anyone at any time.

The specific dynamic of silencing in elevators begins with a spatial tightening of these basic rules: There is a mutual enforcement of both rights, because a

continued conversation turns others into involuntary listeners, i.e., it makes them appear either as intruders or as non-persons. In addition there is a tightening of time restrictions for talking occasions. Compared to the staircase, an elevator obstructs conversation for two reasons: because the time available is dictated by the automaton, and because people cannot choose whether just to greet in passing, or start a conversation. Contacts are hardly established because one can't *break them off* at a self-determined moment.

Nevertheless, even in a setting which is so inimical to conversation, there are some well defined opportunities for talking, which at the same time illustrate the structural restrictions elevators set for their unfolding.²⁴ Let's begin with the case of a continued conversation which already started outside the elevator. The continuation depends on many factors: the privacy of the topic, the placement of speakers, or the "strength" of the parties (whether there is only one eavesdropper or a silent majority). More important is how the continuation of talk appears in the context of elevating: It can be obtrusive in enforcing an involuntary listening, but it can also save the passengers from a *horror vacui tacendi* which would be caused by a sudden breaking off of talking. Mostly it comes to compromises: The exchange of words is continued with lowered voices, then it dies without ending in concluding remarks, and flickers up again at the exit (cf. Goffman, 1963: 157).

In any case conversational partners in an elevator have to face the uninvited engagement of others, even if it is a couple (on their way to a cinema):

He: where exactly is the cinema?

She: oh, I see! don't know

Fellow-passenger: don't worry, I've already pushed the button

He/she: (giggle)

On the other hand, other persons can also be forced to participate by certain genres of public communication. Jokes and anecdotes, e.g., do address a larger audience by themselves. Thereby they increase accessibility, but they also commit others to some reaction. If it was not polite to be engaged without one's consent, it would be even more impolite to refuse any participation in appellative speech events. The mimic compromise for such compulsory participation is a wry smile.

Given the different strength of the parties, compulsory participation can also be turned against the conversational partners: *Two students enter a rather full elevator and push the button for just the next floor. They are talking about sports. One of them says: "Perhaps we should take up our training now." General laughter of the others.*

Such formation of an alliance against illegitimate elevator using is also one of the occasions for *opening* a conversation in an elevator: *An elevator with eight passengers stops immediately after start at the next floor and then at the next but one without anyone entering.* A says: "In this way nothing will come of that." B responds: "One could go just as well on foot."

The abuse of elevators creates an “offended collective” with two “speakers” articulating moral consternation in the form of comments of the same tenor.

Likewise, other occasions of opening conversations are disturbances of the public order of elevator riding: technical defects (e.g., a breakdown of the illumination), which immediately constitute an action collective (what’s the cause? what is to do? who does it?), or welcome troublemakers like children or dogs, which offer chances of establishing contact, because their proxemic or visual indiscipline gives a focus to the ongoing interaction.²⁵

The most frequent cases of such disturbances are the handicaps of elevator use, already mentioned: full hands, large cartons, trolleys with books, etc. The little aids stimulated by them are typically performed as minimalized forms of (a non-committal) contact: One is lending a hand, but not an ear to someone. Thus the accompanying words can be of nearly impolite brevity: “where?”—“4th floor, thanks.” If instead of this utilitarian shortening a more polite formulation is chosen (“May I push the button for you?”) this could be heard as a conversational offer compelling one to go on somehow. In this case, a hasty “third floor please” can counter this impression by denying that the questioner has taken any specific threshold of contact. (Or, having said this, does one have to say good bye leaving this cage?)

Another, regularly occurring case of disturbance is the overcrowding, which can suddenly relax the concentrated silence, giving way to a general readiness to engage in conversation. Typically, there is a reflexive reference to the tragicomedy of the situation: *The elevator is nearly full. At another stop somebody manages to squeeze himself in. When the cage goes on with an unusual jerk, he says in an apologetic tone: “Hmm. heavy bones.” General laughter,²⁶ although the atmosphere is tensing again when the cage gradually empties. One can sense a latent panic whether the chat would go on until one’s own exit.*

This hints at a conversational “functionalism.” An exchange of words in an elevator is a mere “accompanying music” for a primarily proxemic interaction event. In fact, the words themselves are a kind of spacer: They are put between people. In addition, they have to fill the *time* of an encounter. This gives the elevator door an independent role in opening and closing conversations: Talks are often opened and closed together *with* the door—an example of the “acting” of a material setting, independent from the sequential self-organisation of talk.²⁷

But there are also cases where the door not only limits a talk, but initiates it. E.g., the elevator can constitute acquaintance by technically causing a “meeting again”: *A and B are waiting. Both want to go up. The elevator comes, but indicates that it will first go down. A steps in, B waits. The door closes behind A, but then immediately opens up again. B enters:*

A: just as things go

B: well

On such occasions there is often an exchange of words, because one gets in a face to face position and because it is now an encounter of “acquaintances,” since the elevator caused an *interruption* of presence.

Another occasion where the elevator is responsible for the main initiative in conversations is the encounter of casual acquaintances, persons one is greeting “to avoid them” (Luhmann, 1984: 562). Characteristically, there is a compulsion to open a conversation, which can hardly be evaded (unless there are other persons one can use as a front for “polite” silence). The compulsion emerges, because silence would make obvious the casualness of a nodding relationship: One was greeting as friendly as if on occasion one wanted to deepen the relationship, but one has—as this occasion now reveals—nothing to say to each other, one can’t and won’t. Hence encountering casual acquaintances in an elevator is embarrassing, because one has to choose between a silence that unmask friendliness as a mere convention, and a talk that involuntarily deepens a relationship. The elevator catalyzes the clarification of human relations.

If the participants decide to open a conversation, they have to face a double problem of timing. For one thing, one can’t wait for the opening as if one were talking only because it is unavoidable—one has to go over to the offensive as if one had chosen the opportunity. Secondly, the end of conversation should be reached not too far away from the exit of one of the participants, because the pause emerging would reveal once more that one has nothing to say to each other. The art of conversation in this case consists of holding talk in a balance (like the elevator!) and closing it only when the door opens.

8. EXIT: COLLECTIVE FICTIONS

Getting out of an elevator is accomplished in a concerted action of moving apart; one could also call it “standing easy.” As soon as the elevator brakes, people are looking around for signals of setting-out, e.g., the gathering of personal belongings. Then they might again refer to a turn regulation: “first on, first off.” Finally, lanes are formed, people can worm their way through, before they disappear from sight.

Again, the timing of these practices is remarkable. On the one hand, elevator riders try not to be late, so that they get to the exit without calling the others’ attention to themselves (by hurrying, requests, or jostling). On the other hand they also avoid going out “too early.” There are a lot of reasons for this, which can explicate again what elevator riding is about. Generally in favor of a minimization of contact, participants seem to wait whether they can get out wordlessly in the wake of others. In addition they don’t give up their backing without reason: Getting out means standing in the limelight and that without a chance to control others’ gazes. But there are also three other reasons, which have to do with the maintenance of collective fictions of elevating:

First, pushing one’s way out in a haste, a while before the door opens, is “too early,” because this lacks an adjustment of inner and outer time (like honking in a traffic jam). The “impatience” thematizes—like the delayed making way—the

cage-character of the elevator; it destroys the fiction of a comfortable offer of space.

Secondly, the untimely attempt to get out means turning away from the others sooner than needed. It reveals too much of the anticipated relief of “turning one’s back on them” after all. To get out also means being a “drop-out,” an unashamed happy renegade of a community of fate. By untimely getting out, people violate a latent expectation of “minimal solidarity”: that one is not unbearable. Insofar the gazes in their neck carry a resentment.

Thirdly, by pressing one’s nose against the door, the collective illusion is shattered that one could be engaged in doing anything interesting in an elevator. It is a fiction which not only individualizes elevator riders (by dissociating them from one another), it also preserves them in their cognitive complexity as persons. Waiting in front of the door, the elevator rider is exposed to be, here and now, nothing but a “mass,” individualized by measuring kilograms, a load which—compared to other means of transportation—is conveyed gratis indeed, but also without any prestige. In an elevator one goes without image.²⁸

This has a democratic side effect: The elevator is a class-less vehicle, letting all users participate in the same experience. Nevertheless, even under these conditions, some elevator riders try to gain prestige by hierarchic distinctions: A social structure of elevator riders can be displayed by the use of one’s *own* time. At the bottom there are those slowpokes who waste their time, at the top there are the “jostlers” who can show even here that *their* time is precious.²⁹

9. ACCOMPLISHING STRANGENESS AND UNDOING PRESENCE

Let’s take an analytic glance backwards. I proceeded on the assumption that the practices observed are neither accidental nor mere cultural conventions. Rather they can be regarded as running solutions to general interactional problems of public encounters, which are enhanced in elevators: a problem of bodily navigation (1), a problem of contact avoidance (2), a problem of feigning preoccupation (3), a problem of absenting oneself (4) and the problem of how to stop the automatism through which co-present bodies start interactions (5).

(1) At first, the co-presence of mobile bodies poses a problem of navigation which is—as Goffman (1971: 37) suggested—less an interpersonal than an “intervehicular” problem: that of avoiding collisions—a problem of social “contact” in a very basic sense.³⁰ These bodies, however, are vulnerable to crashes not only because they have no crush section, but also because they have to be kept intact as symbol and container of *persons*.

The navigation of bodies is a practical problem to be solved in all situations of public life, e.g., when two formations of passers-by crossing a street intermix in the middle (Livingston, 1987). Goffman’s example we used to introduce this article referred to the individual encounters of two pedestrians on a sidewalk. In this

case glances are not only needed for bodily navigation, but navigation becomes a problem for glances, too: They shall not “meet” in bodily proximity. Having investigated this aspect of civil inattention in elevators, we can now summarize polite disregard as composed of two opposite requirements which link the visual with the proxemic order. The first is just the avoidance of contact: One needs space for glances because they are the crucial means left to display social distance in extreme physical proximity. Looking away denies physical nearness as a sign of personal relationships. The second requirement is visual control: Since gazing at others from a short distance is an act of intimacy or hostility, maximizing distance is a precondition of visual control. So participants avoid eye contact, because they are so near to each other, and they look for physical distance in order to get visual control.

(2) We had stated in the beginning that the interactional pattern of civil inattention is related to another problem of co-presence in public settings: the problem of staying unknown to each other. Like other passers-by, elevator riders try hard to avoid getting acquainted with others. Staying unknown consists in an unstable, always “threatened” non-knowledge of names, faces, biographies and living conditions. Thus the “strange” aspect of unknown others neither consists of cultural attributes, which legitimate a marginal position in a collective (Simmel, 1908/1992); nor of something absolutely incomprehensible which throws basic cultural assumptions into a crisis (Schütz, 1962); nor of the sober indifference by which persons are excluded from “functionally differentiated” social systems (Nassehi, 1995). Unknown others become strange because of a radical devaluation of physical co-presence as a chance for establishing contact. Urbanisation and geographical mobility have inflated this chance by producing masses of “*insignificant others*,” clashing in encounters without past and future. Personal relations only gain their meaning against this background of a massive unrelatedness.

Encounters in an elevator now call attention to the problem that this unrelatedness has to be *interactively maintained*. Being unknown means both having no interactional history and producing none: preventing any obligation from earlier encounters, denying the recognition of faces. Otherwise the irreversible social fact of “acquaintanceship” (Goffman, 1963: 112) would emerge. Thus strangeness isn’t only something passively experienced (like Schütz’ cultural shock), it is also practically accomplished by people treating each other as strangers or like strangers. More than in any other public place, in the elevator strangeness is revealed to be an *accomplishment of enacting indifference*.

(3) But the problem of avoiding acquaintance is (like that of navigation) not specific to elevators. It has to be also faced in other public places, e.g., in other means of public transportation (trams, busses etc.), where there might be more space but on the other hand lengthier trips. In these places, the enactment of indifference typically replaces engagements with others with multiple forms of “auto-involvements” (Goffman, 1963: 65). But exactly for these the elevator rider is lacking communicative means: In most elevators there is a lack of occupational

opportunities like the panorama gaze from railway-compartments, reading a newspaper in the subway, observing fellow-passengers from a distance. Many elevators even refuse opportunities of merely staging “doing something”: the study of advertisements, leafing through magazines, or humming. That’s why often there is only the “busy” gaze to the floor indicator. Thus a practical problem specific to elevator riding is the simultaneous management of keeping distance and being without occupation: *to have nothing to do to assure others that one has nothing to do with them.*

That’s the reason why two contrary aspects of urban encounters escalate: For countless casual encounters there is “no future” (no biographical perspective, no chance of repetition) and, at the same time, “no escape”, because people are fix(at)ed upon one another. Spatial compulsions like those caused by elevators create a subject-less but generalized obtrusiveness, from which everybody tries to creep away. Here, the maintainance of strangeness requires a *retreat from presence.*

(4) Elevator riders try to withdraw from the social situation as “participants” by performing mutual perception without full reciprocity, and presence without present time. They raise the thresholds of addressability and reduce their mutual attention to the minimum of a safety measure. Presence in elevators is, so to speak, the opposite of presence on stages. An elevator rider tries to be no protagonist at all, but also no supporting actor, and no mere by-stander, more than that: not even a present, but only an “existant.”

For such modulations of presence the sociology of interaction has no systematic place. It is sociological common sense that situative presence is not given by simply being at one place physically, but only by the mutual perception of this being there.³¹ But further sociological specifications of “presence” are looked for only with respect to the selection of relevant participants: Who counts as a present person for an interaction? (exemplarily: Luhmann, 1995). With respect to this boundary making of interactions, elevator riding delivers us into a paradox. On the one hand, the walls of a narrow closed room make the local criterion of presence completely unambiguous: The elevator *participates* in the definition of presence not only by releasing people from an interactive specification of the “circle of the present persons”; it irrefutably instructs them who belongs to the circle. On the other hand, those people, marked as present by the elevator, in most cases all agree to treat each other as *not* present.

This hints at a dimension of presence beyond the “horizontal” limitation of participants, a vertical dimension on which presence is produced, enhanced and deadened. Social presence doesn’t simply happen with the perceptive incorporation of “being there” in the interactional structure. The bizarre situation of elevator riding rather shows a *continuum of presence*: a complex variable, composed of posture and decorum (which influence the level of attention), perceptive tension, mutual noticing (verbal or nonverbal), and various degrees of participation, i.e., orientation, addressability, level of activism etc.

(5) Instead of these modulations on a continuum of presence, sociological theories of interaction often make the assumption of an “autocatalysis” of interactions through presence: if present, one can’t avoid communicating.³² Leaving it at this terminological axiom is unsatisfactory for two reasons. First, it ignores the participants’ *handling* of this gentle compulsion to communicate. They can use and support it to establish relations (e.g., by eye-contact or by greeting signals), but they can also interrupt the starting phase of an interaction by preventing any consequence deriving from presence, and in this sense “undoing presence.” Though the co-presence of elevator riders is effective as an urgent appeal to communicate—as if the telephone would ring constantly—all those present just do as if they were “not there.”³³

Secondly, the axiomatic statement leaves in the dark the actual reason for a compulsion to communicate. It has to do with a neglected *materiality* of communication. The efforts of elevator riders to absent themselves demand a lot from another “participant” in the situation, from the most complex element of material culture: the body. What appears as “autocatalysis of interaction by presence” actually is its catalysis by the autonomous communicative activity of the body. For an absencing effort all of its controllable expressions—movements, gesture, mimic, sounds—are restrained, the looks are dimmed: The body is motionless, expressionless, soundless.³⁴

One can call this habitual requirement “inactivity”—quite in the sense of a latent volcanism. For this bearing stands in a permanent relation of tension with possible activities. Sociological *action* theories know this from omissions, a class of negative activities which become determinable by a contrast to definite expectations and intentions (Geser, 1986). But the *practical accomplishment* of omitting requires less of a tension in relation to such mental phenomena, but to a productivity, nervousness, restlessness, and alertness incorporated in the cultivated body.

Compared with other communication media, the body can’t simply be turned off; it remains at least in a stand-by mood which can run counter to the intentions of its inhabitant. We might try hard to become a “no-body” in the eyes of others (in the sense of Goffman’s study on normal appearances), but we *never are*. In the social vacuum of the elevator, especially the communicatively socialized eye develops a life of its own, difficult to restrain, an exceeding activity which involves persons into interactions. Like dogs who trail their owner at the lead, bodies threaten to draw their inhabitants into a conversation.

In this sense, in elevators the subject of action theory is not only constrained by rules of interaction which take away its “autonomous decisions,” it is also squeezed between two artifacts, acting on their own: a technical automaton, which cages but also moves, and a fleshy one, which is the engine but also the burden: heavy and weary—(which, we remember, was in fact the reason for taking the elevator). Human beings appear less as “actors” but as participants in a practice jointly brought about by persons, bodies and artifacts.

In the practice of elevating there is an interpenetration of contributions from heterogeneous orders: In the same way the motoricity of the body has to adjust itself to the motoricity of a locomotive machine, the interactive rules of the “conversational machine” (Sacks et al., 1978) are working with the inclusion of a real automaton, and persons unwilling to interact have to deal with the automatism through which their bodies set interactions in motion. The practice of elevator riding is an amalgam of rational calculations and involuntary bodily reactions, intentional actions and unintended effects, interaction patterns with and without participation of a consciousness, as well as operations of a technical artifact. If one wanted to put this mishmash in order by reducing it to, e.g., rational decisions, bodyless communications, or so-called “human-machine-interactions,” one could construct neatly arranged theories, but one would not give a description which does “sociological justice” to the inner complexity of a simple cultural practice.

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NOTES

¹ This article is based on extensive participant observations by different subjects and in different settings. Beside my own observations over six years of sociological elevator use it profited from data collections of students of five lectures in qualitative methods at the University of Bielefeld (Germany). In addition many colleagues contributed to the study, e.g. by offering illustrative examples for cultural variation: Monika Salzbrunn (Paris), Veronika Tacke (Florence), Nina Degele (Minnesota), Boris Nieswand (Bombay). The final text profited from discussions in colloquia at the University of Bielefeld (Germany), at the Ecole des Mines (CSI, Paris) and at Cornell University (Department for Science Studies). Special thanks for their challenge and lucid criticism to Mike Lynch and Alex Preda, and for their opposite sympathetic reading to Michel Callon and Vololona Rabeharisoa.

² Watson’s experimental study on intercultural variation of the behavior in elevators followed the classical work on proxemics by Hall (1959). It differentiated between more or less “sociable” societies, using a simple holistic notion of culture. Caesar’s essay on elevator use in Japan uses the phenomenon as an access to “national mentality”.

³ Augé defines a “non-lieu” in contrast to the ethnological space of a historically and geographically localized culture: timeless and faceless transit spaces with no specific identity, which don’t create specific social relations, only “loneliness and uniformity.” His examples are supermarkets, railway stations, airports, gasoline stations, and many means of public transportation.

⁴ This means that I will not consider technical variants like panorama or hospital lifts, neither would I discuss social variants like elevator trips with liftboys or with acquaintances using the elevator for gossiping, or couples using it for (short termed) intimacies. No

doubt, these practices occasionally happen in elevators, but they are also relatively unspecific compared to what acquaintances or couples do in cafés or on benches in a park.

⁵ This question tries to take some important theoretical impulses from science and technology studies (for reviews see Preda, 2000 and Reckwitz, 2002) for interactional analysis.

⁶ A last remark on the genre of this article. In the process of discussing and of reviewing there were two opposite critical readings of it: as an empiricist study, in risk of getting lost in details of questionable relevance, or as a mere thought experiment, detached from the “lived experience” of elevator riding. My own view is: This is not an empirical study in the style of “classical ethnomethodology”. In its idealtypical descriptions it neglects much empirical specificity of “cases”—types of elevators, people, localities (which is only compensated for in some footnotes). Insofar it has more of the scientific “fiction” in the sense Clifford Geertz (1973) called his thick descriptions “fictional”. This actively constructive mode of writing is due to the theoretical relevances invested into the study. On the other hand this article is no pure desk product. It is grounded in intense empirical work, and its descriptions claim to have “sucked up” the actual practice of elevating in the sense of Harold Garfinkels invitation to going native: “become the phenomenon!”. So my suggestion for reading the genre of this article is: This is *empiricist theorising*.

⁷ The coach-like equipment posed the problem of how to classify the space of the elevator. At the end of the 19th century it was a delicate question of manners whether men should take off their hats in elevators or not (like in coaches). On the one hand, the elevator was inside houses (where hats should be taken off); on the other, it was a public means of transportation. On the one hand gentlemanly manners should be demonstrated, especially in the narrowness of the elevator; on the other, hats found a place only on heads (Simmen and Drepper, 1984: 153f.).

⁸ Of course, the invisible (the dark shaft) invites many fantasies (especially anxieties) which have become steady co-passengers in the elevator. Therapies treat them (as a serious handicap for the mobility of townspeople), novels and movies spell them out: “L’ascenseur à l’échafaud” (France, 1957), “The Towering Inferno” (USA, 1970), “The Lift” (Netherlands, 1983), “Abwärts” (Germany, 1984) etc. The elevator as a rocket seems to be an “intercontinental” children’s fantasy: It has been described both by Roald Dahl (“Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”, US, 1964), and by Annie Schmidt (“Abeltje”, Netherlands, 1953): Caused by a wrongly pushed button the cage leaves the shaft and travels around the world.

⁹ For Albert Einstein this disorientation was an invitation to use the elevator for physics: not as a metaphor nor as a research instrument (as we will do), but as a theoretical model. He traced back his basic idea of relativity to the curious question of how natural laws might change in a free falling elevator cage. He concluded that only physicists who were born and live in the cage, could believe the earth to be an inertial system (Einstein and Infeld, 1950: 254ff.).

¹⁰ So, conditioning doesn’t mean “determination,” but handling doesn’t mean free “interpretation” either. The notion of “script” points out that specific positions and possibilities for human activities are inscribed into the design of an artifact. They work as social norms insofar as they turn many practical variations into “deviant behavior.” In this sense automatons “expect” (Johnson/Latour, 1988: 306) to be treated in a certain way.

¹¹ To be sure, this folk theory has been taken quite serious by proponents of normative action theories in sociology, not as topic, but as resource of their own theorizing: There are numerous empirical studies of the choices between means of transportation—train or plane, car or bike, bus or tram (e.g., Franzen, 1998).

¹² Fuller (1994) has argued that such a transfer of agency to artifacts typically grows the more unreliable they are, i.e. the more they refuse to be fitted into a means-end calculation.

¹³ The following analysis of the proxemic order of elevators takes up some categories of Goffman's classical study on "territories of the self" (1971: 50). It sketches a typology of spaces which constitutes persons, and one could also say, which distinguishes these cultural entities from things or non-persons. At least this is the point that is interesting to me in this paper.

¹⁴ Other occasions for giving precedence to others don't emerge from the structure of the artifact but from its cultural localization: In Japanese elevators, for instance, getting in and out is much more structured by rules of politeness, which demand a strict consideration of others (Caesar, 2000). Or in institutional settings, the "democratic" basic rules of entrance can be altered by organizational hierarchies: priority for the bosses.

¹⁵ In contrast, places in the back are devalued, when the elevator fills up: one is cut off from the entrance. An injustice, peculiar to elevators: Those who came last, are now best placed.

¹⁶ This formal rule has to be distinguished from the question of which distances we found in elevators in individual cases. Here, of course, cultural variation prevails. An informant from Bombay reported a huge winning of space when he returned to Germany. In the U.S. the "German distance" grows even further: Nobody would squeeze him- or herself in a cage, and in entering it eventual greetings take the form of an "excuse me", as if one had already jostled others if one only enters their field of vision.

¹⁷ A counter-example: *A man wearing a Walkman strolls into the lift, and turns his face to the wall as if trying to maximize privacy (acoustically and visually)*. Such means of shielding have an interesting side-effect: Subjectively, the others might "disappear" under the headphones; in fact they participate in the "private" musical experience—the louder the more. (It is like in the subway, where the newspaper used to shield from the vis-a-vis can also be read from the reverse.)

¹⁸ Since it has no seats the elevator has an advantage of flexibility for the readjustment of personal space. Goffman (1971: 55) mentions the embarrassment of two people who are left in an emptying tramway, sitting next to each other, and by that seeming to display a relationship they actually don't (and won't) have.

¹⁹ Again, it should be kept in mind that the character of visual contact as "collision" can vary with the individual properties of the passengers. E.g. the visual order is gendered: Buchanan, Goldman, Juhnke (1977), who used the elevator as an experimental setting, showed that direct gazes of men work as an effective marker of territories towards both sexes, the gaze of women only towards men. With respect to cultural variation see again Watson (1970).

²⁰ Sudnow (1972: 277). In his brilliant discussion of how the timing of glances and the temporal structure of activities are tuned to each other in order to "formulate" an activity and to recognize its "definiteness", David Sudnow mentions a sequencing of this type: "Since 'scans' are seen as specifically desinterested ways of visually taking in some environment, by fitting a glance within a scan, the attempt to have that 'glance' not appear as a 'glance' at all but as a 'non-look' is made" (ibid.).

²¹ To just look, if the other doesn't, has a superficial similarity to the pattern opening up a flirt: to look, whether the other is just looking, too. But the course of looking is opposed: In an elevator nearly always the minimization of the time of overlapping is at stake; in situations which are more open for flirting, its maximization is wanted. One looks for a collision and is carried away by the risk of extended eye-contact as a form of a mutual search.

²² In one elevator of my sample this problem was highlighted by a little shameless graffiti just aside the floor indicator: it threw back the inmates' looks, which had fled to the indicator in the hope of avoiding contacts, with two words: "fuck yourselves!"

²³ Especially for this topic readers should have in mind the limits of our analytical perspective: Of course, the openness for conversation varies considerably with the kind of

relations prevailing in different buildings: neighbors, colleagues, patients, students or guests of a hotel have quite different degrees of acquaintance. And in homes for the aged, e.g., the elevator often offers an opportunity to talk. The cultural variation is considerable too: A larger inclination to talk than in German elevators is to be found in the context of the Dutch informal manners, or in Japan, where the elevator offers a rare private-like space for the exemptional relaxation of the strict formalization of public life (Caesar, 2000), or in U.S. cities, where in the context of fear of crimes talking can be a desired demonstration of harmlessness, if it doesn't interfere with new norms against sexual harassment. For the history of the order of silence in European cities see Sennett (1994).

²⁴ Conditions change a bit when we take into consideration technical "updates" of our standard case elevator: the installation of "Muzac", the friendly voice of a computer, or the video infotainment offered by a connection of elevators with the internet. These forms of one-way communication can have two divergent effects on verbal exchanges: They deepen the silence (because they demand it as focused attention), and they offer specific occasions and topics for talk (weather-report, stock-exchange, sport-results etc.).

²⁵ Unwelcome troublemakers are another example: One "informant" of my study performed a little breaching experiment using a hair spray in the elevator. She reported no verbal reaction—until she left the cage and the inmates started giving vent to their anger. In this example we find the pattern of alliance formation, but also the high threshold where strangers get involved into talk. In elevators, it seems to be raised, because there is no "exit" for the conflict if it were verbalized.

²⁶ Of course, the humor of the remark lies in exaggerating others' impairment of comfort to a physical threat. The entering person forces others to "forgive" him by feigning an excuse for something much more serious than a loss of comfort: a safety risk. Who wants to take that seriously?

²⁷ Here, a conversation analytical study could proceed by investigating systematically how the sequentiality of communication is linked to its materiality. In U.S. elevators I got the impression that the inclusion of the automaton within the conversational practice is further developed than in Europe. Its rhythms are so dominant compared to those of talk that they produce an abrupt style of communication: Hardly is the end of conversation announced than it is performed immediately. The "elevator chat" is less adjusted to the rituals of cultivating relationships, rather it is functionalized for a "social trimming" of the short trip.

²⁸ This is different in all those vehicles trying to win users as customers, and it was different in an old technical rival of the elevator: the paternoster lift. Here, administrative warning signs excluded children and the handicapped from use, and the vehicle demanded body techniques appropriate for presentations of masculinity: decisiveness and speed of reaction when entering, a little boasting when jumping off—back into the dull everyday life of an office building (Simmen and Drepper, 1984: 228).

²⁹ Clearly these presentations are often grounded in the relevances elevator riders ascribe to their working time. If we follow participants' categorizations, at universities e.g., "jostlers" typically come from the ranks of professors, "slowpokes" from the non-professional staff (craftsmen, secretaries, cleaners) that even for short distances rank comfort over saving of time, because they don't exploit their working time entrepreneurially but spend that of an employee as stipulated by contract. Freshmen can be identified when at the beginning of the term driving times grow, because individuals explore the building (like the course of their study) with the disorientation known from drivers of cars with foreign license plates.

³⁰ An exact analysis of the problem of public navigation is offered by Ryave and Schenkein (1974) in their study on the "art of walking." They portray walking as a concerted methodical accomplishment. Participants negotiate who has to walk about

whom; they signal “walking together” by proximity and synchronicity of speed (especially in bends); they respect “own ways,” when they avoid following hot on someone’s heels (and prefer a staggered course) or when by enhancing speed they avoid being abreast of someone else for a longer time.

³¹ See for instance one of Goffman’s definitions of social situations: “an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are “present,” and similar find them accessible to him.” (1964: 134). Though Goffman also offers several observations of mental “aways” (1963: 69) or of “social absence” (e.g., when after a goodbye the “exit” is delayed).

³² In Watzlawick et al. (1967) this enforced communication comes from a terminological axiom: it’s impossible not to communicate, because it’s impossible not to behave, and all behavior has a communicative dimension. Similarly Luhmann (1995): Behavior is necessarily taken as communication when it appears in the context of mutual perception and can be interpreted as oriented to this perception.

³³ In an environment of suddenly delimited chances of communication the elevator rider is (like someone bothered by many phone calls) struggling to simply be alone. In this sense, a comparison between elevator and internet is interesting: At first sight, the transportation of bodies with means from an industrial society seems an anachronism compared to the technically enhanced chances of bodiless communication in an information society. But on a second view one can take the elevator as a little model for what can be expected from a state of unlimited communicational accessibility: that presence and absence in social situations for people “trapped” communicatively becomes a question of personal integrity.

³⁴ Typically, the residual problems of absenting are the uncontrollable expressions of the body: its sounds and smells. Characteristically, they give an involuntary access for contacts: one sneezes, and someone says “bless you!”

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