

ULYSSES IN TEXAS

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STREECK, J. (2017). *Self-Making Man. A Day of Action, Life, and Language*. Cambridge University Press.

Even though Jürgen Streeck himself compares his portrayal of Hussein Chmeis to a pointillist painting (p. 378), it was an analogy with James Joyce's *Ulysses* that first came to mind as I finished reading his book. Streeck follows Chmeis, the owner of a car repair shop in Austin, Texas, for eleven consecutive hours (i. e. his entire work-day) with his camera and, over the following years, spends 7,000–8,000 hours analysing the material thus obtained, paying close attention to each and every means Hussein Chmeis uses to communicate with his environment: gesturing, speaking, looking, pointing or even walking. *Self-Making Man* is, in a certain sense then, a remarkable attempt to achieve what Roland Barthes has called *mathesis singularis*: Mr. Chmeis — just like Joyce's Leopold Bloom — is a single individual, situated in a particular time and in a particular place, but at the same time he is an “Everyman”, an incarnation of human communication in general. As Streeck himself puts it: “This book has the double ambition of illuminating an individual person and his idiosyncrasies and the generic, socially and culturally shared practices this person enacts” (p. XXV). Streeck's “micro-ethnographic” methodology (p. XXV) enables him to move constantly between the particular and the general, between Hussein's “idiosyncrasies” and broader theoretical considerations, the guiding idea of the book being that of *self-making* or auto-poiesis: the ongoing individuation of a human being who “continuously fashions a viable communicative self” (p. XXII) from his cultural background, as well as from his intersubjective communicative interactions.

At first reading, it seems that the book is not without a certain resemblance to ancient treatises on rhetorical devices. The human body is thus duly divided into different semiotic spheres, and the various activities of the hands, eyes, and feet are examined. The resemblance is, however, only a formal one. First of all, the division in question is made for analytical purposes only: the individual is conceived of as a *dynamic unity*, a locus of different communicative practices that cannot be separated from one another. Second, Hussein's communicative activities are being studied as just so many ways of interacting with others and of handling the surrounding *Umwelt*: the stress is thus put on doing things, on making sense, on interaction with others.

Streeck's book contains literally hundreds of examples illustrating the subtleties of human communicative activities. I will, of course, mention only a small selection of these here. Take, for example, the analysis of Hussein's *walking*. Far from being a mere means of getting from place to place, walking and its different modalities represent an important element of what Streeck calls “practices”, that is, embodied methods for “performing social actions” (p. 7): drawing on a beautiful passage from one of Balzac's lesser known texts, *La théorie de la démarche* (quoted at length on p. 10), Streeck envisages the possibility of elaborating a social “physiognomy” of walking,





considered to be a *communicative behaviour* or “an important conveyor of social information” (p. 17). Hussein’s way of walking changes according to the situation, from a neutral “unmarked gait” (p. 13) to the various modulations in his ways of moving around as he interacts with others or, as Streeck puts it, “attends to his visibility for others” (p. 13). Under certain circumstances, this “intercorporeality in motion” (p. 54) may even acquire very complex features that bring it surprisingly close to *dancing*.

No less remarkable is Streeck’s analysis of gaze. In general terms, mutual gaze is interpreted as a “minimal social contract”, signifying a mutual recognition of the interactants rather than a mere display of attention (p. 70). This, however, is only the roughest outline of things: the vision-based activities in which Hussein engages during his workday are considerably more complex and call for a much more subtle conceptual distinction to be made between various modes of visual interaction. As Streeck justly complains, the general notion of gaze “obscures the variations that occur in the ways humans look at the world (and each other) and that are captured by the rich vocabulary for ocular actions in our everyday languages” (p. 78). Thus, gaze is not only the vehicle of the “social contract” in face-to-face interactions (and of *breaking* that contract when one of the interlocutors turns away), but also of joint attention and other modalities of intersubjective behaviour.

Even more complex, perhaps, is the activity of pointing and showing, moving us into the realm of manual communication, Streeck’s principal field of scientific interest for many years. The various forms of Hussein’s pointing gestures are subjected to detailed analysis. Streeck’s principal idea (already put forward in many of his previous works) seems to be that the referencing based on pointing gestures is an important element of constructing a common *Umwelt*, of “sharing perceptual experience and information” (p. 162); as such, they require what Streeck terms “local knowledge, or even layers of knowledge, including normative ontologies of what is there to be seen in the first place” (p. 126). However elementary and simple it may look, the activity of pointing may acquire rather complicated modalities, not only “spotlighting”, i.e. disambiguating certain objects or “raising the figure from the ground” (p. 135), but also “construal”, that is, a way of *representing* the object in question, showing it “as something” (p. 141). It may also become a sign of authority: “Pointing gestures are too narrowly conceived as acts geared only toward directing attention; often, they are made when the speaker, rather, directs someone to *do something*” (p. 162). *Showing*, on the other hand, is a more general form of interaction whose purpose is not only to direct the attention (as is the case of pointing), but, rather, to teach and explain — “pedagogy”, as Streeck calls it (p. 202). Showing is a way of conceptualising the world we live in and especially of making this conceptualisation accessible to others. Of particular interest is the fact that showing is not limited — as one might expect — solely to visible things in that world, but is capable of encoding, in visual form, even the qualities perceived by senses other than that of sight: Streeck gives several examples of “sensory transformation” or “transmodality” (with an interesting reference to Gilles Deleuze’s book on Francis Bacon), that is, the ability of gestures to transpose sensory experience from one modality to another (p. 177). Gesture, therefore, appears to be a trans-sensory phenomenon — providing a good illustration of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis according to which the human body’s interaction with

the world is not based on a mere juxtaposition of different perceptive modalities but rather on the intertwining of those modalities, on an interpenetration that enables the body to endow the world with meaning.

Not surprisingly, a large section is devoted to Hussein Chmeis' gesticulations. The section opens with a minute analysis of a forty-second sequence of dialogue between Hussein and Streeck himself. In it, Streeck demonstrates that while pointing and showing, in most cases, seem to have a relatively clear communicative function, "the gestures in this turn are not so obviously 'functional', although each one demonstrably furnishes some experienced structure and perceived meaning to the interaction" (p. 215). In some cases, the relation between a particular gesture and the "information" it conveys is not devoid of opacity. A good example of this is Hussein's "slicing" or "cutting" gesture (a rapid downward movement made with the hand held in a palm-vertical position): Streeck asserts that all instances of this gesture are connected with some kind of negation, but admits also a possibility — quite a plausible one, in fact — that "the cutting gesture marks a dividing or separating of what is and what is not the case, of true and false, instead of signifying negative polarity, as grammatical forms of negation do" (p. 275–276). The opacity of gesticulation has obviously to do with the fact that this form of gesturing is prone to idiosyncrasy and individual variation; however, this does not mean that it is impossible to present a general theory of the phenomenon of gesturing. For example, on pp. 215–218, the reader finds a very useful overview of the general features of gesticulation, based on the forty-second sequence just mentioned. Streeck denies — like Merleau-Ponty before him — any species of body/mind dualism that might lead us to believe that gesturing is in any way a corporeal *representation* of mental states. As Streeck succinctly puts it: "Gestures are cognitions, not the outer signs of 'inner' cognitions" (284). And later on: "If we are truly interested in understanding the nature and logic of spontaneous gesturing, we gain little by thinking of them as expressions of a speaker's thoughts" (p. 294). In other words, gesturing is not an *instrument* for expressing the "inner" states of mind of a self-conscious subject, but rather "a subjectless activity, uncontrolled by any entity other than the living body itself" (p. 295). This refusal of duality is not without precedent, but the great advantage of Streeck's book is that his approach is always grounded in abundant empirical data and example: indeed, Merleau-Ponty scholars, often exasperated by the abstract and ambiguous character of his reflexions on gesture, language and corporeality, would gain much by reading *Self-Making Man*.

The wonderful chapter on Hussein's way of speaking is worth brief mention. When it comes to speaking, Hussein is not what we would call a "standard" subject, English not being his mother tongue. But this is not where our interest lies here. Hussein's speech, grammatically "imperfect" as it may be, is treated precisely as a corporeal activity (p. 299), with attention therefore being paid to such aspects as rhythm and intonation, as well as to what Streeck calls the "poetics" or "rhetorical range" of Hussein's language (p. 318). Streeck discovers and describes the remarkable poetic devices Hussein uses — most likely unwittingly — to enhance his message: different kinds of parallelisms, such as alliteration, repetition etc. In this perspective, Hussein appears to be a true "oral poet", whose linguistic performance, in certain respects, is compared to freestyle rap (p. 322). In Streeck's own words: "Hussein, I believe, at



times betrays a poet's tuning to the music of language, as he builds engaging lingua franca narratives and shows a public speaker's persuasion skills at the same time" (p. 322).

Instead of further summarizing Streeck's illuminating book, I will conclude with a few remarks whose personal character I will not attempt to hide. First of all, if Streeck stresses the poetic qualities of Hussein's language, it is also worth noting that there is an undeniable literary or poetic undertone in his own writing. This is particularly apparent in the titles of some of the chapters (*Crazy Days*, p. 319; *The Story of the Red Capri*, p. 340), or in unexpected metaphorical constructions (comparison of the car repair shop to a clinic, p. 364). There is also what Roland Barthes has called a "tender attention to details"; for example when Hussein is having his lunch, not only do we learn that he is eating (which is obvious), but we are told *what* he is eating: "He has warmed a pita bread in a microwave and is eating it with vegetables and hummus, seated on a desk in the garage" (p. 223). This literary dimension makes *Self-Making Man* not only an engaging treatise on human communication, but also an enjoyable read in the most common sense of the word.

Equally important is the fact that there is an underlying *philosophy* in Streeck's book that amounts to much more than the simple use of philosophical references. Because Streeck studies human communication and interaction in the natural environment (in different natural ecologies, as he calls it) and not under laboratory conditions, he is able to develop a true theory of the body and of its way of inhabiting the world: gesture, one of the most complex and most mysterious means of establishing the relationship between the body and its *Umwelt*, "is grounded in the body's indigenously position in the world, its life form: its forward-looking attitude toward the world, its relatedness to objects, obstacles, and forces" (p. 276). In the conclusion, this philosophy of the body inhabiting the world and creating *Umwelten* through various communicative practices (p. 379) is stated even more clearly: the individual actor's interaction with his environment "brings into relief the always open-ended relationship between practice/habit/routine and contingent situation, between 'sediment' and 'spontaneity', between repetition and change" (p. 284). Or, in other words, the human body and human communication are inseparable from *practices* that "reside in individual human bodies, who acquire the majority of them from 'the society' and 'the culture' by participating in their public commerce, but adapt them and blend them with 'self-made' practices, routinized solutions to recurrent tasks and circumstances in the life-world, and perhaps infused with a personal style (signature)" (p. 67–68). This is precisely what I propose to call — following, but also distorting Roland Barthes' expression — *mathesis singularis*: the study of an individual actor's communicative behaviour which permits us to find a balance between the idiosyncratic and the general, but also — and this is one of the great merits of Streeck's study — to ground the often rather abstract philosophical theories it draws upon in the realm of the concrete, for Streeck literally *shows us* how the body inhabits the world, what corporeal means it uses to build meaning upon it, to conceptualise it, to share it with others. The dynamic of the book, as I have already stated, rests in its capacity to pass from extremely minute analyses of concrete communicative situations to general considerations.



More generally speaking, this philosophy of the body is also a philosophy of life. After all, it is no accident that the word “life” appears in the subtitle of the book. The word, if I am not mistaken, seems to be endowed with several meanings. First of all, there is what might be called a “current” meaning: the book focuses on one workday in the “ordinary life” of a car repair shop owner. But then there is also a philosophical meaning: “(...) to understand the body and give it its proper place in our social theories, we must understand it as *life* and recognize in its communicative movements the logic that is characteristic of the self-organization of all life and movement. (...) Gesticulation cannot be described and explained within the traditional categories of subject, agent, and communicative intent, for the one who makes gestures is an autonomous, unsupervised living body, making sense of the oncoming world by moving toward it, grasping it, taking hold of it (...)” (p. 386). Briefly, the living body, as Streeck conceives of it, is situated at the crossroads between cultural habitus and spontaneity, between learned or culturally acquired behaviour and idiosyncratic “signature”, between the singular and the general. But there is, I believe, also a third meaning of “life”, perhaps not as explicit, but equally important: a poetic one. Apart from being a book on human communication and interaction, *Self-Making Man* is a moving tribute to life in all its mystery and wonder, condensed into the communicative activities of one particular human being on one particular day, and my own personal acquaintance with the author, if I may say so, gives me reason to believe that stressing this third meaning is by no means an over-interpretation.

Self-Making Man is, in every way, an exceptional book. Not only because of its unparalleled richness and its analytic rigour combined with vivid imagination. One is tempted to quote the poet and say that it leaves the reader “a sadder and a wiser man”. Wiser, because many aspects of human communication become, thanks to Streeck’s patient analyses, significantly less opaque. Sadder, because the reader realizes all the more acutely that this communication with all its complexity will forever remain a mystery. But is this, after all, a reason for sadness?