

*From Here to Where?
Roads as Metaphors for Self & the Work of Anita Groener*

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Of the many metaphors that comprise and shape selfhood, and of the many images we deploy to think about 'self', that of 'self as road' is surprisingly uncommon. Even when we shift our attention to the idea of 'time' and consider self as a process that unfolds and enfolds over time, the metaphor of self as road retains its rarity while at the same time remaining implicit in a still more abstract concept which philosophers have called 'The Moving Time Metaphor.'ⁱ Time is here imagined as 'objects' which 'move past' an observer. Where the observer is located is understood as the present, the space 'in front' of the observer is the future and the space 'behind' is the past. The idea of the 'passage of time' is then understood as the motion of objects past the observer 'from' the future 'through' the present 'to' the past. So ingrained is this metaphor of time in our ways of structuring reality, and of constructing our 'selves' as subjects of this reality, that we need to be reminded that it is a metaphor and not 'literally' true. It is just one amongst a number of ways for fabricating our concept of time.

If we now think of self, in all its complexity, as a process or as a project then we must somehow map this idea of self onto our metaphors of time. This we can do verbally or, as Anita Groener does, visually. In doing this she uses the idea of 'The Moving Observer' which Lakoff and Johnson have called the second major metaphor for time.ⁱⁱ Doing this leads us to think of time as locations in a landscape. As the observer 'passes' these locations so we are led to think of the observer's motion as the 'passage' of time and of the distance between the observer and those locations in the landscape as the 'amount' of time 'passed'. These metaphors arise from our most basic experiences of being in the world and they recur in languages throughout the world. It does not seem to be possible to think about 'time' without using such metaphors.

But do such metaphors have to find their exclusive expression in natural languages? Work like Groener's suggests that the answer to this is that visual languages can build upon natural language metaphors, and then re-present them in the particular way that pictorial modes so excel, namely as expressions to be apprehended *simultaneously* rather than *serially*, as is the case in natural languages which necessarily unfold over time.



For the ancient Greeks, their level but unpaved roads served to connect cities with religious centres and to enable trade. The great network of Roman roads primarily served military and political functions.ⁱⁱⁱ The best of them were up to five metres wide, often paved, in straight lines marked by milestones. Notwithstanding such sophistication, the river maintained its edge on the road in ancient traditions as the likely metaphor for the passage of life.^{iv} In modern times the road becomes dominant, signifying the cultural transformation of the natural. More than that, being 'on the road' has, after Jack Kerouac, become a potent contemporary metaphor for self-knowledge and also a suggested means of gaining it. Yet roads retain a deeper connection to the more ancient symbol of the river via the properties of water.



Groener's pictorial work shares that deep connection with contemporary music such as that of the American composer John Adams.^v In the sleeve notes to his own 2004 *Road Movies* (for piano, pianos, and violin), Adams speaks of his music in ways that resonate with Groener's reflections on the connections between roads and her self. Adams speaks of this music as 'travel music' which 'passes through harmonic and textural regions as one would pass through a landscape on a car trip'; there are movements of 'almost motionless contemplation' and others which shift 'into high gear with syncopated accents making the surface bump and stutter with unexpected shifts and swerves'; there is 'the possibility of having similar or even identical material played at a very slight delay, thereby creating a kind of planned resonance'; the acoustically identical sounds of two pianos constantly changing the pulse of the music 'provide a kind of giddy uncertainty to the forward motion'; and, finally, the 2001 piece *American Berserk* has a surface which 'is studded with sudden twists and curves and punctuated with unexpected stabs of syncopation and unpredictable , bipolar shifts of mood and tempo'. One key source for some of Adams' pieces was the regular, infinitely modulated motions of waves on a sea surface giving rise to 'ripples', 'regularities' and 'undulations' in the music.



It is no accident that the language of a composer could so readily be transposed to the pictorial work of Anita Groener. This is because both Adams and Groener are exploring the abstract expressive possibilities of the road in contemporary culture as a fertile source for representing the temporal structure of our lives as each and every one of them moves inexorably forward towards its own ultimate destination(s). If music can sometimes sound like its referents (when, that is, it has them), then by analogy some pictorial art might exhibit a kind of visual onomatopoeia. Self understood as a journey, as on a road, offers pictorial opportunities such as these: somewhere to start and somewhere to finish; passages

of movement which curve back on themselves, perhaps tangling into knots which hamper forward movement; knots unravelling and once again releasing energies for forward movement, albeit in repetitive spirals or snaking curves; many roads on many levels ultimately coalescing, from the perspective of a backward glance, into one large meandering road which seems to stop where – here! – as though Fate or Destiny always intended it to be so; mistakes made are left to remain where they were made; and, from the enclosed inwardness of those pictures without horizons, the return of the horizon in the later work, with its allowances for what might lie beyond, sounds a quiet unsentimental optimism as the register of *Crossing*.



Groener's roads, while all the time relying on human presence, have no humans present other than her unrepresented self. They are roads of quiet solitude. Achieving this sense of calm and quiet silence is her criterion for success in this work. It is not insignificant that she especially loves the light just before dawn. This is for her a luminous realm of ambiguity when everything once again begins to retake visible form, just as it always has done in the endlessly repetitive rhythms of life. At that moment, one quietly waits for things to happen. Those hints of colour which return to her work, which is largely composed in a chromatic range from black to grey white, appear like the faint hues of dawn to mark a very personal sense of where her own road is taking her.

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ⁱ Lakoff, G. & Johnson M. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 141-142.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 145-146.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harvey, P. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 364-365.

^{iv} Cooper, J.C. *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols*. (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1988).

^v Adams, J. *Road Movies*. (New York: Nonesuch Records, 2004).