

Rabbit Hole and Hamster Wheel

Thoughts on Joram Schön's Roadside Distraction

When you go on a road trip, the old saying “the journey is the destination” finally seems to apply. You look left and right; the laws of the highway prevail. Sometimes you need gas or a snack—fuel for the body, that is. In the displays of American gas stations, you find far more artificial beverages than at German ones: Gatorades in every color imaginable, fuel for body and mind, so to speak.

My first encounter with Joram Schön was an exchange about chocolate bars. I told him a story about a man I had met one night in a bar who lost himself entirely in a monologue about the advantages and disadvantages of individual candy bars. He could describe the clear distinctions between a Baby Ruth, a 5th Avenue, a Milky Way, a Kit Kat, a Chunky, a Snickers, various Reese's products, a Rocky Road, a Wonka Bar, a Twix (of course), a Mr. Goodbar, four different Hershey's bars, and a Three Musketeers. He could also explain the subtle difference between an Almond Joy and a Bounty, as well as between an Abba-Zaba, a PayDay, and a Whatchamacallit. With his professional approach, he even had a very clear opinion about whom one could trust: always someone who chooses a Snickers, never someone who prefers a Twix.

This “detour,” this diversion in the road trip of conversation (which knows no detours because the journey *is* the destination), reminded me of Joram himself—for he responded unexpectedly by explaining his own perspective. The “Roadside Distraction” became the actual conversation. As always, he followed the principle: just keep driving, almost no matter where, just don't stand still.

So I wrote Joram a message and asked him about his favorite chocolate bar. He answered circuitously:

About thirteen years ago I would have said Reese's, even though it was really PayDay. Back then you could only get those bars in two or three video rental stores in Berlin, and it was always something special. On Friday nights I would rent three films and one Reese's, sometimes two and a PayDay. On the way home I would already eat a piece of the Reese's. But it's more of a praline, really. Now that you can get Reese's in every late-night corner shop, I hardly eat it anymore. When it became so popular here, I sort of boycotted it because the myth was gone. Once in New York, in midsummer, I bought a Reese's because it felt like something I had to do—because now I was in America. But chocolate bars don't taste so good in the heat of summer. I love the ice-cream versions of chocolate bars, though. Yesterday I had a Snickers in my bag. Actually, Snickers is what I like best. Snickers always works. As a child I was addicted to Bounty. I always found Milky Way disgusting—it made me dizzy and nauseous. So PayDay is really my favorite. Salty and sweet together. So good. But on a day-to-day basis I eat Snickers most often ^_^ And you?

After this conversation, I felt a deep and lasting respect for Joram. His affirmative, devoted relationship to futile acts—like the road trip itself—seems incomparable to me. There appears to be a mischievous pleasure in watching people get stuck in the hamster wheel of life in their own individual ways, filling it with activities, consumer goods, and passions that are at once pleasurable and faintly bored. Time is limited, repetition inevitable, orientation scarce—the view from the car window is poor when it comes to the future. What is beautiful is only failure and the distractions along the roadside. The small and large, deep and not-so-deep rabbit holes one can fall into while supposedly heading

somewhere else. Like the question of the best chocolate bar, into which one could delve for hours.

What I particularly liked about Joram's message was that in the end—though the road of the sentence did not suggest it—he arrived at a conclusion. There was a longing for resolution—as if every “Roadside Distraction” ultimately presupposes a destination one is trying to reach. Yet the destination itself is sometimes the true distraction—a placeholder for the fact that such a destination cannot really exist, because it is always futile. An excuse to stop along the way, precisely because one can never truly arrive.

I especially loved the almost laconic question “and you?” at the end of his elaborate reflections. That Joram assumed I would follow him down the rabbit hole of chocolate bars moved me. The strategy worked: my relationship to chocolate bars deepened instantly—it is now far more differentiated than it was before our conversation. One could not answer his question with a mere product name. Thankfully, the situation had become more complicated.

I like that Joram claims Milky Way makes him dizzy (I always think: how strange, a chocolate bar named after the galaxy). In another message he sends me airplane sick bags and asks what I associate with them. I tell him about a flight during which the pilot had to abort landing several times. So abrupt and so low to the ground—then so steeply back up (the landing gear already extended)—that several passengers grabbed the sick bags from the seat pockets and, as they say, “vomited their souls out.” I myself had no bag behind the magazine and, in desperation, threw up into the newspaper of the man sitting next to me. The “go-around”—the ultimate roadside distraction.

Joram and I both have no driver's license. All the more amusing that we both tend toward traffic metaphors. I keep thinking about the technique of “multi-lane writing.” About punctuation marks as traffic signals. The period as a red light and the semicolon as yellow. At the same time, in reality, I am merely the passenger who puts her feet on the dashboard. You can see it clearly in the black-and-white photograph—of course we were flashed by the speed camera, because once again we ignored the speed limit.

Joram and I share both West Berlin local patriotism and a longing for the “wide distance,” which seem almost to go hand in hand. We accept the flaws in our apartments with mild nostalgia and frugality.

In the deepening of individual conversational rabbit holes, techniques of zigzagging unfold: a feint by which the hare, non-linear and producing distractions, hops away. What is he fleeing from? The Berlin city foxes, perhaps? Or is the cunning Joram afraid of becoming roadkill on his odyssey along the American highway? I remember a one-sided love in which I increasingly thought: *Am I just your roadkill?*

Perhaps it is a bit like in *Alice in Wonderland*, where things alternately shrink and grow in relation to the protagonist. The proportions and units of measurement shift in Joram Schön's works as well—nothing is reliable except him: the ultimate protagonist of his own self-shifting world. From “Jack in the Box” becomes “Jo(ram) in the box”—you never know when and at what speed he will appear. Or whether he is the shop owner or the customer—who is “Joe” of “Joe's Gym”?

I keep thinking of “ROY's” gas station, which seems to me similar to “Tom's Diner.” In Suzanne Vega's song Tom's Diner, not much happens—and at the same time, everything does. The dramaturgy of the song itself is a single “Roadside Distraction.” Only that the

“road” seems to be the sidewalk in front of the diner. From a safe distance, as the passenger in her own life, the protagonist—who also acts as narrator—reports on the entirely ordinary and yet extraordinary occurrences of everyday life. A kind of narrated “Where’s Waldo,” without punchline or goal, only the rhythmic background noise of the street, orchestrated by obeyed and disobeyed traffic rules. Sometimes someone enters Tom’s Diner, which feels like a spaceship only peripherally connected to the planet beneath it.

Joram and I both learned from our fathers how to eat currywurst. My father, who was a taxi driver in West Berlin, even kept a record of the quality of the various currywurst stands at which he stopped night after night. The notebook—which Joram immediately asked me about—has unfortunately been lost in the thirty years since. In the world of currywurst there is only one relevant question: “With casing or without casing?” Joram says: “The casing—the second brain.” And I think: is it better, more vulgar, to consume the sausage with or without its brain? Joram gives the only correct answer—in the spirit of the “Roadside Distraction”: “I always take both.”

And I think: What interests me about two is three. More is more. Long live distraction.

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