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Book Review

Présentation longue

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The view of a passenger sitting by the window, her eyes lost in a passing landscape, is a rather unremarkable urban scene, a banal expression of our mobile lives repeated infinite times with the precise regularity of a train timetable. Such a simple gesture presumes certain elements that make it possible. In Western Europe, it presumes that it is aesthetically pleasing to look through the window, that the carriage is relatively safe and quiet and the person does not feel the need to talk to others, that she thinks of herself as a passenger, a consumer, a citizen who can, and wishes to, move freely. It may presume also the certainty that the train will safely arrive at its destination at the scheduled time. On the most basic level, this in itself presumes that the rails are in place and the whole infrastructure is run under social, economic and political criteria that make it sustainable. In this ensemble we have aesthetic dispositions, social conventions, economic doctrines, legal structures, technological imaginaries and political agreements. Some may now seem contingent, for example whether the railway should be a state monopoly or open to competition and privatization. But essentially the act of travelling by train seems fairly natural, something deeply ingrained in the background of our everyday lives. Yet all this had to be invented. Like other modes of transport aspiring for a relevant place in society, the railway journey had to fit, wrestle with, change and adapt to an existing order, a social, cultural, technological and politico-economic habitat with which it co-evolved.

Looking at the origins of the railway journey

The Railway Journey examines this co-evolution. It analyses how this new mode of transport found its place in European societies and, in the process, changed not just

ways of travelling and communication, but also modes of feeling and sensing. By looking at how the encounter with a machine destabilized old habits and invented new ones, this classic of railway and transport studies traces the emergence of the new 'industrial subject' or 'industrialized traveller'. The Railway Journey provides an exemplar of the type of interdisciplinary synthesis needed to understand the dynamics of social and technological change. Schivelbusch illustrates his argument with reference to the railway journey itself but also makes incursions into other related spheres that are symbolic of the modern culture of movement such as of Second Empire Paris and the department store. This review focuses on what are arguably the more central elements of his analysis such as the institutionalization of the railway as an autonomous mode of traffic, the creation of new ways of experiencing landscape and the emergence of new urban spaces.

The old way of travelling: the stagecoach

To fully understand the degree of novelty introduced by the railway as a mode of transport Schivelbusch constantly refers the reader to the stagecoach as the form of transport that it displaced. The stagecoach was the most extensive and reliable mode of land transport before the emergence of the railway. It provided a high degree of flexibility in terms of destination – as long as one had the money, one could travel to almost any place connected to a road network – and routes were operated by different companies in a regime of open competition. Stagecoach travel presumed a particular way of relating to others and the landscape. The interior design –two rows of seats facing each other– encouraged conversation during the journey, something that became a social convention. Moreover, the windows enabled the passenger sensuous proximity to the landscape being traversed. Lively and detailed descriptions of fellow travelers and the landscape are an essential element of the many literary accounts of the stagecoach journey written at the time.

The new way of travelling and the institutionalization of the 'machine-ensemble'

The development of the railway ushered in a new era of travel, heralding the decline of stagecoach travel whose complete disappearance would eventually take place with the widespread use of the car in the first quarter of the twentieth century. But such was the novelty of the railway as a mode of transport that, at first, society

misunderstood its needs and possibilities as a technical concept. And so ingrained were the ways of thinking about travel that the stagecoach had engendered that passengers were culturally and physiologically unprepared for the new sensory experiences that it enabled. As a technical concept, the railway is an assemblage of the vehicles and the rails, what Silverbusch calls a 'machine-ensemble'. Such indivisible unity requires an autonomous traffic system and provides a disciplined form of mobility. Thus, the technical concept of the railway does not easily accept the type of flexible, individual traffic that characterizes stagecoach travel on roads or boat travel on canals. Yet these were the very terms in which the railway was first thought of and, accordingly, persistent efforts were made to regulate it through liberal principles of competition applicable to canals or roads. It was only later, after the resistance by the prevailing economic thought had been weakened, that the railway as an indivisible unit of 'machine-ensemble' was institutionalized with the establishment of railway monopolies.

Panoramic vision, new ways of feeling and sensing

The novelty of the railway was also evident in the way it challenged acquired habits of experiencing the journey. The relatively slow pace of stagecoach travel allowed passengers to relate to the surroundings through the appreciation of proximate objects in the foreground. The railway, with its speed and directedness of movement, put an end to such an intense experience. Describing the train as a projectile, the passengers would conceive of themselves as being shot through a landscape that had become unrecognizable. Their senses still attuned to pre-industrial travel, prevented passengers from knowing what to do with the vista offered by the train. It lacked objects of curiosity and had become dull. 'All they saw', Schivelbush notes, 'was evanescent landscape'. The dissolution of this landscape was caused by the habit acquired during stagecoach travel of focusing equally on proximate and distant objects. But the result of this sheer proliferation of visual impressions was the fatigue of the senses.

Eventually passengers would learn to adapt to the mechanization of perception and, instead of trying to accommodate the effects of the new technology within old modes of sensing, they began to internalize new ways of seeing. A new mode of perception developed that took speed as the source of aesthetically pleasing experiences. Speed did not cause the landscape to disappear but instead put it in motion and made it attractive. Searching for a name that captured the new experience people found the

concept of 'panorama', that popular optical gadget that put images in rapid succession, a fitting term. What made panoramic vision distinctive is that it 'no longer experienced evanescence: evanescent reality has become the new reality'.

Passengers also learnt to cope with the proliferation of visual stimuli by adopting new habits while travelling, such as reading. Reading would have been unthinkable within the stagecoach whose design encouraged travelers to engage in intense conversation. But the increase in the number of passengers in each carriage made such interaction in small groups difficult and reading emerged as a practical way to neutralize the embarrassment of silence.

The contingent origins of the railway were also reflected in the design of the carriage. Initially the railway was understood as a string of stagecoaches pulled by a steam engine. Accordingly the interior of the carriage replicated that of the stagecoach with individual, self-contained rooms accessible only through an external door and rows of seats facing each other. It was only later that the practical inadequacies of this design were evident and carriages adopted the design dominant today, comprised of a single space with many rows of seats, linked with other carriages at each end.

An architecture of a mobile modernity

The notion of the railway journey conjures up an image of movement and of transit between places, an existence in space but, save for the carriage, lacking a definable place. And despite Robert Louis Stevenson's famous maxim, 'To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive', however enjoyable a journey may be, all finish (and, indeed, start) in a concrete place. The focus on building high-spec transport hubs today, such as Heathrow's new T-5, highlights the importance of creating places that attract users, provide comfort in the inevitable wait before a journey and, in their architectural form, speak of speed and modernity.

Schivelbusch makes it clear that this is nothing new. Like Monet's Gare St Lazare, Schivelbusch depicts how the growth of the railway changed architecture. Steel and glass were mobilised to create a 'light space', which would create a sensation of novelty, of the future and, to use Schivelbusch's own term, of 'evanescence'. Railway stations, relying on immense glass structures appeared abstract and fleeting, becoming disassociated from place and stability, which were represented by heavy stone structures.

But stations are located in a city and Schivelbusch makes it clear that this new form of mobility altered the cityscape by entering into it, and brings modernity into its heart. While railways did not infringe upon city centres, they did increase traffic volume which then had the effect of creating the need for systems of urban street regulation. Haussman's Paris is used as an example in this, allowing a rationalisation of movement, which also served to aid the city's business needs. If the old Paris had been for pedestrians, the new was geared towards modern traffic. Even the new department stores were made feasible through the transport networks that delivered customers, and the styles of movement and circulation which the railway inspired. In this sense, Schivelbusch reminds the reader that the relevance of the railway, or of any studies concerning mobility lies not only in what occurs during movement, but the impact that this has on places of origin and of arrival.

An enduring legacy

The Railway Journey is full of compelling insights and, despite being published in 1977 is still relevant and poignant today. The scope of the book is wide and, owing to this, some reflections seem to be poorly grounded and somewhat generalized in terms of empirical evidence (for example, the latter section on department stores). The book has become a classic in transport studies and is widely cited in sociological and cultural studies of modernity and the senses. More than that, however, the book has acted as a springboard for further research since its publication. Because of this, a second, revised edition may be justified.

About the author

Wolfgang Schivelbusch (born 1941) is an independent cultural historian living in New York.