

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Reflections on rails in the city

Journal Item

How to cite:

Revell, George (2014). Reflections on rails in the city. *Transfers: International Journal of Mobility Studies*, 4(2) pp. 124–130.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 Berghahn Books

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.3167/TRANS.2014.040209>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Reflections on Rails in the City

George Revill, The Open University

As the articles in this special section show, railways mark out urban experience in very distinctive ways. In the introduction, Steven D. Spalding makes plain there is no clear relationship between railway development and the shape and size of cities. For many cities, suburban rail travel has been either substantially insignificant or a relative latecomer as a factor in urban growth and suburbanization. Walking, tramways and the omnibus may indeed have had a much greater impact on built form, yet the cultural impact of railways on the city life should not be minimized. Iconic city stations are both objects of civic pride and socially heterogeneous gateways to the promise of a better urban life. The physical presence of substantial tracts of infrastructure, viaducts, freight yards and warehousing, divide and segregate residential districts encouraging and reinforcing status differentials between communities. Subways, metros, and suburban railways open on to the often grubby quotidian underbelly of city life whilst marking out a psychic divide between work and domesticity, city and suburb. Railways not only produced new forms of personal mobility but by defining the contours, parameters, and possibilities of this experience, they have come to help shape how we think about ourselves as urbanized individuals and societies. The chapters in this special section mark out some of this territory in terms of, for example: suburbanization, landscape, and nationhood (Joyce); the abstractions of urban form implicit in the metro map (Schwetman); the underground as a metaphor for the topologically enfolded interconnections of urban process (Masterson-Algar); and the competing lay and professional interests freighting urban railway development (Soppelsa). In the introduction Spalding is right to stress both the multiple ways that railways shape urban experience and the complex processes that continuously shape and re-shape urban cultures as sites of contest and sometimes

conflict. As Richter suggests, in the nineteenth century only rail travel demanded the constant and simultaneous negotiation of both urban social disorder and the systematic ordering associated with large technological systems and corporate business. Thus “the railroad stood squarely at the crossroad of the major social, business, cultural and technological changes remaking national life during the second half of the nineteenth century.”¹

Cultural portrayals of railways reflect back widely held concerns as societies came to terms with the experiences of urbanization and modernity. For some Victorian painters city stations were stages for a rich social theatre of urban life conveying a range of plots and subplots with all the qualities of a nineteenth-century novel. This is most famously exemplified in W.P. Frith’s painting of a crowded station platform at the Great Western Railway’s terminus at London,² Paddington, *The Railway Station* (1862). The station itself is simultaneously a centrifugal and centripetal force, what Richards and Mackenzie call “an extraordinary agent of social mixing.”³ The passage of goods, movements of people, commuters, visitors and migrants, and flows of information and ideas through the station integrate and co-ordinate the rhythms of local, national, and international routines and events. At other times the heterophony of railway carriage and station platform is a focus of conflict, acting as a resonant and lively conduit for political messaging. As Lisa Mitchell has shown in her study of language and regional politics in southern India since the 1950s, railways continue to act as powerful and informal conduits for political communication.⁴ They are sites for protests, violence, and graffiti, feeding back local and regional complaints and objections to the centre of power. Perhaps in this way we can come to understand better a range of incidents including the Dutch train hostage crisis in 1975 involving a group claiming independence for the south-east Asian islands of South Molucca; the Madrid train bombings of 2004, often attributed to al-Qaeda inspired terrorists; or perhaps the full-scale riots which broke out during rush hour at Constitución station, Buenos Aires in May 2007.⁵ In these

examples the rhythmic counterpoint of routine, system failure, pent up anger, and spontaneous protest produce and reshape the civic sphere, creating direct connections between local, national, and international concern. Thus railways produce a wide range of temporary and contingent political urban spaces.

Railways also figure as agents of alienation and estrangement in urban life. They are for example a recurrent motive in the work of the Greco-Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978). Pictures such as *The Anxious Journey* (1913) and *Gare Montparnasse (The Melancholy of Departure)* (1914) are dream-like works, which seem to echo Freud without owing him any direct influence.⁶ A conception of urban life as individualistic and atomistic is also made articulate in Theodore Dreiser's (1871–1945) first novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), in which a young woman flees country life for the city. Dreiser, a newspaper reporter in Pittsburgh had become interested in the work of the social philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), who coined the term “survival of the fittest.”⁷ As Lehan argues, *Sister Carrie* can be read as an exercise in Spencerian principles of matter in motion overlapping cyclical and linear time.⁸ Dreiser describes Chicago in terms of physical force, as a magnet, possessing a compelling attraction that draws people to it with pulsating energy. Urban crowds are matter in motion, sweeping onward through space and time. Chicago is the epitome of a railway city and the city became a model for the characteristically zoned patterns of urban development typical of the nineteenth-century railway city codified by Robert E. Park and Earnest Burgess in “Chicago School” Sociology. An important intellectual influence on the “Chicago School” was Georg Simmel (1858–1918), and his concept of “the stranger” gives form, substance, and voice to the half-conscious fears and anxieties experienced by people on trains.⁹ Railways then might be understood as complicit in generating as well as simply reflecting some of the important conceptual frameworks by which we come to articulate urban experience.

How then to continue taking forward the sort of interdisciplinary cultural railway history advocated in this special section? Perhaps one of the first and most important moves is to recognize, as John Schwetmann says quoting geographer Denis Wood, that maps or indeed any other form of representation are propositions or contentions rather than unproblematic documentary sources. As the articles in this special section show, histories of transport, travel, and mobility have moved well beyond naïve empiricist reading of novels, paintings, and films. The vitalization of transport history refigured as the history of transport, travel, and mobility has been given new dynamism and insight by scholars in related fields of literary studies, art history, sociology, and cultural studies who have brought new theoretical, methodological, and empirical agendas. Yet there is still work to do if scholars working with histories of transport, travel, and mobility, and railway history in particular, are to set new theoretical and empirical agendas for ourselves.

Firstly, there is a continued need to be more reflexive, critical, and creative by better situating the work of theorists like Wolfgang Schivelbusch, who are central to the study of railways and culture. To this extent Spalding's reference to Schivelbusch's lesser-known thoughts on the railway station and the city are indeed most welcome. Schivelbusch's phenomenology can all too easily produce univocal assertions of the experience of rail travel and by implication urban life.¹⁰ Though, for instance, the idea of panoramic perception has become a dominant metaphor for academics, this is only one of a number of possible ways to think about the experience of rail travel, either historically or geographically. For those travelers who are not culturally familiar with the dominant Western aesthetic of landscape perspective, or those experiencing the conviviality, crowding, incivility, and sometimes rowdiness of third-class travel in nineteenth-century Europe, contemporary Asia, and Africa, or amongst overcrowded urban commuters, panoramic perspective may well not be the dominant mode of experience. Thus Schivelbusch's work does not necessarily afford analysis

grounded in the sort of contested understandings central for instance to Soppelsa's article, or indeed for comparison or contrast between different modes of representation. Taken in isolation, as for example John D. Schwetman shows, the London Tube map can certainly be understood as an exercise in abstraction. Yet when considered as part of London Underground's broader marketing strategy, which includes the richly figurative posters and brochures which UERL and later London Transport used to advertise the newly built suburban housing estates developed along their routes, different interpretations emerge. Rather than simply creating an alienated no-place disconnected from real geographies, or indeed annihilating space by presenting the world primarily from the perspective of temporal distance, the Tube map seems to work in a rather more duplicitous manner. Suggesting connection on one level (lines and stations) and disguising it on another (actual topography of settlements and suburbs), the map simultaneously conceals and reveals the intimate connection of work and home that enable city and suburb in tandem to become the separate foci for a modern domesticated consumerism.¹¹

Secondly, as authors here demonstrate, there is also much to be gained by engaging cultural histories of transport, travel, and mobility with more recent social and cultural theory. However, here too we need to move beyond simply responding to existing theory and develop new ways of conceptualizing the relationships between railways as technological infrastructure and the urbanizing cultural mobilities of an elaborating modernity. It is most refreshing to find authors in this section drawing on concepts such as appropriation (Peter Soppelsa) and topology (Araceli Masterson-Algar). However, as the articles here suggest, such conceptual material requires careful deployment. As Paul Ricoeur shows, appropriation needs to be considered in dialogue with distanciation; vernacular and syncretic reworkings are co-constructed with abstractions and objectifications.¹² The networks of interconnection and modes of territorialization produced by railway development reorganize and build from

existing rather than simply erase existing geographies of the city. Whilst topology seems to provide some of the most useful vocabulary for understanding this spatial complexity, it also invokes a complex ontological politics. This requires a more symmetrical consideration of materials, processes, and cultural resources than that enabled by consideration of symbolic and textual representational alone. Here cultural histories of railways and the city need to take into account some of the more symmetrical approaches to materiality and culture developed within sociologies of science and technology and which are best represented within mobilities studies by work on, for example, automobility and velomobility.¹³ Though it is good to find contributors to this section drawing on the work of theorists like Paul Virilio and Henri Lefebvre, these iconic theorists of the modern and indeed “postmodern” condition also require reflexive critique in the context of mobility histories. Some years ago Tim Cresswell and others argued very persuasively that celebrations of a politics of mobility such as that suggested by Paul Virilio require very careful historicization.¹⁴ Not everyone is equally mobile or has access to the resources of mobility and not everyone moves by choice. The political resources of mobility are very unequally distributed through society. Virilio’s coupling of speed and the visual is both intuitively persuasive and also potentially problematic; though it has become commonplace to read speed and Cartesian perspective together as primary agents of power in modernity, others argue that the experience of modernity has very distinctive and potentially subversive haptic and auditory dimensions. Steven Connor shows this in his conceptualization of the modern auditory “I.” Drawing for instance on Don Ihde’s self-styled post-phenomenology of technology, the potential to think of railways as media of communication rather than simply a network infrastructure has yet to be fully explored.¹⁵ Though Lefebvre’s (2004) *Rhythmanalysis* has informed many studies of mobility, including those concerned with railways, it too does not constitute an unproblematic starting point. As Burgin shows, Lefebvrian-derived rhythmanalysis is much more

comfortable with regulatory structurings and embodied affectivities than the meaningfulness of reflexive cultural experience. Rather, Burgin has forcefully argued that a major stumbling block is Lefebvre's essentially passive understanding of perception.¹⁶ In this context rhythm is something which is done to people and rhythmanalysis remains firmly grounded in the search for a geology of underlying truth lying beyond historical specificity.¹⁷ Railway carriages and stations might appear to be archetypal models for the tacit regulatory structuring of embodied experiences of flux and flow, however we should remember that they also have distinctive, and iconic presence in the creative elaborations of popular imaginations and public histories. This suggests the need to develop a rather more co-constructed and balanced relationship between the apparently hidden underlying rhythms of mobility, the cadences of its immediate and affective practice and the reflective social and cultural meanings through which we make sense of and come to understand these experiences reflexively.

Articles in this section do some very useful work demonstrating the complexity of relationships between circulations of people and other forms of circulation and fixation, for instance capital accumulation, modes of governance, nationhood, personal and social identity, the physical fabric of cities and suburbs. Yet, as authors here demonstrate, we should not be afraid to look for new metaphors and theoretical resources in our interdisciplinary engagement with railway history. These might include, for example, ideas of appropriation and topology or indeed work by Conner and Ihde. Take for instance the contemporary city railway station, part shopping mall, part leisure destination, and the departure point for airline-style international high-speed travel. Rather than being simply gateways to the city, as Schivelbusch understands them, these are what Alessia Ferrarini calls "significant urban locations" in themselves.¹⁸ In this context, what might be produced by thinking these through the conception of "terminal" present in the work of architectural critic Martin Pawley (1939–

2008) and deriving both from the transport hub and the computer? Referencing both Connor and Ihde, a terminal is a nodal point for the access and exchange of a heterogeneous mix of information, flows, and services – it intensifies, broadcasts and amplifies.¹⁹ Thus for Ferrarini the contemporary conception of the railway station based on the maximization of its income-generating capacity is envisaged as a junction for different kinds of traffic, a “fulcrum for the reorganization of the surrounding area itself.” This marks a “transformation in the very conception of the railway station.”²⁰ Like the computer terminal, the station might be thought of as a junction point within a territorial system, of mixed traffic flow, a place in which movement is translated into millions of individual lifestyle choices, acquisitions, and purchases. A site in which desires, wants, needs, and expectations suggested by Schivebusch’s “gateway” are both generated and fulfilled. Railway stations exemplify the points where objects or actions are translated from one mode or register of circulation to another. The act of translation or transshipment marks their cultural location, their value as tradable commodities, and their significance within skeins of socially meaningful interaction.

George Reville is Senior Lecturer at the Open University. His research concerns issues of landscape, technology, culture, and identity. His current research interests bring issues of sound, mobility, and landscape together. His most recent book *Railway* (Reaktion Press, 2012) examines the railway as a cultural icon of modernity. E-mail:

george.reville@open.ac.uk

¹ A. Richter, *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 81, 83–84.

² S.J. Daniels, *Train Spotting: Images of the Railway in Art*, exhibition catalogue Nottingham Castle Museum (Nottingham: Castle Museum, 1985), 18; M. Freeman, *Railways and the*

Victorian Imagination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 237; J. Treuherz, “States of Mind,” in *The Railway: Art in the Age of Steam*, ed. I. Kennedy and J. Treuherz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 96–98.

³ J. Richards and J.M. MacKenzie, *The Railway Station: A Social History* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 138.

⁴ L. Mitchell, *Language, Emotion and Politics in South India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 2, 27–28.

⁵ G. Revill, *Railway* (London: Reaktion, 2012), 150–152.

⁶ Treuherz, *States of Mind*, 202–206; J. Thrall Soby, *Giorgio de Chirico* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 13–14; M. Holzhey, *De Chirico* (Köln: Taschen, 2005), 23–24; W. Schmied, *Giorgio De Chirico: The Endless Journey* (Munich: Prestel, 2002).

⁷ Revill, *Railway*, 153–157; R.C. Bannister, *Social Darwinism Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); G. Revill, “Liberalism, Paternalism and Corporate Culture: Local Politics in ‘Railway Derby’ 1865–75,” *Social History* 24 no. 2 (1999): 196–214.

⁸ L.R. Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 197–199.

⁹ R. Lindner, *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); G. Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. D. Frisby and M. Featherstone (London: Sage, 2002), 174–186.

¹⁰ G. Revill, “Perception, Reception and Representation: Wolfgang Schivelbusch and the Cultural History of Travel and Transport,” in *Mobility in History: Reviews and Reflections*, Yearbook of Transport, Travel and Mobility (T2M), ed. Peter Norton, Gijs Mom, Liz

Milward and Mathieu Flonneau (Suisse Neuchatel: Editions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, 2011), 34–35.

¹¹ Revill, *Railway*, 180.

¹² P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 31.

¹³ G. Revill, “Histories,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*, ed. P. Adey, D. Bissell, K. Hannam, P. Merriman and M. Sheller (London: Routledge, 2013), 513.

¹⁴ T. Cresswell, “The Production of Mobilities,” *New Formations* 43 no. 11–25 (2001): 13; C. Divall and G. Revill “Cultures of Transport: Representation, Practice and Technology,” *Transport History* 26 no. 1 (2005): 99–111.

¹⁵ Revill, *Histories*, 509–511; S. Connor, “The Modern Auditory I,” in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. R. Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), 203–223; D. Ihde, “If Phenomenology is an Albatross is Postphenomenology Possible?” in *Chasing Technoscience: Matrix of Materiality*, ed. D. Ihde and E. Selinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 117–130; D. Ihde, *Postphenomenology and Technoscience: The Peking Lectures* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009).

¹⁶ V. Burgin, *In/different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 30.

¹⁷ G. Revill, “Points of Departure: Listening to Rhythm in the Sonoric Spaces of the Railway Station,” *Urban Rhythms: Mobilities, Space and Interaction in the Contemporary City*, ed. R.J. Smith and K. Hetherington, Sociological Review Monographs (Oxford: Wiley/Blackwell/ The Sociological Review, 2013), 51–69.

¹⁸ A. Ferrarini, *Railway Stations: From the Gare de L’Est to Penn Station* (Milan: Electa Architecture, 2005), 12; Revill, *Railway*, 208.

¹⁹ M. Pawley, *Terminal Architecture* (London: Reaktion, 1998).

²⁰ Ferrarini, *Stations*, 11; Revill, *Listening*, 65–66.