

Writing Railway

In 2007 I was asked by Reaktion Books to write on railways for their Object series. The brief was to write a book with global coverage which interrogated the culture of railways as an iconic presence in modernity. I was asked to engage freely with cultural ideas and arguments but minimise use of academic jargon, find unusual angles on the cultural history of railways but also to give readers a sense of their historical development. Books in the series had single word titles so I was told it was to be called '*Railway*' not 'Railways' or 'A History of Railways'. The terseness, singularity and abstraction of the title seemed to me like a provocation suggesting a focus on ideas and material presences rather than 'matter of fact' railway history. As a geographer writing railway history and having a long term interest in interdisciplinary work, when asked to write this piece I took the opportunity to ask myself:

What travels when we write across disciplines? What is lost? What can be gained?

Though I think of myself as a cultural/historical geographer with interests in landscape, environment and the arts I had written a PhD about railways and published on the subject. My work focused on 19th century railway workers, settlements, lifestyles and senses of workplace identity. This work was grounded in social and cultural history, it dealt with issues of employer paternalism, corporate and workplace culture, rather than something easily recognisable as railway history. With a lifelong fascination for railways and some professional experience of writing historically on this topic, I still felt very much an outsider encroaching on someone else's sphere of expertise. Yet I was also enthused by the possibility of writing a history that engaged with cultural debates beyond the conventional confines of the discipline.

Before writing the book I had been thinking for some time about the ways in which cultural materials were used in transport history and with Colin Divall had written about this in *Transport History*¹. One conclusion from this was that I wanted to think about how railways could be placed within broader cultural histories in ways that were mutually informing. A second was that I did not want to reproduce verbatim well rehearsed cultural narratives of railway history; such as those concerning the experiential novelty of early railway travel, the homogenisation of time zones, nation building and the stitching together of continents, or more recently stories of loss, nostalgia, authenticity, heritage and preservation. A third conclusion was to engage constructively with the pioneering cultural history of railways written by Wolfgang Schivelbusch in ways that did something

other than replicate his well known analyses of panoramic perception, the machine ensemble and traumatic shock². My final thought was that even though this book was not aimed specifically at the discipline of cultural geography I wanted to clearly locate it in the conceptual resources of my own field. I wanted my version of railway history to be informed by issues of movement and stasis, the making and remaking of connections, borders and boundaries, difference and otherness, materiality and lived experience, and the uneven spatial and temporal patterning of modernity without allowing these to dictate the agenda. I wanted to play around with the idea of the railway as a means of communication, making, affording and giving shape to the meaningful experience of modernity³.

Working within the strict limits set by the publisher to keep it short, provide no more than five chapters and omit a separate conclusion, I worked out a writing strategy which was as much about pragmatics as principles. A passage from Thoreau's Walden in the introduction set the tone for a story concerning the technological transformation of both nature and culture. There were to be five thematic chapters which engaged with but were not dictated by the established conventions for writing the cultural history of railways. These chapters covered (1) the cultural accommodation of railways within the aesthetics of landscape, (2) nation states, the machinery, politics and sociology of technological networks, (3) the journey as biographical story making, (4) design, marketing and the making of cultural objects, and finally (5) transport sustainability and environmental discourse, with a brief return to the theme set by Thoreau in the context of Latour's sociology of science. These also provide some sort of historical trajectory through the book from the early decades of railway operation in chapters 1 and 2 and finishing with present day issues in chapters 4 and 5. The aim was to try and set railway history within themes that give form to the experience of cultural modernity, for example the reworking of concepts of nature and culture, politics technology and organisation, social individualism, commodities and commodifications and environmental concern.

When I reflect on the process of writing and the resulting text, I feel some satisfaction but also significant amounts of frustration. So what is lost when writing across disciplines? Well quite a lot actually. Perhaps the main thing is the kind of context that gives vitality and urgency to specific empirical materials and academic debates. To work across or synthesise between disciplines and debates whether these are long established or emergent is to run the risk of falling between established positions without enabling the reader to make the necessary connections. Situating work within recognised debates gives purpose and makes work accessible, relevant and usable by others. To successfully travel between disciplines, texts and their authors have to do a lot of work in order to explain themselves. Whatever its creative challenges, working within a predetermined

format does not always make this possible. I should have learned from Schivelbusch and remembered that providing conceptual tools which can be carried over from one discipline to another is one important way to enable materials and ideas to travel. Whatever their limitations, his development of easily identifiable concepts such as 'panoramic perception', or the 'machine ensemble', enable his work to speak eloquently across disciplines from mobility studies to art history⁴. In this respect Schivelbusch remains the model for writing interdisciplinary cultural histories of transport.

What is gained from writing railway history from an interdisciplinary position? Again I think the answer has to be 'quite a lot'. As both Wolfgang Schivelbusch and John Stilgoe⁵ have so capably demonstrated I remain convinced that decentering the study of railways from the established concerns of transport history and resituating it in broader themes concerning cultural modernity provides a range of fascinating possibilities. This includes moving the study of railways and landscape aesthetics on from a focus solely on panoramic perception⁶; theorising the railway as a means of communication within what Steven Connor calls 'the switch board of modern experience'⁷; or tracing the implications of cultural ecology in the railway corridor.

If asked would I do it differently? No probably not ... I would happily make the same mistakes all over again!

George Revill

The Open University

¹ Revill G and C. Divall. (2005) 'Cultures of transport: representation, practice and technology', *Transport History* **26** 1 pp.99-111.

² Schivelbusch, W., (1986), *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Leamington Spa: Berg. Revill, G (2011). 'Perception, reception and representation: Wolfgang Schivelbusch and the cultural history of travel and transport,' In: Norton, Peter; Mom, Gijs; Milward, Liz and Flonneau, Mathieu eds. *Mobility in History: reviews and reflections*. Yearbook of Transport, Travel and Mobility (T2M), 3. Neuchatel, Suisse: Editions Alphil-Presses universitaires suisses, pp. 31–48.

³ Revill G. (1994) 'Working the System: journeys through corporate culture in the "Railway Age"', *Environment and Planning D. Society and Space*. **12** pp.705-725.

⁴ Revill George (2013) 'Mobility history', in K Hannem, P Merriman, J. Urry eds. *Routledge Companion to Mobilities* Routledge.

⁵ Stilgoe R (1983) *Metropolitan corridor: railroads and the American scene*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT

⁶ Revill, G (2014) 'El Tren Fantasma: arcs of sound and the acoustic spaces of landscape', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39 pp. 333-344.

⁷ Revill, G. (2013) 'Points of departure: listening to rhythm in the sonic spaces of the railway station', RJ Smith and K Hetherington eds *Urban Rythms: mobilities, space and interaction in the contemporary city* Sociological Review Monographs pp.51-69.