SPECIAL SECTION ON RAILWAYS AND URBAN CULTURES

Rail Networks, Mobility, and the Cultures of Cities *Introduction to the Special Section*

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Abstract

Scholars writing about railway mobility have pointed to the rails' impact on the culture of cities, while urban theorists and critics have cited the crucial importance of movement and mobility to how cities are lived. A truly interdisciplinary approach, which balances the priorities of mobility studies and urban studies, and informs itself through compelling cultural artifacts (including visual, literary, or other media) offers insight into the processes of urban cultural production and their close link to the discursive valences of urban rail mobility.

Keywords

critique, logistics, mobility, perception, railways, urban space

The articles that make up this special section of *Transfers* have taken on a two-fold purpose. First, each seeks to explore the cultural and historical conditions, significance, and impact of railway mobility in a range of contexts. The focus on the rails lends cohesion to the contributions, while also allowing each to examine different issues, time periods, and primary source material. Since Schivelbusch's foundational work *The Railway Journey* so compellingly expanded how the cultures of the railways are approached and understood, it has become impossible to ignore the many connections between the train and a host of critical topics and their related disciplines of inquiry.¹ This interdisciplinary set of concerns is an important part of what has come to prominence in recent years under the broad heading of Mobility Studies, and thus the work of this special section engages with important ongoing debates within this relatively new field of inquiry. Second, each contribution pursues railway mobility in the context of the urban, allowing each to confront certain valences of urban transportation systems – or in one case, their suburban ex-

tensions – with the complex processes that continuously shape and re-shape urban cultures. The common thread throughout the analyses presented here is that of contest: urban rail networks have been and continue to be sites of struggle among competing visions of urban practice and aesthetics, opposing discourses of urban and national identity, and conflicting ways of seeing and mobilizing rail technologies into urban life. The joining of these two interests has precedent: in a very brief chapter entitled “Tracks in the City” Schivelbusch discusses the redesign of European city centers to accommodate rail and car traffic in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.² The title of this special section is thus an homage to Schivelbusch, lauding his recognition of the importance the relationship between the logistics and logics of the railway on one hand and of urban culture on the other.

The topic “Rails in the City” was inspired by theorists of mobility *avant la lettre*: scholars working before the emergence of the field of Mobility Studies in the last decade. To set the stage for the double exploration undertaken by the contributions included in this special section, this introduction mobilizes the theoretical and critical work of these key antecedents. Working in a broad range of scholarly disciplines, these theorists have given attention to the experiential and conceptual changes wrought by the new structures of speed and mobility in the modern period. Their work has opened up creative critical and theoretical avenues still being explored by scholars from a variety of disciplines, and, like the influential work of John Urry and other figures associated with Mobility Studies, frames the connections between urban railways and urban cultures developed by the contributions to this special section.³ Paul Virilio’s *Speed and Politics* stands as one of the first essays to explore connections between a complex notion of mobility and a critique of political control.⁴ Historians have developed compelling arguments about the acceleration of daily life and its effects.⁵ Scholars of literature and film have emphasized the primacy of the rails to understanding the complex relationships among new forms of mobility, urban experience, and their cultural representation. Finally, urban theorists have underscored the centrality of speed and movement to definitions of modern urban experience. Revisiting this important work prepares the conceptual terrain for bringing together railway mobility and the cultures of cities in the innovative ways pursued by the authors in this special section.

Mobility and technology are recurrent themes in many of Paul Virilio’s critical essays, but a considerable part of his interest is given to teasing out their effect on ways of seeing in contemporary cultures and the ideological weight of such logics of perception. His recurring focus is on perception, vision, and the image, in order to suggest that their logics stem from the logistical exigencies of ideology; the logistics of mobility have introduced movement into how one sees, perceives, and thinks. Movement and mobility are thus key components in the political and economic organization, control, and mobilisation of

societies. In *Speed and Politics*, he writes, “From now on speed is less useful in terms of getting around easily than in terms of seeing and conceiving more or less clearly.”⁶ The critical connection between movement and vision appears throughout his work; indeed, mobility and its perceptual effects are, for Virilio, forever ideological in nature.⁷

Christophe Staudy’s archival approach to defining and exploring mobility offers a different tack, giving particular significance to the daily material and experiential dynamics of mobility. His work traces out how, over several centuries of French cultural history, speed “was dreamed of, laid claim to, and then conquered” and as such Staudy pays important attention to the cultural desire for mobility, as well as its subsequent migration into daily life.⁸ This shift importantly opens up ground for understanding cultural discourses of mobility as they evolve over time; to do so, Staudy makes a crucial methodological step, one that insists on the role of representation. He calls for “[a] closer dialogue of history with literature which, since it is best positioned to express radical changes in life conditions, offers a unique concentration of experience that gets to the heart of our fascination with speed.”⁹ His different emphasis in no way vacates Virilio’s ideological interpretation however, as suggested in his introduction when he states his goal of observing “how for the past two centuries, acceleration has drawn us in, captured us, and holds us still.”¹⁰ Just as Althusser’s ideology interpellates its subjects, Staudy’s work documents many of the changes felt by subjects “held” within the new regime of movement.¹¹

Following Virilio and Staudy, we are led to consider not just the effects of mobility and acceleration on travelers, but in turn the meaning of travelers’ new modes of perception of the surrounding environment. Technical changes produce new mobilities, which in turn produce their own cascading effects: this feedback loop pertains particularly in the context of rails in the city, where new mobilities shift the user’s consciousness of the city itself. Lynne Kirby’s book, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*, has offered a compelling exploration of the railway’s close relation with the cinema, shaping mobile subjects and spectators in shared and complicitous ways. In linking the train and the cinema, Kirby articulates paradigmatic aspects of the culture of the rails with the cinema’s establishment as a dominant form of cultural production and consumption. Confirming Virilio’s earlier insight, Kirby cites the train’s introduction of new ways of seeing and of reframing perception. She writes, “[a]s a perceptual paradigm, the railroad established a new, specifically modern mode of perception that the cinema absorbed naturally.”¹² This mode of perception transposes itself into the spectatorial experience, framing and informing that experience in fundamental ways and leading to the construction of the cinema as a mode of consumption. The implications of this transfer are many, and involve ideology and aesthetics equally:

Perceptual, temporal, and metaphorical logic was also a technologic that linked the two nineteenth-century machines of economy and leisure in practices of tourism, the spectacle, and the amusement park ride. Thus as an ideological paradigm, the railroad created a subject invested in the consumption of images and motion – that is, physical displacement – for entertainment.¹³

The site of this transfer was, in Kirby's view, the city, and much early film shows the interplay between the cinema and the rails at a time when the former was establishing itself as a quintessentially urban artform. Kirby writes, "[f]ilm is without doubt the urban art par excellence in its incorporation of the rhythm and fragmentation of urban speed and shock"; the early cinema uses images of and from the rails to convey this essentially urban mode of perception.¹⁴

Kirby offers provocative ideas about the train's impact on culture in the modern period and calls compellingly for its renewed critical assessment while also underscoring the important role of the city. Before turning to the work of the contributors to this special section, we address the question of the city directly, and consider themes of mobility in the work of urban theorists Georg Simmel and Henri Lefebvre.

A common thread connects Simmel's descriptions of the modern city at the turn of the twentieth century and Henri Lefebvre's later call for understanding the city as an ensemble of phenomena in movement: each seeks to build a theoretical approach to the city through a practical grasp of the daily lived experience of the urban.¹⁵ Georg Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* identifies the key link between movement and urban culture. The experience of speed and urban mobility is foremost among the components of city life that for Simmel lend it its particular power to transform the individual. As a city-dweller one learns to cope with the constant rush of stimuli, the "rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli" produced with "every crossing of the street."¹⁶ Exposure to and participation in the sounds, sights, rhythms, and dangers of the city street are fundamental conditions, in Simmel's view, of urban experience, and immediately bring about psychological changes. The stresses and stimuli of the urban scene, of which unfettered mobility is the presumptive basis, force new modes of apprehending and thinking about the world, which alienate one from the slower realm of the village. There is thus a psychology of the mobile city, produced by the sensory spectacle and physical experience of mobility.

Inasmuch as the city hosts a range of new sensorial effects produced by urban mobility, one's life in urban cultures is forever marked by one's physical incorporation into the rhythms of urban transportation. Through its emphasis on movement and mobility in the production and experience of urban life, Henri Lefebvre's work on space, the city, and ideology provides tools to critique the use and meanings of spatial practices in the city, and to recognize how such practices tie into mobile urban processes and ideologies. For

him, incorporating movement and mobility into one's approach to the urban means avoiding static and simplistic understandings of the city. In writings published posthumously as *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2006) Lefebvre calls for balancing the spatial dimension of the urban with a critical attention to the temporalities, rhythms and movements of the city. Such an approach teases out the competing discourses vying for dominance over urban spaces and practices, the "struggle for appropriation [...] in which rhythms play a major role."¹⁷ The appropriation of space and its deployment in time represent a setting into motion and rhythm. Urban rhythms, flows, and patterns of movement point up the traces of mobilities on the cityscape, and reveal the oppositional forces writing and rewriting urban space.

For Lefebvre, to understand urban cultures requires injecting urban flows, circulation, and temporalities into spatially centered approaches to urban geographies. Mobility informs urban life in the day-to-day, forming the conditions in which cities are experienced, how individuals interact with and within them, while also a marker of the ideologies that continuously shape and reshape both the cityscape and the cultures that inhabit it. Building from the ideas laid out by the aforementioned scholars, the contributions to this special section pursue the questions of movement, railway mobility, and the city in the realm of representation: from public debate in the press to literature, film, and map-making, each grounds its analysis of the interface between the rails and the city in textual interpretation. Peter Soppelsa examines the debates over appropriation of new modes of mobility in the late nineteenth century to show how language use about mobility reflects a number of discursive and ideologically charged categories. The Parisian integration of tramways and subways – a model for so many other cities – was in fact met with bitter controversy that engaged with conflicting visions of civilization, aesthetics, democracy, and modernity. About so much more than trams or subways, the debates heralded the entrance of the rails into language, literature, art, and the French cultural imagination, and underscore conflicting definitions of the modern city.

Heather Joyce and Araceli Masterson-Algar address poetry and film respectively, showing how representations of the rails engage urban and cultural history in very different ways: in Joyce's reading of the English poets Larkin and Betjeman, the mode of nostalgia for a bygone cultural identity read in the landscape outside the train window is rendered more complex by considerations of duration and of the ambiguities of the suburban views afforded by the train. In reading the rail journey as a kind of imaginative prosthesis – enabling a sharp focus on certain images of the English city, and the blurring of others – the author examines literature's reflection of and upon the multiple symbolic valences and performances of riding the urban rails in postwar England. Masterson-Algar's work on the Argentinian film *Moebius* investigates how the metaphorical nexus of the subway line in the film crosses

the cultural history of the dictatorship with a sharp critique of late-capitalist urban spatial practices. The film's representation of the Buenos Aires subway network imagines impossible journeys and trajectories that reflect and comment on the movements of capital, the discourses of growth and modernity, and the essential myths that have shaped the contemporary city. The film's journey into its railway labyrinth is a poignant reminder of the utopic possibilities the subway once represented, and its current, dystopic reality. John Schwetman's work looks at representations of the rails from the perspective of network maps, to explore their links with epistemology, aesthetics, and cognition in the age of information. Beck's 1931 map of the London Underground serves as a touchstone in defining what Schwetman calls the "organizational sublime." The remarkable appeal and embrace of Beck's design suggests that it captures something critical about users' conception of and relationship to the city.

Analyzing various discursive forms, from film and literature to other media, the authors in this special section uncover not just the centrality of mobility to how contemporary cities are thought of and lived, but also the importance of mobile processes and ideologies in shaping and reshaping urban cultures. All aboard – the rails in the city!

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Notes

1. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986 [1977]).
2. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 178–187.
3. See John Urry, *Mobilities* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007).
4. Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).
5. Christophe Studeny, *L'Invention de la vitesse: France, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995). See also Marc Desportes, *Paysages en mouvement: transports et perception de l'espace, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Enda Duffy, *The*

- Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
6. Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 71.
 7. In *War and Cinema*, for instance, he explores the connection drawn between the accelerations of mobility and a logistics of perception in the context of technologies of warfare. See Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (New York: Verso, 1989 [1984]).
 8. Studeny, *L'Invention de la vitesse*, 11 (all translations of Studeny are my own).
 9. Studeny, *L'Invention de la vitesse*, 12.
 10. Studeny, *L'Invention de la vitesse*, 10.
 11. See Louis Althusser, *Positions (1964–1975)* (Paris: Les Editions sociales, 1976).
 12. Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.
 13. *Ibid.*, 8.
 14. *Ibid.*, 184.
 15. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, in *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 174–186.
 16. *Ibid.*, 174.
 17. Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 96.