

# Gazing from the Train Window: Spacetime and the Mobilization of Landscape

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This paper explores the relationship between mobility and visual perception, and examines the role locomotive technologies have played in mediating visual perception of the landscape. Contemporary North America is described as a speed-oriented visual culture, and argues that its origins lay in the industrial transformation of the landscape, enabled by the construction of the railway. The train window is seen as an interface between passenger and landscape, impacting upon the temporal sense of motion and duration, and changing the relations between subject and object. Following from the works of Henri Lefebvre and Paul Virilio, four elemental features of the spatial and temporal aesthetic of rail travel are laced throughout the discussion: presence and duration, interface and inertia. The paper concludes that the technological mediation of perception had 'mobilized' the landscape, giving rise to a dense, image-saturated urban environment where little can be articulated outside what has become *mobile*. 'We see men under treatment by Motion, and know there is a chance for them'. E. Foxwell and T.C. Farrer, *Express Trains English and Foreign*, 1889.

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A peculiar thing happens in passage, seated in either a bus or a train. The temporal sense of the present feels elongated as the traveler both passes sequential time and occupies a non-sequential limbo between departure and arrival. There is also a heightened sense of relativised space—the passenger at once held stationary and the occupant of a moving projectile. Staring out of a train window, fellow passengers are seated in a shared spacetime regime individualised to their separate perspectives. Yet they are alienated from each other in a way that was not apparent in pre-industrial forms of travel, before mass transit.

Commenting on this experience, Andrew Benjamin (1997) remarks, "I cannot help but look. However in looking my gaze cannot be returned with any form of full acknowledgement. "Furthermore, "Allowing for spacing,

holding distance in place, opens up the insistent reality that my presence, thus my own possibility, is no longer merely mine. Being held yields a me that is not just mine" (1997: 7,10). An elongated present disperses the

For the sleeper and coach cars, the still-shot picture of the Canadian landscape framed by the window is post-card perfect. In fact, the windows take on more of an appearance of a high-tech plasma screen than actual transparent glass. The passenger is pleasantly 'incarcerated' in his or her stainless steel compartment, passively sedated by the splendor of the Canadian landscape.<sup>3</sup> He or she may even provide a personal soundtrack to the cinematic presentation with a portable stereo, as in photo 5.

In the Park and Skyline Cars, there is seamlessness between the interior and exterior. The panorama surrounds 180 or even 360 degrees. Passengers gaze off

into the distance or chat jovially. It is a demonstration of Bell's "accelerated sublime," the "touristic body" hurtling through the physical landscape (Bell 2002:62). Bell delineates three different forms of sublimity: the horizontal sublime (the physical horizon), the vertical sublime (as in a mountain range on that horizon), and the inverted sublime (as in a chasm or gorge within that range) (Bell 2002:71-72). All forms are represented in Via's photos. There are the vast horizontal tracks of the Canadian landscape depicted in photos 1, 4, and 5. There is the vertical sublime of the big city skyscrapers in photo 3. There is even the inverted sublime, which is "coded for depth" as demonstrated in the 360 degree panorama of photo 2.

The intent of these hyper-glossed publicity photos is to convey the sense of a relaxed, effortless trip laced by the natural beauty of the



Figure 2 Panoramic Dome in skyline Car



Figure 1 Panoramic Dome in Park Car

landscape. Yet, as "tourism depends on the desire for personal memories and narratives," Via must also be sure to illustrate a captivating, exciting mode of travel (Bell 2002:135). This is accomplished through a union of the sublime of physical landscape and a postmodern 'technological sublime' (Perry 1998:168). For instance, inside the panoramic dome the standard languid movement of the landscape past the train window is amplified to encompass the whole of the passenger's vision. The powerful land-speed capability of the train is demonstrated as the ground blurs past the window towards the floor of the translucent car. The layered panoramic movements of landscape from ground to ceiling visually "live out relativity itself" (Virilio, quoted in Armitage 2001:27). Inside the sleeper cars, the small window portholes serve the same sedative purpose as an aquarium in a restaurant: to relax the customer into his/her surroundings, in this case the comforts of the personal compartment. In these ways, mediated experience produces 'a narcotic out of reality itself' (Robins 1996:119).

Through the various demonstrated gazes in these five photos, rail travel is depicted as both tantalizingly

progressive and blissful, through the cinematic interface of the train window. Many of these marketing techniques trace back to the same campaigns constructed by early railway industrials, albeit accentuated by digital technology.

## Interface and Acceleration

Enveloping our contemporary mobile lives is a media-saturated environment. As Siegworth (2000) has noted, banality and intensity enjoy a close relationship in the contemporary metropolis as a consequence of this saturation. Similarly, early railroad critic John Ruskin once disdained, ‘all traveling becomes dull in exact proportion to its rapidity’ (John Ruskin, quoted in Urry 1999:online). A dense city is rich with mediated experience, so much so, that individuals suffer an existence that ‘properly belongs to neither subject nor object of any encounter but to the movements and variations of intensity that constitute a ceaseless oscillating foreground/background or, better, an immanent plane (i.e. this is an *in-between* with a consistency all its own)’ (Siegworth 2000:232, emphasis in the original).

Visual perception became more technologically mediated over time through transportation and the build-up of interfaces within the contemporary urban environment. Mass transit mobilized the landscape, and in doing so, provoked an upsurge in media-related



Figure 3 LRC Coach Car



Figure 4 Single Bedroom

technologies. Perception became increasingly visually oriented, empowering *presence* itself with the ability to span distance without losing time, what McQuire (1998) calls ‘rapid seeing’ (McQuire 1998:186). As this occurred, a narrative formed to encapsulate the phenomenology of it all: acceleration, *pure speed*, became a theme and a value detectable throughout the historical retrospectives of technological and social development.

For example, a recent Lewis and Clark College web project titled *Landscapes of Capital* catalogues visual metaphors for speed utilized by advertisers, drawn from a collection of over 800 commercials dating from 1996: “The speed of light cannot be signified without referring





Figure 5 Transcontinental Coach Car

to the frozen traces left behind by blurred light paths. The blurred 'speed' of streaming light is especially appealing to advertisers because it also offers a metaphor for information flows of in an information economy. It offers an ideal signifier because fiber optics utilize laser beams to carry packets of information"(Goldman et al. 2003:online).

Transportation developments have come to embody characterizations of circulation (veins) for human traffic flows and institutions (organs) for the mediation of resource flows. Conversely, this would imply that our biological bodies are economies, their organic components commodities circulated in the flow of veins, traded from one organ to another. In essence, the gaze from the train window led to a conception of landscape and individualism where little can be articulated outside what has become *mobile*. In this cinematic conception of the world, indeed, 'the eye is a technology' and the world 'is being redefined to suit the eye'.

## Summary and Conclusion

"The base banner under which they fight, bears the motto, 'Expediency is our God! RAILROADS are our politics!'" Robert Jackson MacGeorge, editor *Streetsville*

*Weekly Review*, 1854.

To summarize the process, over the course of the twentieth century, as the first means of rapid mass transport developed, so too did the malleability of space (Benjamin 1999:602; Wakermann 1997). Moreover, the landscape became mobilized, altering our visual perception of the built environment. Physical and technological forms of sublimity became intertwined. Temporally, the industrial transformation of the landscape had given rise to the proverbial visual drama of rapid, liquid flows of urban traffic, both vehicular and metabolic, automobiles and pedestrians, speeding up the pace of the everyday.

The concepts of interface and acceleration are two essential elements of mediated experience and have changed the way we contemplate human-machine complexes, as well as the way we negotiate space-time. It is the contention of this paper, that it was the development of the railway that provided the catalyst for this shift in perception, assisted by the mobilization of the landscape. Readings of physical panorama, of our habitat, changed accordingly. They became motorized, and a new articulation of land, time, and self developed.

In this new articulation of land, time, and self we have followed from the research of Paul Virilio, which discusses locomotive technologies as having moved from a discourse of conquering space to that of conquering time. We conquer with Virilio's argument that this shift has impacted upon the passenger's sense of *presence* in the 'here and now.' The research of Henri Lefebvre offers support and has given us a better understanding of precisely what this sense of 'presence' is, and how it relates to the way relativity is lived out experientially in the everyday.

During the course of this research, I was surprised to discover the quantity and quality of literature on the subject of mobility and perception. It promises to be a growing area of study as transportation and

communications networks (and their accompanying visual metaphors and referents) continue to develop and expand.

## Footnotes

1 In another analysis, Melbin (1987) discusses the parallel between artificial luminescence and the construction of the railroad. Melbin examines both technologies as tools through which the colonization of a dual frontier have taken place: the frontier of landscape, where the extractive resources lay, and the frontier of the night, where continuous production may take place for the first time in industrial history (Melbin 1987:4).

2 See Coyne (2001) for observations on the dialectical tension between heterogeneous definitions of space and the homogeneity (unity) of space.

3 On rail travel and incarceration, see de Certeau (1984).

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