

# Railway And New Media: Transforming the Functional Transit to A Digital Journey

Dr. Karthika R

*Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Sanatana Dharma College, Alappuzha, Kerala*

**Abstract**—Travel always acts as a phenomenon of transcending our geographical dimension. The mechanism involved in locomotion decides the praxis of enjoyment. The mode of transportation the traveller adopts has serious repercussions on the nature of enjoyment s/he feels. Rail travel is the most popular among these which claims to bestow on passengers, the feeling of having been suspended between two places without actually experiencing the transition. This property of railway is accentuated in the global phase with the emergence of technology and new media. Whereas technology refines the physical structure of railway, new media gives a new impetus to the cultural undertones it earlier had. Discourses generated by passengers in train construct a public sphere. The evolution of network society channelizes this process of constructing one's own space and private domain in train travel. Concerning geography, the travellers' gaze is predominant in shaping their views on nature. New media has set a constraint to this countenance as the travellers have their senses glued to the gadgets. Also, the self-regulatory mechanism offered by new media acts as a ruling ideology which conditions the schedule or infact the behaviour of the passengers. Regarding speed factor, contemporary society has reached a cul-de-sac where no further acceleration is possible. The paper analyses how the emergence of new media has driven forth a transformation in the politics of space, speed and gaze factors with respect to rail travel.

**Index Terms**—Rail Travel, Space, Speed, Gaze, New Media

## I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of railways in the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been seen as a critical harbinger of modernity. Not only did rail travel have an enormous economic and social impact, it also created a radical reconfiguration of our perceptual experience. In creating public spaces for the formation of

transnational identities, earlier railway compartments served a mainstream platform which was slowly taken over by e-generated social media spaces. Traditional media outlets that used one-way communication and passive audiences have shifted to new, collaborative, participative and democratizing media. Increased participation and feedback created personalized media environments that allowed for more control over the media messages with which they engaged. This new media space substitutes the spatial domain in workplace, means of transportation, institutions and even in families resulting in a new sociality.

“Victorians viewed train as Frankenstein's monster and the coming of railways was seen as having profound symbolic significance, representing the triumph of mankind over fundamental physical constraints, in much the same way that the internet would later be credited with the potential to bring about radical culture change.” (Qtd in Nair 45)

The overlapping of these two mechanisms, railway and digital technology, has shown forth a transformative outlook in the creation of transnational spaces and sociality.

## II. SOCIAL SPACE

The social space provided by the railways demands a complete surrendering of individual agency and control where there is a fixed time of departure and arrival. At times, railway lines transcend national borders which dismantle the confines of space further. Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Bangladesh train services have helped in cultural exchanges and interaction of people. Discourses generated by passengers in trains help in constructing what we call

a public sphere. Henry Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* claims:

“Social space is produced and reproduced in connection with the forces of production (and with the relations of production). And these forces, as they develop, are not taking over a pre-existing empty or neutral space, or a space determined solely by geography, climate, anthropology or some other comparable consideration. A social space can be accounted taking into consideration, its mediations and mediators; the action of groups, factors within knowledge, within ideology or within the domain of representations.” (198)

Inside the railway compartments, important and burning social as well as political issues were scrutinized and analysed from different vantage points. This tendency was more obvious in the case of regular passengers who establish a bonding and camaraderie between them. Like visitors to internet chat rooms, railway travellers find themselves in a fluid environment that lacks many of the usual markers of social class and identity. For most passengers, the major radical change brought about by the railway was the necessity for travelling in close contiguity with random strangers from a range of social classes. The passengers are compelled to include “an-Other” in the ‘Thirdspace’ so created which is a notion developed by the world-famous spatial theorist Edward Soja. According to him,

“Thirdspace is an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that enables the contestation and re-negotiation of boundaries and cultural identity.” (Soja 46)

Soja here closely resembles Homi K Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridisation, which states that all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. Railtravel does foster a critical reorientation of visual perspective with regard to external landscapes but this external space is largely ignored in favour of the social space defined by the interior of the railway carriage. The new social world created by the mix of passengers in a carriage or the private, interiorized space of a newspaper or novel to be read define the attention of the traveller inward. The railway experience can thus be seen as the first step of creating a virtual world, a gradual dissociation of self from the travel experience which is explicitly manifested today in the iPods, laptops and smart

phones that guide contemporary travellers to ignore their immediate surroundings while on the move. Thus, a double virtuality is created primarily by railways and secondarily by digital technology. Social networking sites like facebook, twitter, whatsapp, etc. have challenged the establishment of social space in railways detaining the passengers to the e-generated secondary virtual space.

In the ‘new world order’ created by cyberspace, “old and trusted boundaries- between human and machine, self and other, body and mind, illusion and reality-are dissolved and deconstructed. With the erosion of clear distinctions, the emphasis is on interfaces, combinations and altered states.” (Helmets 52) The same can be said of the new world order represented by the railway which has the power to challenge the boundary not only between man and machine, but between corporeal and mental experience. The railway junction like the cyberspace matrix, is a nexus of technological order and human desire. The network of predetermined routes that pass through it represent the opportunities and constraints of modernity. Railway stations also serve as a hub of vitality and movement that witness the constant activity of drawing people in and spinning them out again. In parallel to this, we have the paradigms of technology generating a networked community of passengers at the transnational level. The locomotive generated transient population subsumes in the e-generated community eclipsing the railway network to the ancillary stage.

### III. CELEBRATION OF RATIONALISM AND IRRATIONALISM

Railways have always been figured as a celebration of modernity. At the same time a peculiar and unmistakable dream world is attached to its geometrical tracks and to the machine ensemble of which they are a constituent part. Trains, thus, embody ‘the spirit of rationalism and invoke the spectres of irrationalism’ (Beaumont 13). In the modern parlance the magical aura associated with railways and trains is triggered forth with the assistive technology. When mass movement and haste became emblematic of rapid transit, a systematic commuting was the solution to the growing congestion. This resulted in the construction of labyrinthine underground railroad termini beneath

the central areas of many cities and also metro railroads. The conception of urban commuters themselves as cogs in a machine accentuated the phenomenon of 'rapid transit' in every pattern of life. Rapid transit meant 'rapid everything else'; and shopping, eating, shaving and shoe-shining were all done in quick-time (Stilgoe 23). The brisk transit made off with the passenger the details of the landscape as these were lost in an impressionistic rush. The fleeting images by the carriage window in a bewildering sequence describes a mobile gaze which doubles up with the passenger's flickering focus induced by smart gadgets. A whole series of optical recreations, namely panoramas, dioramas and cycloramas, get produced, in Jonatha Crary's phrase, an 'uprooting of vision'. (Crary 14)

The habit of reading, which was a mass middle-class phenomenon in the nineteenth century became less ritualized, and more ordinary, because of train travel. But the train's motion inflects the reading experience making unprecedented demands on the reader's concentration, enforcing short bursts of attention. In the report on 'The Influence of Railway Travelling on Public Health', published in the British medical journal, the *Lancet*, in 1862, the authors describe the physiological strain imposed by reading in the compartment of a moving train. "When the traveller sets himself to read, he imposes yet further labour on the eye in tracing the shifting characters of his book or newspaper, and also on the brain." (17)

In a similar way, cyber activities within the compartment reinforce the phantasmagoric effects of travel by rail, as it blurs the distinction between the illusory world offered by the gadget and the supposedly real world apprehended from the compartment window. Thus, the compartment assumes an ambiguous ontological status, caught between dream and reality which transform it into a kind of time-space machine. Passengers step into it in one place and alight at another, without much consciousness of having overcome distance, in all its frictional restrictions on movement.

The man-machine interface invoked by a train compartment also proves explanation to the condition of post humanism. The coevolution that happens alongside intelligent machines allows one to extend their subjective understandings of real experiences beyond the boundaries of embodied existence. According to Hayles's view of posthuman, visual

perception and digital representations are paradoxically salient. "Even as one seeks to extend knowledge by deconstructing perceived boundaries, it is these same boundaries that make knowledge acquisition possible." (Hayles 35)

While the compartmental space facilitates an illusory panoramic view of the exterior, the constructed cyberspace within the compartment distances the passengers' embodied existence. The mental phenomena and the identification of objective reality happen non-physical, where the constantly shifting complex succession of images seen and imagined by the passenger are distinct and separable from their body, evoking a sense of Cartesian dualism.

#### IV. SPEED AND MOBILITY

An obsession with the speed achieved by trains is evident in virtually all accounts of railway travel. According to Paul Virilio, the noted French philosopher, speed-space is a vision structured or constituted in rapid motion. He argues that dromology (science of speed) is important when considering the structuring of society in relation to warfare and modern media. He notes that the speed at which something happens may change its essential nature, and that which moves with speed quickly comes to dominate that which is slower. When a locomotive is moving, the landscape which forms the background which is itself mobile "displays inanimate objects as if they were animated by a violent movement." (Byerley 149). The vastly increased speed of train travel has an effect on travellers' perceptions of distance, or, more abstractly, of space in general. But the advent of digital technology has further dismantled the speed-space structure since the passengers' indulgence in cyberspace makes them succumbed to a much more illusory experience of a timeless slippage between the subject and the surrounding environment. Thus, the traveller has an enlarged sense of having been magically transported from one place to another, without fully experiencing the transition.

#### V. POLITICS OF GAZE

Within the social spaces of trains, there is segregation on the basis of class and gender. The so-called classes like 1st class, 2<sup>nd</sup> class and air-conditioned

compartments are essentially meant for the affluent class and ordinary individuals are kept out to languish in general compartments. The gendering of space is also seen with separate compartments for ladies with the intention to safeguard women from male gaze or voyeurism, to protect and survey them by state agents like police, reinstating their stereotypical identity as weaker sex. Segregation reaches a higher level when individuals like beggars and scavengers are kept at bay; the passengers treat them as the other, a nuisance to be kept apart. There is also the vision on part of regular as well as other staffs like the drivers, cleaners, TTR, etc. By spending a major portion of their time within the train, they may have their unique experience of their work space.

With the evolution of new media, the facilities are so digitalised that all the above-mentioned people constituted the common group, 'bearer of the look' and smart phones, tablets and laptops coded with 'to-be-looked-at-nesses'. The virtuality so created has greatly been substituted for women on account of voyeuristic or fetishistic male gaze. Besides this, the CCTV cameras and implementation of complete wi fi facility have upgraded the gaze factor to a disciplinary mechanism. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright write in *Practices of Looking*, "The gaze is integral to systems of power and ideas about knowledge." (57) The new media surveillance can also be seen in the light of Foucault's concept 'panopticism'. It refers to how people modify their behaviour under the belief that they are constantly being watched at even if they cannot directly see who or what is watching them. This possible surveillance, whether real or unreal, has self-regulating effects irrespective of gender.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Thus, the evolution of network society has channelized the process of constructing one's own space and private domain in train travel. The passengers are subjected to a double virtuality, where new media space engulfs the compartmental space. Temporal shrinkage and ignorance of exterior landscape are by-products of this phenomenon. Concerning the dromological aspect, digital network attains dominance over the railway network with booster chips embedded in the nexus. Towards the gaze factor, new media serves as a self-regulatory

disciplinary strategy as well as a protective mechanism for women passengers from voyeurism, substituting them with smart gadgets to a great extent. The monster machine and the new media, thus, hand in hand generate a double illusory experience, invoking a feel of magical transportation.

## REFERENCES

- [1] M. Beaumont and M. Freeman, Eds., *The Railway and Modernity*. Peter Lang, 2007.
- [2] A. Byerley, *Are We There Yet? Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism*. University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- [3] J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 1992.
- [4] N. K. Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. Chicago, IL, USA: University of Chicago Press.
- [5] M. H. Helmers and T. J. Mazzeo, "Introduction: Travel and the Body," *Journal of Narrative Theory*, vol. 35, no. 3, Fall 2005, doi: 10.1353/jnt.2006.0012.
- [6] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans. Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1991.
- [7] R. V. Nair, "Tracks of Transit: Cultural Geography of Indian Railways," *Journal of History and Society*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 45–49, Mar. 2016.
- [8] E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. New Jersey, NJ, USA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996.
- [9] J. R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene*. New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1983.
- [10] M. Sturken and L. Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- [11] "The influence of railway travelling on public health: Report of the commission," *The Lancet*, Jan. 4, 1862.
- [12] P. Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, M. Polizzotti, Trans. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2006.