

## Speed and Convulsive Beauty: Trains and the Historic Avant-garde<sup>1</sup>

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When Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, leader of the futurist movement, wrote in his 1909 founding manifesto that “Time and Space died yesterday,” he was stating in poetic terms what contemporary science was proving: that time is no longer considered a metered and inexorable progression, but rather something shaped and manipulated by speed and perspective. Marinetti and other avant-gardistes depicted these changing ideas about time, speed, and perception by employing the symbolic imagery of new technologies, including modes of transportation. The train was not the newest of these, but emerged as an important image in both futurist and surrealist art and literature.<sup>2</sup> Although it could not match the airplane in terms of speed, the train nonetheless possessed certain qualities of rapidity, inexorability, and strength that captured these artists’ imaginations. The train compartment was another distinguishing feature, differing both in size and comfort from the motorcar and other modern modes of transportation, and facilitating the exploration of new definitions of space and a better understanding the modern world. As a result, artistic and literary images of trains, somewhat ironically, continued to permeate 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde work. Considering the contribution of more recent theorists like Paul Virilio, Michel Foucault, and various others who are participating in the growing field of mobility studies, this paper aims to understand the persisting presence of the train as a symbol of an alternative reality in historic avant-garde literature and graphic art.<sup>3</sup>

Echoing Marinetti’s earlier statement, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his monumental study of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century railway, describes in great detail how the train “annihilated space and time” by making distances shorter and travel time quicker (33-38). Faraway places were no longer so distant, and perceptions of geography and the globe itself shifted significantly. Everything associated with train travel, including the standardized timetables that compromised the individuality and local flavor of smaller train stations in faraway locations, served to redefine existing notions of distance and place. Schivelbusch’s cultural history of the railroad makes clear that train travel marked 19<sup>th</sup>-century perceptions of space and time.

But the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw significant changes in both technology and philosophy that facilitated a different and more profound understanding of train travel. Mobility studies scholars Matthew Beaumont and Michael Freeman explain that 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers and artists in general were unable to fully appreciate how contemporary technologies were engaging with and changing society. They failed to understand “the relations between individual consciousness

and the spatial and temporal dynamics of industrialized society” (Beaumont 38). For these critics, it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that “artists began to fully engage with the sheer speed and energy of steam locomotion” (Freeman 32).

Early cinema, in particular the short documentary film *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*) by Louis and Auguste Lumière, shot in 1895 and shown to the public the following year, helps illustrate this divide. According to cinematic lore, the train rushing forward and appearing bigger and bigger so frightened the audience that people ran from their seats in panic to the back of the theater. Although Martin Loiperdinger and Bernd Elzer, in their article “Lumière’s Arrival of the Train: Cinema’s Founding Myth,” point out that there is no evidence to support this version of the audience’s reaction, they agree, based on contemporaneous accounts of the viewing, that the oncoming train greatly excited the moviegoers. Despite its effective depiction of the train’s sheer power and ferocity, this film, like many of its 19<sup>th</sup>-century predecessors, failed to engage with the more subtle questions of time and space and their effect on the travelers.

One reason is perhaps that cinema, certainly more so in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is an aesthetic medium with certain limitations in its ability to depict complex notions of time and space. Henri Bergson uses the cinema as a metaphor in his 1907 book entitled *L'Évolution créatrice* (*Creative Evolution*). Bergson criticizes science for being attached to an understanding of time he calls “la méthode cinématographique” ‘the cinematographic method,’ where time progresses like in a movie, sequentially and in a metered rhythm (341-342). For Bergson, this representation of time does not take into account the subjectivity of the person experiencing time, or in the example of the Lumière film, the person riding on that incoming train. Spectators only experience the sequence of events that bring the train to the station. But the individual waiting for the train beforehand, or the person traveling, both experience the passing of time quite differently. Bergson gives the example of waiting for a cube of sugar to dissolve into a glass of water and suggests that the impatience and eagerness associated with anticipation influence our perception of the passing of time (9-11, 338). For Bergson, this proves that the concept of measured time is an artificial invention: “le temps est invention ou il n’est rien du tout” (341) ‘time is an invention or it is nothing at all.’<sup>4</sup>

Although Bergson was critical of science, contemporaneous advancements in the field of physics supported his perceptions of reality. Perhaps more than any other discovery, Albert Einstein’s 1905 paper entitled “On the Electrodynamics of Moving Bodies” paved the way for a more accurate understanding of the consequences of movement and speed.<sup>5</sup> It, and later his 1916 “Theory of Relativity,” elucidate how time and space are not absolute, but are relative to the

observer's position and movement in space. According to Einstein's research, time passes more slowly as the speed of an object increases (Parkinson 12-19).

There is no evidence that Marinetti had read Einstein's papers (Henderson 358) or was familiar with his work before 1919, which is when Einstein's Theory of Relativity and quantum theory became known to the larger public (Parkinson 11), but the Futurists were undoubtedly familiar with Bergson: they wrote about movies in their manifestos and their work reflects the expanding discourse on time and space.<sup>6</sup> Many of the futurist manifestos as well as futurist graphic art demonstrate a fascination with the power and potential of speed. Marinetti, pronouncing the futurist aesthetic in his founding manifesto, underscores this motion-oriented sensibility. He writes: "We declare that the splendor of the world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed...a roaring motorcar, which seems to race on like machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace" (Marinetti 181). What is most remarkable about this statement is the way in which Marinetti describes speed like a work of art, as an experience that can be aesthetically appreciated. Symbolizing the paradigm shift at the turn of the century, Marinetti redefines speed not only as a subjective experience, but as the most splendid and beautiful kind.

The following year, a group of futurist artists, influenced by Marinetti's manifesto, adapted these ideas to painting. The *Manifesto of Futurist Painters 1910*, signed by Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, and Gino Severini, is a violent call to arms urging the reader to reconsider art by rebelling against previous notions of beauty. They conclude the manifesto with a list of numbered points, a few of which are listed below:

3. Elevate all attempts at originality, however daring, however violent.
7. Sweep the whole field of art clean of all themes and subjects which have been used in the past.
8. Support and glory in our day-to-day world, a world which is going to be continually and splendidly transformed by victorious Science. (Boccioni et al. 26)

The idea that creating something new meant violently destroying the past is a theme elaborated here and elsewhere in futurist art, but what stands out in these excerpts is the theme of innovation and technology denoted by the terms "victorious Science," something which includes, among other things, new modes of transportation (25).

In addition to ideas about violence and technology, these artists begin to formulate in this manifesto, and in subsequent ones more clearly, a philosophy they call "universal dynamism," which is the idea of speed mixing with all aspects of daily modern life (Boccioni et al., *Futurist Painting* 27). Instead of painting a

bus on a street, they suggest painting the experience of noise, sound, movement, violence, and intensity one feels when seeing and hearing the bus go by. They write:

The motor bus rushes into the houses which it passes, and in their turn the houses throw themselves upon the motor bus and are blended with it. The construction of pictures has hitherto been foolishly traditional. Painters have shown us the objects and the people placed before us. We shall henceforward put the spectator in the centre of the picture. (Boccioni et al. 28)



*The Street Enters the House*

Boccioni's 1912 painting *The Street Enters the House* illustrates this idea of all sensations mixing together without boundaries, so that a woman on a balcony becomes indiscernible from the noise and activity of the street below her. The focus of this passage and of Boccioni's painting is that of the subject experiencing the modern world and all its energy, speed, and relentless ferocity.

The relationship between speed, subjectivity, and violence, although newly articulated in futurist ideology, is an inherent part of the human experience according to Paul Virilio in his study on the phenomenon of speed entitled

*L'Horizon négatif*. Attempting to answer questions about the origin of speed, Virilio concludes that one runs only if one is being chased, which in effect prompts the pursuer to run as well, resulting in a violent tearing away of the pursued from the starting point. This perspective on history, which necessitates a reinvention of “our vision of the world,” reveals that speed is at once the origin and the culmination of humanity; men first chased women to reproduce, then animals (horses in particular) for food and transport, and finally machines (cars, trains, planes, etc.) in order to advance society (38-40). Virilio writes:

*Speed being simply the production of fear*, it is flight and not the attack that prompts the violent distancing, the sudden burst of speed. The constant acquisition of greater and greater speed is only therefore the curb to increasing anxiety; in this sense ‘the transportation revolution’, in producing in the nineteenth century the factory of speed, industrializes terror: *the motor manufactures fear*. (46)

Speed, an essential component of being human, always echoes some commonly shared and atavistic experience of flight for survival, something intensified by the advent of the motor. The emotional and psychological experience of speed will, on some level, always “manufacture fear.”

Virilio’s understanding of the human relationship to speed, formulated some seventy years after the futurist manifestos, provides a framework for understanding futurist art and literature. It helps to elucidate, for instance, the motifs of fear, anxiety, violence, and the subjective experience of modernity in Marinetti’s first manifesto, mentioned above. For example, when Marinetti writes metaphorically about trains as “rogue locomotives,” or “steel horses,” the reader can also understand these references as part of a greater psychological expression of fear that permeates the modern experience, and as a result, the futurist aesthetic.

A graphic expression of the violent futurist locomotive can be found in Luigi Russolo’s 1912 painting *The Dynamism of a Train*, which shows a moving locomotive pitching forward with hazy aureoles ahead of the wheels indicating its inexorable advance. Ten years later, Ivo Panaggi, who joined the group after World War I, painted *Speeding Train*. Although very different in style, with strong cubist tendencies, it is similar in its violent energy. Like Russolo’s train, it is entering the frame from the right and moving left. Geometric shapes representing waves of motion emanating from the train insist that the locomotive is moving forward in both paintings. These two works, which convey qualities of speed, force, aggression (and potentially fear), intensity, pervasiveness, and progress, illustrate how the train is an appropriate symbol of futurist “universal dynamism.”



*The Dynamism of a Train*



*Speeding Train*

The aggressive qualities of the train become most obvious in a military context, as when Marinetti links speed with gunfire in the founding manifesto. The futurist leader, fascinated by combat and in an effort to design a new war aesthetic, writes in a 1914 letter to Severini:

[I] believe that the Great War, intensely lived by Futurist painters, can produce true convulsions in their imaginations... [Boccioni, Carrà and myself] urge you to interest yourself pictorially in the war and its repercussions in Paris. Try to live the war pictorially, studying it in all its mechanical forms (military trains, fortifications, wounded men, ambulances, hospitals, parades etc.). (Tisdall and Bozzolla 191)

Severini at the time was living just outside of Paris, where from his house he could observe supply trains going to and coming from the front. When he moved to the city, he chose to live near the Denfert-Rochereau station, staying in close proximity to the engines that would inspire at least one work in a series of war paintings finished in 1915 (Tisdall and Bozzolla 190). *Armoured Train* depicts the recognizable forms of gunmen aiming at their targets and contrasts them with a nebulous, smoking, and hectic background. The war, the guns, and the speed of the train exemplify the futurist aesthetic of movement and violence.



*Armoured Train*

These aforementioned examples demonstrate the violent impressions conveyed by a speeding train. But how do train travel, motion, and speed affect the everyday lives of travelers? Boccioni, in much of his work, attempts to locate the subtle energy linking movement and feeling. In his tract *La Pittura Futurista* 'Futurist Painting,' Boccioni writes, "se i corpi suscitano stati d'animo attraverso

vibrazioni di forme son queste che noi disegneremo” (168) ‘if bodies evoke moods through vibrations, then we are going to draw vibrations.’ The relationship between the “vibrations” of life and human emotion is also the subject of a series of triptychs suitably titled *States of Mind I, II, and III*, completed in 1911. Each painting, *Those Who Stay*, *The Farewells*, and *Those Who Go*, illustrates a certain feeling associated with travel. Unlike the previous images, Boccioni’s paintings do not depict the train itself, but the passengers at the station, “those who go,” and “those who stay.” The abstract human forms and surrounding spaces underscore a rethinking of subjective experience and space, leaving questions about the relationship between the two. Boccioni and his contemporaries, “instead of expressing inner feelings . . . introduced a new visual language of angular and faceted forms to represent volume and space seen from varying viewpoints rather than a single one” (Treuhertz 196). Linking psychology, space, and movement, Boccioni and the Futurists demonstrate how speed generates changing perceptions, helping to effectively narrate the human experience of train travel.



*Those Who Stay*, courtesy of <https://flic.kr/p/pgg5dd>

A similar theme emerges in a poem written by Blaise Cendrars, a Swiss-born avant-garde poet who moved in 1912 to Paris, where he became acquainted with and began to publish in the same journals as Marinetti, the Surrealists, and various other progressive artists and intellectuals. The 1913 poem *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (*Prose of the Trans-Siberian and*

of the *Little Jeannie de France*) illustrated by Sonia Delaunay—the founder, along with her husband, of Orphism—uses the train and its inexorable traveling forward as a metaphor for the constant evolution of human sentiment. Cendrars’s biographer, Jay Bochner, explains: “It is Cendrars’ successful use of the train as a modern but viable objective correlative for feeling in the poem that makes him the modern poet earlier theorists such as Beauduin, Guilbeauc, Marinetti, and Barzun tried, but failed, to become” (105). If Marinetti, as Bochner suggests, does not look beyond the phenomenon of speed as an isolated sensation, later futurist work, like Boccioni’s paintings discussed above, certainly do. Nevertheless, Bochner’s comparison of Cendrars to Futurism’s leader reinforces the link between these two avant-gardistes and suggests a theoretical evolution concerning the avant-garde’s understanding of speed, movement, and the train.

Originally printed on a sheet of paper two meters long in different type faces and sizes, and accompanied by Delaunay’s colorful abstract images, *La prose du Transsibérien* highlights the concept of “simultaneous art,” where the work reflects the instantaneous dialogue between text and image. In this case, the colors and patterns of Delaunay’s designs simultaneously evolve and change with the advancement of the train on the Trans-Siberian Express through Russia, and the progression of the thoughts of the young poet-narrator. Part of a collection of poems about voyages, this particular work explores the theme of movement and how it catalyzes the passengers’ dreams and thoughts about the past.

But there is ambiguity concerning boundaries between past, present, and future, and the train also acts as a time warp when the poet writes, “Et cette nuit est pareille à cent mille autres quand un train file dans la nuit” (23) ‘And this night is like a hundred thousand others when a train flies through the night.’ Not even watches, nor the sun, the most reliable and natural measure of time, can instill a sense of chronological evolution. Cendrars writes, “Et l’avance perpétuelle du train / Tous les matins on met les montres à l’heure / Le train avance et le soleil retarde. . . .” (29) ‘And the perpetual advance of the train / Every morning we set our watches / The train advances and the sun lingers. . . .’ Time becomes a nebulous concept and the blending of future and past are also underscored by the repetition of certain phrases. For example, the poet’s travel companion and lover little Jehanne repeatedly asks “Sommes-nous bien loin de Montmartre?” ‘Are we far from Montmartre?’ There are other examples of emphatic repetition in the poem. The narrator’s reiteration of “Je ne sais pas aller jusqu’au bout” ‘I do not know how to go all the way,’ in addition to underscoring a recurring thought and thus the cyclical nature of the human experience, also suggests the inability to successfully complete any undertaking, whether writing, the sexual act, or the voyage itself.

Despite these suggestions that life is a repetitive and futile loop, Cendrars includes some ideas that suggest progress and evolution. Perhaps the most

obvious among these is that the train, which departs from Moscow, eventually arrives at its destination in Harbin, present-day China. Along with this geographical progression, there is also an evolution in the relationship between the narrator and little Jehanne, where the narrator grows more affectionate toward her and in the end, after his return home to Paris, expresses nostalgia for this great, lost love. The idea that traveling stimulates self-knowledge and intimacy with others is expressed by the author himself, whom Bochner quotes as saying, “On voyage pour connaître, reconnaître les hommes, les choses, les animaux” (102) ‘We travel to know, to recognize people, things, animals.’ For the author of *La prose du Transsibérien*, train travel is one way of deepening a relationship and thus probing the human psyche. Cendrars’s poem, which highlights the effect of train travel on perceptions of reality and insights into human relationships, underscores this shift away from pure fascination with speed and how to depict it, towards an exploration into how it can catapult the passenger into another time continuum or an altered emotional state.

While the Surrealists also consider the train a symbol of transformation, their chief focus is on what lies beneath the surface of reality: the surrealist train, unlike its avant-garde predecessors, provides access to a sur-reality. This is something Virilio explores in his analysis of speed. He suggests that speed allows us to see reality differently because it skews perceptions, obscuring and even misrepresenting reality. Inspired by a quote from Rudyard Kipling that “the first victim of war is the truth,” Virilio claims that “the first victim of speed is the truth” (116). He explains:

the transportation revolution also set off the industrialization of the traditional enterprise of images, *a factory for speed* and, therefore, also for light and images, this suddenly becomes *a cinematic projection of reality*, the fabrication of a world, of *a world of artificial images, a montage of dromoscopic sequences where the optic of mobile illusion renews optical illusion*. (118, emphasis in the original)

Virilio’s commentary on speed and truth explains why the Surrealists, despite a general disinterest in technology and the wonders of the industrial age, demonstrate a continued interest in locomotive symbolism. The world of “artificial images” and “optical illusion” generated by speed would certainly be useful in surrealist work, where the goal is often to reveal something other than surface reality.

André Breton, the leader of the group, exploits these locomotive qualities in his highly autobiographical 1928 short story, *Nadja*, about a young woman whom he meets haphazardly in the streets of Paris and who symbolizes the surrealist lifestyle. During the declining phase of the romance, the two

protagonists decide to take a train trip and leave Paris. The intimacy of the compartment and the movement of the train trigger a series of strange visions, where Nadja claims to see a “man in the window” when Breton sees nothing. Although Breton eventually gets a glimpse of this strange man who had inexplicably been hiding on top of the train and peeking down at the two lovers, the bizarre episode underscores the ability of train travel to generate varying realities for the two voyagers in the same compartment.

The connection between a difficult or strange train ride and a psychosis or pathology was already present in 19<sup>th</sup>-century diagnoses. “Railway shock” and male hysteria, for example, could be the results of a difficult train ride (Marcus 155).<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud was also writing about and attempting to understand the effects of movement on passengers. In *Three Essays on Sexual Theory*, published in 1905, Freud concluded that the rhythmic and mechanical agitation of the train could provoke sexual excitement in the passenger (600).<sup>8</sup> Breton, influenced by Freud’s work,<sup>9</sup> and affected by his own experience with shell-shocked victims at the front, underscores in *Nadja* the connections between violent movement, psychological shifts, and romantic emotion.

Breton’s understanding of the train contributes to one of his most famous metaphors, found at the end of *Nadja* where he defines the shocking, violent experience of love and beauty. The jolts and movements of the compartment are for Breton a metaphor for a pulsating, always moving, beautiful experience that is all-encompassing, dynamic, and transformative. He explains in *Nadja*:

A certain attitude necessarily follows with regard to beauty, . . . neither dynamic nor static, I see beauty as I have seen you . . . Beauty is like a train that ceaselessly roars out of the Gare de Lyon and which I know will never leave, which has not left. It consists of jolts and shocks, many of which do not have much importance, but which we know are destined to produce one *Shock*, which does. Which has all the importance I do not want to arrogate to myself. In every domain the mind appropriates certain rights which it does not possess. Beauty, neither static nor dynamic. The human heart, beautiful as a seismograph . . . Royalty of silence . . . Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all. (159-60)

Nadja, her shocking revelations, clairvoyant predictions, and unpredictable appearances and departures, all rooted in the metaphor of the train, are one of Surrealism’s most explicit and clear descriptions of splendor.<sup>10</sup>

Continuing to elaborate on these ideas almost ten years after *Nadja*, Breton expands his thesis on beauty, movement, speed, and Surrealism. *Mad Love*, published in 1937, refers directly to the definition of “convulsive beauty” from *Nadja*:

The word *convulsive*, which I use to describe the only beauty which should concern us, would lose any meaning in my eyes were it to be conceived in motion and not at the exact expiration of this motion. There can be no beauty at all, as far as I am concerned—convulsive beauty—except at the cost of affirming the reciprocal relations linking the object seen in its motion and in its repose. (Breton 10)



*La nature dévore le progrès*

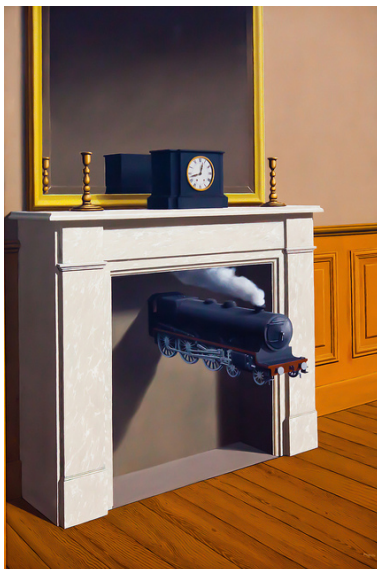
Perhaps the most striking element in the evolution of Breton's theory on the train and movement is his introduction of the idea of "repose," which stands in opposition to motion. In order to illustrate his idea, Breton refers to a photograph of a "speeding train" that had been abandoned in and overtaken by a forest. That photo accompanied a short story written by Benjamin Péret, a friend of Breton's and one of the founding members of the group, in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* published earlier that year.<sup>11</sup> Both the photo and the story put a fierce train engine into stark contrast with the natural world, which overpowers and seems to stop the man-made machine in its tracks. The following is an excerpt of Péret's story, which describes how the train in the picture might have arrived there:

Dès lors, commence la lente absorption: bielle par bielle, manette par manette, la locomotive rentre dans le lit de la forêt et, de volupté en volupté se baigne, frémit, gémit, comme une lionne en rut. Elle fume des

orchidées, sa chaudière abrite les ébats de crocodiles éclos de la veille, cependant que dans le sifflet vivent des légions d'oiseaux-mouches qui lui rendent une vie chimérique et provisoire car bientôt la flamme de la forêt après avoir longuement léché sa proie l'avalera comme une huître. (*La nature dévore le progrès*, 21)

From this point forward begins the slow absorption: rod by connecting rod, lever by lever, the locomotive enters into the bed of the forest and, from one voluptuous pleasure to another, bathes, quivers, and moans like a lioness in heat. The locomotive smokes orchids, the boiler shelters frolicking crocodiles hatched just the day before, while amidst the buzzing dwell legions of hummingbirds that give the locomotive chimeric and temporary life, because soon the flame of the forest, after having long licked her prey, will swallow her up like an oyster.

Péret highlights movement, the striking and distinguishing feature of the train, by describing it in a non-railroad context. The photo of this incredible iron steam engine, completely overrun by nature and consequently immobile, only underscores the complete and utter lack of movement and speed the viewer does not normally associate with the train. Both Breton's and Péret's examples of the train, in great contrast to the futurist trains, suggest that the train ride must be understood as a process and evolution. It begins and ends in stillness, and these moments only serve to highlight the speed it attains in between.

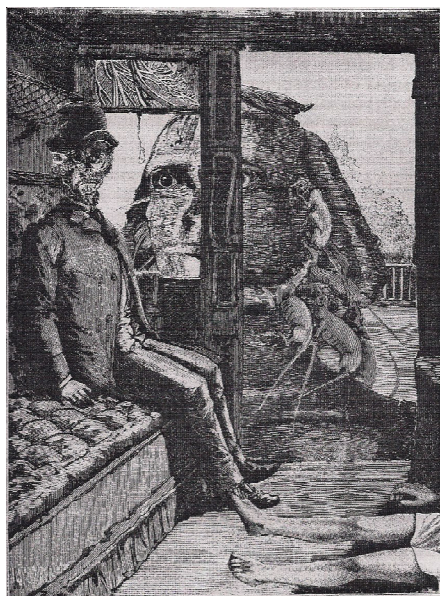


*Time Transfixed, courtesy of*  
<https://flic.kr/p/fcHFqo>

In addition to Breton and Péret, René Magritte, a Belgian Surrealist closely associated with the Parisian group, also uses the train to experiment with ideas about speed and stillness. In his 1938 painting *La Durée poignardée* (*Time Transfixed*) a dark, weighty British “Black Five” locomotive emerges from a hearth on a set of invisible tracks. Suspended in space, the engine is also suspended in time, something underscored by the clock above the mantle and the empty calm reflected in the mirror behind the clock. Magritte’s painting suggests there are multiple dimensions of time and reality, where an ordinary tranquil room can at any moment be penetrated by a roaring steam engine without any disruption or commotion.

Magritte’s painting also highlights a shift of focus from speed onto the details of the surrounding space. The interior of the sparse, eerie room seems to stand still in a different space-time continuum—in what Michel Foucault might call a “heterotopia.” In his lecture “Des espaces autres” (“Of Other Spaces”), Foucault analyzes social spaces that have particular psychological and emotional qualities. He defines these spaces as heterotopias, ideal but real places set apart from ordinary social spaces. Among the qualities he attributes to them is that they possess various layers of time which he calls “des découpages du temps” ‘chronological slicing.’ Foucault provides the example of cemeteries as having this quality because they are simultaneously a symbol of the end of life and a place where one is commemorated and thus can exist eternally. This contradiction in concepts of time also exists in Magritte’s room, whose deliberate and sparse décor exudes timelessness, but where the fireplace, spitting forth a steaming train, undermines all of that.

Another quality of heterotopic spaces listed by Foucault is that they possess a system of opening and closing that renders them isolated and penetrable at the same time, something that is true of Magritte’s fireplace. This is also true in general of the train compartment, and in particular of a series of train compartments by Surrealist Max Ernst, whom Breton had already identified “as an artist of ‘infinite possibilities’” and whose work is seen by critics as an expression of multiple realities and the discoveries of modern physics (Parkinson 56). *Une semaine de bonté* (*A Week of Kindness*), published in 1934, is a graphic novel of assorted pictures amassed during frequent trips to the Parisian flea markets, where the surrealist artist collected illustrations from 19<sup>th</sup>-century popular novels and scientific journals and pasted them to create unexpected images that tell sordid and dangerous tales, some of which unfold in the train compartment (Beaumont, *Railway Mania* 145). Juxtaposing luxurious interiors, plush fabrics, and wealthy bourgeois travellers with dangerous half-beast, half-man characters, enigmatic victims, and erotic situations, Ernst overturns the conventional notion of a safe traveling vessel.



*Mercredi, Oedipe*  
courtesy of Dover Publications

In accordance with Foucault's definition, Ernst's train compartments are intimate but also vulnerable to intrusion. That vulnerability, coupled with Virilio's argument about the inherent link between speed and fear, explains the sexual violence and deviancy in Ernst's images. For example, in the twenty-first image of the section entitled "Mercredi, Oedipe" ('Wednesday, Oedipus'), a bird-man seated on a decadently plush sofa is looking directly at the viewer, although his animal characteristics do not allow for the communication of emotion or feeling. We can see only the exposed (and suggestive) legs of a dead woman, most likely murdered,<sup>12</sup> in the foreground, and outside of the compartment, a sculpted sphinx swarming with mice.

This image and the two other train compartment images in Ernst's book (18, 19) are all framed in a similar way, from the vantage of the entryway. This perspective highlights the unseen threshold, which intimates a possible intrusion into an inescapable place, a chance encounter, a sexual adventure or violent struggle. For Robert Dingley, these qualities of the threshold define the entire train compartment, which he refers to as a liminal space. Dingley writes: "The compartment, indeed, is for the Victorians a tensely problematic, because liminal, space: seeming to reproduce in microcosm the cozy private security of the bourgeois home, it is forever threatened with the possibility of invasion by some sinister other" (117, 119). The fears associated with the threat of intrusion are one of the main themes in Ernst's train collages. All three images leave unanswered

questions, like who is responsible for the violence, suggesting that the compartment's liminality allows for anonymity and freedom from social laws.

These anxieties and fears become real in the liminal, heterotopic space of the train compartment, where an alternative universe is able to unfold. In Ernst's collages, this "other" place is a manifestation of the bourgeois psyche. The interior spaces of the train become a reflection of complex psychological thoughts that are often hidden or buried in the subconscious. Like many surrealist descriptions of space, Ernst's images deconstruct or "decode" the internal spaces of the mind and project them onto exterior spaces, in this case, the train compartment.<sup>13</sup>

But Ernst subverts these bourgeois fears and subtly pokes fun at them. Juxtaposing serious crimes with surreal imagery, or plush bourgeois furnishings with unexpected animal-human figures, Ernst underscores the absurdity of bourgeois society, a technique Matthew Beaumont describes: "In this book [Ernst] sought to portray nothing less than the unconscious of the nineteenth century, taking melodramatic images from cheap romances and exposing them, in spite of their innocuous appearance, as so many prurient attempts to conceal the aggressive drives that threatened to tear apart polite middle-class culture" ("Railway Mania" 145-46). Exposing the subconscious and criticizing bourgeois society are two important goals of Surrealism, elucidated in the manifestos and more. Ernst promotes these goals with his use of the train image in *Une Semaine*, effectively exposing the sordid and cowardly side of the bourgeois psyche.

The sexual undertones in these images, however, reveal another kind of social criticism. The juxtaposition of violence and sexuality, a theme explored by various Surrealists, is a way of exposing the repressed sexuality that the Surrealists felt governed social behaviours of the modern era. The link between sex and the train compartment, however, did not begin with Surrealism. In 1897 Sigmund Freud wrote to his friend and colleague Wilhelm Fliess, explaining that at the age of two, during a railway night voyage with his family, his libido was suddenly awakened by his mother, no doubt from having seen her change clothes.<sup>14</sup> This explanation of sexual awakening, based on a childhood memory, gives the train a prominent place in the history of psychoanalysis and the theory of the Oedipal complex. Laura Marcus, who examines the idea of the train and psychoanalysis in her article "Psychoanalytic Training: Freud and the Railways," explains: "in more than one way, the railway journey 'founds' psychoanalysis" (161).

This perspective sheds light on other surrealist examples of the train compartment and sexuality. In *Violette Nozières*, a collection of drawings and poems published in 1933 in support of the real-life Violette Nozière,<sup>15</sup> the Surrealists also employ the train as a catalyst for sexual arousal, but in this case, it symbolizes a much darker and more problematic sexual experience. Miss Nozière

was an eighteen-year-old Parisian who had poisoned her parents and succeeded in killing her father. During the trial, Miss Nozière accused her father, an employee of the national railway industry, of sexual abuse, something that was largely ignored even by the defense due to the taboo nature of the subject. Miss Nozière was condemned to death, and later acquitted.<sup>16</sup> The Surrealists, interested in the psychological complexities of the father-daughter relationship and the possibility of patriarchal abuse, protested the ruling with this publication, which was a broadside against bourgeois society for condoning the abusive conditions that triggered the patricide. In one of the poems, Péret illustrates the association between the sexual crime and the train. He writes, “Daddy / Little Daddy you are hurting me / she said / But the daddy feeling the heat of his locomotive / a little south of his belly button / raped / Violette / in the garden bower / . . . amid the shovel handles that fired him up” (Maza 216). Péret’s explicit and disturbing poem attacks the legitimacy of the *pater familias* with the train metaphor, which underscores the violent and forbidden nature of the crime. Throughout the collection, the father is the center of attack, the target of the Surrealists’ rage against bourgeois society. The interior spaces of the train are a sinister microcosm representing what is wrong with society.

Surrealism’s attempts to explore emotional, psychological, and often disturbing experiences came to a momentary halt at the onset of the Second World War, when many of the members were forced to leave France. The outbreak of the conflict not only dispersed the Surrealists, symbolically ending the historic avant-garde wave, it more significantly changed public perception of many things, including the train. The expanding role of the locomotive in the various wars and conflicts across Europe eventually altered its role and function in society. Whereas Virilio mentions the association between trains and “abduction [which is] is at the heart of accelerated travel” (42-43), Freeman moves toward making a more unambiguous reference to the Holocaust, comparing pre-WWII stations, which were once the “sites of joy and excitement,” with stations after the war, which became associated with “sadness, . . . anxiety,” and “deportee movements” (29-30).

Although the Surrealists continued to meet and produce art after the Second World War, post-war surrealist locomotive imagery, like Salvador Dalí’s *Gare de Perpignan (The Station at Perpignan)* (1965), or Magritte’s *Le Rossignol* (1956), attest to a significant shift. Both paintings depict the train, but unlike the work of their predecessors, the locomotive is mythologized and surrounded by religious imagery. Dalí’s image is divided into four quadrants separated by an ethereal light (he said he was inspired by a “vision” he had at the station) and Magritte’s painting shows a god-like figure on a cloud above a passing train. This new approach is less concerned with experiments in speed and heterotopic space, and more suggestive of human transcendence. These examples underscore David

Fleming's observation that the railway, as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed, began to evoke nostalgia for something lost or unattainable (12).



*The Nightingale*

The train in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was never the most technologically advanced mode of transportation, but it remained an important symbol for the most experimental artists of the time. The historic avant-garde, more than its predecessors or those artists who followed, effectively depicted the train as a special vessel capable of propelling the reader or the viewer into the alternative reality it championed. The avant-garde effectively exploited the heterotopic and liminal qualities of its moving compartment, highlighting them as metaphors for multiple perspectives and subjective reality. In his philosophical essay on linguistics and psychoanalysis entitled “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious,” Jacques Lacan, an ex-friend of Breton’s and former regular at the surrealist café meetings, making a point about the ambiguity of language, uses the train to illustrate the same qualities of change and transformation advocated by the avant-garde. He tells a story about two children, a brother and a sister, sitting opposite each other in a compartment arriving at a train station. Both see public lavatory signs from their window and the little boy exclaims that they have arrived at a destination called “Ladies,” whereas his sister thinks they have arrived at “Gentlemen” (417). As Lacan points out, the rails, like the Saussurian equation of *signifier* over *signified* on which he bases his analysis, are a necessary component in the production of endless meaning; the speed and position of the

train play a role in the final result. And so with the avant-garde, the train, its speed and its space, remain the insistent symbol of possibility.

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## Notes

1. The historic or historical avant-garde refers to the avant-garde movements active at the height of modernism, between 1910 and 1930, including Futurism and Surrealism, according to Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and according to subsequent avant-garde theorists such as Günter Berghaus, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Olivier Penot-Lacassagne, and Emmanuel Rubio, among others.
2. Although this paper focuses on literary and graphic images of the train, there are also interesting theatrical representations, which the following authors have investigated: Günter Berghaus, *Italian Futurist Theatre*; Jane Barnette, *Locomotive Leisure*; Kyle Gillette, *Railway Travel in Modern Theatre: Transforming the Space and Time of the Stage*.
3. In addition to Virilio and Foucault, other 20th-century critics and theorists addressed issues surrounding the representation of the train in art and literature. One contemporary source would be Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, which discusses the railroad tracks as an entryway to a "dream world" (156). See also Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs: The Complete Text*, (127), for an insightful commentary on the significance of different perspectives through train windows in Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu (Remembrance of Things Past)*. For discussions on the interior space of the train compartment, see Michel de Certeau's chapter "Naval et Carcéral" ("Railway Navigation and Incarceration") in *L'Invention du Quotidien (The Practice of Everyday Life)*. Finally, Gaston Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'espace (The Poetics of Space)* provides a useful analysis of the particular qualities of interior spaces, especially part III of chapter IX "La dialectique du dehors et du dedans" "The Dialectic of Outside and Inside."
4. All translations not listed in the Works Cited are my own.
5. Although there are other discoveries in the sciences, like non-Euclidian geometry (see Henderson), that influenced the avant-garde's understanding of space, Einstein and Quantum Theory remain the most important in terms of speed.
6. The Florentine group of writers for *La Voce* ('The Voice'), a literary journal in which Marinetti had published, had translated writers like Bergson and William James—see *Préface*, VIII of Lista, Giovanni. For an exhaustive list of artists who

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inspired or influenced the Futurists, see Chapter 2 of Tisdall and Bozzolla's *Futurism*.

7. For examples of technologically induced maladies, see Schivelbusch, especially his discussion of railroad shock and shell shock, pages 150-58. See also Claudie Massicotte's discussion of the train symbol in Freud's writings.

8. For another example of how the train can provoke emotion, Dingley points to a paper written by Freud's colleague Karl Abraham entitled "Locomotor Anxiety," where Abraham links fear of motion with a strong pleasure in it (115-16).

9. Although Freud's work would not be translated into French until 1921, Breton became aware of his work in 1917 (Polizzotti 51).

10. A number of critics, like Polizzotti, suspect that the final pages of *Nadja*, and the excerpt on beauty included above, are not about Nadja but about Suzanne Muzard, the woman with whom Breton was in love at the time he finished *Nadja*.

11. *Minotaure* n° 10, hiver 1937, p. 20.

12. For a discussion of murder on trains, see Schivelbusch (84-88, 133).

13. See Henri Lefebvre's *La Production de l'Espace* (*The Production of Space*), especially page 18, for a discussion of the projection of psychological workings of the mind on exterior spaces.

14. See the letter from 3 October 1897 in *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess* (268).

15. Note the mistaken spelling of the published title, which has an extra "s."

16. For a full account of the murder and trial, see Sarah Maza's *Violette Nozière: A story of murder in 1930s Paris*.

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