

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.6.Issue.1.2019 (Jan-March)

ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE 'MACHINE-ENSEMBLE' IN PAUL THEROUX'S SELECTED TRAVEL NARRATIVES; A
BRIEF EXPLORATION

NEEMA SUSAN MATHEWS

Research Scholar, Department of English Language & Literature, St Thomas College, Kozhenchery,
Pathanamthitta, Kerala, India

neemathews@gmail.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.6119.149>



ABSTRACT

Travel narratives have made known its presence since ancient times. After Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Travel Writings became popular among the critics. Often their main focus is on the observations made by the traveller than the infrastructure that facilitated the journeys. Paul Theroux, the American writer, depends on Railways to reach the new places. The Railways in Theroux's narratives do not just serve as a transport medium but additionally they play a functional and structural role too. The involvement of infrastructure- mainly, the railroads offer new critical possibilities for reading Theroux's Travel narratives and this paper dwells on the centrality of railways in Theroux's journeys.

Keywords- Mobility studies, Infrastructure studies, Modes of journeys.

Oh God, to be free of all hemmed- in life- the horror of human tension, the absolute insanity of machine persistence. The agony which a train is to be, really.

- D. H Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia* (30).

And the notion of travel as a continuous vision, a grand tour's succession of memorable images across a curved earth — with none of the distorting emptiness of air or sea — is possible only on a train.

-Paul Theroux, *'The Great Railway Bazaar'*

Travel narratives have made known its presence in the cultural realm since ancient times. After Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Travel Writings became popular among the critics. Often their main focus is on the observations made by the traveller than on the background elements like the infrastructure that enables the journeys. The mode of travel that is, "the spaces and technologies that facilitate travel" (Vandertop, 129) has not been a topic of study in Travel Narratives until recently. Infrastructure can be defined "(a)s the driving circulatory and connective forces of modernity..(it) operate(s) as complex assemblages, channelling flows of energy, goods, people and information across shrinking distances" (ibid,130). The literary infringement of infrastructure, in the case of Paul Theroux, the Railways, calls for critical attention as it provides a framework for literary construal.

D. H Lawrence in *Sea and Sardinia* gets excited to face the vast and boundless sea, far away from a "life among tense, resistant people on land" (30). Lawrence becomes expressionistic and impulsive as his "heart beats with joy" when he feels the "slow lift of the ship" and the "slow slide forwards" (30). Lawrence's liberating experience can be contrasted with Theroux's journeys on the eastbound trains. Theroux is occupied with the impressions of the physical and mechanical world-"...the sound of a train at night, striking the precise musical note of train whistles, a diminished third, into the darkness, as you lie in the train, moving through the world as travelers do, 'inside the whale'"(GTES, 3).. Lawrence and Theroux use different modes of journey and it is reflected in their respective texts. The contributing presence of infrastructure - the Railways- offers critical possibilities for reading Theroux's Travel Narratives.

Paul Fussler in his study of Travel Writers, between the World wars, observes that, many of them- D H Lawrence, Evelyn Waugh, Robert Byron despise the technological impact on the society for they have witnessed how technology brought atrocities during world wars. This created a desire for the world outside the civilization which can be seen as a post-Romantic movement. When Theroux publishes his first Travel text, *The Great Railway Bazaar* in 1975, it marks a new trend in the genre. To introduce a new form for the book he decides "on a series of train journeys"(GRB, X) that feature "lots of people and dialogue and no sightseeing" (ibid,vii-viii). Since then he has written many travel books in the same form including *The Old Patagonian Express*, *Dark Star Safari*, *The Ghost Train to the Eastern star*, *The Last Train to Zona Verde*.

Theroux's fascination for the Railways is as old as him. His first text begins thus:

EVER SINCE CHILDHOOD, when I lived within earshot of the Boston and Maine, I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it. Those whistles sing bewitchment: railways are irresistible bazaars, snaking along perfectly level no matter what the landscape, improving your mood with speed, and never upsetting your drink. The train can reassure you in awful places -a far cry from the anxious sweats of doom aeroplanes inspire, or the nauseating gas-sickness of the long-distance bus, or the paralysis that afflicts the car passenger. If a train is large and comfortable you don't even need a destination; a corner seat is enough, and you can be one of those travellers who stay in motion, straddling the tracks, and never arrive or feel they ought to...(GRB, 11)

This introductory passage establishes his choices and reasons for it. As a beginner, Theroux prefers to be in a comfortable position than to take a risk as he does in the later texts for railway travel provided a relatively safe, clean, sheltered, and foreseeable mode of conveyance.

The Great Railway Bazaar and *The Old Patagonian Express* consist of thirty chapters and each records his experiences in thirty different trains in each text. The rails move through a predictable path which serves as a backbone of the narratives. To embellish this narrative spine, Theroux reconstructs the everyday details of the trip, based on the notes he kept, with vignettes of people encountered and sketches of towns he visits. Throughout these descriptive and anecdotal details of his journey, Theroux weaves a far more personal narrative that includes the Escape stories, disintegrating romance, a family chronicle of immigration to America- creating a series of mini-histories of people who are on the motion. These mini-narratives and short episodes have everything to do with Theroux's relationship to locomotive mobility and the identity of the traveler he has shaped for himself. Thus the railroad world has also supplied "...a new pattern of narrative construction, a model for a serial and sequenced ordering (a "montage") of narrative situations and events"(Ceserani,1999). Train journeys are always intriguing especially when an episode of Railways appears in fiction or film, it arrests the attention of the readers/viewers and makes them sit at the end of the seat, arousing curiosity in them. Theroux exploits this natural curiosity in readers when he recounts his peregrinations.

In the book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau discusses how people individualises mass culture in order to make them their own. He explains rail journey in post-modern terms in the chapter, "Railway navigation". In train travel, there are two sites of immobility brought in association with one another. The first site is the inside of the railway car-the fixedness of the "rationalized cell" (111) moving through space. The second one is the 'geographical space through which the train passes- "the world outside the railway

car...that of things, towering mountains, stretches of green field and forest, arrested villages, [and] colonnades of buildings" (111). What mediates between these fixities are the human eyes- the eyes of the traveler, here of the writer. Thus the train becomes the "primum Mobile" that transports the eyes which observes everything around it.(113).

The narrative's "visual spectacle of mobility"(Fraser and Spalding 180) made possible in a Railway journey offers new perspectives to the reading of the text.

The train made its slow circuit of Paris, weaving among the dark buildings and shrieking *frseeeeeeee-fronnnng* into the ears of sleeping women. The Gare de Lyons was alive, with that midnight glamour of bright lights and smoking engines, and across the gleaming tracks, the ribbed canvas over one particular train turned it into a caterpillar about to set off and chew a path through France. (GRB, 18)

This rapid entry into the city of Paris can be contrasted with the tamed-decelerated movement through a Costa Rican Countryside.

It is, for the first third of the trip, a mountain railway, the train travelling along a narrow shelf that has been notched into the mountainside. How narrow? Well, at one point a cow had strayed onto the line. To the left was the sheer mountain wall, to the right the drop into the river; the cow was baffled and for almost a mile she lolloped ahead of the engine, which had slowed so as not to kill her. At times she stopped, put her nose against the mountainside, sniffed at the precipice, then started away again, rocking back and forth, stiff-legged, the way cows run. The track was too narrow to give her space to allow us to pass, so she ran ahead rocking, her tail swinging, for almost a mile on this high shelf. (OPE, 187)

The paradoxical scene in which the hefty and speeding machine of transport becomes docile before a cow is offers a unique spectacle that documents the confrontation of nature and technology. Another description reads-

The train plunged out of the tunnel and lost its racket in the sunlight and clear air. We teetered on a mountainside, and the subdued chug of the engine - muffled by the tide of air- was like a husband reverence for the ten fertile miles of the Jiboa Valley, which began at the tunnel entrance and descended as evenly as a ski slope before rising at the foot of the volcano. The volcano was a darker green than the landscape it sprang out of, and it had leonine contours of light and shade, some like shoulders and for paws, some muscled like flanks and hind quarters. But it had a carved considered look to it and seemed, as I sped towards it on the train, like a headless sphinx, green and monumental, as if its head had rolled away leaving its lion's body intact. (OPE, 167)

These exhilarating panoramas of the landscape impart a memorial mobility to the narrator. The visuals and the perspectives formed are with reference to the movement in a train's cabin. That is, in such visuals and perspectives, the train becomes a reference point. Spalding's comparison between the descriptions of rail journey and cinematic effects can be used here " (t)hese effects- narrative movements, accelerations, and decelerations- translate into the appearance..(as) equivalents of the Cinema's jump cuts, sweeping panoramas(or crane shots)" (181). Thus train and railroad do not only suggest a background or a theme but become a functional and structural part of plot and narration.

Railway stations are other focal points in Theroux's texts. Theroux attempts a cultural reading of the stations and integrates it in his texts.

"When in Vietnam Theroux sets out for the Saigon station-(t)here is o sign on Saigon Station, and, though I was perhaps fifty feet away from it, no one in the area knew where it was...but even when I got on the platform I was not sure it was the railway station: there were no passengers and no trains on the platform. (GRB,275).

While in the metropolis the stations are becoming more and more like airports, in remote places like Saigon in Vietnam locals are not even aware of the location of the stations. Theroux mentions about stations in

Bulgaria and Yugoslavia are made interesting by the people there and the food that is offered for sale. Other stations like the large station on the Asian side of the Bosphorus in Istanbul , Howrah station in Calcutta impose landmarks by themselves. In India, he remarks that villages literally exist in Railway stations.

This paper dwells on the centrality of railways in Theroux's journeys. For Theroux Railway became more a physical condition of possibility and a metaphorical model for his conception of subjectivity. His journeys on the rail cars provided him a setting for his reflection on the activity he is indulged in, at the same time, metaphorically, they hold out a structure for his understanding of the internal connections, paths of communications, and networks of information in memory.

Bibliography

1. Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988
2. Ceserani, Remo. "The Impact of the Train on Modern Literary Imagination" in *Stanford Humanities Review*-Volume 1.1.1999
3. John Urry, *Mobilities*, Cambridge: Polity, 2007
4. Lawrence, *Sea and Sardinia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1997.
5. Smith, Sidonie. *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*. NED- New edition ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
6. Spalding, Steven D; Benjamin Fraser. *Trains, Culture and Mobility*, Lexington Books, 2012
7. Theroux, Paul. *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star*. Penguin UK, 2009
8. Theroux, Paul. *The Great Railway Bazaar*. Penguin Classics, 2008
9. Theroux, Paul. *The Old Patagonian Express*. Penguin Classics, 2008
10. Vandertop C. "Travel Literature and the Infrastructural Unconscious". In: Kuehn J., Smethurst P. (eds) *New Directions in Travel Writing Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, London,1997
11. Wilken, Rowan. "Seen From A Carriage: A Rhythmanalytic Study of Train Travel and Mediation", B. Fraser & S.D. Spalding (eds), *Trains, Culture, and Mobility: Riding the Rails*, Lexington Books., 2012