'The Ministers of Locomotion':

Some Historical Speculations on Velocity Culture

- Esther Milne
- Respond To This Article

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'The vital experience of the glad animal sensibilities made doubts impossible on the question of our speed; we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling; and this speed was not the product of blind insensate agencies, that had no sympathy to give, but was incarnated in the fiery eyeballs of the noblest amongst brutes, in his dilated nostril, spasmodic muscles, and thunder-beating hoofs.' -- Thomas de Quincey (1849), "The English Mail-Coach"

For Thomas de Quincey, the thrust of speed is intimately linked with the thrust of the body. Subjectivity is formed by and through a corporeal experience of acceleration. In this way, De Quincey has the jump on those other lovers of automated speed: the Italian Futurists. That heady clash of bodies, speed and information, or the technological sublime, we characteristically associate with the development of twentieth-century communication is already articulated some sixty years before Marinetti imagines the 'divine fusion' of body and machine. Thomas de Quincey's 1849 ode to the postal service -- "The English Mail Coach" -- functions as a significant text in modernity's velocity culture. Specifically, de Quincey allows us to historicise the critical terms of 'speed', 'body' and 'circulation'. This paper makes some preliminary historical observations about the acceleration of communication and transport systems and how this rapidity might give rise to new forms of subjectivity or the emergence of what Jeffrey T. Schnapp calls 'the kinematic subject'.

The perceptual reconfiguration of time and space is central to an understanding of modernity's preoccupation with speed. Rapid data circulation through digital information systems means that distance appears to shrink and time seems to collapse. Manuel Castells calls this a 'new time regime' (429). Temporality now functions according to a double logic: a simultaneous binary of 'the eternal and of the ephemeral'. The contemporary 'manipulation of time' turns on 'instantaneity and eternity: me and the universe, the self and the net' (462-3). For David Harvey the defining feature of postmodernity is 'time-space compression'. Capitalism is 'characterised by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us' (241).

Castells and Harvey are not, of course, the first to notice the degree to which the changing rhythms of a communication vehicle might impact upon perceptions of time and space. In 1909 Marinetti announces its demise: 'Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed'. Yet this death is prefigured some 120 years before by the 18th century author Hannah More in a letter where, quoting Alexander Pope, she illustrates her reaction to the introduction of the mail coach:

I have just been thinking that if the amorous poet, who modestly wished to annihilate time and space had lived to see our fortunate days, he would have seen his prophetic visions realised... cards having well-nigh accomplished the first, and mail-coaches the last. (Qtd. in Lewis 264)

This letter is dated 1788, only four years after the establishment of the mail coach system. Initially the service ran between London and Bristol so that Hannah More writing from Somerset would complain of being bypassed by this new mode of information circulation:

Of the other blessing, the annihilation of space, I cannot partake; mail-coaches, which come to others, come not to me. Letters and newspapers, now that they travel in coaches like gentlemen and ladies, come not within ten miles of my hermitage. (265)

More here identifies an important historical factor in the transformation of information networks. It concerns the coupling of transportation and communication: information travels 'in coaches like gentlemen and ladies'. In More's 18th century account the two remain connected while, as James Carey has noted, the significance of the 19th century's invention of the telegraph is that it splits the two processes. The telegraph 'allowed symbols to move independently of geography and independently of and faster than transport' (213). For de Quincey, a pivotal feature of the mail coach is the way in which communication and transportation function coextensively. Recounting his travels on the coach as it distributes news from the Napoleonic wars he notes that 'the grandest chapter of our experience, within the whole mail-coach service, was on those occasions when we went down from London with the news of victory' (290). For de Quincey, as for other commentators, the mail
coach is a political instrument. Through the increasing efficiency of its communication infrastructure, it 'binds the nation together' (Austen 361). As de Quincey puts it 'the mail-coach, as the national organ for publishing these mighty events, thus diffusively influential, became itself a spiritualised and glorified object to an impassioned heart' (272).

What impresses de Quincey most, however, is the speed of this vehicle. Or perhaps, more accurately, it is a particular relation between the self and speed, which confers on the mail coach a 'glory of motion' (270). By the time he publishes his essay, postal and newspaper circulation by mail-coach is nearly at an end. The last mail coach ceases action in London in 1846 (Daunton 123) and postal distribution begins to be carried out by rail. De Quincey clearly mourns the loss of this form of communication. And his regret depends on the self's perception of speed. That is, to qualify as an authentic act of transportation (of the body, of the post or of language), one must, to some degree, be aware of the systems of circulation, the modes of delivery and the vehicle of communication. One ought to be able to experience the speed at which one travels or the mail is delivered. The body must remain in contact with the message. In de Quincey's view the railway communication system fails for these sorts of reasons:

The modern modes of travelling cannot compare with the mail-coach system in grandeur and power. They boast of more velocity, not however as a consciousness, but as a fact of our lifeless knowledge, resting upon alien evidence; as, for instance, because somebody says that we have gone fifty miles in the hour though we are far from feeling it as a personal experience ... . Apart from such an assertion, or such a result, I myself am little aware of the pace. But, seated on the old mail-coach, we needed no evidence out of ourselves to indicate the velocity. (283, emphasis in the original)

Perched atop the careening mail coach, the self needs no secondary evidence to confirm its propulsion: 'we heard our speed, we saw it, we felt it as a thrilling'. But with the emergence of railway systems, the self somehow becomes cut off or distanced from the mode of transport: 'But now, on the new system of travelling, iron tubes and boilers have disconnected man's heart from the ministers of his locomotion' (284). To be sure, rail is faster. But that fails to impress de Quincey for the mail coach cannot offer him the same sublime effect. The mail coach is drawn by 'royal horses like ministers of his locomotion' (284). The sublimity of speed is also aural. But once again the railroad fails to inspire awe: 'the trumpet that once announced from afar the laurelled mail; heartshaking, when heard screaming on the wind ... has now given way for ever to the pot-wallops of the boiler' (284).

In Burke's formulation of the sublime there is danger and terror but there must also be a certain distance from this threat. It is 'simply painful' when we are aroused by causes that 'immediately affect us' but it is sublime when 'we have an idea of pain and danger, without being actually in such circumstances' (51) . For de Quincey sitting inside the carriage seems to offer too much safety and distance, the interior reserved as it is for the 'porcelain variety of the human race' (273). Instead, he travels aloft near the driver because of 'the air, the freedom of prospect, the proximity to the horses, the elevation of seat' (275). And he has the possibility of reining them in himself: 'the certain anticipation of purchasing occasional opportunities of driving' (275). The closer he is to the ministers of his locomotion, the better de Quincey likes it. The more he becomes the agent of his own speed, the more immediate, authentic and sublime seems his journey. For de Quincey, then, the superiority of the mail coach over the railroad lies not in terms of absolute speed but rather it concerns issues about the body's experience of and relation to that speed. As Matthew Schneider (1995) puts it 'the difference between the two with respect to their speed, privileges mail coaches by virtue of their violent immediacy, their ability to transmit the actual or living sensations rather than one that is intermediate or representational' (152).

In a fascinating paper about the correlation between speed and subjectivity Jeffrey T. Schnapp identifies the mail coach in general and de Quincey in particular as emblematic of an 'inaugural moment' in the development of an 'anthropology of speed' (3). With a quick side swipe at the ahistorical and apocalyptic underpinning of Paul Virilio's Speed and Politics, Schnapp argues that although speed has always been 'an agent of individuation' it is with modernity that it begins to depend on the relation between self and vehicle:

... the mere experience of riding on horseback was not enough to establish a modern culture of velocity. Speed's rise as a cultural thematic, its move into an everyday realm of perceptibility, its adoption as sacrament of modern individualism, became possible only with the development of mechanical buffers between rider, horse, and roadway: buffers that enable new fantasies of attachment, first, between rider and engine, and, then, according to a more complex logic, between rider, engine, vehicle, and/or landscape. (10-1)

What is particularly productive about Schnapp's account is that he schematises the history of transportation in terms of the relation between speed, body and vehicle. For Schnapp this is a pivotal dynamic. De Quincey's equestrian desire and his disdain for railroad travel, is part of a
historical process where individuality comes to be 'identified with administration of one's own speed' (14). In Schnapp's model, there are 'two concurrent yet distinct experiences of velocity', one that he calls 'thrill-based' and the other 'commodity-based'. The first is experienced in modes such as on top of the mail-coach and later, cars, motorbikes and aeroplanes. 'Commodity-based' refers to train and bus travel. The difference between the two is that thrill-based transportation occurs when the passenger 'can envisage himself as the author of his velocity' while in 'commodity-based' forms the traveller is 'shielded from the natural environment and the engine, and passively submits himself to velocity' (18-9).

De Quincey's essay is a valuable resource for communications historiography. Like Jacques Derrida, he recognises how the rhythms of the postal service function to construct identity. As a system of circulation and exchange, the post office institutionalises modes of correspondence, producing and regulating particular subjectivities. And like Postman Pat, de Quincey knows the corporeal pleasures of delivering the mail.

Footnotes

1. There are also issues of class at work here. Tickets were more expensive to sit inside the carriage which de Quincey, then a student at Oxford, could not afford. He attempts to reverse these class distinctions by arguing that 'inside which had been traditionally regarded as the only room tenable by gentlemen, was, in fact, the coal-cellar in disguise' (187).

2. The secondary material on de Quincey is quite extensive. In the last 15 years his work has been investigated from a number of different angles including poststructuralist approaches to language and his transitional status as a figure between Romanticism and Modernism. As well as Schneider, see Clej and Snyder.

References


Citation reference for this article

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