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## A Cult of Modernity

Modernity exists due to years of academics setting the definitions of it. The idea of modernity may be a modern convention as much as anything discussed here. What makes something modern? Does an idea or a technology have to be new or innovative, does it have to create a world so entirely different that there is no returning to the atmosphere before its release? Is modernity universal or nuanced? Scholars have argued over these questions since they first were queried, each finding a stalwart theorist whose flag they pick up and wave vigorously at each other. Most of the time, the nuts and bolts of an argument or innovation get lost in all the sabre rattling among the theorists. There are a few examples of modernity studies that have stood the test of time, albeit with some critics, and those works speak well beyond their portrayals of what makes the modern, modern.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* is a prime example of a work that transcends its intended audience, topic, and time period to stay a mainstay and useful foundation for histories of technology, modernity, industrialization, and even public reception. The breadth of Schivelbusch's source material is one reason his book has survived the tumultuous historical resets of the 1980s and 90s. He begins with an overview of the mechanization process of the railway systems in the United Kingdom and Europe. By looking at the railway as a collection of technologies that is greater than the sum of its parts Schivelbusch is able to create a single entity with which to

compare multiple vantage points. With a standard means of comparison *The Railway Journey* looks beyond the simple Old World vs. New World arguments that Marshall Berman thinks he's the first at doing in 1983. Schivelbusch's discussion of time and space is one repeated in current narratives on technology and culture. The idea that space can be contracted and expanded at the same time is used to further explain the paradox that modernity study is.

The *Excursus* chapters could be taken on their own accord or even left out of the book completely. Their inclusion however, allows the author to paint a fuller portrait of modernization techniques and their inherent impacts on nearly every aspect of "modern" life. They fall into a rhetorical tactic akin to the "I told you that story to tell you this one" manner of presenting an argument. Each one is more than a presentation of anecdotes tangential to the story of railway development, but give a deeper insight into the sections surrounding them—whether architecture or pathology. The latter of which discusses industrial fatigue as a mechanical engineering term as well as population growing tired of the whirlwind that was the railroad and the history of shock. The very nature of "shock" being a modern term in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is something that an entire book could be written on, especially since as the 20<sup>th</sup> century progressed "shock" has gained a new "modern" diagnosis—post traumatic stress disorder.

One of Schivelbusch's greatest strengths in *The Railway Journey* is its readability. The book is easily accessible to novices in history be it technology in general of the railroad in particular. However, the book is not only a light overview with nothing to offer more advanced readers. Students and Scholars can many

things to add to their own works, whether they study specific history or have general historical overviews. Nearly everything in *The Railway Journey* has a double meaning, one for the general and one for the specific. The use of the railroad as a model for industrialization can help students of history to understand the industrialization process of areas they may not be familiar with. The brilliance of this scheme is within the title itself. Within *The Railway Journey* Schivelbusch reveals not only the act of going on a journey via the railroad, but also the journey of the railroad as it made its way both geographically and temporally throughout time and space.

Schivelbusch's model is still in use in more "modern" times. Nearly three decades after *The Railway Journey* Bernhard Rieger published *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945*. Rieger replaces "industrialization" with "technology" but follows the same pattern of narration that makes Schivelbusch's *Railway Journey* so useful. Each one of the technologies the Rieger examines follows the same pattern of research. He sets up these "modern wonders"—film, airplanes, and giant ocean liners from the beginning and then looks at each one individually to show the stunning amount of similarities that each technology shared when they each became part of the public's consciousness. Rieger argues that their differences were more of a question of degree and not so much as a question of kind.

Rieger looks at hero and heroine air pilots for personal narratives of a new technology as a way to explain the rise of airplanes in popular consciousness in the time before passenger air travel in a way that he could not with Ocean liner captains or

movie producers. I suppose the temporal restrictions that Rieger places on himself is the only reason he does not compare early ocean liner passenger stories with later air liner passengers in more detail. His attention to ocean going “palaces” highlights mainly the acceptance of such technologies even in the face of great disasters like the *Titanic* and even the *Hindenburg*. The odd man out at cursory glance of Rieger’s topics is film. He discusses early on that film did not have the immediate political and military implications that things such as aircraft and large ocean going vessels had.

What *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945* reveals is that even though a particular technology may not have implications from the outset, it may grow to be used to great effect and with great power in later years. In their essay *Nowhere: An Introduction to Space, Time, and Modernity* Roger Friedland and Deirdre Boden call Adolf Hitler “the world’s first media dictator” (19), indicates that by the Second World War film had as much an influence on world power as air and seagoing vessels.

The greatest similarity between Rieger and Schivelbusch’s works is their attention to accidents with technology and their impacts and repercussions within the population. Schivelbusch deals with mainly railway accidents while Rieger goes beyond and looks at the aforementioned icons *Titanic* and *Hindenburg*. The similarities leading to the accidents and public outcry, reaction, and acceptance are hard to ignore. What is interesting to note is that after initial dirigible disasters Britain abandoned airship technology and went on to bigger and more “modern” things while Germany increased airship research following the *Hindenburg* disaster.

While governments had different reactions to similar accidents, the general worry and concern was almost identical when human life was at stake. In fact these disasters became an almost point of pride for the calmness in the face of disaster motif. The fact that the captains stayed calm during pandemonium showed levels of civility above all. These reports did not have to be entirely accurate for the sentiment to blossom either.

As someone only slightly familiar with the history of technology and less so with concepts of modernity both Rieger and Schivelbusch are good foundations to understand the context in which the theoretical and definitional arguments are taking place. I still don't know enough to choose a theoretical side, but understanding the models used in these works has allowed me to look at technology in a different manner.

The books are good assignments but can be even more effective if they are read while traveling. Having finished *The Railway Journey* and read *Technology and the Culture of Modernity in Britain and Germany, 1890-1945* while on a trip that involved air travel as well as staying in engineered space makes many of the points in both works more personal. The airports are a derivation of Schivelbusch's Railway Stations, and the airport and hotel's atriums were exemplars of his Glass Architecture *excursus*. While the engineered space of a hotel without access to sidewalks, forces one to use taxi services.

Upon returning we attended one of the modern marvels that Rieger wrote about—film. Watching a modern 3D IMAX projection movie after reading the arguments about film blurring the line between fact and fiction and confusing the

populace seemed ironic for reasons other than watching the prequel to The Wizard of Oz. The fact that even after film was part of the mainstream, it still went through technological advances like color and 3D would have probably never occurred to me had I not visited a theatre soon after reading Rieger. The pairing of these books reinforce the arguments of each and reading them together while utilizing the technologies they are discussing make them even more apparent. Reading Schivelbusch on a train and Rieger on a cruise might be the only thing that could make their points even stronger.