

## **THE HUMAN SPACE OF THE RAILWAY CARRIAGE**

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[DRAFT: Please consult published version for citation purposes.]

What do you do when you get onto a train? Chances are that you try to find a seat. If there's nowhere to sit, you look for somewhere to stand. Perhaps you lean against the luggage rack, or sit down on the corridor floor. As more people get on, everyone shuffles around so that no-one is standing too close to anyone else. I imagine that you don't get on to the train and start throwing shopping down the corridor, or practising your clarinet, or undressing in the middle of the aisle. The railway has, at various times, explicitly told people how to behave, prohibiting drivers from 'skylarking', and requesting of passengers, 'please adjust your dress before leaving'.<sup>1</sup> Yet for the most part, you don't need to explicitly *think* about what to do. You can be absentmindedly wondering what to cook for dinner, yet still manage to successfully navigate the space of the train. How is this possible?

We can begin by noticing that the human world is shaped according to the activities that take place in it. A coffee mug is sized to the human hand, and made to hold liquid. The height and width of a chair's seat is aligned with the length of human legs and the size of a human pelvis. In this way, human spaces are designed to offer people a range of opportunities for action – they *afford* certain possibilities for behaviour. The train carriage is a human space like any other, so we should expect it to be likewise shaped by the activities that take place within it. The point of railway travel is to get from one place to another. (Although some might argue that the journey can be an end in itself.) Given this, there's not an awful lot of things to *do* except wait patiently until one arrives. The journey is a period of enforced leisure. Some luxurious early carriages (only available to the wealthy) thus replicated other spaces where people relaxed with no particular aim in mind – living-rooms – complete with upholstered sofas and elaborately draped curtains. By recreating this environment, such carriages facilitated similar sorts of leisurely behaviour. Even today, carriages are designed for people to sit down.

The behaviours that shape human environments include those that are dictated by cultural *norms* – ways of behaving that are deemed appropriate by the communities of people who inhabit those places. One example is that of the Ladies Only carriage. Travelling by train, one is thrown into an intimate setting with strangers; sat near to others, either next to, or facing them. Being in such close proximity to men was – and to some extent still is – deemed dangerous for women. Regardless of whether or not it really was or is unsafe for women to travel in the company of strange men, the received wisdom is that it may be imprudent. Such fears are voiced by women who took part in a survey into women's perceptions of danger: 'I hate trains I hate being enclosed. I mean do you remember Michelle Booth being attacked and thrown off a train<sup>2</sup>, that was years ago. I mean if I got in a train where there was a carriage for six people and there was just me and a man I'd get off'.<sup>3</sup> 'I hate it when you sit on the train and you see them stare at you because you know in the back of the mind that if they attack you there is nothing you can do because they're so much bigger and stronger'.<sup>4</sup> Such worries, together with

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<sup>1</sup> Signs such as these can be seen at the National Railway Museum in York.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Booth was sexually assaulted on a London commuter train in 1979, when she was just fifteen, before being thrown from it. She was found in a coma by the railway line, but recovered.

<sup>3</sup> Gill Valentine, "Women's Fear and the Design of Public Space" *Built Environment* 16, no. 4 (1990): 290.

<sup>4</sup> Valentine, "Women's Fear", 300.

more general concerns about propriety, lay behind the existence of Ladies Only carriages, which were a feature of trains from the outset. However, despite fears of the sort expressed in the quotes above, Ladies Only carriages were never particularly popular with women travellers. Oliver Betts, in his research for the National Railway Museum, reports that in a Board of Trade inquiry conducted in 1887, *Great Western* submitted the information that it had reserved 1060 seats for women but only 248 of these were taken up, with over 5000 women making use of the smoking carriages instead. Moreover, travelling in a Ladies Only carriage didn't ensure women weren't harassed. When women first started wearing mini-skirts, some drivers on the *Great Eastern* pulled into the station so that the Ladies Only carriage was higher than the platform, requiring women to be lifted in and out of the train by guards! Ladies Only carriages vanished from trains during the 1970's, as sex-segregated travel fell out of favour as a cultural norm.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst we can see how trains – like any other human environment – are shaped to the behaviour that occurs within them, this by itself isn't sufficient to explain how we can interact with trains without thinking about what we're doing. How is it that I can enter the carriage and just sit down without making any conscious decision to do so? The French Phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, points out that we can immediately *perceive* the things we can do in our environment. I do not just see a chair as a blue object with a padded top and four legs; I immediately see it as for-sitting. Similarly, I see footballs as kickable, food as edible, and so on. He argued that it is, in part, our habits that give perception its character. When I gain a habit, I do not just acquire a way of moving my body, I also learn a new way of seeing the world.<sup>6</sup> Consider the magical thing that happens when one learns to navigate around a new city. First, everything looks strange. I have to use a map and think about where I am going. But as I spend time in the city's streets, it gradually comes to feel familiar, and I can find my way around without a map. I can just see that *this* is the way to the coffee shop; *down there* is where one will find the university; *over here* the marketplace. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the development of habits that brings about this transformation. By repeatedly moving through the streets, one develops habitual routes throughout the city, and comes to just see them as leading to certain places. Merleau-Ponty talks of one's habits as becoming 'sedimented' – both in the way the world appears to one, and in the structure of one's body (what is now sometimes called 'muscle memory'). He goes on to argue that the way someone sees the world – the possibilities for action she experiences her environment as offering – can guide her behaviour without her needing to consciously think about what she is doing. When I get on a crowded train, I don't *think* about where to stand. Instead, social mores are engrained so that I simply see if I am standing too close to someone, and the resulting sense of discomfort regulates my behaviour.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, our habit of sitting in seats means that I simply see the chairs in the carriage as inviting me to sit on them, and my perception of them as such guides me in sitting down, again without my needing to explicitly think about doing so.

However, whilst the design of our environment and its habitual use exerts an influence on our behaviour, its demands do not have to be obeyed absolutely. We can

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<sup>5</sup>Thanks to Oliver Betts for making this research on the history of Ladies Only carriages available to me.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Example adapted from Hubert Dreyfus, "A Merleau-Pontyan Critique of Husserl's and Searle's Representationalist Accounts of Action," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 100, no. 3 (2000).

use things creatively, finding new possibilities for action in things that go beyond their original design. An obvious example is the way that standing passengers used the luggage racks to steady themselves in the days before trains were fitted with handles for this purpose. A 1947 survey on its carriages, commissioned by *Southern Railway*, and carried out by *Mass Observation* reported under ‘luggage racks’ that ‘interest in these is negligible and the racks are mainly looked on as supports for those who have to stand’.<sup>8</sup> A more surprising case was the use of rail travel to bring about orgasms in women as a cure for hysteria. The earliest description of this supposed mental disorder is in Ancient Egyptian documents from 1900 BC. The condition was claimed to involve symptoms such as depression, tonic-clonic seizures, and a sense of impending doom. Throughout its history, right up until the early twentieth century, hysteria was thought only to affect women. For much of this time, physicians thought it was caused by the patient’s womb moving around the body and emitting toxic fumes, which happened when the patient did not have enough sex.<sup>9</sup> Physicians treated hysteria by variously prescribing herbs or sexual intercourse, and by massaging the patient’s genitals in the clinic to produce what was known as ‘the hysterical paroxysm’. With the introduction of the railway, some physicians noted that the shaking of the train carriage might produce this effect, and recommended it to their patients. In 1923, for example, Charles Malchow wrote that the vibration of a train carriage ‘sometimes occasions excitement, especially when sitting so as to be leaning forward’.<sup>10</sup> Whilst he seems to have been concerned about overstimulation of his female patients, Jean-Martin Charcot, in contrast, who worked at the famous Salpêtrière hospital in Paris during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thought rail travel was good for women, and even sent some of his patients on long bumpy train rides as part of their cure.<sup>11</sup>

Human environments are designed to make demands on human bodies, guiding them as to the appropriate forms of behaviour in those spaces – although, as we have just seen, we do not need to obey these demands and can repurpose environments for ends that go beyond their design. But conversely, human bodies also make demands on the environment. They emit waste, require fuel, take up space, get tired, experience cramp, become hot or cold, need sleep, and so on. Human environments must meet these needs if they are to allow people to live in them. When it comes to the demands our bodies make on our environment, a central problem for the design of trains was sanitation – what to do about toilets? Initially, there were none at all on trains. Carriages were single compartments, which could only be accessed by an external door, so there was nowhere to situate a lavatory. Those who could afford one could purchase a device to overcome this difficulty. ‘The published Philip Unwin (born 1905) recalled that articles of this kind, made of rubber and strapped to the leg, could be had from the shops at the approaches to many stations... John Gloag (born 1896) recorded that women sitting together in an otherwise empty compartment might bring into service from their

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8 *Mass Observation* “Report on Southern Railway Carriages” (London, 1947), 22.

9 Cecilia Tasca, Mariangela Rapetti, Mauro Giovanni Carta, and Bianca Fadda, “Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health,” *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health* 8 (2012).

10 Charles Malchow, *The Sexual Life: A Scientific Treatise Designed for Advanced Students and the Professions, Embracing the Natural Sexual Impulse, Normal Sexual Habits and Propagation, Together with Sexual Physiology and Hygiene*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1923), 56—57.

11 Rachel Maines, *The Technology of Orgasm* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999), 89—91.

luggage ‘an innocent-looking circular basket which contained a chamber pot’.<sup>12</sup> Lavatories were slowly introduced. However, at first, this was a luxury only afforded first-class passengers. An article in the *British Medical Journal* from 1895 bemoans the lack of ‘lavatory carriages’ on trains, especially those travelling to destinations popular with invalids wishing to escape the town and take in the sea air. ‘In regard to Margate this deficiency has been forcibly brought to our notice by a correspondent, who states that the London Chatham and Dover Railway do not put a lavatory carriage on any of their trains, and that the only conditions upon with the South-Eastern will do so is that one pays four times over for a first-class ticket’.<sup>13</sup> The article ends by noting that ‘crowds of invalids’ have to make do with travelling to Brighton rather than Margate as a result. (The *British Medical Journal* is, incidentally, a somewhat surprising source of interesting anecdotes about rail travel. For instance, an article from 1880 about treating smelly feet notes that ‘There are few persons of experience, medical or lay, who have not had the misfortune to discover that certain individuals smell so offensively that it is almost impossible to approach them. In many instances the evil smell is connected with the feet... The entry of such an individual into the compartment or a railway carriage or an omnibus immediately fills it with such a sickening effluvia, which to the initiated, is unmistakable’.<sup>14</sup>) The problem of sanitation on trains has still not been entirely solved with the BBC reporting that as recently as 2015, a tenth of British trains simply dumped raw sewage from lavatories straight onto the tracks. Money has since been spent on fitting train toilets with sealed tanks.<sup>15</sup>

The reader will notice that initially it was only those travelling first-class who had access to a lavatory. This is one example of a pervasive feature of human environments: the design of human space often marks social hierarchies; in many cases it reinforces them by failing to adequately meet the bodily needs of those at the bottom, whilst those of a higher social status are provided with greater levels of comfort. The design of railway carriages provides a further example of this phenomenon. Initially, there were three classes of travel. First and second class passengers enjoyed the comparative luxury of upholstered seats, whilst those in third class merely had benches in wagons that were often open to the sky. A letter to *The Times* from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1879 authored simply by ‘A Frequent Traveller’ decries these sorry conditions. ‘The third-class carriages on the Brighton line are simply most disgraceful – low in height, uncomfortable in sitting, draughty, dirty, foul-smelling, and highly objectionable in every way... it is too bad that travellers in them should be huddled together like so many sheep in pens, and so degraded to their level!’ Interestingly, the author argues for improvement partly on the grounds that making carriages more comfortable will improve the behaviour of the occupants, ‘as a decent house has a good influence upon a man, teaching him self-respect, and, in a measure, good conduct’.

Philosophy tells us that humans exist in dialogue with their environment. Our surroundings affect the way we behave, yet at the same time, we shape the space around us in accordance with our needs. It seems fitting to end, therefore, with some

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12 Simon Bradley, *The Railways: Nation, Network, and People* (London: Profile, 2015), 50.

13 “Lavatory Carriages to Health Resorts,” *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1809, 551.

14 George Thin, “On the Cause of the Bad Odour Sometimes Associated with Excessive Sweating of the Feet with Directions for Treatment,” *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1029 (1880), 465.

15 “Toilet Waste Horrors Lurking on British Train Tracks” BBC. Last modified 12 Jan 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-england-30541015/toilet-waste-horrors-lurking-on-uk-train-tracks>

poetic remarks published in *Scientific American*, which reflect on the new pace of living that the railway introduced, recognising that our behaviour is deeply affected by the environments that we build for ourselves: ‘Has not the railway affected, influenced, altered yea, directed, the drift – the direction, of human thought?... The mode, manner, and style of locomotion used by man influence his being, molding his character and affecting his habits of thought and action... To mount a horse is to partake of his nature – to sympathize with his spirit, bound, curvet, or caper, as his sportive mood may suggest. When we are seated in the railway carriage do we not mentally snort in accord with the iron steed – take pride in his speed, and glory in the force with which he devours distance?... The railway has enforced habits of promptitude, illustrated the value of time and shown the power of discipline’.<sup>16</sup>

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