

Moving Beyond but Staying Within

The Train as a Contemporary Figure of the Social in French Contemporary Literature

by

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In this paper, I would like to propose a reading of the train in contemporary French literature, where it is a recurrent figure in a vast number of works. Doing so I am going to touch upon just four central works where the train is a recurrent figure. This of course runs the risk of superficially touching upon elements that need much more clarification. It is my hope however that it will be enough to at least give an idea of how the train can be read as a literary figure of the contemporary.

From these brief examples, I will try to propose, how literature by focusing on conventional everyday places such as the train can articulate how the contemporary is a certain way of moving through our everyday places and how experience is tied to these places and social spaces. Therefore, my reading of the state of the contemporary in literature is as much tied to space and place as time.

Throughout this paper I want to show how an everyday place such as the train is adopted into a literary fabric that should not be limited to a single work. Rather it is how the train is both singular and recurrent that has my interest. Crossing a range of works it enables a multiplicity of experiences as well as an investigation of our contemporary social spaces that sees our everyday places as places of conflict rather than the idea of unity subscribed to by modernity.

The train is typically a place of the everyday. A place where habit and convention rules on the surfaces and where social structures and configurations act not only upon the production of space but on the body and experience as well.

In literature, it thus becomes both a question about how the everyday and the train are not as familiar and uniform as they appear, and how literature can investigate and make visible and sensible those inherent social structures that make our spaces.

By looking at something as seemingly simple as the train through a range of literary works, it may become clear how we can understand the contemporary and how the contemporary as a multiple spatial arrangement is a sphere in which conflict and the trajectories of experience can resist any singular and limited discourse.

Looking at contemporary French literature, the train is a recurrent figure. To name but a few instances where the train loses its conventional status of just being transportation from a to b, and instead is a central place in which difference and contingency is articulated – we find it Annie Ernaux' *Journal du dehors* and *La vie extérieure*; in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade*, *La fille du métro* and *Métro. Instantanés*; in Alain Mabanckou's *Bleu blanc rouge*; in François Bon's *Paysage fer*; Raymond Bozier's *Fenêtres sur le monde*; Jean-Christophe Bailly's *Le Dépaysement*; in the metro poetry of the OuLiPo – most notable Jacques Jouet's *Poèmes de métro*; in Rachid Boudjedra's *Topographie anecdotée pour une agression caractérisée*; and in Rachid Djaidani's *Mon nerf* ranging from 1975 until present day.

In the book *Shérazade* by French-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar for instance, we meet a young runaway called Shérazade. Her family lives in the suburbs outside of Paris. The suburbs or *la banlieue* is a place that holds their own symbolic importance. They are often related to riots, social problems, bad integration and so forth.

Shérazade now lives with a group of young runaways in a squatted house in Paris. Her wish is to leave Paris, her family and travel to Algeria. She is searching for freedom. Throughout the novel the train is a recurrent place that articulates how she cannot find any stability anywhere. Either she sees young girls in the metro that remind her of her younger sister. The child becomes a gateway by use of the train to an innocence, a culture, her family. Or she experiences how her friends are being harassed by the police or metro security in the metro. It is not a place of freedom, but alienation, instability on the one hand and memory and culture on the other.

One way to see this is how the train articulates the theme of exile. In her book *Lettres parisiennes*, Sebbar writes how exile is an existence located on the limits of a here and a there. Exile is being in a state of permanent instability.¹ It means living in disruption or disintegration.

Exile becomes a state of impossibility since it is never grounded in *Shérazade*. Yet it is also that from which she ultimately escapes, which means a rupture from both the alienation of the now and the culture and past that holds its grip. The theme of exile articulated through the train as a social space of experience, we also find in how Mabanckou or Boudjedra as mentioned before also use the train as a small concentrated social space, where alienation and exclusion are forever present.

In the end of the book Shérazade finally leaves Paris for Algeria and the impossibility of exile becomes the take-off for freedom. What is central though is that the train as social space articulates a sense of the contemporary that points to a crossing of borders both mentally and

culturally, of multiple spatial arrangements that are inhabited by conflict and exclusion rather than unity.

Or to quote French Lionel Ruffel, the contemporary is “[...] an arena of conflict, where the public sphere enters into dialogue with a multitude of public spaces in which expressions are deployed [...]”.²

Another example I would like to mention briefly is Rachid Boudjedra’s *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* that too articulates exile as impossibility located in the train as a social contemporary space.

In the beginning of this complex novel, we meet an anonymous Algerian who has just arrived in the Parisian metro. His sole possessions are his suitcase and a small piece of paper with the address of a friend. As a modern Theseus-myth this anonymous traveler finds himself lost in this foreign maze, where nothing makes sense to him. He does not know French, people are hostile, and he finds himself utterly lost. When he finally arrives to his destination, he is killed at the exit of the metro. He never succeeds in finding his way out of this alienating labyrinth.

To the everyday Parisian, the metro is a most familiar place, where habit and routine rule. For our anonymous protagonist, however this finely composed system is a place so strange that any habit or sense of logic is not mediating but alienating. Any habitual time or sense of place is replaced by a loss of coherency. An everyday reality is grotesque; a surreal nightmare. Boudjedra’s tale takes place the same day that a number of anti-Arab killings occurred in France.³ The anonymity of the protagonist carries the name of each of the victims.

But it also shows how the adoption of a conventional place into literature points back out to an outside the text. The everyday is reformed and investigated as something else. The everyday possesses something strange or foreign, the paradox being that on a daily basis this strangeness is that the everyday does not occur strange at all.

The metro as social space is opened in this novel. Literature tears a rift into the surface of our modern walls so that these inherent social structures and alienating configurations becomes visible for the experiencing body. It shows not only how social space is a dynamic tension of conflicting elements, but also how racism is governed by certain cultural habits connected to our everyday spaces.

The anonymous Algerian never reaches neither his destination nor a momentarily state of habit or peace. He is constantly in the instability of exile: coming to some place, getting somewhere but never actually arriving.

My third example is Annie Ernaux and her everyday descriptions from *Journal du dehors*. In this fragmented portrayal of everyday life in and around the suburban New Town Cergy-Pontoise, where she lives, as well in her follow-up *La vie extérieure*, the train is a the most recurrent place as she rides the RER-train to and from Paris, walks around the platforms and halls whether it is in the capitol or *la banlieue*.

She describes the homeless, conversations, immigrants, children. In her usual clinical language freed from passion, narrative or emotion, she notices how racial structures, gendered or sexual representations and class are part of what Georges Perec calls the infra-ordinary everyday tissue of our lives.

Public space intervenes in our private sphere. For instance, how we on a daily basis ignore the homeless. That way they become markers of certain spatial arrangements. We may try to exclude them but only by first confirming their actual presence. How we use space is defined by what we see, our practices and what we do not wish to see.

To mention just one example from *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux writes:

“The lights and clammy atmosphere of the Charles-de-Gaulle-Étoile station. Women were buying jewelry at the foot of the twin escalators. In one corridor, on the ground, in an area marked out by chalk, someone had scribbled: “To buy food. I have no family.” But the man or woman who had written that had gone, the chalk circle was empty. People tried to step around it”.⁴

What this brief example can show is how a certain social public practice is an attempt to maintain a private sphere in a public space and how this practice of ignoring and walking around maintains a structural power. Exclusion serves as a support of a social-hierarchical distribution of place, of what can be heard or seen, of bodies, norms and habits.

Literature can redistribute these spatial arrangements. This example shows how the rejection of certain disruptive elements preserves a privileged spatial arrangement. The absence or exclusion is made specific by the empty chalk circle. According to German philosopher Hannah Arendt a public reality is constituted by something being made visible for us. Something must be seen or heard by others. She writes: “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of a reality of others”.⁵

So, despite the absence of a physical body, the people still moves around the circle. The chalk circle becomes a small concentrated fragment of a public social space where exclusion is specifically marked. The absence of the homeless body is a symbol of how the socially marginalized are rejected and how this absence and exclusion through practice points to a social organization of space. The circle and the absence of the homeless cuts into social habits and how social space is conceived of as surface and division. Through literature this train space is appropriated through a particular movement. The homeless body that is always already excluded points by force of its absence to how our contemporary places are places of conflict, of how a presence or lack of, is a social actor, when in fact this body and space becomes present by exclusion and absence.

In her book *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies. Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, American sociologist Kristin Ross writes, how modernization, and thus how we may perceive of the evolvement of social spaces, is characterized by *evenness*. She writes:

“Modernization is even because it holds within itself a theory of spatial and temporal convergence: all societies will come to look like us, all will arrive eventually at the same stage or level, all the possibilities of the future are being lived now [...]. [...] Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been leveled or smoothed away [...]”.⁶

She continues to write how this *evenness* in fact is: “[...] a *means* of social, and particular racial, difference”.⁷ This entails that this static idea of modernization and modernity where everything seems flat and singular only is so on the surface. The contemporary as such is defined by the image of unity. Differences run through modernization which is the endless token by which it continues and by which all is already encompassed.

Which brings me to my fourth and last example. In his book *Les ruines de Paris*, French author Jacques Réda dedicates the latter part of his book to a series of descriptions of the outskirts and landscapes outside Paris made through the window of the moving train. This is similar to François Bon, Raymond Bozier and Jean-Christophe Bailly, who also use the window as a moving frame of a fleeting modern landscape where modernization and globalization move away

from the center of both city and subject. The world and the body are no longer experienced through the idea of a center – for instance the capitol of Paris – but from decentered position.

As Réda's window text begins, he stresses the urge to leave Paris and to go out outside the *boulevard périphérique* that neatly encompasses Paris as a visual and social image of all that is not Paris – the idea of city and modernity as unity, as something singular. Réda's window text uses the train window as a staging of movement. It is the fleeting capture of movement that reminds one of a film roll, where the window becomes a continuous frame that captures and moves at the same time.

We all know that gazing out the window of a moving train creates a perspective, where the distant seems stale and unmoving, and what is close to the window loses all coherencies. Therefore, too in Réda's text, things are both discernible and intertwined. But what we may notice or capture in the text is not always given beforehand. The discernible and the fleeting becomes part of the same experience of reality. They become part of a description in which the sensations of the rhythm of the train and writing through the penetrable flatness of the window that rushes through the landscape point to how this *evenness* is both discernible and entangled, how it is a surface and how it is possible to penetrate this surface.

For instance, he writes:

“For it is the train that is tilting as it starts to cross bridges, and this water is merely following its own separate gliding power. There is power in the whole landscape too. Rather low and devoid of gracefulness, but very compact and strong, like the squat belltowers halfway up slopes beneath patches of yellow earth and copses. The crumbling edges expose the chalk beneath the surface, which rolls down towards the spangled rubbish among tin cans and tyres”.⁸

Language or literature may sort the indiscernible, but what is perceived comes forth in a new light and rhythm. His description shows for instance how nature and industry overlap. Short time after he writes:

“Here again, the residual traces of an excavating project are remodeling themselves into small wooded islands and crumbling river-banks, in the same way as the outcrops, the forts, the hills and even the shapes of the flight of the rooks over the steely surface of the flood water. And thus, the world in its deafness is obstinately jubilant”⁹.

The specific and the sensible become part of the same language. What his window descriptions show is how our social spaces and modernization are moving. The local and the global do not swallow each other up, yet they are two forms of the same social spaces and are experienced at something different yet part of the same. Through the train the rhythms of both nature and industry act on the surroundings and each other.

The train itself is also part of a contemporary socio-historic time and spatial arrangement. For instance, when Réda notices an older locomotive from his own train perspective. He writes:

“Not far from Besançon, the line runs along beside huge piles of scrap metal, right next to a reprocessing plant. And there stands the diminutive old locomotive, on its very best behavior, one of those models that had become fit only for depot work”.¹⁰

We sense both the movements of growth and economy in a globalized world as well as the local business and environment. We may even sense how eventually even the bushes and weeds slowly will conquer the old locomotive leaving it as a decayed monument that may tell the stories of modernization and the rhythms of nature and industry.

What these four examples may provide and what a closer look at the train in contemporary literature in fact can show is how contemporaneity is also a certain multiple intersection of space and experience.

Our spaces are divided and superimposed. Space is crossed, traversed, divided by roads, tracks, paths, and endlessly and overly borrowed, as geographer Michel Lussault writes in his book *Hyper-lieux*.¹¹ But this constant production and division point to how spaces are fragile and intertwined. Spaces are always already vulnerable. And to acknowledge this vulnerability is admitting to an intrinsic fragility to human spaces as well as searching for a resistance to an inevitable damage and for an ability to adapt to a potential crisis and exclusion.

It is not about inventing a space or a place, or to reinvent them, but – as Georges Perec suggested – to question them or even just to read them, since what we call the everyday and our everyday spaces and places are something opaque, a form of blindness or anesthetic.¹²

If we recall Kristin Ross’ definition of modernization as something that presents itself as evenness, this refers to a double perception of modernization as experience and movements – capitalistic, urban and so forth. It is a totality and a flatness where all differences seem equalized.

But this rectified surface is constituted by spatial and timely structures and configurations; by difference and production.

In contemporary literature, the train is the intersection. It is a grid or maze that exceed any coherency or chronology. Reading and investigating the train can bring about an awareness to how contemporaneity in fact is a state of conflict and not unity. As French philosopher Jacques Rancière writes in his *Politique de la littérature*: “The modern world is a gigantic accumulation of ruins and fossil populations that are incessantly renewed, a vast web of hieroglyphs that can be read across the walls”.¹³ Modernization may present itself as something even, but the world is a world of the contemporary where the past, the present and the future writes itself across those walls, those spaces and places that slowly are opened when they are being written and are lived each day.

Therefore, it is not so strange that much of the French contemporary literature looks at our everyday places and spaces, such as the train, since it is here that this evenness can be momentarily dissolved and where modernity is nothing but a singular conception of time, a distinctive and separated conception of our world, whereas the contemporary proves itself as a place of difference, of conflict and exclusion, of being co-temporary, as bodies.

It is a question of relations and repetitions, of what is articulated and how, and finally how the flatness of convention is distorted. American geographer and sociologist David Harvey writes:

[...] we have to recognize the material relations between such things, even though they hide the social forces they jointly represent and contain. And for purposes of daily life it is often sufficient and even necessary to stick to such surface appearances as the basis for action.¹⁴

These literary works are motivated by how these inherent conflicts in our social spaces are driven by themes of alienation, of exile, of globalization, of social conflict, of sexuality, of the body. These writers are interested in the material reality that surrounds us. These works are interconnected, thus positioning the train as the place of contemporaneity.

By looking at how the train is repeated in literature, one can find not only how this repetition engenders difference – something unnoticed in the habitual web of the surface of everyday life, but also how history, experience, culture and symbols are interrelated and can be articulated transversally, and how these are connected in different ways. What we may find in Ernaux, can be connected to Sebbar, hereby broadening one experience. Sebbar’s text, and the

how train is used, may then be further connected to Boudjedra following another line, and he may in fact engage in dialogues with Ernaux or Réda.

What this range of contemporary works share – and these brief examples may show – is the relationship that is between the body, experience and the social-spatial processes that occur at the same time, yet are acted out differently and transversally.

Through this intersection and crossing of works, themes, and motifs the train is a figure that talks of a here and there, of a now and then, of a present and past from the position of the excluded or forgotten whether that be the exiled, the homeless, the gendered body or the outskirts outside the capitols drowned by the waves of globalization. These different bodies become conflicting units whose voices and presence can be articulated by use of the train as a figure of the contemporary – always moving, intersecting, crossing, changing.

As Ernaux reminds us, literature and writing should concern a loss of the self on behalf of a writing that puts itself in relation to the sexual, the social and so forth – a fusion of the neutral ‘one’ or ‘someone’ into the ‘we’. The literary repetition enables the train to articulate itself differently without losing its grip of a larger rhizomatic production across different texts and writing, where bodies, themes, experiences and so forth are both singular and related in different patterns.

What a mapping and interrogation of the train in contemporary literature can provide is a conception and perception of the train as a figure that privileges – as Lionel Ruffel writes – discontinuity, superposition, the montage.¹⁵ Where modernity and modernization provide us with an idea of evenness that levels out those immanent dynamics and conflicts of our social spaces, the adaption of the train in literature as a conventional everyday setting can break this distinctive division. Discontinuity and connections of different kinds replace chronology.

Thus, the contemporary is – through the optic of the train – just as much about space as about time. Returning to Michel Lussault, he writes that this contemporaneity becomes reality and is actualized by the distribution of space via spatiality.¹⁶ This spatiality Lussault defines as how every social act is rather characterized by the dynamic tension between habit, routine, reproduction and creativity, innovation, change, adaptive spontaneity, which do in fact seem to fit neatly with the train across literature and reality. The trains as a recurrent literary figure allows for a criss-crossing of themes and bodies on different levels. This points to a plenitude of

connections. How contemporaneity is a certain being together that breaks down divisive barriers by conflict and experience can thus be explored.

It may then be possible to investigate how everybody and anybody crosses each other through certain spatial and timely distributions that enter into dialogue and show inherent conflicts. These conflicts intersect and move beyond borders, whether they be historic, cultural, economic, social, yet at the same time staying within a contemporaneity of the moving train.

¹ Nancy Huston and Leïla Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes* (Paris: Éditions J'ai lu, 1999), p. 28

² Lionel Ruffel, *Brouhaha. Les mondes du contemporain* (Paris: Verdier, 2016), p. 203

³ John Culpert, "Haunting the *métropole*" in *Formules: Formes urbaines de la création contemporaine* 14 (Baetens and Schiavatta, eds.) (2010): p. 100

⁴ Annie Ernaux, *Exteriors* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996), p. 20

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 50

⁶ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies. Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 10-11

⁷ Ross, *Fast Cars*, p. 11

⁸ Jacques Réda, *The Ruins of Paris* (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), p. 108

⁹ Réda, *Ruins*, p. 109

¹⁰ Réda, *Ruins*, p. 116

¹¹ Michel Lussault, *Hyper-lieux. Les nouvelles géographies de la mondialisation* (Paris: Seuil, 2017), pp. 25-26

¹² Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), insert

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), p. 28

¹⁴ David Harvey, *Consciousness and Urban Experience. Studies in History and Theory of Capitalist Urbanization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), p. 251

¹⁵ Ruffel, *Brouhaha*, p. 205

¹⁶ Lussault, *L'homme spatial. La construction sociale de l'espace humain* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), pp. 280-281