The Iron Horse and the Silver Image

"The end of the line.

The railway radically altered the personal outlooks and patterns of social interdependence. It bred and nurtured the American Dream. It created totally new urban, social and family worlds. New ways of work. New ways of management. New legislation.

The technology of the railway created the myth of a green pasture world of innocence. It satisfied man’s desire to withdraw from society, symbolized by the city, to a rural setting where he could recover his animal and natural self. It was the pastoral ideal, a Jeffersonian world, an agrarian democracy which was intended to serve as a guide to social policy. It gave us darkest suburbia and its lasting symbol: the lawnmower."\(^1\)

Marshall McLuhan

The implied metallurgy of the iron horse and the silver image shared a common history in the physical and cultural reconfiguration of the land and the landscape. The landscape became technological. The implementation of the railway and the invention of photography were contemporaneous events, anticipating the textbook relationship of the tourist and the camera. The impact on economic and political expansion, labour, knowledge, urban development, and human experience was extensive. Incalculable archives of documents, images, artifacts and historical analysis verify the effects that rail transportation has had on modernity and the world. As products of Western science and industrialization, photography and the railroad were, and continue to be, ‘new technologies.’ They offer significant potential in the wake of their presumed obsolescence, not as what they were, but as what these technologies will become. As media for the dissemination of information, the railroad and the photograph had a unique and consequential impact on our comprehension of space and time, categories of perception that permeate the discourse and visual culture of landscape and representation.
"This semblance of the new is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the semblance of the ever recurrent."

A photograph made by the British photographer William England in 1898 captured the convergence of the "technological sublime" that the railroad and the photograph could enact. The version of *Niagara Suspension Bridge, 1859*, in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), depicts a wire suspension bridge spanning the Niagara Gorge. In the foreground are three gentlemen sojournning on the edge of the gorge. Two of the subjects are wearing top hats, a ubiquitous male fashion produced by hatter industries that shared a common hazard of mercury poisoning familiar to the practitioners of early photographic processes. The centre of the photograph depicts a section of the bridge spanning the horizontal frame from edge to edge. On the bridge, a train pulled by a steam engine appears to be passing at exactly the same time that a horse and buggy are travelling beneath the train on a roadway located under the train tracks of the bridge. In the distance, effectively diminished by the astonishing synchronicity of the train and carriage, the magnificent Falls of Niagara excites the identifiable mists of Nature. The fact that the image of Niagara Falls functions as a picturesque footnote to technological innovation is significant to the "locomotive of positivism" that was characteristic of 19th-century industrialization and the role that photography had in documenting and manufacturing the epistemology of this period. As John Szarkowski has noted, William England "has included everything of the most favoured subject matter of the period except an ancient architectural monument — generally unavailable to photographers working in this country." Although England made a variety of views and versions of the train crossing the bridge, the albumen print that resides in the Museum of Modern Art has
been staged. The train and the horse drawn carriage are motionless. The men clinging to the exterior of the railcars are posed and aware of the photographer’s purpose.

The railroad, built thus across the terrain by means of cuttings, embankments, tunnels, and viaducts, made its mark on the ... landscape from the 1850s on; it also made its mark on travelers’ [sic] perceptions. The alienation from immediate, living nature that was initiated by the mechanization of motive power was increased as the railroad was constructed straight across the terrain, as if drawn with a ruler. The railroad was to the traditional highway as the steam engine was to the draught animal: in both cases, mechanical regularity triumphed over natural irregularity. The abandonment of animal
power in favor [sic] of steam was experienced as the loss of sensorially perceptible animal power/exhaustion, i.e. as the loss of the sense of space and motion that was based on it. As the natural irregularities of the terrain that were perceptible on the old roads were replaced by the sharp linearity of the railroad, the traveler [sic] felt that he lost contact with the landscape...

On November 7, 1885, the "Last Spike" of the Canadian Pacific Railway was driven into the ground at Craigellachie, British Columbia. A whistle stop on the Trans Canada Highway, Craigellachie is located between Revelstoke and Vernon, about five kilometres east of the Beardsle Castle Miniatureland. The historic plaque from the Department of Recreation and Conservation located in Craigellachie states the following: "A nebulous dream was a reality: an iron ribbon crossed Canada from sea to sea. Often following the footsteps of early explorers, nearly 3,000 miles of steel rail pushed across vast prairies, cleft lofty mountains passes, twisted through canyons, and bridged a thousand streams. Here on November 7, 1885, a plain iron spike welded East to West."

In 2008, Scott Conarroe travelled to the Craigellachie Station at the side of the Eagle River in the Eagle Pass to photograph this historic site. Craigellachie symbolizes a beginning and an end, and it is at this station that I will begin my journey into the remarkable colour photographs that Scott Conarroe has assembled for *By Rail*.

A lone, dark-red Station House sits in the foreground of the image. A carefully manicured lawn with a gravel path and three picnic tables on concrete pads identify this as a bona fide historic site on the edge of the national highway. Today, we travel by automobile to see the rails. It is dusk and the warm glowing porch lights that illuminate the small building direct my eyes to a wooden sign between the porch and a short, 20-foot section of railroad track that is presented as an isolated historical artifact. The sign says "Last Spika." Behind the station house are the actual train tracks, the Eagle River, the mountainous Eagle Pass and a dense forest that extends up the slope of the mountain to the pinkish sky of sunrise that joins the smooth curve of the mountain crest. Although I travelled through Craigellachie on many occasions during my childhood, I have no memory of this place. Apparently, this roadside marker did not merit a family pit stop.

In short, there is nothing immediately exceptional about this site, and the image that Conarroe has created explains this fact. It is "average," a formal and conceptual ideal that Conarroe has explored in many of his photographs. For Roland Barthes, this "average affect" characterizes the *stadium* of the photograph, the "...application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity." It is here that I learn something about the subject and context of the photograph, the photographer's art and intentions, and explore an educated response to what I see in the photograph. Although Barthes relegates the *stadium* to a position of predictability, it remains the most characteristic
attribute of photography. In contrast to the *studium*, Barthes also looks to photography for a *punctum*, an unanticipated experience of irrational love and trauma that wounds him. Although these two categories of reception are coexistent, the *punctum* ultimately destabilizes the average affect of the *studium*; the *studium* is coded, the *punctum* is not.\(^9\) As Eduardo Cadava and Paola Cortés-Rocca note, the "*punctum* and *studium* are the two threads that, together, constitute the materiality of the photographic language: contingency, chance, gratuitousness, singularity, and difference, on the one hand, and necessity, predictability, composition, regularity, and repetition, on the other."\(^10\)

This average affect that resides in Conarroe's photograph from Craigellachie is, in effect, antithetical to the history that created this heritage site. The transcontinental geography of Canada is a consequence of completing the Pacific Railway. Exemplified by Pierre Berton as the "National Dream," the political decision to construct a railway in 1871 linking the territory of British Columbia to the other regions of Canada would expand the political boundaries of this country from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. The railway opened the new frontier of Western Canada and ensured the sovereignty of the Dominion of Canada.

The six scattered provinces had yet to unite in a great national endeavour or to glimpse anything remotely resembling a Canadian dream; but both were taking shape. The endeavour would be the building of the Pacific railway; the dream would be the filling up of the empty spaces and the dawn of a new Canada.\(^11\)

Craigellachie is the site of "The Great Canadian Photograph."\(^12\) The image from 1885 depicts Donald A. Smith surrounded by a crowd of dignitaries and "nameless navvies" hammering the last spike into the completed railway line. In response to the image, Pierre Berton poses a cryptic question: "Do they realize, as the shutter closes, that this is destined to be the most famous photograph ever taken in Canada? Perhaps they do, for Canada, with their help, has just accomplished the impossible."\(^13\) The photograph made with an extended exposure by Scott Conarroe at the tourist stop in Craigellachie invites us to pause and look closer at this picturesque landscape and the history that is inscribed on it by the parking lots, historical markers, proximate theme parks, picnic tables and theatrical artifacts. Perhaps it is the vernacular photography of enthusiastic tourists posted on the Internet from the site of the Last Spike that merits the distinction of being the greatest Canadian photographs ever made.

Does our experience of the railway exist somewhere between a nebulous dream world and an average affect? Walter Benjamin, in his exhaustive historical archaeology on modernity and obsolescence, the *Arcades Project*, cites the following statement by Jacques de Lacroix: "... train stations are truly factories of dreams."\(^14\) The railway, its sites of arrival and departure, shipping and receiving, are synonymous with this dreamscape
of history and technology. Scott Connaroe’s images of the rail impart an inventory of temporality, sites and things that evoke the temperament of this reverie. The same rails that are visible in the suburban and industrial landscapes of the city connect to the vast geography of the frontier, the North American prairies, the badlands of Texas, mountain passes, valleys and the Canadian Shield.

The three people waiting under the canopy in Connaroe’s image titled Street Car Stop, San Francisco CA recollect a semblance of the daydream associated with the station stop. As with many of his photographs, Connaroe made this image at dawn, blending the first moments of daylight with the ethereal glow of the streetlights, documenting the boundary of luminance between night and day. A woman standing under the canopy of the rail stop is illuminated by a pale green glow from a rear-lit advertisement. Her face is blurred. Next to her is a man sitting on the one available bench. The third person at the stop is also blurred, a transparent apparition whose motion has been captured as a ghost of the exposure time required for the photograph.

“The railway station is ... a monument to the tedium of waiting.”

The stop is labelled Stockton and Beach. Behind the station stop is a large parking lot filled with transit buses, identifying this location as a transportation hub. To the left is the Academy of Art University. Beyond the bus lot is the skyline of San Francisco, the Transamerica Pyramid jutting into the powder blue sky. The elevated vantage point is reminiscent of many of Connaroe’s photographs. Typically hovering above the landscape, Connaroe locates a view that gathers the topography, luminosity and extensive detail from the site, constructing an image that summons a panoramic gaze associated with modernity and the sublime. The tedium of the urban quotidian is contrasted with this beautiful rendition of a train stop and concrete field of buses. A quick tour around the block using Google Street Maps reveals that Connaroe was standing in a four-storey parkade serving “Pier 39,” a leisure attraction with a public aquarium, marina, whale-watching tours, an infinite mirror maze, restaurants and non-stop shopping on the San Francisco Bay. A contemporary phantasmagoria of tourism resides just behind this scene of everyday life.

This photograph employs visual devices that engage an insightful understanding of nostalgia and boredom. “We are bored when we don’t know what we are waiting for.” The complex strata of space and time is strangely cinematic, the motion recorded in the figures at the streetcar stop references the tension between the still and the moving image. This construction is echoed in the image titled Film Shoot, Montreal QC.

A film crew is working in an urban walkway amidst recent condominium development. The laid stone foreground features a decorative addition of inlaid train tracks that are not functional. The visual shape of the rail track and ties that are set into the stone walkway is repeated in the wooden and metal fences that delineate the private boundaries and backyards of the residential setting. The only piece of functional track that is visible in this
photograph is a short section of dolly track used for the film camera, another artifact of rail technology. The film crew is mingling around what appear to be large chunks of abstract geometric public sculpture. The sculpture and a backyard deck tent are employed as a temporary base camp for the film crew. A large cinematic spotlight on wheels waits for action. Is this the set? What is the story? "The past went that-a-way."? This image functions as an analytic commentary on the artifacts of nostalgia and boredom that the relics of the railway imply.

It is the 'afterlife' of things that reveals the significance of their existence. During the past 15 years, we have witnessed the complex and demanding adaptation of the photographic industries to electronic and digital
formats. This retooling has frequently been met with obstinate resistance from professional practitioners schooled in the craft of film and chemistry. Companies have either developed viable contemporary digital products or have gone out of business. In many circumstances throughout Europe and North America, the industrial-style factories owned by Kodak, Ilford and Agfa have been decommissioned and, in some cases, demolished. In Canada, the railway is a relevant subject for a photographic technology that shares many of the same attributes of transition and obsolescence.

Consequently, it may seem inevitable to approach the subject of the railway and the landscape through an ambiance of longing and nostalgia. In the contemporary culture of data management, mobile computing and a pervasive atmosphere of velocity, what could be more tranquil than a long afternoon framed by the Via Rail dome car travelling through the expansive landscape of the Canadian psyche? In this context, it is interesting to note that Scott Conarroe did not travel by rail to make the photographs for *By Rail*. Although it may have given the title of the exhibition a greater appearance of authenticity, pragmatically it would have encumbered his mobility, requiring car rentals at every stop simply to access the sites and locations of interest. Many stations to small or out-of-the-way communities in Canada have been decommissioned. Only the major commuting and inter-city routes remain economically viable. Large sections of railway have been removed and are now being used for the Trans Canada Trail system. Conarroe reflects on the past and future of rail travel on a regional and global scale:

> It's worth considering why the rest of the developed world is decades into a rail *renaissance* and we view the technology as a heritage contraption. Forty years in, Japan is still expanding its bullet train system. Germany and China have based ambitious development schemes around new stations and lines. The Channel between England and France opened in 1994, and even longer tunnels scoot under the Alps. Our high profile projects chip away at a vast transportation infrastructure turning it into museums and condos and parks and malls. To what degree the existing system might function could be up for debate, .... I do find it curious though that something in our psychology seems determined to disregard it out of hand.  

Perhaps the most characteristic feature that the railway retains in North America is its relationship to the landscapes of industry that continue to define and influence urban life. Anachronistic, repellent and also attractive to aesthetic trends in art and urban renewal, the residual brown spaces of cities reflect the unequivocal significance that the railway had during the 19th and 20th centuries to an experience of the landscape. As Antoine Picon has argued, the transition from the honoured traditions of landscape, where the presence of human endeavor was aesthetically integrated into the natural domain as a reflection
on dwelling, time and composure, the advent of the industrial landscape is a symptom of modern anxiety. The brown spaces that Conarroe introduces into his conversation with the rail system exemplify the rusted ruins of late twentieth-century culture.

The problem is most certainly caused by a landscape saturated by man's technological endeavors [sic], a landscape where wild grass exists only between strips of asphalt, where abandoned warehouses and rusty carcasses replace Poussinesque ruins. It is a landscape that puts to shame the many evidences of the European landscape tradition, as it has long been defined in painting, as well as in the practice of gardeners, architects, and engineers.¹⁹

Images such as Canal, Cleveland OH, Coal Town, WV, Fraser River, New Westminster BC, Lift Bridge, Chicago IL, Nickel Mining, Sudbury ON, Yard With Skyline, Montreal PQ and Yard, St. Louis, MO establish a preliminary inventory of the endless possibility with respect to the "ruins of rust" that demarcate the edges and transportation routes of cities and towns.

The intricate weave of rail and automobile bridges spanning the waterway in Canal, Cleveland OH is a cogent example of this contradiction of the incongruous picturesque aesthetic of the industrial landscape. These sites diminish the aura of the ruin. In a reversal of the image by William England cited above, the local traffic for automobiles now rises above the older iron rail system that curves beneath the more recent Inner Belt Bridge supporting the I-90 highway. The metal and rivet construction of Nickel Plate Railroad Bridge (1955) spanning the Cuyahoga River is visible in the left side of the frame. The winding tower with its massive wheel pulleys is reminiscent of coalmines, referenced by the heaps of coal and gravel visible in right side of the frame. This is the heartland and the rust belt of American coal, iron and steel. The foreground presents a clutter of things; trailers, stacks of pipe, and wire spools sit in contrast to the clean white layer of snow that brings some sense of brightness to this non-place of industrial productivity and transportation, a chronicle to shipping and receiving along the Cuyahoga River. The urban ritual of graffiti on the side of the trailer in the foreground adds a welcome highlight to an otherwise bleak statement concerning the industrial history of Cleveland.

The obsolescent affiliation that the railway and the photograph share with these landscapes is accentuated by the images: where Conarroe looks at suburban yards that border the tracks, House with Pool, Shrewsbury WV and Patio Set, Thomasville GA illustrate how the shock of industry felt during the 19th century is domesticated by consumer trends and leisure time in the 20th century. The industrial landscape and the anaesthetic effects of contemporary life dwell here. The humble beauty of a white picnic table with its rainbow umbrella perched in a small clearing next to the railway tracks designates this as a suitable haven for relaxing in the natural setting provided by the trees and shrubs that frame the rail line dividing the pictorial space of the
photograph. On the 'other side of tracks,' the garbage that accumulates in the culvert addresses a distinctly different relationship to nature that the pastoral folklore of the garden courtyard on the left seeks to establish. There is a skilful and expressive poetry to this photograph that is empathetic to our attempts to reconcile a sense of place and identity with the dulling patterns of consumer culture. This is a tribute to McLuhan's lawnmower.

That which works wears itself out and stops being useful. And everything wears itself out, or almost, in the cityscape of today. Metal oxidizes, plastic yellows and cracks. The idea of functionality goes hand in hand, therefore, with that of obsolescence. Obsolescence is not exactly the same thing as death, the progressive and dignified death that came to the objects of yesteryear. In traditional landscapes, the productions of man, his constructions in particular, surrendered themselves progressively to nature in the form of the ruin. The ruin re-integrated, in successive stages, the traces of human activity into the cycles of nature. There is nothing of the sort in the contemporary city, where objects, if they don't disappear all in one go, as if by magic, are instead relegated to obsolescence, a bit like the living dead who endlessly haunt the landscape, preventing it from ever becoming peaceful again. We have gone from ruin to rust, from trace to waste.39

The relationship that the photograph and the railway acquire through the landscape is augmented by the analogies of death, mourning, shock and disaster that closely followed the emergence of these technologies in the 19th century. Photography, due to its paradoxical relationship of subject and arrested temporality, was immediately understood as a memento mori. The metaphor for death that the photograph acquired was manifest in the discourse of the accident that the railway established. The uncanny relationship to temporality established in the photograph and the advent of synchronous clock-time and precise scheduling that were required to divert rail disasters converge in the disruptive experience of industrialization. The motionless death of the photograph and the powerful locomotion of the steam engine collide at an average speed of 40 miles per hour.

In photography, time is compressed into space while rail travel introduced a sensation of space compressed by time. Although contemporary experience has embodied and absorbed these phenomena of perception and sensation, Conarroë's photograph titled Loop Canyon, Chicago IL feels like a disaster waiting to happen. Although I naively trust that this is impossible, the intersection of shared rail tracks enclosed in the canyon of Chicago architecture is discomforting. Control tower #18 implies a watchful resilience to the train traffic that enters the crossroads, and under average circumstances, this site would have little impact on my apprehension of danger. Consistently, Conarroë's meticulous choice of vantage point and timing assembles a complex
pattern from within the core of the built environment. A lone automobile sits on the upper level of a vacant parking garage and the familiar arabesque signature of a graffiti artist on concrete echoes the intricate weave of rail and wood that supports the junction. The lingering glow of electric lights on the exterior and interior of the surrounding buildings, a formal quality of Conarroe’s attention to light, accentuates a feeling of the calm before the storm.

On the evening of July 12, 1890, a minor train accident at the Eastleigh North Junction in England transpired. A light engine collided at low speed with a stationary freight train. The accident has been attributed to the fatigue of the engine driver and fireman who failed to see the signalman waving his red lamp. A piece of lumber that was thrown from the accident into an adjacent guardhouse resulted in the only fatality. The accident inspired a short poem, “Death and His Brother” by Edwin J. Milliken, published in the British magazine *Punch*. According to the memoirs of Winston Churchill, he was on the verge of reciting this poem to the British House of Commons in 1935 during his attempts to alert Parliament to the danger imposed by the rise of fascism in Germany.

Who is in charge of the clattering train?
The axles creak and the couplings strain...
[For] the pace is hot, and the points are near,
And Sleep [hath] deafened the driver’s ear;
And signals flash through the night in vain,
For Death is in charge of the clattering train.

The visual and conceptual depth in Scott Conarroe’s photographs invites the viewer to look and to engage his subject with care. In one sense, the sites and landscapes are immediately familiar, reflecting admirably on the conditions of contemporary history and culture. At the same time, they evoke a solidarity with the past. Utilizing a documentary style, Scott Conarroe has succeeded in reminding us of the ability of photography to astonish our perception of everyday life and what awaits us at the next junction.

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Notes
7. See "Average Pictures" by Scott Conarroe: http://scottconarroe.com
17. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, 73.
20. Ibid, 76.