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Mass culture, social *imaginaire*, and creating intermodal transportation network: A lesson from France in the 1920s-1930s

My presentation will consider the way different intermodal initiatives were translated into the language of mass culture and advertising in interwar years. My presentation will focus on several initiatives to improve the communication between rail and water transport. The history of intermodal transportation in France had a varying degree of success because some initiatives proved to be long lasting and successful when others faded into oblivion. The most interesting intermodal projects emerged at such contact zones as Marseilles, Cherbourg, and Dunkirk. My presentation will describe the history of advertisements of such projects in mass media and will suggest the important role such a promotion played in the eventual success of such initiatives. I will argue that only when such initiatives could be meaningfully translated into the language of mass culture, did the intermodal projects enjoyed the success and left an important legacy for developing the intermodal transport. My presentation will also suggest that the development of the intermodal transport also involved the shift in the aesthetics of the transport system. Instead of seeing a port or a train station as a decoration and showcase decorating the city, the development of intermodal hubs required the application of new aesthetics of functionalism.

The interwar years gave a new impulse to the development of intermodal transport in Europe. First, in the course of the Great War, the army applied new schemes of connecting different modes of transport. It was particularly the case with the development of train ferries across Le Manche in the end of the Great War. The British

army had installed two train ferries between Harwich in Dunkirk and Newhaven and Dieppe (the later was inaugurated on February 22, 1918) (*L'Illustration*, March 2, 1918, cit. in. *L'Illustration*, 1936). However, such initiatives were limited to the transportation of goods rather than passengers. Second, the development of air industry gave the French passengers an opportunity to drastically increase the speed of travel. With an airplane voyage as an option, the management of railway companies had taken seriously the improvement of communication among the different modes of transport. Many of such initiatives were connected with the French ports where the necessity to coordinate rail and water transport was especially apparent. This was especially the case for interwar Marseilles. To ensure fast communication between Paris and Algiers, they sought to improve transfer of passengers between trains and boats. The management of the railway reseau of the PLM completed an important project of improving the transfer of passengers in Marseilles that has brought about the creation of the new system of transfer. On June 15, 1933, city authorities, representatives of the reseau du PLM, and those of the General transatlantic company had gathered to celebrate the introduction of the first direct transfer for railway passengers going to Alger. To ensure the fast transfer of passengers, a new pier *La Joliette* was built in the port of Marseilles. The new direct connection functioned four times a week in every direction and relied on express trains (trains 50 and 51), which contained three classes.¹ The speakers praised the new direct connection for enhancing the liaison between Algeria and the metropole through Marselles and characterized this route as “the most rapid, most frequent, and most

¹ Voyage en train au temps, 452.

convenient.”² In 1933, *Bulletin du PLM* proudly announced that it took only thirty-seven hours (37 hours and 22 minutes, to be exact), to reach Paris from Alger and demanded of a passenger to spend just one night on the road.³

Yet the creation of the new system of transfer needed to be successfully translated into the language of mass culture. In his poster created in 1933 on the occasion of the initiative, Maurice Hardy reinterpreted the creation of the intermodal transportation system as the important step in integrating the colonies.⁴ First, the poster contains an informed technical description of the new initiative. It features the Pacific 231, the express with a most powerful engine that was actually utilized on the line between Paris and Marseilles. The Pacific 231 train and the ship are united by their fast flight towards the colonies: on the poster, the train goes so fast that it seems to transform into the ship. Second, emphasizing the connection between trains and boats, the poster, moreover, creates a striking symbol of the French empire. It visually narrates the interwar efforts of the city authorities and the intellectual elite in Marseilles to highlight the city’s important role in the development of communication between France and its northern African colonies. The poster emphasizes Marseilles’s essential place in the integration of the French empire. The image on the poster completely effaces any difference between the mother country and colonies: taking a bird's eye view on the sea dividing France and its colonies, the image represents the French empire as a homogeneous entity, tightly united. This discourse brilliantly shows the poster representing the travel to colonies.

² *Le Bulletin PLM*, n.28, July 1933, p.94 and “Le Trains-paquebots de La Jolliette” in *La Vie du rail*, n.2417, October 27, 1993, p. 27-32

³ *Le Bulletin PLM*, n.28, July 1933, p.94. On the competition between the reseaux du PLM and the PO-Midi, between Marselles and Port-Vendres see “Le Trains-paquebots de La Jolliette” in *La Vie du rail*, n.2417, October 27, 1993, p. 27-32 and “Dialogue” in n. 2422, December 1t, 1993, p. 44.

⁴ M Hardy, Cie de Navigation Paquet, Paris, Tanger, Casablanca par Marseille, 1933 Paris, M. Dechaux, p. 128 This advertisement appeared in 1933. Reprinted from *Le train à l'affiche*

This discourse inspired the appearance of two other posters. The railway network of Midi, the major competitor of the PLM railway network for providing service to passengers going to Africa, commissioned another poster emphasizing the easiness of communication between different modes of transportation for tourists to Africa. Roger Broders describes the travel between France and North Africa as an interrupted communication on different modes of transportation, boats, trains, and airplanes. In his presentation, intermodality makes North Africa well integrated into the French empire. The easiness of communication between trains and boats makes the French empire the unified territory. To emphasize how this voyage is smooth, the artist chose a bird's eye view that allowed the advertisement to imagine this transfer between rail and boat so unproblematic. The poster only emphasizes the ties uniting France with North Africa. Red-dotted lines, which show the routes connecting France and its colonies, map out the unbroken routes of the French empire (ill.7).⁵ Going beyond its utilitarian function of promoting overseas tourism, the poster becomes a powerful assertion of the easiness of travel using different modes of transportation, train, boat, and airplane.

The improvement of the communication between France, Britain, and North and South America inspired the intermodal initiatives undertaken by French railway management on the north-west of France. It was the port of Cherbourg which became especially remarkable for the introduction of intermodal practice. Cherbourg was one of the busiest ports in France as it was the destination point of many transatlantic liners coming from New York. Before the construction of the new port, passengers and goods arriving to Cherbourg on liners had to be transported to ground via barges. This procedure was onerous and time consuming. On May 1st, 1933, the new port Cherbourg

⁵ This advertisement appeared in the early 1930s. Reprinted from *Le train à l'affiche*.

was inaugurated; the structure of the port integrated the improved communication between ships and trains; rails lay along the new pier, as it is apparent from the picture of the port. The new structure of the port made possible direct transfer of the passengers from ground to the boats. Moreover, the new pier stretching to the ocean could accommodate two ocean liners at the same time.

The new port in Cherbourg with the elements of intermodal transport system was remarkable from several aspects. First, the new port had received a wide publicity as the facility implementing the philosophy of uninterrupted travel. Articles describing the new project appeared in many newspapers, including those addressing the mass reader in *L'Illustration* and *Times*. In an article in *L'Illustration* (R. Lest, "L'extension du port de Cherbourg", *L'Illustration*, March 11, 1933) the author describes the new port as intermodal initiative and as a drastic improvement in a passenger service. The new port assured the direct liaison between port and train station. The installed cranes ensured the fast unloading of automobiles from liners. The article emphasizes that the new port allows the owners of cars, who arrived on liners, hit the road immediately after arriving to Cherbourg. The roadway connected the port with a national route. The article also says that before the construction of the new train station, due to a tedious necessity to use barges, many liners could arrive late to New York. It meant that the passengers had to spend an extra day on the ship waiting when the customs and immigration service would be reopened. The construction of the new port was, therefore, reinterpreted as the embodiment of uninterrupted travel.

Second, the new port of Cherbourg also became one of the symbols of France as the maritime nation expanding its influence across the continents. The aesthetics of the

new port and, in particular, its pier stretching out to the ocean, galvanized the imagination of the contemporary French elite. In his “Metier d’hommes,” Dautry highlighted the role of ports as the symbols of the French influence over the world. In his poetic description, Dautry argued that the ports of the western coast are among the most beautiful in France. In his beautiful metaphor, “they are the domain of our railway network which, at the furthest point of Europe, break through the ocean as the prow of the ship, stretches out towards New World; gather in the south traffic on the African continent and that of South America.” (Dautry, Metier d’hommes, 207). Ports embodying the elements of intermodality came to mean the accessibility of the new world; they also strengthened the position of France as the maritime nation. The interpretation of intermodal initiatives by media, therefore, translated the initiative in the domain of new technology into the appealing language and metaphors, language which struck the public imagination.

The development of the philosophy of intermodal transport was mutually connected with the rhetoric of improved passenger transportation. Raoul Dautry always insisted that the primary goal of the French railway is to better service to the passengers. Inspired by these ideas, Dautry has undertaken several important initiatives to improve the transfer of railway passengers to ships on the western coast. In 1929, Dautry inaugurated the express train Manche-Océan which corresponded in Dieppe with the liners of Newhaven. He improved a communication in Dieppe and other ports. The alteration of railway schedule so it would fit the schedule of boat departure allowed train passengers to shorten their trips for hours. (Dautry, Metier d’hommes, 229) Such efforts to coordinate communication between different the modes of transport virtually laid ground for the development of intermodal transportation. It is important to note in the

presentation of the poster the route between Alger and Spain and London appears unbroken. Such presentation helped to develop the philosophy of intermodality in the public imagination. By representing the Manche-Ocean as an interrupted voyage, the imagery on such posters represents intermodality as the present and future of the French transport system. Such images translated the technological initiative, intermodality, into the domain of mass culture. In fact, such imagery translated intermodality into one of the symbols of modern travel, fast, interrupted, and smooth. The image on the poster also suggests that railway is the means of the French unifying project.

Finally, the creation of the train ferry between Dover and Dunkirk in 1936 became a major accomplishment in the implementation of intermodal transportation in France. The train ferry in many ways embodied the century-long dream of creating the reliable communication between England and France. The idea of the train-ferry appeared in the late 19th century, but the British Parliament had rejected several projects to create such a route. Gathering the materials submitted before the Parliament during one of such considerations of 1905, Ernest de Rodakowski published a detailed study of the “Channel ferry: Advantages and feasibility of a train-ferry between England and France” in 1905. In his book, Rodakowski explained numerous advantages of uninterrupted railway communication across the Channel. Besides avoiding double handling, reduced charges for packing, the train ferry was essentially a way to make travel between London and Paris pleasant. The necessity to change from the train to the boat at night, a necessity which both passengers going to and from Paris faced, was, in his words, ““barbarous nuisance which, by depriving passengers of their sleep, added seriously to the fatigue of traveling“”. (Rodakowski, p. 5). In his monograph, the author highlighted the advantages

of train ferry between Dover and Calais and included drawings showing the engineering rational behind this project. Before the First World War, a departmental commission investigated the project of a ferry between Newhaven and Dieppe.

In the 1930s, mass media on both sides of the channel paid close attention to the construction of the train ferry. Months before it began to operate *The Times* put articles describing its construction. The creation of the train-ferry demanded the coordination of efforts from the Cie internationale des wagons-lits, Cie de Nord, the chamber of commerce of Dunkirk, and the Southern railways. In particular, Sir Walker put many efforts into the implementation of this project. Journalists described the advantages of unbroken travel between two nations. No longer railway passengers needed to wake up after the midnight to catch a boat across La Manche. A passenger boarded the train at the Victoria station in London. Then, when the train reached Dover, the train entered the ferry. Next morning the passenger woke up in Paris. Its inauguration gathered Mr. Corbin, the French ambassador, British and French engineers, the representatives of the Southern railway company and that of the state-operated *reseau*. The new initiative received a high praise for an incomparable convenience of travel between two capitals.

In the representation of media, the train ferry that was built in 1936 between Dover and Dunkirk soon became a symbol of friendship between France and England (“Le Nouveau service de ferry-boats de Dunkerque a Douvres,” *L’Illustration*, October 24, 1936, # 4886, p. 255). Indeed, the train ferry was compared to the magic carpet, a miraculous way of travel between the two nations. Media also characterized it as “a ferry that would help to cement friendships between the countries of the world, and “another attractive way to reach the center of the Empire, the facility that strengthen and tighten

the bond between two great nations.” (*The Times*, October 14, 1936) Media, therefore, reinterpreted the creation of this intermodal transport system as the symbol of the friendship between the two nations. The journalists portrayed the new ferry as the visual symbol of trust and partnership between the two nations and as an evidence that the rivalry between France and England, the rivalry existing since Napoleon, eventually had disappeared. In this sense, the uninterrupted travel between London and Paris came to symbolize the bonds of friendship between two nations.

In the conclusion, I want to emphasize the important role the promotion of intermodal initiatives in mass culture played in ensuring the success of intermodal transport in interwar France. Translating the initiatives in the domain of technology into those in the domain of mass culture proved to be a crucial element in ensuring the success of the new philosophy, the philosophy of intermodality. As I have demonstrated, different intermodal initiatives had utilized different cultural discourses whether it was the imperial discourse in the case of the port of Marseilles, the discourse of France as a maritime nation in the case of the port of Cherbourg, or the discourse of friendship between France and England in the case of the train ferry between Dover and Dunkirk. After receiving wide publicity through advertisements, posters and newspaper articles and photos, intermodal projects and intermodality became a matter of social *imaginaire* in interwar France