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Space, Sound, Smog and the Senses: Environmental Mobility History in the Making

Up until now, surprisingly little energy has been dedicated to environmental issues within the field of the history of mobility. This is regrettable because only a thorough dovetailing with environmental scholarship can help evolve current mobility history (interpreted as improved transport history) into what I would call a new mobility history, which in its turn would be able to inform general historical research.

This project will focus on three case studies that differ in several respects: the senses addressed (sight, hearing, smell), the vehicle technologies applied (open tourer, closed family car, “electrified” personal automobile), the forms of knowledge (conservationists’ knowledge of nature, expert knowledge of acoustics, engineering knowledge about combustion and catalysis, each opposed to or connected to a popular discourse on the topic at hand), type of expert network (international touring club AIT, Society of Automotive Engineers [SAE], and United Nations-Economic Commission for Europe [UN-ECE]), and its counter-movements (rural youth, urban elites, grassroots protest movements).

Methodologically, this research will benefit from social practice theory. The theory (or better: the cluster of theories that can be subsumed under this epithet, including ecological psychology) intends to transcend the dichotomy between mind and body, individual agency and structure, and culture and nature by focusing upon the activities (the “doings and sayings” according to Theodore Schatzki) of actors within their environments. Applied to mobility, and especially to the bicycle and the automobile, such theories seem well suited to analyze the activities that have historically been developed in, around and against these vehicles, because motion forms a constitutive element of the perception theories stemming from this body of scholarship. A central role in the analysis of “practices” is occupied by the five senses, and it is in the scholarly fields that reserve an important place for these senses (including media studies, literary theory, film studies, but also the social sciences with its “anthropology of the senses”) that these insights have been applied with the most success. Recently the application of such theories within environmental history has been proposed.

This research project intends to apply these insights to mobile activities with a clear environmental impact, such as the “discovery of nature” through bicycle and car touring, the production of noise through traffic motorization and its abatement, and the creation of urban smog (and, in general, the car emission crisis). Space, Sound and Smog (or, expressed in the senses, Sight, Hearing and Smell) are the instances this research project intends to investigate.