



J. M. W. Turner, *Rain, Steam and Speed – the Great Western Railway*, 1844. 91 x 121.8 cms. National Gallery, London. Public Domain.

## UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara\*

Emerging through a storm and belching puffs of steam, a dark train with a glowing face hurtles out of the canvas towards the viewer. This relatively small but arresting picture must have been alarming for Victorians unused to travelling faster than the pace of a horse. By blurring and spattering the paint, the artist J. M. W. Turner has intensified the confusion, the sense of dizzying disorientation at high speeds that makes you want to step back for safety, away from the noise and dirt of this encroaching machine.

This engine of modernity seems to be trampling everything in its path, except for the emblem of Speed, the hare racing along the tracks. This tiny creature could still just match its mechanical rival – but for how long into the future? Turner probably knew that one of these new ‘Firefly’ locomotives was called *Orion*, the

hunter eternally transfigured in the stars to chase the nearby constellation of Lepus, the hare. Possibly the three stars in Orion’s belt are reflected in the three white puffs of steam stretching out horizontally from the funnel.

Turner was fascinated by modern technology, although this painting is ambiguous about its benefits. The train is crossing Maidenhead Bridge, recently constructed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel with a controversial design of two semi-elliptical arches that critics predicted would soon collapse. He has contrasted this headlong rush towards the future with the stability of England’s rural past. To the right, a traditional ploughing team sedately continues its work, while the other side is dominated by the sturdy pillars of the old road bridge across the Thames. Nearby, a small boat carries a man sheltering from the storm beneath a black umbrella. Might that be Turner himself, indulging his passion for tranquil angling and sketching?

The railway system was expanding at great speed, as imperialising enthusiasts predicted

placing ‘a girdle around the globe’ that would unite the world beneath British Christianity. In 1830, under 100 miles of track existed, but by 1852, there were 6,600: in the year of this painting alone, an unprecedented 220 applications were submitted to Parliament. Distances seemed to shrink as straight steel lines stretched out across the land to replace winding muddy roads, and perception of time were irreversibly altered. Punch predicted that ‘Distance, of course, will no longer figure in the maps, but time will be the substitute. ‘How many miles?’ will be altered into ‘How many minutes?’”

To prevent timetabling chaos, every station was obliged to synchronise with London rather than the local sun. On his sketching trips to Ramsgate, Turner could see the inscription beneath the harbour clock: ‘The first Stroke of this Clock at the hour of Twelve indicates Greenwich Mean Time / Ramsgate Mean Time is 5Mins 41Secs faster than this Clock.’

Travelers accustomed to ordering a horse from the stables discovered that they were no longer in charge of their own schedules. The requirements of punctuality led to unfamiliar anxieties: a satirical poster about ‘The Wonders of Modern Travel’ included ‘WONDER if my watch is right, or slow, or fast. Wonder if that church clock is right...Wonder if I’ve got time to get a sandwich and a glass of sherry.’ New expressions emerged, such as having all the time in the world to complete a task: before 1840, there was no need to say that because everybody did – time was not in short supply.

Turner himself was a last-minute artist, notorious for enhancing his canvases when they were already hung for an exhibition, awaiting their final coat of varnish. He drew on the past by emulating his great predecessor Rembrandt van Rijn, and he influenced the future through French Impressionism. In the Victorian present, critics were stunned but divided: the novelist William Thackeray remarked ambiguously that the rain was composed from ‘dabs of dirty putty slapped on to the canvas with a trowel...The world has never seen anything like this picture.’

Turner’s title specifies ‘the Great Western Railway’, Brunel’s ambitious scheme that had recently been extended and would eventually stretch from Paddington to Penzance, carrying express trains at over 60 mph. His was just

one of around 100 separate companies, each headed by ambitious, ruthless competitors – and Turner presumably approved, since he held shares. Determined that his trains should be the fastest, Brunel chose a far wider track than usual. His trains were more expensive to build, but passengers appreciated the reduction in journey times and the luxurious comfort.

Brunel’s rivals retaliated by warning that such high speeds were dangerous, and devoted exaggerated publicity to the ‘Battle of the Gauges’. There were around thirty stations in Britain where the rails suddenly shifted between Brunel’s broad gauge and a narrower one – but transferring passengers and their luggage was inconvenient and expensive. Queen Victoria was one of those not amused when she had to change trains at Gloucester as she travelled between her estates in the Isle of Wight and Balmoral. But she had no choice: even royalty was obliged to mind the gap between railway tracks of different widths. A Royal Commission was set up in 1845, although – perhaps unsurprisingly – the members collected a great deal of evidence but failed to resolve the conflict.

No mere tussle over technicalities, this was a fundamental debate about scientific innovation. Which should have priority: technological progress, private profit or public safety? And did it matter that these noisy, dirty engines were destroying rural peace, threatening traditional ways of life and damaging the environment? How beneficial was it to unify the country beneath a single time regime? Turner addresses these questions in this magnificent, troubling picture.

### Main Sources and Further Reading

- Michael Freeman, *Railways and the Victorian Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).
- John Gage, *Rain, Steam and Speed* (Allen Lane, 1972).
- There is an enlightening 30-minute National Gallery talk with great close-ups at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8mf9y6ziXA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8mf9y6ziXA).

\*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is number ten in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.