

Symbolic and Narrative Functions of Railway Vehicles in German Short Stories

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Abstract. The paper analyses how trains and trams are represented as narrative and symbolic spaces in German short stories written in the 20th century. Drawing on the concepts of heterotopia suggested by M. Foucault, the phenomenology of poetic space described by G. Bachelard and the cultural history of railways introduced by W. Schivelbusch, the study reveals how railway transport functions as a setting for movement, transformation, and existential reflection. The analysis emphasises how various symbolic meanings of transport are interpreted in the works of H. Hesse, F. Kafka, W. Borchert, F. Dürrenmatt, R. O. Wiemer, and H. M. Novak. The connection between heterotopia and the phenomenological approaches applied allows us to highlight the interaction between micro and macro spaces in the context of the individual's emotional and existential experiences, as well as wider social and cultural structures. The paper reveals that the train and the tram in German short stories are not merely means of transport. They are multilayered symbols that reflect the interplay of technology, space, time, and human vulnerability, as well as the dialectics of modernity. The study provides a broader understanding of the relationship between mobility, space, and human experience within a literary context.

Keywords: German; literature; railway; tram; symbolism; space; heterotopia.

Introduction

The train and the tram were important symbols of modernity in Europe during the 19th and 20th centuries. They transformed human mobility patterns and radically changed the perception of time and space. The railway network, which expanded rapidly in Germany and throughout Europe in the second half of the 19th century, became a symbol of the progress of the Industrial Revolution as well as the growing ability of humanity to overcome the obstacles of nature and distance. As one of the technological innovations, the railway fundamentally transformed the concepts of time, space, and social order. The railway became the central transport mode of the modern era and the Industrial Age. It

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symbolised the profound social, technological, spatial and temporal changes that took place in the 19th century. Serving as a powerful driving force for societal acceleration, it reshaped social, economic and spatial relations. Alongside its basic infrastructure, the railway functioned as a cultural icon representing progress, modernisation and change, while also raising concerns about mechanisation and the erosion of traditional spaces and ways of life (Kellermann, 2021, pp. 162–164). These changes became particularly evident when railway operations required a new, unified understanding of time that went well beyond the boundaries of local traditions.

In literature and cultural discourse, trains and trams emerged as symbols of the modern experience, representing acceleration, displacement, and the dialectic between progress and alienation. In *Black Devil and Iron Angel*, P. A. Youngman examines the role of the railway in the works of 19th-century German realist authors by arguing that technological advances became integrated into mythical and religious narratives rather than replacing them, helping to explain the world and confront the unknown (Youngman, 2005, pp. 1–27). This cultural and experiential transformation is further illuminated by the impact of new forms of mobility that significantly changed people's daily spatial and social dynamics: "The introduction of new transport technologies led to an unprecedented reduction in distances and a general increase in mobility, expanding spatial reach and social possibilities of interaction while reducing traditional costs" (Kellermann, 2021, p. 189). The train, including the tram, is not only part of a modern infrastructure but also a system that transforms temporal, social, and cultural experiences, linking them to the analysis of transport in a literary context.

Florian Cebulla studies border crossings and the role of railways in modernity, with a particular focus on the railway as a symbolic space in literature. Drawing on Wolfgang Schivelbusch's theory, he presents rail travel as an experience of crossing boundaries. Cebulla's approach demonstrates that, in literature, the railway is a multi-layered symbol. Referring to German authors, he argues that cross-border rail transport is becoming an increasingly important field of research within contemporary studies of the history of technology. This perspective highlights that railways function not only as technological infrastructure but also as cultural and symbolic spaces through which mobility, border crossing, national identity, and European integration can be explored (Cebulla, 2003).

Jan Hurta, in his study of the railway motif in the literary works of Thomas Mann, argues that, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, the railway was not only the principal means of transport for an ever-growing segment of the population, but also emerged as a powerful symbol of progress, industrialisation, and both national and human development. In this sense, the railway came to represent the transformative forces of modernity that reshaped society and everyday life (Hurta, 2022).

While previous studies have mainly interpreted the railway as a symbol of modernity, technological progress, industrialisation and border crossing, this article shifts the analytical focus from the railway as a historical phenomenon to railway vehicles as spatial environments. This study compares them as experiential, heterotopic, and phenomenological spaces in twentieth-century German short fiction. It explores how

these mobile environments organise perception, social interaction, temporality and subjectivity, thereby creating different modes of experience for the protagonists on the move. By using a comparative central narrative of the train and the tram, the article explores how different forms of railway mobility create different spatial and symbolic configurations. The selected literary corpus reveals shifting configurations of meaning that correspond to different historical and cultural contexts. These range from ambivalence towards technological progress in the early 20th century to a sense of post-war dislocation, bureaucratic rationalisation, and mnemonic concerns in late modernity.

The spatial and symbolic meanings of trains and trams in German short stories reveal them as liminal spaces that illuminate contemporary issues such as alienation, acceleration, and fragmented perception. By examining these vehicles as heterotopic and phenomenological spaces, the study demonstrates how they shape the protagonists' spatial experience and construct the cultural and existential meanings of movement, waiting, and displacement. In doing so, it contributes to interdisciplinary discussions on mobility, transport, and spatiality by showing how railway vehicles function as sites of meaning, existential tension, and cultural memory.

1. Methodological framework

The short stories under study use the image of a train or a tram as a pivotal narrative and symbolic element, conveying a variety of meanings ranging from progress and modernity to catastrophe and alienation. The selection includes writings by the following authors: *Die Stadt* (*The City*, 1910) by Hermann Hesse, *Der Fahrgast* (*On the Tram*, 1913) by Franz Kafka, *Die lange lange Straße lang* (*Along the Long, Long Road*, 1947) by Wolfgang Borchert, *Der Tunnel* (*The Tunnel*, 1952) by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Frühzug* (*The Early Train*, 1979) by Rudolf Otto Wiemer, and *Abgefertigt* (*The Processed*, 1979) by Helga M. Novak. These texts cover a wide historical period (1910–1979), thus revealing the semantic diversity of the transport motif in German short prose.

The aesthetic and thematic diversity in these authors' works allows for a comparative study of heterotopic and phenomenological spaces, which makes this corpus particularly suitable for thematic and theoretical analysis. The images are not marginal; they occupy a central place, creating plot twists and the psychological development of the protagonist. The train/tram in these narratives is the core of the text's structure and meanings. The chronological and historical overlap allows for an analysis of how the image of transport changes in different contexts: at the beginning of the 20th century (as a symbol of progress and urbanisation), after the Second World War (as a metaphor of disorientation and trauma), and in late modernity (as catastrophe, empathy). The authors also represent different literary approaches: existential perspective (Kafka), post-war disorientation (Borchert), absurdist dramaturgy (Dürrenmatt), humanistic realism (Wiemer), criticism of modernist civilisation (Hesse), and social criticism (Novak). This allows us to compare how the same image (a train/tram) acquires completely different meanings depending on the aesthetics and the author's point of view. Rail transport, as a driving force of modernisation, is consistent with

the phenomenological, heterotopic, and spatial literary approaches in a cultural-historical context. The literary analysis focuses on the transformative role of railway vehicles in reshaping concepts of space and social experience.

The theoretical framework for analysing rail transport spaces in German narratives integrates insights from Bachelard's phenomenology of poetic space, Foucault's concept of heterotopias, and Schivelbusch's cultural-historical approach to railway vehicles. Each of the named perspectives sheds light on space, experience, and social function.

The Poetics of Space (1960) by Bachelard reveals how intimate spaces transcend physical dimensions to embody emotional and psychic meaning. Bachelard argues that poetic space is a realm of imagination and memory, where the dialectic of the "inner" and the "outer" evoke belonging, alienation, and existential reflection. This focus on personal, intimate experience provides a foundation for interpreting transit spaces in literature as psychologically charged locations rather than merely functional environments (Bachelard, 1960, pp. 108, 214, 260). Foucault's theory of heterotopia (*Of Other Spaces*, 1967) develops this by conceptualising transit spaces as "other spaces" that coexist with everyday reality but are radically different from it. Heterotopias (Foucault, 1984) contrast incompatible places and are associated with ruptures in time and social order. Railway transit sites, such as stations and trains, function as heterotopias, where conventional rules are suspended, and new social dynamics emerge (cf. Foucault, 1998, pp. 179–183; Sudradjat, 2012, pp. 29–34). In *The Railway Journey* (1986), Schivelbusch, who is regarded as a classic figure in culturally oriented railway history (Cebulla, 2003), analyses how the railway restricted space and time, alienated passengers by transforming landscapes into ephemeral vistas, and introduced a new perception of movement and place. He highlights how the rail transport reorganises spatial and temporal experience, while providing a critical context for literary representations that emphasise dislocation, modernity, and fragmented perception (Schivelbusch, 1986). According to Schivelbusch, the train also introduced categories of precision and rhythm. The railway timetables determined the sense of time, and travel became standardised and regulated.

The social and economic aspects of the railway expansion included the impact on urbanisation, labour migration, and new social practices related to waiting and mobility in transit environments. These spaces function as cultural sites, creating new forms of perception, social interaction, and embodied experience characteristic of the spatial and temporal logic of modernity (Kellermann, 2021, pp. 161–190). Thus, by combining the perspectives of heterotopia and phenomenology, it reveals how, in a single space, heterotopia reveals the social structure by showing how the space of transport is embedded in cultural and historical contexts. Meanwhile, phenomenology highlights individual experience by revealing how an individual perceives oneself and the world in this space. Therefore, in German short stories, the train and the tram become both a socially constructed "other space" (heterotopia) and a bodily emotional experience (phenomenology). The theoretical framework allows for the discovery of both social structures and layers of internal experience.

Drawing on the synergy of heterotopia and phenomenology, qualitative literary analysis is combined with thematic and symbolic interpretation. This focuses on how train and tram spaces are constructed in the narrative, and how they function as heterotopic environments that reflect broader social and cultural structures. At the same time, it reveals the symbolism that connects movement, constraints and transformation with the psychological and existential states of the protagonists. The analysis demonstrates how individuals experience these spaces emotionally and bodily (in perception, memory, and identity). This integrated approach shows how spatial motifs in German short stories not only reflect the external social reality but also express internal experience and self-reflection. Therefore, a combination of heterotopian and phenomenological perspectives provides an understanding of space as both a cultural construct and a personal experience.

2. Symbolic and existential dimension of space

In a similar vein, Youngman analyses the railway as an ambivalent symbol, acting as both a herald of progress and a force for cultural upheaval, and Hesse reflects such parallels in his works. In the story *Die Stadt* by Hesse, the train is presented as a symbol of the beginning, progress, and expansion of civilisation. It is revealed as a marker of the cyclical nature of prosperity and decline. At the beginning of the story, the train appears as the first connection with the outside world:

„Es geht vorwärts!“, rief der Ingenieur, als auf der gestern neugelegten Schienenstrecke schon der zweite Eisenbahnzug voll Menschen, Kohlen, Werkzeugen und Lebensmittel ankam. (Hesse, 1995, p. 30)¹

It delivers people as well as materials, and acts as the main driving force of the city, embodying the spirit of technological progress. As the story develops, the train becomes a sign of complete integration into the economic and cultural network. It symbolises power, interconnection, and the infrastructure foundation that turns the city into a commercial centre. However, when Hesse talks about the city's growth and prosperity, he also reveals its cycle of collapse. The first train marks the beginning. The dense network of tracks represents the peak of development. As the city declines, the train disappears from the narrative. On a metaphorical level, the train is more than just a means of transport. It depicts acceleration, a force that transforms untouched nature into urban civilisation. At the same time, it initiates a process that inevitably leads to decline, revealing the ambivalent nature of progress.

The thematic perspective of the text on the railway as a symbol of progress and the cyclical nature of civilisation is grounded in a study of the early 20th century intellectuals, including Hesse, who expressed a critical response to modernity and the perceived loss of cultural and civilisational values. The railway, as an ambivalent figure of progress, is

¹ “We are moving forward!” cried the engineer as, on the section of track laid only yesterday, the second railway train already arrived, full of people, coal, tools and provisions (Hesse, 1995, p. 30; author's translation).

understood as both creative and destructive, which aligns with the study's characterisation of Hesse as a "last bearer of Romantic values in the age of mechanization" (Jose, et al., 2023, p. 851), with the author being acutely aware of Europe's moral and social crises.

In Kafka's short story *Der Fahrgast*, the tram is imbued with a profoundly symbolic significance that contrasts starkly with the train depicted in Hesse's *Die Stadt*. While Hesse's train embodies collective progress and the cyclical rhythm of civilisation, Kafka's tram becomes a space of existential uncertainty and self-alienation:

Ich stehe auf der Plattform des elektrischen Wagens und bin vollständig unsicher in Rücksicht meiner Stellung in dieser Welt, in dieser Stadt, in meiner Familie. (Kafka, 1912, p. 59)²

The tram platform functions not as a destination, but rather as a transitory and in-between space, suspended between stations, between the "inside" and the "outside". This liminal position reflects the narrator's own state of internal and social uncertainty. The interpretation of the tram as a liminal and existential space is theoretically grounded in Krauss's study of the process of "Kafkaesque" perception. Krauss argues that the distinctive effect of Kafka's texts originates in the destabilisation of the reader's situation model, whereby the information presented to the reader cannot be reconciled with the schemas and scripts acquired through everyday life experience (Krauß, 2022, pp. 52–53).

The vehicle is in motion, but it is not a result of the action of the passenger. This reinforces the protagonist's feeling that he is subject to forces beyond his control. Everyday reality contrasts sharply with this inner unrest. For the driver, passers-by and the girl at the bus stop, this scene is mundane and unremarkable. Yet, for the narrator, it becomes a profound existential question, a confrontation with the inability to justify one's existence ("I cannot even justify the fact that I am standing on this platform" (Kafka, 1912, p. 60). The realistic description of the girl, rendered with precision down to the shadow at her ear, reinforces the sense of distance. The observer perceives her in detail; he projects his inner confusion onto her and is disturbed by her calm presence. In the story *Der Fahrgast*, the tram is not a symbol of hope or progress but rather an existential stage where the gap between one's own uncertainty and the world's indifference becomes visible. The narrator appears as a passenger on the "tram of life" without a purpose, unable to justify his presence, trapped in the profound alienation that defines Kafka's vision of human existence.

Within Krauss's reception-theoretical framework, the title *Der Fahrgast* functions as a guiding marker (*Leitvermerk*), immediately activating the "public transport script" in the reader's mind. Whereas, in Hesse's work, this script remains functional and serves as a symbol of progress, yet, in Kafka's story, the familiar process is defamiliarised and disrupted. The narrator's profound uncertainty regarding his place in the world suggests that the conventional passenger script no longer provides a sense of security, while transforming the tram into a space of uncertainty and existential indeterminacy.

² I am standing on the platform of the electric car and am completely uncertain about my position in this world, in this city, in my family (Kafka, 1912, p. 59; author's translation).

In the short story *Die lange lange Straße lang* by Borchert, the tram is much more than just a means of transportation. It becomes a central symbol intertwined with themes of homecoming, alienation, and disorientation. The story begins with a stark contrast between the "gray street" and the "yellow tram" that immediately identifies the tram as a bright sign of life and movement against the backdrop of the post-war emptiness:

Ein Mensch läuft durch die Straße. Die lange lange Straße lang. Er hat Angst. ... Ich will zur Straßenbahn. Ich muß mit der Straßenbahn, denn alle sind hinter mir her. (Borchert, 1963, p. 135)³

However, its destination remains unknown, "And no one knows where?" (Borchert, 1963, p. 135). This uncertainty encompasses the existential situation of the returning soldier, who finds himself in a world that continues to move, but without him. The tram represents life before the war. It is the orderly rhythm of everyday civilisation, the urban structure and normality that the protagonist once knew. It is part of the former, well-known world, and said familiarity, now seen as odd or out-of-reach, demonstrates that nothing stays the same. While the returnee searches for the tram to get himself oriented, his inability to find or recognise it reflects his inner disorientation. He knows the streets, and yet no longer understands the reality to which he has returned. The contrast between movement and silence becomes a central theme. The tram, symbolising continuous movement and social routine, is contrasted with the static nature of the protagonist, who seems "outside of time". Whether the tram passes him or stands still, it reflects his inability to return to the rhythm of normal life. Being both a sign of connection and distance, the tram could theoretically take him home. Yet, it seems unattainable, thereby underlining the gap between the world that has continued and the returning protagonist who can no longer belong to it. In this sense, the tram in Borchert's story becomes a symbol of the longed-for home, normality, and direction. It reminds us of what once provided security but now reveals the depth of alienation. Thus, returning home is revealed not only as a physical return, but also as an internal struggle to reconnect with a world that has irreversibly changed.

In the story *Der Tunnel* by Dürrenmatt, the train becomes a powerful and multifaceted symbol. The train represents life moving along predetermined tracks: an image of the illusion of safety, regularity, and control. The student, who is accustomed to the route, embodies the modern person who moves through life in a mechanical rhythm, relying on technology and the stability of daily routine. However, the sudden and inexplicable lengthening of the tunnel interrupts this normality by transforming the journey into a metaphor for the uncontrollable:

Sie betraten den Raum, schwankend durch die ungeheure Geschwindigkeit, mit der die Maschine, den Zug mit sich reißend, immer weiter in den Tunnel hineinraste. „Bitte“, sagte

³ A man is walking down the street. Down the long, long street. He is afraid. ... I want to get to the tram. I have to take the tram, because everyone is after me (Borchert, 1963, p. 135; author's translation).

der Zugführer und drückte einige Hebel nieder, zog die Notbremse. Die Maschine gehorchte nicht. (Dürrenmatt, 1962, pp. 255–256)⁴

The endless tunnel becomes a spatial symbol of the abyss, where light, direction and certainty disappear. As the train accelerates and the brakes fail, the narrative transforms into an allegory of collective demise. The train becomes an image of technological fatalism: progress without meaning, precision without purpose, and movement without direction. The existential dimension of the story culminates in the narrator's reflections, "Nothing. God let us fall, and so we fall upon Him" (Dürrenmatt, 1962, p. 257). *Der Tunnel* transforms the train into a profound metaphor for modern humanity, representing the fact that people are tied to the tracks of progress, driven by forces they cannot control, and rushing inexorably towards an unknown destination.

Although the train does not have as dense a symbolic weight in the story *Frühzug* by Wiemer as it does in Dürrenmatt's *Der Tunnel*, it nevertheless plays a crucial narrative and emotional role. The story is told through the perspective of the train conductors, who see an old man standing in the same place by the tracks day after day, making the same gesture as if directing traffic. Thus, the train becomes a vantage point through which the scene is observed and slowly gains meaning. The regular movement, always at the same time and along the same route, reflects the unchanging ritual of man himself, suggesting a common rhythm between human perseverance and mechanical routine. As part of the daily routine, the train symbolises repetition, and so does the old man. They are both fixed elements of the landscape. The train passes the man standing on the tracks at a certain time, while the man stands at the level crossing as the train moves past. The narrative structure depends on this repeated encounter because, without the regular movement of the train, the narrator would have no reason to notice the old man and discover the tragic story behind his strange behaviour. On a symbolic level, the train embodies a dual meaning. For the reader, it represents the continuous movement of life, rushing past individual tragedies. Yet, for the old man, it is his only connection to the world. What seems like a harmless oddity from the train window is actually a silent act of mourning and remembrance. Passengers on the train observe the man's solitary ritual.

von Boltensern's (2026) analysis of Novak's metaphorical language and her concept of an "intersystem" perspective resonates with the central issues of the short story *Abgefertigt*. This perspective helps contextualise the narrative's exploration of bureaucracy, control, and systemic transitions – themes that also reflect Novak's own biographical experiences. The text, set on and around a train, depicts a space in which individuals are subjected to systematic administrative procedures, revealing the intersection of mobility and power in a regulated and monitored society. The action of *Abgefertigt* takes place on several levels. At the most immediate level, it describes the bureaucratic and security procedures

⁴ They entered the room, swaying from the tremendous speed at which the engine, dragging the train along with it, continued to rush deeper and deeper into the tunnel. "Please," said the train driver, pressing down several levers and pulling the emergency brake. The engine did not obey (Dürrenmatt, 1962, pp. 255–256; author's translation).

that dominate the scene: uniformed officials move through the carriages, collecting forms, checking passports and giving instructions to passengers. A dog searches the compartments, undercarriages, and tracks:

Ein Mann in schmutziger Geländeuniform stellt sich draußen neben den Zug. Er hält einen langhaarigen Schäferhund an der Leine. Er macht ihn los. Der Hund sabbert. Er trägt einen Maulkorb. Der Mann nimmt ihm den Maulkorb ab. Der Schäferhund duckt sich. Er kriecht unter den Zug. Er geht zwischen den Gleisen unter dem Zug entlang. (Novak, 1981, p. 91)⁵

These actions depict a carefully organised inspection process as a mechanical routine in which both people and objects are checked and approved. On a human level, the story reveals the depersonalising effect of such control. Passengers become administrative objects that are inspected and categorised. Their identities are reduced to documents and procedural steps. Their journeys are fragmented by checkpoints and commands. The train, both as an environment and as a symbol, embodies a controlled world. It is a confined, transitional space in which human interaction is dominated by surveillance, hierarchy, and procedures.

The literary depiction of a controlled world is not merely an abstract critique of bureaucracy but is deeply rooted in the author's own life trajectory. Novak's biography itself constituted a continuous movement across different countries and political systems. Novak deliberately sought out "points of rupture" and sites of social transformation. The short story *Abgefertigt* stages a confrontation between individual freedom and the repressive mechanisms of the system. While power, through border guards, dogs, and bureaucratic forms, attempts to regulate and categorise the individual, Novak defines herself outside these classificatory structures. Consequently, *Abgefertigt* documents not only a journey between stations but also an intermediate state in which the individual exists to preserve his or her identity while the systemic apparatus subjects him or her to processing and administrative classification.

3. Heterotopic and phenomenological synthesis

The synthesis of heterotopic and phenomenological perspectives reveals different experiences of mobility, relationships with the world, and broader worldviews. In terms of relations with the world, Kafka's narrative highlights isolation and alienation despite participation in public life. Borchert depicts the alienation of the individual returning from war, confronted with transformed homes. Dürrenmatt emphasises powerlessness in the face of an unstoppable fate, Wiemer reveals empathy and respect for the ordinary, yet deeply meaningful gestures of everyday life, and Novak reveals the reduction of individuals to

⁵ A man in dirty field uniform stands outside next to the train. Beside him, on a leash, is a long-haired German shepherd. He unties him. The dog drools into its muzzle. The man removes the muzzle. The dog crouches, wary and tense. Then it slips under the train, moving silently along the tracks in the narrow space beneath the cars (Novak, 1981, p. 91; author's translation).

administrative objects by illustrating how social and institutional structures can ignore personal presence and agency.

Furthermore, the symbolic function of micro- and macro-spaces in these literary representations of transport should be emphasised. The corpus of works analysed in the study allows us to conclude that the motif of rail transport in the German short stories functions not as a mere background but as a reflection of opposition and the dynamics of change. The synthesis reveals three main thematic directions, in which the interaction between micro and macro spaces produces new meanings.

The first direction is the diminution of human agency in the technological space. Textual analysis reveals a shift from transport as an instrument of expansion to transport as a denial of individual will. In early 20th century texts, the train symbolises the power of civilisation, whereas in later works it becomes a space in which a person loses one's subjectivity. Kafka's passive tram passenger and Novak's "administrative object" are figures which illustrate how existential insecurity is transformed into systemic control in the artistic spatiotemporal framework. The micro space (a carriage, a platform, a tunnel) reveals itself as a place of intense individual experience. It concentrates the protagonist's emotions, psychological tension or existential confusion. The narrow, moving space forms a metaphorical "inner chamber", in which the character confronts himself, his insecurities or memories. The macro space (a city, a railway network, a post-apocalyptic space, or a state control system) reflects broader social, cultural and historical processes. In Schivelbusch's terms, the railway functions as a technological system that reorganises spatial perception by compressing distances and integrating individuals into larger networks of mobility and modernity (Schivelbusch, 1986, pp. 33–34). Spatial isolation in a microenvironment allows the authors to highlight the characters' inner worlds while showing their vulnerability to macro systems. It shows how the fate of the individual is determined by the structures of modernity: progress and its collapse, the rhythm of urbanisation, the mechanisms of bureaucracy, or the alienation created by technology. These two spaces do not exist separately. The micro space reveals the mechanisms of the macro space, while the macro space shows how individual experience fits into the broader narrative of modernity. The micro space becomes a place where macro structures directly affect the human identity. Foucault conceptualises such spaces as heterotopias, in which broader social structures become visible and directly shape individual experience (Sudradjat, 2012, p. 33).

The second thematic direction is the standardisation of time and phenomenological resistance. According to Schivelbusch's theory, the railway introduced a unified temporal regime. However, literary works reveal a contradiction between chronometric time and subjective experience. In Dürrenmatt's text, anomaly becomes truth, where the endless tunnel interrupts the "illusion of security" offered by movement along the tracks, transforming technical precision into a metaphysical catastrophe. In Wiemer's work, by contrast, the railway timetable (the macro time) becomes the framework that alone can contain and render visible individual mourning (the micro time), turning mechanical repetition into an expression of empathetic action.

The third direction is heterotopia as a zone of crisis and transformation. All the transport vehicles examined function as the heterotopias described by Foucault, in which everyday rules are suspended. The train and the tram are “in-between spaces” where characters confront their traumatised past or their inevitable future. The train and the tram become transitional spaces, in which the micro and macro levels lead to a symbolic structure that reflects both personal and collective experiences of the modern world.

Across the selected stories, the linking of the train/tram as an individual experience to broader processes of modernity, through themes of progress, alienation, empathy, and bureaucratic control, is observed. The combined application of heterotopia and phenomenology highlights the dual function of these spaces as sites where cultural and institutional orders intersect with lived experience, by demonstrating how railway environments mediate both collective meanings and individual perceptions. The train and the tram function not only as symbols of movement but also as heterotopic sites in the Foucauldian sense and as manifestations of the spatial and temporal transformations associated with the “railway modernity”, as described by Schivelbusch.

Conclusion

Railway vehicles in 20th-century German short stories emerge as multilayered literary symbols whose meanings evolve in relation to historical and aesthetic transformations. A combined heterotopic and phenomenological analysis demonstrates that trains and trams function as liminal spaces, in which social structures intersect with lived experience, while shaping perceptions of space, time, and identity. They simultaneously embody progress and collapse, intimacy and alienation, security and chaos, thereby reflecting broader processes of urbanisation, technological change, war, and social control. Railway vehicles thus become symbolic sites through which literature negotiates modernity, human vulnerability, and the relationship between individual experience and historical transformation. Future research could extend this approach to other European literatures and historical periods, further examining how transport-related symbols contribute to literary representations of identity, memory, and temporality within changing cultural contexts.

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