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STS.036 Technology and Nature in American History
Spring 2008

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Week 5: The Aesthetics of the Industrial Landscape in Antebellum America

4 Mar 2008

Lecture outline

“Devilish iron horse” and “Aeolian harp”: Artistic Responses to Industrialization

1. Seeing the railroad in the American landscape
 - a. Railroad as the icon of the new industrial age
 - b. The ideology of progress
 - i. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872
 - ii. Currier & Ives, *Across the Continent “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way,”* 1868
 - c. *Harper’s* magazine Artists’ Excursion on the B&O (June 1858)
 - d. Paintings by Hudson River School artists
 - i. Thomas Doughty, *A View of Swampscott, Massachusetts*, c. 1847
 - ii. Asher B. Durand, *Progress*, 1853
 - iii. George Inness, *The Lackawanna Valley*, 1855
 - iv. George Inness, *Delaware Water Gap*, 1859
 - v. George Inness, *On the Delaware River*, 1861-63
 - vi. John Frederick Kensett, *Hudson River Scene*, 1857
 - vii. Thomas Prichard Rossiter, *Opening of the Wilderness*, c. 1858
2. Literary responses to the “Age of Machinery”
 - a. Leo Marx’s *Machine in the Garden* thesis
 - b. Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Celestial Railroad,” 1843
 - c. Herman Melville, “The Tartarus of Maids,” 1855
 - d. Ralph Waldo Emerson
 - i. Early optimism regarding technology as a source of creative inspiration and a prosperous democracy
 1. “Machinery and Transcendentalism agree well” (*Journal*, 1843)
 2. “Railroad iron is a magician's rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water.” (“The Young American,” 1844)
 - ii. Later concern that too much reliance on technology would weaken the soul
 1. “Things are in the saddle, / And ride mankind.” (1847)
 2. “I cannot accept the railroad and telegraph in exchange for reason and charity.” (1851)
 3. “Machinery is good, but mother-wit is better. Telegraph, steam, and balloon and newspaper are like spectacles on the nose of age, but we will give them all gladly to have back again our young eyes.” (*Journal*)
 4. “The age has an engine but no engineer.” (*Journal*, 1853)

- e. Excerpts from Henry David Thoreau, "Economy," *Walden*, 1854
 - 1. "I would rather ride on earth in an ox cart with a free circulation, than go to heaven in the fancy car of an excursion train and breathe a *malaria* all the way."
 - 2. "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate."

3. Henry D. Thoreau and the making of *Walden*

- a. Thoreau's path to Walden
 - i. "Studious of natural facts" (Emerson's eulogy for Thoreau, 1862)
 - ii. American literary Transcendentalism
 - 1. "Build, therefore, your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions. A correspondent revolution in things will attend the influx of the spirit." (Emerson, *Nature*, 1836)
- b. On Walden Pond (July 4, 1845 to September 6, 1847)
 - i. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. ... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life ... to drive life into a corner ..." ("Where I Lived and What I Lived For")
- c. Thoreau's Concord
 - i. Boston to Fitchburg Railroad (reached Concord in June 1844)
 - ii. Telegraph line
 - 1. "At the entrance to the Deep Cut I heard the telegraph wire vibrating like an Aeolian Harp. ... I instantly sat down on a stone at the foot of the telegraph pole--& attended to the communication." (Thoreau, *Journal*, September 12, 1851)
- d. The writing and publication of *Walden*
 - i. *Journal* (over 2 million words in 21 volumes)
 - ii. 6 revisions in 7 years
 - iii. Published in the summer of 1854 by Ticknor & Fields