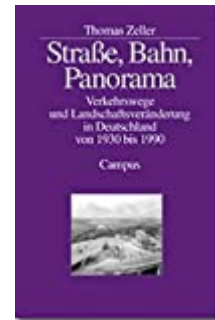


**Thomas Zeller.** *Strasse, Bahn, Panorama: Verkehrswege und Landschaftsveränderungen in Deutschland von 1930 bis 1990.* Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2002. 451 S. EUR 39.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-593-36609-8.



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## Embracing and Escaping Nature

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Thomas Zeller joins environmental and cultural history with the history of technology to analyze the impact of *Autobahn* and railroad construction on German landscapes from the end of the Weimar Republic to the *Wende*. Arguing that landscape is defined, shaped, and reshaped as much by cultural conceptions and social conflicts as by technological innovation, Zeller describes how the German experience of nature through travel has evolved from prioritizing the panoramic view to emphasizing efficiency and speed at the expense of panorama. In so doing, Zeller describes the complex debates among government bureaucrats, engineers, landscape architects, and nature preservationists over the relationship between landscape and modernity; debates in which the racism of the Nazi regime and the postwar desire to efface the Nazi past played major roles.

Zeller devotes roughly two-thirds of his book to highway construction. During the Weimar Republic, private investors, inspired by the Italian *autostrade*, proposed the so-called *Hafraba* highway (from the Hansa cities in the north, to Frankfurt, and then to Basel), but the project

came to naught because of political instability and insufficient financing. Because the *Führer* was determined to motorize the masses, however, the Third Reich aggressively promoted the *Autobahn*, appointing Fritz Todt as its general director. Moreover, because of that commitment, funding for the *Autobahn* exceeded that of the *Reichsbahn*, although the latter carried far more commercial and passenger traffic. The *Autobahn* bespoke the putatively common goal of creating the embodiment of “German technology,” super highways that met the highest technical standards, while conforming to topography and nature. Similar to the egalitarian *Volksgemeinschaft*, which reconciled the classes, “German technology” would harmonize technology and the natural world. Thus, roads would curve gently through the countryside, punctuated with native plantings, while rest areas were to be constructed in appropriately regional styles. In actual practice, however, the rapid construction of the *Autobahn* complicated that objective. Nature preservationists found themselves excluded from the planning, while landscape architects, who received minimal compensation and resources for their efforts, struggled to gain a hearing. To enhance their position, landscape architects

especially, led by the Munich architect Alwin Seifert, cultivated personal relationships with Todt, characteristic of the social Darwinian character of the Third Reich, seeking to enhance their influence by articulating a strident racism in their designs. Yet even then, Todt's own vision, when push came to shove, departed significantly from that of the architects. In his view, landscape existed to provide a new and homogenized experience of space and time for the consumption of drivers, not to express authentic varieties of German regionalism.

In postwar West Germany, highway planning and construction differed significantly from that of the Third Reich despite continuities in personnel. The formal division of responsibilities between the federal ministry of transportation and the *Länder* made for more routinized procedures, in contrast to the administrative chaos and competition of the Nazi regime. Thus, landscape architects who once had exploited ideology and personal connections to enhance their professional standing, now found their ideas for the highways' natural surroundings ignored by engineers, who alternatively promoted speed, efficiency, and safety. Even Todt's dream of drivers enjoying panoramic views of nature fell by the wayside, not least because highways constructed in mountainous regions proved impassable in the winter, especially for commercial traffic. To distance themselves from the "Romantic *Sonderweg*" of the Nazi regime captured in Todt's emphasis on panorama, not to mention their profession's own association with the Third Reich, engineers in the Federal Republic latched onto utilitarian mathematical models, specifically the cloverleaf, because they implied order, rationality, and a re-definition of modernity on those terms. Yet as Zeller points out, the West German public, at least that sufficiently motivated to write letters to the German automobile club, contributed to the valuing of engineering over landscape design, demanding the removal of trees from medians because they impaired the driver's vision.

Zeller terminates his account of the *Autobahn* in 1970, shifting his attention to the difficulties of the rail transport in postwar West Germany. As a public agency that had to serve diverse political needs yet, at the same time, compete for passengers and freight in a private market place, the *Bundesbahn* suffered from continued inadequate funding and the disruption of rail lines as a result of postwar divisions. Beginning in the mid-sixties much discussion arose as to how to make the railroad more competitive and thus less of a financial drain, in part because Japan's introduction of a high-speed rail line between Tokyo and Osaka exposed the inability of

European railroads to keep up with technological innovation. In addition to rebuilding inter-city service with the promise of speed and comfort, planning began on the construction of the Inter-City Express (ICE), introduced ultimately in 1990. Nevertheless, citizen initiatives that flowered in the seventies and eighties significantly impacted rail routes as well as landscapes. Because of local opposition to noise and other forms of pollution, the *Bundesbahn* was forced to construct numerous tunnels, among other devices, to assuage popular concern. As a consequence, the experience of travel, once focused on the traveler's panoramic gaze, became comparable to flying, as interior designers of train compartments built in comfort and entertainment en route. Whether in a car or by train, the once distinctively modern notion of panorama had dissipated. High speed in enclosed compartments became an experience in itself, not a vehicle for experiencing nature.

The rationale behind the organization of *Straße, Bahn, Panorama* is often unclear. To be sure, the priority Zeller gives to the *Autobahn* begins to make sense once one reads the details he provides in the text—the unequal distribution of resources between the highway and the rail system, for example—but it would have helped to have an explanation of this emphasis in the introduction. Moreover, Zeller's decision to terminate his discussion of the *Autobahn* in 1970 remains mysterious. Nevertheless, Zeller has written an interesting and important book. First, it provides a new lens through which to view the continuities and discontinuities in German history. In addition to illustrating the multifarious conflicts among those involved with the *Autobahn* to a degree not explored in the existing literature on the subject, Zeller underscores the regime's sensitivity not just to issues of consumption per se, but especially to the consumption of nature. Such an emphasis, from the perspective of this reviewer, accords with Nazism's effort to provide a higher standard of living, but one not limited to the possession of material goods which it could not afford to encourage. Todt's vision, as Zeller suggests, reflected the altogether limited consumption of the thirties, in that the panoramic gaze by automobile was limited to those few privileged enough to own a car. Then too, the manner in which the desire in West Germany for speed, efficiency, and profit pushed panorama to the background underscores the unabashed materialism of consumption in the Federal Republic, despite and perhaps because of the boom in tourism after 1960. Historians of tourism will profit not only from Zeller's insights regarding how technology contributes to the human experience of landscape,

but also from his discussion of a phenomenon so central to tourism, the panoramic view, which bears further study in light of the inevitable debates that surround systems of transportation. Second, Zeller exposes in interesting ways the persistence of tension between authoritarianism and democracy in Germany, which extended well beyond the Third Reich's *Führerstaat*. The discussions surrounding transportation during the 1930s, not surprisingly, remained limited to competing professionals, bureaucrats and technocrats, especially those ideologically predisposed to exploit Nazi ideology to advance their objectives. Yet well into the postwar period, a similar cadre continued to operate above public debate, intruded on mainly by citizens' letters to the automobile club, which ultimately confirmed the inclinations of en-

gineers. The oppositional potential of public activism became clearest in the seventies and eighties against the congestion on the highways and the threat of railroad construction to local communities. The confidence with which transportation professionals could once claim to speak for the public interest, be it the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* or the West German citizenry, has in recent years had to capitulate to voices from a broader public.

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