Analysis Essay

While for many people, trains evoke images of romance and nostalgia, few are aware of the ways in which trains kill. People die from their misconceptions of the stealth with which trains appear. People die from their invasions of the narrow boundaries in which trains travel. And people die from their arrogant refusal to acknowledge the respect which trains command. Trains kill both the willfully reckless and the inattentive innocent.

Trains kill people with Doppler effect, welded rails and "Walkman" tunes. Railroads are frequently found in scenic locations off limits to cars and traffic. Joggers often use railroad tracks to get their exercise in relative freedom. They believe they'll hear a train coming and just step aside. Unfortunately, sounds get lost in the distance. Trains literally appear from around the bend before their noise arrives. And some noises never arrive. Casual walkers assume they'll hear the clickety-clack of wheels telegraphed through the rail and know that a train's getting close. In many cases, they'll be wrong. Mainline railroads weld the rail ends together in order to reduce friction. Welding also creates deceptively silent movement. And if the physics and mechanics weren't daunting enough, consider the trackside jogger on a beautiful spring morning. The air is crisp. The flowers are in bloom. Filled with the beauty of the moment, she pulls on her mini headphones and cranks up the Walkman in her fanny pack. She bets her life on her ability to watch ahead and behind for oncoming trains. She won't hear a locomotive's shrieking whistle until it's too late. Trains deliver their threat in relative silence. Other varieties of danger await the lazy.

Trains kill people with seclusion, disorientation and suction. Tunnels provide trains with a direct route to pass through what is difficult to go over or around. Impatient hikers regard a train tunnel as a quick route to the other side of the hill. In all but the shortest of versions, tunnels are dark and often curving with few if any lights. As the intruder gropes towards the other end, he learns another important fact. Empty tunnels are very quiet. No outside sounds reach his ears. The hiker will get no warning before his dark, quiet world suddenly becomes floodlit and deafening. In shock, he starts to run but most likely stumbles over the uneven crossties and rocky ballast. The hiker has good reason to panic. The train thundering towards him fills the entire tunnel. Locomotives roar through the enclosure with no more than two feet of clearance on either side. Terrified, he hugs the wall as various deaths race towards him.
A broken strap of metal banding flies by, slashing through his clothing and the flesh beneath. A shifted piece of lumber jutting out from a flatcar knocks him down to the rough gravel floor. The train's passage through the narrow space creates a vacuum effect that lifts the body up, drawing it into the under-carriage of the boxcars. Trains turn trespassers into endangered species. Though the tragedies mentioned to this point are saddening, they are, in ways, understandable. The same cannot be said of those who taunt the dragon. Often, they are burnt.

Trains kill people with optical illusion, altered timing and help from the ego. Drunk or sober, adult or teen, playing chicken with a train borders on insanity. The player's initial decision to step between the rails is based on faulty data. From a distance, the challenge appears slight. Yet the eyes that face an oncoming train deceive the daredevil's brain. The "stare-down" doesn't reveal that the danger is moving twice as fast and is twice as large as it seems. With the visual input distorted (and that's with a sober set of eyes), the daredevil easily miscalculates the escape. The time needed to get to safety is always greater than expected. The face of a locomotive stretches over 3 feet beyond either side of the rail. Standing in the middle of the track, the novice stuntman must jump nearly 7 feet in short seconds to escape impact. The odds for success are dismal. And if distortion and proximity weren't menace enough, the ego conspires to insure tragedy. The risk-taker faces a speeding train for only two reasons: to win a dare or to show off. Whether alone or with companions, bravado is mistaken for bravery and fear of ridicule lords over caution. The mind stalls between stay and go. The hesitation proves deadly. Trains have no sympathy for the foolhardy. After the idiocy of playing chicken, a jogger's mistake at least more human and less stupid.

Trains kill the people who wrongly assume their safety. Trains kill the people who impatiently ignore their restrictions. And trains kill the people who impudently challenge their mortality. Trains kill.