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Railway modelling as an object-relation

Examining the discursive framing of a serious leisure

Abstract: Railway modelling involves the reproduction, miniaturisation and mimesis – with various levels of accuracy – of life scenes that are centred around the display and/or running of model trains. Railway modelling is a serious leisure activity inasmuch as it requires continuous engagement on the part of the hobbyists as well as the development of various skills. The scholarly literature on railway modelling has described it as serious leisure, which engages aspects of craft consumption, and which presents the potential for hobbyists to achieve successful ageing. The aim of this article is instead to conceptualise railway modelling as a serious leisure centered on the materiality of the models, which act as conduits for reinforcing particular normatives within the hobby. To do so, it draws on Woodward's (2011) concept of object-relation to demonstrate how material things configure the relationships and modes of communication within the hobby. In deploying the method of qualitative content analysis as applied to a corpus of issues of a railway magazine, this seeks to show how materiality cements modes of communication and types of sociality within the hobby.

Keywords: craft consumption; leisure; materialities; mediated nostalgia; railway modelling; object-relation.

Introduction

Dating back to the second half of the 19th century (Viaud, 1998), railway modelling refers to the reproduction, miniaturisation and mimesis – with various levels of accuracy and detailing – of life scenes that are centred around the display and/or running of model trains (see Hoffsummer, 2002; Yarwood and Shaw, 2010; Pollard and Carver, 2012, 2016; Stevens-Ratchford, 2014; Kühne et al, 2021; Kühne, 2025; Heinze and Wehe, 2025). Railway modelling is a hobby that attracts many enthusiasts around the world, although it is difficult to collect detailed figures about the number of railway modellers worldwide or in specific countries (because of the difficulty to count modellers and the lack of definition as to what counts as a modeller).

Railway modelling is broadly associated with a number of social and cultural connotations, such as being 'childish' and exclusively practiced by older (white) men (see Yarwood and Shaw, 2010; Pollard and Carver, 2012; Hern, 2024). It is also a hobby that is practiced by a number of celebrities, such as British singer Rod Stewart who recently called railway modeling 'the greatest hobby in the world' (Railway Modeller, 2025). Other famous railway modellers include British television personality James May, British musicians Jools Holland, Roger Daltry and Brian May, British record producer Pete Waterman, American actor Tom Hanks, or British comedian and actress Suzy Eddie Izzard.

The sporadic scholarly literature on railway modelling emphasises how the hobby is a serious form of leisure activity due to the range of skills and lifelong commitment it demands (see Yarwood and Shaw, 2010; Pollard and Carver, 2012, 2016). Others have also discussed how the hobby can help with modellers' successful aging (see Stevens-Ratchford, 2014; Heinze and Wehe, 2025). This article draws on those accounts but aims to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the cultural and discursive configurations of the hobby. To do so, it conceptually focuses on the centrality and significance of materiality (of models, tracks, buildings, characters, sceneries) in the hobby. Thus, it asks: how does materiality cement modes of communications and types of sociality within railway modelling? The article builds on and operationalises the concept of 'object-relation' proposed and developed by Woodward (2011), which, at its core, considers contemporary modes of consumption as entangled between the materiality of objects and the desires and engagements of individuals. The method this article draws on is a qualitative content analysis of a sample of 48 issues of a French railway magazine (*Loco-Revue*) organised around two samples of 24 issues, the first for the years 2018-2019 and the second for the years 2023-2024. Overall, the corpus of data provides a robust account of modes of communication and types of sociality of modellers (through the editorials and readers' comments) and specifically of how materiality operates as a focal point for how modellers position themselves.

The article is structured as follows: the first section reviews the scholarly literature on railway modelling, by first examining notions of craft consumption and then serious leisure in relation to successful aging, and lastly, by exploring the norms that regulate the hobby. The second section introduces the conceptual framework of the article - object-relation theory (Woodward, 2011). The first section details the empirical data that this article draws on - a sample of 48 railway modelling magazines. Lastly, the fourth section analyses the data from those railway modelling magazines and specifically the modes of communication as organised by the magazine (4.1), the negotiation of norms and conventions in the hobby

(4.2), the material configurations in the hobby (4.3), and mediated nostalgia and the future of the hobby (4.4).

1. A literature review on railway modelling

Railway modelling primarily consists of the construction of either a diorama – a contained scenery featuring trains with limited to no motion – or a layout – where trains move around in a scenery (see Yarwood and Shaw, 2010). A layout requires more physical space than a diorama, but it also offers greater possibilities to represent different landscapes and feature various sceneries (Kühne, 2025). In contrast with other modelling practices, ‘Railway modelling, as it requires a layout, offers greater scope for innovation, giving working model trains meaning and context’ (Pollard and Carver, 2016, p. 175).

Railway modelling specifically developed in the second half of the 19th century (Viaud, 1998), with the development of industrial brands such as the German brands Bub (established in 1851), Märklin (est. 1859), the English brands Bassett-Lowke (est. 1899) and Hornby-Dublo (est. 1901, under the name Meccano) (see Viaud, 1998). The hobby has developed over time primarily through the mass production of models by brands, which have industrialised the utilisation of technologies such as ‘the injection moulding of plastics’ (Pollard and Carver, 2016) to produce models. A brand like Hornby (UK) quickly saw the potential market to promote model trains as toys to young generations as well as a serious hobby to adults (see Yarwood and Shaw, 2010). The same brand, Hornby, reported a £43.135 million in the UK in 2013 (in Pollard and Carver, 2016, p. 169). They then reported a revenue of £53.7 million in 2022 (see Hornby PLC, 2022), £55.1 million in 2023 and £56.2 million in 2024 (Hornby PLC, 2024).

The scholarly literature on the hobby primarily focuses on railway modelling through the lens of craft consumption (1.1) and serious leisure that promotes successful aging (1.2).

1.1 Railway modelling as craft consumption

Railway modelling is described and conceptually understood as a ‘hobby’ or ‘leisure’ (Stevens-Ratchford, 2014), and a human occupation (Pollard and Carver, 2012, 2016). Railway modelling is a hobby in that it ‘... is a voluntary occupation engaged in alone, at home, using tools to produce an object’ (Daily, 2018, p. 377). Railway models are often sold ‘already made’. However, they are objects in becoming: their materiality is configured and manifested through assemblages with other materialities. Railway modelling is a serious leisure (Stevens-Ratchford, 2014) but not simply through the continuous engagement of modellers into the hobby. Instead, it is a serious leisure through the skills and creativity that

they develop. Railway modelling offers greater possibilities ‘... than any other form of model-making’, because ‘... [it] allows the modeller to recreate reality in microcosm’ (Harrington, 2012, p. 20, cited in Pollard and Carver, 2016). Such recreation refers to mimesis, ‘an imaginative activity that facilitates replication’ and which ‘requires a prototype’ (Davy and Dixon, 2019, p. 6). In the words of Yarwood and Shaw (2010, p. 431), ‘[m]odel railway layouts represent a personal expression of vision, skill and achievement that is brought about and manifested in different ways’. In that regard, the actual work of construction and the aesthetics of the layout matter more than its level of realism. Such construction of a layout or diorama requires the assemblage of industrial scale models with the imagination and skills of the ‘craft consumer’ (Campbell, 2005). This assemblage materialises the modeller’s (temporal and spatial) inspiration(s). A realistic approach to railway modelling requires more archival research, careful search for particular (and possibly rare) items by ‘navigating the forest of objects’ (Woodward, 2006), and deploying specific skills to assemble those elements together.

The concept of ‘craft consumption’ (Campbell, 2005) has been rightly mentioned in lithe literature (Pollard and Carver, 2016). Rejecting the description of the figure of the consumer as a ‘dupe’, Campbell (2005, p. 31) draws on Kopytoff (1986) and develops the notion of ‘craft consumption’ to specifically capture what he sees as a desire of singularisation in complex societies:

Craft consuming clearly refers to more than either the simple personalization or customization of products; that is, it has to signify more than simply having a product marked with one’s name or initials or even employing a specialist to design a product especially for one. For consumption activity to warrant being described as a craft, then the consumer must be directly involved in both the design and the production of that which is to be consumed.

Campbell’s account is inclusive of practices of consumption that contribute to redefining the original meaning and materiality of objects. For example, Campbell talks about ‘ensemble creativity’, which refers to ‘... a “putting together” of products, each of which may itself be a standardized or mass-produced item’ (2005, p. 34), which is very relevant to practices of assemblages of railway modellers. Pollard and Carver (2016) apply the concept of the ‘craft consumer’ to railway modellers because of the ‘opportunities for innovation’ at their disposal. Yarwood and Shaw (2010) suggest that modellers engage in reconfiguring the materiality of models, both by assembling them (in a collection on display, a diorama, or a layout) and/or by modifying them (through detailing, painting, or weathering). In particular, one of their participants highlights the range of skills required to assemble a railway layout or diorama:

'... there is geography, there is history, there is woodwork, there is carpentry, there is artistry, all different things... Whilst you can buy things like this off the shelf there are things that I can do to it that actually put my own mark on it' (p. 427). Although purchasing locomotives, coaches, and wagons may be sufficient for collecting and displaying model trains, it is the assemblage of trains within a scenery on a diorama or layout that better fits the profile of the 'craft consumer'.

Railway models are mostly industrially produced. Most of them nevertheless still require some level of detailing. Some modellers also personalise the models by weathering them to make them closer to what they resemble in reality. Combining locomotives and coaches in trains or gathering locomotives in depots or sheds also consists of practices of material assemblage. Different objects fit together, in terms of epochs, companies, aesthetics, and sceneries. Layouts or dioramas also require skills in engineering, woodworking, electrical installations, and decorating. The challenges posed by the availability of physical space also requires creative solutions (Hoffsummer, 2002). Yarwood and Shaw (2010, p. 428) add: 'a "finished product" is rarely achieved and may remain largely in the mind of the modeller'. In the context of railway modelling, craft does not solely describe the approach of modellers to industrial objects, but also to physical spaces, and throughout their entire career as modellers. Put simply, dioramas or layouts are never entirely finished. Craft remains a constant pursuit in the hobby. The dedication the hobby demands of modellers and the range of skills they acquire and develop over time justify the discussion of railway modelling as 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2001), which is the focus of the next section.

1.2 Serious leisure and successful aging

Another theme explored in the scholarly literature on railway modelling is the one of 'successful ageing'. Here, the focus lies on the outcomes of engaging in the hobby or serious leisure. Highlighting the leisure aspect in railway modelling, Pollard and Carver want to uncover the psyche behind their passion for the hobby: 'Modelling can bestow psychological benefits such as enjoyment, relaxation and a sense of absorption, and as such may contribute to personal well-being' (2016, p. 174). As serious leisure, railway modelling can also nurture a sense of community (Gallant et al., 2013) and increase life satisfaction (Heo et al., 2012).

Stevens-Ratchford (2014) specifically writes about railway modelling as fostering the cognitive and physical functions of older hobbyists, which she links to successful ageing. She further notes that railway modelling encourages social interconnectedness through a

continuous engagement with various activities around the hobby. As a result, railway modelling is 'gratifying' through its physical demands (Stevens-Ratchford, 2014).

Stevens-Ratchford draws on interviews with two men who started engaging in the hobby as kids and had done so for more than 40 years at the time of interviews. She concludes her research by writing:

Since [railway modelling] can demand the use of high-level physical and cognitive capacities and because [railway modelling] offers much opportunity for productive, social, and leisure activities across the life course, [railway modelling] as serious leisure possesses attributes that can be related to successful aging.

(Stevens-Ratchford, 2014, p. 117)

Her account convincingly describes railway modelling as a serious leisure activity, through the continuous temporal engagement of modellers, and it informs us of the range of practices that the hobby demands in order to separate the mere enthusiasts from the 'serious' modellers (see Kühne, 2025).

In a more recent article, Heinze and Wehe (2025) further confirms Stevens-Ratchford's conclusions. Drawing on a survey with 60 modellers and interviews with 9 of them, they are interested in how railway modelling fosters '... formal opportunities for men to socially connect' and thus 'participate, create new friendships, and increase their social networks' (Heinze and Wehe, 2025, p. 3). From their empirically-rich study, Heinze and Wehe argue that serious engagement in railway modelling provides 'a pathway for aging successfully'. They conclude:

Railroad modeling encouraged the men to remain engaged with one another through their national organization (NMRA), learn new skills by attending conventions and conferences, and participate in an outlet that provided purpose and meaning in their lives. (Heinze and Wehe, 2025, p. 11)

Although those results are significant, the focus on the cognitive outcomes of railway modelling as serious leisure neglects the central aspect of the materiality of models, in a hobby that is organised around the use, display, and crafting of material things.

1.3 Norms in the hobby

Railway modelling carries robust social connotations as a hobby. A broad perception of it being 'childish' has been documented in the scholarly literature (see Pollard and Carver, 2012; Yarwood and Shaw, 2010). Railway modelling is often associated with imaginaries

referring to childhood, and particularly to boys. Railway modelling is primarily male (Jenks, 1988; Yarwood and Shaw, 2010; Pollard and Carver, 2012). The gendered nature of the hobby is illustrated through the specialised press, the online forums, or the dedicated conventions and shows that happen all year long in different countries. The hobby is also seldom to extensive scholarly research, which can be explicated by the social connotations attached to railway modelling (often perceived as a childish, masculine, white, and conservative hobby), rendering it an illegitimate object of scholarly investigation. The negative social connotations about (railway) modelling is for instance manifested in the hesitation that Pollard and Carver (2016) felt in disclosing their passion for their hobby to each other.

Besides the connotations attached to the hobby, the norms that define it tend to overrepresent certain imaginaries. Although industrial models tend to cover the historical and cultural evolution of real trains, plastic model kits and characters tend to largely over-represent white people, hetero-normative couples, and to display traditional gender roles.

Beyond the connotations and normatives associated with railway modelling (being overly represented by older white men - see Hern, 2024), the hobby is quite complex and intricate:

The simplistic image of the “small train” travelling around on a table in the living room has nothing to do with railway modelling, a creative and documented activity, which is susceptible to reproducing an ambiance, to raise an interest in railway history and architectural heritage. (Hoffsummer, 2002, p. 155, translation by the author).

There is a whole ecosystem around the hobby, consisting of ‘... a whole series of [...] other agencies, including clubs, magazines, conventions’ (Yarwood and Shaw, 2010, p. 432). For example, Jenks (1988, p. 185) compiled a ‘comprehensive list’ of specialised railway magazines, which ‘... are directed toward the enthusiast, buff, or railfan – call him (and it usually is a male) what you will’. Besides magazines, numerous publications that can be found about railway modelling are mostly ‘how to’ guides that provide advice on how to better one’s practice (see for example Burkin, 2010; Pybus, 2015). The specialised press, be it magazines or books, largely contribute to communicate and reinforce normative ideas about representations (Kühne et al., 2021). Likewise, ‘Model railway-related literature, whether in book or magazine form, serves to convey expert knowledge on technical design’, but ‘... it also caters to normative aesthetic demands on model railway layouts’ (Kühne et al., 2021, p. 2013, translation by the author).

The complexity and richness of railway modelling as serious leisure is touched on by the scholarly literature, but what is disregarded is how materiality acts as a conduit for modellers to position themselves and engage with others, which is what this article aims to address. The next section discusses the conceptual underpinning of this article.

2. Conceptual framework: object-relation theory in the study of materiality

The scholarly literature on railway modelling largely highlights the activities of the modellers, either from the range of skills they learn, the commitment they have towards, or the benefits on their wellbeing. The materiality of the models, at the core of the hobby, is rarely discussed, even in passing. Yet, what coheres the modellers and their activities is the range of miniatures they purchase, collect, detail, paint, weather, and assemble into displays, dioramas, or layouts. Railway modelling is first and foremost a hobby about representing a scenery that at least features or at most focuses on railway models, be them static or moving. Turning to studies of materiality helps garner an understanding of how material things organise and cement the relationships between modellers and their hobby, and between modellers within the hobby.

Important theoretical interventions in the field of material studies have demonstrated not only that the materiality of objects matters, but also how it matters, for example with regards to identity construction and management (see – among others – Dant, 2008; Hutchby, 2001, Rappert, 2003; Woodward, 2006, 2007, 2011).

In particular, Woodward's (2006, 2007, 2011) material cultural sociology seeks to unravel the motives behind individuals' interactions with material things. He argues that '... there is a need to pay [...] attention to the cultural effervescence of everyday material culture and the role things play in structuring and mediating cultural practice' (Woodward, 2011, p. 367). To Woodward (2007), objects significantly partake in everyday cultural practices and routines to the point where their materiality orients individual and social actions. He further notes: 'the cultural meanings of consumption emerge from fusions of object-centred pragmatics with imaginative, emotional engagement' (Woodward, 2011, p. 367). Objects therefore matter because they meet consumers' expectations.

Against research that focuses on the social 'work' of consumption, Woodward develops a theory of 'object-relation' to understand the relationship between material objects and individuals' consumption of them. Borrowing from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and psychoanalytic, he writes that '... the cultural meanings of consumption emerge from fusions of object-centred pragmatics with imaginative, emotional engagement'

(2011, p. 367). Woodward here echoes Dant (2008, p. 28), who writes that consumers make sense of objects by ‘... [reading] the intentions designed into objects and groups of objects and [acting] on them with appropriate gestures to bring about their purposes’. Consumers select objects for particular functions, aesthetics, and with the idea of projecting certain ideals: ‘Object-seeking offers the individual an opportunity to use the object – and the search for it – as a resource for fantasizing, hoping, dreaming of potency or virtuosity, and the acquisition of vision’ (Woodward, 2011, p. 377). Through the act of assembling material things, consumers construct a particular, and ideally coherent, vision that aesthetically meets their expectations. This means considering more than interactions with single objects. Woodward (2007, p. 16) adds: ‘Objects exist within networks of relations that serve to define, mediate and order them, and which in turn are “acted upon” by such objects and human subjects, affording them purpose and meaning within a system of social relations’. This is what Woodward (2011) calls ‘object-relations’, which refers to the entanglement of the material with the individual through practice (see also Dant, 2008).

Woodward’s approach is important to consider the material, the individual, and the myriad ways through which they interact. In that sense, object-relation theory provides a conceptual template to investigate contemporary leisure forms centred on materiality. This article operationalises object-relation to railway modelling, a hobby that incorporates a range of material practices such as collecting, assembling, and modifying models, notably with the aim to create aesthetic sceneries. The aim is to conceptualise the central role of material objects in how railway modelling is configured. The next section details the data that this article draws on - articles from the railway modelling specialised press.

3. Methods and data

This article draws on the content analysis of model railway magazines. In this methods section, I first discuss content analysis and its application to magazines, before discussing the sampling of model railway magazines that constitute the (secondary) empirical data for this article, and then I discuss the codes that emerged through the analysis of the corpus of magazines

3.1 Magazine content analysis

Content analysis is a text-based method of data collection and analysis that refers to the analysis of the content of a message (Kerlinger, 1986; Morgan, 1993; Stemler, 2000; Bryman, 2008; Devi Prasad, 2008; Forman and Damschroder, 2008; Prior, 2020), in order to identify valid inferences from text (Weber, 1985). As Devi Prasad (2008) highlights, the

method of content analysis insists on *what* message is communicated, *how* it is communicated, and *to whom* it is communicated. In that sense, content analysis narratively accounts for the means of communication, not just its content (Drisko and Maschi, 2016). It is an ‘unobtrusive’ method of data analysis in that the researcher does not intervene on the data itself (Prior, 2020). Babbie (2013, p. 295) notes that content analysis is ‘the study of recorded human communications’. As such, content analysis explores the types and modes of communication as they occur within specific contexts but the use of the method also enables researchers to identify changing trends over time.

The content analysis of magazines in particular, is a method developed by researchers in the US, for example to look at prejudice against minorities (Berelson and Salter, 1948), the reinforcing of gender norms (see Peirce, 1990; Schlenker et al., 1998) or the depiction of senior citizens (Peterson, 1992). In the case of the study conducted by Schlenker and colleagues (1998) for example, the focus was on scanning articles from the magazine *Seventeen* for content. Thus, articles were categorised as containing either their traditional or their feminist messages. This article draws on magazines as data for content analysis but develops a different procedure.

3.2 Applying content analysis to railway modelling magazines

The approach to content analysis deployed in this article is qualitative (see Morgan, 1993). Thus, rather than quantifying occurrences of categories of communications, the aim is to deductively and thematically analyse modes of communication between hobbyists in the pages of a railway magazine. The data presented in this article consists of a corpus of French model railway magazines - *Loco-Revue* (LR hereafter). LR presents itself as the reference of French railway modelling. The monthly magazine was founded in 1937. No figures regarding subscription or readership are available online, but the editor of the magazine, Yann Baude, reports 20,000 monthly readers in the May 2019 issue (editorial, issue 850, May 2019).

LR’s aim is to report on and debate over the hobby of railway modelling, its evolution, and its directions. The magazine features rubrics that announce the development or release of new models, that discuss and test new models, that present a modeller’s layout and discuss their techniques, and that provide advice on the realisation of a layout or discuss new techniques. As per the editor’s words, the magazine presents to its readers not only information but also knowledge (editorial, issue 921, April 2024).

The corpus of magazines selected for analysis is composed of 48 issues in total - 24 from the first sample, which covers the years 2018 and 2019 (issues 846 to 869), and 24 from the second sample, which covers the years 2023 and 2024 (issues 906 to 929). The two samples offer a comparison of two time periods. Moreover, the COVID19 years (2020-2022) are excluded from the content analysis because the pandemic would have been the focus of the conversations and skewed the data towards an analysis of leisure during COVID19 (see Sivan, 2020).

The aim of this article is to focus on the cultural and discursive configuration of the hobby in the magazine and how the materiality of models is central to such framing. Thus, the focus of the content analysis of LR is on the editorial, which features on page 3 of every issue, on readers' comments and editorial column, which feature over two pages at the end of every issue next to a box that lists the content covered in the next issue. Those sections, situated at both ends of the magazine, capture the exchanges between the editor and the readers, and between the readers themselves, as mediated by the magazine. Overall, the data present a snapshot of key discursive elements that animate the hobby and conversations within it.

3.3 Data coding and analysis

All LR issues used for this article were accessed through the smartphone application of the magazine (and are still available through the same means). They were accessed through single purchase or via a subscription. I took screenshots of the articles of interest, then transferred them onto a secure folder. A total of three pages and therefore three screenshots were captured for each issue, thus amounting to 144 pages analysed for their content. A close reading of the data was conducted (Morgan, 1993). Then, the analysis of the content was conducted in stages: a preliminary analysis preceded the finalising of the units of analysis (as per Devi Prasad, 2008; Forman and Damschroder, 2008). The content of the selected magazine was coded and analysed thematically with regards to the research question that underpins this article (how does materiality cement modes of communications and types of sociality within railway modelling?). The content analysis of these sections uncovers more than modes of communications, but also the normative expectations of modellers, and it identifies the attitudes, views, and interests of individuals or groups of individuals (see Drisko and Maschi, 2016).

Each section - editorial, readers' comments, editor's column - was read, reviewed, and thematically coded onto a spreadsheet. While the editorials contain between one and three themes, the readers' comments and editor's column all contain a single theme.

Typically, besides announcing some of the key themes presented in the magazine, the editor tends to reflect on seasonal changes or on the state of the hobby. On the other hand, the categories of communications from the readers are as follows: reporting, suggesting, correcting, responding (see section 4.1). Lastly, the editor's column more directly tackles some specific issues, often with a more definitive perspective.

A notable difference between the samples was noted: magazines from 2018-2019 (sample 1) contained more readers' comments than those from 2023-2024. In excluding issues that solely feature readers' comments that only showed seasonal photos for Christmas or the New Year, or photos reporting from a big toy fare, the issues from sample 1 featured an average of 4 readers' comments per issue to 3.1 readers' comments per issue for sample 2.

In what follows (see section 4), I aim to show how the materiality of models is not only central to the magazine and the discussions organised through its pages, but also that it is a conduit for a range of discussions that are about the hobby and about how the hobbyists live in and through it. All extracts quoted in section 4 were translated by the author from French to English.

4. Discussions of materiality within a serious leisure

In this data analysis section, I show how a serious leisure activity - railway modelling - can be discursively organised by one of its key intermediaries, the specialised press.

4.1 Setting up the parameters of communications between modellers

The specialised press is a key intermediary in a nice hobby such as railway modelling (Jenks, 1988). How the magazine LR organises communications between modellers is critical in how the hobby is (1) presented and framed, and (2) how it lives. The qualitative content analysis of the selected sections from LR provide insights over a range of normative expectations around material things in the hobby, be then in terms of how to communicate about them (which is explored in this section) or the negotiation of norms and conventions in the hobby (discussed in section 4.2).

Unsurprisingly, many of the editorials serve as an introduction to the issue, as a way to present what the readers will find in it. Issues of LR often total 100 pages. Some issues, because they feature key announcements, report on events (such as the annual Nuremberg's toy fare taking place in February), contain 132 pages. The magazine's editor Yann Baude also uses the 200-word editorials to react to conversations he has had with

modellers, to discuss seasonal changes, to react to how he perceives the hobby to change over time. In his position, he is both an untrained ethnographer and a cultural intermediary. In his editorials, he is a voice of authority when he reports back on and summarises discussions he has with modellers, or when he discusses the future of the hobby, but he also invites dialogue with the readers/modellers by leaving discussion points open to interpretations. At times, the editor attempts to conceptually frame the hobby. For example, in an editorial entitled 'the three pillars of railway modelling', he writes that the two accepted pillars (techniques and creativity) need to be complemented with a third pillar - historical motivation. He writes that the three pillars form a triangle: "At the heart of this triangle, each modeller situates their own practice, more or less attracted by one pole. Whatever your motivation may be" (editorial, issue 911, June 2023). Elsewhere, he recounts the nostalgia (see section 4.4 for a discussion of the concept) about the first model he was gifted as a kid: 'Nowadays, I expect, like many others, an accurate version of a locomotive, assigned to the right depot from my favourite epoch and to my chosen regional area' Talking about a new model that had just come out and presented in a photo next to the same locomotive in a model that dates back 60 years, he continues 'I will just have to place it on the tracks and admire it. I wonder whether we have not lost anything' (editorial, issue 910, May 2023). Such commentaries serve as an invitation to the readers, who then submit comments that respond to editorials. Modes of communication include open questions from both the editor and readers, as to invite conversations that are meant to happen in the magazine and beyond the pages of the magazine. This enables themes to come back over different issues of the magazine, sometimes over three or four successive issues. This animates conversations within the hobby.

The readers' comments feature letters and emails sent to the magazine. These are selected and some are truncated, thus manifesting editorial decisions over what is deemed worth publishing. Some of the readers' comments respond to the editorials, to the editor's columns, or to other readers' comments. Some of the readers' comments sections of the magazine feature editor's columns, which give the editor or another member of the editorial team a license to provide a critical discourse on a specific issue. Editor's columns tend to be more definitive and critical than other parts of the magazine.

Across the two samples of LR sections analysed for this article and which amount to 48 issues in total, the readers' comments are thematically categorised as follows:

- Reporting - on photos of layouts, on activities of clubs, on the passing of a modeller;

- Suggesting or recommending new techniques;
- Providing feedback on new models (positive or negative);
- Responding to previous editorials, editor's columns, or readers' comments;
- Correcting mistakes made in articles.

Based on the names that sign the readers' comments, all contributors appear to be men. The gender dimension of the hobby is explained by some authors by the transmission process from fathers to sons to discover railway modelling (see Skelton, 2009; Yarwood and Shaw, 2010; Pollard and Carver, 2012, 2016).

Modes of communications are structured by the editorial decisions by the magazine. They provide different ways to report on and cement the object-relation of modellers, by anchoring expertise, negotiating types of sociality, establishing the state of the hobby, positioning one as a 'serious modeller' (Kühne et al., 2021). In the next section, I discuss how those modes of communication enable modellers to negotiate the norms and connotations of the hobby.

4.2 Negotiating the norms and connotations of the hobby

There is no clear definition as to what constitutes a railway modeller (does collecting models suffice?), and it is therefore impossible to systematically count their number. For example, a participant from Heinze and Wehe (2025, p. 8) mentions the clubs that unite modellers but also the 'lone wolves', who cannot be counted by any means. What separates the 'serious model railroader' from the 'toy train railroader' (Kühne et al., 2021) or the 'uniformed' from the 'serious' (Kühne, 2025), is their practice, craft, and positioning within the hobby. The magazine LR, through its structuring of modes of communication between modellers, encourages the 'serious' modellers to comment and report on their craft and practice. In that sense, it reinforces a divide that can exist in the hobby between experts and amateurs, at the risk of excluding many modellers.

As previously highlighted, railway modelling is broadly associated with a number of connotations regarding what the hobby (and its practitioners) mean (see Pollard and Carver, 2012; Yarwood and Shaw, 2010). Those connotations are taken into account in the magazine, for example by the editor:

'Toy store', 'toy for kids', 'playing with trains', so many terms associated with railway modelling, with modellers often pejoratively qualified as 'big children' [...] Things

change, mentalities change, and the inner child in all of us is nowadays largely valorised, acknowledged as a source of creativity, brain plasticity, and enthusiasm of those who accept their inner child. (editor, issue 865, August 2019)

Railway modelling is a serious leisure activity (see Stebbins, 2001) and as such, emphasising one of its many aspects, for example the range of skills of modellers, or their creativity, can be used as counterpoints to one of the main connotations associated with the hobby. Those connotations remain nonetheless important in how modellers make sense of their hobby.

Through communications that denote how they position themselves as modellers, many readers report on the state of the hobby. An example of this is the generational gap that exists in the hobby and which questions the future of the hobby. A reader reports:

'Railway modelling is over' ... This is a defeatist discourse I hear often. It is true that the average age in our club is not a source of optimism, but what can we do to attract or even retain our younger club members? At the club, most refuse to adopt digital systems, and yet, young modellers would be keen to control their layouts with their tablet or smartphones, and so they do not come back. (reader, 865, August 2019).

Although different generations of modellers cohabit in clubs and online, it is still over-represented by baby boomers (Pollard and Carver, 2016). LR certainly features older modellers whilst younger modellers are more likely to participate in online spaces. Added to this, railway modelling requires time, money, and physical space inside a home, an attic or in a garage, which explains how many sociodemographics are excluded from the hobby. All these above characteristics, Yarwood and Shaw (2010, p. 432) conclude, '... reflect hegemonic constructions of gender as well as stage in the life cycle, financial stability and access to domestic space that reflects position on the property ladder'.

A third and final issue regarding the norms and connotations of the hobby concerns the over-representation of whiteness within the hobby, from the modellers themselves to the actual models (miniatures and figurines) available for purchase. One reader notes and regrets that there only exist white figurines to feature on his layout and wonders whether this reflects racism in the hobby and by the manufacturers (reader's comment, issue 849, March 2018). In the following issue, another reader responds that the catalogue of the one the manufacturers does feature 'exotic characters' and invites other modellers to also paint characters themselves (reader's comment, issue 850, April 2018). While both readers ask for more diversity in the characters available for sale, the terminology adopted by one of

them certainly denotes their own positions. In that sense, they tend to reinforce the connotations attached to the hobby.

4.3 The material configurations in the hobby

Object-relation theory highlights the interactions between individuals and material things (Woodward, 2011). LR is a space where modellers report on their collection (for example by sending photos of rare models) or on the ingenuity of their techniques/craft. One recurring issue discussed in the pages of LR is the price of models (across both samples), which has increased over time. The editor comments: 'At the magazine, we read your comments with attention. Among them, many talk about the increasing price of new models, and bemoan it'. Increasing prices are explained by the greater level of detailing, the price of market studies, production, and transport. He continues: 'Rest assured that we take into consideration the frustrations generated by this evolution' (editor, issue 913, August 2023). In a later issue, he argues more definitively:

It's become an automatic reaction from modellers. Every time a new model comes out, we see cries on social media about its price. [...] New models respond to a desire for realism and sophistication from many modellers. [...] The real question is why there doesn't exist cheaper alternatives? (editor's column, issue 918, January 2024).

Although Woodward (2011) insists that objects provide individuals with satisfaction and purpose (see section 2), it is clear that railway models also generate frustrations for the modellers.

Beyond the price and materiality of models, a discourse that often comes back through the pages of LR is the role of modellers themselves (their craft and creativity) to give 'life' to the models. For example, in announcing the launch of new models, the editor notes that those models will always need to be brought to life by the modellers: 'Through the environment you create, the trains you assemble, through the weathering of them, you tell a story, you add what is missing from those models' (editorial, issue 920, March 2024). Such material assemblage gives meaning to the practice of the hobby, by forming a vision and creating a miniature world that offers the potential for escapism: 'Don't we do railway modelling to escape reality, to create a pleasant reality, or even an acceptable one?' (editorial, issue 917, December 2023). In preparation for Christmas, he invites the readers of LR to 'escape' and to 'build better miniature worlds' (editorial, issue 917, December 2023).

The motivations of modellers to engage in the hobby is the focus of the last section of the qualitative content analysis.

4.4 Mediated nostalgia and the future of the hobby

Woodward (2011, p. 373) notes that... 'The emphasis in object-relations theory is [...] on fixing upon objects that satisfy key needs'. Railway modelling is largely configured around representing certain ideas of the past. Mediated nostalgia is a key motivator for most modellers. Nostalgia is broadly understood as a 'structure of feelings' in Western Societies (see Tannock, 1995; Pickering and Keightley, 2006), and it has become an obsession in contemporary society (see Lizardi, 2015). Nostalgia is not to be regarded as a naïve turn to the past:

... nostalgia for a lost time clearly involves yearning for what is now not attainable, simply because of the irreversibility of time; but to condemn nostalgia solely to this position leaves unattended not only more general feelings of regret for what time has brought, but also more general questions for how the past may actively engage with the present and future. (Pickering and Keightley, 2006, p. 920)

In railway modelling, and particularly through the pages of LR, mediated nostalgia is manifested through discourses that recall the initial interaction with models, and which act as a reminder of the motivation and satisfaction of engaging in the hobby: '... Let us remember when, as kids, December was an unbearably long month, up until we found, at the foot of the Christmas tree, our coveted first railway model' (editor, 858, January 2019). Such discourses are complemented with issues in January (in 2018) or February (in 2019, 2013, and 2024) when modellers send photos of their models for Christmas and to celebrate the New Year (issues 846, 859, 907, 919).

Although this may appear as contradictory to imagine the future of the hobby, mediated nostalgia and imagining the future of railway modelling work hand in hand in how the hobby is configured in the specialised press and through the exchanges. This is so because a turn to the past informs and serves as a source of inspiration for modelling practices that will take place over months and years to come. In the May 2019 issue, the editor lists a number of motivations for modellers to engage in the hobby:

We create railway models to find forgotten trains. Or because we are trying to recreate an atmosphere of the past. Because we want to see images from our childhood again. Because we like to tinker. Because we love the design of the locomotives. Because we like the architecture of stations. Because we would love to

live in this charming village. Because, in our small world, the weather is always nice. Because we are bored, in the winter, locked up. Because a garden – with a train in the middle – appeals to our grandchildren. Because we have finally found an activity to do with our son or daughter. Because it reassures our partner to know that we are in the attic. Because we found daddy’s trains in the boxes. Because we remember the electric train that we were given when we turned eight, and how much we loved it! Because we are fond of electromechanics. Or that we love to write computer programmes and create automations. (editorial, issue 862, May 2019)

The editor also later comments on the necessity to move on to other sources of inspiration for material representations:

It seems clear that nostalgia is a powerful aspect of the creation of miniature worlds. Maybe even the main one. [...] And yet, isn’t it just pointless? The past is the past and will never come back. The future is yet to be imagined. What if we stopped looking in the wingmirror to look ahead instead? I only see too few layouts anticipating the future. (editor’s column, issue 923, June 2023)

Despite such calls and as evidenced by what readers recount in terms of memories associated with the hobby, nostalgia remains the most powerful engine that motivates modellers’ craft and material practices of assemblages.

Conclusion and discussion:

This article has explored a serious leisure activity - railway modelling - through the lens of object-relation theory (Woodward, 2011) and, specifically, how modellers discursively report on the materiality of all things in the hobby in a specialised magazine - *Loco-Revue* (LR). In doing so, this article has shown how materiality is the central point that organises the activities in the hobby. Through editorial decisions - what editor writes in the introduction of each issue every month, and with the decisions over what to publish from readers - the magazine contributes to reinforcing particular normatives about railway modelling as a hobby and serious leisure. I argue that such normatives center around the materiality of models, through particular ways of reporting on interactions between modellers and models and the emphasis on material aspects of the hobby. At the center of it all are material things, such as the trains, tracks, buildings, characters, and all aspects of sceneries, which continue to evolve in terms of aesthetic and technicality, which coalesce modellers’ engagement with the hobby.

LR provides a particular way of framing railway modelling, with discourses that cyclically come back, for example regarding its future, what inspirations for modellers are, generational differences between modellers, complaints regarding models that are not produced, or the same models produced by different manufacturers, about the price of models, about the realistic mimesis of models, and so on. Those exchanges, always courteous, say more about the modellers that engage in this form of communication and sociality than it does about the state of the hobby and all the modellers that exist within it. Looking at the two samples of LR magazines, it appears as if things change so that they never change. The magazine thus sustains itself, in a niche market composed of modellers who report on their passion for, and approach to, the hobby. The discussions are not meant to resolve any problems, they in fact enable the hobby and the modellers that populate it to sustain itself. Of course, the magazine uses those to trigger or maintain interest over time, and to economically survive, but this has consequences for how the hobby is known from the inside and consistently becomes connoted on the outside.

Railway modelling is a serious leisure activity that invites craft consumption, and it certainly promotes successful aging. It also promotes modes of communication and sociality that ensure that the hobby continues to exist. As a hobby that is often described as rich (as highlighted by LR's editor in issues 857, 919, 928), the contours of railway modelling are discursively framed by the key sites where practitioners exchange and make the hobby live, such as the specialised press. The French magazine LR represents a prime example of what discourses are authorised in the hobby and how they ought to be framed. What is neglected however is a diversity of voices (in terms of age, gender, ethnicity) and the new sites where the hobby exists and is discussed. Future research could address such issues by drawing on primary data collected from modellers themselves.

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