

## CHAPTER ONE

*A Transport of Delight*

Humans have been travelling from Point A to Point B since time immemorial. The changes come about when Point B becomes that much further from Point A (it may even be somewhere in space) and when we manage to get there a bit more quickly.

**chauffeur**

The French verb *chauffer* means to heat and in French *chauffeur* can mean a fireman or stoker on a steam train, as well as a driver. A modern French *chauffeur* might be driving a bus or a lorry rather than a car – it means simply ‘the person who happens to be driving’. When the word was first adopted into English at the turn of the twentieth century it had that broader sense, but as early as 1902 the fact that the word was French had given it a certain *cachet* among the *élite*. The *Westminster Gazette* was able to report that, in the quest to find a word to designate a paid, professional driver, “chauffeur” seems at present to hold the field’. As, indeed, it has done ever since.

**clutch**

The pedal in the car that allows you to change gear is so-called because it controls the *clutch* in the engine. This is defined as ‘a device that enables two rotating shafts to be joined or disconnected as required’. In a car, it’s a matter of disconnecting the engine (which spins all the time) from the transmission and wheels (which don’t). Before the advent of the motor car a *clutch* could be any device that gripped or grasped, the earliest meaning of the word being the claw of a beast or bird of prey – the same sense as is found in *falling into someone’s clutches* or *clutching at straws*.



## express

The French word *exprès* means ‘on purpose, deliberately’ and in English *express* had a similar meaning for several hundred years; we still use the adverb in this way, as in *it was produced expressly for the occasion*. So the original *express* TRAINS weren’t designed for speed, necessarily, but for a purpose: a *special* (or *express*) train might be laid on to take crowds to a race meeting or to the seaside at holiday time. But because such a train was heading for a particular destination and not stopping at the usual intermediate STATIONS, it was faster than it would normally have been.

The original *Orient Express* may well have been special, but it certainly wasn’t speedy: for the first six years of its service (1883–9), passengers for Constantinople (now Istanbul) had to do part of the journey by ferry or by horse-drawn carriage. Even when the railway line across Bulgaria was completed in 1889, the whole trip from Paris to Constantinople took sixty-seven and a half hours. Even so, by the end of the nineteenth century, the word *express* had come to be used with reference to other appliances and services where speed was implicit: *express delivery* of mail, an *express rifle* and, not long afterwards, an *express lift* that didn’t stop at every floor. And by the 1930s and 1940s, the Americans had invented the *express highway* or *expressway*, designed specifically (or expressly) for fast-moving traffic.



## hitch

There was no need for the word *hitchhike* until the 1920s, when for the first time a significant number of people owned a motor car and others – mostly the young and impoverished – took to travelling further from home than they had ever done before, relying on the kindness of strangers to give them a lift. The original meaning of *hitch* was to move jerkily or unevenly – a perfect description of a journey where you have to get out of the car when the driver has reached his own destination, then walk (or *hike*) a bit farther until you can pick up another lift. *Hitchhike* had been abbreviated to *hitch* – as in *to hitch a lift* or *a ride* – within a very few years.

*Hike* itself is a surprisingly recent coinage – early nineteenth century – of uncertain derivation. It initially carried the implication of walking for pleasure and came into being when a growing middle class started doing just that, rather than walking because that was the only way they could get from A to B if they weren’t rich enough to afford a carriage.



## CHAPTER TWO

*What a Picture!*

When photography and then the movies came into being in the nineteenth century, they required remarkably few new words. The camera itself and many of its components and functions were adapted from existing vocabulary.

**biopic**

A *biographical picture*, with ‘picture’ here meaning motion picture or movie. It differs from the **DOCUDRAMA** in that it tells the whole story of someone’s life, whereas a docudrama generally focuses on a particular incident. The concept is as old as cinema itself – the pioneering French film-maker Georges Méliès made a short biography of Joan of Arc in 1900 – but the term doesn’t seem to have been coined until the 1940s.

**blockbuster**

A *block* in this context is a city block, the area bounded by two pairs of two parallel streets – a common way of measuring distance in North America, where they are more likely to say, ‘It’s five blocks away’ than ‘It’s ten minutes’ walk’. ‘Block’ has been around since the late eighteenth century. *Bust* as a colloquial alternative to *break* is only fractionally younger. They were first put together during World War II, when a *blockbuster* came to mean a bomb capable of destroying a whole block. Once the war was over, the word quickly developed a figurative and more positive sense – to describe something as a *blockbuster of an idea*, for example, was to say that it was terrific, imaginative, breaking new ground.

Hollywood soon caught on to the word, applying it to 1950s films such as *Ben-Hur* or *The Ten Commandments* and then, over the decades, to *Jaws*, *Superman*, *Star Wars*, *Titanic*, *Batman*, *Avatar* and many others. The defining features of a blockbuster are massive production costs and huge marketing budgets, with (although the list I have given contains honourable exceptions) perhaps less

emphasis on the quality of the script or the acting. A *blockbuster novel* also tended to have a big marketing spend behind it; it was by definition long and usually broad in its scope – often covering several generations or continents, or describing a character’s rise from grinding poverty to wealth beyond the dreams of, well, anyone but a blockbuster novelist. Among the blockbusters of the 1970s and 1980s was a subgenre that came to be known as ‘sex and shopping’, to which the British writer Sue Limb brought a new twist. Under the pseudonym Dulcie Domum (which translates very roughly as ‘the sweetness of home’), she wrote a column in the *Guardian* called ‘Bad Housekeeping’; in it Dulcie is struggling to write a novel her spouse describes as a *bonkbuster*. Dulcie’s description of the new gardener, as glimpsed by her heroine through the bathroom window – ‘stocky, balding Slav, with magnetic eyes and masterful manner with turnips’ – gives an idea of the tone. Nobody who takes their writing seriously would describe their work as a *bonkbuster*, but it has caught on among those who are dismissive of the genre and those who don’t mind admitting that they are reading rubbish for the fun of it.



## camera

*Camera* is the Latin for a room, particularly a private one, so that when a judge hears a court case *in camera* it is in the absence of the public and the media. The *camera obscura* or ‘dark chamber’ is a precursor of the modern photographic camera, based on the observation (made by Aristotle in the fourth century BC, but possibly older than that) that light passing through a small hole into a darkened room produces an image on a wall

opposite. It was used for centuries in various parts of the world by scientists studying the movement of light, by astronomers observing the sun and by artists learning about perspective. Although originally referring to a room, the expression *camera obscura* could, by the nineteenth century, be applied to something no larger than a box that worked on the same principle, projecting images on to a wall or large screen – for entertainment as well as for scientific purposes.

As the concept of photography developed, the fact that the word *camera* had derived from the room rather than the device was pushed aside, and it came to be applied to the little box that used an aperture and a lens to shed light and therefore an image on the film within. That use is recorded in 1840, and when ‘movies’ came into being half a century later, it was logical to apply the same term to the apparatus that produced their images too.

