

## Railway and locomotive language in film \*

### Introduction

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Since the Lumière Brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (*L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat*, 1895), trains – one of the most emblematic signs of modern times – have been puffing and speeding their ways onto movie screens, affecting spectators in multiple manners. A hundred and twenty years after the fifty-second long film allegedly provoked panic during its first screening in Paris, at the dawn of cinema when audiences were still unfamiliar with the realistic illusions of the new medium, it is interesting to return to the origins and later developments of this highly charged symbol by focusing on the complex kinship between the railways and the cinema.

Since the onrushing locomotive speeding towards the audience became one of the founding myths and iconic shots of film history, cinema has not ceased to exploit the dramatic, diegetic and symbolic potential of trains. While the use of movement from a distance, and the impression of depth of field opened the way for radically new visual experiences, later motion pictures created a variety of railway-inspired narratives, tropes and types, enhancing the effect of the intrusive train age by their sound-tracks. After the railway films' static teens, train chases and other action sequences required more elaborate camera techniques; and even today, the long-term relationship between the railway and the cinema is recalled by technical terms such as the "tracking shot", in reference to a camera which moves on a vehicle along rails.

In "train films" – a moveable category, rather than a separate genre – it is not uncommon to encounter oddly autonomous runaway locomotives, characters empowered by an anthropomorphic engine, or passengers animated with anxiety when exposed to the power unleashed by a railway engine. In a number of more modern films where crisscrossing railway tracks foreshadow a state of confusion or moral derailment, it is the train's mere velocity that seems to generate a language and rhythm of its own, creating associations that highlight the intersecting roads taken by the railway and the cinema. This is demonstrated in Lynne Kirby's blend of railway history and film scholarship, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (1997), which argues that the train works as a mechanical double for the cinema, since both these complementary technical innovations construct optical experiences in the form of a journey, juxtaposing different places, and annihilating space and time.

Today, long after the Lumière Brothers' static camera gave way to more mobile filming techniques, cinematographic experimentation continues to capture "moving pictures", oxymoronically coinciding with the very etymology of the word "locomotion"

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(from *locus*, “place”, and *motio*, “motion”) – an association worth bearing in mind when observing the mechanical and visual connections between the cinema and the train, two singularly oxymoronic spaces implying motion and stillness; both constituting a paradoxically static, yet moveable and porous, *topos*.

Accordingly, carriages, sleepers, dining and lounge cars, coaches and cabooses constitute both real and symbolic “non-places”, that are particularly fruitful for drama. Despite attempts by railway and film production companies alike to classify and compartmentalize, train interiors provide suitable sites for shocks, startling encounters and plots. They allow spectator-passengers of different social classes and origins to bump into each other and mix, since with its railway stations, platforms, bridges, crossings, junctions and tunnels, the train has come to represent a classed society on the move. Hence, it is unsurprising that train films, driven by different motive powers, keep moving between generic categories, to deal with a wide range of individual and social conflicts, or simply with the intense pleasure of traversing space.

Born in the heyday of nineteenth-century train travel, today’s cinematographic train imagery tends to reflect twentieth and twenty-first century perceptions and disruptions. Besides scenarios where the railway impacts the overall structure and aesthetics of the moving picture, epic, tragic, melodramatic, as well as comic and parodic films use train sequences for sporadic effects, sometimes through deliberate winks to the protocinematic train staged by the Lumière Brothers.

Indeed, railway and locomotive language in film reads as an ongoing process of mediation between technology and art. With their post-romantic language of wheels, steam and speed, cinematographic trains highlight numerous cross-fertilizations between different arts, epochs and film genres, as well as between cultural and geographic areas, such as the North American West and South. Whatever the ultimate meanings conveyed by the puffing, panting, rattling, whistling, merrily chugging or frightfully squealing trains, when transposed to the film screen, arriving, leaving and rolling trains are always far more than a means of transportation.

Raphaëlle Costa de Beauregard’s study of John Ford’s *The Iron Horse* (1924) considers various reasons for the train’s intimate association with the origins of film. She begins by examining the early years of cinema history when trains also celebrated the power of the imagination. Costa de Beauregard’s discussion of the train film underlines the special relationship between the traveller and the moviegoer. In Britain, the industrial revolution triggered a series of railway events which greatly stimulated the imagination of writers and early filmmakers, like the “phantom ride films” filmed by a camera mounted on the front of a train engine. In the United States, the hugely popular entertainment called “Hale’s Tours”, or the “Pleasure Railway” gave the illusion of travelling on a real train. These and other similar optical means provide the historical background for Costa de Beauregard’s contextualized examination of Ford’s film, namely in terms of the way two different sources of entertainment, fantasy and realism, coexist in westerns that rely strongly on railway motifs and rhythms.

Hervé Mayer’s study of Henry King’s *Jesse James* (1939) approaches the filmic train as an agent of corruption serving undemocratic forces, menacing the agrarian American republic imagined by Thomas Jefferson. After recalling how the construction of the railroad

has often been viewed as a symbol of progress and a metonym for westward expansion and construction of the American nation, Mayer moves on to focus on the political ambiguities conveyed by the railroad system in the film. His reading underlines how King's filmic recreation of the bank and train robber as a noble ex-Confederate outlaw and folk hero creates a partial reversal within the conventional western narrative of progress. The train functions thus within the epic drama as an ideological signifier of systemic corruption. Interestingly, when deviating from its western plot to expose some of the political and economic conflicts in the wake of the Great Depression, King's *Jesse James* takes a southward turn, introducing a ruthless railroad tycoon who stands for the new tyrannical economic system, especially for the historically more agricultural South.

Two years after *The Iron Horse*, United Artists released *The General*, Buster Keaton and Clyde Bruckman's railway comedy set in the American South during the Civil War. Contrary to the best-known American train films, which associate the metonymic westbound "iron horse" with the railroad/nation couple, the locomotive driven by Buster Keaton evokes a stubborn "metal donkey", whose rolling resistance challenges the tractive forces of more conventionally heroic men and machines. Exploiting the train as a ready-made site of romance, crime and disaster, the Keatonesque locomotive narrative incorporates a number of hilarious gags in its storyline, allowing the quixotic Confederate gentleman-engineer to overcome a long series of obstacles along the tracks. Recalling the historical background of the 1862 train-jacking which inspired the silent movie, Taïna Tuhkunen examines the parodic means used in the picaresque railway romance based on a deliberately zigzagging narrative which, rather than pivoting upon a nostalgia-laden Southern mansion, sets in motion old stereotypes about the rural *antebellum* South through the jubilant companionship between a Confederate engineer and his locomotive.

In contrast to the more classic American western figures, who are generally intricately linked to the shaping of the United States as a nation, another, lesser-known filmic figure of the American railway emerges: the train-hopping transient, vagrant or hobo. Claire Dutriaux focuses on this mythical figure, who appeared on film screens in the wake of the Great Depression, as countless migrant workers kept hopping on and off trains in search of a brighter future, or simply to survive. The cluster of three films studied by Dutriaux – *Boxcar Bertha* (Martin Scorsese, 1972), *Emperor of the North* (Robert Aldrich, 1973), and *Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby, 1976) – highlights the interest in "common folks" in scenarios impacted by the counter-culture movement. Despite the films' differing approaches to the railway and trains, their shared themes, types and "aesthetics of ambivalence" regarding the Depression-era railroad challenge the American myths of freedom and classlessness through the *praxis* of train-hopping in the "Other America", namely by foregrounding a logic of circularity, rather than linearity.

Cristelle Maury focuses on Richard Fleischer's crime thriller *The Narrow Margin* (1952), examining the film's train-gear imagery and rhythmicity as correlates of mental processes, claiming that the railway language created by Fleischer functions as a metalanguage that sheds light on the film noir codes. According to Maury, Fleischer's exploitation of the train and railways makes it possible to review underlying features of the genre, since the film interferes with some of the generic features of film noir. Although *The Narrow Margin* is not the first film noir to use the visual and aural possibilities of trains, it rearranges the

traditional noir setting and the figure of the male detective by laying the emphasis not on a man and a femme fatale, but on a train-generated confusion between man and the machine. It thus creates a complex noir anti-hero marked by moral ambivalence and duplicity at a time of increased cultural anxieties regarding the decline of masculinity.

Trains also play a significant thematic and structural role in several Alfred Hitchcock films. Rebecca Franklin-Landi tackles two of his fifties train films, *Strangers on a Train* (1951) and *North by Northwest* (1959), in which the famous filmmaker demonstrates the dramatic potential of the train as a perfect location for crimes and mishaps that may befall the passengers. Expanding upon previous cinematographic representations of the train, Hitchcock uses the train and the railway motif to set up chance encounters, as well as symbolic derailings. Both Maury and Franklin-Landi draw attention to the 1950s as a particularly productive period for the making of intense train movies. Reading Hitchcock's American train films against the political background of the era, Franklin-Landi sees them as an expression of the British filmmaker's ambiguous relationship with the United States.

Finally, Yvelin Ducotey approaches the kinship of trains and cinema by concentrating on Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011), viewed as a homage to former cinematographic masterpieces. Confirming that a train need not pull out of a station to initiate a parallel journey with the cinema, Ducotey examines *Hugo* as a collective experience. He analyses the role of the technologically-inclined, Dickensian orphan who leads a solitary yet magic life within the walls of one of the biggest and busiest railway stations of Paris, the Gare Montparnasse. While Scorsese's film works its way out of indebtedness to pre-existing movies, it also functions as a partial biopic, drawing on the life of the great French illusionist, Georges Méliès, who was famous for his "trick trips". Emphasising the vivid links contemporary cinema maintains with the films of the past, Ducotey highlights one of the main functions of train films: time-travelling.