

NORD EXPRESS / 1990

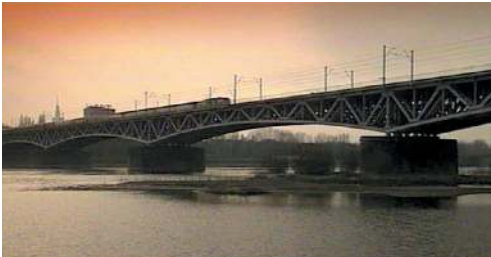
A journey through History

Founded in 1872 by the Liège engineer and businessman Georges Nagelmackers, the Compagnie internationale des wagons-lits (CIWL) was an industrial adventure that transformed the way people travelled in Europe and left its mark on the literary and cinematic imagination. Intended first and foremost for the bourgeois elite and for the businessmen who needed to move about



Europe, the company's luxurious trains linked the great capitals of Europe, like the celebrated *Orient-Express*, which, departing from Paris or from Berlin, reached Constantinople by way of Vienna and Budapest. In 1896, Nagelmackers launched the *Nord Express*, which connected Paris to Saint Petersburg in forty-eight hours. The two world wars, the shifting of borders and the Iron Curtain altered its route on several occasions, then its destination (Riga, Berlin, Moscow) and finally its comfort, which grew ever less luxurious. Once the CIWL had ceased its railway operations in the 1960s, the Paris–Moscow service was taken over by the national railway companies of the various countries crossed, working together to run an increasingly ageing train. In 1990, nearly a hundred years after its inauguration, the *Nord Express* still takes forty-eight hours to reach its destination. At a time when the aeroplane has long since supplanted long-distance rail journeys and the network of high-speed lines is under construction, the journey from Paris to Moscow is no longer a luxury reserved for the upper bourgeoisie. It is aboard this once legendary train, which has since lost its panache, that the film invites us to climb for a journey through space and time.

“A story of speed, of comfort, of waiting and of work,” announces the *voice-over*. From Paris, where the allegorical statues of the great cities looking down over the Gare du Nord are already an invitation to travel, the train swiftly reaches Belgium and then West Germany, which it crosses by night. In the early morning, the concrete wall and the watchtowers that run alongside the track hide the landscapes of East Germany, heightening the sense of confinement already felt inside the train. Having crossed the Oder, then the Vistula, the traveller discovers the silvery birch woods of Poland, then the Russian plain dotted with blue, yellow or green izbas [QR4].



The progress of the journey can be read directly off a map on which a red line advances from city to city and crosses the borders. All along the route, the film describes the work of the ticket inspectors, the stewards, the signalmen in their control towers and the customs officers who get on and off at every border post. We witness the countless manoeuvres that punctuate the journey, the changes of locomotive on entering each country crossed and, in a spectacular sequence shot day-for-night, the replacement of the bogies at the Russian border, owing to the different track gauge on Soviet territory, which means lifting the entire set of carriages, passengers and all, with powerful jacks. “It is here that Nagel-

mackers’s dream is realised,” says the *voice-over*: “Paris to Moscow without leaving one’s carriage.” Of the ten or so sleeping cars that left Paris, only one will go all the way to Moscow.

Born at almost the same time as the *Nord Express*, the cinema shares with the train a long common history that Rob Rombout’s film inevitably inherits. The film is born of the union of two machines: the train, which carries its travellers through the real world and invites them to contemplate the landscape unrolling before their eyes, and the cinema, which invites its viewers to travel in images. Travellers and viewers alike are passengers who have set out to discover an unknown world. The idea that the train journey is a spectacle to be watched on the screen of the compartment window was applied to the *moving panoramas*, a nineteenth-century fairground attraction, in which one took a seat in a mock railway carriage and discovered through its window landscapes painted on a long canvas scrolling past at the speed of a train¹. In fiction films, the train journey lends itself to a multitude of narrative possibilities, combining the wide-open spaces outside with the closed world within and the dramatic tension generated by the protagonists’ inability to leave the moving train. Many films telling stories of railwaymen have exploited every motif offered by this fantastical universe, in which Promethean heroes, their faces blackened by smoke, must master the power of machines hurtling at full steam along the rails. The pursuit of a train, the

1. This device can be seen in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, by Max Ophüls (1948). See on this subject the richly documented study by Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion. Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2013.

seizing of its controls, fights on the roofs of the carriages and of course railway disasters have supplied the scripts of action films with breathless incident. The modern romantics, by contrast, the likes of David Lean, Wim Wenders, Alain Robbe-Grillet or Jerzy Kawalerowicz, have made the train, and the stations where characters cross paths, the privileged settings of fleeting encounters and impossible loves. *Nord Express* follows in the wake of this long genealogy of films, which Rob Rombout remembers, now and then giving the cinephile a knowing wink. He restages the now classic shot of the train passing over the camera that Vertov had filmed in 1929 for *Man with a Movie Camera*. In Berlin, he films the train passing close to the Victory Column from which the angels of Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* watch the mortals live.

Most of the train shots produce an effect of déjà vu. The long convoy filmed from a compartment window, the iron bridges it crosses, the trains running at the same speed along a parallel track, the rails criss-crossing in the marshalling yards, the level crossings, the dining cars, the engine drivers, the signalmen in their control towers, the customs officers checking travel papers and of course the travellers asleep or smoking a cigarette in the corridor, all these images reawaken the memory of similar shots filmed by Gance (*La Roue*, 1921), Renoir (*La Bête humaine*, 1938), Hitchcock (*North by Northwest*, 1959), Aldrich (*Emperor of the North*, 1973), Lumet (*Murder on the Orient Express*, 1974) or Kawalerowicz in his splendid *Night Train* (1959).

To board the *Nord Express* is to take the train of history, and not only that of the cinema. From the outset, the film hooks archive sequences onto the thread of its journey: old advertisements for the sleeping cars, newsreels or communist propaganda films that relate, more or less directly, to the history of the *Nord Express*





and of the countries it crosses. These black-and-white archive images enter into dialogue with the colour images of the present: a steward brings bed linen into a compartment, but it is another who, in the 1930s, makes up the berth. We see once again the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, under the guard of soldiers and before the dumbfounded eyes of Berliners waving to their relatives who had stayed on the other side. In 1990, the Wall is still standing despite having been opened a few months earlier. A few residents or passing tourists try to chisel pieces off it. A child hops about on the concrete blocks that hide the Brandenburg Gate. The city is not yet reunified and the train crosses the vast empty expanse that cuts it in two. The GDR still exists, and with it all the signs of a regime bled dry. One could say of this train crossing the Iron Curtain what one reads in a famous intertitle of *Nosferatu*: “Beyond the bridge, the phantoms came to meet him.”

A menu bearing the Mitropa² name introduces an advertising sequence showing the dining car around 1935. Every table is occupied by families of elegant travellers. In 1990, the dining car is almost deserted. Its design, reworked in the 1950s, has come to look dated. The plates marked “Mitropa” await travellers who are unlikely to come. A compartment door left open bangs with

every jolt of the train. The further east the train advances, the more dilapidated it becomes and the less comfortable. Past the Polish border, the dining car is no more

2. Mitropa (an abbreviation of Mittel Europa) was a German sleeping-car company founded during the First World War, at a time when the French CIWL was no longer in a position to operate on German territory. Under the Nazi regime, its network extended across the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. After 1945, Mitropa became an East German company that served the “communist” countries. Still active in 1990, the company was restructured in 2002, reducing its activities to catering alone. The name disappeared in 2006 following the integration of the company into a German group.

than a canteen where one goes to fetch one's meal from the bar. On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Treaty of Friendship between Poland and the USSR, the Polish workers of the Stalin factory in Poznań had built a train which they presented as a gift to their Russian big brother. The black-and-white film shows the interior of a carriage, the very same one that, almost empty, still runs on the Paris–Moscow line. The gigantic Warsaw station, inaugurated with great pomp by Edward Gierek, general secretary of the party, is now plastered with advertisements for major German brands. A Lada Samara fresh from the factory is on display in the middle of the vast concourse, amid general indifference. The Polish newsreel devoted to the station's inauguration in 1975 celebrates “a symbol of Poland's victory”, a phrase which, fifteen years later and a few months after the fall of the communist government, takes on an altogether different meaning. From these many journeys back and forth in time there emerges a strong impression of obsolescence: apart from a few advertising hoardings, nothing has changed in decades. Bundled up in her yellow parka, the crossing keeper at Nemchinovska scrapes away the snow packed onto the rails. Her whistle is frozen. From the window of her wooden hut, she waves a yellow baton to signal to the driver of the passing train. Genadi, shaken about in his rattling cab, will in all likelihood not have the chance to drive a new locomotive before his retirement, a few years from now. On the outskirts of Moscow, history is also written on the wooden façade of the tiny station of Fili, where a commemorative plaque recalls that there, in 1812, Napoleon's army was encircled by General Kutuzov. History has recorded of the Battle of Borodino that it was neither a victory nor a defeat. In 1990, barely a few months after the end of communism in Poland and the fall of the Berlin Wall, the history of this part of Europe is every bit as uncertain. Nothing in this film announces that this history is undergoing its greatest upheaval in nearly half a century. Thirty years after it was made, Rob Rombout's film has acquired an undeniable historical added value: it has itself become an archive film.

The great History of the past alternates with the small one, that of the travellers and of the railway employees who recount a few pages from their lives. Boris is a Ukrainian mechanic who has been to visit his daughter, whose Volkswagen had broken down. He spent the three weeks of his stay repairing the engine of this car, of which there are not many to be found in Ukraine [QR3]. Stanislaw will be retiring three days later, happy that someone is taking over his job in the control tower of a Polish railway station. His pension is well deserved, because he has worked hard. At nightfall, he leaves his post and crosses the tracks, filmed in semi-superimposition, like a ghost. The Russian rockers of the band Belie Rosi (“White Roses”) give charity concerts for orphans or for the soldiers wounded in Afghanistan. They sing a *cappella* a beautiful and deeply melancholy song of farewell, while a soldier in uniform and other passengers with sad eyes gaze out at the snow-covered landscape [QR6].



The train running along its rails under the eye of the signalmen who set its direction then takes on a symbolic dimension. It expresses the destiny of all these people who are compelled to move forward along a track they have not always chosen. Théodore, an African student, did not choose to go and study medicine in Moscow. He was awarded a grant, but it

was the Cameroonian state that sent him to the USSR, where he is to spend a year learning Russian, followed by seven years of medicine. Galina, the Russian carriage attendant, has no future at all: "If I complain, I'm fired. No other prospects... because I'm a woman!" Her husband, who is a member of the party, could travel to the capitalist countries, but because his wife works with him and because couples are not allowed to cross the borders, this is forbidden to him. For him to get a promotion, she would have to give up her job and stay at home. Beside her, on the compartment's folding table, three tulips nod their heads in a bottle. "I have a dream: to grow flowers. [...] It is such a joy to see flowers in a vase. You can look at them, smell their scent. My husband knows my weakness, which is why I always have a few flowers at home or at work. That is my dream: flowers, flowers, flowers. Perhaps at the end of my life my dream will come true." A fade makes her disappear from the image; only the flowers of her dream still sway, melancholically, in front of the window.

Besides these travellers who seem to have been caught in the trap of a fate they endure, the film catches others unawares through doors and windows. Multiple frames within the frame help to confine them still further within this train that carries them but from which they cannot get out. Weariness can be read on their faces during the long periods of waiting, at border posts or during manoeuvres, which heightens even further the pessimism that pervades the atmosphere of the film.

Train journeys have often fascinated writers. Nabokov, in his childhood memoirs, describes the journey from Saint Petersburg to Paris aboard the *Nord Express*, as he made it in 1909, at the age of ten:

"It was at night, however, that the Compagnie internationale des wagons-lits et des Grands Express européens did justice to the magic of its name. From my berth below my brother's (was he asleep? was he really there?), in the half-darkness of our compartment, I observed things, and details of those things, and shadows, and portions of shadows moving circumspectly here and there and going nowhere. The woodwork creaked and crackled. Near the door that led to the WC, a vague garment hanging on a peg and, higher

up, the tassel of the blue bivalvular night light swung in rhythm. It was difficult to correlate these hesitant, furtive and hooded approaches with the impetuous rush of the night outside, but I knew it to be rushing past, streaked with sparks, illegible³.”

Beneath his “hooded” gaze, all that appears to the young Nabokov’s eyes are things, details of those things, shadows and sounds – in short, the singularly strange atmosphere of a train rolling through “the impetuous rush of the night outside”. Rob Rombout proceeds in just the same way: like the writer, he seeks to “correlate” the small things within and the great things without, and he too proves himself sensitive to “the magic” of this once prestigious train which is now no more than a shadow of its former self.

3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Autres rivages. Souvenirs* (1947), trans. Yvonne Davet, Paris, Gallimard, “Du monde entier”, 1961, p. 145–146.



COMMENTS

❑ The whole film, the whole journey is steeped in the history of the twentieth century. I added a dated, anachronistic voice – a slightly ponderous *voice-over* commentary, like those of the educational films of the 1950s. It underlines the weight of History.

❑ The title, straight away, sets you dreaming a little, even if it isn't the *Orient-Express* but a train conceived by Nagelmackers, a banker from Liège, to link Lisbon to Saint Petersburg at the very beginning of the twentieth century, at a time when the track gauge changed between Spain and France, and then again at Brest-Litovsk on the Russian border. As that project came to nothing, he created the Paris–Saint Petersburg train, then the Paris–Moscow. In 1896 the journey took forty-eight hours. And a hundred years later... forty-seven. This train has only stopped running twice, because of the two wars; it has hardly increased its speed in a hundred years, and it keeps on running. Whether or not there are any passengers. As long as there's no war. It's a kind of fossil train. With a life of its own. That fascinates me. Whatever happens – the war, the Berlin Wall, its fall – it carries on.

And on the train there are little characters, people with no plans, ordinary people, nothing special about them, but magnificent, and who always reach a conclusion.

❑ I had written a script with Christian Janssens; I wanted to produce a blend of fiction and documentary. And the German and Belgian (RTBF) television channels gave me enough to make a pilot film, which was not to be shown in public. I was entitled to five days of shooting, with a large crew, for a fifteen-minute film. It was this pilot that enabled me to find a style. It was half fiction, with characters, an actress, and half documentary.

The pilot film explains the project a little, and shows a few scenes of the journey by train between Paris and East Germany. There are people in a carriage, a limited space, a limited time... Nobody goes all the way to Moscow.

❑ I wanted to set myself apart from the fashion of the time for filming everything in motion, and to shoot nothing but fixed shots, with cranes, in Paris, Berlin and Moscow. It was only in Paris, at the Gare du Nord, that we had to pay, and since there were more than five of us in the crew, we paid the hire rate charged for a fiction film... far higher than for a documentary.

❑ In Berlin, I was given to understand that a crane was out of the question in the Eastern bloc countries: stations and trains were "classified". To film beyond the Wall, we would have had to do it hand-held. But between my location scouting and the moment we were able to start shooting, the Wall came down. It was total anarchy, and we were even able to do more than we had planned.

❑ The border with East Berlin is a kind of *no man's land* roughly the width of a football pitch, which you travel along for twenty kilometres, through the centre of the city, between two walls.

We were able to fix the camera to the locomotive, and "the viewer" crosses the Wall (for the first time); that was special...

❑ I practise a particular kind of interview with the characters: someone talks, develops an idea, then talks about something else before coming back to what they said at first. The first traveller is returning from Belgium, where he went to see his niece. He had never been to the West. We spotted him, we talked with him. He tells an anecdote.

There is also a Cameroonian student on his way to study in Moscow. And finally the lady, a carriage attendant. In that interview it's the setting that matters, the tulips in the bottle... First we see the flower moving in a fixed frame. The flower moves, so does the outside. When you film on a train, on a ship, either the director moves with the movement, or he stays fixed and then the character moves with the movements of the train, of the ship. In that case, the viewer has to think in order to understand why the character is moving.

❑ I used archive footage, sequences on the train and sequences shot outdoors. I had

prepared a shooting schedule on the basis of the location scouting (after a first journey without a camera, to take notes), with fall-back solutions in case of need – as a general rule, I anticipate everything that could go wrong.

After my scouting journey, there was a Paris–Warsaw journey, then an Ostend–Moscow one, then a third journey, by car this time, following the tracks. It was during this third journey that the exterior shots were filmed.

□ By the time of the second journey, we had viewed the rushes from the first; there were shots to redo...

Keeping continuity isn't always easy.

□ On screen, the train always travels from left to right, because on every map Moscow is on the right. But one day, at the moment of shooting, it started to rain and we missed the train going past. We either had to wait for the next one, the following day, or cross the tracks and film the train coming from Moscow. Which is what we did, hoping the viewer wouldn't notice that it was a different train, going the other way.

CREDITS

Screenplay: Rob Rombout & Christian Janssens.

Camera: Louis-Philippe Capelle.

Sound: Olivier Struye, Paul Heymans.

Assistant director: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.

Camera assistant: Marc Ridley.

Cast: Elena Satchkova, Boris Alexandrovitch, Nicolai Gorshkov.

Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.

Voice: Pierre Laroche.

Mix: Jacques Clisse.

Original music: Piotr Hertel.

Production manager: Jean-Philippe Laroche.

Production assistant: Christiane Philippe.

Executive producer: Marilyn Watelet.

Archive research: Pierre Malchair, Anne Fourny.

Archive footage: Pathé–Gaumont, Paris –

Bundesarchiv, Koblenz – USIS, Bonn –

Stichting Nederlands Filmmuseum,

Amsterdam – Transit Film Gesellschaft MbH,

Munich – Service photographique de la force

terrestre, Brussels – Ministère de l'Éducation

nationale, Brussels – RTBF, Brussels –

Wytwórnia Filmów Dokumentalnych,

Warsaw.

Co-production: Paradise Films – Triangle 7 –

RTBF (Carré noir) – CAC-CICV Montbéliard –

Wallonie Image Production, with the

participation of the Ministère de la

Communauté française de Belgique.

Format: Beta-SP. Colour and black and white.

Running time: 58 minutes.











