

TRANSATLANTIQUE, QUEEN ELIZABETH 2 / 1992

A floating city

After the *railroad movie* that was *Nord Express*, Rob Rombout takes up and develops the very same narrative device in order to film the voyage from Southampton to New York aboard the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, the last of the transatlantic liners and, at the time, the largest ship in the world. This *sea movie* describes life on board over the five days that the crossing lasts and lends an ear to the personal stories of a few of the passengers and crew members.

Like the famous *Great Eastern*, the first legendary liner, on which Jules Verne himself had embarked in 1867 for a voyage that inspired his novel *A Floating City*, the *Queen Elizabeth 2* is a microcosm that is highly representative of the contemporary world, marked as it is by immeasurable social inequalities.



An officer recounts that in the merchant navy there has always been a friendly rivalry between the deck officers and the engineers. The chief engineer would draw an imaginary line separating the two categories. "They called this situation 'water and oil', because water and oil never mix. It was impossible to run a ship on such a basis, since the tasks of the engineers and the officers are intertwined." On the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, the line between water and oil is very real. It is a horizontal line, one that cuts the ship in two: above, the officers and 1,800 wealthy passengers; below, the porters, the cleaning women, the Filipino cooks, the Chinese laundrymen, the stewards who change the time on every one of the clocks each time a meridian is crossed and who slip the newspapers under the doors of the cabins, the circus artists who are rehearsing the evening show, the painters who, in port just as at sea, are forever repainting the immense vessel. If the *Queen Elizabeth 2* is a floating city, that city might very well be called *Metropolis*: upstairs they dance, downstairs they work. The film does not forget the port workers, the staff of the control towers, the crane operators and the dockers. Beside them, on the quayside, a small orchestra salutes the departure of the liner. The solemnity is included in the price of the voyage.



The cinematic form Rob Rombout chooses to express this social dichotomy is a classic one: parallel editing. It asserts itself from the very start of the film, with the embarkation of the passengers, who are welcomed by the officers and have their photograph taken while their heavy suitcases arrive on the conveyor belt and are carried off by anonymous porters.

In the restaurant, a ship's officer and his Japanese wife are seated at the table the wine waiter has just laid. Meanwhile, in the galleys, fillets of raw salmon are being prepared, with a layer of cream and caviar. The Filipino chef talks about the customers who criticise everything (including one passenger who found that the fish tasted too much of fish!).

Setsuya, the Japanese wife, tells how she met her husband: the company she worked for had chartered the ship. While she speaks, they are served the salmon we saw being prepared in the galley. This detail, to which the alternation of the two scenes has drawn the viewer's attention, appears to be a coincidence. Which of course it is not: it is Rob Rombout's meticulously prepared *mise en scène* that made it possible. By creating false coincidences, the filmmaker sets side by side in his film social situations that are far apart in reality, weaves threads between the top and the bottom of the social pyramid, associates the Filipino cooks with the liner's passengers and officers and so underlines, by uniting them through editing, everything that separates them in life. Creating coincidences, one of the filmmaker's fundamental choices in most of his films, is not the aesthetic whim of a *deus ex machina* intended to assert his hold over the real. It is, on the contrary, the expression of his vision of the world, in which there is no such thing as chance.

Destiny is one of the great recurring themes of Rob Rombout's cinema. In *Nord Express* as in *Transatlantique*, *Queen Elizabeth 2*, and later in *Les Passagers de l'Alsace*, destiny finds expression through the metaphor of the means of transport: the train running on its rails, the ship whose trajectory we follow in superimposition on a nautical chart, impose their itinerary on their passengers. Destiny presupposes a continuity that nothing deflects from its course. The captain himself bears witness to it: his father, who is travelling with him, commanded the ship before him and directed its construction. But destiny, for Rombout, is not a supernatural force that would mysteriously guide the existence of individuals. Destiny is the product of a social structure from which it is difficult to escape. One

need only listen to the testimonies. Mr and Mrs Hammonds are regulars. Seated in a deckchair, wrapped up in a blanket, she beneath her headscarf, he beneath a handsome yellow cap, they remember their first voyage, in 1937: “A great many ships were crossing the Atlantic, so that there were very few passengers aboard them. [...] In those days there was no entertainment. You had to keep yourself occupied on your own, because nothing was organised. You could play ping-pong on deck. You went walking, you read. The valet prepared your bath and checked its temperature. Today you have to do it yourself. We were so young and so innocent. We had no idea of how lucky we were. We were swimming in luxury. We were not able to appreciate those moments at their true worth [QR7].” It is not only money and a taste for luxury that determine the destiny of individuals; there is also one’s origin, as a member of the Filipino crew testifies: “Some people, and especially the British, don’t like the Filipinos being part of their group. But we work together. When they go ashore, we stay on the ship. It would never occur to them to invite us to join them.” Between those at the top and those at the bottom, the film pauses on an intermediate character, the *social director* Andrew Graham, always smiling, and without having to force himself, “because he loves his job”. Of modest origins, born into a family of nine children, he cannot remember ever having owned a pair of shoes before the age of 10. He left school at the age of 14 to go to work. His parents died when he was 26 years old. He does not envy the rich, because, as he says, “everything I own, I owe to myself. I don’t believe in luck. I think you make it yourself. You are the master of your own destiny and you can become whatever you want”.

The dialectic of destiny and freedom is not merely the subject matter of the testimonies. It governs the very structure of the film, as is magnificently illustrated by a long sequence that alternates three narrative lines, each of them centred on one character. The first of them, Ana Moretic, is a Yugoslav chambermaid whose country, at the time when the film was being shot in 1992, is in the grip of a dreadful war. She is working on this ship because she cannot go back to Yugoslavia on account of the war and because she cannot work in Great Britain because she is Yugoslav. She has no choice in the matter. The ship, once again, as a metonymy for her destiny as a woman in exile. At the very start of the sequence, she receives a telephone call from a passenger, Mrs Ann Watson, who asks her to have her dress laundered. While she does the cleaning in a cabin, we hear her in *voice-over*, talking about her dreams: “I dream of home. I dreamt of it the day before yesterday, last night, this afternoon. I dream of my home town, I see myself working in my house and going into the old town. I see myself in the very place where the fighting is now going on.” [QR8] The camera lingers on the bluish night that envelops the ship. On the lower decks, Chinese laundrymen wash and iron a blue dress, then wrap it up in plastic. While they are working, the passengers dance beneath the bluish glass roof of the ballroom. A second character, the chief engineer Steven Hare, who is filmed in a reverse tracking shot,

inspects the engine room and the propeller shaft. “Most passengers are completely unaware of the responsibilities you have on board a ship: they think they are in a hotel,” he says in *voice-over*. The following shot shows three women doing aqua aerobics in the pool. Steven Hare talks about his very first voyage by ship, at the age of five, which determined the course of his life. Ever since then, he has had “the sea in his blood”. Ana, also filmed in a reverse tracking shot, walks down a corridor carrying the blue dress wrapped in its transparent plastic. In the pool, the women carry on with their gymnastics. Over a shot showing the woman who leads the aquatic exercises appears, as a caption, the name of Mrs Ann Watson, the third character. Ana continues on her way along the corridor, holding Mrs Watson’s blue dress. Over fresh images of the pool, Ana recounts in *voice-over* that she had polio at the age of five, an illness which paralysed her vocal cords. When she recovered her voice, she never again stopped talking, singing and reciting poems. On the deck, where the painters pursue their patient labour, Mrs Watson, in her beautiful blue dress, performs a song *a cappella*, while the bow of the ship cleaves the waves [QR11].



It is at the end of the sequence that the viewer grasps the logic of its construction, whose guiding (red) thread is traced by the blue dress. It entwines the destinies of three characters who, in reality, do not know one another. But the chambermaid and the chief engineer are in the service of the passenger, who lives on the ship as in a luxury hotel. Ana Moretic, condemned to live in exile on a liner, submits to her destiny, unlike Steven Hare, who, having “the sea in his blood”, has chosen his. Beyond the alternation of characters, other devices cement this montage: Ana’s *voice-over* on the images of the pool, the blue of the dress, of the night and of the ballroom, the reverse tracking shot accompanying Ana and the chief engineer, and finally the song Mrs Watson strikes up, whereas Ana suffered a paralysis of the vocal cords. By braiding the threads of these individual

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stories in this way, Rombout fixes the destiny of his characters even more firmly, as a fiction screenwriter does with his own. It is he, of course, who chose the motif of the blue dress to link Ana and Mrs Watson, who asked the Chinese laundrymen to wash and iron it, then Ana to bring it to Mrs Watson and finally the latter to put it on for the scene sung on deck. It is hardly surprising, then, that Ana, in *voice-over*, should speak in terms that confirm the meaning of the sequence: “I believe deeply in predestination. If we had to stay at home for fear that something might happen to us, we would never do anything any more. If it is your destiny to die in such and such a year, you will die that year.” Words that answer a question we have not heard but which, we can well guess, steered the chambermaid’s discourse in a direction that suited the filmmaker. Ana feels free to do as she pleases, since her destiny is written in any case. To hear her tell it, predestination is the guarantee of her freedom. A freedom limited to the dark corridors she walks along to carry the dress of Mrs Watson, who, on the ship’s deck and under a resplendent sun, sings in her place.

Beneath its guise of a nautical epic aboard the largest ship in the world, the film questions the human condition. At the same time, its highly directive *mise en scène* imposes on its protagonists a performance, actions, a costume and even a discourse that suit what its author wants to express. In doing so, he himself becomes the master of his characters’ destiny, an all-powerful master who leaves nothing to chance. This mastery is expressed visually in each of the film’s shots, in their composition and their colours, which bring out the architectural beauty of the liner against a backdrop of sky and ocean, by day as by night.

Louis-Philippe Capelle’s camera is attuned to the architecture of the ship, whose symmetry is brought out by skilfully composed shots, filmed with a wide-angle lens. The tiered decks, the funnel, the stairwells, the lounges, the windows or the corridors are all framed so as to throw into relief the architectural forms of the vessel. The camera favours orthogonal lines parallel to the edges of the frame, creates frames within the frame, centres itself on the circle of a porthole or a dial, accentuates the depth of field through a bold point of view, as in the fine shots of the sailors casting off the mooring lines. When he films the liner from a helicopter (a recurring device in his films), Rombout asks the pilot to position himself in the ship’s wake, once again composing a symmetrical image. The filmmaker appropriates a whole body of imagery specific to the maritime world: the bow cleaving the waves, the liner’s slender prow seen from the sea recall a famous poster by Cassandre or certain shots from Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin*. The shots of the officers on the bridge, filmed with a long lens to flatten the perspective, look as if they had come straight out of a Hollywood film.



The meticulous composition of the shots also helps to delineate the compartmentalisation of social space. It makes visible the order of things, as powerful and immutable as destiny. The briefing of the hotel managers is filmed from above, along the axis of the table. The same elevated point of view is adopted to film the strict organisation of work in the galleys, signified by the almost authoritarian posture of the camera placed above the long tables on which are lined up the plates that the Filipino cooks are garnishing. On deck, wrapped in their blanket, the Hammonds have taken their place in a deckchair that Rombout had positioned exactly on the ship's axis. While they talk about their first voyage in 1937, a shot shows the entrance to two adjoining cabins whose doors stand open. The camera, set on the axis of the partition, composes a perfectly symmetrical mirror shot. A steward enters the left-hand cabin, sets down a basket of fruit, comes out again, then goes into the right-hand one to set down a second. His mechanical gait matches the architecture of the place and confirms his submission to the social order from which the Hammonds are able to benefit.

The highly elaborate mise en scène that governs the positions and gestures of the characters, and the emphatic graphic quality of the images do not let the film drift into gratuitous formalism. On the contrary, they sustain the dominant idea that structures it. The film nonetheless remains a documentary describing a certain state of affairs, without for all that envisaging the possibility that it might change. It is up to each viewer to see what he or she is willing to see. One will rejoice that order reigns on the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, another will deplore it. But both will have seen it, and that is all one asks of cinema.



COMMENTS

❑ After *Nord Express*, we wondered what else we could do, and someone suggested: a ship. Yes, but then, the biggest ship in the world! And we did it...

The *Queen Elizabeth 2*, a transatlantic liner, 1,100 crew members, 1,800 passengers, a five-day voyage, at 50 km/h, from Southampton to New York... another enclosed space.

❑ First, we had to find money for a film without a clearly defined line of enquiry – which may seem a bit of a luxury.

Then we had to negotiate the permits: a ship is an enclosed, private place.

Fortunately, the co-writer and producer Jean-Philippe Laroche and I were able to make a scouting trip, during which I took photographs. From there we drew up a kind of script, not really a *storyboard*, but picture boards, which give a good idea of the atmosphere that the film would have, and of the editing.

❑ I shot in Super 16, with roughly the same crew as for *Nord Express*, eight people. Shooting on Super 16 mm is a severe constraint, because you can't shoot thousands of metres of film stock and then throw away whatever doesn't work.

The number of shooting days was also limited by the length of the voyage.

❑ With film stock, there's no way to check immediately what you've shot. Fortunately there was the return trip and, between the two crossings, four days docked in New York. We used them to have the rushes developed and to view them. On the way back we were able to make up for the mistakes; we mixed the two voyages in the edit.

What's more, during the four days in New York between the outward and return trips, we filmed the departures and arrivals from the control tower.

❑ During the editing period, we did some shooting from a helicopter. Often, helicopter shots are very demonstrative... you circle round and round the object. I opted for

static shots (*top shot, side shot, front shot*), a bit the way a bird at rest (or God) would see the ship. Shots without movement are very difficult from a helicopter: the pilot has to manage the wind, the turbulence... The director of photography Louis-Philippe Capelle concentrated on the image and I guided the pilot.

❑ The helicopter images are used superimposed on charts made for the film from existing charts, by adapting them. It's fairly expensive – for a purely aesthetic effect. When it comes to aesthetic choices, you have to be uncompromising.

❑ Another spectacular shot took time to set up.

The ship is on the open sea, the viewer sees the bow head-on, cleaving the waves. The camera therefore had to be in front of the ship. We had to build a tubular structure that would jut out beyond the prow.

The captain was not willing; the operation was turning out to be too dangerous. I explained to him that one of the camera assistants, Marc Ridley, was a former para-commando, used to danger.

In the end, after much insistence, he gave in: "OK, but if someone falls in the water, I'm not doing anything; he'll die of cold or be eaten by the fish before the ship stops." I replied that I had three camera operators... so we could afford to lose one.

❑ During the scouting, I had noticed that the ship was an exact replica of English society, a static world where everyone has their place, their role, and with no real social mobility. There are two parallel stairwells, the lifts are off-limits to staff... I wanted to translate that into symmetrical shots: everyone in their place... that's how it is and that's how it will always be.

❑ Travelling with us were the members of a rock band, The Cure (they're afraid of flying and travel by ship). They are filmed on the ship's upper deck. The higher up you are on the ship, the more important you are.

At the very bottom are those who never see daylight, Filipinos for the most part.

The passengers come across the officers (all British), but not the staff; the officers, all English, meet both the staff and the passengers. At every level there is segregation: between the Filipinos and the Anglo-Saxons, between the deck officers and the engineers, between the Chinese and the Filipino staff. With editing you can jump from one world to another, which makes it possible to underline each person's social class.

❑ We had negotiated free access everywhere. Only the staff bar remained off-limits to us – we went in there anyway: you were walking in beer in there...

Of course, the company that owns the ship did not want certain images.

The Filipinos talking about their very harsh working conditions, that got through, but the sequence in which you see them cutting meat with their bare hands, without gloves, was cut!

❑ As with *Nord Express*, I couldn't predict who the passengers would be or which characters I would be confronted with. On the *Queen Elizabeth 2*, I developed the portraits further, and the characters sometimes come back, several times over.

There are *voice-overs* and on-screen voices. In the cabins, without a camera, we conducted interviews with sound only (*voice-over*): the quality is excellent and the content goes deeper. There is also an on-screen voice, a more conventional interview, with picture; in the edit, the two voices blend.

❑ On the scouting trip, on arriving in New York, the weather was very fine, luminous. I had imagined what would need to be done. But on the day of the shoot, the city was shrouded in fog. I hesitated, then decided it was better that way, more interesting. We shot from the wheelhouse, with a tripod. Exceptionally, a second camera films the front of the ship: with a single camera we wouldn't have had enough time to get from one point to the other. Filming the departure or arrival of a ship (or a train) is always tricky, and improvisation is impossible.

CREDITS

Screenplay: Rob Rombout and Jean-Philippe Laroche.

Director of photography: Louis-Philippe Capelle.

Camera assistant and grip: Marc Ridley.

Assistant director and script supervisor: Catherine Piette.

Sound engineer: Paul Heymans.

Sound recording and sound design: Philippe Sellier.

Production assistant and unit manager: Alain Bonnet.

Production coordinator for RTBF: Chantal Bournonville.

RTBF coordination: Micheline Leblud.

Editing: Adriana Moreira de Oliveira.

Mix: Jacques Clisse.

Original music: Jean-Christophe Renault, performed by Steve Houben (saxophone and flute), Éric Mathot (double bass) and Jean-Christophe Renault (piano).

Executive producer: Jean-Philippe Laroche.

Associate producers: André Darteville, Jacques Laurent, Christine Pireaux, together with Erik Pertz.

Production: Nota Bene.

Co-production: RTBF – BRTN – Wallonie Image Production.

With the support of the Fonds télévisuel de la Communauté française de Belgique and Télévision suisse romande.

Format: Fuji colour Super 16 mm film.

Running time: 58 minutes.















