

Movies and Trains

Luc Béal

Introduction

Trains were playing roles in movies as soon as the first movie was shot by the Lumiere brothers. Although no one will ever arrive at a definitive answer about who invented cinema (probably because no single person was responsible), Louis Lumiere (1864–1948) has one of the strongest claims because he (and his brother Auguste (1862–1954)) invented the *cinematographe*—a machine that combined the functions of camera and projector and was able to project films onto a screen for an audience. The invention was patented on 13 February 1895 and a programme of short films directed and photographed by Louis was first unveiled to the public on 28 December 1895—a date that many historians claim as the birthday of cinema as we know it (<http://us.imdb.com/>).

The first railway lines had been constructed some 50 years earlier in England and in 1827 in France. Right from the start, these two revolutionary technologies have had an intermingled history and the early trains even became film stars (*L'Arrivée d'un train—la Ciotat*, 1895). Over the following 100 years of filmmaking, trains have been used by various directors with various degrees of technical mastery and artistic ambition. Of course, trains are universally associated with particular movie genres like the American (or Italian) western and in this article, I would like to make a few observations about the significance of trains and railways in world cinema.

Trains as Break with Past

In Japan, trains are part of daily life in the same way that automobiles are profoundly associated with American culture and lifestyle. Any Japanese director will have countless memories

associated with trains, and for older directors like Yasujiro Ozu (1903–63) and Keisuke Kinoshita (1912–98), trains and railways are the privileged symbols of the modernization of Japan. Quite interestingly, the train is used to represent the frontier between the Japan of childhood and of adulthood. Stephen Dodd (1993) explains that in Japanese culture, the railway can be symbolized as the break between the *furusato* (home town) or the place that one originates from and that often carries strong emotional overtones, and the modern city, where adults go to study and work. The railway therefore establishes a link between the two worlds of childhood innocence and the adult world full of promise, mystery and anxiety.

Like in Federico Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (*Spivs*, 1953) where the hero leaves his friends to go to the big city by train, Kinoshita's *Karumen kokyo ni kaeru* (*Carmen Comes Home*, 1951) obviously jubilates in filming a local farming community shocked by the behaviour of a stripper returning by train to her rural origins. Similarly, in *Tokyo monogatari* (*Tokyo Story*, 1953), Ozu uses trains to formally structure the movie in order to represent the repeated trips from the provinces to the capital. Toson Shimazaki describes the emotions that urban life and the railway could evoke: *'Ueno! Ueno!' The platform attendant's voice was lost in a confusion of noise. I drew up to my elder brother and as we walked, we were swept along on human waves. The clatter of clogs, cries of every kind, the train whistles and beams of light that stuck in your eyes—bewildered by all these things, I was terrified I might have set foot in Hell* (*Mita Bungaku*, June 1911).

While Kinoshita and Ozu acknowledged the beneficial effects of urbanization and modernization, they could not help underlining the destructive impact on family and social structures. In Juzo Itami's *Tampopo* (*Dandelion*, 1986), the

alienation of an urban housewife is eloquently shown when the agonizing woman unconsciously leaves her bed to prepare dinner for her sons and husband. She finally drops dead as a screeching commuter train passes her tiny apartment—like a leviathan snake, the train eats up humans.

But trains also represent a technical challenge to filmmaking; the limited inner space and speed of moving trains challenge the creativity of the director and actors.

Filming Trains—A Technical Challenge

An early example of the technical achievement of filming trains is *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) by Edwin Porter (1869–1941). The technical limitations at the time (film speed, camera weight) did not allow shooting inside trains, nor was it possible to capture fast action sequences on film. Therefore, the director had to innovate, particularly with montage technique, in order to give to the audience the *impression* of action. At the time, most of the films shown to the public were mere documentaries, with very limited camera angles. They were hardly fiction. When Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* was shown, audiences were reported as panicking and trying to escape from the theatre during the sequence where bandits shoot at the camera! Decades later, as film techniques were improved, actors could perform outstanding action sequences, like Sean Connery walking on the roof of a train in Victorian England (Michael Crichton's *The First Great Train Robbery*, 1979), or Jean-Paul Belmondo in Henri Verneuil's *Peur sur la Ville* (*The Night Caller*, 1975) exploring the Paris subway in a rather unusual way! Ultimately, Andrei Konchalovsky's *Runaway Train* (1985) is probably the best example of a train movie not only showing breathtaking action scenes, but also using



Sean Connery in *The First Great Train Robbery*, 1979, Michael Crichton

(Archive Photos/APL)

an out-of-control runaway train as a metaphor of the hopeless situation of two escaped convicts.

Progressively, the increased technical virtuosity allowed extensive use of places and symbols related to railways like the train station in Vittorio De Sica's *Stazione Termini* (*Indiscretion of an American Wife*, 1953) and in Sam Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1972) and Walter Salles' *Central do Brasil* (*Central Station*, 1998), for the surrealistic fight at the beginning of Seijun Suzuki's *Tokyo Nagaremono* (*Tokyo Drifter*, 1966), and inside a train in Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951). In 1952, when Fred Zinnemann (1907–97) made *High Noon* with Gary Cooper (1901–61) and Grace Kelly (1929–82), he found the ultimate way to create suspense with a train—by almost not showing it! The movie's time and its structure are exclusively oriented towards the arrival on the noon train of a gangster coming to kill the sheriff (played by Gary Cooper). The hero finally wins but the suspense is quite tense.

Some directors not only considered trains and railway as powerful tools for expressing metaphors or for building an action scene, some thought that using



Jon Voigt, Rebecca DeMornay and Eric Roberts in *Runaway Train*, 1985, Andrei Konchalovsky

(Archive Photos/APL)

trains to bring the film crew to the location would have interesting results.

Experimenting with Trains

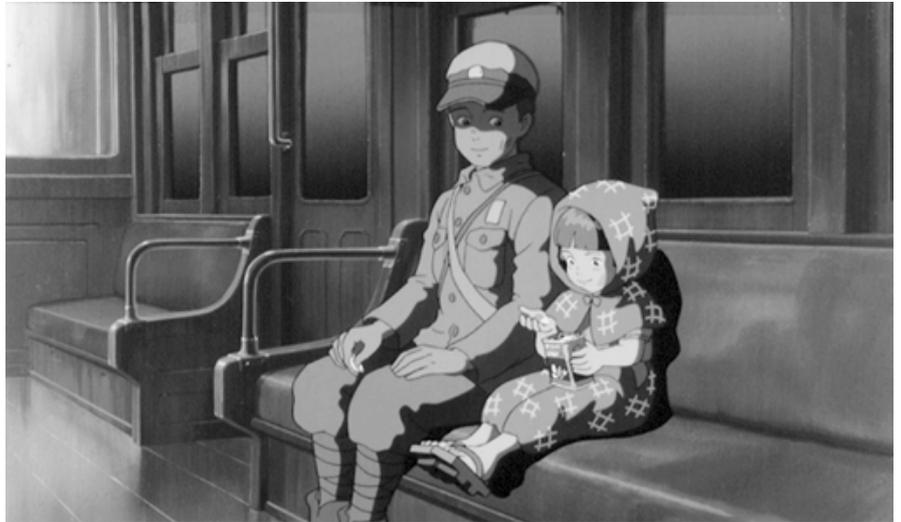
At the beginning of his career, the Russian director Aleksandr Medvedkin (1900–89) worked for the Communist Party and directed several propaganda movies, especially his masterpiece *Schastiye* (*Happiness*, 1932). In 1932, he started an experiment called *Cinetrain*. The idea was to produce propaganda movies by travelling throughout the USSR and by using the public as actors. The crew and equipment travelled on a chartered train. In the 1992 TV documentary *Le Tombeau d'Alexandre* (*The Last Bolshevik*), French director Chris Marker shows extensive footage of this extraordinary experience. With Medvedkin, the train was not only a vector of breaking with the past, it literally breaks down the boundary between fact and fiction! But what makes trains so different from other means of transport?

**Voyages on Planes,
Boats and Trains**

Alastair Reid (1990) wrote that plane trips across oceans or countries, 'leave nothing to remember but a drone of passing time, so the points of arrival and departure [airports] are made to look alike, as indistinct as possible... . They deceive us by allowing us to travel without a sense of movement.' On the other hand, people on boats are removed from either the contexts they have left or the ones they are going to assume. Some feel relieved, some deprived. Reid also observes that, during a sea voyage, 'a small, artificial community is created.'

By being more a matter of will in which the car becomes almost an extension of the driver's body, travel by automobile makes a journey much less mysterious. What makes trains different is that they must go where they are going. The outcome of a journey by train is ineluctable (*Runaway Train*) and the travellers are therefore prone to trust them—trains are for meditation, for long thought-processes.

Sometimes, trains are the occasion of unexpected encounters. In *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Hitchcock (1899–1980) has a famous tennis pro meet a psychopath on a train. The former complains about his wife, while the latter wishes he could get rid of his father and the psychopath dreams up a crazy scheme of exchange murders. With his consummate command



Scene from *Hotaru no haka*, 1988, Isao Takahata

(Shinchosha)

of formal expression, Hitchcock includes extensive metaphors of this exchange, this trading of roles, and for this purpose, he make extensive use of the train and railway. At the beginning of the movie, Hitchcock himself makes his trademark appearance passing the young tennis pro and then we see the tracks crossing as the train starts its journey.

One could hardly imagine a movie making a more inventive use of trains and railways as metaphors for the atmosphere and feelings that the director wishes to express. However, it would be unfair to discuss formal inventiveness of directors without mentioning Japanese *anime* (animation) films. This film genre can be seen as an example of the Japanese love of the perfect

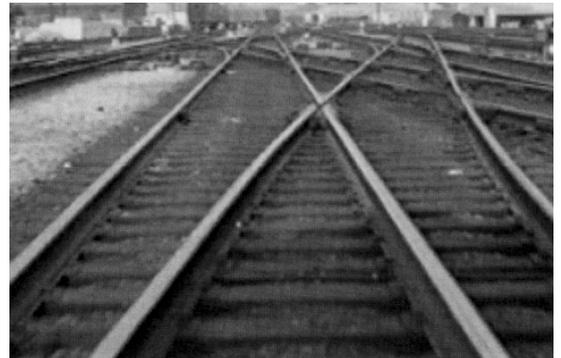
artifact. Just as all components of Japanese gardens are arranged to present a natural aspect without using any *actual* natural elements (wild flowers, etc.), animated films are man-made frame-by-frame, free of any undesirable element. Therefore, each object and character plays a programmed role, like in Isao Takahata's *Hotaru no haka* (*Grave of the Fireflies*, 1988) in which the overcrowded train catches the atmosphere of postwar Japan.

Unfortunately, this article cannot discuss all the significant train pictures in the history of cinema, but I would like to conclude by mentioning two masterpieces: Jean Renoir's *La bête humaine* (*The Human Beast*, 1938) and Shohei Imamura's *Akai satsui* (*Intentions of Murder*, 1964). Renoir



Farley Granger and Alfred Hitchcock in *Strangers on a Train*, 1951, Alfred Hitchcock

(Author)



Scene from *Strangers on a Train*, 1951, Alfred Hitchcock

(Author)

and Imamura went quite far in drawing an analogy between the human condition and the machine—the beast. In *La bête humaine*, like in Buster Keaton's *The General* (1927) or Kurosawa's *Dodesukaden* (*Clickety Clack*, 1970), the anthropomorphic steam locomotive is a powerful machine that drives its fireman to madness.

Japanese film critic, Donald Richie says that in *Akai satsui*, Imamura 'combines all the various roles trains can play in the movies.' He not only uses the train to clarify the structure of his movie, he also extensively explores—during the sequence where the rapist pursues the woman in the train—every possible angle, from stationary to full motion, from horizontal to vertical, from two- to three-dimensional perspective from the tracks. Imamura is often presented as fascinated by figures of irrationality in modern Japan; maybe the quintessence of train sequences in world cinema is when Imamura metaphorically intertwines the rape scene with surrealistic pictures of a steam locomotive belching steam and whistling inside a tunnel.

It is impossible to choose the best train movie in the history of cinema, but Japanese directors have certainly given us some of the best. As Richie says, 'it is precisely in eloquently using the train that Japanese cinema is finally so memorable.'

Further Reading

Allan Casebier, *Images of Irrationality in Modern Japan: The Films of Shohei Imamura*, in *Imamura Shohei*, Cinematheque Ontario Publishing Co. & Japan Foundation, 1997.

Stephen Dodd, *The Railway as Rupture: The Writings of Shimazaki Toson. Disrupted Borders: An Intervention in Definitions of Boundaries*. Ed. Sunil Gupta, London: Rivers Oram Press, 1993.

Interview With Donald Richie, *Kyoto Journal*, 1999.

Alastair Reid, *Whereabouts—Notes on being a foreigner*, White Pine Press, 1990.

Donald Richie, *Partial views—Essays on contemporary Japan*, Japan Times, 1995.



Masumi Harukawa (right) and Shigeru Tsuyuguchi in *Akai satsui*, 1964, Shohei Imamura

(Nikkastu)



Buster Keaton in *The General*, 1927, Buster Keaton

(Archive Photos/APL)



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