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The train of life

You start by queuing at the ticket office, you buy your ticket, you take a few steps, edging forward in the hope of finding a free seat, then you are ready for the journey. No, you are not on a train or a bus. Yet here we are, in a place where some people are sitting and others are standing, all of them waiting for the off. People standing up? That's a bit odd. Surely you can't do that at the cinema? True enough, but today is an exception: we're at a festival attended by a large audience. Cinérail, the festival devoted to films with a train connection: short films, fictional tales, documentaries, corporate films, even classic feature-length movies, dusted off specially for the occasion.

Having arrived with plenty of time to spare, you settle back comfortably in your seat and rapidly flick through the day's programme featuring some 20 short films from across the world: United States, Germany, Iran, France, Italy, Australia, Spain, Slovenia, Poland, South Korea, United Kingdom, Switzerland, Belgium, India, Netherlands, Japan, Slovakia, etc. In short, a whistle-stop world tour by train in less than five hours. The lights dim, it's time to move off. Here we go!

It opens with a rush of noise, the noise of a train moving forward at a steady, regular tempo. A train which meanders through the city, using a roof-mounted camera to film low-angle shots of the buildings: a train's-eye-view of urban architecture. The train then continues on its way; but, in addition to being a transport mode, it is also now a place offering the chance to read, work, relax, chat, meet people, make a phone call, etc., demonstrating to any remaining doubters that no time is wasted on public transport. On the contrary, time is used to optimal effect.

And here comes another train. Less welcoming, this one. Something fishy is going on. Someone is being assaulted. The crime is thwarted in the nick of time by the intervention of fellow passengers. Solidarity in transport. Phew! But let's press on, because we have to change trains at the next stop, otherwise we'll be late for work. It's the daily obsession of every commuter: arrive in time, but not too early, for the 7:17, and above all not too late since the next one, the 7:28,

stops at every station; so, even though it arrives first, you prefer to wait for the fast 7:37 service. Train times which chime with the rhythm of your day. You make those same journeys day in, day out. But today, just for a change, you decide to go and see what there is to see at the station after yours. To your surprise, you discover a delightful spot, mere kilometres away, which you had never dared visit before, for the simple reason that your monthly season ticket wasn't valid that far. So many missed opportunities to escape the daily routine!

New technology has invaded the world of the train. Some find it fun to usurp its applications. Passengers perform in front of the CCTV cameras, every day at the same time, offering watching surveillance staff a daily soap on their control screens. A ticket clerk refuses to be replaced by a ticket machine: she hides inside the ticket dispenser and lends a personal touch to each sale, going so far as to deposit a lipstick mark on a ticket to seduce one particular passenger. That's the way to inject a little heart and soul into technology. And it works!

Indeed, the train is the ultimate public forum for flirting. How many lovers have met, and how many couplings were first formed on public transport, transported by love? The plethora of small ads following an exchange of glances or a moment of complicity on a metro train means we can only guess at the number of other opportunities seized without having to resort to the lonely hearts columns. The train becomes a venue where people go to meet others, in

the same way as they would at a bar or discotheque. So you start to imagine a commissionaire with a memory for faces at the entrance to the station, deciding which passengers to let in. Happily, public transport hasn't got to that stage. Above all, it remains a place of social mixing and a melting pot, a place offering something different to see every day, a location where you meet people daily for the first and last time. But it is also the theatre of sorrowful parting: who among us hasn't been part of, or witnessed, a tearful farewell on a station platform? It is a place full of activity and life!

This train journey, with its succession of films, is patently an emotional rollercoaster. A journey illustrating how the train provides a rich, varied, multifaceted and lively setting. A city within a city. The journey is nearing its end now, the noise of the train reaches a crescendo as it crosses the points approaching the station. But not for a young deaf and dumb female passenger who, in her silent universe, continues to gaze at the film being projected on board the train. The train at the cinema, the cinema on board the train. The circle is complete. End of the line, everybody off!

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