

The Secret Pleasure of Trains

Sato Hiroaki (Editorial Board, *neoneo*)

As soon as I saw the train that appears as the “main character” in *Ex Press*, the film directed by Philippine director, Jet Leyco, and being featured in the YIDFF New Asian Currents screenings, I was struck by the feeling that I had seen this train somewhere before.

Ah, of course. That train with the gold band running the length of its blue body, which now has wire netting protecting the windows from flying stones, was once the Blue Train express sleeper that ran in Japan. Before it became the Philippine National Railway operated Bikol Express that connects the capital, Manila, to the eastern Naga district, the train was the Hokuriku Express that until 2010 ran between Tokyo and Kanazawa. Donated to the Philippines, it began operating there in 2011 (although I have heard that it is currently not running). Because I am a train freak, every time I see the train interior or the Japanese word “Su-ha-ne-fu 14” — the train code number — on the screen, my excitement knows no bounds. Over the past fifteen years or so, there have been a growing number of old Japanese trains sent overseas and given a second lease of life in other parts of Asia. This has happened in Thailand, Burma and Indonesia, as well as the Philippines. Since these countries have

a similar railway gauge to Japan, Japanese trains can be made operational there with very little difficulty. For a number of years now I have checked for a Japanese train whenever I have seen an Asian film, and I am overjoyed to finally have the chance for another meeting with these trains here at the Yamagata Film Festival.

Railways are part of the infrastructure that reveals a country’s national standing. Each of the things that make up a railway system — the carriages and trains themselves, the windows of the train, the station buildings and architecture, the passenger demographic — provides a socio-historical snapshot of a nation. Which places are joined by the lines? What other countries have helped build the railway system? Where do the protagonists move to? Who are the people travelling on the trains? There is also a sense of the influence of former imperial powers, and the current relationship a country has with the power that ruled them in the past. (No matter what part of the country, Taiwanese railways, for example, give a clear impression of being founded during the era of Japanese rule.) Cinema footage of railways should broaden and enrich our understanding of a movie from a different point of view to the plot.

Thus, when I see a railway on the screen, I become completely absorbed in every element, from the actions of the station staff or the passengers’ luggage to minuscule details such as the momentary flash of a signal or a sign at the carriage window. Trains have always made great movie viewing. As either “motion” or as “a sealed space,” the narrative device of the train is perfect for progressing a movie story-line. Moreover, there is a natural association given the fact that both emerged at the same time as “products of the modern era.” (And what, of course, did the Lumière Brothers first film?) Even leaving that aside, trains that are featured in film are overflowing with details which give us train freaks a never-ending high.

Standing grandly at the centre of *Ex Press*, a film that accumulates the memories of a range of people, including those of the director himself, is the “railway,” that presence in the nation that has the people at its mercy. When I watch *Ex Press*, which takes me into a film realm that weaves together fantasy and reality, I realise that my heart, too — as I gaze from the carriage window at the landscape that passes by outside — has blurred the border of the fantastic and the real. And documentary film, also, continues to flourish today as it embraces the subtle topics which lay out before our eyes an ever-growing number of phenomena and permit us to see the sequence of images on the screen that we call cinema.

(Translated by Barbara Hartley)

■ Screenings

Ex Press [NAC] 10/12 21:30- [F3] | 10/14 16:20- [F5]