

# Railway Aesthetics: Experiencing Locomotion across Media and Cultures

International Conference, Vienna-Bucharest-Istanbul,  
10-13 September 2025

*‘With the tremendous acceleration of life, mind and eye have become accustomed to seeing and judging partially or inaccurately, and everyone is like the traveller who gets to know a land and its people from a railway carriage.’ (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1878)*

We are inviting proposals for a multidisciplinary conference on the aesthetics of the railway. Taking place on two trains from Vienna to Bucharest and from Bucharest to Istanbul, the conference will itself be a mobile experience.

In a 1993 article entitled ‘The Second Railway Age’, David Banister and Peter Hall wrote that ‘[t]ransport technologies seldom make a comeback, save in nostalgia trips for well-heeled tourists. . . . But there is a spectacular exception: railways, written off thirty years ago as a Victorian anachronism’ (157). In fact, there have been several ‘spectacular comebacks’ in the history of the railway: from the futuristic streamliners of the 1930s to the bullet trains of the 1970s and the magnetic levitation trains of the future,

railways have repeatedly reinvented themselves to suit the technological, cultural, and symbolic needs of different phases of modernity. In the present day, we are witnessing yet another transformation: having once fuelled the modern industrial capitalist society that produced our current environmental crisis, railways are now being championed as tracks towards a greener and more sustainable future (see Revill 2012, 211-255).

Throughout their history, trains have transported not only passengers and freight, but also manifold cultural, political, and ideological narratives. From Charles Dickens’s proto-modernist railway sketches to the post-apocalyptic Korean film *Snowpiercer*, from James Bond’s train top fights to the space train in the Japanese manga series *Galaxy Express 999*, the



*Railway Aesthetics* (2025), Carmen Armenteros, mixed media

railway has fuelled fantasies about mobility, progress, conquest, and connection. In the nineteenth-century US, for instance, the transcontinental railroad spatialized the ideology of manifest destiny (see White 2011); for interwar Europe, railways signified the utopia of a unified continent; on the Indian subcontinent, trains functioned as the long arm of empire before becoming associated with Indian nationalism (e.g. in Ravi Chopra's 1980 action film *The Burning Train*). As literal and metaphorical vehicles, trains have carried multiple, often contradictory meanings. For the American Romantic Henry David Thoreau, they signalled the oppressive structures of society ('We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us'). In African American culture, they have been linked to slavery and segregation but also been envisaged as speculative engines of resistance and social change (see Zabel 2004), as in Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad*. Across a range of cultures and periods, railways have represented the hegemonic orders of the modern world while holding out disruptive and transgressive possibilities.

In these narratives, the railway is frequently connected to historically specific aesthetic experiences. In his landmark study *The Railway Journey* (1974), Wolfgang Schivelbusch argued that the experience of speed facilitated a new 'panoramic perception' of the landscape while also contributing to a phenomenological experience of the world as mobile, fleeting, and fragmentary. Since the beginnings of railway travel, writers and artists have translated these aesthetic experiences into the expressive possibilities of different media. Nineteenth-century poets, for instance, explored the rhythm of the rails through the rhythm of poetic language (e.g. Robert Louis Stevenson's 'From a Railway Carriage'); writers of crime fiction – most famously Agatha Christie in *Murder on the Orient Express* – used the spatial structure of the train to reflect on the narrative conventions of crime fiction; for early filmmakers – think of the Lumière Brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train* (1896) or the many 'phantom rides' of silent cinema – the train was a double of the cinema as a technology of movement and vision; and visual artists such as Umberto Boccioni translated the experience of speed into the abstractions of futurist art. At the same time, trains themselves have been figured as aesthetic objects. In the 1930s, for instance, industrial designers fashioned locomotives as works of art emblematic of techno-utopian futures; more recently, high-speed trains have embodied the 'flow, efficiency and ergonomics of modern design' (Revill 2012, 249), contrasting with the heavy industrial aesthetics of nineteenth-century steam trains.

### Call for papers

We invite 20-minute presentations on the changing roles and meanings of the railway as a site of aesthetic experience and artistic production. We are interested in the railway (journey) as both an infrastructural apparatus and a form of mobility that has generated historically and culturally specific aesthetic, poetic, and narrative responses in multiple media, genres, and forms from the nineteenth century to the present. We also encourage reflections on the railway as a medial apparatus in itself.

How, where, and for what purpose are trains and railway journeys mediated through narrative and visual representation? What fears, hopes, and desires are attached to them, and

how are they aesthetically expressed? In what ways has the railway facilitated reflection on the formal and aesthetic possibilities of different media?

We welcome contributions from a range of disciplines including literary studies, film studies, art history, cultural studies, cultural geography, transport history, mobility studies, environmental humanities, and more. Artistic interventions are also welcome. Contributions should be in line with the general aims of the conference and may relate to (but need not be limited to) the following areas:

- The railway journey as a narrative trope in literature and film
- Sensory geographies of the railway
- Historical phenomenologies of the railway
- The railway as a multisensory experience in literature and art
- Railways and the aesthetics of speed
- Nostalgic or futuristic railway imaginaries
- Trains as vehicles of style and design
- The railway and locomotives in visual art
- Border aesthetics and the railway
- Railway aesthetics and stories of migration
- Environmental narratives and ecopoetics of the railway
- Post-/decolonial and Indigenous figurations of the railway
- Metaphorical trains and railway metaphors
- The railway as an (inter)medial apparatus and/or semiotic system
- Trains as metafictional/metapoetic/metacinematic devices
- Artistic interventions related to trains and railway travel

### **Practical arrangements**

The conference will begin in Vienna and end in Istanbul. While we will organise transportation from Vienna to Istanbul, participants are responsible for their own travel arrangements to and from the start and end points of the conference. Most sessions will take place on moving trains (from Vienna to Bucharest and from Bucharest to Istanbul), so we can only accept submissions from people who are willing to participate in the entire conference. Also, please note that as we will spend two nights on trains, speakers will be sharing a compartment with other conference participants (there are different options available on the first train, but the second train only has four-person cabins; same-gender cabins will be available upon request).

Provisional schedule:

Wednesday 10 September: departure in Vienna at 19:42

Thursday 11 September: arrival in Bucharest at 15:05

Evening session and night in Bucharest

Friday 12 September: departure in Bucharest at 10:47

Saturday 13 September: arrival in Istanbul at approx. 07:00

Closing session in Istanbul on Saturday morning

### **Submission of abstracts**

Please send an abstract of 200-300 words and a short biographical note (no more than 100 words) to Johannes Riquet (johannes.riquet@tuni.fi), Carmen Armenteros (carmen.armenterospuchades@uniroma1.it), and Michael Frank (michael.frank@es.uzh.ch) in a single Word file.

### **Keynote speakers**

To be announced.

### **Deadline for proposals**

The deadline for abstract submissions is 2 May 2025.

Submitters will be notified of acceptance or rejection by 7 May. Please note that the maximum number of participants for this conference will be 46.

If your proposal is accepted, you will need to register for the conference by 17 May; at that stage registrations will be binding. Please note that these deadlines are very important as this conference takes more planning than a conventional academic event.

### **Conference fee**

We will announce the exact conference fee at the end of April. Currently we are expecting a conference fee of 150 EUR (100 EUR for PhD researchers) plus ca. 350 EUR (300 EUR for PhD researchers) for the train tickets including two nights in a four-person compartment and meals onboard. Participants are responsible for organising their own accommodation in Bucharest (Thursday 12 September) and, if desired, Istanbul.

The organizing committee

Johannes Riquet (Professor of English Literature, Tampere University)

Carmen Armenteros (PhD Researcher in Landscape and Environment, Sapienza University of Rome)

Michael C. Frank (Professor of English Literature, University of Zurich)