Charlotte Rottiers

Selling the Sleeper Train: Interiors, Imagery and the Visual Culture of the Simplon-Orient Express, 1880s–1940

Founded in 1872, the Belgian-French Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits (CIWL) built one of the most extensive transnational luxury travel networks of its era, operating long-distance sleeping trains and grand hotels across Europe, North Africa and Asia. Its sleeping cars and hotels were spaces of modern tourism and mobility. Examples include the Pera Palace in Istanbul, the Maloja Hotel, and the Hotel Quarnero (today Kvarner) in Opatija, and famous long-distance train connections including the Orient Express, Trans-Siberian Express, or the Train Bleu to the French Riviera. In these spaces, an international elite of aristocrats, royalty, diplomats, wealthy businesspeople and tourists shared the same standards of comfort, service and taste across borders. This lecture presents a newly started research project, funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and based at the Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts. It argues that these mobile and fixed interiors formed a continuum in which a transnational identity was designed, sold and performed. A central case is the Orient Express and its southern route, launched after the First World War as the Simplon-Orient Express. The project traces the tourist infrastructure that emerged along this route, with stops in Trieste, Zagreb and Belgrade among others: hotels, station buffets, restaurants and travel agencies. In the CIWL's marketing, south-eastern Europe was long a region to be crossed between West and East, and only in the interwar period, it gradually became a destination in its own right.

This talk questions how the CIWL designed, mediatised and commercialised its interiors between the 1880s and 1940. It combines an analysis of the material culture of the sleeper cars and hotels, with their luxury interior decoration and modern comfort infrastructures, with a visual and semiotic analysis of the company's advertisements and printed media. Publicity included posters and postcards, hotel brochures, guides describing the route such as the 1887 itinerary Paris-Constantinople-Brousse par l'Orient-Express, and company periodicals such as the Revue des Voyages and Continents. At world fairs, the company built pavilions to showcase its rolling stock and destinations, turning the train itself into a moving display. Across these media, and especially in the CIWL's poster art, ancient monuments, folkloric dress and orientalist images of local people and architecture were juxtaposed with the modern comforts and technological innovations of luxury rail travel.

Charlotte Rottiers is an architectural historian and lecturer at the Dortmund University of Applied Sciences and Arts. Her work questions the role of art and architecture in cultural and political representation and identity formation. She holds degrees in Art History, Urban Planning, and East-European Languages and Cultures (Ghent University). She obtained her PhD in Architecture at KU Leuven with the dissertation Housing the Nation Abroad: The Material Representation of Belgian Diplomacy, 1831-1914 (2024). She was a postdoctoral fellow at the Academia Belgica in Rome, the Czech Academy of Sciences, and a Swiss Government Excellence Scholar at ETH Zurich, working on the mediatisation of diplomatic spaces in print media in the Interwar period. Her new project Railing Transnational Identities along the Simplon-Orient Express, 1920-1940 is supported by the Gerda Henkel Foundation.



Image credit: Route map from the brochure Simplon-Orient-Taurus-Express, 1930, printed by J. Barreau & Cie. Collection Arjan den Boer; digitised and published on retours.eu, 22 June 2019.