

Document Citation

Title	Baltic Express
Author(s)	RWA
Source	<i>University of Illinois Film Society</i>
Date	1966 Apr 06
Type	program note
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Kawalerowicz, Jerzy (1922), Gwozdziec, Poland
Film Subjects	Pociag (Baltic Express), Kawalerowicz, Jerzy, 1959

THE FILM SOCIETY
of the University of Illinois
presents--

April 6, 1966

BALTIC EXPRESS

[also titled "Night Train";
original title: Pociąg, "The Train"]
(Poland - 1959)

Directed by Jerzy Kawalerowicz

Screenplay by Jerzy Lutowski & Jerzy Kawalerowicz

Director of Photography: Jan Laskowski

Music by Andrzej Trzaskowski; Sets by Ryszard Potock

Cast: Lucyna Winnicka, Leon Niemczyk, Zbigniew Cybulski, Teresa Szmigielówna

Every year, many of the program notes (perhaps most of them) are written by someone who has not seen the film; none of the Participating Members of the Society have seen the film. This regularly produces oddly misjudged notes. The situation cannot be corrected, really, it can only be explained. The society feels obliged to offer "important" films from some of the smaller film industries. These films do not get wide commercial distribution; indeed, that is one reason for showing them. Necessarily, then, we show a rather large number of "unknown quantities." In the case of tonight's film, our thinking was that, given the international prestige and influence of the Polish cinema, we should show a Polish film this year. The Wadja films are now fairly well-known; therefore, we should show something else. At the time the selections were made we considered showing Munk's Eroica; but we were advised that Cinema Internationale planned to program that film (subsequently cancelled by the Union Board). No other films by Munk or by Has were available to us. Czech films had not yet been made available. This left Baltic Express. We had shown Kawalerowicz's Mother Joan of the Angels last year, on the strength of its excellent reviews, and that film had been highly successful with our audience. We decided, therefore, to take a chance on this earlier Kawalerowicz film, in spite of the fact that we knew nothing at all about it.

Here are the facts about Baltic Express, so far as our library supplies them. It was made in 1959, at the end of the great resurgence of the Polish film, and appeared to some Polish critics to be a conscious attempt to break away from the materials that had characterized that resurgence. Polish film from the end of WWII until 1955 was dominated by entertainment films and films rehearsing, in rather "official" style, the horrors of the war. Auschwitz appears again and again in the official Polish film history. The thaw of '55 - '58 produced an "explosion" in Polish cinema, Wajda and Munk's films being characteristic. The best work dealt with the Occupation and/or the immediate post-war situation (for instance, Ashes and Diamonds). The subjects are not treated "officially"; the dilemmas of the "national character" break out in these films. Polish literature, especially in the 19th century, continually exploits the theme of the man caught outside history, who desires to act in history, to share some obscure national destiny, but who cannot connect with the times either from ineptness or from perverse circumstances. The Polish hero fails, or else succeeds absurdly, for his success is always somehow irrelevant. History ignores him. This theme, dormant before 1955, fills most of the best films of the '55 - '58 period.

Kawalerowicz was born in 1922, studied both film and Fine Arts at the Film Institute in Cracow after WWII. He also wrote a few scripts at that time. His first film (with K. Sumerski) was "The Village Mill" in 1952. His next effort (1954) was a two part film, "A Night of Remembrance," dealing with the postwar situation, and a great success in Poland. In 1956, his

"The Shadow" won the Polish Film Critics Prize. In 1957 he made a film titled "The Real End of the Great War." This film, and the '54 and '56 films, to judge by their titles only, would appear to fall in with the typical Wadja and Munk product of the period. Since 1955 he has been Artistic Director of the Film Production Group Kadr. He made Baltic Express in '59, Mother Joan in '61, and at last report was in Egypt directing an epic of some sort.

The plot of Baltic Express sounds like everybody's Hitchcock train thriller, with a bit of von Sternberg thrown in for kicks. A beautiful woman (Mrs. Kawalerowicz, Lucyna Winnicka) appears mysteriously in a train compartment. She had purchased the ticket hurriedly from a stranger in the train station, and in spite of the fact that the man who shares the compartment (Leon Niemczyk) sullenly objects, she refuses to leave the compartment. She is attempting to escape from a young lover (Mr. Cybulski). The man is also trying to escape from something or other. There is a rumor that there is a murderer on the train. There are voracious lovers in the next compartment. And so on, and so on. The film concludes with a chase after the murderer, in which all the male passengers pursue him from the train through a graveyard. Once they capture him, however, they all feel a vague remorse. The train starts up again. It arrives on the Baltic. The blank grey sea. The end.

A Polish critic insists that this film was the first to break from the Great National Drama. It is European, he says, not Polish. It is pointedly anti-heroic; it concerns itself only with the "small irresponsible clashes of everyday life." Maybe so. The little Western criticism I have found emphasizes two things: 1) the photography and general technique are of a remarkably high quality, perhaps too high for the material; 2) the close of the film seems to strive for a "symbolic" ending unjustified by what has been presented. Kawalerowicz himself has remarked that he is not interested in "meaning" as such, but in technique. On the other hand, he has also been quoted as criticizing the French New Wave for just that very thing: their "failure," he says, is that they are all technique and no content. For myself, I am skeptical. Mother Joan certainly is much more than a technical display, and I suspect that Baltic Express aims at something more as well.

Whatever the film turns out to be, there seems to be one sure thing-- it is a dazzlingly well-made film. Everyone agrees to that. It also marks an historical turning of sorts, prefiguring in many ways Polanski's Knife in the Water.

RWA

Short films tonight: "Symphonie Mechanique" by Jean Mitry
"Monsieur Tete" by Jan Lenica (a Pole, but the film was made in France)