

**POINTS DE VUE**



## **JEAN-PIERRE MARTIN – L'EXCITATION FERROVIAIRE**

May 2014

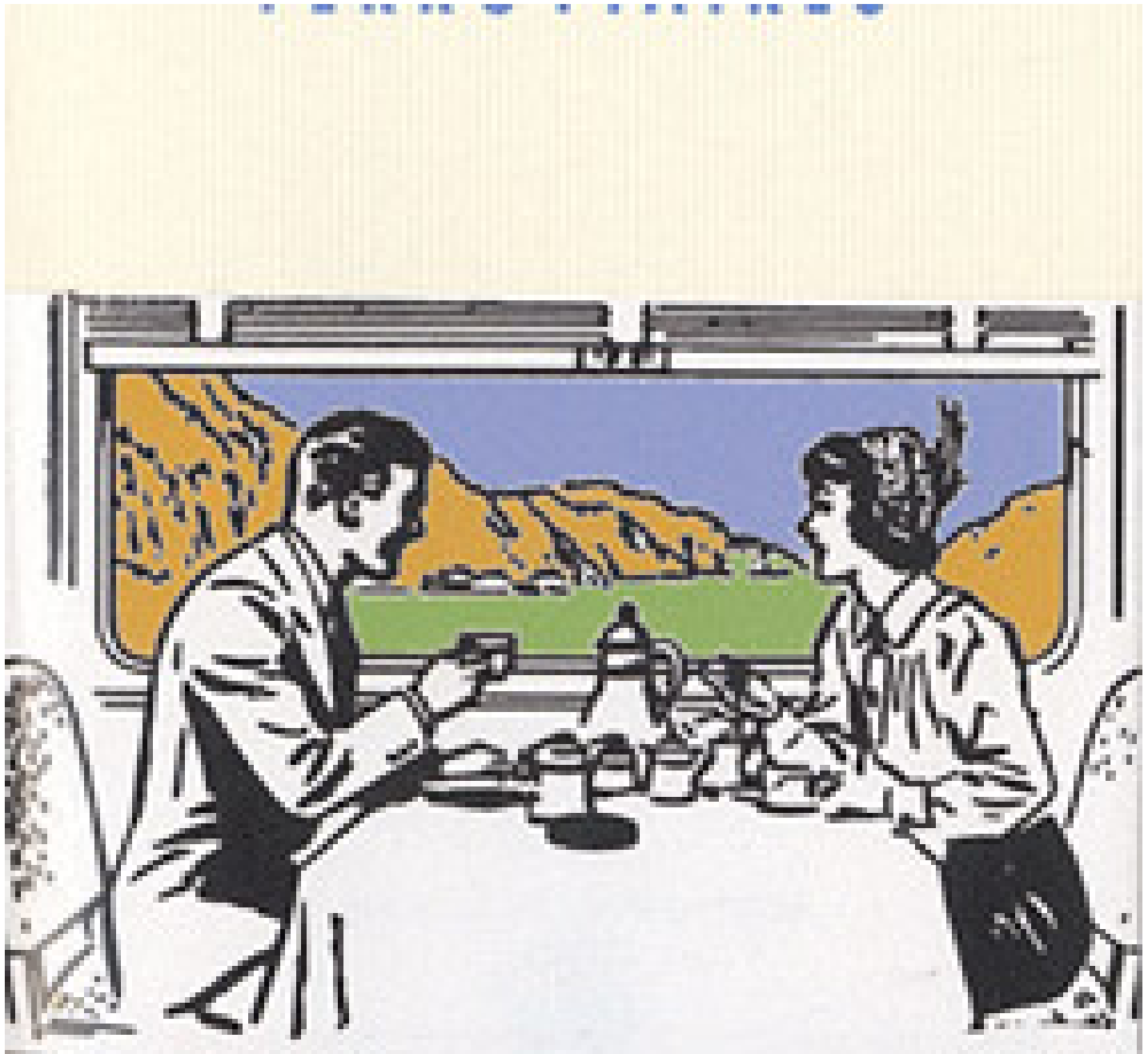
Born in 1948, French writer Jean-Pierre Martin became a professor of contemporary literature at the University of Lyon 2, after literature studies that culminated in a thesis on Henri Michaux. Meanwhile, as he himself confides, he lived several lives, first as a student, then a left-wing proletarian and labor activist. Travel and jazz have also played an important role throughout the years. His extensive bibliography continues to grow at a steady pace. His most recent work, *L'autre vie d'Orwell*, was published in 2013. The work we will look at here, *Les Liaisons ferroviaires*, was published in 2011 and reprinted in 2013.

---

**JEAN-PIERRE MARTIN**

**LES LIAISONS**

**FERROVIAIRES**



*Etienne Montgolfier, ethnologist of the close, says, "My goal is to surprise the evolution of so-called erotic adventures. I seek out first encounters, those first velvety glances, the male parade, female cooing, the verbal caresses..." in JEAN-PIERRE MARTIN'S L'EXCITATION FERROVIAIRE.*

In this novel, Jean-Pierre Martin takes us on a train journey through different characters and their games of seduction and desire, using a variety of perspectives and often narrating in direct speech. According to the author, "It's an original subject. Contemporary love. Please don't laugh. Or rather the love of encounter. Mediological love...correlated with technology – don't get me wrong. We've never really been able to talk about it the way I mean it: love in the time of the TGV. Love as a general force - hearts and bodies alike - like the high-speed, frantic search for the other, by any means." Love, feelings, mutual attraction: these are the subjects that should inspire research on mobility which, up until

now, has obscured them, or addresses them in a roundabout way, without managing to conceptualize them.

## **Analysis and presentation of the concepts**

Not content to merely make an original proposal as regards the concept of mobility, Martin's novel raises many questions about the enigmas that the unique experience that is travel by train, a space vested with multiple imaginaries and both positive and negative connotations. These questions call for collaboration between researchers and artists to reflect together and outline possible answers. We also find such imaginaries relative to the car and other forms of collective transportation, but without the range of possibilities that makes travel by train unique. While the car gives way to unique imaginaries different from those of public transportation, and vice versa, only rail seem to combine the two.

What makes trains so conducive to the building of social ties and to producing imaginaries that value speed and slowness alike – a kind of crossroads of positive and negative imaginaries? Scientific literature underlines the fact that, while the train does not allow for the same degree of evasion as the car, it does not have the restrictive characteristics of other forms of public transportation.

But why is it that the train generates stimuli and imaginary representations of social ties in the form of seduction and attraction, while the images of other modes of public transportation makes social ties and physical contact undesirable?

## **The specificity of travel time**

This problem can be addressed through the notion of travel time, which appears to be closely linked to positive imaginaries associated with the trains. Train journeys are, generally speaking, longer than travel by public transportation. Conversely, when the train is used for daily commuting and is no longer a medium of travel, it takes on a negative image. In such instances, users tend to complain of recurrent delays, outdated equipment and patchy connections.

Martin's novel makes us realize that it is travel time on trains that, in part, gives rise to research on social ties in general, and games of seduction in particular. The journey is long and sometimes slow, but also limited in time. As passengers know its length in advance, they make the most of it, all the while weighing the risks of possible failure. Effectively, authors of failed attempts are obliged to continue their journeys to their destination – an embarrassing situation that one would obviously rather avoid. To illustrate these strategies, Martin has several characters speak in succession, interrupting their remarks with the observations of Etienne Montgolfier – “ethnologist of the close” -and descriptions of scenes on the train or from the characters' lives. By successively stepping into the shoes of the

on the part of their characters lives. By successively stepping into the shoes of the different characters, the reader shares their feelings and is privy to their schemes of seduction throughout the trip from the Cote d'Azur to Belgium.

The train used as a means of travel has been accompanied by new experiments in movement, socialization and the perception of the surrounding landscape (Schivelbusch, 1986 and Mobile Lives Forum's Forum Notes. Must-reads:

<https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/publication/2013/11/12/revue-critique-1812>), evoking the mobilities of Kesselring's spaces of connectivity, which are comprised of experiences of this kind and not merely time between a departure point and a destination (2006).

### ***The qualitative value of travel time (encadré)***

- *The value of time is based on the idea that each person has limited resources of time and money, and therefore tries to make the best use of them (Mobile Lives Forum – Lexicon – La valeur du temps, by Emmanuel Ravalet: <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/reperes/valeur-temps-59>*
- *Time has gradually taken on qualitative value, which opens new perspectives for research, particular in terms of how mobility is used (Lyons and Urry, 2005). Also: (Mobile Lives Forum – Videos conferences- Making use of travel time, by Stéphanie Vincent Geslin <https://fr.forumviesmobiles.org/video/2014/03/18/lappropriation-des-temps-deplacement-2240>).*

### **Seduction as a fundamental aspect of travel**

By focusing on the specific dimensions of social ties that are seduction and physical and/or romantic attraction, the novel offers a comprehensive approach to mobility that is lacking in the research (Paolini, 2011). Researchers are undoubtedly increasingly interested in emotions, rhythms and mobility as an experience (Sheller, 2004; Löfgren, 2008), but do not deal with them in their most subjective form – that of seduction. Indeed, seduction cannot be manipulated using scientific or political concepts. In Jean-Pierre Martin's works, sensuality and attraction – the basis of all social relationships – give shape to the trip throughout its duration, thus becoming inherent parts of it.

### ***The experience of mobility***

- *John Urry's concept the "mobility turn" emphasizes, among other things, travel itself as an experience, and focuses on how people experience, feel about and deal with their mobility (Urry, 2006).*

- *Kesselring distinguishes between mobilities in transit areas (characterized by direction, linearity and/or places, where encounters and interactions are fleeting occurrences in view of an objective) and those in spaces of connectivity, where travel is a veritable experience and not only time between a departure point and destination (2006).*

## **Fiction inspires research: documenting the emotions of mobility**

What is striking in this work – as well as in those of other artists – is the ease with which it takes the reader into the world of mobility and the perceptions and emotions associated with it. This is largely thanks to the author's painstaking description of the sounds, smells, bodies, scenery and feelings the characters encounter and experience, with thoroughness worthy of a scientific approach but using very diverse modes of expression. In many cases he gives readers the chance to put themselves in the narrator's shoes as he wanders, or in the minds of the characters as they think about and experience their travels. He even also allows readers to slip into the sleek skin of a TGV named Alice.

The experience of mobility – not simply the act of moving from one place to another but also of moving from one character or object to another – is thus richly documented. We also learn how users learn to juggle the desire to cultivate social bonds and those times when they cut themselves off, focusing instead on the emotions evoked by the passing landscape or lost in personal reflection, strategies which allow them to move from the public space that is the train to a protective cocoon, similar to that of an automobile.

### ***The car as a representation of the individual's world (encadré)***

- *The car is a reflection of a lifestyle, an extension of the self, and is easily anthropomorphized. It is a place of emotion, a safe living place, like a domestic capsule (Sheller, 2004; Urry, 2007; Löfgren, 2008).*

---

## **Thématiques associées :**

MODES DE VIE

THÉORIES

---

