

# Orient Express

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The Orient Express was a luxury passenger train operating on the Paris-Istanbul route since 1833. Owing to the high standard of the service, the train attracted many wealthy tourists interested in the world, including people of culture (writers, painters, musicians, etc.). The train was a manifestation of the polarisation of the world. It encouraged the privileged part of society to visit the peripheries of Western Europe. Technological development stimulated by the colonisation process accelerated the development of the transport network and changed the way in which the economy was organised. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western Europe and its colonies occupied 85% of the area of the globe. This impressive hegemony of the West over the rest of the world was observed in the areas of politics, economics and culture. This positive image of development was based on apparent happiness resulting from an asymmetrical exchange. Raw materials and semi-finished products (spices, crude oil, rubber and cotton) were imported from the colonised areas and then used in industrial production. Next, ready-made products were exported back to the colonies. In this way, the value added remained in Western civilisation. A large difference in price between raw materials and industrial products adversely affected the financial conditions of periphery countries. Moreover, fast technological development contributed to the effective use of raw materials increasing disproportions in capital accumulation. In addition to the exploitation of natural resources, Western civilisation (Europe and North America) introduced their values and patterns of behaviour to other cultures (under pressure or upon request), such as: Western science, technology, fashion, art and cuisine. The consequences of this cultural impact can be seen almost everywhere in the present-day world. People eat junk food, wear similar clothes and communicate using the internet. The ever-expanding consumer offer in Europe, however, smells of exotic oriental cuisine and Eastern style. Wealth has its geographical location – the West. This is where 20% of the wealthiest people in the world live controlling about 80% of global profits. The Orient Express can therefore be treated as a metaphorical experience of Western myths. It symbolises the Western approach to periphery societies (inhabitants of the Third World). They are seen as primitive people who have been liberated from provincialism, ignorance and backwardness by Western culture, which is based on progress and transformation. The common picture of a skinny Indian pauper liberated by Western civilisation that functions in European culture is, however, an erroneous political construct used to justify colonialism. The colonisers often contributed to the collapse of the local economy, destroyed the industry

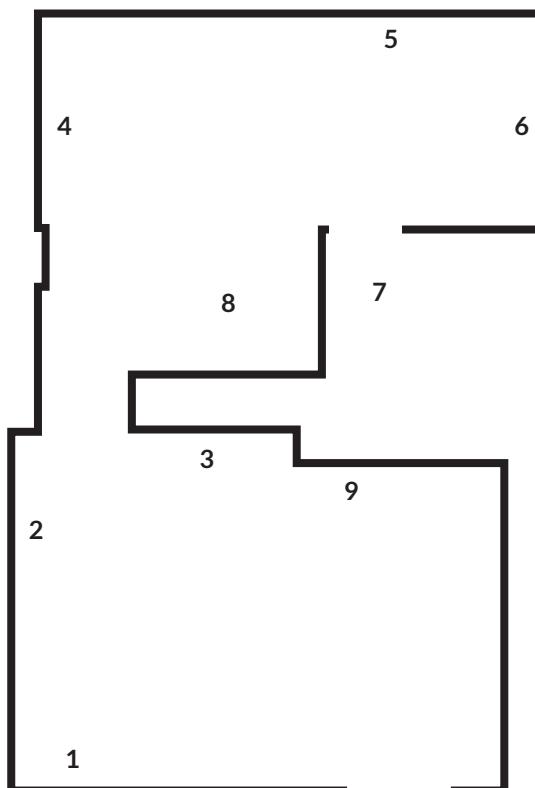
and the modernisation introduced by them, such as the extension of railway lines, led to increased social divisions and deep poverty.

For many centuries, the abovementioned mechanisms were directly used to build a cultural image of 'the other' – the one that was not part of Western culture. Works of art reflected Western fascination with Oriental exoticism, which, however, only perpetuated the divisions imposed on the world. Art was thus a catalyst for socio-political stereotypes. Despite European and American artists took inspiration from the achievements of other civilisations, they did not contribute to overcoming existing divisions and inequalities. It is therefore worth asking how current global processes in the areas of the economy, politics and economics are reflected in contemporary works of art. Have the new imaging mechanisms been adapted to the problems of the modern world? Do artists interpret old topics in a new way? Or perhaps – sometimes not consciously – they perpetuate the old ways of seeing distant lands and their inhabitants? Is the rapprochement of cultures through art (often postulated by present-day cultural institutions) possible at all?

A clear division into the centre, semi-periphery and periphery is still observed in today's international relations. The example is the strong influence of Western institutions controlling the global economy, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization, on poorer countries. The former forces the latter to adapt to their rules. The fact that countries belonging to Western civilisation control the global economy does not improve the economic situation of the poorer part of the world. Instead, the rich obtain profits and the poor lose their possessions. This can be described as neo-colonialism. Due to the rapid economic development in Asia (primarily in China), which is based on a different political model (a lack of liberal democracy) than the one pursued in Western countries, we must redefine the question about the location of the economic and cultural centre and periphery. China and South Korea, which experience significant economic growth, do not obey the rules of international financial markets (e.g. the Chinese yuan is independent from the market laws). Due to its unprecedented economic growth, China is no longer perceived as a frozen, conservative country and becomes a new metaphorical orient express. The economic dominance of this country gives it an advantage over other developed countries in the world. Will China regain the economic and cultural leadership in the global world that it had until the 17th century? Is Western culture ready to accept this? The fight for the 'centre of the world' status also affects culture and art. Hong Kong has the opportunity to

become the world's capital of the art market thanks to preferential tax rules that cannot be afforded by New York, which stole the name of the 'capital of art' from Paris in the post-war period. The relationships between contemporary centres and peripheries in the world of art are considered in the context of discussions about the Western geography of art which is currently based on verticality and hierarchy. However, some theorists, including Irit Rogoff and Piotr Piotrowski, suggest that this approach to art should be replaced with a 'horizontal' model. This model takes account of the uniqueness of artistic activities undertaken outside the centre and gives the opportunity to create a truly 'universal' history of art. The 'vertical history of art', which the theorists reject, in fact preserves the old centre/periphery system, imposes a top-down positioning, destroys the local specificity of culture and imposes an identity that the other party accepts passively. Do phenomena arising on the periphery become relevant only if they are noticed by 'art centres' identifying themselves with objective knowledge? The Orient Express exhibition at Duża Scena UAP Gallery tries to answer this and the other questions. The selection of artists and works of art displayed corresponds to the multidimensionality of cultural relations prevailing in the present-day world. The location of the exhibition is also of much significance

for the context of the works presented. Poland is considered a semi-periphery country which continuously aspires to be in the first league of Western countries, yet is often pushed to the role of the second-class player. Do centres, peripheries and sub-peripheries really exist? Does distant Thailand gain a different meaning when it is seen through the eyes of an Englishman or a Polish photographer (M. Warda)? Can Taiwan (which, from the Western perspective, lies on the outskirts of the periphery and does not even deserve to be recognised as a separate state in the international arena) become the subject of visual comparisons with the landscape of post-transformation Poland (M. Skorwider)? Do Japanese salarymen, getting drunk on a weekly basis, become more human if their weaknesses are depicted by a Pole (P. Jaszcuk) than if they were photographed by a New Yorker? And finally, is the original composition of the Orient Express (which once operated between Warsaw and Hong Kong and is currently falling into ruin in the rail yard in a small Polish town near the border with Belarus) a symbol of the opening or closing of our Eastern European culture?



1. Centrala Rybna  
*Aukcja ziemia z Polski*
2. Janek Simon  
*Smutek tropików*
3. Paweł Jaszcuk  
*Salaryman*
4. Sławomir Brzoska  
*Autoportrety chiazmatyczne*
5. Ewa Kulesza  
*Terytorium*
6. Michał Warda  
*Paradise Lost*
7. Max Skorwider  
*Polska / Tajwan*
8. Paulina Piórkowska & Małgorzata Barańska  
*Czego to ludzie nie wymyślą*
9. Tomáš Ságner  
*Orient Express w Polsce, Mieroszów*