



## 'Station to Station': Sundance Review

10:36 PM PST 1/27/2015 by Boyd van Hoeij



Courtesy of Sundance International Film Festival

### The Bottom Line

*Hop on and get off.*

### Director Doug Aitken's high-concept experimental feature consists of 61 one-minute short films that recount a transcontinental train journey and its associated art events.

U.S. artist-director **Doug Aitken** directed the semi-experimental *Station to Station*, which consists of no less than 61 short films, each one-minute long. The feature, 71 minutes in total including the opening and end credits, was shot over the course of 24 days in 2013, when a train with Aitken's "kinetic light sculpture," fixed to the train's outer shell, traveled from New York to San Francisco. Aboard the vehicle and along the way, at 10 different stops, art happenings with participants from media ranging from music and photography to dance and the visual arts were organized. They all find their way into the film organically, which thus becomes a meditation on art, (train) travel and transience. Festivals and gallery-type spaces will find this thrilling while regular audiences shouldn't worry about this potentially diminishing the quantity of multiplex screens simultaneously screening *The Hobbit* anytime soon.

The film is described early on as a "journey through modern creativity." That's one way of looking at it, though the film's forced segmentation offers at least 60 others. Practically, each short contains at least a shot of the train or a view from the train, but for the art happenings at and close to the various stations, the camera, handled by Aitken and **Corey Walter**, obviously ventures outside.

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/sundance/2015>

In some of the shorts, there are a lot of rapidly edited shots, which suggest the fast movements of train travel. A particularly good observation, heard in voiceover, suggests how the railroad network can be viewed as the 20th century's equivalent of the Internet: a network that made things much faster than before.

Other shorts, some in black and white, prefer to drink in the changing landscapes and hours of day in more languid takes (still not longer than one minute, of

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course) that feel like the viewer is simply staring out the window as the vegetation changes and urban and natural landscapes alternate.

Featured singers run the gamut from self-professed "professional buskers" and indie bands playing on the moving train to greats like **Patti Smith**, who sings during an outdoor concert about her trains of thought. In one short, **Beck** talks about travel as a way to collapse time, and in another, he performs. Indeed, many artists are highlighted in more than one short, with occasionally the music spilling over from one segment to the next. Architects, photographers and even *The New Yorker's* music critic **Sasha Frere-Jones** briefly talk about their work. Flamenco dancers and marching bands both make appearances several times, while a visual arts highlight comes in the unexpected form of a montage of the hypnotic drawings made aboard the train by artist **Olafur Eliasson's** Kinetic Drawing Machine, which sends a ball of ink over a piece of paper suspended by springs. The paper then moves in sync with the train's own movements, allowing the vehicle's vibrations to dictate the drawings.

It's an unusual decision to have one director make so many shorts that he will then assemble into one feature, but it's one that seems justified here. Firstly, since there's no continuous narrative, the superstructure ensures audiences that don't like one segment will never have to wait long for something new to see. Secondly, and more importantly, the film's narrative structure itself feels like a postmodern comment on contemporary art.

What we're looking at is, in essence, an artwork that looks at other art — a concept film about a conceptual art project. It suggests that a one-minute part can be the whole for one viewer or that, conversely, the whole is made up of an infinite amount of smaller parts that can each tell only a small part of the story. The many short fragments also evoke something of the frenzy of contemporary travel itself, with all those people and stories passing each other in rapid succession in various directions, with only fleeting glimpses of their true identities. That's quite a lot to take away from a 71-minute investment.

*Production companies: Doug Aitken Workshop Production, Arts & Science*

*Director: Doug Aitken*

*Producers: Chris Totushek, Alex Waite*

*Executive producer: Doug Aitken*

*Directors of photography: Doug Aitken, Corey Walter*

*Editor: Austin Meredith*