

Railways in Film

Jiro Hanyu

Introduction

This article does not discuss documentary-type films showing rail travel or railways in action, because I am more interested in how the railway can be used as a prop or background in a film, and how it can create impact in a single scene. My intent is to show how a number of directors have made trains and stations an essential part of their films and skilfully used the railway to develop a story line for memorable movies. Some film scripts need train scenes in the same way as William Wyler's film, *Roman Holiday* (1953) needed Rome. *Roman Holiday* is a story of love between a princess and a journalist. The architecture and atmosphere of Rome are effectively used as a background. The romance is a fairy tale, but a convincing one because the story takes place in Rome. If the movie had been shot in New York, London or Paris, the impact would have not been as strong. In the same way, the reason why some films have a strong impact is because trains appear in them.

Of course, trains appear in far too many films to list in full here and this article is limited to just a few railway films.

Railway films generally fit into one of the three following categories:

- Films in which trains are an essential backdrop and play an important, even essential role;
- Films in which a railway station is an essential backdrop;
- Films in which the railway is used as a prop in perhaps only one scene, but as an essential element to the film.

The Railway as Centre Stage

I suppose there are not many great movies that use the railway throughout the story-line. The main ones that come to mind are: Abel Gance's *La roue* (*The Wheel*, 1922); Buster Keaton's *The General*

(1926); Jean Renoir's *La bête humaine* (*The Human Beast*, 1938); René Clément's *La bataille du rail* (*The Battle of the Rails*, 1945); Pietro Germi's *Il Ferroviere* (*The Railroad Man*, 1956); Jerzy Kawalerowicz's *Pociąg* (*Night Train*, 1959); and John Frankenheimer's *The Train* (1964).

Everyone would agree that the greatest two of these seven films are the silent movie *La roue* and the talkie, *La bête humaine*. The main character in both these films is a fireman on a steam locomotive, and both men fall into difficulties despite themselves. I do not know whether the two directors, Gance and Renoir, would agree with me, but it appears that one intent was to show how these two men must follow their destiny, just as a locomotive must go where the rails take it. In this sense, the railway is an essential element in the story-telling process.

Both films are milestones in film history and well worth some discussion here.

Abel Gance (1889–1981) was a world-famous director and many Japanese film enthusiasts still remember two of his silent

masterpieces—*Napoleon* and *La roue*.

La roue tells the story of a fireman and his two children, a boy and an adopted girl. The girl joins the family, innocent of the world, after her mother is killed in an accident. As the plot thickens, love and physical attraction lead the family to its inevitable destiny. One memorable scene unfolds in the director's skilful hands as he portrays the fireman's feelings and circumstances with tremendous dramatic effect while the locomotive rushes along the tracks. The fireman, consumed by jealousy and driven by despair, tries to kill himself and his adopted daughter as the locomotive rushes forward. The scenery flashes by, the locomotive's wheels spin madly, and a single rail rushes past in the middle of the screen, framed by darkness on both sides. The flashback scene creates a powerful mood that only a silent movie can achieve, yet the overall effect remains avant-garde even today in this modern era of motion picture technology.

Although the fireman fails in his attempt to kill himself and his daughter, he is disabled, but rids himself of the irrational feelings of love that had consumed him.



Seregin Mars in *La roue*, 1922, Abel Gance

(Uniphoto Press)

His new situation is symbolized by the job he takes as an engineer on a funicular railway that crawls slowly up and down the Alps. As time passes, his son is killed, he becomes blind, has to quit his job on the funicular, and then dies too.

Throughout *La roue*, Gance takes pains to link the story line to the train action. The railway is the medium through which the plot develops. In the last scene, the model locomotive that the fireman had loved is broken. Here is another symbol—everything that he had is lost.

The railway forms more than just the backdrop to *La roue*—trains play an important role by continually driving the story forward. The imagery is tremendously powerful, and the story-line, with its twists and turns, is well adapted to the medium of film. I believe that even today, *La roue* is the most memorable railway film ever made.

The next film I want to mention is *La bête humaine*, a talkie made in 1938 by Jean Renoir, son of Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), the famous French impressionist artist. Jean Renoir (1894–1979) is considered one of the best directors the world has ever seen and he has left us a number of important films, including *La grande illusion* (*Grand Illusion*, 1937) and *La règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939). His masterpiece, *La bête humaine*, is based on a story by Emile Zola (1840–1902) and is similar to *La roue* in that trains form the backdrop to the action.

Renoir has been quoted as saying that his film, *La bête humaine*, takes only the essential elements of Zola's story-line, but faithfully follows the real railway world. The main character is another locomotive fireman, played by Jean Gabin (1904–76). In order to master the role, Gabin spent considerable time working as a fireman on a locomotive. Renoir said he wanted the railway scenes to be realistic because, just as in Zola's story, trains play a central role in the film. Renoir could be proud of



Jean Gabin and Simone Simon *La bête humaine*, 1938, Jean Renoir

(Uniphoto Press)

the fact that the five- or six-minute opening scene is beautiful in its realistic treatment of men serving a locomotive. I believe that the imagery of this first scene, shot from a camera on a locomotive speeding along the track, has never been surpassed by any other movie.

Of course there is much more to *La bête humaine* than just a steam locomotive performing beautifully on rails. The fireman is pathologically violent, and falls in love with a free-spirited married woman (played by Simone Simon) who has led an unhappy life.

At the heart of this tragedy—in both Zola's original story and the film—is the criticism of the capitalist class. Renoir's film presents us with a wealthy sugar industrialist who rides the railway but ignores its rules and becomes angry after being asked to follow the rules, and a rich man who continues a love affair with a woman who is not only his stepdaughter, but also the wife of a deputy stationmaster. The stage is thus set for a number of scenes showing the ugly side of the upper class. Renoir masterfully shows how good, in the form of the main characters, can be

brought to ruin by the wealthy.

These scenes make a lasting impression, but the part I found most memorable culminates with the fireman losing his mind and assaulting a young woman he has just met, even though she evidently has a soft spot for him. The episode starts at a river where the woman, obviously young and healthy, is washing her feet. Young men make fun of her in a scene which, in typical Renoir fashion, exudes a sense of eroticism. In his madness, the fireman throws the girl down beside the track and begins to choke her. At this instant, a train roars past, awakening the man from his murderous trance.

The locomotive reawakens the sense of pride the fireman feels for his work and saves him from his evil impulse. To me, Renoir is using the train to symbolize the forces of good.

La bête humaine is faithful to Zola's story of tragic love and social injustice. The hard labours of the working class are portrayed realistically but without the Marxist slogans that would slant a Soviet film of the period. The film does not indulge in an excess of moralism that

would portray capitalists and the *petit bourgeoisie* as evil and the workers as good. In fact, this is why it succeeds in its criticism of society at that time.

Renoir was more skilful than any other director since the age of silent movies in using the railway as an effective tool for social criticism.

The Station as Centre Stage

The railway station holds great promise for film. It has only one purpose—to serve as a place for train passengers to arrive and depart—but creates its own atmosphere, heavy with feeling as people say goodbye, and light with hope as they greet each other. A small station can evoke feelings of sentimentality and loneliness, while a large station can create feelings of solitude in a sea of people. In this sense, a railway station has far more potential than a bus stop or airport.

Most people would probably agree that of the many movies using stations as a location, two stand above the rest—*Brief Encounter* (1945) directed by David Lean (1908–91), and *Stazione Termini* (*Indiscretion of an American Wife*, 1953), directed by Vittorio De Sica (1901–79).

Like many other films with station scenes, *Brief Encounter* and *Stazione Termini* are

love stories. For some reason, train movies often depict extramarital love. The advantages offered by a station are obvious for someone filming a love story, but it is hard to understand why the love depicted often involves characters married to someone else!

David Lean is famous for his direction of great movies like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1959). His *Brief Encounter* was filmed some time earlier, and was based on a play by Noel Coward (1899–1973). Coward oversaw the writing of the movie script and adapted his play to the silver screen by taking advantage of the freedoms of space and time (including flashbacks) offered by cinematography.

We see an ordinary housewife (played by Celia Johnson (1908–82)) who happens to meet a doctor (Trevor Howard (1916–88)) in a small suburban station. They fall in love but eventually part, thereby avoiding divorce and family breakup. A lonely station waiting room forms the backdrop for the entire love affair—their falling in love, the twists and turns that love brings, and the final goodbye. The parting scene is unique to film and leaves a lasting impression.

A railway station is an ideal location to show lovers parting. Everyone knows the typical scenario—the ‘All aboard!’ call,

passengers scrambling into the carriages, the young woman leaning out the window, the young man running alongside the train to the end of the platform, the train giving a forlorn whistle as it disappears down the track... *Brief Encounter* has none of that. Instead we are inside a waiting room, with no train in sight, the man and woman sitting silently, a female friend who knows nothing of their love chattering away in an irritable fashion, the man and woman enduring her nonsense, the time for departure coming, their saying a simple goodbye, Howard touching his lover’s shoulder lightly as they part... This scene near the end of the movie, heavy with a sadness that is barely shown, is exquisite. The opening scene is exactly the same as this scene, but it is only near the end that the audience realizes the full implications of the scene. The director uses this artistic touch to great effect.

In another memorable part, the doctor asks the housewife to go with him to his room. She declines, decides to go home, leaves the station and boards the train. But just before the train departs she has a change of heart, descends from the train and sets off for his lodgings. The inner turmoil felt by the main characters is skilfully depicted against the backdrop of the station and the train. It appeared that



Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard in *Brief Encounter*, 1945, David Lean (Uniphoto Press)



Meryl Streep and Robert de Niro in *Falling in Love*, 1984, Ulu Grosbard (Uniphoto Press)

the heroine would go home when she got on the train. But no—she takes her seat on the train for a few seconds, then changes her mind. The opening and shutting of a door and the whistle of the station attendant announcing the train's departure suddenly make us aware of a new twist in the plot.

Brief Encounter offers a model for any director who wants to use a station and train to depict the inner workings of the soul. It takes place in a rural suburban station in England.

Stazione Termini is another love story in another station, but the setting is Rome, and the station is huge. The director, Vittorio De Sica, was at the forefront of Italy's postwar neo-realism movement. Neo-realism takes an almost documentary approach in its portrayal of the practical side of life and society. Two of De Sica's best known works are *Ladri Di Biciclette* (*The Bicycle Thief*, 1948) and *Sciuscia* (*Shoeshine*, 1946). *I Girasoli* (*Sunflower*), another movie he made much later in 1970, lacks the refreshing touch of his earlier works when he led the neo-realism movement, but has a sense of wholeness that brought him back into public acclaim in Japan.

Stazione Termini is a short film of only about 70 minutes. The story takes place over a period of 2 hours, from 18:30 when the heroine arrives in Rome, to 20:30, when her train leaves. The camera never leaves the station during the entire film. This offers ample opportunity for a neo-realistic approach—the entire 2 hours moves forward inside the station, one scene after another.

A beautiful married woman (played by Jennifer Jones) is touring Rome. She happens to meet a young Italian (played by Montgomery Clift (1920–66)), and the two fall rapidly in love. However, the woman is pulled by her ties to her own family, and the two part.

Trains have only a minimal role in this film—all they do is follow the station



Jennifer Jones in *Stazione Termini*, 1953, Vittorio De Sica

(Archive Photos/APL)

schedule and carry people to their destinations. Likewise, the other people in the station form only a backdrop as they go about their business. With the exception of the woman's child relatives, the other people in the station have no connection with the two main characters. De Sica is not at all interested in using trains as a symbol or as a medium to express emotion. His touch is entirely realistic—amidst the everyday occurrences in a crowded station in Rome, two people fall in love but realize that they must part. *Stazione Termini* shows directors how a station can be used in a realistic way to create an impressive love story on film. The story's similarity with that of *Brief Encounter* is obvious. *Stazione Termini* is different in that it is a masterpiece in the neo-realistic mold and expanded the possibilities of cinematographic expression.

Falling in Love (1984) is another more recent film that uses a station as background. The director, Ulu Grosbard,

is not well known, but the film had two popular stars, Meryl Streep and Robert De Niro. Although the movie made waves in Japan, it is a poor modern American remake of *Brief Encounter*. The acting is not bad, but we cannot see into the souls of the characters, as we could with Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard. But why was *Brief Encounter* better than *Falling in Love*? The answer is that the director and script for *Brief Encounter* were both far superior. For example, the station is the most important setting in both movies, but in *Falling in Love*, the station is not used effectively to highlight the complex feelings that love can evoke. In addition, the ending is ruined by an unnecessary twist, and there is a lack of artistic tension throughout. If we compare even the last 10 minutes of each film, the inferiority of *Falling in Love* is obvious. The subject matter is the same, the backdrop (a station) is the same, and *Falling in Love* had a much larger budget. But if a director does not use the station to full cinematographic effect, he is lost.



Marilyn Monroe, Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*, 1959, Billy Wilder (Archive Photo/APL)

The Train as One Essential Element

Many great movies have a train scene that brings the story to life and leaves a lasting impression. The technique is used in a very many movies, and each is different. Some scenes that come to mind are:

- The last scene in Federico Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (*Spivs*, 1953)—The hero sets out to broaden his horizons, leaving his home town by train and his youth behind.
- Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Aventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960)—A couple look for a female friend who has disappeared. In a subsequent train scene they part with feelings of guilt.
- Ingmar Bergman's *Tystnaden* (*The Silence*, 1963)—In the opening scene, a

train arrives at a destination that is unknown to the main characters. In the last scene, it is time to depart. In both scenes, we sense the unease and despair of the characters on the train.

- Victor Erice's *El Esperitu de la Colmena* (*The Spirit of the Beehive*, 1972)—Two girls playing on the track create a beautiful yet disturbing scene.
- Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959)—Marilyn Monroe (1926–62) and other stars board a train and turn it into a luscious and bewitching vehicle.

- John Sturges' *Last Train from Gun Hill* (1959)—This American western has a memorable duel at a station.
- Giuseppe Tornatore's *Stanno Tutti Bene* (*Everybody's Fine*, 1990)—As the titles roll and the first scene unfolds, we see a father setting out on a trip to visit his adult children. The tempo is brisk and the train scene is beautifully shot, a welcome relief after some years of less-than-aesthetic treatment.

If I were to introduce each film properly, this article would be as long as a book. I do not have enough space to concentrate on some of the best films, nor to give a short critique of many. Instead, I will choose two films by one of the world's most famous directors, a man who made a point of using

trains as an important element in his films—Alfred Hitchcock (1899–1980) known for such marvellously crafted thrillers as *Rear Window* (1954), *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963).

Hitchcock is also well known for using trains to special effect, such as in *The Secret Agent* (1936), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), *Strangers on a Train* (1951), and *North by Northwest* (1958). Two of these films, *Shadow of a Doubt* and *Strangers on a Train*, are considered to be among the best thrillers ever made.

Suspense fans give high marks to *Shadow of a Doubt* because of Hitchcock's skilful merry-go-round waltz scene and Joseph Cotton's superlative performance as a cunning villain (so different from his performance in the 1949 movie, *The Third Man*, in which he plays a good but simple character). I would like to give another reason why *Shadow of a Doubt* has such an impact—two superlative train scenes.

In the first scene, a man played by Cotton (1905–94) pretends to be sick and gets other passengers to help him off the train. When he sees his relatives on the platform, he recovers miraculously in less than 20 seconds. The only person who has an inkling of his subterfuge is his niece (played by Teresa Wright). This scene sets the stage—a crafty villain pitted against an observant niece.

The other scene occurs on a train. The more the train accelerates, the more the villain shows his true colours. While talking with his niece, his tone of voice and words change from pleading to menacing to threatening to kill. The suspense is heightened by the camera angle. The shot where two trains rush past each other has far more impact than a similar shot in *The Lady Vanishes*. Hitchcock planned the crime scene on the train carefully to give ultimate shock value.

Hitchcock's second film that I will discuss is *Strangers on a Train*. Although *Shadow of a Doubt* was more carefully crafted for psychological effect and is superior on the whole, *Strangers on a Train* is generally given higher marks because of the unique idea of having two train passengers plan an 'exchange murder', and the suspense created by a psychopath stalking someone who did not give the response he expected in a conversation. (The stalking scene sends shivers through audiences today when stalking has become a social issue.)

Personally, I give high marks to *Strangers on a Train* for its train scenes. The first scene is especially powerful. This is when the villain and his future victim happen to walk towards the same train together. The camera lens focuses mainly on the shoes of the two people. We do not see their faces until their shoes brush against each other on the train. This technique is remarkably suited to depicting a chance meeting of two people on a train.

I also give *Strangers on a Train* high marks for the scene early in the movie, when we see rails crisscrossing and trains moving in different directions across points. This treatment of the rails forebodes the 'exchange murder' that will be hatched later, as viewers may realize with a smile after the movie ends.

The Railway's Special Appeal for Directors

I have placed railway movies into three categories, concentrating mainly on works that have received considerable acclaim worldwide. Now I would like to conclude this article by briefly analyzing the reasons why directors use trains in their movies. What is it about trains that they find so attractive?

Railways have one clear advantage over other types of surface transportation—they have tremendous carrying capacity. They



Farley Granger and Robert Walker in *Strangers on a Train*, 1951, Alfred Hitchcock

(Uniphoto Press)

also have one clear disadvantage—they must follow a set path, so they lack freedom of movement. These are the features of railways and, of course, one could mention other unique features, such as precise scheduling and high speed. But these two features only stand out when railways are compared with other modes of transport. The perspective of a transportation expert is naturally different from that of a movie director. Even so, both would probably think first of railways in terms of carrying capacity and predetermined route.

Since a single train can carry many people, it offers a number of dramatic

opportunities for chance meetings and fond farewells. Stations lend themselves well to film. Trains do too, as *Strangers on a Train* shows.

Carrying capacity is a physical advantage while the lack of freedom symbolized by parallel rails is a psychological quality. A train must remain on its two rails, otherwise an accident occurs. This lack of freedom can be used to symbolize an unavoidable destiny. Film pioneers knew this and so do film makers today.

The unique nature of rail travel, as described above, has been used extensively in films in the past, and it will surely be used in the future as well. ■



Jiro Hanyu

Mr Hanyu was recently appointed Vice Minister for International Affairs in the Japanese Ministry of Transport. He graduated in economics from the University of Tokyo before joining the MOT in 1969. He was a Councillor in the Embassy of Japan in London and Director General of the Policy Affairs Bureau of the MOT before his present position.