

#1195051

Cinematic Romance Underground:
How Temporality and Movement Affect Love in the Subway

Love in the filmic subway shows a romance that can seemingly only exist underground, combines both negative and positive aspects (humor and pain; realism and fantasy), and will succeed or fail based on the lovers' interactions with both the platform and the moving trains. The most significant part of this analysis is how the characters spend their time while underground, and the extent to which they become comfortable with this space. If the couple spends too much time on the platform or in the station, their relationship is doomed to fail, because the train platform represents a space that is only to be occupied for a brief amount of time. The temporary nature of the station will reflect the temporary nature of the relationship. Similarly, if the lovers only spend time individually on the trains, this indicates their movement in two separate directions, which also shows that the relationship will fail. The only way for a relationship to succeed is for one lover to be able to extract the other from the grips of the underground. If the two are shown riding together on a train, this is an indication that the relationship will be a success, as they are moving together in the same direction. However, the ultimate success will be dependent on escaping the underground altogether.

In looking at each of the following films, *Brief Encounter*, *Subway*, *Amélie*, and *Kontroll*, I will examine the romance that blooms in several different ways. First, I want to look at how, specifically, the underground setting works as a source, or catalyst, for love. I have chosen films that center around a romance that is born and grows because of

the role of the underground. For each of these films, there are reasons why this love cannot exist aboveground. I will look at the different reasons for each why the underground is the catalyst for this romance.

In each of these films, there is also a mixture that takes place. In many, there is a combination of reality and fantasy. Sometimes this occurs in the filming locations or sets, and sometimes in the ways that certain cities or subways are portrayed. The other conflation that occurs is between comedy and drama. As previously discussed, no space can be entirely positive or entirely negative. In comparing different spaces portrayed in films throughout the semester, it is much easier to see the use of humor and lightheartedness in films focusing on the subway than any other underground. For instance, while the sewer often stands for rebirth and a new beginning, many of the films that take place in the sewer end on a rather depressing note, with no hope in sight. The subway, however, tends to be a place of entertainment, creativity and community, with both positive and negative moments woven together, often with a dash of humor thrown into the mix.

Finally, I will examine how the characters move within this space, specifically whether they interact with each other on the trains themselves, or if they stay on the platforms and other areas of the stations. Depending on the answer, we will be able to tell whether each couple will be successful or not. There are several factors that go into this part of the analysis, including whether they are shown on the trains individually or together, and whether they stay underground or eventually surface into the aboveground world.

The first film we will look at is *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945). It is a love story that takes place in a train station in England. Laura, a married woman, meets Alec on the train platform, by chance. She gets soot in her eye, from a passing train, and Alec, a doctor, helps her get it out. After this, they continually run into each other in the station, and eventually, fall in love. It is significant that they initially meet in the station. They would not have met otherwise – aboveground. Laura’s solitary weekly excursions mirror her desire to find something more; something her dull husband cannot provide. Gene D. Phillips discusses the difference between Laura’s dull and boring home-life and the excitement that she feels when she falls in love with Alec in the train station. He explains that the reason that they end the affair is due to middle-class decency and respect. Their love cannot exist in the normal aboveground society; it only can exist in the train station. “The film explores the anguish and frustration caused by having one’s desires thwarted by the pressures of social conventions” (Phillips 95). The two are dreamers who end up unable to keep the “real” world at bay, and so, give in to the pressures of mainstream society. Framing the two lovers against societal norms helps to explain why they feel more comfortable in an underground setting.

Their first kiss takes place in the train station, under an overpass. During this scene, it is difficult for the audience to even see their faces, as they stand in the dark tunnel, surrounded by gray concrete and shadows. Throughout the rest of the film, it is the train station that operates as their means of communication. This is where they decide to meet, and it becomes a place of communicating with each other. It is in the station café where Laura first admits to herself that she is in love with Alec. All the major points of their relationship happen in this underground setting. At their last meeting, as they are

parting forever, the camera shows them entering the train station by going down a set of stairs, and we can see an engine and smoke behind them. As they are walking, we hear Laura's voice-over telling us: "As we walked through the station, I remember thinking, 'This is the last time with Alec. I shall see all this again, but without Alec'" (*Brief Encounter*). Despite the fact that they do meet in other places, and they even spend some time out in nature, it is the train station that continues to be a pivotal part of their relationship.

Brief Encounter reflected a "new realism" that was becoming increasingly popular in Great Britain after the end of WWII. Lean, the director, admitted that the film was shot in "unglamorous settings" (Phillips 86). This effect was intentional, though, as this was the first of Lean's films to be shot on location. This was done in order to seem more realistic (Phillips 88). The exteriors of the railway station were shot at a suburban station at Carnforth in Lancashire and were filmed for two weeks between the hours of 10:30pm and 6:00am, in order to avoid the crowds of commuters (Phillips 90). Part of the film was still made up of sets, but much of it was filmed in an actual train station.

While the film is most definitely a drama, and it is decidedly not funny, there are both happy and sad moments in Laura and Alec's relationship. The more noticeable conflation here is between the quotidian and the dangerous. Laura opens the film by stating: "I've fallen in love. I'm an ordinary woman. I didn't think such violent things could happen to ordinary people. It all started on an ordinary day, in the most ordinary place in the world: the refreshment room at Milford Junction" (*Brief*). The film is peppered by ordinary experiences: gossip-y friends, crossword puzzles and tea with the husband, and afternoon matinees. However, the crux of the narrative rests on the

excitement and danger of forbidden love, framed by the banality of commuter transportation.

All of the time that they are together in the train station, Laura and Alec are on the platform, in the station café, descending the stairs, or running beneath the tracks, from platform to platform. The only times they are shown on the train itself is when they are arriving or departing, separately. Laura is shown riding the train, without Alec, on several occasions. More than once, she is daydreaming about running away with Alec, and she feels guilty about what she is doing and how she is feeling. Alec is often shown boarding and leaving on a train, but he and Laura are never traveling together. This mirrors the fact that they are both moving and traveling in life, but in different directions. They are destined to be unhappy, because the train platform represents a transitory space that should only be occupied briefly. Because the majority of their relationship centers around the platform, the space mirrors their relationship, and, therefore, only exists within temporal confines. It is doomed to fail, as it can only be temporary. Alec attempts to pull Laura (and their relationship) out of the underground when he asks her to meet him at his friend's apartment, but she ends up fleeing the scene, and it is a failure. Their love must stay within the walls of the station, and, therefore, it does not work.

Subway (Luc Besson, 1985) is another film that mirrors the failure of staying too long on the platform. Fred lures Helen down into the Paris metro through a series of ransom notes. He ends up becoming part of an underground community, and he, along with the others that he meets, manipulate aspects of the subway system in order to use the space for their own personal purposes. Helen joins them, and they transform the underground setting into a livable space, rather than merely a space of transport. All the

interactions between Fred and Helena happen underground, and they are both happiest when they are together there. Fred first admits his love to her when he calls her from a phone in the metro. At the film's start, Fred descends into the subway and never comes out again. At the film's end, when Fred is dying in Helena's arms, he asks whether she love him just a little bit, and she responds by kissing him. This scene takes place during the band's performance, inside the métro station, after Fred has been shot by men hired by Helena's husband.

Most of the activities of the community take place during the night, when commuters are not in the station. That they are only able to live as they wish during the times when the metro is closed is proof of their inability to fit in with the aboveground, "normal" society. After spending the night underground, Helena's husband comes to take her home, which she resists. Once aboveground, she voices her frustration and the sense of imprisonment she feels in her life. Her millionaire husband and the bland, fake people she must interact with in her society lifestyle smother her. Her happiness lies underground with Fred, whom she is falling in love with. They both know that the love they experience in the subway cannot be had aboveground. She is a bourgeois married woman, and he is a criminal and a thief. It is only through living outside of mainstream society that they are able to express their true love.

Luc Besson decided to use both elaborately constructed sets, as well as actual métro locations in the film. Besson said that he wanted to recreate the métro in order to "focus on form and colour rather than direct realism" (Hayward 40). In doing so, the subway is at once both recognizable and unfamiliar. He explains that he "wanted to show not the violence of the métro but both its sterile side and its more disconcerting and

glaucous aspects” (Hayward 37). It was important to him that the underground scenery mirror the aboveground world of Paris. He wanted it to serve both as a source of Fred’s freedom, but also act as his prison. It was to appear both as very real, yet also as completely constructed. Both Besson and Alexandre Trauner (who constructed the sets of the “fake” métro) admitted that in the early stages of making the film, the métro threatened to take over. Besson says, “We couldn’t find a storyline strong enough to take the décor’s place” (Powrie 124). This explains the significant role of the setting in the film and why it plays such an integral part in the narrative.

Just as the scenery represents the conflation of reality and a make-believe world, so too does the film combine humor and pain. Fred is a source of entertainment throughout, as he adjusts immediately to the underground spaces and timetable (almost entirely nocturnal) and, in this adjustment, starts to play and manipulate his surroundings for his entertainment. He attends a birthday party, creates a ballroom to dance with Helen, takes her to see “fireworks,” which are the sparks from the welders on the tracks, and puts together a pop rock band. The humor of him shocking the old people in the audience with his new rock group is immediately tempered by his death. The film ends on a sad note, but the band keeps playing. It manages to be both upbeat and sad at once.

Throughout the film, Helena and Fred are never shown riding the train together. While all their interactions take place in the métro, they only take place on the platform, or in other underground spaces within the station. They speak to each other on benches on the platform, they dance together in an empty station after it has closed, they watch the welders’ sparks at night, and they stay in Roller’s secret room hidden deep within the underground. They are continually using spaces for purposes for which they are not

intended. By spending too much time in a setting that should only be occupied for a short amount of time and during certain times of the day, they are dooming their love to fail. The couple never rides the train together, and therefore, their love never progresses or moves from its static and counter-cultural position on the platform. They are using a transitory space as a livable one, which guarantees their relationship to be a failure.

Not all subway romances end up broken however. Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001) shows how the underground can contribute in bringing two people together successfully. The first time that Amélie sees Nino, he is crouched on the ground of a métro platform, trying to get something out from under a nearby photobooth. She spots him again on another morning, after spending the night in a train station, on her way back home from her father's house. This time, when the two make eye contact, the camera pans down from Amélie's face, and we see inside her chest, where her heart is glowing and beating rapidly. They have fallen in love. In addition to their first meeting being in the métro, all of their subsequent communication goes through the subway stations as well. Nino uses posters in the métro to find his lost photo album and Amélie, as a result. Again, after recovering the album, Nino uses posters plastered around the train station to find Amélie. She responds by leaving torn-up photos of herself, asking when and where they should meet, under the photobooth, where she knows he will find them. Instead of talking or calling or even writing letters, they use the walls of the train station as their own personal form of communication to advance the relationship. The subway stations are used again and again as a mode of communication between the two characters and both seem very comfortable within the confines of the underground. For the two of them,

it is more than just a place of everyday transport, but a livable space, where other aspects of life can, not only take place, but also thrive.

The comfort that Amélie feels in the underground can be seen when she sleeps there. Upon realizing that the station was closed, Amélie sleeps with her gnome in a photobooth. This is of note, because it seems like the natural thing for her to do in this situation. By her sleeping there, she has made it a livable space, and one in which she feels comfortable inhabiting. Amélie, especially, seems more comfortable existing and interacting in the underground, than aboveground within normal society. When Nino comes to the café where Amélie works to see her, she loses all courage and refuses to tell him that she is the mystery girl for whom he is searching. Underground and on the train platforms, she is brave and adventurous, but within mainstream society, she cannot live normally. During the courting stages of their relationship, they must stay underground, because Amélie would not have the courage to interact with Nino in any other way.

Although many real métro platforms and train stations are used in the film, *Amélie* has been described as portraying a fictionalized Paris. Elizabeth Ezra discusses the success of *Amélie* and how it was viewed as a quintessentially French film, however, its depiction of Paris is skewed, as it portrays the city as an “alien hybrid” (86). The city is both strange and familiar because it shows very traditional “Parisian” and “French” things, but it does not accurately represent the actual city. This strangeness is reflected in the tension between the state-of-the-art technology used in the film and the quaintness it is trying to evoke. Paris has been manipulated into something both recognizable and bizarre. François Penz contends that Jeunet created a fictionalized and idealized Paris, with no crowds, traffic or dog shit. And, while the film is very specifically placed at the

time of Lady Di's death, Jeunet's portrayal of the city is very old-fashioned, deliberate and, ultimately, anachronistic. The city is a combination of the real and the imaginary.

The film is also a combination of a lighthearted comedy and an examination of a woman unable to interact in normal society. Amélie finds her love in the métro system of Paris, and she spends most of the film pursuing and avoiding him, both wanting him and giving in to her cowardice. The film makes light of the subject, as they lead each other on scavenger hunts throughout the city, but at the heart of it, we have the story of two people who are unable to come to terms with their inability to interact in society. The ease with which she is able to inhabit the train stations and platforms says something about her comfort in the underground space, while aboveground we see situation after situation of her awkwardness with others. Overall, it is a playful film, but there are undercurrents of sadness.

Throughout the film, Amélie is often shown riding the trains by herself. She is always alone, and Nino is never on the train with her. In fact, Nino is never shown riding the trains. While he uses the train stations and platforms as playgrounds and as a way to communicate with Amélie, his mode of transport is completely aboveground. Even when he is exploring the stations for new photos, he drives from station to station on his scooter, through the streets of Paris. Once Amélie and Nino get together, she is pulled from the trains and brought into the aboveground. The final sequence of the film shows her riding on the back of Nino's scooter around Paris. Their love is successful because Nino is able to extract Amélie from the underground and get her off the solitary trains and into his world aboveground. As long as she is on the trains, riding alone, the relationship will not work. Also, as long as she is spending too much time in the stations

and on the platforms, the relationship is doomed to fail. However, because Nino is able to remove her from the underground, the love is saved, and the two lovers can end up happily together at the film's end.

Another happy ending and successful romance takes place in *Kontroll* (Nimród Antal, 2003). Bucsú first sees Szofi dressed as a teddy bear on one of the train cars. He stares at her intently, as if in a trance, and Szofi finally asks if he wants to say something to her. She points out that he is acting strangely, and the ticket checkers never act like that. Up until this point, we see Bucsú acting roughly with his fellow crew and the difficult passengers that he has to deal with on a daily basis. The audience realizes now that he is mesmerized with Szofi and is falling in love with her. The two continue to see each other on the trains and in the stations. They talk and share parts of their lives with each other, but only within the confines of the underground or on the trains. Bucsú sleeps in the subway, and he even dreams of Szofi, who leads him down onto the tracks and into a small tunnel that holds the "pusher." Their relationship progresses in this space, and Szofi even invites him to a secret rave in the underground.

The relationship has to stay in the subway, because Bucsú is unable to face the aboveground world. He has escaped from normal society and has begun living in the stations and sleeping on the platforms. Although it is his job to constantly occupy the subway, he spends *too* much time there. Even his co-workers, who are a gang of misfits and living on the fringes of society, call Bucsú crazy when they find out that he has been sleeping there. Once the space is re-appropriated for other uses, it becomes wrong. The space is only supposed to be used for certain purposes, and if it is used in a different way,

it falls outside the frame of what is considered normal. Bucsú has become more comfortable living in the subway, so his romance with Szofi must stay underground.

Like the aforementioned films, *Kontroll* also deals heavily with the idea of realism. The film was shot during five-hour increments when the Budapest subway system was closed for the night. All the trains used in the film are real, and during the scenes when characters are “rail running,” this is exactly what they are doing while being filmed (“Trivia”). Yet, while all this adds to the hyperrealism of the film, there are also the remarks at the film’s beginning from a “spokesperson” from the Budapest subway. Is this real or fictional? There have been many debates over the truth of this part of the film, and no one has been able to say whether this was just a ploy by Antal to make the film seem even more realistic, or whether it is meant to be funny. Even in a film that portrays space as realistically as *Kontroll*, there is still an unsure combination of what is fictional and what is real.

The humor in the film also adds to this conflation of reality and fiction. This group of seemingly incompetent subway workers gives the audience many moments of comedic relief within a dark film. There are scenes of Tibi dancing to pulsing electronic music, and even while we are repulsed by the paramedics collecting bits and pieces of the latest victim of the subway “pusher,” we still halfway smile at Tibi’s interaction with the Professor. We’re torn between the comedy of Tibi vomiting all down the front of the Professor while being horrified at the scene on the tracks. Muki also works as a humorous device, with his narcolepsy, falling asleep mid-fight. Yet, despite all this humor, we still see the darkness that pervades the narrative in the character of Bucsú, who is unable to operate above ground. We’re saddened by his inability to be in control of his life outside

the subway, and the film pulls us in two different directions as we laugh and then feel bad about it moments later.

Bucsú is often shown riding the trains. Often he is with his crew, working, or he is riding with Szofi. When they are riding together, they are shown talking and interacting. Szofi, in addition to riding with Bucsú is also shown riding with her father, who is the train's driver. In this examination, this is the only time that a couple is shown riding the train together. The two lovers also spend a large amount of time together on the platforms as well. Much like Amélie, Bucsú is in danger of ruining the relationship because he occupies the platform for too long. It is only because Szofi pulls him out of the station and aboveground that their love will work. She, like Nino, is the saving grace, and because she is able to negotiate both worlds, she is able to remove Bucsú from the underground and make the relationship successful. While both Szofi and Nino are comfortable in the subway, they do not cross the line as Bucsú and Amélie do, and are therefore able to bring their lovers aboveground and live happily ever after.

Love in the underground, specifically the subway, is a complex idea, and there are several factors that combine to determine its ultimate success or failure. The relationships themselves seem only to be able to exist underground, as the two lovers are unable to operate "normally" in an aboveground world. They retreat to the underground to feel more at ease, and, in doing so, are often in danger of becoming trapped there. In order for the romance to be successful, one partner must be able to negotiate both the aboveground and the underground. The presence of the trains, their timetables and schedules, helps to emphasize the significance of temporality. These are spaces that are to be inhabited for only a short amount of time and for certain purposes. When these criterion are violated,

the couples have to pay for it. The riding of trains also indicates whether the relationship will be a success or not, and literally represents the direction in which the characters are moving. In the end, despite the mixtures of humor and pain, realism and make-believe, and mainstream society and the outcasts, the lesson learned from these films is that love can only continue to bloom if its roots are ripped from the underground and brought out into the sunlight.

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