

Derailment

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“As for the place not desired, there is something there and that is disorder. As for the desired place there is nothing there and that is order.” Bertolt Brecht

Derailment is a short film of poetic beauty that explores the conflict between dream and reality. A simple narrative frames a woman's encounter with a sleeping man and opens up a resonant space of romantic possibility. Yet as the title suggests such encounters involve the risk of derailment, of slipping from our everyday, familiar track into the unknown. And what derails us, what always derails us, is our free-floating *desire*. In this sense the film tells an old story about storytelling itself, about our need to generate new stories for our selves and our fear of what change might bring. The film suggests that our imaginings and romantic longings are the glittering surface, that play over our deepest fears of darkness and death.

This is also therefore a world of *mythic*. resonance. A wordless, black and white world built around image and sound, looks and glances. The first shot establishes that we are Underground, and no longer in the bright rational light of the everyday.

A woman steps out of the darkness as a train arrives. Her face suggests the composed, privatised world of the city dweller. The warning hum of the closing door reminds us that there is no turning back and there may be danger ahead. As we take off into the darkness of the tunnel, we could be on a journey to the land of the dead. (The warning sound is also a structuring motif; it is repeated later to awaken the woman from her dream and to remind her that time for making a decision, is running out) For now however, the ethereal lighting, the shadow figures, the dissonant echoing sounds, all prepare us for a dream-like journey. The woman moves slowly in and out of the light and pushes passed the swaying, ghostly bodies, the lost souls of this underworld.

Lulled by the motion of the train we are already in a somnambulant

world, where time seems to have slowed down and every image feels charged with meaning. The woman is searching for a place to sit (but there is also a suggestion she is looking for something more) and her gaze alights upon the face of a sleeping man. She squeezes in to the seat opposite him.

A series of shots now show her growing, *erotic*. fascination with the man building to an intimate almost caressing close-up of the man's face. A *gender reversal*. of the Sleeping Beauty, she is the one who can dream about waking him up. She is also the one who is taking pleasure in *looking*. at his secret sleeping smile and his open legs as he touches himself. It is her gaze that organizes the narrative flow, she is in control of the fantasy. The film at this point, represents a satisfying shift away from the dominant male gaze of mainstream Hollywood. Yet the reality of their bodies touching, her knees between his legs, seems to break the spell. She tugs at her skirt and looks away to her own sad reflection in the train window. In reality she is alone yet the almost gothic imagery of their faces reflected and doubled suggest not only a disturbing *otherness*. but also a parallel world where they may yet meet. They will encounter each other again on the street of dreams.

The woman's eyes close and her head falls to the window, mirroring the pose of the sleeping man. Faint, ghostly voices and the screech and squeal of the train act as a transition into her dream. The carved, stone cherub (divine messenger) on the cornice of the window watches over the entrance to this world, as lace curtains part to reveal a mirror, symbol of that parallel world of possibility. In this place she is fulfilled, she has her heart's desire. On the other side of the looking-glass she has found her twin, her soul mate. Her face lights up, a huge loving smile, full and sensual at once post-coital and divine. She turns to her sleeping partner, the man from the train. His look is more distant, he seems strangely absent as if he himself is symbolic rather than real. He is a reminder of something lacking in her self or perhaps the impossibility of relationship itself. A broken flower pot adds to the sense of unease. An image of fertile growth now scattered. Then a moment of *irony*. as the woman turns her gaze toward the camera, towards the audience on the other side of the screen/mirror. We are reminded that another aspect of the film's affective pleasure, is that it is a film about film and the cinematic pleasures of looking, dreaming and desiring.

A warning buzzer cuts across the dream. We have arrived at a station and the doors are opening. It is the man who wakes up first and becomes aware of the woman's legs between his own. Now it is the man who looks at the sleeping woman. She awakes to find him smiling at her. She briefly returns his smile then looks away while sounds of another train slowing down, suggest a sense of coming back to earth, to gravity to the heaviness of social reality. Just moments ago she was lying with this man in fantasy and now in reality he wants her. He is standing in the doorway waiting for her to follow him. Now we recognize the essential nature of this tale. It is a variant of the "what if...?" story. The one where you pass someone in the street and there is a moment of recognition. You want to stop and say something but you let them go. You will never see them again but *what if*. you had spoken to them, would your life have changed forever? In this sense *Derailment* is similar to certain television adverts which focus on dreaming individuals looking out of buses, walking along deserted beaches, staring at the sky - which end with the brand name of the company that will change your life and make your dreams come true. The difference of course, is that the advert is superficial and sentimental; manipulating desire for something we don't really need while concealing the costs of excessive consumption. The challenging, disturbing and utopian aspect of the dream wish is lost. The woman in *Derailment* however must be aware she has woken up into not only a daydream but also a complex *patriarchal*. reality; an insecure, fragmented world of privatised emotions where it is dangerous to dream of love and relationship with strange men. This is an important aspect of the disturbing power of the film. If she follows him, she risks much more than he does. She doesn't know this man whose footsteps echo down a lonely subway tunnel. (Anything could happen; we do not know the consequences of our actions nor do we have enough information.) She hesitates as the warning buzzer sounds then makes a decision. The train leaves and a woman's footsteps click emphatically over black. Is she walking toward life or death? You need to take risks, you need to go off the rails from time to time, but what if you get what you desire? [1] In the end our desires are shadowed by existential dread yet still we cling to the hope of a better life; and what is life without a dream of love. [2]



1 " There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire.
The other is to get it." George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman*.

2 "We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep"
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* .