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'Renoir's *La Bête Humaine* is a tour de force because it powerfully combines symbolism, metaphor and realism.' How far do you agree? Answer with reference to the film.

Jean Renoir's 1938 adaptation of Zola's 1890 novel, *La Bête Humaine*, is remarkable for its combination and juxtaposition of the Naturalist concept of realism with Romantic features, symbolism and metaphor, creating an effect which is both chaotic and unsettling, thus reflecting the subject matter of the film. Initially, such concepts may appear incompatible, for whilst Realism as an artistic movement is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary to mean "close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene"¹, the very nature of symbolism and metaphor is such that each exists outside of direct representation, with symbolism referring to "[t]he practice of representing things by symbols, or of giving a symbolic character to objects or acts; the systematic use of symbols; hence, symbols collectively or generally"², and metaphor "A figure of speech in which a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable"³. It will therefore be argued that Renoir's own brand of realism is such that it employs symbolism and metaphor in order to express universal truth, and that this is particularly prevalent in such elements as the use of trains, the soundtrack, and the metaphor of vision.

Perhaps the prime example of Renoir's use of a combination of symbolism, metaphor and realism is that of the recurring motif of the train. This is encapsulated by John Anzalone, who states that "[w]ith the railway [Renoir] is faithful to an important naturalistic dimension of the novel, and consistent with his quest for cinematic realism. But he had not altogether turned his back on the romantic and mythic dimensions of the story"⁴. Certainly, the film's opening sequence, in which Lantier and Pecqueux are shown driving the train, with its initial lack of any sound other than that of the engine itself, can be viewed in a purely naturalistic sense, with the importance placed on the noises of the train foregrounding their status as working-class railway

¹ "realism, n.". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.) <<http://0-www.oed.com.pugwash.lib.warwick.ac.uk/view/Entry/125337?redirectedFrom=naturalism>> [accessed 10 February 2014].

² "symbolism, n.". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

³ "metaphor, n.". *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

⁴ Anzalone, John, "Sound/Tracks: Zola, Renoir and *La Bête Humaine*", *The French Review*, 62 (1989), 583-590 (p. 585).

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Comment [1]: Good: raising problematique

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Comment [2]: Unpacks meaning of terms and thus shows their potentially contradictory nature

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Comment [3]: Writer has successfully defined his/her take on the question that can be pursued in what follows.

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Comment [4]: Main theory to be tested: train combines all three elements. Note how secondary quote enhances this examination

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Comment [5]: Theory 1 evidence: train realistic in its visual and oral presentation

drivers.⁵ This is again cited by Anzalone, who argues that throughout his films of the thirties, Renoir's "own realism" was grounded "in character and class", both of which are clearly illustrated through such extended focus on the mundanity of Lantier's every-day, working-class life.⁶ Aside from this, the train, Lison, may further be viewed as an object of realism due to its effect on the characters of the film. [This is exemplified in the romantic scene between Lantier and Séverine, in which constant reference is made to the physical effect of the train on Séverine in particular, with her claiming that "c'est chaud" and "mes mains, elles sont toutes noires".⁷ [This capacity of Lison to inhabit the physical space of the film, and to tangibly affect its characters, seems to denote the train to be an object of realism: its presentation is accurate, dirty and hot, rather than romanticised], and it works to ground the film with a sense of the class hierarchies which, according to Anzalone, are what constitutes realism for Renoir.

However, the train is especially significant in this sense, as it may be argued to be simultaneously a realist element, and one of metaphor and symbolism, encapsulating the "romantic and mythic dimensions of the story" as described by Anzalone.⁸ Critics have cited the importance of the train as a metaphor in Zola's original novel, with Katherine Golson speaking of "the catastrophe of the unmanned train speeding toward war and destruction at the end" as a metaphor for the inevitable self-destructive impulses of human nature, and although she concedes that Renoir's treatment of the train subject and its representative state is "different" to that of Zola, it must nevertheless be supposed to be more than simply a realist plot device.⁹ It is here useful to regard Renoir's adaptations of Zola's novels as "transpositions"¹⁰, rather than direct translations, for whilst the war to which Golson refers is the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, Zola's novel having been set in the 1860s, Renoir's war is, albeit without the director's knowledge, the Second World War, which began the year after *La Bête Humaine* was released. It is at this point that the train takes on a far deeper symbolism, for as Janet Bergstrom accurately surmises, "Renoir's films provided the best cinematic index to French society during those years, from the economic depression of the early 1930s...through the rise and fall of the Popular Front...up to the very eve of war".¹¹ Thus, although Renoir could not actually have predicted the advent of war, the train, with its constant looming presence in such scenes as the romantic one

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Comment [6]: Evidence: characters' real encounters with physical properties of train

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Comment [7]: Explanation of theory 1: train realistic

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Comment [8]: Theory 2: Train also works at symbolic / metaphoric level

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Comment [9]: Reminder for reader of point made in para 1

⁵ *La Bête Humaine*, dir. by Jean Renoir. (Lux Compagnie Cinématographique de France. 1938.) (02:34-05:46).

⁶ Anzalone, p. 585

⁷ *La Bête Humaine* (57:00 – 58:36).

⁸ Anzalone, p. 585

⁹ Golson, Katherine, "'Vous allez vous user les yeux': Renoir's Framing of *La Bête humaine*", *The French Review*, 73 (1999), 110-120 (p. 110).

¹⁰ Anzalone, p. 584

¹¹ Bergstrom, Janet, "Jean Renoir's Return to France", *Poetics Today*, 17 (1996), 453-489 (p. 456).

previously described¹², and the attempted murder of Roubard¹³, appears to symbolise the degeneration of French society in the 1930s, with its powerful forward momentum towards destruction. The fact that the train is stopped safely following Jacques' suicide is merely indicative of the time of the film's making, for as with the potential harm caused to the train and its passengers with the suicide of the driver, the fear here is in the potential for war, not war itself.¹⁴ Thus, the train may simultaneously be considered an object of realism and one of metaphor, particularly in its role as a symbol of the times. However, this still presents problems as to the manner in which these two seemingly-opposing functions are reconciled within the film.

It may be argued that the motion of the train is symbolic, not only of the degeneration of French society with the failure of the Popular Front, but also of the degeneration of humankind on an individual level, as a result of the "human beast" of the title. Golson attributes Lantier's tragic end to both "individual and social blindness", namely to the "fêlure héréditaire"¹⁵ which, she argues, points to both an individual weakness on the part of Lantier, and a social one on the part of France as a whole. When describing his "mal"¹⁶ to Flore near the beginning of the film, Lantier claims that it is like a kind of "grande fumée" which "déforme tout"¹⁷, and indeed the smoke metaphor is extended throughout the film. Since it is reasonable to assume that Lantier's "fêlure" is responsible for Séverine's murder, and Lantier's subsequent suicide, it is interesting to note the role a lack of vision plays in his succumbing to his internal "bête". As Golson accurately suggests, Jacques becomes increasingly physically blinder throughout the film, relying, for example, on Séverine to relay to him the approach of Roubard during the attempted murder scene, and his death at the hands of his "fêlure" marks the culmination of this, as she states that "[t]he cut to Jacques's blank eyes and Pecqueux's final gesture of closing them confirm the failure of vision".¹⁸ Indeed, previous discussions of the film's treatment of class hierarchies mean that a comparison of such individual lack of vision to a lack of vision and, moreover, progression in French society, would not be difficult to make. In fact, such a concept is further expressed on a microcosmic level within the world of the film as one sees Roubard's descent from the egalitarian and loving husband seen at the beginning of the film, to the jealous gambler seen at the end. It appears that such "fêlure" is not confined to Jacques alone, and suggests that it is, in fact, a real and present danger to even the most upstanding of citizens. Thus, it is in this

¹² *La Bête Humaine*, particularly (56:14 – 57:10).

¹³ *La Bête Humaine*, (01:10:32 – 01:14:08).

¹⁴ *La Bête Humaine*, (01:38:52 – 01:39:37).

¹⁵ *La Bête Humaine*, (00:01:57).

¹⁶ *La Bête Humaine*, (22:28 – 22:30).

¹⁷ *La Bête Humaine*, (22:37 – 22:45).

¹⁸ Golson, p. 118.

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Comment [10]: Evidence of symbolic content: degeneration here points to larger social degenerative forces

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Comment [11]: Explanation of evidence

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Comment [12]: Transition to 3rd para

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Comment [13]: Theory 3: links back to theme of 'universalisation' mentioned in the introduction

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Comment [14]: Evidence of theory 3

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Comment [15]: Reference to cinematography

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Comment [16]: Explanation of evidence

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Comment [17]: Second example

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Comment [18]: Second explanation

way that Renoir uses both the metaphor of the train, as is particularly evident when Lantier is shown walking down the tracks following his murder of Séverine, suggesting that he has, in a symbolic sense, become the train, and of the characters of Lantier and Roubard, in order to express the reality of the “beast” of social and individual blindness present in French society of the day.

It therefore appears as though Renoir’s own specific brand of realism is one that employs both metaphor and symbolism to present a more deeply accurate vision of what Renoir wishes to present. For Renoir, precise, visual realism is not the main priority, despite its being generally well-accomplished, rather it is the reality of the “bête” which inhabits society, and can be easily succumbed to through a lack of social vision. Thus, the film’s status as a “tour de force” is an appropriate one, as it not only combines metaphor and symbolism with realism, but also employs the former two techniques in pursuit of the third, existing simultaneously on both a realist and a metaphorical level. The fact that the film was released only a year prior to the outbreak of the Second World War only serves to heighten its poignancy as an examination of the implications of the reality of human “félure”¹⁹.

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Comment [19]: Conclusion successfully draws together the three elements set for discussion showing how their complementarity has been considered in the essay, and giving the reader a new ‘take’ on the question

¹⁹ *La Bête Humaine* (00:01:57).

Bibliography of Work's Cited

Primary Sources

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