

Introduction

Two Myths

WE BEGIN WITH A STORY, really half a story. You supply the ending.

It takes place in Paris, in the present day, where a nice young woman lives with her handsome boyfriend. But alas, she is not happy, because her boyfriend has become interested in another woman. What's more, instead of suppressing this longing, which would have been virtuous, or cheating and keeping the fact to himself, which might have been convenient, he has moved the Other Woman into their apartment. Now three people sleep in the same bed.

At first, the nice young woman is willing to give this a try. She hopes this is just a phase. But as time goes on, she realizes that her passivity is perpetuating this state of affairs, that her boyfriend is quite happy to have two lovers and unwilling to give up this ideal situation. So she despairs. She confides in her mother. She spends time by herself, thinking and brooding. Inevitably, there are arguments, including one particularly fierce one as the three walk down a street heading toward a nightclub. But soon enough, they calm down and proceed to the club as planned. It's crowded. Loud music plays. And then. . . .

Let's leave our story there. Imagine you're the screenwriter. Where would you take the story next? How would you develop it? How would you end it?

Let this percolate in the back of your mind for a bit, and we'll get back to it soon.

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT FRENCH CINEMA, specifically the women of today's French cinema—a subject as vital as life and as irresistible as movies. Yet many Americans, unfamiliar with French film, will hear “women of today's French cinema” and immediately imagine something forbidding or austere. Other more refined cineastes may know and appreciate the French movies that play at art houses and arrive on DVD in this country, but they can't know the full story. They are not in a position to know that what they are seeing is just a hint of something vast and extraordinary.

The full story is that for the last two decades France has been in the midst of an explosion of female talent. What is happening in France today is a blossoming of female brilliance and originality of a kind that has never happened anywhere or at any period of film history, with but one glorious exception—in the Hollywood of the 1930s. Indeed, today's Hepburns, Davises, Crawford, Garbos, and Stanwycks are not American. They're French. They are working constantly, appearing up to three or four times each year in films geared to their star personalities and moral meaning. These films, often intelligent, personal, and insightful investigations into what it means to be human in the twenty-first century, are the kinds of films that many Americans want to see. And they wonder why no one is making them. But people *are* making them, just not in the United States.

Moreover, women are not only working in front of the camera in France but behind it, too. Important actresses are writing and directing films, and many of the country's biggest and most acclaimed directors are women. Truly, this is a halcyon period, happening as we speak, and to miss this moment would be like living in 1920 and never seeing a silent comedy, or like living in 1950 and never seeing a film noir. It would be to miss one of the most enriching cinematic movements of your time. Yet most Americans, virtually all Americans, have been missing it.

AMERICAN FILMGOERS operate according to two myths when it comes to foreign film. Like most myths, they are comforting. Unlike a lot of myths, these are not even slightly true.

Myth Number One is that we in the U.S.—especially those of us who live in cities and have access to film festivals and art houses—get the very best of foreign cinema. We may not get everything, the idea goes, but why import what we already have? We don't need a routine cop thriller from Denmark. The important thing is that we get the best.

We don't.

The truth about foreign distribution in the United States is that what we get in theaters (and on DVD) is random—a small, haphazard sampling of average to above-average product. True, we usually don't get the worst films, but beyond that there's no pattern. Great movies are often ignored, while pretty good movies somehow slip in. And the vast, vast majority of good and great product we never see at all. We never hear about it. Unless we go out of our way to find out about it, we never know it exists.

Myth Number Two is even worse, because it's pernicious, difficult to dislodge and is believed by many people, including sophisticated folks who care about movies. This is the notion that the dearth of foreign cinema in America doesn't really matter, because American independent films can serve the same function. According to this line of thinking, American independents can even be a kind of improvement, a lively, no-subtitles alternative.

In reality, American independent cinema is very much a product of the same culture that produces Hollywood films. The aesthetic values may be different, but the cultural values and assumptions are identical, because the films are, in the end, products of the same country, the same people and the same period of history. Some independent films may show us new ways of looking at movies, but they won't show us new ways of looking at life. Moreover, they tend to be guy-movies just as often as the films out of Hollywood. Hollywood guy-movies may be more violent or boorish, and independent guy-movies may be more thoughtful and sensitive. Hollywood leading men may be handsome, while independent leading men may be more scruffy or homely and look exactly like the director. But it's still mostly guys, all the time.

Only foreign films can show us entirely new ways of being and of seeing life . . . which brings us back to the story that introduced this book,

about the nice young woman forced into a three-way relationship by her randy live-in boyfriend. I asked you to come up with the rest of the story. Think about it for a minute, then read on.

HOW WE FINISH THE STORY highlights how we see the world. Present this scenario to a group of Americans, and inevitably you will hear the same three endings, all of them mere variations on a theme:

Scenario One: The nice young woman leaves the boyfriend and resumes her life, meets someone else . . . and just as she's recovering from her sadness, but while she's still vulnerable, the boyfriend comes back, begging her to return. She does return, but then realizes she has the strength and the desire to get rid of him, and so she does. He's miserable. She's happy. The End.

Scenario Two: The nice young woman leaves the boyfriend and resumes her life. She gets over him, and then one day he returns. He begs. He crawls through mud. He walks on broken glass. She's inclined to reject him as a bad bet, and then some crisis takes place, and he gets to prove that he really, really has changed. She accepts him back. He's contrite but redeemed. She's happy. The End.

Scenario Three: The nice young woman remains in the uncomfortable situation but starts bonding with the other woman. They share a growing frustration, amusement and disdain for the boyfriend. Then one night, when the boyfriend is away and they're sitting around drinking wine . . . something happens. They look at each other. They start kissing. They realize that what they like best in the relationship is each other, and what they like least is the guy. This feeling solidifies over the course of time, and eventually the gals throw the bum out. He's embarrassed and shattered. The women are happy. The End.

You'll notice that these three scenarios, while different, have one big thing in common. In all three, the nice young woman—suffering and put-upon at the start of our story—ends up triumphant. And the boyfriend, who has been heedless of her feelings, ends up sorry. In the first scenario, he's rejected. In the second, he's humbled. And in the third, he's sexually humiliated.

These scenarios bespeak our American way of seeing reality. Young and old, urban and rural, liberal and conservative, Americans have an ingrained cultural tendency to see life in moral terms. This is so much a part of us that we don't even notice it, but even our love stories are about finding Mr. Right and rejecting Mr. Wrong. Even our romances are about discerning the eternal moral pattern in the clutter of our specific circumstances. Thus, when Americans hear half a story, they complete it by restoring the moral order.

The French are not like this. They may care about right and wrong as much as we do, but they're much less interested in exploring moral gradations in their stories. Their movies are more interested in human behavior, in the stuff people do. They are far more content to live with the unknowable and accept the unexplainable than to settle for a glib answer. To them, putting a neat button on things is cheap, not a way of identifying and establishing value but of minimizing and limiting a story's scope and resonance.

In the case of the young woman and her boyfriend, the scenario I gave you is from an actual movie, Christophe Honoré's *Les chansons d'amour* (*Love Songs*), from 2007. Ludivine Sagnier starred as Julie, upset that Ismaël (Louis Garrel) has brought Alice (Clotilde Hesme) into their bedroom. But alas, the true fate of young Julie is far different from anything imagined in our Three Scenarios.

In the actual film, Julie and Ismaël argue all the way to a nightclub, then calm down and go inside. And then, within minutes, Julie begins to feel ill. Needing air, she walks outside the club . . . and drops dead. Of a cardiac arrest. Because you know how it is: Seemingly healthy twenty-nine-year-old women are dropping dead of cardiac arrest all the time.

And what of Ismaël and Alice? They break up soon after, and Ismaël experiences a dark night of the soul that goes on for several months, until one day Ismaël realizes that he's gay. He gets an apartment with a nice young man and discovers love once more. That is the happy ending.

Now in terms of Hollywood storytelling, *Les chansons d'amour* would be considered utterly insane, and I admit that it's an extreme example.

Most French movies do not have scenarios quite so ludicrous. But while Americans might reject the story as far-fetched in terms of character and pointless in terms of meaning, a French viewer might see the movie as simply depicting an interesting situation—a situation so different and unexpected as to be worthy of dramatization.

It should go without saying that there is no single right way of seeing the world or of telling stories. The French fascination with life as it is lived has given us the human comedy of Jacques Tati, epic achievements such as Jean Eustache's *The Mother and the Whore*, and just about every film of the French New Wave. At the same time, in lesser hands, the same French tendency has given us narratively flaccid, self-serious films that are basically just a succession of pointless incidents pretending to indicate the randomness and absurdity of human existence. It has given the French too much of a tendency toward easy, thoughtless nihilism—or silliness such as *Chansons d'amour*.

Likewise our American preoccupation with morality, in the right cinematic hands, has give us films like *Casablanca*, *Brokeback Mountain* and *No Country for Old Men*. America's best movies, such as *The Godfather*, *Schindler's List*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Million Dollar Baby*, are almost invariably grand moral documents that explore the nature of good and evil and that challenge moral complacency. Yet on the downside, this same American preoccupation with morals has given us preachy movies, idiotic romantic comedies and every mindless action movie known to man. It has given our movies too much of a tendency toward easy, thoughtless formula. And it has also made our love stories predictable and our romantic scenes the least sexy and most ridiculous in the world.

This last point can best be illustrated by the rather absurd fact that in American films first-time lovers almost never actually *decide* to have sex. Instead, we routinely find one of two clichés. In comedies, two people become so hot for each other that they fall through the front door and proceed to demolish the apartment. Dishes break, tables are overturned, they tear off each other's clothes—careful to leave on the leading lady's bra, because her contract doesn't include a nude scene.

American dramas, meanwhile, cart out a parallel cliché—the standing-up sex scene. People are so hot for each other that they don't take the time to lie down. No matter that in real life, having sex standing up requires precision akin to linking the lunar module to the mothership. Never mind that in real life women tend to wear stockings or at least underwear that would have to be taken off—in American movies, women apparently wear bras but no underwear. These ridiculous clichés, comic and dramatic, are so pervasive we barely notice them anymore, but the real question is *why are they there?*

They are there because the American preoccupation with right and wrong makes filmmakers squeamish about presenting characters morally culpable for their sexual behavior. So they make their characters too lust-ridden to think. Walking into a bedroom, or even taking the extra second or two to lie down, would imply a certain cognition. It would mean deciding. It would mean taking responsibility.

It would also mean dealing in human emotion, in the realities of interpersonal relationships, in thoughts and motives. But over the last fifty years, as women have joined the workforce and as the weekday matinees that once sustained women's pictures have faded into history, American films have increasingly concentrated on action, on grand conflicts, on the world of external struggle and violence. Actresses have become marginalized. Male box-office dominance has become a permanent condition.

By now, America has not only lost many potentially distinguished women's careers. It is in the process of losing what might be called the Female Principle. In the most pervasive and influential of art forms, we have lost feelings, inner life, reflection, introspection, the soul, the spirit. In its place, Hollywood is offering a titillating, neurotic vision of life out of balance, in which half the equation is missing.

To see the films coming out of France is to break into a vast treasure and become liberated from these and other varieties of domestic neurosis. And, ironically, through this foreign cinema, it is to come into contact with what's missing and intensely desired within the American soul.

SOME OF THE WOMEN YOU WILL MEET on these pages, you will already know. Some you'll know by name, and others, including some of the very best, you may never have heard of. Frankly, some of these women have careers that deserve a book-length treatment all their own. I'm thinking, in particular, of Nathalie Baye, Sandrine Bonnaire, Isabelle Huppert, Agnès Jaoui, Sandrine Kiberlain, Valeria Bruni Tedeschi and Karin Viard. In any case, over the course of this book, you will come to know their best work and that of their colleagues. It is a striking thing, the sheer vastness of the working talent, a roster that includes but is hardly limited to names such as Isabelle Adjani, Fanny Ardant, Josiane Balasko, Emmanuelle Béart, Leïla Bekhti, Monica Bellucci, Juliette Binoche, Élodie Bouchez, Isabelle Carré, Amira Casar, Marion Cotillard, Marie-Josée Croze, Emmanuelle Devos, Marina Fois, Sara Forestier, Cécile de France, Catherine Frot, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Julie Gayet, Marie Gillain, Marina Hands, Mélanie Laurent, Virginie Ledoyen, Valérie Lemercier, Sophie Marceau, Chiara Mastroianni, Anna Mouglalis, Géraldine Pailhas, Charlotte Rampling, Natacha Régnier, Brigitte Roüan, Ludivine Sagnier, Emmanuelle Seigner, Mathilde Seigner, Audrey Tautou, Sylvie Testud, Kristin Scott Thomas and Elsa Zylberstein.

Some of these women are renowned for their beauty (Béart, Bellucci, Binoche, Marceau). But many others are beautiful in ways that elude analysis. They are warm or electric or magnetic or so idiosyncratic that your eyes immediately go to them. They are beautiful like the actresses of an earlier Hollywood generation, like Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert or Olivia de Havilland. In the 1930s, Busby Berkeley's chorus lines were filled with women who were prettier, and yet these ladies became objects of cinematic fantasy. Obviously, they had some requisite base level of good looks, but what pushed them into the realm of beauty was something else, something inside *them*, something to do with their essential being. And yet . . . what happens if a culture or an industry isn't interested in a woman's essential being? Stanwyck and her exalted colleagues would have been nothing in such an environment, just as many American actresses today are going through entire careers without ever showing what's inside of them.

In 2003, Meryl Streep won a career achievement César Award, the French equivalent of an Oscar. Streep's words (my translation) acknowledged the enduring interest of French audiences in women's lives and women's stories:

I have always wanted to present stories of women who are rather difficult. Difficult to love, difficult to understand, difficult to look at sometimes. I am very cognizant that the French public is receptive to these complex and contradictory women. As an actress I have understood for a long time that lies are simple, seductive and often easy to pass off. But the truth—the truth is always very very very complicated, often unpleasant, nuanced or difficult to accept.

In France, an actress can work steadily from her teens through old age—she can start out in stories of youthful rebellion and end up, fifty years later, a screen matriarch. And in the process, her career will end up telling the story of a life—her own life, in a sense, with the films serving, as Valeria Bruni Tedeschi puts it, as a “*journal intime*,” or diary, of one woman's emotions and growth. No wonder so many French actresses are beautiful. They're radiant with living in a cinematic culture that values them, and values them as women. And they are radiant with living in a culture—albeit one with flaws of its own—in which women are half of who decides what gets valued in the first place.

Their films transcend national and language barriers and are the best vehicles for conveying the depth and range of women's experience in our era. The gift they give us, so absent in our own movies, is a vision of life that values emotional truth, personal freedom and dignity above all and that favors complexity over simplicity, the human over the machine, maturity over callowness, true mysteries over false explanations and an awareness of mortality over a life lived in denial.

In the luminous humanity of their faces and in the illuminated humanity of their characters, we discover in these actresses something much more inspiring than the blank perfection and perfect blankness of the Hollywood starlet. We discover the beauty of the real.