

Elegy

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It is a simple story; almost like the rich cousin of a Harlequin romance with its focus on the relationship and romantic love between two people, but with a modern twist: explicit sex and a bitter-sweet ending. The interest is, therefore, not so much in the story itself, but in the issues it raises about whom we love, what we love in them, why we are loved and why love is so fraught with pain and strife. The combined talents of Philip Roth who wrote the novella *The Dying Animal* and the director Isabel Coixet, turn the story into a rich exploration of what makes human beings fall in love with each other. The remarkable good acting, including Dennis Hopper cast against type, adds to make this a small gem of a picture.

Coixet started as a director of TV ads which may explain the economy of the film: there are no superfluous scenes and has a very fluid editing. It moves without effort through David's inner thoughts and memories, his phantasies and his life. He is the chief character, a charismatic professor with ageing metrosexual looks, who glows in the admiration of his young female students. All the rest are there to tease out what makes him tick and what not. The social environment he thrives in is basically non-marital, a sort of erotica free range where desires are played-out unfettered by contractual limits. It is interesting in this sense, because the vicissitudes of desire are only linked to the internal, undeclared and ambiguous contracts each character carries within.

Archie Leach, a famous British comedian, better known as Cary Grant, was once told in an interview that everyone wants to be Cary Grant, and Archie Leach answered 'And so would I.' This is the short version of what in the film is that dialogue between David Kepesh and George O'Hearn.

George: Beautiful women are invisible.

David: Invisible? What the hell does that mean? Invisible? They jump out at you. A beautiful woman, she stands out. She stands apart. You can't miss her.

George: But we never actually see the person. We see the beautiful shell. We're blocked by the beauty barrier. Yeah, we're so dazzled by the outside that we never make it inside.

Let's go back to Archie Leach for a moment. What did Archie Leach feel when he was loved as Cary Grant and not as Archie Leach? Could he make the distinction? Was there pain in carrying an ignored Archie Leach under the skin of Cary Grant? Who did he believe he really was, Archie or Cary? Who was hiding whom? I think that this confusing ambiguity is what underlies this film and that makes it such a rich exploration of what David Kepesh calls the carnal aspects of the human comedy. In many ways a comedy of errors.

The film follows David's perilous journey into the inside of a beautiful woman. More perilous still because he remembers that old age is not for sissies. This last plunge into the fountain of youth may just not be one more of the interludes he has had with Carolyn for the last twenty years.

The film starts with Charlie Rose interviewing David Kepesh, who proposes that under the straitlaced land of the puritan founding fathers lays another country that woke up in the 60s. A time of great licentiousness that had been dormant for three centuries. David belongs to a decade earlier, when to have sex you had to get married. He is in the awkward in-between two sexual eras. His unhappy marriage long ago finished, he reflects on old age. An age not for sissies because there is youth all around him enjoying a limitless future with full possibility, and from which his age excludes him. David lives alone in his flat, safely on the margins of life, avoiding intimacy with one foot in the fifties and the other in the sixties. He has been a sissy all his life, and now that the last love train is leaving the station he wants on board. He is in for trouble.

Enter Consuela Castillo, who, David tells us, is beautiful but doesn't yet know what to do with her beauty. Once she has no recourse to the sexual harassment hot line David will teach her. A masterful seduction follows: he singles her out from the crowd and when she is in front of a letter by Franz Kafka to Milena, perhaps an anticipation of an unfulfilled love. He remarks that she has something about her that invites formality, an elegant austerity. What a better way to someone's heart can there be than recognizing their uniqueness? A uniqueness that will tempt her to discover the core of her ideal self. Add to that his identifying her to the best known Goya painting, *The Naked Maja* and the deal is done. If Consuela doesn't know what to do with her beauty, David will guide her, like an enthusiastic Pygmalion of modern day. His trick is to make her want to be desired the way he wants to desire her. It is a subtle, well designed seduction that began when he could not, would not, take off his eyes from her in the class. She is picked out from the crowd to have her eyes identified with the eyes of the *Maja*. But not before a peep at the naked *Maja*, just before opening the page on the dressed *Maja*. This focusing on Consuela's eyes equates them to the promising gaze of the *Maja*, whether naked or dressed. This is a telling moment: it is what David sees in her, the promise, and what is asked of her, the fulfillment of that promise.

That furtive glance at the *Naked Maja* that underlies the *Dressed Maja* is, I think, a valid metaphor for what David seeks in Consuela. This dressed image has a surplus of meaning and power due to its relation to the naked one. It would still be a remarkable painting of a desirable woman, but it is the twinning in our mind of both images that makes it memorable. I think this is a clue as to how David sees Consuela: under the superficial, dressed Consuela, he sees, or invents, the naked object of his desire.

How does this "invented" Consuela work on Consuela? Is she seduced into becoming David's invention? Does she see herself just as naked and desirable as David sees her? I think she does, although there may have been a misunderstanding that will pop-up later. Anyway, the magic works and they get involved in a highly erotic relationship. Consuela becomes David's *Maja*, as if his image of desire had finally come to life. That idealized flesh can be touched in its reality, like the breasts that he worships. They enjoy a time of joy and fun with each other.

David leaves his secure marginal life and becomes so estranged from his half exile that he goes for the advice of his expert on the pragmatics of love affairs, George O'Hearn. George is the wise old man in the flying trapeze merrily gliding between marriage and affair but who always lands safely. Although both David and George live double lives, George does it with care-free

impunity while David doesn't have it that easy. George is common sense in the sexual comedy of our time that makes no sense in the area of David's passion. Passion and common sense don't mix. George, played by Dennis Hopper is the kind of dare-devil of love, an expert in enjoying what he can get from it, and with years of experience under his belt, knows how not to be burnt by it. He is not only David's love guru, but a sort of alter ego that helps him along his perilous journey of love at a mature age.

George should approve the sporadic release provided by Carolyn. She has been for twenty years, since also being David's student, a necessity for periodic sexual catharsis, with some implicit understanding of loyalty to each other, but not much more than that. He lies to her without much conviction or concern, just enough not to rock that lifeboat. This is David as he relates not only to Carolyn but also to his son: they are intrusions into his marginal world that stir the discomfort of distant, almost forgotten sources of guilt, but nothing more.

The first turning point in the story comes by as if by surprise when David, the jealous lover, explores Consuela's past love history. The only kinky event was going to bed together with her two best friends. The honeymoon is over and David's jealousy worms through his life. He realizes and regrets that he will never possess her. From the depth of his self, hidden under the cynical man of the world, lies that strange demand for exclusivity which socially translates into the imprisoning monogamy from which he escaped many years ago.

I can offer some hypotheses why this seasoned, cynical lover is so shaken by a threesome in Consuela's adolescence. One may be the realization that she belongs in a generation whose sexual zeitgeist never really was his own. It has been said that the past is a different country: that they do things different there, and this is painfully true for him. It is his bad faith that makes him want the object to be from that different country while he claims citizenship in the country of the present.

Another hypothesis may be more valid. Later on in the film he refers to her role in this episode as being the meat in the sandwich, his own graphic picture of the threesome. It is not only her consent to being sodomized but it turns her flesh into meat. It is the move from the desirable flesh of the Maja to an undifferentiated degraded sexual commodity. The delighted communion is broken and David's only aim is to recover that lost paradise, the bliss of possessing without the anxiety of losing. That Consuela remain the Maja of his private gallery. That magnificent Maja, alone on a bed offering herself only to the eyes of the beholder, as if ready for delivery.

He imagines her with young lovers, pursues her to a dance hall with infantile excuses that humiliates him and expels him from the youthful environment where she so naturally swims. He soldiers on in a losing battle. George's expert advice is of no avail. His commonsense pragmatism cannot reach the core of David's impossible pursuit.

Consuela ups the ante and invites him to a family event that feels like her introduction to his future in-laws. This threatens to pull him away from his safe life in the margins of commitment into the centre of a relation. Time to show his true colours, if he has any. In the disgusted looks he imagines receiving in Consuela's graduation party, he sees his own rejection of the generational boundary he has breached. He cannot make that leap of faith. Furthermore, one

thing is to possess and quite another to be possessed. He thinks he controls the relationship, but he is in turn possessed by his passionate desire for her. At the end, like a true narcissist, between surrendering his self and surrendering his object he surrenders the object. They both demand more than the other can give, and what one cannot give is felt as a cruel deprivation by the other.

That loss has a heavy price. The loneliness he is heading towards is poignantly pictured at the racquet-ball court where he has no one to play against; nobody to bounce his desire with. He is like the ball he lets go and drifts aimless into stillness. Yet he becomes more real. There is sincerity when he confesses to Carolyn his love for Consuela.

The next shock from reality comes with George's illness and death. He sees George's desperation at the gates of death, but cannot understand the plea for life and bonding that his kiss claims. He retreats confused from the intensity of the demand. The Dying Animal doesn't want to die alone. George asks from David what David asks from Consuela's youth and what Consuela wants from David when she calls him: I want to have your love when I die.

I believe that it was Oscar Wilde who said that where there is pain, there is sacred soil. Death has the virtue of expelling all banalities from life. The reality of our biological being, indifferent to our wishes and phantasies, knocks down any omnipotent ideas we may have that we are masters of our lives.

Out of the blue, when David has resigned himself to the half life he has with Carolyn, just before New Year, he gets a phone call from Consuela. She has been struck at the very core of her desirability, the place of her body that David worships. She comes with a strange request: a photograph of her breasts before the mutilation. This is a crucial test: is there anything left after lust is extinguished. Those breasts that Consuela offered with pleasure, and David indulged in fondling and kissing, now become distanced and out of touch, as an object to be photographed, a document of a past of pleasure forever lost. What remains?

Was lust just the lure for the relationship? Or was it the dazzling light that blinded them both to a deeper bond? A bond that they only become aware of when lust disappears by the threat of death or mutilation? In the new state of affairs that the ultimate threat to desire brings about, a new reality is born or discovered. With sex out of the way, at least for now, they discover an underlying tender affection and need for each other. Mutual consolation is what is left to them to come to terms with the reality that we are children of chance and fate, a stone wall against which human projects sometimes crash. Perhaps the realization that we have a limited future is the most painful narcissistic injury we will eventually have to face. Death is a limit that will stop some, while letting the survivor mourn from the other side of the great divide.

This new reality has interesting consequences, as if all the assumptions about their relationships were put out of joint. In a moving scene when Consuela tells David of her illness, he falls to pieces to the point that she in the end has to console him. This reverses their roles: she becomes the mature adult that takes care of the grief of a desolate man deprived of his vital object. The erotic breast reversed to the original maternal breast of comfort.

In the process David becomes more human, more complete. The remorse he feels for having failed her turns into reparation and concern. His selfish defense of his uncommitted life gives way to an altruistic dedication. He becomes paternal to her and even a more real father to his problematic son. We are left with the image that both will share what the future may bring to them.

This new turning point needs a re-examination of what the story had initially suggested to us. First: it is proposed that lust and love are not good bedfellows. David's possessive jealousy destroys their relationship, and it is only when she no longer is the object of lust that the tenderness of their love can be uncovered. For, if she comes back to him in her hour of need with the excuse of the photographic testimony of the core of their lust, it is because at some level she has the knowledge that he will respond as he actually does. Consuela's tragedy is that only when she is no longer desirable she becomes lovable. And only when David is no longer blocked by the beauty barrier he can make it inside and see beauty there.

In this sense, lust is the troublemaker in the house of love. As Consuela pointedly tells David children are jealous and possessive of their toys, but when they get tired of them they leave them behind, forgotten. She will not be David's toy. He is part of her life but not the whole of her life.

Another point of interest is the relation of Pygmalion with his creation. David goes into this job of creating his private Galatea with great gusto. When he notes that Consuela does not yet know what to do with her beauty, he indulges and opens her to all the culture that is David's everyday bread and butter. It is the world he breathes, where he has left his stamp. This Consuela that he is creating has little to do with the one that goes dancing to a Latino dance hall. This may be Consuela's resistance to become his Galatea, her way of affirming her identity. I think that it is not only an erotic jealousy but also existential, for want of a better word. It is the shock of realizing that to love is to idealize the object. Both partners glow in idealizing and being idealized by the other. The illusion breaks down when the object reveals an identity that doesn't match the ideal.

Finally, why does beauty ignite passion? I think that it is the idea of perfection and uniqueness that is so close to an ideal, the hope that in that communion with the ideal we will exist in world beyond the ordinariness of everyday life. Or, as David says, 'when you make love to a woman you take revenge for all the things that defeated you in life.'

In love we are both Pygmalion to our object and in the reciprocal way the Galatea for its desire. It is in this sense that the carnal aspects of the human comedy as David calls it, is a true comedy of errors. It is the land of misunderstandings, misperceptions, of ambiguity and ambivalence. Much has been said and written about and will be said and written about and still very few can get it right. Perhaps it is fair to say that since life has enough tragic moments, we better enjoy the comedy for as long as it lasts.