The Movies On My Mind:

Breaking the Waves, directed by Lars Van Trier.

UN/POLLUTED FLESH

"Lay her i’ the earth; –
From her fair and unpolluted flesh
May violents spring!..."

Laertes, at Ophelia's grave, in

Hamlet (I)

Too Late, a benchmark in morbid Victorian kitsch painted by William Lindsay Windus, shows a Pre-Raphaelite beauty staring nobly into the nether distance; an elegant gentleman stands to her right, his arm thrown across his face in an extremity of despair. The obscure title derives from the hectic flush upon her cheeks, betokening the ravages of consumption.

According to the received truth of the day, young women were especially vulnerable to tuberculosis upon breaking of their troth by a backpedalling swain. It may be assumed that Too Late's distraught dastard has returned to the pearl of great price he tossed away after learning that his cruelty brought on his former lover's mortal sickness. One imagines Victorian viewers would enjoyably anticipate the improvement of his depraved nature attendant upon his remorse, while also savoring a quiet frisson of moral superiority.

Too Late emblematizes a pervasive figure of folk tale and literature, high or low: the virginal young woman whose beauty, virtue, and canniness brings to heel a ruthless, or at least feckless heel. Occasionally, she imperils or forfeits her life in the process. A short list of heroines whose honorable example tames and shames
masculine derelictions includes Scheherezade; the eponymous Beauty; diverse Joans of Arc, Faust's Marguerite; Isabel of Measure for Measure; the eponymous Pamela of Richardson's epistolary novel; Jane Eyre, and Lizzie Bennett of Pride and Prejudice.

World cinema was quick to reap fodder and fortune from the therapeutic impact of long-suffering, compassionate heroines upon unworthy admirers. The trope repeatedly figures in the oeuvres of Lang, Fellini and Mizoguchi; and in a much cherished sub-genre of the 1930s-50s Hollywood "Woman's Picture". Three-hankie Tinseltown classics of this ilk include Letter From An Unknown Woman (1948), Magnificent Obsession (1954), and Now, Voyager (1942). Their lugubrious guilty pleasures continue to be profitably mined by contemporary penny dreadful Harlequin romances and TV soap operas.

The perennial fascination of the Beauty and the Beast(ly) tale for a diverse audience of female readers and viewers has been ascribed inter alia by echt Freudians to innate feminine masochism; by feminist pop culture mavens to a vicarious identification with the put-upon heroine's gentle triumph over The Patriarchy; by critics of whatever ideological stripe to the audience's yen for the voluptuous excess typical of such fare.

Lars Von Trier, the maudit of contemporary Danish cinema, often experiments with cinema rhetoric towards the surreal interrogation of genre conventions (e.g., Dancing in the Dark, 2000), an over-the-top riff on the classic Hollywood musical. Zentropa (1992), interprets as a Kafkaesque homage to the Hitchcockian espionage thriller replete with skewed allusions to Notorious (1946), The Lady Vanishes (1938), and Vertigo (1958). His first English-speaking film, Breaking The Waves (1996), stands every stale convention of the unsullied maid/rogue male narrative on its head, advancing a profoundly ambiguous, yet compelling spiritual vision.

The film is set a generation ago in a tiny community of Scotland's remote north coast, where young men spend long months away in dangerous
work on the nearby dangerous oil rigs, sometimes never to return. The environs are as harsh as the convictions of the Free Church, a singularly rigorous branch of Calvinism. Its elders, lead by a thin-lipped pastor, rule the minutest facets of daily village life.

At funerals, the latter regularly consigns departed parisioners to hell if he deems their lives sinful. Those who stray from the righteous path can be shunned to death. Bells have been stripped from the church tower by the righteous. Drinking, music, and unseemly displays of emotion are frowned upon. Outsiders are eternally suspect. One is put in mind of H.L. Mencken's definition of a Puritan as someone who is horribly afraid that someone else, somewhere else, may be having some fun.

Bess McGuire (played radiantly by Emily Watson), a shy, great-eyed young beauty, thrives in this unpromising landscape as a rose amongst thorns. She lives with her mother, a sour woman perpetually vexed by Bess' winning simplicity, which the latter mistakes for mere simplemindedness; with a silent grandfather, and the lively widow of a brother, killed not long ago on the rigs.

Bess' immense despair after her brother's death precipitated psychiatric hospitalization -- perhaps another source of the mother's withering displeasure. (Characteristic of the script's parsimony -- of which, more presently -- Bess' commitment is revealed only after evidence of her emotional fragility painstakingly accumulates).

Bess has fallen in love with Jan (veteran Swedish actor, and subsequently mainstream Hollywood stalwart Stellan Skarsgard), a rugged Swedish oil-rigger who obviously knows his way around the world. Because of her unblemished piety, the elders grudgingly grant permission for their marriage. Her unexpected tender eroticism flowers at a wedding celebration which tellingly contrasts the rowdy pleasure of Jan and his inebriated friends with the villager's dour anhedonia. Bess guides Jan into the lavatory; over his amused protests, she urges him on to deflower her on the spot.

The next few weeks pass in an idyll of besotted sensuality. Then Jan must return to the rig, and Bess is plunged into melancholy. Her mother coldly chides
that she must grow accustomed to the absence of men which is woven into the fabric of village existence; even her sympathetic sister-in-law gently scolds her about her immoderate longing.

One has earlier witnessed Bess in the empty church, speaking both parts of an obviously long-standing dialogue with God. Then she thanked Him then for granting a love she never knew possible; then received in reply His stern admonition that what she has been given could be taken back, should she not prove deserving. (Here and elsewhere His answers uncannily bear the stamp of the introjected mother's speech and displeasure.)

Now she begs that Jan be returned to her. A few days later, her wish is perniciously fulfilled. He suffers a near fatal head injury on the rig; is helicoptered to the local hospital, fitfully conscious and nearly quadriplegic.

Jan mends sufficiently to return home to Bess' adoring care. But once he fully registers the permanence of his injuries and his wife's captivity to his impotence, he unsuccessfully attempts suicide. Afterwards, he sells the artless Bess a means to redress her deprivation: he convinces her to take lovers, then to recount her squalid experiences so as to recuperate their love by proxy.

Jan's altruism initiates an increasingly perverse, ominous symbiosis reminiscent of the fatal coupling in Oshima's *In The Realm Of The Senses* (1976). His good intentions become hopelessly compromised as his condition declines; he fearfully pleads with Bess to keep him alive with the tales of her mounting licentiousness, and she obliges him. It's moot how depraved Jan actually is or was; possibly, some untapped vein of perversity has surfaced due to the disinhibiting effect of his neurological deterioration, as well as the panoply of medication often prescribed under such dire circumstances.

Soon Bess believes even more fervently than Jan that her promiscuity is haling him back from the grave, thus must perforce be sanctioned by Divine
Will. The sordid ruttings she recounts leave her clearly unaroused, indeed repelled. The "special gift" she speaks of having been granted from Above is not orgastic, but sacrificial.

Her descent into prostitution precipitates callous shunning by the village -- her mother included -- except for her devoted sister-in-law. A humane physician who had helped her through her earlier mourning, and now refuses her advances even though he secretly loves her, believes Bess has become delusional. He has her recommitted with her husband's consent, during a rare moment of Jan's lucidity. She escapes. Learning that Jan lies near death, she deliberately places herself in mortal peril by embarking to service the sadistic crew of a nearby freighter. Before her departure, she asks Jan to be sent her prayers in certain hope he will rise and walk again.

Bess is brought back from the iniquitous vessel, raped and mortally battered. She expires in bliss, as Jan miraculously regains consciousness and the partial use of his limbs. With his companions' help, he steals her body; brings it to the rig, leaving her coffin behind filled with sand. After the unknowing elders bury the box in a desolate corner of the village cemetery with the parson's expectable malediction, Jan slips his beloved into the tranquil waves. Next morning, he and the crew awaken to a sonorous chiming that seems to emanate from everywhere and nowhere. The film ends on a shot of the rig from an heavenly height, as mysterious bells at the edges of the frame ring out a joyous knell.

One has repeatedly warned against the pitfalls of pathobiography in analytically oriented film criticism, even when a director or other key figure is known to exert authoritative control over the work (obviously Von Trier's case).(2) Given this caveat, Breaking The Waves does seem heavily influenced by Von Trier's conversion to Roman Catholicism not long prior to the film, and a new -- or renewed -- belief in the redeeming power of love after the pessimism of his earlier films (the latter arguably reflected the external strife and the darkness in his nature he often obscurely alluded to in interviews).
Breaking The Wave's over-the-top redemptive agenda knowingly summons up the signatures of kitsch and a hollow, pastiche-ridden post-modernism towards the intended transcendence of both. Von Trier particularly conflates the asceticism and excess of those ever popular martyrologies which simultaneously instructed the faithful, and provided lurid accounts of the horrid torments visited upon the sanctified -- many of them female.

Carl Dreyer meets Ken Russell in the director's wildly melodramatic enunciation of Bess as a contemporary Magdalen cum lamb of God. Breaking The Waves unfolds as a series of tutelary "chapters", each documenting a station in the heroine's inexorable progress towards her Golgotha. Each is introduced with a terse title -- "Bess Gets Married" -- "Living Alone" -- "Despair" -- over an infinitesmally shifting landscape whose garish, oversaturated colors were achieved through adroit computerized manipulation.

The numerous references subliminally evoked by the titles include bathetic chromo postcard or serious visionary art, (Blake, Dore, and Ryder inter alia); the overblown illustrations of Gothic and Victorian Romantic fiction; the title cards of Griffithian silent films in which naïfs such as Bess confronted masculine barbarity and the world's sanctimonious rancor. Folk/Rock classics like Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne" or Procul Harem's "Whiter Shade of Pale" play underneath the headings. The songs strike a jarring, yet oddly apposite note; elliptically commenting upon action to come.

The hyperbolic lushness of the chapter headings is intentionally counterpoised against the barrenness of the Scottish/Danish landscapes and the sparse homeliness of the indoor settings, accentuated by a rough-hewed super-35mm based cinemascope format (later digitalized). The narrative is pared down, moving with an achingly slow, Dreyerian pace. Long shots are few; traditional intercutting during dialogue is refused. Instead, Von Trier ubiquitously deploys vertiginous swish/whip panning: Robby Muller's eloquent hand-held camera sweeps restlessly back and forth between one
extremely tight closeup and another, with frequent minute blurring and return to focus.

These strategies construct a curious frontality hearkening back to the guileless, unperspectived exposition of medieval hagiography. The viewer is painfully sutured into a febrile, claustrophobic intimacy, especially in the sequences between Bess and Jan. One beholds the nakedness of their emotions as uncomfortably as when one first observed the vulnerable nudity of their lovemaking. The effect is definitively anti-pornographic.

As Bess becomes maligned, severed from the familiar, and caught up in her martyred course, Von Trier's focus upon the marvelous planes of Emily Watson's delicate face attains an hieratic intensity which echoes Dreyer's virtuoso capture of the ectastic Maria Falconetti in The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928) (to prepare Watson, the director reportedly had her watch Falconetti, and Giuletta Masina as Gelsomina, the holy fool/sacrificial lamb of La Strada (1954))).

Institutional psychiatry receives as short shrift as organized religion in Breaking The Waves. Little is revealed about Bess' previous breakdown, nor does one know if her hospitalization proved any more helpful than mere passage of time. While the young physician who offers her supportive psychotherapy is infinitely more compassionate than the townspeople, he is as hobbled by his zeal to diagnose, heal and confine her according to the narrow tenets of his science, as they are driven to judge and condemn her according to their narrow dogmatism.

Doubting Thomases like the doctor have always been a staple in miracle tales, highlighting the ultimate triumph of faith over skepticism. After the fashion of these characters, he renounces his desiccated rationality at Bess' inquest; declaring she suffered from a surfeit of goodness rather than a debauched folie a deux. Her saintliness has humbled him, as it has put to shame the elders' and pastor's hypocritical piety.

In death, Bess also raises up the spirit of the fearful husband,
who lusted to save his life even if his survival should degrade hers. Like the guilt-ridden suitor of *Too Late*, Jan can now be suitably purified by her example; touched by the Grace that shone through her and set the bells to chime in reverence to her un/polluted flesh. The force of Von Trier's invention impels the viewer to identify with Jan, to join him in bedazzled awe.

I have elsewhere remarked on the false note struck by *Suspicion's* (1941) happy conclusion (3); so strong is the thrust of Johnny Aysgarth/Gary Grant's psychopathy, informed by Hitchcock's dank Hobbesian vision of human relationships, that one ultimately suspects the director would have preferred the picture to end with Johnny/Grant throttling Lina McLaidlaw/Joan Fontaine, rather than finding deliverance through her love.

Hours away from *Breaking The Waves*, and its ending has worn similarly thin for many viewers. The Hitchcockian predatory view of the human condition which pervades *Zentropa*, and infects Bess and Jan's love after Jan's accident, arguably may outweigh the convenient attractions of a contrived, even hokey sanctification.

When the lights come up, a psychoanalyst sympathetic to the vicissitudes of religious experience must nevertheless acknowledge Bess' innate psychic fragility, arguably abetted by her mother's icy rejection. One speculates that she has turned towards God, then Jan as unfailing sources of the nurturance denied her as a child.

Against the background of materanal rejection, the threat of Jan's death recapitulates the devastation caused by her beloved brother's demise, providing a substrate for her vulnerability to Jan's lewd, self-serving enticements. Acting out her rescue fantasies, she becomes palpably disturbed to the point of exalted religious delusions. Ultimately she emerges as another female victim in an all too common masculine fantasy; treasured for her abjection; depleted of selfhood, dignity, even life itself so that the male, however chastened, may prevail.

Yet, even as one acknowledges the grim reality of Bess'
emotional disorder; even as one questions the authenticity of Von Trier's supposedly nascent faith, there is no gainsaying the idiosyncratic potency of Breaking The Wave's art. However one may be skeptical about the film's dubious and saccharine theophany, Von Trier's rendering of a romantic obsession whose grandness eclipses its undeserving object is certainly as arresting as Scola's work in Passione D'Amore (1982), and nearly approaches the immense power and generosity of Truffaut's The Story of Adele H (1975). No small achievement.

FOOTNOTES

