

Trop Belle Pour Toi: A French Movie Opera

With Schubert's music going on in his soul, a man calls his mistress lover "ma soeur." Baudelaire's "Invitation au voyage" comes to my mind. Bertrand Blier's 1989 film *Trop belle pour toi* is a very time disoriented work about the quest, and nature of beauty that we can render linear by making it a Baudelarian opera. The Baudelaire quest for beauty co labors in the voices, or interior durations, of the characters. This paper will be an opera about what music, film and opera do to us in an intertextual ensemble. After looking at the concept of opera and Baudelaire's conflict of beauty and spleen, I will talk about Blier's film as an opera with three major arias and finish with an answer to Baudelaire's invitation.

Opera and the "Durée intérieure"

One of the complaints against opera is that the stories are usually simple in order to highlight the voices of the singers. The recitatives, the narrated sung part, are not very musical, but they set up the arias, the beautifully sung melodies that reveal the inner feelings of the leads. Opera, according to Wagner is the perfect drama combining all the arts: music, poetry, and dance. Sometimes one or more of these elements give way to the music, or to the singers, but in some operas all seem to work together and present powerful dramatic representations of the "durée intérieure" of the characters – that eternal time of their state of soul in love.

In Blier's film we have such a case as he plays with time and space to present the inner lives and struggles of Bernard, an auto mechanic-turned executive, who falls in love with his temporary secretary, Colette, a more or less plain looking woman. Their affair is presented in flashbacks and flashforwards shifting from Bernard's wedding, to the day Colette and he met, their growing attraction to each other and their affair, and four years after their separation, which is the day that his wife Florence leaves him. We also witness the inner thoughts of Colette, Florence, and Bernard and their friends. Three major sequences of scenes combine characters from different spaces and times. These sequences are arias.

Beauty in Baudelaire's Evil Flowers

This movie opera plays like Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, poems where the search for beauty starts in the flowers of evil in his mind. Beauty and the ideal are always confronted with the spleen or evil reality. Beauty is always unexpected, bizarre and likes to astonish. It fills the poet with celestial and infernal desires.

In the first stanza of "Invitation au voyage," the poet invites his lover to a country that looks like her.

Mon enfant, ma soeur,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble!
Aimer à loisir,
Aimer et mourir
Au pays qui te ressemble!
Les soleils mouillés
De ces ceils brouillés
Pour mon esprit ont les charmes
Si mystérieux

De tes traitres yeux,
Brillant à travers leurs larmes.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté
Luxe, calme, et volupté.

The suns shining through the clouds are like her treacherous eyes shining through her tears. Treacherous – she may be thinking of something else, but the poet is still charmed. Beauty is always treacherous, inviting betrayal in many ways. In the second stanza, the interior setting, the shining, reflective quality of the deep mirrors is like their profound love spoken in a sweet native language of souls, an interior music without words.

Des meubles luisants,
Polis par les ans,
Décoreraient notre chambre;
Les plus rares fleurs
Mêlant leurs odeurs
Aux vagues senteurs de l'ambre
Les riches plafonds,
Les miroirs profonds,
La splendeur orientale,
Tout y parlerait
A l'âme en secret
Sa douce langue natale.
Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté
Luxe, calme, et volupté.

The poem ends happily as the world goes to sleep in a warm light of the setting sun. The poet is the earth and the lover is the rest of the world – her eyes being the sun that close at sunset.

Vois sur ces canaux
Dormir ces vaisseaux
Dont l'humeur est vagabonde;
C'est pour assouvir
Ta moindre désir
Qu'ils viennent du bout du monde.
-Les soleils couchants
Revêtent les champs,
Les canaux, la ville entière,
D'hyacinthe et d'or;
Le monde s'endort
Dans une chaude lumière.

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté
Luxe, calme, et volupté

These ideal moments of Baudelaire's *Flowers* are countered with other moments of torture in the search for beauty. In "La mort des artistes" the artists wear out their souls looking for it. Then, there are times when beauty is personified and speaks. In "La beauté" she says her eyes are like pure mirrors that serve, for artists and lovers, to make everything more beautiful. Yet she all also says that she is "beautiful like a dream of stone."

Aria of Love's Beginning

Bernard in Blier's film is a searcher for beauty. He has various forms in his life, and in the end loses them all. He falls in love with Colette, a temporary secretary at his automobile dealership. She is plain in appearance, but he falls for her through the glass partitions, which draw attention to her, especially her eyes. Something about her is "sympa." They consummate their love on a tramway bus where they speak to each other without words in their sweet native language. This scene is created through a series of

flashbacks and forwards, jumps in time, from the first office meeting, to a street scene of him pursuing her, to the bus. It is an aria of the start of love as he asks her “what is going on between us?”

At home he has a beautiful wife in outward appearance (Florence), but now he feels like a thief in his house. What is he stealing? Schubert’s music is in the house. Diegetically – the tune is on the stereo player as his son is writing a composition on Schubert. The music is also in his earphones as he listens in his own world separated from his wife. The music is also in his own mind, but his mind and not really for us the viewers. Then there is the non-diegetic Schubert music as a background for the film in general.

Schubert’s music represents the characters’ “Durée intérieure.” This “interior duration” is the eternal time of their state of soul. Mostly sad, but sometimes joyful, it represents the rises and falls of our emotions which in the end are usually sad. We fall much harder after high moments of love and acceptance.

Before falling in love with Bernard, Colette, the plain secretary had a live-in lover Pascal, who is a writer. In one scene Pascal praises Colette’s inspiration on him. This scene will be identically duplicated to Bernard who says how she inspires his creativity in industrial car dealership! Colette’s effect on them will tie them together as friends in their bouts with beauty.

Florence, his “traditionally beautiful” wife, becomes more attracted to Bernard as he falls more and more in love with Colette. She becomes a personification of exterior beauty that fights for attention in the souls of humans. But she fails and, in a fantasy scene, transforms into a maid, a simple woman in a pale blue light compared to the arrival of the now illuminated Colette to Bernard.

Colette becomes angry when she sees his wife. Why would he love her when he has beauty like that in his life? But, then they make love – the first time in words in words rather than in actual physical contact. It is an erotic scene. She is so happy that an opera aria goes on in her head as she feels obliged to tell the co riders of an elevator. “Why do you tell us this?” one person asks. Opera heightens high moments and takes us higher too. She needs an audience to validate her emotions and finds one in the elevator. They do not hear the music like we do though.

The Dinner party- Wedding Sequence: Aria of Love and Beauty Blooming and Clashing

The longest sequence in the movie is a combined wedding banquet - dinner party spread out in time where the main characters meet and tell their stories. Florence in one scene appears in a white dress apologizes for her beauty and explains that her beauty doesn’t mean much to her. She searches for love and hopes it will be with Bernard. She, her beauty, has been probed by many and will be probed, she says, by Bernard later. She says from her point of view she is a simple woman who needs love, but that she inspires different “probes” from others: jealousy in other women, and envy in other men as we see in the thoughts of one of their friends who wants to do lewd things with her private parts.

In another part of the dinner sequence, Florence is in a black dress as Colette crashes the party. She is a wedding crasher who poaches on the beautiful moments of others. She worked for a mayor and city hall weddings and had been fired. She is reduced

to crashing other people's moments of happiness. She has an interior beauty for those who can see it. She is a hopeless, shattered seeker of beauty.

Bernard listens to her confession and calls her "ma soeur - the one he never had." Her shatteredness is what attracts him. They are of the same family. The Baudelaire poem is not about incest here – but a mutual sharing of shattered moments. He confesses next and tells his audience of friends that Colette doesn't make love. She gives it. Her eyelids closing are like the sun going away.

Florence is sympathetic to Colette's suffering. She suggests that Colette and Bernard spend some time together to get each other out of their systems. It is ironic that she gives the invitation to the voyage that Baudelaire gave to his lover.

The "It's Over" Aria: the Idyll That Ends the Affair

Colette and Bernard spend some time away from society in a country house. An idyll is the name given to this kind of story where two lovers can have a love relationship away from society. Sometimes there is a social message saying that this type of ideal love cannot take place in the real world that favors political and economic gain over true feelings of love. (see Silvère and Miette in Zola's *La Fortune des Rougon*)

Bernard leaves her here. He is torn by his obligations and love for the other beauty in his life. There is a four year gap here as scenes intermingle with Colette begging him to stay a little longer. She has been married to another man, not Pascal, and she has a child. In a fantasy scene, Bernard and Florence talk about their fading marriage. Florence has been faking orgasms for four years. Colette is in the back seat! begging him to stay with her. Bernard winds up losing both women as he chases Florence telling her Colette was nothing. Colette hears this and leaves him, too. He walks away from us, accompanied by a Schubert melody, and then comes back and looks up. At us? At God? He says to God or us that our Schubert stinks.

The "Too Beautiful" Finale

Bernard and Pascal talk about beauty and what attracts us. They are perplexed. Bernard thinks that Florence's beauty is too sublime. He needs some imperfections of life to move him. He liked Colette because she was shattered. "Like the Schubert music" asks Pascal? Bernard then replies, "do you have some?" Some is a partitive article. The music is like a drug that they need to take to face the downside of beauty.

The Schubert music at the end is diegetic. It is going on in Bernard's head, but it is also going on in ours, and it is not background music. We have a beautiful use of film music that accompanies NOTHING in the film. The music IS the inner expression of the torments of love and beauty in our minds and those of the characters. The thirst we have for this impossible dream is like a dream of stone. "Trop belle" has many meanings. Florence's beauty is too beautiful to be human and have feelings. Colette's beauty is too beautiful for Bernard to understand. Schubert's music is too beautiful for cold brutes who don't understand these feelings. Beauty is too beautiful for us to comprehend and it will fill us with positive and negative moments.

Our opera will end with two Baudelaire poems. In "La musique" the music is a sea and he is the boat that sails on it. Sometimes the sea, with its wind and its convulsions

rock him on an immense gulf. He senses all the passions. At other times the sea and music are calm, flat and a big mirror of his despair - true "ideal and spleen" of Baudelaire.

In "Hymne à la beauté" he compares beauty to wine whose source could be heaven or hell. Its eye contains the setting sun and dawn. It spreads its fragrances like a stormy sea. Its kisses are like a philter its mouth an amphora that makes kids heroes and heroes, cowards. Whether beauty is an angel or a siren, the poet doesn't care. Beauty makes the universe less hideous and less heavy. Baudelaire rocks back and forth with his beauty and elevates his life on the variations of its extremes.

Blier's film doesn't end on this note. He rejects the invitation to beauty in the end. He is more pessimistic. He ends on the final note of Baudelaire's "La musique." Most of the time, Schubert mirrors our despair. Most of the time beauty is too much for us.