

## François Truffaut

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### *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*

Not quite ten years ago, on an afternoon when I was dying to be at the movies rather than in school, our literature professor came into the classroom and said, “Last night I saw the stupidest film in the world, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne*. There’s a character in it who resolves his romantic problems by driving eighty miles an hour. I can’t think of anything more grotesque.” The critics were not any kinder. The public didn’t come, or if they did, it was only to smirk at every one of Cocteau’s lines. The producer, Raoul Ploquin, was ruined, and it took him seven years to recover.

The Cinéma d’Essai has just put Bresson’s film on the program as part of a retrospective, and I hear that the attendance is greater than for any other film, that the audiences are quiet, and sometimes even applaud. To quote Cocteau, the movie “has won its case in the appeals court.” After its spectacular commercial

failure, *Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* was shown in film clubs and almost all the critics made their amends. Today, now that *Journal d’un curé de campagne* has won over the last holdouts, Bresson is considered one of the three or four greatest French filmmakers.

His first film, *Les Anges du péché*, from a screenplay by Father Raymond Bruckberger, with dialogue by Jean Giraudoux, won universal approval when it appeared in 1943. In *Les Dames*, Bresson started from an episode in Diderot’s *Jacques le fataliste*—the adventure of Madame de la Pommeraye and the Marquis des Arcis. The adaptation is faithful and very restrained. It is faithful to the degree that entire sentences of Diderot remain unchanged. It is common to underestimate the importance of the role of Cocteau, who was on this occasion a rewriter of genius. One example: Diderot: “The history of your heart is word by word the history of mine.” Cocteau: “The history of your heart is word for word the sad story of mine.” If we read the two sentences aloud, it has to be admitted that Cocteau improved on Diderot; he added the music.

In Diderot’s story, all the characters are base. Madame de la Pommeraye is vengeance itself, a pure Racine character (pure in the sense that Phèdre is pure), and Madame Duquenois and her daughter, the pious ladies, push duplicity to the point of going to confession assuming that the Marquis will corrupt their confessor and find out everything. When Diderot’s hostess finishes her tale, Jacques’s teacher says, “My dear hostess, you tell the story very well, but you still have a long way to go in dramatic art. If you want your young girl to be interesting, you must teach her simplicity, and show her to us as the innocent victim, against her will, of her mother and of Madame de la Pommeraye, and show us that the cruelest things are done to her. . . . When you introduce a character into a scene,

his role must be singular. You have sinned against the rules of Aristides, Horace, Vida and Le Bossu.” What is most astonishing about Cocteau’s and Bresson’s adaptation, why it is at the same time faithful and unfaithful, is that they took the observations of Jacques’s teacher into account: in the film, Agnès is unequivocal, she is the innocent victim of Hélène. The lion’s share of responsibility goes to Cocteau; from the very first exchange, his mark is everywhere: “Have I not succeeded in distracting you? Are you suffering?” And later: “There is no such thing as love, only its proofs.” And further: “I love gold, it is like you: hot, cold, clear, sombre, incorruptible.” But if one doesn’t know Diderot’s text, this could easily be missed. Just as Giraudoux gave *Les Anges du péché* its dynamism, Cocteau endows *Les Dames* with life. We cannot fail to be struck by the similarities between the films that Cocteau has himself made since 1945 and this one. The relationship between Paul Bernard and Élina Labourdette in *Les Dames* is exactly the same as between Josette Day and Jean Marais in *La Belle et la bête*. There is between them a love that leads to total submission and devotion. Maria Casarès reminds us inevitably of Nicole Stéphane in *Les Enfants terribles* as she pronounces

those sentences that are Cocteau’s trademark: “And above all, don’t thank me” or “Don’t pull down my supports.”

To get away from the monotony of the usual labels that are applied to Cocteau, we should think hard about his realism. It starts with the “spoken” side of his dialogues, which sometimes make us smile: “I can’t receive you, come in.” The sharp sense of realism, when it’s pushed to its limits, introduces the eccentric. Twenty years after *Les Enfants terribles*, Cocteau can film it without changing a word of the dialogue and the actors can deliver it with extraordinary truth. An excellent example, which borders on the baroque but without being ridiculous, is a scene where Maria Casarès walks down a staircase talking to Paul Bernard, who is escaping by the elevator: “Why are you leaving? I don’t like the piano. . . .”

Bresson’s part is not negligible, however. Though it was begun before the Liberation, the film was abandoned, then taken up again and completed to all intents and purposes, then really started again, several months later. The direction remains, despite the intervening years, very abstract. Cocteau himself remarked: “This isn’t a film; it’s the skeleton of a film.” We are seduced by Bresson’s intentions rather than by his execution. *Les Dames* is an exercise in style, like the book *Madame de*. . . . But if, with Louise de Vilmorin, our admiration is easily and facilely elicited, it is the opposite with Bresson, whose stubbornness and laborious work of refining finally commands our respect.

I think *Journal d’un curé de campagne*, in which every shot is as true as a handful of earth—the earth of Georges Bernanos, its author—is Bresson’s best film. We shall have to wait for *La Princesse de Clèves*,\* which he’s going to make next year, to know Robert Bresson’s own real personality at last and assess his talent, on his own this time, without Giraudoux, Cocteau, and Bernanos.

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\* Bresson never made *La Princesse de Clèves*; it was directed in 1961 by Jean Delannoy, adapted and with dialogue by Cocteau.