

SURREALIST INSIGHT: JACQUES DEMY'S *PEAU d'ANE*

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Ethereal, rootless longing is run into the ground in *Peau d'Ane (Donkey Skin)* (1970), where the scenario has made some kind of peace with fantasy. (As with the song and dance tangents, Demy gravitates to unsettling extravagance of narrative, setting and costume to capture the almost abusive and almost ridiculous excesses of self-aggrandizement to which the bathetic dash to shine is prone. Whereas Demy's take on fantasy generally concentrates upon its redolence of pathological egotism, *Peau d'Ane* itself indicates a far more approving approach. The protagonist of the work, a shabby excuse for a king, is played by Jean Marais, whose most notable role was that of *La Bête* [the Beast] in Jean Cocteau's Surrealist fantasy, *La Belle et la Bête [Beauty and the Beast]* [1946]. There he portrays a humanoid wildcat reigning over a domain of darkness and magical opulence. Into this decorative hell-hole obtrudes a young woman whose beauty of heart matches her physical attributes, and the repellent Master falls instantly in love with her. The main content of the narrative has to do with the increasing ennoblement of each of them by way of deriving from each other what they have lacked—in his case, depths of heart, in her's, range of spine. Counterpointing their discoveries are incidents revolving around her family and associates who evince protracted selfish distemper, shallowness and savagery. This zone of death leads to *la Bête's* dying of a broken heart due to her being prevented from returning to him at an appointed time. Cocteau's lovely denouement has a handsome prince rise from the dead beast and carry her away to live happily ever after. Only, though, the Prince notices that she would have preferred the ugly monster and his uncanny lair. Demy would have pondered this paradox by way of embarking on a career of happy endings that are in fact no such thing. The momentum of that film's haunting ("Surreal") problematicness would add to the reflective sting of *Peau d'Ane's* beast-endowed crudity.) Although we never see them together in *Les Demoiselles*, Delphine and Maxence return to face the music here. Also on hand are Delphine (Syrig) herself and Sacha Pitoeff, emissaries from the territory (*Marienbad*) of very tough love. The box germane to that fateful darkness is the glass coffin of a beautiful queen (Catherine Deneuve, the demoiselle "Delphine") who has put her daughter (played by the same actress) *au hasard* (at risk) with a goofy last wish, charged to her husband, that he marry only a woman more beautiful than she. The Princess' judicious exile—expedited by her lighter than air godmother (Syrig)—entails a touch reminiscent of the Tati-motif of *Les Demoiselles*. She has demanded—as the price of marrying her not well resolved father—a garment from the skin of the royal donkey who processes his food into precious stones and gold coins, the heart of the kingdom's economy. A donkey of stature who also dies in the deadly crossfire of squalid intent is the subject of Robert Bresson's, *Au Hasard Balthazar (Balthazar at Risk)* (1966). The Princess- in- hiding within the flesh of a kind of slot machine (a trade-off urged upon the monarch by his "Prime Minister," the consistently productive Pitoeff, who once again could not prevail against the wiles of Delphine) would thus also sustain the legacy of a creature constantly responsive to the loving attentions of his first human contact, a young girl who abandons caring as she grows older and thereby abandons Balthazar to a series of cruelties which he withstands with heart-piercing dignity. Whereas the beauty concealed as a beast, and earning her way by toiling in a pigsty, laments, "I don't deserve to be so unhappy," she has been warned by a mentor who has a long history of enduring difficult tasks, "Life is not as easy as you think."

Be that as it may, Delphine the power broker slips to Delphine who has much to live up to an extra magic wand, thereby accentuating how at risk she stands as exposed to the temptation of facile ("fairy tale") successes. As weighted down with the trappings of fantasy—*blue* personnel, including a *pair* of *blue horses* carrying her out of the range of her rancid father—the young lady with such physical promise renounces a course of "love that makes wise men go mad," and conjures up a "Prince Charming" (Maxence), in red. (The love ditties, generated by the prospect of easy attainment to what could be called all that life can provide, are mimicked by a blue parrot [singing, "Love!...Love!"] who brings to mind the little old lady not won over by the excitement in *Jour de Fête*, whose quiet observation makes François' frenzies on behalf of ideal delivery show forth as dead on arrival. One such song, though, performed by the Princess at the outset of her father's predations, manages a steely glimpse of problematic horrors intrinsic to the dawning of love.

I carry love around my neck,
My heart is sick,
For your embrace will bring torture
To my serene soul.

Like a scarf of coarse wool,
Love envelops
And then forms knots.
Love, love
Has driven me mad.

Love often makes great trouble.
At the moment of my flowering,
It tears and devours me.
All lovers must suffer.
Who hasn't had to let it go?
Love, love
Is not kind.

In a heart once light
And now empty,
At the slightest mishap,
Love unravels.
The claw of memory
Snares it.
Love kills itself with time.

Love, love,
I love you so much.
Love, love,
I love you not.
[*Amour, amour,*
Je t'aime tant.
Amour, amour,
Je t'aime pas.]

Thus the Cinderella climax of the last phase of the scenario comes shrouded in mishap both ridiculous and devastating. The Prince Charming, “burning up,” becomes convinced that only a “love cake” from *Peau d'Ane* can save him. As joined with the nobility of Balthazar, overlapped by his head and his gentle eyes, she recites to her golden former self, so full of hope, and at the same time to the memory of her mother, as a repository of loving care, ingredients (including her ring) of the recipe to do the trick. This conjunction of skills sails forth in the form of a bouncy, joyous song bearing some resemblance to a Christmas carol. (Bresson has implied that only the Christ-like character of Balthazar can maintain anything resembling integrity on this planet.) The Prince gobbles down his gift (almost choking, as would a teenager with lots of growing up to do). In a “dream,” they roll awkwardly up a hill (her movements tellingly recalling the suicide of a girl named, Mouchette, in another of Bresson's films) to a table with many desserts (a far cry from the meaningful dinners experienced by *la Belle* and *la Bête*), then overeat, and sing things like, “What will we do with so much love?...We'll do what's forbidden” (reminding us of forbiddenness she was trying to take seriously). The almost swallowed ring takes us into the moment of the swallowed key, which makes the birthday party-cum-home-movie antics look juvenile with a vengeance. On discovering the only one for whom the ring is a perfect fit, there is a wedding and her father descends on them from a helicopter (recalling *La Belle's* Prince Charming's whisking her heavenwards). The magic accessories distributor, the darker Delphine, has snagged him for herself. Grandmothers, mothers and daughters, will, it seems, always remember such grandeur.