The Movies of Susanne Bier: A Cohesive Discourse (Open Hearts)

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The Movies of Susanne Bier

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Open Hearts

Original title: *Elsker dig for evigt*
Year: 2002
Director: Susanne Bier
Scenario: Anders Thomas Jensen
Actors: Sonja Richter, Nikolaj Lie Kaas, Mads Mikkelsen, Paprika Steen
As in The One And Only, a car accident brings the life of 2 couples together. But whereas all the personages of the preceding movie end up in an amorous relationship, all the couples in Open Hearts break up in the end: Joachim (Nikolaj Lie Kaas) and Cecilie (Sonja Richter); Niels (Mads Mikkelsen) and Marie (Paprika Steen); Niels and Cecilie; Stine (Stine Bjerregaard) and her boyfriend end up alone.

1. Structure

Exposition
Joachim and Cecilie are very much in love and plan to get married.

Disruption
As Joachim steps out of his car, he gets violently hit by the car driven by Marie. Joachim is completely paralyzed and has only the use of his head.

Adaptation
Feeling responsible for the accident, Marie asks her husband Niels, who works at the hospital where Joachim has been taken, to look after Cecilie.

Rejected by Joachim, Cecilie takes refuge in the arms of Niels, who falls in love with her. Despite her feeling of guilt, Marie tries to save her marriage.

Redistribution
When Joachim calls Cecilie back, she leaves Niels in a rush. Joachim convinces her to let him go. She agrees and, before leaving the hospital, she breaks up with Niels too. The film ends with Cecilie riding away in her car.

2. Characters’ narrative

Individual storylines

Joachim
Pivotal event: Joachim is knocked down by a car.

Powerlessness and dependency: Joachim is completely paralyzed and is entirely dependent on others.
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Rejection: Joachim rejects everyone, especially Cecilie.
Acceptation: Joachim calls Cecilie and spends time with her.
Liberation: Joachim frees Cecilie from their engagement.

Cecilie
Pivotal event: Joachim is knocked down by a car.
Powerlessness and rejection: Rejected by Joachim, Cecilie finds consolation in the arms of Niels.
Acceptance: When Joachim calls her, she immediately returns to him. She accepts to put an end to their engagement.
Liberation: Freed from her commitment to Joachim, she releases herself from her relationship with Niels and is ready to start a new life.

Characterizations

Guilt
In Open Hearts, guilt is present in most personages. Marie acknowledges that she was driving too fast and did not see Joachim because of the argument she was having with her daughter. To alleviate her sense of guilt, she asks her husband to help Cecilie.

When she confronts Cecilie, Marie tries to trigger a feeling of guilt in her by saying that their affair will upset many people.

Stine too feels guilty because she is partially responsible for the accident and, as a consequence, for the separation of her parents.

We can also detect a feeling of guilt in Joachim’s reactions towards Cecilie, for he knows that he will not be able to keep the promise he made to marry her.

Finally, Niels acknowledges that he feels guilty for having to lie to his wife about his affair with Cecilie.

Cecilie is the only one who does not express any feeling of guilt.

Characters’ interactions

Duplicity and deviancy
As in the previous movie, cheating on one’s partner is a male attribute, with Niels a married man starting an affair with Cecilie, and Stine’s boyfriend Rolf having one with Stine’s best friend. On the other hand, Cecilie’s relationship with Niels arises as a reaction to
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the situation imposed on her by Joachim, just as Sus reacts to Son-ny.

Interestingly, Hanne, the nurse who takes care of Joachim, seems to experience deeper feelings for her patient than those pertaining to her duty. The complicity that arises between them parallels that of Niels and Cecilie. The reading machine serves as a material symbol of their relationship, one that Hanne has to fix every time it breaks down.

Desire
A few times throughout the movie, Susanne Bier makes use of close-ups shot with a super-8 camera that alters the light and the texture of the film. It creates haptic images that reveal the “material presence” of a personage [Totaro, 2002] and the desire this personage inspires in the eyes of the beholder, desire that, in most cases, is of an unrealizable nature.

Temptation
Niels and Cecilie exchange their first smile when he offers her an apple, an allusion to the seduction scene in the Garden of Eden.

3. Contextual Narrative

The use of furniture as a symbol of the couple is more developed in Open Hearts than in the previous movie. References to the kitchen are, however, more limited, if only because the couple Joachim-Cecilie does not yet form a household. The kitchen serves nevertheless as context to Niels and Marie’s family life.

Furniture
After having heard that Joachim does not want to see her, Cecilie finds out that he has sent someone to take away his furniture and things from their apartment. His keys are all that is left behind. Joachim marks this way his definite rupture with Cecilie, as Sonny did in The One And Only.

Later that day, Niels and Cecilie make love in the empty room. He offers her to buy furniture: at his instigation, the new couple is taking shape. In the furniture store, they share an intense complicity in a scene that parallels the passage in the kitchen showroom in The One And Only: both represent a climax in the relationship of the two couples and announce its end. Indeed, the scene that follows
sees Niels among the still unpacked furniture saying to Cecilie that they should cool off a bit.

Finally, Niels confesses his affair to Marie by saying that he has bought some furniture for Cecilie. Later on, Marie says to Cecilie that they cannot afford to pay for this furniture, making it clear that Niels cannot manage the two relationships.

4. Thematic narrative

Love constructs

The One And Only and Open Hearts rest on the same premises but develop along somewhat inverted trajectories. In the first movie, the accident allows Niller and Sus to escape their unhealthy relationship and leads to the creation of a new familial unit. The accident of the second film, on the other hand, transforms a promising love relationship into an unviable one, breaks up an existing family, and concludes with all personages being on their own.

In both films, the whole process is orchestrated by the main male character. Every decision Joachim takes has a directive effect on Cecilie and impacts her relationship with Niels, whom she uses as a substitute to Joachim.

The first time that Cecilie is rejected by Joachim, she calls Niels and they go for a walk. The second time, Cecilie does not accept his rejection and lies down beside him. She tries to put his arms around her, but his limbs are lifeless. That evening, she asks Niels to hold her in his arms.

The third time, Cecilie hears from the doctor that Joachim does not want to see her and discovers that his things are gone. Joachim having left definitively, Niels can come into her life.

However, as soon as Cecilie hears that Joachim wants to see her, she immediately leaves Niels with whom she was making love, clearly stating that Niels is just but a temporary surrogate for her. After Joachim has led Cecilie to agree to their separation, Cecilie decides to stop her relationship with Niels as well.

A purgatorial transition

Made under the strict set of rules of “Dogme 95”, Open Hearts (Dogme #28) is an adaptation of the pre-Dogme film Breaking The
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Wave (Lars von Trier, 1996): in both movies, the main male character, paralyzed in an accident, manipulates the lead female protagonist. However, they differ on important points. In Breaking The Waves, the context – an isolated Scottish village and its oppressive community, the continuous presence of the family, the tyrannical religious shackles – plays a decisive role in the reactions of the female personage, whereas these influences are non-existent in Open Hearts.

Furthermore, the fact that the accident occurs before Joachim and Cecilie get married removes the legal and ideological obstacles that determine most of the actions in Breaking The Waves.

All in all, Susanne Bier has eliminated the moral sufferings imposed by external forces on the female character and set the focus on the transfer of love that shapes Cecilie’s purgatorial transition: carrying no responsibility whatsoever, Cecilie is allowed, in the end, to walk away, freed.

Another movie that shares some common ground with Open Hearts is Trois Couleurs: Bleu [Kieslowski, 1993], in which the main female character, who has lost her husband and her daughter, follows a purgatorial trajectory that takes her from powerlessness and refusal to acceptance and liberation. The absence of religious and moral constraints, its positive conclusion, and the ‘obsessive’ use of close-ups [Rabourdin, 1994] sharpen the similitude with Open Hearts.

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