

David Walsh reviews

Cousin Bette: Poor Balzac

David Walsh
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The setting for *Cousin Bette*, directed by Des McAnuff and scripted by Lynn Siefert and Susan Tarr from the novel by Honoré de Balzac, is France on the eve of the Revolution of 1848. Its story involves the revenge wreaked on the distinguished Hulot family by the cousin of the recently-deceased Madame Hulot, Bette (Jessica Lange), a spinster of 40, whose life has been a series of affronts and humiliations. Baron Hector Hulot (Hugh Laurie) is a womanizer who has spent the family fortune on a series of mistresses. The chances of his daughter, Hortense (Kelly MacDonald), marrying decently are rapidly dwindling. When Hortense falls in love with and 'steals' a young sculptor, Wenceslas (Aden Young), from Bette, who has fantasized about a relationship with the artist, this is the final straw. Bette, in alliance with the Baron's former mistress, Jenny Cadine (Elisabeth Shue), executes a plan that ruins the family financially and morally.

The film is astonishingly poor. It is flat and clumsy, without a single distinctly dramatic moment or profound characterization. *Cousin Bette* manages to feel both leaden and rushed. Individual moments take an eternity, but the film hurries through its relatively complicated series of events at a breakneck pace. Time after time, the dramatic potential of scenes is drained away by the graceless and perfunctory direction of the actors and organization of the images. Some of the actors, including Jessica Lange, are fine, others are not fine at all. It doesn't matter very much; they are all fighting a losing battle. If Elisabeth Shue's singing and dancing disastrously fails to come off, I can't entirely blame the actress. She looks unprepared and seems not to have any confidence in what she is doing.

McAnuff's film has *none* of the complexity or intensity of Balzac's book, which includes some of the most far-reaching and exacting social analysis ever

attempted by a novelist. The problems Balzac was painstakingly considering--the significance of *class* as a socioeconomic category and historical determinant, the extraordinary human drama produced by the decline of one class and the advance of another, the complex relationship in the new society between money and emotional life, the psychology, in short, of an emerging bourgeois world--must have been very much in the air at the time. (*Cousin Bette*, after all, appeared in the same year as the *Communist Manifesto*.) One has no sense that Balzac is straining to incorporate these issues into his prose. The language, the art and the analysis form an organic whole.

The filmmakers have essentially thrown the historical and aesthetic elements out the window and satisfied themselves with superficially dramatizing the notions that money corrupts and revenge is sweet. This is done in the name of making Balzac 'accessible' to modern audiences.

Is it legitimate in general to demand of a film that it 'live up to' the novel upon which it is based? In the narrow sense, probably not. In the first place, novels and films accomplish different things. Moreover, a filmmaker is under no obligation to be faithful to his or her source, either in story line or in spirit. But presumably the screenwriter or director must have some reason for adapting a book; something in the original must have struck a chord. In this instance, it is not immediately apparent what that element could have been.

It is difficult not to view the entire project with a certain amount of cynicism, given that the film bears only a passing resemblance to the novel. A certain niche has been created by the adaptations of Jane Austen, Henry James and others. Balzac offers a rich and relatively untapped supply of stories and characters

to an industry incapable apparently of creating many of its own. By simplifying and vulgarizing, one can reduce his work to a recipe that is not so unusual: a few cheap jibes at the rich, a few harmless hints at the decadence or even disintegration of a society, a little sex, a little broad comedy--a very little of everything.

If *Cousin Bette* radiated a deep purposefulness, whatever its outlook and whatever its attitude to Balzac, that would be one thing. But how should one react to the ignorant comment by co-screenwriter Tarr that 'Balzac was the Jackie Collins' of his day, i.e., a trash novelist?

This is Balzac: 'Crevel had married money in the person of the daughter of a miller of Brie, an only child whose inheritance made up three-quarters of his fortune; for shopkeepers grow rich, as a rule, not so much from their business as by the alliance of the shop with rural interests. A large number of the farmers, millers, stock-breeders, market-gardeners round Paris dream of the glories of shopkeeping for their daughters, and in a retailer, a jeweller, a moneylender, see a son-in-law much more to their taste than a solicitor or an attorney would be; for the lawyers' social status makes them uneasy; they are afraid of later being despised by persons so influential in the bourgeois world.'

That Balzac wrote quickly and sometimes carelessly, that he sought to reach a wide audience, that his prose upon occasion is lurid and contrived--these hardly add up to an argument for lumping him, one presumes admiringly, in with genuinely shameless purveyors of junk.

The fondness of Marx and Engels for Balzac is well known, and one is not obliged to agree with their assessment. (Engels noted that he had learned more about the France of 1815-48 from the novelist 'than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together.') But the impression his works made upon two of the greatest minds of the nineteenth century surely has some significance.

The intellectual level of the screenwriters is matched by that of those who publicize the film and the critics who have generally praised it.

Consider this. Fox Searchlight Pictures' official production notes include the following passage: 'The story, written on the cusp of the French Revolution, bursts with such piquant modern themes as adultery, rapacious fortune hunting and the notion of uncertain

virtue.' Well, of course, the book and film are set on the eve of a French revolution, the Revolution of 1848. But when one speaks of 'the French Revolution' one is generally understood to be referring to the Great Revolution of 1789. Is it possible that the studio publicists confused the two?

In any event, the 'confusion' was picked up and passed on by numerous critics, including some who will remain nameless, working for daily newspapers. One referred simply to 'pre-revolutionary Paris'; another to 'Paris on the eve of the French Revolution'; another--adding insult to injury--picked up on the above-mentioned comment and observed that, according to Tarr, 'Balzac was the Jackie Collins of the French Revolution' (although the novelist *wasn't even born* until after the collapse of the revolutionary regime and didn't begin writing novels *until 1820*); one critic described the setting as 'Napoleonic Paris' (although Bonaparte had lost power *a quarter of a century before* the events of the novel).

Is it possible, frankly, to expect sound aesthetic judgments, or much of anything, from individuals who are ignorant of the most elementary facts of modern history, facts that ought to be known to every high school graduate?

Unhappily, nearly every element of the making and distribution of *Cousin Bette* smacks of this sort of shallowness and philistinism. It is particularly unfortunate because the film will give large numbers of people a distorted picture of Balzac's work. Balzac can look after himself, but the last thing modern audiences need are more obstacles put in their path.



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