The Bridges of Madison County (1995)

Heike Paul

dir. Clint Eastwood; prod. Clint Eastwood, Kathleen Kennedy; screenplay Richard LaGravanese; photography Jack N. Green; music Lennie Niehaus. 35mm, color, 134 mins. Amblin Entertainment and Malpaso Productions, distrib. Warner Bros.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

This realist melodrama is set in 1965 and tells the story of the four-day love affair between Francesca Johnson (played by Meryl Streep) and Robert Kincaid (Clint Eastwood), which takes place in Madison County in rural Iowa. Francesca, an Italian-born homemaker and mother of two, married to Richard (Jim Haynie), by chance meets Robert, a traveling photographer for *National Geographic*, who has lost his way while searching for a local covered bridge for a photo documentary. Francesca's husband and teenage children have just taken off for the Illinois State Fair, granting her four precious days of solitude when Robert stumbles into her life. After giving him directions to the Roseman Bridge, Francesca rides with him in his car and later offers him a drink and meal at her house. Following an evening at her kitchen table, both quickly fall in love with each other. The apparent lack of perspective for their budding love only seems to intensify their feelings. They cherish the little time they share, in an intimacy and understanding that both recognize as exceptional and fragile: »This kind of certainty comes but once in a lifetime,« Robert states in affirmation of the well-known topos of romantic love. He encourages Francesca to leave her family and come with him. She spontaneously consents but then refrains from this radical departure for the sake of her husband and children. She chooses her quotidian »life of small things« and remains bound to »the choices she made,« sacrificing her love for Robert and rejecting that all-American offer of a second chance that he holds out to her.

The film is a »progressive reworking of a rather conservative novel« (Metz 67) written by Robert James Waller, a somewhat saccharine book that initially prompted Streep to reject the film project, calling the novel »a crime against literature« (qtd. in

Schickel). Critics mostly agree in their »good movie, bad book« diagnosis, and classify the film as »top class tear-jerking material« (Felperin). Steeped in the melodramatic repertoire of the kind that Roland Barthes laid out in *A Lover's Discourse*, the film effectively dramatizes the star-crossed lovers and their fateful encounter and transformation in an unlikely place. A less-than-glamorous Iowa of cornfields, mosquitos, and dry heat is temporarily turned into an affective landscape of romance and love. In fact, the film's libidinal exoticizing of Madison County was so successful that it gave a boost to regional tourism, turning a local attraction into a globally known destination, at least temporarily, and on the heels of the success of the 1992 novel (Kroll). Thousands of couples reenacted the roles played by Streep and Eastwood, celebrating anniversaries and marriage proposals while posing on the bridges of Madison County.

In the larger archive of melodrama, the film invites comparisons to two films in particular: David Lean's British melodrama *Brief Encounter* (1945)—Kauffman describes Eastwood's film as »*Brief Encounter* in Iowa«—and Douglas Sirk's classic → *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). *Bridges* also addresses small-town hypocrisy and the pressure to conform, a pressure primarily exerted on women. Like Sirk's widowed protagonist, Francesca is a middle aged woman who has a passionate affair with a man not her equal—and not her husband. Women of her age and social standing quickly become the objects of malicious small-town gossip (often by other women) in that day and time. In a side plot, the film introduces the case of Lucy Redfield, whose extramarital affair had been revealed, thus serving as a warning to Francesca. Lucy is ostracized and on the verge of being refused service at a local diner when Robert witnesses her humiliation.

The film has been credited with mild feminism. In the beginning, Francesca is clearly bored with her domestic routines and with performing labor that no one notices or appreciates. Hers is »the problem that has no name« (to use Betty Friedan's description of the unhappy housewife syndrome from her book *The Feminine Mystique*, published in the vanguard of the women's movement), and her frustration comes to the fore with Robert's visit. It is to him that she confesses her disappointment in her life in the United States, a place she moved to as an Army wife, having met her husband in Italy. The promise of »America« has in many ways not been realized in a life that revolves around family and farm in rural Iowa. Long ago, she quit her job as a teacher to take care of the children and to please Richard. Robert's mobility, his experiences traveling the world, elicit her envy and admiration, but also her scorn. When Robert repudiates the American family model in favor of a life of individual freedom, she feels offended and belittled in her own existence. In many ways, Francesca and Robert personify the two Americas—one rural, one urban—and their divide. In addition to projecting a different way of being in the world, Robert's visit also brings to light Francesca's own foreignness in Iowa.

The subtle critique of patriarchy that the film offers, in plot and character constellation, is corroborated by its visual regime and spatial arrangements. The former is an angle that affirms Francesca's emergent subject position in her partial appropriation of the (male) gaze. First, she cautiously attempts to catch glimpses of Robert through cracks in the covered bridge, which he notices. Later, she observes Robert's naked torso through the bedroom window as he washes himself. In the visual regime of melodrama, such a gaze often reflects a woman's unfulfilled yearning but not here: Rather, Francesca is about to have an affair with the object of her desire (Metz 69).

The spatial order of the film is characterized by its domestic setting. Due to the need for discretion, much of their whirlwind romance takes place indoors, even as the seating order at the kitchen table becomes destabilized, along with everything else in Francesca's life. Initially, the Johnson family breakfast is shown at length to characterize Francesca's place at the table as mother and domestic servant for her husband and children. Walter Metz points out how the domestic order is changed when Robert takes her accustomed seat at the table, the seat of the homemaker (70). Both also sit in the places of Francesca's children, their postures relaxed, as she reveals her delight in his stories by slapping her knee.

The atmosphere in Francesca's kitchen becomes increasingly eroticized in the interaction between the two protagonists. One way in which this is achieved is by means of what Toni Morrison calls the »Africanist presence«—that is, references to black culture and blackness, and the use of their symbolic capital (often coded as sexually charged or transgressive) in affect-saturated white storytelling, as a plot device in the service of white character development. Asked about his travel experiences, Robert identifies Africa—the entire continent—as the most exciting place he has ever been, and he captivates Francesca by telling her about his African encounters, including some comic relief. A second instance of Africanist presencing is their night out. Hiding from the white locals, they choose a club where they will not be discovered: the Blue Note, a bar frequented by African Americans. The protagonists' whiteness allows them to cross the color line and hide their illicit affair among people who according to white stereotypes are less concerned with bourgeois morals. Furthermore, Afro-diasporic music—blues and jazz playing on the radio and live at the bar—provides the soundtrack to their melodramatic love story and sets the mood for their bitter-sweet intimacy. This pairing of animating sensuality and suffering is combined in the Africanist presence: Yet, even, or especially, in their transgressive behavior, Robert and Francesca enjoy their white privilege.

The film's signature farewell scene, after her family has returned, comes when Francesca and her husband are running errands in town. Robert, standing in the pouring rain before stepping into his truck, one last time beckons her to come with him. She remains seated next to her husband, fingering the knob of the car door. Both trucks sit at a red signal. When the light turns green, Robert still lingers, as if waiting, and when Richard honks, he turns left—and is gone. This melodramatic ending is a quiet one. Francesca stifles her sobs, which her husband appears not to notice. There is no theatrical scene of revelation, jealousy, betrayal, or regret. The routine life of the Johnson family simply continues as if nothing had happened. Francesca is as invisible to them in her suffering as she is in her care work. This ending has been read critically, as it calls upon a conventional maternal sacrifice that cuts short the arc of Francesca's emancipation.

The love story between Francesca and Robert is framed and contained by a narrative that relates how after Francesca's death in the 1980s, her children, Carolyn and Michael, find their mother's journals, the pictures Robert took of her, the cross necklace she gave to him, and details of her last wish—to have her ashes thrown from the Roseman Bridge. Dismayed, and even shocked, at first, they realize how little they knew their mother—and how little they cared—which prompts one critic to ask: »Why does a movie about such an interesting and beautiful woman's desires have to begin and end with her semi-unpleasant and aggressively ordinary children?« (Enelow 58). Still, Fran-

cesca's legacy—and her sacrifice, the film suggests—becomes a catalyst in the lives of her children, who are finally moved to question their own choices and commitments.

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