

The 7 families game: The families of actresses

Axelle Ropert

A vast area of love can be formed around physical charm,
 But that is of little importance.
 At the end of the day, what matters is the actress's particular morale.
 Jean Cocteau



Leonor Silveira in *Vale Abraão* (Manoel de Oliveira, 1993)

THE SPIRITUAL TYPES

Emblematic figures: Delphine Seyrig, Leonor Silveira

Place of origin: the heights.

Nature: they have no gifts whatsoever beyond their spirit; that is, their sense of irony and permanent inspiration. They know how to *breathe* and to deploy their oxygenation power. Inhale, and the voice rises; exhale, and the word dies. *Clarity* is their virtue. They speak, we hold our breath, the air becomes still, and the atmosphere becomes empty. Even so, the imminent and ever-renewed asphyxiation may always emerge, in the fleeting form of slight confusion caused by a lapse (that ‘Thank you, sir’ from Antoine Doinel to Fabienne Tabard in *Stolen Kisses*) or a loss of voice (Michel Piccoli’s marine confusion in *Party*). They are inhabited by Spirit, and they repay this inhabitation by bestowing grace around them. They can only die from tuberculosis, a slow laceration that attacks what sometimes serves as a heart: the lungs.

Distinguishing characteristics: the art of keeping their voices in suspension.

Prohibited: doing any sport.

Suggestions: play Malibran or Kathleen Ferrier.

Clues: Kristin Scott-Thomas’s downcast eyes.

What they ask of us: to be left breathless in mid-speech (like Michel Piccoli).



Françoise Lebrun in *La maman et la putain*
(Jean Eustache, 1973)



Juliet Berto in *Céline et Julie vont en bateau:
Phantom Ladies Over Paris*
(Jacques Rivette, 1974)

THE CALM TYPES

Emblematic figure: Françoise Lebrun.

Place of origin: a harbor by Vermeer.

Nature: they speak as if they have slept for too long. Slurred words, untidy chignons. ‘Meadow-saffron the color of lilac and of shadows / Beneath your eyes, it grows there; your eyes are like those flowers / Mauve as their shadows and like this autumn / And for your eyes’ sake, my life is slowly poisoned’ (Guillaume Apollinaire). The lowlands embrace them with open arms, and couches welcome their horizontal figures, in those postures that enable them to speak a *tone lower*. They are cursed by a slight slow motion, because the personal clock of sorrow and hope breaks when there is no (other) possible love. They are nurses (*The Mother and the Whore*) or wardrobe assistants (Emmanuelle Riva in *Liberté, la nuit*); they bandage and they sew. What stays with us is not the pleasure of those painstaking chores that serve to highlight their lost sorrows, but that flattering pose; that arched neck and gracious spirit.

Distinguishing characteristics: actresses with a geological vocation: they erode easily. However, this erosion should not mean the exhaustion of resources, but a chance to ‘climb back to the surface.’ That is their opportunity.

Prohibited: the glibness of all Garrel’s most recent movies.

Suggestions: play, once again, the delighted drunkenness of a Ninotchka visiting the West.

Clues: a glass of absinthe? An opium cigarette?

What they ask of us: to change our sleep cycle.

THE HELPLESS TYPES

Emblematic figures: Joan Fontaine, Juliet Berto.

Place of origin: haunted houses, orphanages.

Nature: they are easily unsettled, to the satisfaction of invisible enemies who allow these empty women to experience their power of resistance. In Hollywood, Joan Fontaine is hit particularly hard, threatened by Rebecca’s ghost and a glass of milk (*Suspicion*). In Paris, Juliet Berto learns judo and struggles in the twists and turns of dialectics (*Out 1, Le Gai Savoir*). While a chest movement sent Dana Andrews back to the logical horror of his fate (*Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*), the elasticity of long distances and an obsession with all kinds of rituals attempt to reduce (topologically speaking) an incomprehensible world to playful laws in miniature (*Celine and Julie Go Boating*). Joan folds — Juliet unfolds. They are not victims, they are only tricked, and it is *trust* that shatters their relations with the world. It’s only one step from ‘damaged’ to ‘ammunition,’ a step which Juliet skips easily, as she stands dejectedly at the end of a street. It’s not ‘real’ revenge, rather a lack of respect that they have for a game you might call ‘Scare me if you want me to trust you.’ Grace and a vein of terror are not brought face-to-face for nothing.

Distinguishing characteristics: Joan blushes and Juliet slurs her words.

Prohibited: exposing them to real terror, because pathos is detrimental to poverty — like when Joan Fontaine faces those Cukorian furies in *The Women*.

Suggestions: the role of Bluebeard’s last wife in a script by Jean-Claude Biette.



Maria Casarès in *Orphée* (Jean Cocteau, 1950)



Ingrid Bergman in *Europa '51*
(Roberto Rossellini, 1952)

Clues: a liking for taboo subjects.

What they ask of us: that we who are not in danger should show them a little kindness.

THE QUEENLY TYPE

Emblematic figures: Maria Casarès, Françoise Fabian.

Place of origin: isolated areas, deserted palaces.

Nature: it is not so much about reigning, but rather about *taking* (love, admiration, support, etc.). While some play with the power of submission, they prefer the power of respect. A finger raised imperiously, a held gaze, they assert themselves so strongly that they don't need to give orders. 'Violence is fair where sweetness is vain' (Corneille). They possess the power of law because they rule — period. They do not command, nor do they forbid any specific aim, anything in particular, any precise objective (they are Kantian, of course, though they do have slender, trembling hands). 'You are my death.' With this brilliant line, Jean Marais subjects himself to an exclusive amorous servitude in *Orpheus*. The (illusory) belief that they are the only ones who suffer for these women prolongs their reign *ad vitam aeternam*. Whether they are aristocratic or bourgeois, the plebeian world is forbidden for them because power is not determined by social class, but by an indifference to all perceived, experienced or shared hardships. Place a helpless person before a queen and you will see the full force of her cruelty and scorn. Nobody can ever forget Juliet Berto's humiliation before François Fabian in *Out 1*. But an inability to carry out life-saving acts in ordinary life might be tragic, and that vulnerability dangerously raises the stakes on their grandeur. To parody Corneille, they should be taught this line: 'No matter how great queens are, they are just like us.'

Distinguishing characteristics: the angle of the head as the art of silently indicating which choice to make.

Prohibited: do not play the Marquess of Merteuil (too much outright venom would be detrimental to the display of their greatness).

Suggestions: play Balzac's forsaken women (don't we already have Jean-Claude Guiguet's *La Visiteuse?*).

Clues: Marie-Armelle Deguy playing Viriate in Corneille's *Sertorius*.

What they ask of us: the (Paulhanian) stance of the prisoner in love, the Patti Hearst syndrome, even.

THE SINCERE TYPES

Emblematic figures: Ingrid Bergman, Deborah Kerr.

Place of origin: Northern lands.

Nature: Cary Grant confessed to Deborah Kerr: 'I loved you at first sight because I knew you were sincere' (*An Affair to Remember*). Sincerity, instantly revealed at the heart of meetings and conversations, accelerates or even short-circuits the course of feelings — love at first sight is compelling. The impact of sincerity is not measured by a lack of hypocrisy or secrecy. These sincere types are indeed capable of lying, acting and evading, because their sincerity goes beyond their confessions, to the point of jeopardizing their chances of love (i.e. Deborah Kerr's sacrificial decline in *An Affair to Remember*). Everything is there, making all future pretence or silences obsolete, disguising the denial of words with inanity,

within *the expression*. This expression makes the most secret movements of one's soul immediately readable. Unlike the helpless types (such as Joan Fontaine) or the transparent ones (Gene Tierney, etc.), we cannot picture them in their youth. In short, they are mature women *par excellence*, as brave as little soldiers. Paradox: the embodiment of sincerity, in spite of all, they are the great actresses of romantic comedies, which means that everything is calculated (facial expressions, compromises, clumsiness and seduction). A sincere comedy is not a matter of timing, of misunderstandings or of the (anticipated) outcome of its charm. It is rather a way of putting the end before the beginning; of rejecting the tempo of the seducer as he savors every last morsel of his conquest, and the imminence of the moment that the woman 'surrenders,' thereby confessing to him — sincerely — that it's not worth it, because love *has already been gambled away*. The wisdom and the impatience in this statement, though not cruel, clearly come from the theatre (*Elena and Her Men*). The generosity of how they play makes them capable of great compassion — more than any other type of woman. 'For deep mercy is like rain: it keeps falling back onto the earth from which it came, and is a blessing for the fields.' (Rilke). Their (expressive) sincerity reaches its peak in their act of self-s forsaking, and they also leave their husbands (*Europe 51*, *Tea and Sympathy*) to devote themselves to helping others.

Distinguishing characteristics: they know when to stop talking so they can listen better (Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant's mother in *An Affair to Remember*, Ingrid Bergman and Giulietta Massina in *Europe 51*).

Prohibited: playing virtuous women who choose to embark on an extramarital affair (*The Grass Is Greener*).

Suggestions: their husband should die for love (*La Princesse de Clèves*).

Clues: we shouldn't forget (in Japanese film) about Kogure Michiyo, the eldest sibling in *A Geisha* (Mizoguchi).

What they ask of us: to understand the powerful seduction exerted by domestic virtue. Long live the conjugal *amour fou*!

THE TRANSPARENT TYPES

Emblematic figure: Gene Tierney.

Place of origin: Boreal regions.

Nature: 'I am passionate about her as one might be about a



Gene Tierney in *Leave Her to Heaven*
(John M. Stahl, 1945)

species of flower.' (Marcel Proust) They are not virtuous, only discreet, and they are constantly besieged by lapses of memory. When Gene Tierney leaves a fateful clock to its ticking (*Laura*), or the cries of a drowning man desperately calling her for help (*Leave Her to Heaven*), the echoes of a sonata from an obsessive portrait (*Dragonwyck*), or a laugh (Rex Harrison's) that is lost in the past (*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*) — her face always seems to reflect fake questions. Always 'excessive,' as if the movie was uninterested in her; it simply lets her be, as it opens the doors of the story, one by one, so that no incident spoils the plot. This bullet-proof naïveté returns light, our gazes and the men's kisses to their origins, where evil does not yet exist. These transparent types are not women, they are just young girls or fake mature women (*Advise & Consent*) who admirably withstand the artificial cosmetics of ageing (*Heaven Can Wait*) in order to better attain their reward: to turn into a ghost, to love what we become, and to love ghosts (*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*). To surrender to the charms of eternity — isn't that the illusion that consecrates them to the contemplative curiosity of the audience?

Prohibited: walking hypnotized along windowsills, unless this has been prescribed by Dr Korvo (*Whirlpool*) — the diabolical doctor who scrupulously applies the principle of 'kill or cure.'

Suggestions: play the role of Madame de La Chanterie, a heroine whose sudden clemency led her to utter the following Kleistian quote to the old lawyer, who is eventually forgiven: 'Angels get their revenge, too' (Balzac, *L'envers de l'Histoire Contemporaine*).

Distinguishing characteristics: they offer men (Don Ameche) and specters (Rex Harrison) the chance to become immortal.

Clues: a child-like voice that considers itself to be cured from failed marriages by psychiatric shock therapy (read Gene Tierney's autobiography, *Self-Portrait*).

What they ask of us: ask JFK.

THE DETERMINED TYPES

Emblematic figures: Hawksian actresses, Anne Bancroft (*7 Women*).

Place of origin: the Olympic Games of modern life.

Nature: these are the best women for *making decisions*. And these dynamic decisions about love (in Hawks), or moral, final ones (in Ford) are inseparable from physical action. If choosing which side to be on or what to do next is all done instantly, it's because in their world, uncertainty does not and cannot exist. If the female doctor in *7 Women*, made up like an oriental doll, meets the tragic fate of the Mizoguchian heroines when she sacrifices herself, it is for the purpose of better accentuating a fundamental difference: to reject any 'feminine condition.' Their kind of heroism is different to that of other women, but above all, it is not inexorably determined. Loneliness is safe — and that includes solidarity. The woman who sacrifices herself in the last Ford movie also has to break the walls of silence that imprison another girl in *The Miracle Worker*. Hawksian actresses (Paula Prentiss, Katharine Hepburn, Gail Hire, Elsa Martinelli, Carole Lombard, Ann Sheridan and Rosalind Russell) can only be loved all together, because the actions of one produce a reaction from another, because the emergence of one 'example' implies the existence of the others. A Hawksian actress is a *prototype* who faces nothing but masculine indifference. In any case, it is not a 'war of the sexes,' but an intransigence that is as futile as it is demanding: to make her male counterpart *lose his temper* (the unacknowledged aim of all Hawksian actresses). They love to sink down onto couches, sneak into rooms illicitly and unleash wild beasts, and they walk and talk as if they were leaping hurdles. 'My dear Volgelstein, she's the latest, freshest fruit of our great modern evolution: she's the self-made girl!' (Henry James). What will their victory be? Officially, a loving one, and *the man will fall into their arms*; unofficially, a clinical one, and *he will return to childhood*. After having finally discovered the elixir of youth, the much dreamed-of formula, Dr Fulton utters these decisive words: 'How can one survive one's own childhood?' (*Monkey Business*) Remember Cary Grant in *Bringing up Baby*, *I Was a Male War Bride* and *Monkey Business*, and Rock Hudson in *Man's Favorite Sport?* Why should seduction take such a strange form? The answer seems clear: for women, love is simply the chance to have *the luxury of a brief pause*. As so often happens in Hawks's films, they are in fact stories of movement, dynamics, mobility and rhythm. Hawksian heroines could not possibly manage to keep up that tempo for the entire length of a movie without a brief masculine pause, in which they conquer the heart of some boorish, regressive, sublimely soft klutz, someone like Rock Hudson or John Gavin. That is why we don't believe that the



Anne Bancroft in *7 Women* (John Ford, 1966)

gynaecium represents that unfathomable promised land. Isn't it much nicer to live like they do here, in a world where no one can follow you, a world that keeps backing off from you, a world that is behindhand or even (actually) *backward*? The world of the Hawksian actresses is a world that is backward because of their men, all men; because of their scatterbrained wise men, their penniless detectives, their bumbling cowboys, their Cornelian aviators, their sappy sailors, their irritated hunters, their journalists rushing hither and thither, their shy athletes, their betrayed pharaohs and their blind soldiers. And in this world you should always kill two birds with one stone: seduce them for a while, and then scare them into becoming less backward.

Distinguishing characteristics: they love to puncture men's pompousness, with their deep voices (Lauren Bacall, Paula Prentiss) or their uniform (Dr Cartwright in *7 Women*).

Prohibited: appearing naked on screen. The elegance of their bony forms comes from the fact that they *bear* clothing and hectic dialogue. Remove their clothes and all you'll have left is the structure.

Suggestions: the role of Kleist's Penthesilea for Anne Bancroft, and Stendhalian heroines (Mathilde de La Mole, Countess Sanseverina, the Duchess of Palliano, etc.) for Hawks's actresses.

Clues: they have certainly proved inspirational — in the US, Michelle Pfeiffer, Linda Fiorentino, Jamie Lee Curtis and Melanie Griffith are all ready to replace them. In France, we hope that Marianne Denicourt succeeds in getting rid of her 'bourgeois-ness' and Dominique Reymond her 'redneck-ness.'

What they ask of us: to anticipate their actions so that we can — at least once — be in synch with them (mission impossible).

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Cinema and its actors

García Figar

Cinema has been hijacked by its actors. Successfully and gloriously, in their opinion. And who are we to disabuse them of this idea? On the one hand, we find actors who have been lured into movie-making by the sacred hunger of self-interest, people who refuse to resign themselves to financial mediocrity, and even less so to their unfitness for work. Cinema, they think, will meet their humblest ambitions. Any 'smart guy' can aspire to a role in it! It's a good business that requires little work and can also be fun, in fact. Which Spaniard doesn't think himself willing and able to perform a heroic act? However, this tendency (which is racial in its origins) can easily fail if it is badly planned or organized.

But the supposed 'stars' (there are so few of them shining in the heavens of film-making!) possess another, higher and more fragile purpose: that of celebrity. It must be so exciting to see oneself on the big screen: either well-dressed or badly undressed, invited out, flattered, praised, in love and speaking in their own voice, listening to themselves and hearing, amongst the crowd, their first name or a business pseudonym. Publicity binges often give birth to so many other kinds of binges.

Even so, greedy or exhibitionist attempts in this direction have not always been feasible in the real world (and the latter even less so than the former). Being a cinema actor, a star, is not about appearing in showbiz, comedy or drama to act out a role, an idea or a human being. It's about knowing how to portray them, in their entirety; living the way they live, just as their creator presents them, just as they were themselves. Not long ago we saw on screen a Don Juan Tenorio who was played as an amusing puppeteer, and a Doña Inés portrayed as a lady who was even stuffier and more frivolous than the busybodies from *Monipodio*. Tirso de Molina would have never recognized them as his own creations, nor would have Zorrilla have acknowledged them as his muse's adoptive children. If an action is only executed out of self-interest, it will never achieve perfection, because its foundations have already been ruined. Whenever any action is preceded by attempts at exhibitionism, it will simply turn out as exaggeration, mannerism and muscular tension — something that makes any performance unattractive.

Any actor, any star, should adopt the phrase 'forget yourself' as his motto for acting; that is to say, impersonality. While it is true that personal characteristics should be used to help play the role, the 'self' should not be visible; it must be hidden and forgotten, as it is the worst enemy of acting. There is no doubt that this total stripping of the self requires specific personal conditions, such as a complete knowledge of oneself, an accurate, intuitive sense of the role, the historical period, the atmosphere, behavior and the corresponding ability to embody all this within oneself as a whole. And not just as a superficial costume, but rather as a substance that is absorbed and brought to life. Failing to excel in all these areas will only lead actors into vulgarity, absurdity and ridiculousness.

The 'embodiment and re-embodiment' of roles requires a great deal of study, observation and experience. The actor must immerse himself in the environment where the actual characters exist. And if this environment no longer exists, then the actor should explore others that most closely resemble it, and which preserve most of its features. The 'ways of being' of the old aristocrats are not quite like those of the 'new rich.' There is no comparison. 'Military psychology' has essential differences — it is achieved through a twofold discipline: inner and outer. This discipline subordinates the person's own will to someone else's, and toughens up the physique, lending agility and looseness to all its movements and cadenced rhythms. The military man is not his uniform or his rank, he is defined by a peculiar 'behavior' that is exclusive to a certain social status. What's more, many military families possess a rich vein of correctness, nobility, chivalry and honor, one which even includes women and children. Playing the part of a military man means becoming a soldier, absorbing 'military behavior' so deeply that it comes to constitute another self. How many actors have considered that? Many of them just put on the costume and think that they've achieved their aim. That is why most of the soldiers we see on screen are mere caricatures or masks: they represent all the worst of the profession but none of the best. And the same must be said about playing teachers, priests and solicitors. In such a liberal age, we have never known any roles better for theatrical and cinema performance than

those of Rabelais or Galdós. The image of the 'popular' actor is falsified in its very conception, and it has been butchered of its tiniest details because it has been inspired by a character that is least representative of the 'popular' role: the pure-bred show-off. Are we to deny the 'popular' actor his psychology, based on tradition, the wisdom of the time, the long-established experience and the spiritual elevation that has lain at the bottom of his soul for centuries?

A good actor is acknowledged because of his 'capacity for absorption,' an intense perfection that is achieved by few. The immense majority of them never 'get into' their role, instead they simply play it superficially. This flaw becomes clear in the metamorphosis that the actor undergoes during the course of the scene. In many ways, the actor will find himself changing, different, and the audience will also notice this, thinking that they are watching various characters, but played by only one actor.

And so, should we create 'drama schools'? Actors are not taught, nor can they be improvised. An actor is born an actor; he comes into the world possessing the basic talents required for the stage. But those talents are like rough diamonds: they need to be polished and shaped.

First, they must be searched for, and once they've been found, they should be taken to the 'drama school' to be shaped and polished. This polishing, however, is not an experience, or a kind of gymnastics — it's work, methodical, hard but flexible work on those innate talents, forcing them to offer their best. Don't singers also have to do undergo such methodical training, involving all manner of hardship and privations?

A good actor should be a decent type, good-looking, with perfect limbs, a harmonious body, graceful in his movements and flexible, with a clear, well-modulated voice, correct, disciplined, and above all entirely natural. He should possess good manners and tact in large amounts. He should be sensitive but not hysterical, vehement but not reckless, emotive but not lachrymose, brave but not arrogant, composed but not cowardly, loving but not foolish, pensive but not scheming, prompt but not hasty, and relaxed but never too laid-back.

I admit that some people will not accept my opinions as I write this. Because instead of portraying perfect men, isn't drama all about despicable, weird, crazy, ugly men? Like real men are? But the ones meant to play them shouldn't be like that, because they would not make the cut. A real character might be flawed, morally or physically, but the imitation shouldn't be, because it is fictive, and fiction should seek perfection. Acting and performance require perfect flaws, which in turn require a perfect balance between extreme exaggeration and a fearful

taciturnity. Just because the drunk speaks dully, vaguely and falteringly, should the actor do the same? If that were the case, cinema would be ideal for the deaf and the hard of hearing. The viewer must understand every word clearly, with the right intonation, and every syllable comprehensible. There are some actors who can do perfect drunk voices — even though they are faked — and if they keep on doing movies, they'll probably end up having to get treatment for their vocal cords. The public should receive perfection within the limits of performance. Can Don Juan Tenorio be portrayed as an ugly man, with buck teeth, skinny legs, and a shrill, feminine voice? That's what we saw in one movie about Don Juan Tenorio. And a man with buck teeth and skinny legs can't make a woman fall in love with him, nor can a man with a shrill, feminine voice swear grand oaths or perform great exploits (even if they might be reprehensible in nature). Thus, 'ugly' or physically flawed men with a poor stage presence should simply not work in the movies. That is my recommendation.

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