

I N T H E A R T S

The pleasures of subtlety

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Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud achieves emotional resonance through the distance between what seems and what is.

By Linda DeLibero

Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud is Claude Sautet's 14th feature film—not exactly prolific for a director whose career spans five decades. But after toiling long years in the shadow of his more famous New Wave contemporaries, Sautet's measured pace has at last yielded rich and unexpected rewards. At one time, Sautet's films, when they were seen at all in this country, were tagged as little more than bourgeois confections, craftily contrived, only a half-step up from the haute trash of Claude Lelouch (*A Man and a Woman*). Worse, they were unapologetically personal and generally sunny, at a time when Americans only went to French films for politics or *l'amour fou*. Along with the disciplined craftsmanship he's been perfecting for years, Sautet has finally developed a moral gravity that rivals

anything the New Wave (with which he refused to be identified) ever produced. Somehow, he's become a master filmmaker.

Like *Un Coeur en Hiver* (1991), the film that ended Sautet's long spell of near-anonymity in America, *Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud* achieves emotional resonance through the slow accretion of seemingly casual detail, through words left unsaid, through the distance between what seems—or what should be—and what is. It's as if Henry James had decided to take up moviemaking. The story, on paper, is slight. Nelly (Emmanuelle Béart), a young woman fed up with her unemployed husband's indolence, meets Arnaud (Michel Serrault), the friend and former lover of Nelly's woman friend. A wealthy retired businessman, Arnaud offers Nelly the money to pay her back rent, but she politely refuses. Back home, though, she presents the idea to her husband as a *fait accompli*. When he barely blinks at this arrangement, she asks for a divorce and takes the check from Arnaud.

Thereupon commences the odd, unnameable relationship between Arnaud, who is near the end of his life, and Nelly, who, thanks to him, is finally beginning hers. She takes a job typing his memoirs, an account of his early career as a colonial magistrate in the Leeward Islands. Their work sessions take on the quality of a slow, polite seduction. Arnaud is clearly smitten; Nelly is intrigued. But consummation is unthinkable. There's convention—the man is old enough to be her grandfather—and the unspoken matter of the money. Mostly, though, there's the unyielding, implacable solitude of each of these characters. Nelly becomes involved with Vincent (Jean-Hugues Anglade), Arnaud's young publisher, largely, we discern, to work off her feelings for Arnaud. Eventually Vincent asks her to live with him; Nelly refuses, and Vincent, in a fit of pride, breaks off the relationship. Nelly proceeds with her divorce. Arnaud leaves for an extended trip with the wife he's been separated from for 20 years. Nelly and Arnaud part. *Finis*.

In lesser hands—or perhaps in Sautet's earlier work—this little story of Parisian angst might have become a soap opera. But Sautet has learned to keep the camera still and the dialogue clear of melodrama, allowing us to see and hear for ourselves what plays beneath the surface of these ordinary lives. Most of what we understand of the characters' intentions and desires we must glean from careful attention to facial expression, to the turn of a phrase, to the stray detail in a frame. When Nelly offers to massage the elderly man's aching back, we briefly see a closeup of her fingers kneading his sagging flesh. The moment, with its curious mixture of innocence and intimacy, forces us to acknowledge our own discomfort with the notion of age



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Michel Serrault and
Emmanuelle Béart in
*Nelly and
Monsieur Arnaud*,
directed by
Claude Sautet.

and passion; finally, the image strips us of our conventional response, and we're left to contemplate what it means in this particular context. Afterwards, Arnaud rewards Nelly with dinner at a posh restaurant, where his business associates and their wives peer at the couple across the room's expanse. They think they know what they're seeing; Nelly comments that they doubtless believe she's a whore. In these small ways, Sautet quietly discloses the trap we fall into when we fail to perceive the ambiguity of human relations. In short, he does what all great directors ultimately do: He teaches us to see.

It's difficult to think of any contemporary filmmaker who works in quite this way; at any rate, few today can afford to assume so much patience and attentiveness in their audiences. It's a pity, because the subtle satisfactions of this method are numerous. Always known as an actor's director, Sautet has coaxed from Michel Serrault (known mostly in this country for his role in *La Cage aux Folles*) a performance that quietly plays on his status as an icon of French cinema—and of the French past. An old colonial boy, Arnaud is both regretful of the darker parts of his own history and angry that there's so much he needs to apologize for. There's plenty of room for sentiment in this portrait of an aging patriarch, but neither Serrault nor the film yields to it. Emmanuelle Béart, here minus the hothouse

gloss of her character in *Un Coeur en Hiver*, uses her unearthly beauty to suggest a woman for whom all things are possible—clearly everyone in the film is in love with her—but who refuses to accept such bounty on principle. With her rueful smile and clean-scrubbed face, she sets off to pursue her freedom like a pilgrim who knows the promised land is pure illusion. When asked repeatedly by various friends whether she'll really divorce, she responds unhesitatingly that it's for the best; nevertheless, you get the feeling that she knows the change will hardly matter to her happiness. And this, finally, is the bond that Nelly and Arnaud share. Although a deep gulf of history and experience separates them, both understand the power of unseen and unalterable limits.

The interiority of a film like *Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud* is the opposite of what we're used to seeing in popular culture, which traffics in surfaces, limitless vistas and unbridled fantasy. Even independent cinema today can't tackle the incongruities of ordinary life without the requisite wink and a nudge, and the improbable happy ending. In fact, it's questionable whether *Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud*, which is even more pared down and nuanced than *Un Coeur en Hiver*, will find much of an audience in this country. That would be a shame, not only because such movies remind us that film is every bit as capable of deft, intelligent expression as any other form of art, but because if Sautet continues to make films like these, there ought to be someplace—other than the video screen—where we can see them. ◀

I N P R I N T

Reclaiming King

By David Chappell

One of the most heated issues in the politics of historical memory is the allegiance right-wingers now claim with Martin Luther King Jr., who, they emphasize, advocated a “color-blind society.” That phrase—attributed to King and the “original” civil rights movement—has become a mantra for opponents of affirmative action, though King is on record supporting affirmative action as a way to move toward a color-blind society.

A more determined recasting of King’s legacy has occupied the other end of the ideological spectrum, where radical black nationalists are claiming an allegiance to King that they never felt when King was alive. The black nationalist revision of King has had much more influence on mainstream publications and academic discussion of civil rights. It is just as misleading as the “color-blind” King created by the right wing.

Back in the 1960s, black “militants” made great sport of King—the Reverend Chicken Wing, as Malcolm X called him. Eldridge Cleaver’s 1968 bestseller, *Soul on Ice*, said that the “emasculated” James Baldwin was full of self-hatred partly because he could not have a white man’s baby and “embod[ied] in his art the self-flagellating policy of Martin Luther King.”

King has remained a prominent, if no longer ridiculous, figure to black nationalists. Vincent Harding, probably the most thoughtful and historically knowledgeable black nationalist today, began a reassessment of King about 10 years after King’s death. Harding defended King—and dissociated himself—from the denunciations of the ’60s militants. King knew, Harding told a symposium at the University of Mississippi in 1978, “that he was being falsely identified as an ‘Uncle Tom’ by many Northern black rhetoricians of revolution who had never once risked their

lives as King had done so many times in the cause of his people’s freedom.”

Yet Harding got in his licks. King became, Harding says, “a tool for defusing” the movement. By “allow[ing] himself to be convinced” that it was unwise to shut down Washington with mass demonstrations while Congress was considering a civil rights bill in 1963, King “produced the one-day, unthreatening March on Washington.” For this and other failures, Harding says, King was “the best friend white folks ever had.”

But Harding claimed that King began to come to his senses near the end of his life—something that nationalists never said at the time. In the debate over establishing a national King holiday, Harding wrote in *Sojourners* in January 1983 that America “enshrined the King of 1963”—an immature King who still had faith that America could solve its racial problems voluntarily. Harding enshrines a later King, who was radicalized after 1965, he says, partly because “courageous and radical spokespersons like Malcolm X and the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,” among others, raised “the cry of black power.”

Harding’s notion of the early King ignores King’s long-standing pessimistic view of human nature, expressed as early as 1951, when King wrote that liberalism’s “particular sort of optimism has been discredited by the brutal logic of events.” Far from “assured progress in wisdom and decency,” King wrote that “man faces the ever present possibility of swift relapse not merely to animalism but to such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice. ... Maybe man is more of a sinner than liberals are willing to admit.” In a 1955 speech denouncing Negro leaders who accept segregation as “mental slaves,” King rejected passive, other-worldly religion: “You must do more than pray and read the Bible to destroy segregation and second-class citizenship—you must do something about it.”

Harding says King’s late, more militant positions were what led the FBI to put King under constant surveillance. But the FBI began investigating King in 1961. As Harding notes in a later article in *Sojourners*, the assistant director of the FBI said King was “the most dangerous Negro in America” in 1963.

The nationalist theologian James Cone develops Harding’s interpretation into a more extreme and influential version of King’s ideological evolution. In a 1986 piece for the *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Cone went so far as to say, “King moved from an optimistic integrationist to a temporary separatist.” To deepen King’s blackness, Cone emphasizes not just the influence of young militants but the childhood influences of the black church. Cone complains that most scholars overemphasize the influence of the “white” thinkers King read in graduate school and ignore the tradition in which King grew up. “The black church,” he says, “was much more decisive in determining his theology even though he seldom referred to it.” When asked to trace the course of his intellectual development, Cone says King would cite “Mahatma Gandhi, Reinhold