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London Grip's
Film & Sound
Contributing Editor
Helen Donlon
is the founder of
Storm Agency
and
is the author of
According to ... David Lynch (a selection of his finest quotes)

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SAVAGE GRACE

film review by
Helen Donlon

Described by Norman Mailer as "the best oral history to come out since Edie", this true crime story put together in the 1980s by astute editors Natalie Robins and Steven M. L. Aronson captured the public's imagination for its compelling portrait of the lifestyle of a classic American couple of a certain time and place; a mannered, highbrow-ish couple living the American Dream, all dinners and society affairs, with their Manhattan townhouse and their Spanish summer homes. It is a fascinating tale because the couple in the story are far from average Joes. In fact, let's go further and say the triple, since the couple and their son all figure as prominently in this compellingly awful tale.

First published in 1985, it captured American public attention chiefly because of the mighty fall aspect of the Baekeland family story. Typically revered for the monied aspects of their lifestyle, their position also went in tandem with the kind of local envy and resentment that propitiated the *schadenfreude* accompanying the family's splendidly grotesque fall from grace.

Radix malorum est cupiditas, said Shakespeare. And cupidity rhymes with stupidity, sez I. A reputation built on money alone sort of deserves a good slapping. In biblical terms, greed may well be the most awful of the deadly sins, simply because it is stultifyingly mundane. I am fascinated as to how these two people possibly thought their relationship could work. On the one side, we have a prim, pompous and pasty American boy who, despite his aloofness and pretend self-confidence dines, continually, on stories of his grandfather Leo. Leo Baekeland was the inventor of Bakelite. An amazingly practical invention, to be sure, and from which fountainhead Brooks, the grandson, had obviously had a cosy enough upbringing, materially speaking. He has a lot to prove though, as he respects his grandfather a great deal more than the father he alludes to as a *crapule*. And he is clearly under the illusion he is more like his grandfather in importance.

On the other side then, we have Barbara Daly, a beautiful, savage Voguey American-Irish wench with a lust for social climbing that is well beyond the comical, and whose life consists of endless namedropping and the obligatory *cartes de visites* collection on show in the hallway. Novelist James Jones immortalised the Baekelands in an unflattering way (including a replay of Barbara's histrionics and suicide attempts) in his novel *The Merry Month of May*. And then…

"I was the steam, when hot meets cold" says Antony, or Tony, their

After the year's last gig, club aficionado HD prepares for Ibiza 2009. Interviews with Tony Pike & Wally Lopez

and Helen's **playlist** April 2010

ART
HELEN DONLON interviews the two most famous men in album cover art, **Storm Thorgerson** and **Aubrey "Po" Powell.** Together they formed **Hipgnosis**, creating images which have entered our familiar visual lexicon.

LITERATURE
Helen Donlon interviews **ROGER TINNELL about FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA**

doomed, beautiful, shattered only child, about his creators. And this is picked up in the opening scene of a recently released film (*Savage Grace, 2007*) which faithfully telescopes nearly thirty years of the painfully pretentious Baekeland marriage and the subsequent cold-blooded murder by Tony Baekeland of his mother in their Cadogan Square London home in 1972.

Snapped up by respected director Tom Kalin (*Swoon, 1992*), and with a script penned by Howard A. Rodman that is sedulous in its respect for the much-lauded source material of the oral history, this was a film people were waiting to see. Fans of Kalin waited patiently to see where he would go next (*Swoon,* made so many years earlier, was a charmed and emotionally loaded retelling of the Leopold and Loeb story with a homosexual subtext, a sort of latter day *Rope*, many said.) As for Rodman (*August, Takedown, Joe Gould's Secret*), a Hollywood writer and film professor by trade and in person a mild-mannered punk-tinged gentleman with a biting intellect (he also contributes a column to the *Huffington Post*, and was described as the "It" scribe at last year's Sundance), fans have long observed his keen eye for international countercultural aesthetics. Then throw in Christine Vachon, one of Hollywood's more risqué producers (*I Shot Andy Warhol, Velvet Goldmine*), a plot painted with the scandal of matricide and incest and the backdrop of literary and artistic Europe in the 1950s and 1960s and we have a heady mix behind this film.

So very Moore
Apparently Julianne Moore, who plays Barbara Daly Baekeland, was won over at the point of reading the earlier draft of the script because she would have been wearing a fabulous white trouser suit for the Mallorca airport scene. Even though by the time it came to shooting she was to wear a magenta and white splashy Givenchy dress typical of the period (symbolically perfect in its bloody suggestiveness), it is the key Moore scene in this film. It is hard to imagine anyone else could have played this scene, as it is so very Moore.

In fact she has one such moment in every major role she has played in the last decade or so. In *Boogie Nights* it is the courtroom scene. In *Magnolia* the pharmacy scene, just to give two examples, albeit from the same director, but a director (Paul Thomas Anderson) who to my mind brought out much of this quality in her in the first place. In *Savage Grace* it is the scene where, after Brooks and the new love (stolen from his son no less) he has left her are catching the Nice flight from Mallorca, where Barbara lives with Tony and where they have taken a house, she heads to the airport to meet a friend and runs into them by chance. And breaks into one of her now trademark power meltdown scenes, before turning and heading off calm, cold and destroyed.

Vanilla Bogarde, fabulous frocks
Brooks Baekeland is played by Stephan Dillane, in manner and charisma a sort of vanilla Dirk Bogarde in *Death In Venice*, only a character with considerably less sensitivity than Bogarde. He is traditionally handsome, and portrays his standing well enough. He certainly comes across as much more level-headed than his spunky wife. But he is weak and eventually unattractive here for it. The filmmakers have certainly given Moore's Barbara the upper hand when it comes to sympathy-stealing scenes. It is precisely by having her be so imperfectly *gauche* that her vulnerability is continually exposed, bringing out a desire in the audience to protect her from herself, whilst we nonetheless cringe at her latest attention-seeking charade. Despite

PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs received from the office of Howard Rodman and credited to Celluloid or IFC, with the exception of the last photograph which is by Anne Friedberg.

1. **Savage Grace, movie still with Julianne Moore as Barbara Baekeland.**
2. **Tom Kalin, director of Savage Grace, on set.**
3. **Movie still, Julianne Moore and Belén Rueda**
4. **Movie still, Julianne Moore**
5. **Movie still, Eddie Redmayne as Tony and Stephen Dillane as Brooks Baekeland.**
6. **Movie still, Juliane Moore and Eddie Redmayne**
7. **Cannes Press Conference: Howard Rodman, Tom Kalin, and Julianne Moore.** PHOTO CREDIT: ANNE FRIEDBERG

her fabulous frocks she seems utterly naked most of the time, and the freckles just add to this vulnerability, making her appear eternally soft and feminine. "Brooks, for ten million dollars, would you sleep with Simone?" She asks her husband, of one of their dinner companions. "Barbara, please… Don't be tedious." He responds with a suggested customary weariness. The rest of the dinner party have seen and heard it all before, the direction also suggests.

Nonetheless, Brooks himself is the author of several solecisms. In one of the most painful scenes of the film, the one in which he is lapping up the attention of his son's Spanish girlfriend (and she his, in spades) we hear him regaling her with the old fame and fortune tales of his grandfather. The girlfriend, played to a pancake jejuneness by the somewhat annoying Elena Anaya (so appropriately named Blanca) bills and coos in all the right places, utterly uninspired to even the slightest regard for poor Barbara who is being viciously ignored by them both in this scene. Barbara in turn is proceeding to get more loud and demanding more drinks and making snide remarks to Antony in return. And who can blame her. The overt suggestion of Blanca's greed is planted by the filmmakers in the scene where she has sex for the first time with Tony, and shows no humility whatsoever in his presence, but seems rather distracted by how impressive she finds his family (or rather, Brooks). "I don't think I've ever met a family like yours. All this excitement. All this…history." She says as they pull up the covers and get down to it. For a Spanish family, the knowledge of the achievements of a mere two generations back would simply not inspire that comment. She means, by history, "money" then. Pure and simple.

Helen Donlon is the author of ***According to . . . David Lynch* (a selection of his finest quotes)**

The scenes set in Europe are an absolute delight visually. In particular, the house in Mallorca is a beautiful example of Catalunyan *payesan* splendour, and the filmmakers have used the unique western Mediterranean light so very well. Every scene set in Mallorca is an exercise in perfect lighting and shade. Similarly the outdoor scenes filmed along Catalunyan highways, with Moore tantalising Tony and Blanca with her speeding and screeching in her beautiful Citroen DS convertible are as exciting as they are amusing. Later, the lighting of the Cadogan Square apartment in the final scenes is by contrast so sinister that it's no surprise it all ended so badly for Tony and his mother there.

And sinister it really is. Once Brooks has left for good that is, and after a spell in Mallorca with an entertaining hanger-on called Sam brought in to amuse and provide company for Barbara. "*You must take stock. You must face the facts. And then, of course, there are things we can do. Lots of things. Do you remember how it was with Maxime de la Falaise? There was — a difficult period. I helped her, as much as I could. A few of us, we did what we could. And now-- Well, no one remembers the sad period, nor do they…"*

But even this organised and rather stifling *fun* situation frays, inevitably, and mother and son repair to London. Tony has become by now something of an embittered young man, hellbent on locking himself in the prison of his own mind and throwing away the key. Variously diagnosed later as manic, bipolar and schizophrenic, he is to outside appearances a little feeble and lost, albeit with beautiful manners and dress. "*Actually, from Anderson. From Anderson and Sheppard….You might walk into Gieves, but you're not going to walk into Anderson. You get walked into Anderson. In my case, by Timothy Chalmers."* He boasts to his mother of his latest bespoke Savile Row worsteds.

Bergmanesque horror and Hangover Square

He is now well out of the closet. A fact that allegedly drove Barbara to try to *cure* him, as she saw it, by having sex with him. She was, presumably, that convinced of her

sexual allure that she believed it worth the risk to do so with her own son. And so to madness. And a very, very cold sex scene, played out in daylight on the sofa while they are both in post-luncheon mood. A sort of Bergmanesque horror at what exactly is going on here pervades the airtight claustrophobia of the London scenes. These are far from feeling like moments from the early 70s and are much more redolent of Patrick Hamilton's London in *Hangover Square*, and certainly in terms of the mood of the protagonists here.

And then the murder, which in the film comes in the very next turn after the seduction. At this point Tony's dissociative states have retuned the film into a psychological horror. In real life, after he murdered Barbara, Tony Baekeland got incarcerated in Broadmoor, and was declared criminally insane. When finally released via family and friends laying pressure and promises on the authorities, he returned to New York and moved in with Nini, his grandmother. Within a week he attempted to murder her too, using a knife, as with his mother. Miraculously she survived. He was then sent away again, and soon after took his own life while in custody.

In many ways *Savage Grace* is a much more European film than an American one. Appropriately then it premiered at Cannes. And despite the beautiful Mediterranean vibration – the props, the landscape, the heady mix of Spanish characters - much of the actual drama is decidedly northern European in texture. It is clearly not supposed to be a film to be enjoyed. From the early scenes with Barbara enjoying her titled dinner companions at the Stork Club in New York, into which she sashays with all the dignity of an overripe fig, and yet as much sensuousness; to the bitter, hardened shady life in London in the 1970s, we pass through many moods, thanks to the brilliance of the filmmakers' set dressing and understanding of how interior lives dictate the appearance of outer aesthetics.

The late sixties in Cadaques and Mallorca into which the Baekelands inveigle their way amid the *louche* Catalunyan and Balearic cultural ideas of the time, bring to mind the steamy Moroccan hideaways of Brian Jones with his dealers, his hangers-on, his Joujouka trance musicians and his tragic descent. In fact the filmmakers have thrown in a Jones of their own with Unax Ugalde who plays the seducer Black Jake, and is a compelling dark priestling for the few minutes he is on screen.

Playing with Duchamp

There is a playfulness to the script at times, shooting scenes at Marcel Duchamp's funeral for example (Duchamp famously forbade his own funeral from taking place). The downright awfulness of the few lines Nini (Barbara's mother) has are another such example. Played to perfection by Anne Reid*, we see everything we need to know about Barbara's upbringing in the late night moment Nini shares with Brooks following the Stork Club dinner, during which she has been left to babysit baby Antony.

"Was the prince there?" she breathlessly enquires, her eyes shining starstruck. "I think you're thinking of Prince Bernhard," Brooks counters, "He was Count Lippe-Biesterfeld, of course, before he married Juliana. Before he became Prince Consort. In 1937 …. The man with whom we dined, Aschwin Lippe, is just-- Aschwin Lippe. Younger brother."

* The casting had to be deliberate. Anne Reid played the eponymous role in the emotionally difficult film *The Mother* (2003; writer: Hanif Kureishi, dir: Roger Mitchell). In it, an aging widow is rejuvenated, perhaps shockingly so, when she ventures into a rampant affair with her son's feckless married friend who is also in a part-time affair with her daughter. He is a very much younger man, played brilliantly by Daniel Craig before his James Bond days. ---- Ed.

"Because Barbara said … Barbara said …" He trails off.
It is more evidence of the obsession with titles that is to plague the judgment of both Nini and her daughter.
"Decent man nonetheless," Brooks adds, as if to feign apology for Aschwin's not being a royal.
"I see …," Nini falters, disappointed.

Eddie Redmayne as the older of the actors to play Antony, is a beautiful, oddly fey creature who could easily be Moore's real son. The scenes they share together are certainly the most poignant of the film, and deliberately so, and they radiate a complicity that is touching and admirable, at least in the first half of the film.

Bataille, Honoré, *Ma Mère*
Let's stop a moment and look at something interesting in terms of the central emotional themes of the film, i.e. the mother and son growing ever more intimate in the absence of the aloof father. Let's leapfrog over Freud and go straight to a great literary hero of mine, Georges Bataille. When I asked Howard Rodman if he was fed up yet of people making comparisons between *Savage Grace* and Christophe Honoré's film *Ma Mère* (2004), to my amazement he said I was the first to bring it up, and that he hadn't yet seen Honoré's film adaptation of the Bataille novel of the same name.

Ma Mère is also set in Spain, or rather it is set in the muggier, more southern and oceanic Canary islands, off the west coat of Morocco. Honoré does a lot of interesting things to challenge the original book with his adaptation. The Spanish setting for instance, where the novel is set in France. The film is set in the present day, where the novel is set decades earlier, around 1910 (though only posthumously published). Shot in the downmarket, volcanic tourist urbanization of Mas Palomas in Gran Canaria, it's rough trade city compared to Kalin's Catalunya.

The highlight of the scenery in *Ma Mère* is the neon shopping mall nightlife mishmash at Yumbo, a bowl of Vegas in the desert in which all the dregs surface after nightfall. It is interesting though to see how Honoré, in this the most beautiful scene of the film, cuts the Yumbo tourist activity (mainly Brits on holiday, "letting their hair down" i.e. doing what they are too prim and priggish to do at home, and even then very little of it) with glances exchanged between the genuinely libertine French party who really now do appear to have escaped direct from the pages of the 19th century –set novel that inspired them. It is the kind of mixed vision familiar to fans of Nan Goldin; grotesque meets splendour. It is a stunning scene. Perfectly placed herein therefore is Goldin muse, musician and actress Joanna Preiss, playing the libertine girlfriend of the mother who in this case is Isabelle Huppert. The two manage, in a very short space of time to claim the affections of the son, in this case Louis Garrel.

In Honoré's tale the women dominate, the father absenting himself early on via his accidental death. In *Savage Grace*, Moore also dominates the sex, at least to begin with, and she has the last word, like Huppert (both die after the consummation of their mother-son love, though in Huppert's case it is as a sacrificial act of suicide). Moore's Barbara Daly is prone to fits of exhibitionism and promiscuity, the more public the better. She uses her powerful sexuality to seduce her husband over and over, switching her affections to her son only when this is finally no longer effective.

Huppert's Bataille heroine is a hooker, apparently for thrills. When the thrills run out, she also turns to her son. Honoré uses an odd mixture of dialogue in his often too faithful script. So the arcane language beloved of Bataille entwines over-dramatically with lines he rips straight from Sarah Kane's nihilistic 1990s writing in one emotionally bankrupt scene in a hotel room for instance.

While watching *Savage Grace* it also occurred to me, coincidentally, how in many ways Moore has become an American Huppert. Aside from all the obvious qualities they share as top level actors, that is. Huppert is an ice queen and her ability to ensnare you whilst standing stock still is unique. Moore on the other hand can ensnare with eyes that appear to ooze sensation. For both of them their finest moments are the ones without dialogue. And of course the red hair, the vulnerability and the intelligence that prevails already mark them both as being well ahead in their game. Then the fact they are both of an age where the film industry (particularly in age-terrorised America) would happily retire them in favour of younger peers but can't simply because these women can mop the floor with most other actors every single time.

The brilliant Peter Bradshaw of the *Guardian* gave this 4/5, the best start any film could have, and picked up on the details that make these character portrayals sometimes as coldly unique as a Bacon triptych. After a very mixed and often baffled opening season in the US, and a tour of the festivals (London, Sundance, Tribeca and others), *Savage Grace* has had a much warmer reception in Europe, somewhat predictably. It's not the kind of film I want to see twice in quick succession, for sure. It is too cold for me, or rather these people are. But each time I see it and then recover from the viewing it strikes me that I have been watching world-class acting which has put me in the state normally reserved for recovery from a hard-hitting documentary.

by Helen Donlon