

# BREAKING THE WAVES (1996)

by

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*Breaking the Waves. Directed by Lars von Trier. Distributed by October Films, 1996.*

# INTRODUCTION

In a small coastal Scottish village in the 1970s, shy and beaming Bess (Emily Watson) marries burly Danish oil-rig worker Jan (Stellan Skarsgard). Bess' love for Jan borders on fixation: she howls in anguish when he must return to work and interrupt their love making. Her friends fear a repeat of the mental illness which appeared when her brother died a few years back. She functions as best she can in her strict Calvinist community, where, for instance, women are not allowed to speak in church, and it is with great reluctance that she has been given permission to marry an "outsider." Meanwhile, she cleans the church and lets God speak through her (in a deep, baritone voice) – but tells no one of this personal communication with the deity. When she prays for Jan's return, her wish is most perversely fulfilled: he returns after a severe head injury, paralyzed from the neck down. Apparently demented by his injury, he asks her to have sex with others and describe the experiences to him. After picking up random locals – and becoming excommunicated from community, church, and home – she becomes convinced that the only way to cure Jan is through sex. Posing as a prostitute, she ventures onto a disreputable boat in the harbor and there is attacked but escapes. After considering Jan's condition, she voluntarily returns knowing it means her death. Jan recovers miraculously. Rather than consign her to a "sinner's grave" as the town elders would have it, Jan steals her body and buries it at sea. Mysterious church bells are seen ringing in the sky. (Rated R)

Watching *Breaking the Waves* it is easy to get locked into an interpretive rut, and from that too narrow point of view, either like or hate the film. There are, fortunately or unfortunately, many different interpretations of the film's action – each leading to a very different conclusion about the film's intent. Interestingly, the problems inherent in each interpretation naturally lead to the next, until we ultimately return to the first. Whether this is delightful or frustrating, a sign of weakness or strength, a flaw or a triumph, I'll leave to you. Let me briefly outline some of the film's possible interpretations.

The most obvious, though not necessarily the easiest approach, is a literal one. Here we have a story (that could easily be a remake of Federico Fellini's 1954 masterpiece, *La Strada*) in which a feeble-minded girl is simultaneously taken advantage of, and loved, by the male dominated world. Taking this film literally is rather difficult given the self-conscious hand-held camerawork throughout. Here we find a story of a bright, chipper but slightly naive young girl, desperately in need of love, who finds her man. At first, we are unsure of him, siding with those who love her, viewing him with suspicion. After all, what would a great big hunk of a guy want with this little wimp? (This question is answered in the second layer of the film – the love story.) On the surface, Jan gets seriously injured and becomes borderline psychotic. To indulge his now no longer physically obtainable sexual pleasures, he forces her to go out and have sex with other men and then to describe her experiences to him. He thrives on these vicarious experiences. Ultimately, she is brutally attacked and murdered. He has a remission from his paralysis. He buries her at sea and hears mysterious bells in the sky. At this level, all we see is cruel lust and brutality. Why did she do it?

The answer resides in the nature of their mismatched, yet apparently deep and “perfect” love. Bess’ love for Jan begins as an awakening of a physical universe she apparently could not even dream of. Her orgasms seem to be gateways to God; gateways that have been previously blocked by the male dominated community in which she lives. Her access has only been through an internal voice. Since she discovers love transcendent, she is willing to give love equally transcendent – transcendent of her own body and her own dignity. Recognizing that sex and love are linked in some convoluted way which she does not really understand, she willingly expresses her love for Jan by having sex with other men. And she is right, for Jan is cured. However, is it necessary for a woman to sacrifice her life to restore her man through sex?

The third interpretation of *Breaking the Waves* looks at the nature of Bess’ sacrifice. A personal sacrifice which brings about not only a resurrection of a single man, but the reform of the male community (Jan’s friends go from being boors to appreciating the nature of love), leads us to the level of religious allegory. In fact, Bess’ journey in many ways reflects Jesus’. (Her love is perfect, she is denied by those around her, she is stoned, she is scourged, and so on. She even repeats the incident in Mark IV where Jesus escapes the crowds by taking a boat into the middle of the lake to meditate.) The problem here is that Bess’ actual accomplishments are so small in comparison to the film’s claim in presenting us with a female messiah.

From this point of view, the film becomes a critique of religious practice.

Yes, Bess’ accomplishments are small, but through no fault of her own. After

all, she follows the voice of god within (in this way she and the Father are one – two aspects of the trinity), she sacrifices, she teaches as best she can. No, the fault is with us – *we* reject her message. The most obvious reason given in the film is that society rejects Bess because she is a woman. And, according to the film, while women are expected – even duty-bound – to live a life of sacrifice both for men and for society at large, that sacrifice cannot change the society. In the town in which the film takes place women cannot speak in the church (it is ironic that God speaks to Bess directly, in the church and elsewhere). Bess is excommunicated for expressing a resurrecting love parallel to that taught by the church to be the ultimate ideal, yet certainly not practiced there. She is consigned to a sinner’s grave, her sin is not conforming to the male prerogative. Yet even at this level of interpretation, we are left with a problem. The final mark of Jesus’ messiahhood was his resurrection. Bess does not resurrect.

But she does, and this brings us back to the literal reading of the film. Bess comes back as the bells we see ringing at the end of the film, suspended in the cotton-puff clouds (in about as laughably tacky a shot as you can imagine). From the beginning, what is missing from the town’s sterile little church are its bells – this is commented on several times. Thus, the church has no voice to reach out and draw the people in; this church has no voice of God. Bess resurrects as the bells, she now is the voice missing from the church. Her internal voice now becomes a public voice, a clarion call to true belief – a belief in love, sacrifice and transcendence.

While *Breaking the Waves* attempts to be subversive, its problem is that it is not subversive enough. The self-consciousness of the film – the director constantly draws the audience out of the story toward his own ego with dozens of devices from the for-no-discernible-reason hand-held camerawork to the Day-Glo tacky matte painting inter-titles supported by snippets of 70s rock music – completely guts any messages of transcendence. If the filmmakers are not willing to give up their own egos in hope of transcendence, how can we? The ambition of the film is too self-evident: ambition seems its strongest suit. We are left with a circular argument that never seems to release us to go back into ourselves, to find our own transcendence.

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