

THE SERVANT

C.R.Featherston

This is a complex film that allows many different readings. My presentation today hopefully reflects this. I will offer my first review of it, then a reassessment of the film and of my first interpretation of it.

Both the screenwriter, Harold Pinter and the director Joseph Losey, were well known to be closely aligned with the political left. However, when this picture makes any political statement it does so in a very subtle way, not according to traditional socialist ideology or rhetoric. A proletarian like Hugo Barrett will never be the heart of the Revolution; he is the interface between high and low classes who want to indulge in life as they imagine the bourgeois do. However, the film intention is to de-link the individual's power from its class affiliation, and status from merit. The British class system in the early sixties offered a good ecosystem to examine power, its legitimacy and exercise, and its transgressions and perversions.

The screenplay is based on a novel by Robin Maugham, nephew of better-known Robert Somerset Maugham, also a homosexual. The author took a real event, the story of a retired army officer whose life was destroyed by the butler. Although homosexuality inhabits the story, it is not primarily about homosexuality. Perhaps because in 1963 it still was a risky subject for a mass audience, the film falters in this area. It can only show its face by the end, when Hugo Barrett asks the older woman, "bring John next time." More to the point, Robin Maugham commenting on the orgy scenes at the end of the film said that they showed that neither the screenwriter nor the director had ever been to one. Anyway, this film is about power, the many areas and ways it is exercised, and how it is subverted and abdicated.

Dirk Bogarde is masterful in the portrayal of the gentleman's gentleman with his quiet gaze, calmly menacing, at the same time deferential and subtly insolent, but always in command. Malignancy seeps out of him almost imperceptibly. Years later, in Night Porter, he would as effectively play a similar vile character. Sarah Miles seems to fully enjoy playing the slut, but James Fox is, in my mind, the weak point in the cast. He lacks, for instance, the damaged weakness of a Michael York in Cabaret or in Accident. He is handsome and shallow, but I think he needed a more subtle range to be Bogarde's prey and, in particular, to portray the abjection of his fall. Wendy Craig plays well the only character who, with reservations, one would invite for tea and cake.

In the first four minutes we already have the subtext of the whole film. The story is to be bleak, barren, like Royal Avenue in Chelsea in dead of winter. We see Hugo Barrett appear as if from a firm of sanitary engineers, whose name Thomas Crapper & Co., Ltd. fathered the slang for defecation. In this tightly plotted film this cannot be an innocent joke. It carries some ambiguous message about where Hugo comes from, or where it will all end up.

We see Barrett arriving at an elegant town-house in that posh London district. He pushes the unlocked door of the bare house. We follow his scrutiny of its emptiness till we meet Tony, asleep at three o'clock after lunch and too many beers.

We have the two characters that will play this drama: Tony is the handsome façade of an empty self; empty as the house he just bought. He is gracious and deferential to Barrett, deferential being that exquisite excuse the British class system has to justify its lordship over the 'lower classes.' They both explore the house. Tony mentions in passing 'a little wet rot,' shows Hugo the service quarters. Significantly these quarters are on the top floor, which seems to be an indication of the future topography of power relations. At the end of this first encounter Tony confesses, in his own words: 'I need everything.' I think that Hugo quickly understands that he needs everything because he has nothing inside. Tony is wealthy but has nothing; more to the point is nothing. Hugo has little more than his professional pride and appetite, but his selfhood has substance indeed.

It is interesting to note the different gravitational mass each character has. Hugo is well ahead of the rest; Susan tries her best but ends failing on all counts. Vera is along for the ride, the happy puppet that enjoys all that is offered. Tony fumbles along a world he does not understand and for which he is unprepared. He is totally inept to catch the attention of Nick's Diner waitress but can complain about a corked bottle of wine in an elegant restaurant. That restaurant is the world he knows. There the bishop disdains the sycophantic curate who follows him like a lap dog. The imperious mother watches her daughter's lips to know whom she talks to. There, hierarchy rules and controls, and no negotiation is possible. Outside that world of sanctioned roles he is lost. In the real world he will leave no trace: no three cities in the middle of the Brazilian jungle. Both Tony and Susan are prisoners in the world of civility and proper manners that contain and oppress the disorder of passion. Susan baulks when he ambiguously asks her to 'go to the jungle' when they are necking in the still empty house.

When master and servant introduce themselves to each other we learn that Tony lost his father about a month ago. He shows no sign of grief, as if he had lost someone who never was. If we take Lord and Lady Mounset as a model of the upper class family to which Tony was also born, we can well understand why. That self-satisfied and benign stupidity may be difficult to find in nature, but as a caricature, it makes a point. Such parents have little imagination to foster a rich 'inside' in a child. All is left to nannies, and perhaps that is why Tony tries to create a nanny he once had with Hugo.

It is fascinating to watch the insidious, almost imperceptible way with which Barrett makes his moves, like the wet rot slowly destroying a house. First, by being indispensable and protective. Then little by little, by gently pushing the boundary ever so slightly, that no one notices the movement over the borderline until it is too late. The progression is so genteel and well mannered that it would be impolite to put a limit, to challenge it.

There is a scene with Tony in bed with a cold, and Susan is visiting. She has sent flowers that Hugo has in display in the corridor. Susan brings the vase into the bedroom, but

Hugo in the background is about to take them away. Without looking, Susan who is already aware of what is going on in the background, tells him 'Put it down.' The two sexual poles of attraction that pull Tony are now clear. His latent bisexuality can go either way. Susan, like Cassandra, knows what is in stock but will not be able to do anything to alter the course.

A state of war between Susan Stewart and Hugo Barrett is silently declared. Only they know it, but Tony has his eyes shut in no-man's land. Susan comes out all guns blazing, a sort of Panzer division ready to take no prisoners. Hugo, on the other hand, knows he is for the time being in a weak position, and falls back to guerrilla tactics. He is master of the undermining, ambiguous comment. By playing on the apparent innocence of a statement, he lets the ambiguity be the latent poison that sinks in when the moment is gone.

Vera is called to the battlefield as Hugo's heterosexual surrogate to fracture the Susan and Tony couple. Susan's reserved sensuality will be no match for Vera's lustful sexuality, a creature of nature whose instinct and body is out to be had by the first willing and able male. We see her in the cab, devouring everything she sees, with Hugo at her side satisfied that new troops are ready to march to the frontline, and into Tony's bathroom.

The bathroom is the only room that occupants almost always lock when they are in. It is the place of excretions and cleansing, plus some other functions that fancy may suggest. If a man's house is his castle, the bathroom is his sanctuary, his most private place in the house. Occupation has begun, the boundary has been breached. Hugo celebrates the victory parade with Vera, with the tanning lamp, and the cologne as the trophies.

Next step is the point of no return, the harpoon of guilt reaches deep into the target. Vera's sexuality seems to be at risk of an orgasmic meltdown at the drop of a hat. Contrary to Susan, she has plenty of 'jungle' to offer and enjoy. The whispering 'Sir' when she addresses him is the whisper of black lace and silk rubbing. Tony alone with her has no bulwark to protect him from the fall. The social conventions no longer shield Tony when he is at the mercy of such desire. By yielding to temptation he transgresses boundaries and is prey to guilt. He is in same league as his servants, he has forfeited any claim to authority, to be able to say no. By not answering the phone, presumably Susan's call, he is cast away from his known erotic universe and thrown into this unexplored realm of the senses to which he will eventually be confined. He becomes ingratiating and deceitful when he now relates to Hugo. The master has sold his soul and position in life for a good fuck. The servant moves one step up towards mastery.

Tony now lives a double life, a conventional one with Susan and an underground one with Vera and Hugo. He lacks the guile to survive and prosper in such dangerous world, becomes distanced from his girl friend, perhaps even disinterested in her. Susan suspects a game is afoot. She goes to Tony's home when he is not there to teach Hugo who is who, who commands and who obeys. He follows Lenin's advice to revolutionaries: 'Two steps forward, one step back.' He makes a tactical retreat and does not join a battle he

cannot win. Susan is vicious with him, asks him whether he uses a deodorant. She further ridicules him by asking whether it goes well with the colour scheme. He manages to say 'The master is satisfied,' to signal who he considers to have authority in the house. She orders 'Light' and puts a cigarette in her mouth. At this point it gives the impression that Hugo is 'put in his place.' He becomes the servant, even automatically polishing the lighter with his cleaning rag as he moves to light her cigarette. When she asks him 'What do you want from this house,' he, all innocence, says 'I'm the servant, Miss.' Her hands-on violence has paid back this time.

They go back to the Mounsets where they hook-up again with each other and decide an early return to his house. They find his bedroom invaded by Hugo and Vera. Tony's world is shattered and will never recover. His two lives, Susan and Vera, collide catastrophically and the three people that populate his world are all lost. Guilt and shame make him vulnerable and powerless. He is alone and left to wander aimlessly in seedy pubs, even unable to pick-up another waif stranded there. The house is messy; he wanders to Vera's room and cries on the empty bed. He doesn't dare to talk to Susan who eagerly wants him to speak to her. At home his phone is off the hook. His world is now an isolated and lonely one.

By chance, but most likely by design, Hugo and Tony meet in the pub. They both look forlorn and grieving. Hugo pictures both of them as the victims of duplicitous Vera, who had him besotted. He pleads with Tony to give him another chance, to have him back in service.

Hugo and Tony are together again but the roles are radically changed. They are now comrades living together in a relaxed, convivial fraternal bachelor's home. No longer a Jeeves and Wooster duo but rather an Odd Couple situation, with rumbustious bantering and abolished hierarchy. Hugo declares himself a 'gentleman's gentleman' but Tony not a gentleman. It is an aggression that at times seems to get out of hand but contains itself this side of reason. At one moment of warm togetherness Hugo reflects that he feels they are like pals, a feeling he also had when he was in the army. Tony had the same experience. A sense of warm familiarity between them has developed.

And then the last turn of the screw comes up: the hide and seek scene. It was the one I had most trouble with, as it seemed difficult to assimilate into the story, yet it is the one that reveals valuable clues as to the dynamics and characters in the narrative. Hide and seek is the game with which we all have had some personal experience. We once felt the thrill of hiding and seeking, and finding and being found out. Such a seemingly harmless and innocent game carries that emotional potential because it plays on the primal circumstances of the hunt, of the predator and the prey.

The scene is introduced by the only surrealistic recourse in the film: Tony's distorted shadow on the folds of the shower-curtain behind which he is hiding. Both characters are taking the game for real, as all games should. Trouble is that it becomes excessively real. There is a surplus of pleasure in them, an enjoyment beyond the bounds of the game. Hugo's sadistic enjoyment as the predator is easy to understand. Tony's passive pleasure

in his masochistic surrender when he faints and falls in the tub is more disturbing. It is fair to say that in extreme circumstances, even experimental as one could call this game, true nature comes through. This masochistic vulnerability suggests to me either an early sexual abuse or physical abuse that became eroticised. The rest of the film explores this to its crucial consequences.

Vera's visit to ask money, probably for an abortion, all a manufactured fiction by Hugo, sets in motion the final destruction of Tony's psyche. The previous fellowship turns into a more sinister and perverse affair. Hugo plays solitaire and Tony is abjectly depressed and confused by the visit. Like a dutiful psychopharmacologist Hugo will offer relief without insight. He suggests laudanum, an opiate, saying 'You see, I can still think things to please you.' He is brazenly patronising and in full possession of the situation. He is not in the least concerned by Susan's visit, who he mockingly calls 'Your old flame.'

Susan is the bearer of news to further undermine Tony. Vera had been to see her to demand money from him. Pity is what is left from her former love for him. He is beyond Susan's reach. He has been isolated and alienated from his love objects, his past, and his station in life, he is a shell of the little self he once had. Susan's last attempt at his redemption is interrupted by the arrival of the women for the party. A little of the old Tony remains when at the sight of Hugo's sadistic pleasure with Susan he kicks the drinks trolley and ends the orgy. But by now he is moving on all fours, the animal that has lost all selfhood. Hugo, now a triumphant plebeian Mephistopheles locks and bolts the door of the house, so no one can intrude into now his own castle. Nor get out. Hell well locked up.

There is a final twist when Hugo asks the mature woman, a sort of orgy M.C., to bring John to the next party, that can only be explained as initiating Tony in the delights of homosexuality. By creating and satisfying all imaginable pleasures, Hugo has emptied Tony of desire. By then he will be completely satiated, as if all desire had been extinguished by having been exhausted. He will be living in a sort of lethal Nirvana.

This first account is what I would call the Conspiracy Theory Hypothesis. It is based on the assumption of Hugo as Evil, who comes to Tony's life to destroy it. In any narrative a story is not done until the very end, because only then we can understand the whole. It is supposed to consolidate and sanction the definite meaning of the story. Thus, if Hugo is really evil at the end, his actions are to be interpreted in that light from the beginning. It is a linear storyline in which the characters follow their fate as set by the storyteller. Herein lies the flaw in my interpretation.

So, let us re-read the story disregarding the ending, because the way I used it, it works as if it were a self-fulfilling diagnosis. Let us see with what alternative readings we can come up. At the very beginning we see Hugo very professional, polite, eager to help a wealthy young man to set himself up in an independent life. He looks after everything, overseeing the proletarian workers in the interest of his master. As a gentleman's gentleman he has abandoned the proletariat and enrolled himself with power. There is a sort of bonding, belongingness, of mutual respect, even affection, between the two men.

Then the feminine element comes in. Susan is from the start against this arrangement, even before knowing Hugo. The first time she comes into the now completely furnished home, proudly presented to her by the two men, she barely acknowledges Hugo. She is petulant as a spoiled brat at best, an envious emasculating shrew at worst, when she ridicules the painting that Hugo describes as classic by dismissingly calling it 'prehistoric'. It will go downhill from there. At dinner she mocks Barrett's choice of glasses and the 'bottler' of the Beaujolais he is serving. She is not only attacking Hugo but also the bond between the two men. We next see Hugo in the kitchen. He disregards the white gloves, a symbol of his service and starts plotting the future. It will now be gloves off.

So, if we go into the structure of the relationships we can perceive a familiar pattern: three into two won't go. The excluded third wants in and splits the couple. Susan may fit the archaic template of the possessive mother who wants her child for herself and blocks his bonding with the father, or Hugo as a father surrogate. In the film each irruption of Susan triggers a hostile response from Hugo. She wants him kept to his quarters. There is a difference, however, between them in how and what they want from Tony. She wants him as an erotic object, her only sin, if you want to call it that, is her possessiveness. Hugo is different now: he wants to destroy what he cannot have. Perhaps deeper still, he wants to steal away the man from the woman.

His aggression has a surplus that is difficult to understand if we assume the usual values by which we believe people are motivated to act. It is not money, and is not sex: Sex, if it is to be had, will be provided by a surrogate, the unknown John. Perhaps what makes it evil is precisely that surplus of pleasure in destruction, well beyond necessity. I think this is what Lacanians mean when they speak of 'jouissance,' that part of life that makes us tick in our very particular way. It is in this that Hugo faces us with the unexplainable.

I think that on the whole sadism is more palatable for us, as it does not put our life and limb at risk as masochism does. At the extreme it helps to kill the enemy, but before reaching that point most humans stop. Only sociopaths go all the way, and it has been said that training soldiers for combat means developing in them those disturbing skills. It is done by erasing empathy for the victim, which is what makes Hugo such a good warrior.

But masochism? Doing evil to oneself should be over the top and off the chart. The way the story is told moves us to believe that Tony is the victim by his being unprepared for life, or the victim of Susan's possessiveness, or Hugo's evil, or Vera's charm. What if we consider his peculiar desire as moving him, not his failure to defend himself? What if he is the agent of his own ruin? To follow this trail we have to go back to the scene where Vera offers herself so blatantly to him. I see two factors in this. First, the obvious one that Vera is a very good lay. If it were only that, then it would be just an event with little consequence. But it is the fact that it is a transgression that makes it more than sexual intercourse, more than a simple physical performance.

Tony has harvested from the forbidden garden, the sister of almost a friend and a member of a less privileged class. Vera has him besotted through sin, or, if you prefer a more pedestrian version, by being very, very naughty. Naughtiness, we have all at one point or another enjoyed it, gives that special flavour to eroticism. Kinky is never far from the core of lust. The difficult point to decide here is to what has Tony been attracted, that will drag him to his doom. Is it the trespassing into the kind of pleasures Vera offers him? Or is the pleasure in the transgression and endless ensuing guilt and retribution through self-degradation. His horror turned into pleasure? A sort of lust in his own shame? What demons from his past were woken up?

This final self-destructive excess is difficult to share by ordinary mortals. It seems to supersede his self-preservation instinct, as we see him at the end having lost most human attributes, a beast unable to stand-up on his own two feet.

Most narratives, once the convulsions of the drama are done, resolve into a new stability: marriage of the couple, or prison for the criminal, or victory to the hero. This story is unsettling not only because it is open-ended but also because it goes down to an endless gutter. This suggests the Christian concept of hell, the punishment for eternity for our sins. Whatever your opinion about hell may be, who can deny that the theory is grounded on a very human fantasy. The way it ends, without closure, we can expect further and progressive degradation of Tony and of the relation between the two men, with no end in sight. I think that the open-endedness is well suited to suggest that the film tries to tackle the essence of that kind of eroticism and tells us it is unspeakable. The masochistic variety of it, as portrayed by Tony is what moved Freud to postulate his most mythical and controversial concept: the Death instinct. And myths are meant to give a provisional name to some horror that we know is there, but not quite understand.