Masculin féminin

Produced by Anatole Dauman; directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard; cinematography by Willy Kurant; edited by Agnès Guillemot; music by Jean-Jacques Debout; starring Chantal Goya, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Marlène Jobert, Michel Debord, and Catherine-Isabelle Duport. Blu-ray or DVD, B&W, French dialogue with English subtitles, 104 min, 1966. A Criterion Collection release, www.criterion.com.

The French New Wave is one of the celebrated movements in the history of cinema. Closely associated, especially in retrospect, with the innovative and often exuberant early films of a handful of brash young critics writing for *Cahiers du cinéma, la nouvelle vague* was much more than that. Breaking free of the rule-driven, studio-bound, rigidly hierarchical film industry, a torrent of new cinema was unleashed—over 170 French filmmakers made their debut features in the years from 1959 to 1963.

Notably, the term New Wave initially referred to a much broader generational cohort. The expression was coined in a series of articles published by *L'Express* in late 1957—a survey and, for many readers, an exposé of the beliefs and behavior of France's youth (those between the ages of eighteen and thirty). The permissive (and, to many traditionalists, hedonistic) values and practices of this emerging generation—whose members were too young to be implicated in the country's disastrous military collapse in 1940 or the shameful (and often eager) collaboration by Vichy France with its Nazi conquerors that followed—did indeed seem to reflect something new and distinct.

The New Wave was, by definition, young—and this was a principal characteristic of New Wave filmmakers as well. Claude Chabrol (born in 1930), Jean-Luc Godard (1930), and François Truffaut (1932), were children during the war, and all still in their twenties when they made their debut features. More precocious still, they each boasted close to a decade of attention getting film criticism under their belts by the late Fifties. (Truffaut was not yet twenty-two when his movement-defining diatribe "A Certain Tendency in French Cinema" was published.)

But youth is fleeting. *Enfant terrible* Godard produced a breathtaking streak of fifteen feature films (not to mention assorted shorts) from 1960 to 1967, one of the astonishing runs in the history of the cinema—for which he was virtually worshiped by a new generation of moviegoers on both sides of the Atlantic. And not without reason. Despite the fact that in retrospect some of those films come across as of their moment, and are often marred by the director's acrid misanthropy and proclivity to overindulge in big, disfiguring "we both know this is just a movie" winks at the audience, most of those movies retain at least flashes of brilliance, and half a dozen of them remain important and exhilaratingly original pictures six decades later.

One of those essentials is *Masculin féminin* (1966), which arrived late in this magisterial chapter of Godard's career, and has been released in an attractive new Blu-ray edition from The Criterion Collection. It's hard to argue with a movie that won rave reviews from both Andrew Sarris and Pauline Kael (then at *The New Republic*). A film of many strengths, one of them derives from the fact that by 1966 Godard, although still reliably *terrible*, was no longer an *enfant*—and he knew it. Godard turned thirty-five during the production, which left him clearly not young, and fourteen years (that is, perhaps two full cultural cycles) removed from the protagonists of his film. Seen in this context, *Masculin féminin* emerges as Godard's cinematic reprise of *L'Express*'s earlier inquest, a decade later. As the often-cryptic filmmaker plainly explained at the time, his movie was "a sociological film about young people."

Godard goes about this in a thoroughly Godardian way. Although the film was a departure from most of those that came before (though it shares some structural and visual affinities with his outstanding *Vivre Sa Vie* from 1962), *Masculin féminin* can well serve as Godard's representative film from this era. Shot in fifteen titled segments (or "precise facts"), and with a loosely structured script that left room for improvisation and chance, the movie is nominally about the romantic pursuits of a small circle of friends, in particular Paul (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Madeleine (Chantal Goya). Léaud, of course, if then still just twenty-one, was an experienced performer and, as Truffaut's on-screen alter ego, one of the signature faces of the New Wave. The rest of the cast, however, were, quite purposefully, a mix of newcomers and nonprofessionals. Goya was a model turned pop singer; Michel Debord, who played Robert, a young salesman Godard noticed playing pinball in a local café. *Masculin féminin* was also the debut feature for Marlène Jobert (Elisabeth), who would soon appear in notable films by Louis Malle, René Clément, Claude Chabrol, and, indelibly, in Maurice Pialat's bracing *We Won't Grow Old Together* (1972).

Godard sought to show these young people as they were, in their natural environment, navigating their modest travails in an endless stream of cafés, bars, laundromats, and apartments, scenes effectively bridged by documentary-style street sequences. With the exception of a shocking, final, off-screen twist, not much really happens in terms of plot or even character development across these episodes (especially if you set aside some incongruous pieces of business—most commonly brief, tangential episodes of sudden violence and edgy confrontation witnessed by the main characters). But action is not the point of Godard's "sociological study"—which touched a certain type of reality, rarely achieved even by great filmmakers, and so notably absent from some of his color-saturated, over-the-top, look-it's-a-movie efforts, such as the films that came immediately before and after, *Pierrot le Fou* (1965) and *Made in U.S.A.* (1966).

Paul (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and Madeleine (Chantal Goya) argue about their tastes in music as their friend Elisabeth (Marlène Jobert) looks on in *Masculin féminin*. (photo courtesy of Photofest)

On these terms alone, as a highly entertaining observational exercise, *Masculin féminin* is welcome and winning, and quite successfully touched a generational nerve in its time. Roger Ebert, noting that he was barely older than the characters when he first saw it, observes how much he "wanted to be Paul, the character played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, or at least be Léaud, and appear in movies by Truffaut and Godard, or at least live in Paris and walk down the same streets." But *Masculin féminin* remains a great and enduring film for a multitude of additional, exceptional qualities. The film is extraordinarily well shot, with a sophisticated, coherent visual style featuring long takes and restrained camera moves, photographed in an impeccable black and white that meshed perfectly with the movie's naturalistic settings and nothing short of glorious night-for-night street shooting.

Credit for *Masculin féminin*'s visual style must be shared by cinematographer Willy Kurant, who would go on to work with Orson Welles over the course of a long and busy career. Raoul Coutard, who shot Godard's first ten features (and would return for a half-dozen more), was then unavailable and Godard hired Kurant after observing him at work on Agnès Varda's *Les créatures* (1966). Kurant, like Coutard, had a background in documentary filmmaking, which was ideal for *Masculin féminin*'s hyperrealistic location work, shot with minimal artificial light and at times amidst a din of reality. Despite these achievements, it would be the only collaboration between the two men. Richard Brody, in his indispensable *Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*, reports that the experience was an unhappy one for the cinematographer. Unlike Coutard, "who took pride in giving as good as he got in his fights with Godard," Kurant found the director's avalanche of virulent criticisms and complaints difficult to endure.

Masculin féminin is also perceptive in its politics, for reasons that are less obvious today. An intertitle famously announced that the movie was about "The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola"—but, like many slogans, that was more clever than coherent. Much more significantly, the film routinely diverts its narrative so that its characters might assertively posture against the Vietnam War. That seems like an easy call in retrospect, but was actually well ahead of the curve in late 1965, when, in the United States at least, the war was not yet the white-hot issue it would become, and was still widely supported by the public. Additionally, a then-pressing domestic political context within France also recedes from collective memory. But in a retrospective interview Godard collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin astutely situates *Masculin Féminin* at the relatively quiescent midpoint between 1962 (the end of France's wrenching and divisive war in Algeria) and the dramatic upheavals to come in 1968. But that lull was indeed relative; *Masculin féminin* was in production during the election of December 1965, when François Mitterrand, if soundly defeated, nevertheless outperformed expectations in his unsuccessful effort to topple the formidable Charles de Gaulle. Among Mitterrand's campaign promises was a pledge to end France's ban on the sale of female contraceptives, which gives a sharp edge to the pointed debates about birth control engaged in by the film's youthful (and sexually active) protagonists. (Ironically, young people would be banned from seeing this film about their lives—as talk about contraception and a reference to abortion led French authorities to impose an 18+ censorship code.)

Jean-Luc Godard and Chantal Goya at one of the Paris café locations during the filming of *Masculin féminin*.

Ultimately, it is the shrewd conceit of the initially implicit "interview" format that situates *Masculin féminin* as an assessment of youth culture and brings the no longer new New Wave full circle, echoing the concerns associated with its original articulation. Many of the film's conversations are essentially staged as interviews, commonly presented in static one-shots, with one character responding to questions posed by another off screen. Even this pretense is abandoned late in the film, when Paul conveniently takes a job as a pollster, which leads to the movie's most famous (and/or infamous) moment—the six-minute take of "Miss 19" (Elsa Leroy, an uncredited nonprofessional). With palpable discomfort, she struggles to answer the questions posed by Paul (clearly representing Godard) about sex and politics that might have been asked by *L'Express* all those years ago. As Kael observed in her review, with Léaud now posing the questions, the scene parallels (and now reverses) the psychiatric interview his character (the adolescent Antoine Doinel) was subjected to in Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959). Fittingly, *Masculin féminin* concludes with a similar shot, with the camera lingering on Madeleine as she responds to the questions put to her by interrogators at the police station—mapping out the prospects for her uncertain future with answers made all the more shocking by their matter-of-fact exposition.

Paul's voice-over during his and Madeleine's trip to the movies: "This wasn't the film we'd dreamed of...the film that we wanted to make, or, more secretly...that we wanted to live."

Extras on the Criterion disc include interviews from 1966 and 2005 with Chantal Goya, a lengthy and self-satisfied discussion between film critics Freddy Buache and Dominique Païni, and snippets of footage from Swedish television showing Godard at work during the production. Especially informative are interviews with Willy Kurant and Gorin. An accompanying booklet features a very fine essay by critic Adrian Martin and a 1966 report from the set by French journalist Philippe Labro, which also includes a brief interview with Godard, who accurately describes a scene recognizable from the movie that he will shoot the following day, and concludes by noting, "It isn't written yet. I'll write it tomorrow."

—Jonathan Kirshner

LETTERS

The Romanticized Poverty of *Nomadland*

Reading Megan Feeney's review of *Nomadland* (*Cineaste*, Summer 2021), I had the impression Feeney was writing about a movie she wished she had seen rather than the one she saw. Placing *Nomadland* in the tradition of American Transcendentalism is like confusing Burning Man with Native American spirituality. It is too charitable of a lens. Whether or not the nomads are authentic late exemplars of a rich Emersonian tradition of self-reliance is almost beside the point, since the perspective of the filmmakers is most certainly not.

Nomadland justifiably generated controversy over its whitewashing of labor conditions at Amazon but the movie's class problem only begins there, and is in fact embedded throughout the narrative, to the extent that one exists. As a result, the defining event of my generation—the Great Recession—gets commemorated in this condescending and bland movie that confuses formlessness with lyricism. What else can one expect from a filmmaker as removed from the real-life struggles of poverty and homelessness as it is possible to imagine? Zhao's father was a steel magnate in China, for fuck's sake, and she was bred for success at elite boarding schools and colleges, culminating with the graduate program at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

There is barely a story in *Nomadland*, just a loosely sketched possibility of a romantic relationship. The only people in the movie that have any kind of an arc are the two lead actors whose characters, apparently unlike any of the other nomads, have options. The first, which Fern dismisses out of hand—"I can't stay here"—is a tasteful suburban two-story dwelling on a tree-lined street, owned by her sister and her real estate agent husband. There are some vague suggestions of sisterly estrangement, but the fact remains that Fern has someone to front her cash when her van breaks down. The second is the "modest" home of the millionaire son of Fern's vague love interest (David Strathairn)—picture perfect, a back-to-the-land fantasy with extra bedrooms, an in-law cabin, horses, peacocks, and ocean air.

The film's other "characters," who contemplated suicide or who live with the memory of someone who did, get little development if any, rarely more than one-liners. They are like the reptiles in the Badlands Zoo—exotic creatures to be looked at, not to get to know or connect with. *Nomadland* glosses over the poverty that is its raison d'être. It makes it seem as though people's decisions to put themselves in difficult living conditions is based solely in their grief and inability to let go of the past, and that living in a van while dying of cancer is a *choice*. Sure, the filmmakers are jumping through hoops to align themselves with an idealized Emersonian perspective but this is meaningless if they are unable (unwilling?) to imagine what being thrown on your own resources with no system of support actually feels like.

The film is essentially a neoliberal wet dream. By its logic, people choose poverty in motion and have a good time living the lifestyle. Everything goes back to personal responsibility and remaining adaptable, ready to have several "careers" in one calendar year, from Amazon packer to beet picker to campsite cleaner. Oh, and offhandedly blame the entire sideshow on the people who borrowed money on homes they couldn't afford, encouraged by real-estate sharks like Fern's brother-in-law.

I don't think you necessarily have to have lived an experience to make a film about it, but it really does help. If there are people who can address an issue from a more informed perspective and who are at least as talented, why not let them? But that would require the Hollywood feeding machine that is the Sundance Institute, where Zhao was nurtured, to encourage an actual range of voices and experiences, not just a faux diversity that can be photographed. (Skin color shows on promo photos; class background does not.)

Joanna Jurewicz
Greenfield, MA

Megan Feeney replies:

Joanne Jurewicz smartly articulates a common criticism of *Nomadland*: that the film romanticizes poverty and depicts it as a lifestyle choice which, as Jurewicz puts it, amounts to a "neoliberal wet dream." She makes some good points, particularly about the two moments—at her sister's and then at Dave's—in which Fern explicitly *chooses* nomadism. In these moments, I agree that Zhao wants to emphasize Fern's free will over structural determinism, which is to say the growing inequities of "late" capitalism that shape Fern's life. To an extent, I sympathize with Jurewicz's impatience with that impulse, even as I disagree that it characterizes the film overall. Given the economic and ecological crises of our day, do we have time for anything but hard-hitting systemic dissection and polemics? Does celebrating human resilience undermine critiques of the inhumane systems they are surviving?

Then again, by that standard, does Thoreau's *Walden*—and the whole "rich tradition of Emersonian self-reliance" itself, as Jurewicz puts it—amount to more than a "neoliberal wet dream," the delusion of agency that elevates individual adaptation over collective resistance? Actually, this is a question I think the film itself asks. This is what I meant when I wrote that Zhao is "never naïve" about Transcendentalism's applicability to twenty-first century America, and that she takes "social determinism and decline, rather than free will and progress, as her starting point."

As that line suggests, I disagree with Jurewicz's interpretation of *Nomadland* as neoliberal apologia. I think it actively misreads the film, perhaps most clearly in mischaracterizing the conversation at Fern's sister's house which does *not* blame the Great Recession "on the people who borrowed money on homes they couldn't afford." The "real-estate sharks" (Jurewicz's term)—and, more to the point, the "false god" of capitalism—are clearly the cads here; not incidentally, those sharks' interpretation that Fern has *chosen* nomadism is revealed as self-serving. Zhao begins and ends the film in Empire, to underscore the mine and town's collapse as the source of Fern's *involuntary* poverty. Throughout, *Nomadland* reverberates with its source text, Jessica Bruder's reporting that delineates the structural sources of the nomads' socioeconomic marginalization; I disagree that they are treated with condescension. Zhao's gestures toward the Western suggest the exhaustion of rugged individualism and "the American Dream"; the mood is elegiac, not celebratory.

In short, just as Jurewicz suggested I used "too charitable of a lens" to review the film I wanted to like, I respectfully submit that she is using too uncharitable a lens to view the film she wanted to dislike.

Rediscovering Agnès Varda

Jonathan Kirshner's well-researched and enthusiastic introduction to the breadth of Agnès Varda's *oeuvre* was a pleasure to read. His essay was occasioned by the release of Varda's complete works in a boxed set of fifteen Blu-ray discs released by The Criterion Collection. For a younger generation mainly acquainted with Varda's autobiographical documentaries of the last twenty years, it will probably come as a revelation to discover how productive she was over sixty years of filmmaking and how many of her most acclaimed works were fiction films beginning with her essential contributions to the New Wave. For people like me, who thought they knew the full scope of her work, this exhaustive collection reveals how much we have missed of the complexity, historical significance, and groundbreaking nature of all her filmmaking. Varda's early ties to Chris Marker and Alain Resnais situated her emphatically as a major innovator in the French tradition of mixing fact and fiction, relying on nonactors to inject intimate reality in fiction films shot as if they were documentaries. But to discover how this signature trait emerged is the beginning of a wonderful story.

Kirshner's chronicle of the various stages of her cinematic practice emphasizes her particular expression of feminism in her films. He also stresses her lifelong interest in photography, which played such an important role in so many of her films. He discusses her personal and creative relationship with husband and filmmaker Jacques Demy and her collaboration with younger artists like the adolescent actress Sandrine Bonnaire, her own son Mathieu Demy, and, most recently, street photographer JR. Attention to her political filmmaking during the Sixties and Seventies—so relevant to the times we are living in now—is reason alone to snap up this collection to discover this aspect of her work. Reading through Kirshner's shout-outs

Continued on page 57

demographic. I felt sure they'd declare the film "too talky" and "boring," and that they'd especially resist a film with subtitles, their first. But I was wrong. They loved it. To them, the Nazi threat outside the frame was grave and ever-present. Whereas I experienced the film, at times, as episodic and low stakes, they experienced suspenseful narrative drive and real danger. "What's going to happen to Heimpi?" they fretted (with tears, after Heimpi's bittersweet phone call on the occasion of Anna's tenth birthday). "Is Uncle Julius going to die?" they worried, recognizing all the signifiers of a character's doom. "Are the mom and dad coming back?" they wondered aloud when the Kempers Senior leave the Kempers Junior in Switzerland to scout the families' relocation to Paris, sharing in Max and Anna's separation anxiety. "Is she a Nazi?" they asked about the Kempers' furtive neighbor in Paris, who eventually spews anti-Semitic vitriol, confirming their suspicions of her villainy.

Whereas I found Dorothea too underdeveloped for identification, my kids readily identified with Max and Anna, with their fears and their sense of adventure. For instance, when we needed to pause our viewing for bedtime, they insisted we keep watching long enough to see the Kempers' much-anticipated Paris apartment, and then identified with Max and Anna's disappointment. My daughter made explicit comparisons to personal experiences, and my son wondered aloud which school-essay theme he would choose to write—"A Journey" or "A Day at the Beach." And, they enjoyed *Pink Rabbit*'s multilingualism. Language sponges, they started picking up phrases and repeating them, trying out the sounds of German and French.

As if to make the film's point, my kids proved more adaptable and wiser than I presumed. In other words, I sat with the children and saw *Pink Rabbit* as the children's film it is. As such, it should not be judged by the same criteria as the aforementioned comedies for adult audiences. And though *Pink Rabbit* never really "clowns" like Chaplin, Benigni, or Waititi, even its lightest moments are not intellectually lazy, but thoughtfully considered for young audiences. Clowning is age-appropriate, after all, as Link might also be trying to tell us in that opening shot.

Is *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit* a hard-hitting exploration of a dark history that will prevent humanity from repeating its mistakes? No. However, per its filmmakers' humbler intents, is it a compelling introduction to this history that encourages children—at an especially impressionable age—to examine their own prejudices, expand their understanding of the world beyond their own neighborhoods, and invite their empathy for refugees today? My own test audience suggests it is and it will. Whether that is a small thing, it turns out, is a matter of perspective.—**Megan Feeney**

Letters (continued)

for films forgotten or barely known by an American public today, I was grateful to him, to Criterion, and to *Cineaste* for giving Varda the serious attention her work deserves. There is almost nothing to fault in this informative and smoothly written essay, but the critic's itch propels me to gently dispute Kirshner's assertion that the major statement of the last decade of her career is found in *The Beaches of Agnès*. It is a moving film about aging, history, and memory, and the magic of movies, as Kirshner claims, but it is not the film that she will be remembered for in years to come. *The Gleaners and I* was a life-changing film for her and for an entire generation of aspiring women filmmakers who found in Varda's humor, creativity, resilience, and self-acceptance encouragement to pick up a camera and follow in her footsteps. Having taught the art and history of the documentary film to aspiring filmmakers for over forty years, I am convinced that Varda's many accomplishments over her lifetime culminated in this film, which inspired a new generation of women to realize their own cinematic dreams.

Deirdre Boyle, Emerita Professor
School of Media Studies
The New School, New York

Cinephilia During COVID-19

On the day director Bertrand Tavernier passed away in France, I received a renewal notice from your cherished magazine. I would sign up to extend my subscription for a few years regardless of Tavernier's death, but the coincidence reminded me of how the lifelong fire in my heart for cinema was still burning strong with passion.

My relationship with the movies drastically changed when Bay Area cinemas shuttered because of the Covid-19 pandemic last year. As a diehard gotta-see-movies-in-theaters gay man who rarely watched films online, I prided myself on no subscriptions to streaming services, didn't own a Blu-ray player, made almost-daily pilgrimages to the Pacific Film Archive (PFA) and paid extra to view the Turner Classic Movies channel from my cable carrier. I adapted to the uncharted new terrain.

I now have access to Kanopy through the San Francisco Public Library, enjoy Blu-rays borrowed from that venerable institution on a player gifted from a friend, and own a Roku to watch Netflix offerings using my sister's account and password, while also renting movies from the Roxie Theater, Anthology Film Archives, and a few film festivals.

With theaters reopening with limited audience capacity and coronavirus vaccinations jabbed into millions of arms, my husband and I hope to soon safely return to watching films with audiences in a dark auditorium.

Regarding Tavernier, I had the pleasure of hearing him speak at a sold-out screening of his film *Safe Passage* at the PFA and the entire experience was a night of cinematic appreciation long to live in my memory. In his honor, my renewal check was sent to the *Cineaste* office. I don't want to miss an issue. Cinema = life!

Michael Petrelis
San Francisco, CA

A Palestinian Film Critic

Thanks to *Cineaste* for a fabulous and thorough review by Kaleem Hawa of Dror Moreh's documentary film, *The Human Factor* (*Cineaste*, Spring 2021). It is rare indeed that American publications feature Palestinian voices, and ones that are as incisive as Hawa's.

I appreciated what Hawa did in this review, not only pointing out the deep flaws of Moreh's film—lack of context, lack of framing, ahistorical and mendacious representations—but writing mordantly about the lazy Zionist and anti-Arab tropes to which the filmmaker and his subjects all resort. In this documentary where Moreh interviews six American "peace process professionals" (a phrase Hawa borrows from Rashid Khalidi), the filmmaker's self-avowed conceit is to try "to understand the American 'thinking' on the world's most 'intractable conflict.'" Hawa's review is a political tour de force: he deconstructs this red herring and exposes all the false premises—implicit and otherwise—on which the documentary rests. He does so wielding his pen with precision and care. I defy anyone to read that review and find a single fact that Hawa invokes as less than accurate—a far cry from what the American peace process industry has peddled for the better part of a quarter of a century on Israel/Palestine.

Bravo *Cineaste* for good writing, good art, and good politics.

maia tabet
Washington, DC

Errata for *Cineaste*, Summer 2021

In the article "Miguel Coyula Aquino: Revolutionary Witness," the filmmaker met Lynn Cruz at the Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana and not the Havana Film Festival in New York City. The desert scenes in *Memories of Overdevelopment* were shot in Utah, not Nevada. The photo of Lynn Cruz pointing at a State Security car was taken at the Havana apartment of performance artist Tania Bruguera.

In the photo caption on page 48, the nickname of the film's protagonist Lyudmila was misspelled as "Ludya" instead of "Lyuda."

The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of: The Dark History Behind *The Maltese Falcon*

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