

Fall Film series 2023

Masculin-feminin

(1966)

Homage to J-L Godard

Cinematheque-Montclair Film

***Masculin féminin***

is a love poem to youth, a reflection on the human spirit at a point in life when you have such a curiosity to know who you are. The film begins when Paul meets Madeline (Chantal Goya), a girl who works at a magazine but wants to become a singer. They have a brief conversation in a café about what they’re doing in life and in their work. He’s looking for a job, and she helps him get one.

One scene I love occurs shortly after Léaud has begun working at the magazine. It takes place in their office, just outside of the bathroom. Cinematically, it’s not the most impressive or most virtuosic scene in Godard’s work—it’s actually extremely simple. Paul is standing against the wall, his coat on the rack next to him, and Madeline comes out of the bathroom and stands at the mirror. It begins almost like theater: one actor enters the room, the second actor comes in, and the show starts.

I love that the conversation they’re having is the kind that’s taking place all over the world, all the time, between men and women. Godard said the film could have been called “The Children of Marx and Coca-Cola,” which makes it seem very historical, but I find this conversation to be timeless. Paul is trying to convince Madeline to go on a date with him, which she understands actually means to have sex with him. She’s not totally for or against the idea, but when she acknowledges this it’s as if he’s made shy by his desires. Because of how the scene is shot—it alternates between a few minutes focused on her and a few minutes on him—there’s a feeling that the characters are making declarations about their existence rather than exchanging thoughts.

In both my own films and Godard’s, real conversations hardly exist. Like Paul and Madeline, people pass their time in an endless effort to declare themselves. There’s a beautiful sentence by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa in which he talks about two human beings as boats in a dark sea that cross paths briefly for one moment and see each other’s light. I feel that in a very instinctive way, and the human encounters in my movies are like this. People are so absorbed in their own existence and find it very hard to have moments where one boat suddenly touches the other.

Though the things they’re talking about in this scene are so universal, their interaction is composed of many small nuances that are very specific to Léaud and Goya: the way he looks (or doesn’t look) at her, the way he lights his cigarette. Godard shows that when people talk, they still have bodies. In many movies, the dialogue plays out as if it’s just people with their mouths moving. But here the bodies are talking as well, and sometimes what they’re saying is different from the words the characters are speaking. The actors are not just reciting from the script, they’re expressing the ethos of the movie. You really need to listen to the melody of their conversation and watch the hips of the actors when they talk.

Cinema is made up of a lot of things, including the position of a speaker’s body observed in relation to everything else going on within the frame. It’s only in the combination of those things that you find the truth of the moment, which for me is the highest aim of cinema. Godard’s work might be ironic, but it’s never cynical, because he is obsessed with that truth. Sometimes I can watch just one scene in one of his films, and not only are my thoughts refreshed, but I’m also filled with an urgency to rethink everything. *Masculin féminin*was made in a period when Godard still seemed to have a kind of innocence as a filmmaker, and you can feel the joy of his discovery in this scene.

***Masculin féminin***

**W**hen I was a teenage cinephile, in the mid-1970s, *Masculin féminin* was enormously significant to me. It repre­sented France’s nouvelle vague of the sixties, with its youthful, anarchic spirit of freedom and spontaneity. It was in black and white and featured icons like Jean-Pierre Léaud and even, fleetingly, Brigitte Bardot. It talked of love and sex and politics and work. It captured every teenager’s dream of hanging out and fooling around in Parisian cafés. It spoke—way beyond its specific place and time of France in 1965—to the confusions of any modern generation stranded between the no-longer-workable moral values of a vanishing world and the yet-to-appear arrangements of a new order.

*Masculin féminin* also existed entirely in my head—as a perfectly imaginary object, a little like the ideal movie that Paul (Léaud) himself “secretly wanted to live”—thanks to the fact that my only access to it at the time was through a gorgeous fetish object published by America’s Grove Press, in 1969, a transcription of the film accompanied by many luminous frame reproductions. Perhaps I was not so far from the characters in the film, who, as Stig Björkman once wrote, live their passions and fantasize their Sartrean “engagement” in reality not just vicariously but “intravenously.” They are, after all, the “children of Marx and Coca-Cola” (as a famous intertitle describes them), carried along by the first great tidal wave of pop-culture consumption.

When I finally saw *Masculin féminin* on a screen, it was something of a shock: grayer than I had imagined (Godard’s regular cinematographer, Raoul Coutard, replaced by Belgian-born Willy Kurant); less romantic and lyrical than his previous movies, like *Contempt* (1963) or *Pierrot le fou* (1965); and, all told, rather serious and sad. Indeed, the movie came at an intriguing, ambivalent juncture in Godard’s career: on the one hand, it picks up the harsh tone and steely approach of several of his earlier movies that deal with political subjects, such as *Le petit soldat*and *Les carabiniers* (both 1963); on the other hand, it captures a mood of melancholy––moments of heartbreaking solitude caught, on the run, in the midst of a thoroughly mad and chaotic world—that returns in force in the eighties, with *Every Man for Himself* (1980), and continues right up to the present. The special aura of *Masculin féminin*comes from its double focus: the sense that Godard is watching his characters from a great distance and judging them (for their venality and banality) is counterpointed by a secret empathy, a fleeting tenderness.

On its initial release, Godard presented *Masculin féminin* as an act of reportage, an almost ethnographic account of the social climate in the period leading up to the presidential elections of December 1965 (Charles de Gaulle beat François Mitterrand). Godard’s key reference points were two films that helped build a bridge from old-fashioned, supposedly objective documentary to the more subjective and experimental form of the cinematic essay: *Chronicle of a Summer*(1961), by Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, and Chris Marker’s *Le joli mai* (1963). This is why *Masculin féminin,*like Godard’s earlier *A Married Woman*(1964), contains so much rich and amusing detail about fashions, fads, pop music, and international political events in the newspapers (especially Vietnam).

But it was particularly as a report on the “situation of French youth” that the film was received (both positively and negatively). In this period, Godard found himself able to step easily into a certain social milieu, and a youth-oriented pop culture, that was largely foreign to him but that captured his imagination. This cultural mobility on Godard’s part was due to his connection with publisher Daniel Filipacchi, who, while churning out such popular teenybopper magazines as *Salut les copains* and *Mademoiselle âge tendre,* also had a certain *Cahiers du cinéma*in his stable. Godard was thus able to closely observe the professional habits and personal relationships within this rather fluid milieu, and to vividly capture these details in the finished film. Through this process, Godard’s attention was drawn to Chantal Goya, a model being groomed for success as a *yé-yé*pop singer.

Even in 1978, twelve years after complet­ing the film, Godard still thought about the project in terms that emphasized, above all else, its documentary aspect. He recalled the fact that the majority of the dialogues in it are constructed, almost surreally, as interviews, question-and-answer sessions delivered in machine-gun shot-countershot volleys: “This was not written dialogue; it was real interviews with the actors—me doing real interviews with the actors—which were partly fictional, because when I spoke to them about the characters in the film, they were supposed to reply in a certain way, the way the characters would. But sometimes I spoke to them as themselves . . . Afterward, I mixed the interviews up . . . I simply edited them so people would think they were talking to each other.” Other accounts suggest that Godard whispered questions to his actors, via an earphone, for them to fire at one another as the camera rolled. This was probably the case in one notorious scene—the interview with an unidentified “Miss 19” (actually Elsa Leroy, who, like Goya, cut a pop record)—where Godard drops the dialogue pretext altogether (instead, he suddenly gives Paul a job as a sociological investigator) and, in a long (almost six-and-a-half-minute) and pain­ful sequence shot, grills this poor young woman on every pressing real-world subject she knows next to nothing about. Godard was here pioneering experiments on the uncertain border between documentary and fiction, of a kind that Abbas Kiarostami would take further a quarter of a century later.

*Masculin féminin* was spookily prophetic in some of its observations. Serge Tou­biana has remarked that Léaud and Goya “are con­trasted in every possible way, and, moreover, their respective sub­sequent careers prove the truth” of Godard’s portrait. For Léaud, at the age of twenty-one, it was a crucial role—closer to his work with radical, hard-edged directors like Jean Eustache, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Glauber Rocha than to the charm school provided by Truffaut in the Antoine Doinel series. Truffaut was, in fact, disturbed by Godard’s handling of Léaud, recalling in a brutal 1973 letter to Godard: “It was in *Masculin féminin* that I noticed for the first time how he could be filled with anxiety rather than pleasure at the notion of finding himself in front of a camera . . . That first scene, in the café, was a painful experience for anyone looking at him with affection and not with an entomologist’s eye.” For Goya, the path was simpler. Her pop debut leveled out into a lucrative career as a children’s entertainer, staging theatrical and television spectaculars and making records where she accompanied, among other pop-culture icons, famous Disney characters. So Léaud, in a sense, stuck with Marx, while Goya definitely opted for Coca-Cola.

Taking *Masculin féminin* as primarily a chronicle of the sixties, however, obscures the film’s achievement, both as a work of art and as a personal testament. Aesthetically, *Masculin féminin* can easily seem like one of Godard’s more casual efforts: a collec­tion of fragments, notes, improvisations. Looked at closely, it coheres into a tight pattern that is surprisingly classical and balanced. Although Godard plays fast and loose with the on-screen numbering of the “fifteen precise facts” of the story, the film nonetheless scrupulously alternates extended “tableau” scenes with transitional flurries (street views accompanied by multiple voice-overs), and the intimate personal story (the private) with explosive intrusions of violence (the public). As in *Vivre sa vie*(1962), but more rigorously, Godard tries out all the available tech­niques (long takes versus extensive editing, static camera versus moving camera) as he experiments with different ways of rendering the verbal exchanges between his characters––demonstrating that truth can never be simply filmed in a singular, transparent way, while trying, all the same, to reach and express that truth through a mosaic or collage structure. This cubist-like form creates striking effects, as when a parodic close-up portrait of Madeleine—who poses narcissistically as Paul reads at top speed, offscreen, a pop magazine’s blurb about her—is flipped, shortly after, by the truly soulful image of her in bed as she recites a poem about the loneliness experienced during lovemaking.

The film’s sound, recorded and organized by René Levert, is just as remarkable as its images: the inescapable barrage from offscreen of street noise or office chatter; the violent mixing in and out of scraps of pop music and radio broadcasts; the faltering, thin voices . . . and the gunshots! Those harsh aural interruptions, firing at unpredictable points, seem to come from the same tape library pillaged by Sergio Leone for his Italian westerns: loud, exaggerated, booming in an echo chamber. An enormous amount of violence is condensed in these gunshots, the violence of everyday modern urban life, which is everywhere in this film (and yet everywhere ignored, or instantly forgotten): on street corners and on trains, playing itself out next to the central characters in bars, suddenly confronting them at the “Bus Palladium” entertainment center.

The film also has a secretive, highly personal dimension. It came at a transitional moment for Godard, who turned thirty-five during its production: after his breakup with Anna Karina and before he took up with the much younger (and highly politicized) Anne Wiazemsky. In 1966, *Masculin féminin* expressed a suspicious wariness on Godard’s part toward the young—and offered him a way to project some of the misanthropy, even misogyny, that he may have been feeling at the time. This is nowhere clearer than in the film’s rather sour typing of gender. Although no one really comes off well in the film—all the characters are alienated poseurs of one kind or another––the masculine-feminine divide signaled in the title is laid out relentlessly: boys talk politics and paint slogans, while girls play with their hair and shop.

One can go deeper into the emotions of the film, however. It is striking to realize, in this regard, that *Masculin féminin* is Godard’s final film to employ a relatively conventional model of char­acter psychology. From *Made in U.S.A* (1966) to *Goodbye to Language*(2014), Godard’s characters become ciphers, mouthpieces, emblems, allegories. In *Masculin féminin,* things are different. There is a great deal unsaid, a theatrical subtext haunting the interactions of the five central characters. This is true even of those merciless inter­views/conversations; note all the per­sonal queries that are not answered at all or are handled cagily or that return unexpectedly at other moments. *Masculin féminin* is, in fact, not far below its surface, a pure melodrama, a daisy chain of unre­quited love: Robert (Michel Debord) wants Catherine-Isabelle (Catherine-Isabelle Duport), who wants Paul, who wants Madeleine, who sleeps with Paul but seems to have far less inhibited fun with Elisabeth (Marlène Jobert). (This lesbian intrigue, entirely explicit but often strangely overlooked by commentators, is taken more or less directly from the Guy de Maupassant short story—“La femme de Paul”—that served as Godard’s launching pad. For more on this aspect of the film, see *Queer Godard,*a 2016 audiovisual essay made by Cristina Álvarez López and me, available on Vimeo.)

The eminent film and literary critic Claude Mauriac (Wiazemsky’s uncle) intuited perhaps more than he realized when he wrote, in 1966, that Paul “stood out as the image of the young man for all times—nervous, worried, unhappy, despondent”—adding as an afterthought: “No doubt he also represents the image of Godard himself.”