

LA
CINÉMATHÈQUE
FILM CLUB



2 visionary French Filmmakers

Van Gogh (1991)

Directed by Maurice Pialat

Maurice Pialat (1925 –2003) – A Tribute



Contributions by Fabien Bouilly, Noël Herpe, Maximilian Le Cain and Glen W. Norton

The Final Shot: *Le Garçu*

by Fabien Bouilly

In the final shot of Maurice Pialat's final film, *Le Garçu* (1995), a beautiful young woman sobs while sitting at a table in a little restaurant in Paris. With difficulty, Sophie (Géraldine Pailhas) manages to contain her grief. At her side, off-screen, we know that Gérard (Gérard Depardieu) sits silently, a man with whom she has had a hyperactive but lovable little boy (Antoine Pialat), who is, himself, not far away either. Why do Sophie's tears move us so? Why does this grief, so dignified in its discretion, seem to condense the emotional charge of the entire film? Why, above all, in Pialat's vast oeuvre, is it this final image – the final shot of his entire cinema – that one wishes to remember?

Within an apparently fragmentary and digressive form, *Le Garçu* is unified by one essential question: what creates our attachments to others? The film centers on the intermixing of ties between people who demonstrate these enigmatic but indestructible attachments, painful, unbearable or irritating as they often are. Gérard, first of all (whom one recognizes as Pialat's alter-ego, giving the film the sense of a subtle self-portrait) appears to struggle with ties of all sorts – loving ties, paternal ties, filial, friendly, sexual, etc. – but doesn't quite know how to situate himself in relation to each

one. Thus, after he and Sophie separate, he returns to her, again and again, to the point of intrusion (at one point surprising her with an enormous toy truck he brings in the middle of the night). It's not clear if his motive is to be close to his son, or because he can't stand the idea of Sophie having a new lover, Jeannot (Dominique Rocheteau). As for Sophie, she suffers from the abominable way in which Gérard treats her, but at the same time cultivates regret at not having been loved by him the way Jeannot loves her: with tenderness, being present for her and her son.

The most important words in this film are thus those that Gérard throws at Sophie a moment before her tears in the restaurant: "Your attachment to my father ... you love the families of others because you didn't have any grandparents," he reproaches her, but not without concluding, "Grandparents are important ... when you don't have them, you miss them." Cast in doubt, but nonetheless recognized as a necessity, the affectionate tie that Sophie has woven with Gérard's father – the eponymous Garçu – becomes the symbol of all the infinitely problematic ties that the characters of this film carry, like hidden wounds, and which sometimes come to light.



If Sophie's tears touch us so profoundly, it is because Pialat appears to have wanted to leave his film in suspense on the subject of the intimate suffering caused by our attachment to people. Without a doubt, Sophie cries less about not having been loved as she wished by Gérard than about the tie, distorted but tenacious, that persists between them; a tie that brings with it a procession of painful memories. She also cries about a loss of will or courage – both a weakness and an admirable leaning of the heart – that prevents her, once and for all, from ending this complicated and unsatisfying relationship that leaves her so bitter.

There are numerous characters in Pialat's films, both men and women – one thinks of Jean (Jean Yanne) in *We Will Not Grow Old Together* (1972) or Suzanne (Sandrine Bonnaire) in *To Our Loves* (1983) – who don't know how to profit from the happiness they have at the present, and who run after, and lament, this happiness after it has been definitively lost. They seem to be carriers of a terminal dissatisfaction and fear of attachment that obliges them to detestable behaviors which torture them more than they hurt the people they love. Sophie does not belong to this category of character, but she had a child with one of them. More than Gérard, then, it is to the most severe part of Pialat's *cinema* that Sophie finds herself eternally tied. Why not feel, then, that her tears express the sadness engendered by this severity? Now that we have a sense of Pialat's oeuvre in its final definition, why not think that the director wanted deliberately, with his characteristic unsparingness, to put forth the harshest face in his oeuvre? This is the reason for which, in the final analysis, Sophie's tears are so distressing.

Translated by Alice Lovejoy

***Passe ton bac d'abord* (1979), *À nos amours* (1983): Sadness Will Last Forever**

by Noël Herpe

Noël Herpe currently teaches French cinema at the University of Caen and the University of Paris-I. He also writes for the journal *Positif*, and recently published *Le Film dans le texte: l'œuvre écrite de René Clair* (Jean-Michel Place).

This article was first published in *Positif* (March 2003). It appears here with permission.

In the beginning, Pialat created a naturalism that was born of formalism. From *L'Amour existe* (*Love Exists*, 1960) to *Nous ne vieillirons pas ensemble* (*We Will Not Grow Old Together*, 1972) it consists, in the first instance, of blocks of reality torn in pain from artifice—beginning with those suburban landscapes that one perceives in his first short film, in the brilliance of a pane of glass in pieces.... When Jean Yanne sits down to dial a phone number, it is as if one hears the director cry: "Action." One feels at each moment his presence and his breath, like a God who has not yet resigned himself to abandon his creatures and would like to accompany them until they learn how to live by themselves through enduring brutal shocks. In due course, there will be the grand romantic structure of *Police* (1985), *Sous le soleil de Satan* (*Under the Sun of Satan*, 1987), or *Van Gogh* (1991): work that relies again, of course, on a narration that is broken into pieces throughout its length... But it seems that the ambition of the "story teller" – that which Pialat himself expressed in an interview given to *Positif* for the opening of *À nos amours* (*To Our Loves*), and which he had probably not entirely fulfilled until *La Maison des bois* (*The House of the Forest*, 1971) – maintains this work in an unstable balance between demonstration and exhibition, between intransigence and complaisance. I need only point, for example, to the all too notorious brothel scene in *Van Gogh*, in which duration becomes a rhetorical motif, and in which the very opacity of time insists upon presenting itself to view. And under the guise of a return to the beginning, *Le*

Garçu (1995) marks the consecration of the latest Pialat manner (not necessarily the least mannerist): the filmmaker substitutes an obsessive and interminable temporality (which ends up resembling a mirror without limits) for the calm blocks of the past (all the more violent because abstract).



Midway between these two aspects of the work (it will be obvious that I incline towards the first, which would have been enough to make Pialat one of the greatest French filmmakers), there is the singular period consisting of the “films of adolescence”, *Passe ton bac d’abord* (*Get Your Degree First*) and *À nos amours ...* These are also the films of my adolescence. This is perhaps what moves me to accord them a privileged status. Alongside Rohmer’s comedies, at the beginning of the 1980s, *À nos amours* is the only film that could have kept me from one screening to another inside a film theater. For once, here was someone who was speaking to me about what I was, about people with whom I might rub shoulders, dramas and psychodramas that shaped the course of one’s life... Even today (and still very close to Rohmer, though from a less ironic perspective of course), I rediscover there the only accurate depiction of this France that is coming into being, caught in a vise between the moral paralysis of the post-war years (possessive parents, sexual taboos, marriage as the only means of escaping the suffocation of the family) and the new conservatism of the consumer society (bodies, clothes, sensations that bring an illusory liberation). The accuracy of such a depiction derives from a strange effect of magnification, as though Pialat denied himself any objectivity and sought, on the contrary, to locate himself in the heart of this neurosis. In this, beyond the tradition of the great Christian pamphleteers, from Huysmans to Péguy, from Bloy to Bernanos, he is the contemporary of Thomas Bernhard, in his passionate determination to mine despair, to repeat it, to amplify it in order to come to the end of it. He is a kind of modern Job, doggedly determined to reiterate his curses from a dung heap which is the only place from whence he allows himself to speak, at the same time judge and victim, mired in a despicable humanity that he would like nevertheless to save.

And what moves me above all in these two films is the frankness with which Pialat exposes this knot, impossible to cut, that ties him to his characters: the kind of maladroitness that he begins to inscribe “outside” (the quadri-genarians sadly flirting

in *Passe ton bac*, the father giving lessons in *À nos amours*) while all the time hoping for a transmission to happen of which he will no longer be the master... In this regard, nothing is more shattering than the masochistic posture that he gives himself in *À nos amours*: at first sight, interposing himself in the body of the film as a representative of the law, of rigor or loftiness accompanied by a deliberate disagreeable haughtiness; less obviously, slipping away in the middle of the story as though he wishes to leave his daughter to “her loves”, returning only to make himself odious and to better encourage Suzanne to fly with her own wings. The final sequence derives its meaning from the play between the two when tenderness succeeds absence; when the face of the father falls again into darkness, eclipsed by the face of his daughter who takes flight towards other skies... It seems to me that what Pialat reveals to us at this juncture in his work is the secret of his failing mastery: the passionate desire to create a world that escapes him, to let himself be overcome and overtaken by others (here, by a new generation who will no longer speak his language, who will no longer be in his image); and the anguish of being obliged when the day comes to disappear from the screen, accepting that his films will continue to exist without him.

Translated by Hilary Radner and Alistair Fox

On Pialat and *Loulou*

by Maximilian Le Cain In the context of my cinematic autobiography, Pialat matters as very few other directors do.



I first encountered him in the early to mid '90s when I was 14 or 15 in the form of a tape of *Loulou* (1980). Already an incurable and opinionated film junky, my preference for classical Hollywood filmmaking had been broadened and deepened over the past couple

of years by the discovery of such art movie giants as Fellini, Bergman, Bertolucci and, most significantly, Tarkovsky, Bresson and Visconti. But my view of contemporary cinema was still dominated by Hollywood and, as such, tended to be somewhat despairing. I subscribed to the notion that if a film was worth making, it had already been made and made before 1965. What I didn't know or appreciate was the modern film's capacity for naturalism and the exploration of its problematics. I hadn't experienced mid-period Rossellini, Cassavetes, Rohmer, Hellman, the post-French New Wave, the Iranians or the Taiwanese. Even if I had seen these films then, I would probably have dismissed them. What was needed was a trauma to rip through my aesthetic beliefs, creating an inner scar that would ache and tremble with excitement at the cinema's potential for capturing a given moment in all its messy spontaneity, for staring fixedly into the eye of temporal and emotional reality and fearlessly recording the sometimes unnerving beauty of its return stare.

Loulou provided this necessary jolt. The opening image, suddenly springing out of the briefest of credit titles, had the immediate mystery of an unexpected cold night breeze striking one's face upon leaving a warm room. A woman – Isabelle Huppert, her face displaying an enigmatic or even arrogantly impenetrable beauty – appears out of the gray Parisian night without quite emerging from it. She walks directly towards the hand held camera that pans left to follow her as she disappears behind a column. She looks briefly past the camera at a kissing couple leaning against the column before vanishing into a nightclub, physically absorbed by the eroticised atmosphere of a nocturnal environment charged with sexual possibility. This 14-or-15 year old was instantly hooked!

What I expected to happen next was for the director to affect, as it were, a formal introduction to the characters: to tell the viewers how to react to them, to be for or against them or else to be placed in an analytically privileged position with regard to a carefully signposted character ambiguity. But the characters seemed to have ideas of their own. From the outset their interactions seemed to occur with no thought of the audience. Rather than playing to the camera, the camera sometimes seemed almost chasing them, spying on them. And the director, this Pialat, had no intention of telling us what to think or feel.

As the film progressed, I was gripped and slowly overcome by a singular form of anxiety, one that seemed to emerge from my subconscious where it had remained buried for a decade or more. As I witnessed every concept of cinematic time that I had ever known disintegrate during the long picnic scene towards the end of the film, one of the most beautiful in all cinema, the identity of this feeling revealed itself. It was the insecurity a young child experiences when his parents leave him or her in the company of strange adults. In the same way I felt that Pialat had abandoned the viewer with his characters, leaving us to make our own way in their vividly realistic world. I left the film disturbed, overwhelmed even. I knew that whether I liked it or not, my experience of what the cinema was able to accomplish had been irreparably altered, blown apart, torn to

shreds. Pialat, it seemed to me, hadn't made this picture for the audience; *he had made it for the characters*. The resulting film had an emotional life of its own, the terrifying truthfulness of which was brought about both through the intensity of the performances, which appeared unpredictable when compared to traditional cinema, and the screen time given to the actors to live and breathe in this environment.

In the ten years since first drawing these retrospectively elementary and even rather naïve conclusions, I've seen the majority of Pialat's works and loved most of them. But *Loulou* remains my favourite, the film that changed my cinematic goals and, by extension, my whole life. The last time I saw it was on January 12th immediately after receiving an email from a friend informing me of Pialat's death. Its undiminished brilliance highlighted the fact that cinema had just lost one of its most fearless and ferociously talented practitioners.



Pialat is the master of intangible day-to-day emotion: drunken falls and embraces, fights which bubble up for no reason, ennui sitting in bars, the fleeting joy of a shared meal – in short, the immediacy of life closing around us despite our plans otherwise. I will always be in debt to him for shaping my own ideas of what a true “cinematic aesthetic” should be. In his films you do not merely see the pain, the hurt, the love, the joy – you *feel* it in your own smile, your own shock, your own tears. This, I believe, is the mark of a great filmmaker.

I hope that it will not be unpleasant to meet myself again after a long absence.

– Vincent Van Gogh

Pialat peintre comme Pialat réalisateur ne veut rien figer. On sent déjà, dans [un] autoportrait, son rapport particulier au temps, sa capacité à l'ouvrir, à le distendre, et à laisser percevoir les vides immenses cachés en son sein.

– Caroline Ha Thuc

In Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for life* (1956), Van Gogh seems to stagger through a landscape of his own paintings. Bedrooms, cafes, streets, fields and people are lit and

arranged as they appear in his iconic canvases. The world is not presented as it is (or might have been), but as mediated through Vincent's mind, his troubled sensibility. This is a form of cinematic Expressionism, and of a piece with Minnelli's other studies of masculinity in crisis, such as *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) and *Home from the Hill* (1960); films where the inner torment of characters is projected onto the external environment, often heightened by the use of blatantly artificial studio sets.

Maurice Pialat is usually, if problematically, classed as a realist, and his take on Van Gogh is different to the earlier film. Like Minnelli, he films the world Vincent painted, but it is the world the artist sees, not the world through his artist's eyes. This is partly the result of narrative emphasis: Minnelli condenses the whole of Van Gogh's adult life into his film, dramatising key episodes to create the sense of one crisis crashing after another. Pialat expands the ten minutes Minnelli gives to Van Gogh's final months in Auvers to two-and-a-half hours, necessarily creating a different texture.

The film begins with the artist (Jacques Dutronc) arriving by train at Auvers-sur-Oise, a sleepy backwater just outside Paris. The events of the preceding year are those which have made Van Gogh the archetypal "image of the artist as madman and failure" (3): his violent quarrel with Paul Gauguin in Arles; the slicing of his own ear; his self-incarceration in a mental asylum at Saint-Rémy; events tumultuously dramatised in *Lust for Life*, but barely even acknowledged in *Van Gogh*. He is in Auvers to recuperate under the supervision of Dr. Gachet (Gérard Séty), friend and collector of the Impressionists, and himself an amateur painter, with whose teenage daughter Marguerite (Alexandra London) Van Gogh conducts a sexual relationship. His art-dealer brother Théo (Bernard le Coq) sends him money, but things become increasingly difficult as he has his wife Johanna (Corinne Bourdon) and a new-born, sickly child to support; and their relationship becomes strained .

Pialat films this narrative with a lack of emphasis complementary to *Lust for Life's* vivid hysteria. The profound difference between the films can be located in their respective central performances. Kirk Douglas dominates *Lust for Life*, his voice and body bursting through every frame, his flame-haired face contorting in pain as if about to turn into a "dark-side" monster like Dr. Jekyll or Bruce Banner. It is a performance attuned to the public myth of Van Gogh, the events of his life, and the intensity that sears his letters, extracts from which provide much of that film's contextual information, locking us further into his worldview

Douglas is so immediate because Minnelli, through dialogue, scenario and *mise en scène*, gives privileged access to Van Gogh's feelings and thoughts. Pialat keeps his artist at a distance, never externalising beyond what would arise "naturally" from conversation; Van Gogh is often marginal to or even absent from whole scenes, "everyday" vignettes that have nothing directly to do with him at all . Dutronc's is one of the great performances, coiled yet passive, its sullen calm occasionally breaking into banal violence, but mostly rendered through walking, painting, listening, doubting,

thinking thoughts we can only guess at (Dutronc said of Pialat himself, "Like all directors, what's in their head is a secret". Minnelli gives us enough reasons to make Van Gogh's death inevitable, even understandable. Watching Pialat's film, the suicide is as arbitrary as any of Van Gogh's other gestures. His death is not viewed through a hagiographic, myth-making glow, but is bitter, silent, painful, spasmodic and dragged out.

This is not to dismiss Minnelli as conventional and theatrical in order to praise Pialat's authentic realism. He may use actual locations, and privilege the routine over the dramatic, time passing over milestones reached, but *Van Gogh* is as artfully contrived as *Lust for life*. Pialat has been accused of being a "chaotic", "inelegant" filmmaker this may or may not be true of his other films, but is plainly not of *Van Gogh*, which features some of the most quietly complex and rhythmic sequences in modern cinema, most memorably the 3½ minute tracking shot that follows Van Gogh and Jo back and forth on the riverbank during the fête sequence, the lack of an edit creating tension only broken when Vincent throws himself into the river.

Pialat's structural care can be seen by comparing two mirroring set-pieces, both centring on a dance, both defined by their contrasts. The first takes place outdoors, and sees a demimonde (in the persons of prostitutes) tacitly encroaching on a "respectable" working- and middle-class fête of labourers, servants, doctors, wives, teachers and businessmen; the second takes place in a claustrophobic, labyrinthine brothel (but not lit with the expressionist flourishes a lesser director might have resorted to), in which the demimonde briefly entertain the respectable; Van Gogh, the artist trying to sell his wares, is the liminal figure between the two. The first set-piece is buoyant with light and the wary, ultimately bogus hopes of its participants (except for Vincent and the perceptive Jo); the second is dark, fraught with a suppressed violence that finds outlet in a sinister parody of a military march, perhaps reminiscent of the *danse macabre* sequence in *La Règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939).

This last reference suggests how far from "pure", unadorned realism *Van Gogh* is. Pialat recognised only one cinematic master, Renoir; his formative experience was seeing *La Bête humaine* (1938; based on a book published in the year of Van Gogh's death. It is Renoir's 1930s form of realism *Van Gogh* most evokes (in particular *Boudu sauvé des eaux* [1932], *Madame Bovary* [1933] and *Une Partie de campagne* [1936/1946]): the provisional composition of space and characters in relation to it, as if the director is in the act of setting up, or readjusting the frame, rather than fixing it finally; the use of frames-within-frames (such as windows and doorways) and sound to create a relationship between off- and on-screen space that is constantly in flux. Like Van Gogh and Renoir, Pialat seeks to pinpoint that historical moment when "a new society is developing

Van Gogh

Release date 30 October 1991

Cast Jacques Dutronc (Van Gogh), Alexandra London (Marguerite), Bernard Le Coq (Théo), Gérard Séty (Gachet), Corinne Bourdon (Jo), Elsa Zylberstein (Cathy)

Van Gogh is a 1991 French film written and directed by Maurice Pialat. It stars Jacques Dutronc in the role of Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh, a role for which he won the 1992 César Award for Best Actor. Set in 1890, the film follows the last 67 days of Van Gogh's life and explores his relationships with his brother Theo, his physician Paul Gachet (most famous as the subject of Van Gogh's painting *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*), and the women in his life, including Gachet's daughter, Marguerite.

The film was entered into the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. The film was selected as the French entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 64th Academy Awards, but was not accepted as a nominee.

- Jacques Dutronc as Vincent van Gogh
-  Alexandra London as Marguerite (Gachet)
-  Bernard Le Coq as Theo van Gogh
-  Gérard Séty as Gachet
-  Elsa Zylberstein as Cathy
-  Corinne Bourdon as Jo
-  Leslie Azzoulai as Adeline (as Leslie Azoulai)
-  Jacques Vidal as Ravoux
-  Chantal Barbarit as Madame Chevalier
-  Claudine Ducret as Professeur de Piano
-  Frédéric Bonpart as La Mouche
-  Maurice Coussonneau as Chaponval
-  Didier Barbier as L'Idiot
-  Gilbert Pignol as Gilbert
-  André Bernot as La Butte Rouge

The film is noted for its anti-melodramatic and unsensationalistic approach to Van Gogh's life. For this reason it is often contrasted with Vincente Minnelli's Van Gogh film *Lust for Life*. Very little time is devoted to Van Gogh's art and work, with the bulk of the 158-minute running time occupied by the artist's often difficult personal relationships and declining mental state. The film omits most references to many of the most famous incidents in Van Gogh's life (including his attempt to cut off his ear in 1888) in favor of concentrating on the social dynamics of the late 19th century.

Writing in *The Washington Post*, critic Desson Howe explains: "In the movie, you don't see Van Gogh (Jacques Dutronc) complete the final brush stroke of a masterpiece, then call up old Gauguin for a celebratory absinthe. You do see a thin, stringy man, suffering from headaches, enjoying whores and moping around irascibly. *Van Gogh* denies you

familiar highlights, keeps you from his working elbow and avoids the Ear Thing. But it shows you the quotidian stuff in between. This is the story of an artist being human, carrying canvases out or lugging them back in – their famous images intentionally out of sight.