

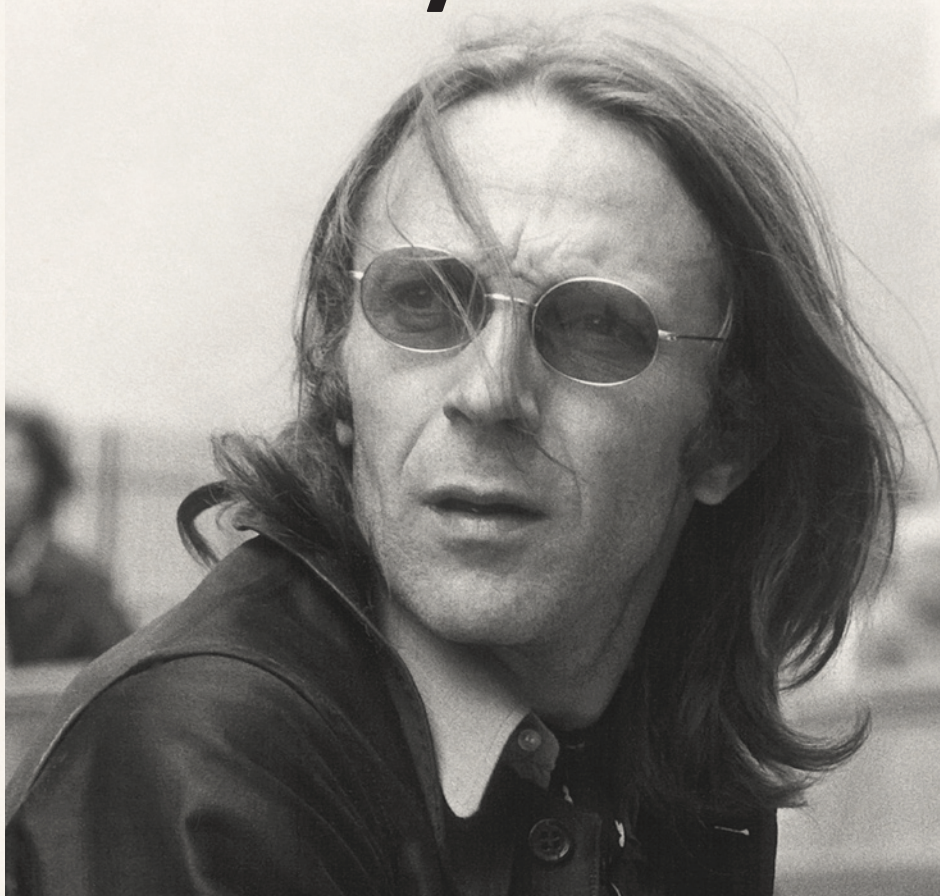
# JANUS FILMS

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## The Dirty Stories of

JEAN EUSTACHE



A 12-FILM RETROSPECTIVE OF THE LATE FRENCH MASTER



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## JEAN EUSTACHE BIOGRAPHY

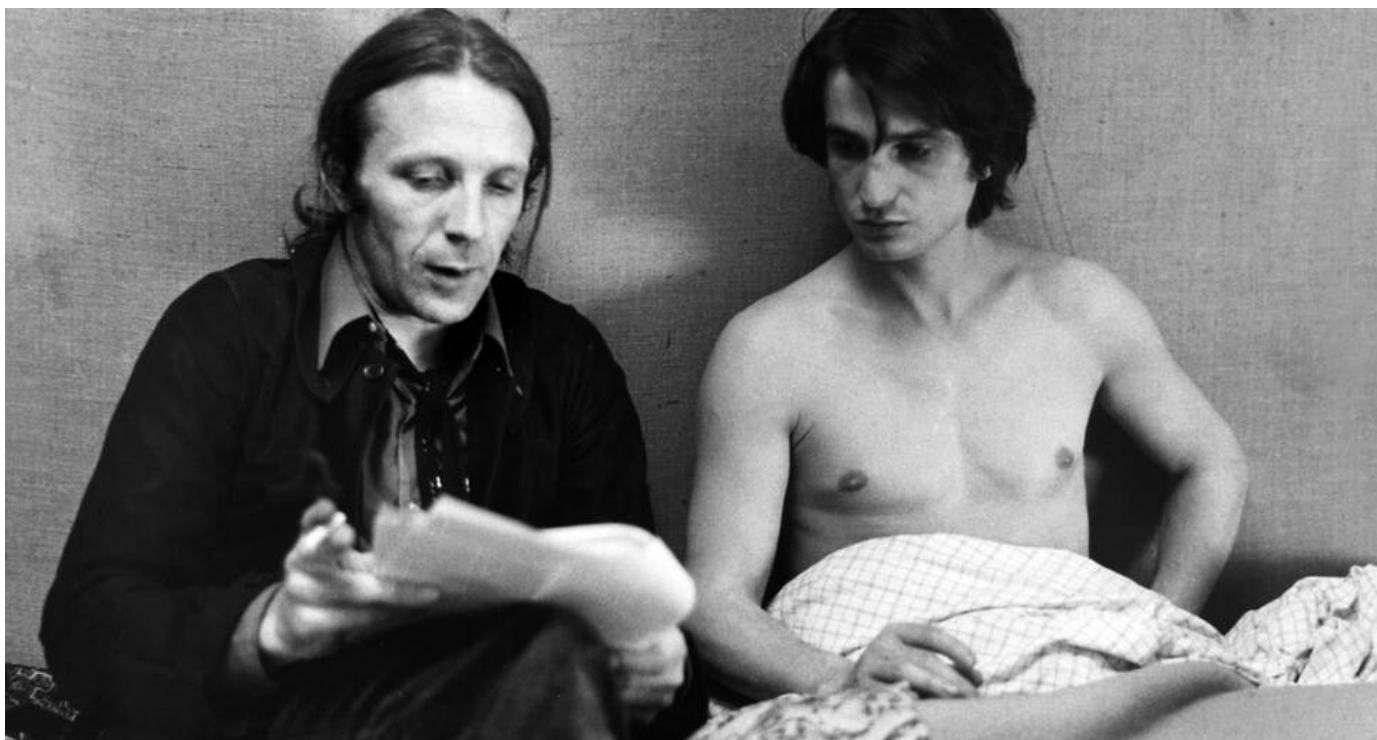
Jean Eustache was born on November 30, 1938, in the Bordeaux region of France. Scant public information exists about Eustache's early years, which he fictionalized in his feature *My Little Loves* (*Mes petites amoureuses*, 1974). Like the protagonist of that film, Eustache was raised by his grandmother in Pessac. Only as a teenager did he begin to live in another town with his remarried mother, who encouraged him to drop out of school and obtain a steady job.

While several years younger than the major critics turned filmmakers who made up the *Cahiers du cinéma* contingent of the French New Wave, Eustache nonetheless formed important alliances with many of them in the late fifties. In 1961, he began making his first short, *La soirée*, a Guy de Maupassant adaptation, but failed to complete it. Two years later, he directed a double bill of shorts, collectively titled *Bad Company* (*Les mauvaises fréquentations*). In 1966, Jean-Luc Godard provided leftover film stock from *Masculin féminin* to help Eustache direct his longest film yet, the forty-eight-minute *Santa Claus Has Blue Eyes* (*Le père Noël a les yeux bleus*). (A year later, Eustache would play a bit part in Godard's *Weekend*. He also made appearances in Jacques Rivette's 1974 *Céline and Julie Go Boating* and Wim Wenders's 1977 *The American Friend*, among other minor acting roles.) *Santa Claus* stars New Wave icon Jean-Pierre Léaud, who would go on to portray the protagonist in Eustache's magnum opus, *The Mother and the Whore* (*La maman et la putain*, 1973). Both *Bad Company* and *Santa Claus* focus on morally and emotionally immature young men.

Documentary dominated the next phase of Eustache's career, starting with 1969's *The Virgin of Pessac* (*La rosière de Pessac*), a

record of an annual celebration in Eustache's hometown, where the local authorities coronate the "purest" of the young women. (Eustache would document the celebration in the following decade for a follow-up that bears virtually the same title as its predecessor.) *The Pig* (*Le cochon*, 1970) also looks at Pessac's customs and rituals, this time a pig being ritually slaughtered and dismembered by a community of farmers. And *Numéro zéro* (1971) consists of an interview with Eustache's grandmother Odette Robert. During this period, Eustache also directed episodes for French television about the work of filmmakers F. W. Murnau and Jean Renoir.

While many of these films developed Eustache's visual style and approach to subject matter, none of them quite hinted at the depths he would plumb in his first full-length narrative feature, the more-than-three-hour *The Mother and the Whore*. Once again centering on the type of dubiously motivated young men who populate his early shorts, *Mother* explores a fragile ménage à trois that culminates in emotional bewilderment and alienation. Instantly heralded as a masterpiece of post-May 1968 cinema as well as a brutally honest autocritique of Eustache's own complicated romantic life, *Mother* would become one of the great cult classics of the seventies. Eustache followed *Mother* with *My Little Loves*, his second and final full-length narrative feature. Despite its similar autobiographical slant, *Loves* differs from *Mother* in its warm color photography and Bressonian performances; whereas the characters in *Mother* ceaselessly discuss their feelings, *Loves*' Eustache stand-in reveals his inner life with only the subtlest gestures and facial expressions. *Loves* has been cited by filmmakers Michel Gondry and Ira Sachs as one of their favorite movies.



In a radical left turn, Eustache used the final period of his career to create short formal experiments that investigate the relationships among language, image, performance, and meaning. *A Dirty Story* (*Une sale histoire*, 1977) contains two sections: the first is fictional, with a man (Michael Lonsdale) telling an anecdote about peeping into a women’s public restroom; the second has Jean-Noël Picq (as himself) relate the same story, which he experienced in real life. In *Alix’s Pictures* (*Les photos d’Alix*, 1980), a young woman discusses her photographic work with a young man, but halfway through the film, her descriptions cease to accurately summarize the images on-screen. And in *Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Delights”* (“*Le jardin des délices*” de Jérôme Bosch, 1981), Picq provides a running interpretation of the third panel of Bosch’s famous painting.

Eustache’s final project was *Employment Offer* (*Offre d’emploi*, 1982), an episode for the television series *Contes modernes*. After a car accident left him partially paralyzed, the director took his own life on November 5, 1981. His small yet influential body of work constitutes a trove of self-inquiry, structural exploration, and humanistic yearning that is continually being rediscovered and embraced by new generations of cinephiles.

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## FILM SYNOPSES

### *Robinson’s Place* (*Du côté de Robinson*)

France | 1963 | 40 minutes | Black & White | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Jean Eustache’s first completed narrative short, a portrait of emotionally immature men on the prowl for female companionship, cemented the template for his subsequent fictions. Aristide Demonico and Daniel Bart play Parisian friends who try to pick up the same young woman (Dominique Jayr). The two men’s competitive barbs and repeated failures in flirtation lead them to band together for petty revenge against their prospective conquest. In the space of forty minutes, Eustache delineates the parameters of his moral universe, in which characters fool themselves into believing that life is completely defined by romantic prowess.

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### *Santa Claus Has Blue Eyes* (*Le père Noël a les yeux bleus*)

France | 1966 | 48 minutes | Black & White | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

In this early narrative short by Jean Eustache, French New Wave icon Jean-Pierre Léaud stars as Daniel, a ne’er-do-well who loafs around Paris with his friends in search of easy money and pretty women. Daniel believes a new job playing a street-greeting Santa Claus will provide him with golden opportunities to meet girls, but his own desperation continually stands in the way of success. By turns comic and melancholy, and filmed with Eustache’s signature

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 1961 *La soirée* (unfinished short)
- 1963 *Bad Company* (*Les mauvaises fréquentations*) and *Robinson’s Place* (*Du côté de Robinson*) (both shorts collected under the title *Bad Company*)
- 1966 *Santa Claus Has Blue Eyes* (*Le père Noël a les yeux bleus*) (short)
- 1969 *The Virgin of Pessac* (*La rosière de Pessac*)  
*Sur “Le dernier des hommes” de Murnau* (*On Murnau’s “The Last Laugh”*) (short)  
*A propos de “La petite marchande d’allumettes” de Jean Renoir* (*About Jean Renoir’s “The Little Match Girl”*) (short)
- 1970 *The Pig* (*Le cochon*) (codirected with Jean-Michel Barjol)
- 1971 *Numéro zéro*
- 1973 *The Mother and the Whore* (*La maman et la putain*)
- 1974 *My Little Loves* (*Mes petites amoureuses*)
- 1977 *A Dirty Story* (*Une sale histoire*)
- 1979 *The Virgin of Pessac ’79* (*La rosière de Pessac ’79*)
- 1980 *Alix’s Pictures* (*Les photos d’Alix*) (short)
- 1981 *Hieronymus Bosch’s “Garden of Delights”* (“*Le jardin des délices*” de Jérôme Bosch) (episode for the television series *Les enthousiastes*)
- 1982 *Employment Offer* (*Offre d’emploi*) (episode for the television series *Contes modernes*)

black-and-white, documentary-style cinematography, *Santa Claus Has Blue Eyes* marks an important stepping stone among the director’s unsentimental explorations of awkward young men who avoid self-reflection in their pursuit of the opposite sex.

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### *The Virgin of Pessac* (*La rosière de Pessac*)

France | 1969 | 66 minutes | Black & White | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

As political and social tumult rocked France in May and June of 1968, Jean Eustache used his first documentary to focus on persistent tradition, in the form of a centuries-old ceremony in his hometown of Pessac. Each year, Pessac’s civic leaders choose a young woman they consider an exemplar of moral virtue, with a daylong celebration commemorating the changing of the guard from the previous year’s “virgin” to the present one. Eustache observes the exacting selection process, the fostering of communal bonds, and a bold implication by Pessac’s presiding priest that the ritual upholds the same Christian values for which leftist students and workers were then currently fighting.

### *The Pig (Le cochon)*

France | 1970 | 52 minutes | Black & White | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Jean Eustache returned to his hometown, the farming community of Pessac, to create this cinema-verité record of the ritual slaughter of a pig, codirected with Jean-Michel Barjol. The documentary captures in unflinching detail—and in beautifully unpolished black-and-white cinematography—the procedural killing, dismembering, and processing of the animal, resulting in a depiction of both the physical gruesomeness and artisanal craft of such work. *The Pig* not only builds upon Eustache's ethnographic representation of working-class customs and traditions in the previous year's *The Virgin of Pessac* but also develops the tough yet compassionate lens he would soon apply to his narrative features.

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### *Numéro zéro*

France | 1971 | 112 minutes | Black & White | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Before paying homage to his grandmother Odette Robert in the autobiographical *My Little Loves*, Jean Eustache made *Numéro zéro*, a documentary portrait in which Robert answers questions about her difficult Bordeaux upbringing, contentious marriage, and traumatic wartime experiences. In excavating the painful details of Robert's life, Eustache discovers their universal resonance. Much of Eustache's later style can be found in *Numéro zéro*, from the inimitable black-and-white photography and static framing to the emphasis on the major revelations of minor movements and gestures. This is the complete version of the shorter *Odette Robert*, which was broadcast in 1980 on France's TF1 channel.

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### *The Mother and the Whore (La maman et la putain)*

France | 1973 | 220 minutes | Black & White | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

After the French New Wave, the sexual revolution, and May 1968 came *The Mother and the Whore*, the legendary, autobiographical magnum opus by Jean Eustache that captures, through the microcosm of a ménage à trois, a disillusioned generation navigating the 1970s. The aimless, clueless Parisian pseudo-intellectual Alexandre (Jean-Pierre Léaud) lives with his tempestuous older girlfriend, Marie (Bernadette Lafont), and begins a dalliance with the younger, sexually liberated Veronika (Françoise Lebrun, Eustache's own former lover), leading to a volatile open relationship marked by everyday emotional violence and subtle but catastrophic shifts in power dynamics. Transmitting his own sex life to the screen with a startling immediacy, Eustache achieves an intimacy so deep, it cuts.



*Santa Claus Has Blue Eyes*



*A Dirty Story*



*Numéro zéro*



*Employment Offer*

### *My Little Loves (Mes petites amoureuses)*

France | 1974 | 123 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Jean Eustache's second and final narrative feature, *My Little Loves*, follows Daniel (Martin Loeb) as he navigates the bewildering world of early adolescence. Living with his grandmother (Jacqueline Dufranne) in a sleepy village outside Bordeaux, Daniel enjoys a carefree existence with his similarly innocent, though often mischievous, peers. But when his mother (Ingrid Caven) arrives and relocates him to Narbonne, Daniel is prematurely thrust into adulthood: pulled out of school, he is forced to work for a surly mechanic and, left to his own devices, falls in with an older crowd that is far more experienced in dating and sex. Featuring a wonderfully nuanced performance by Loeb, *My Little Loves* is a coming-of-age gem surpassed only by Eustache's own earlier masterpiece, *The Mother and the Whore*.

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### *A Dirty Story (Une sale histoire)*

France | 1977 | 50 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Deceptively simple in form and content, Jean Eustache's *A Dirty Story* is a fascinatingly complex investigation of the relationship between fiction and documentary, verbal and visual storytelling, and personal and universal desires. The film's two sections mirror each other: in the first, Michael Lonsdale performs the role of a man explaining to a roomful of friends his past voyeuristic obsessions, while the second section shows an unscripted recording of Jean-Noël Picq, the man Lonsdale plays, recounting the same real-life tale. Eustache presents dramatic and authentic versions of the "dirty story" without authorial commentary and thus encourages the viewer to untangle a web of structural correspondences between the narrations, as well as the sexual and moral implications of Picq's candid confession.

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### *The Virgin of Pessac '79 (La rosière de Pessac '79)*

France | 1979 | 71 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

A decade after making *The Virgin of Pessac*, Jean Eustache filmed another documentary about his hometown's annual coronation of a young woman of moral integrity. The differences between the two portraits of the same ritual are subtle yet telling: The selection process is slightly more fraught in the 1970s, as civic leaders are more concerned with the current economic depression than with broader social upheaval. In *The Virgin of Pessac '79*, the ceremony also provides a stage on which progressive changes are made official, with a local order, the Fellows of Pleasant Pessac, inducting their first female member. Finally, the second time around, Eustache employs color photography, an appropriate choice given the event's verdant spring setting.

### *Alix's Pictures (Les photos d'Alix)*

France | 1980 | 18 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.37:1 aspect ratio

Winner of the 1982 César Award for Best Short Film, *Alix's Pictures* is Jean Eustache's playful meditation on the ambiguity of images and the elusiveness of interpretation. In a room, a young woman (Alix Cléo Roubaud) describes to a young man (Boris Eustache, the director's son) the stories, techniques, and meanings behind several of her meticulously composed black-and-white photographs. But at some point, her explanations don't seem to match what we see. Is this because language can never accurately account for the visual? Because the viewer is being asked to perform more than a surface-level comprehension of art? Because Eustache is perpetrating some sort of absurdist practical joke? Or all of the above?

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### *Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Delights" ("Le jardin des délices" de Jérôme Bosch)*

France | 1981 | 34 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.33:1 aspect ratio

The French television series *Les enthousiastes* asked art aficionados to offer their thoughts on, and interpretations of, paintings that they themselves selected. For Jean Eustache's episode, Jean-Noël Picq (of *A Dirty Story*) chose the third panel of Hieronymus Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, an apocalyptic nightmare-scape that anticipated the darkest reaches of surrealism by almost four hundred years. Looking beyond its obvious grotesqueries, Picq points out several notable qualities of Bosch's masterwork, including its near absence of perspective, its conflation of ontological categories (human and animal, living and dead, time and space), and its objective depiction of sadomasochistic pleasure.

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### *Employment Offer (Offre d'emploi)*

France | 1982 | 21 minutes | Color | In French with English subtitles | 1.33:1 aspect ratio

Jean Eustache's final film—commissioned for the French television series *Contes modernes (Modern Tales)*—is a sharp satire of contemporary man's dehumanization at the hands of specialized psychology. In the first half, an unemployed, middle-aged sales director (Michel Delahaye) seeks a job from the want ads and performs well in his interview. In the second half, a handwriting analyst (Michèle Moretti) determines the suitability of each candidate by reading into their cover letters various subconscious weaknesses and faults. Like much of Eustache's later work, *Employment Offer* contrasts different modes of communication, with an emphasis on the considerable blind spots in human understanding and relationships.