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Masculinity and Politics in New Wave Cinema

Geneviève Sellier

For the last thirty years, most studies on the New Wave have especially emphasized the esthetic renewal embodied by the first films by the "young Turks" of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, to mention only the most influential core centered around Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol, Rivette and Rohmer. This insistence on certain films' innovations in form, on certain filmmakers' stylistic originality, was justified in part by the very nature of this break, which critics and historians have defined as the birth of "modern" cinema. However the use of the term "modern," with its explicit reference to art history also allowed for the definitive legitimization of cinema as elite culture, raising it out of the mud of mass culture where it had been a permanent fixture since its inception in fairground stalls.

Today, particularly in France, the cultural legitimacy of the seventh art is well established, and this authorizes our revisiting the turning point of the 1960s, with a wider, more historical perspective.

The New Wave was essentially established against a backdrop of global economic, institutional and socio-cultural change corresponding to a particular historical time, the time of French society's forced march towards modernization.

In a recent work¹, Kristin Ross attempts to show the associations between political modernization (the passage from a parliamentary to presidential system); the progressive relinquishing of the colonial empire; including the return to France of resources and personnel; economic modernization (with a new technocratic State

machine and massive use of immigrant labor); social modernization (based on the American model with its privatization of social life and a consumer-oriented society favoring the emergence of new social classes of urban professionals, and the expulsion of "archaic" classes towards the suburbs); and cultural modernization expressed both in the New Wave and the New Novel, and in the development of the social sciences.

At the end of the 1950s, French cinema went through a major transformation, with the institution of quality subventions and the soon-to-come box advance on earnings which established the institutional and economic basis of *cinéma d'auteur*.

To offset the "perverse effects" of the first law of public aid for cinema voted in 1948², a new 1953 law called for, in addition to the now permanent "automatic aid," an "aid for quality,"³ paid out after production to films judged more original or difficult. This new system did not come into effect until 1956 and Claude Chabrol's *Le beau Serge* was one of the first films to benefit. When de Gaulle came to power, the Centre National du Cinéma was attached to the new Department of Cultural Affairs, created by and for André Malraux, who had perfected the system of quality subventions, adding an advance on earnings, paid out before production and based on presentation of the screenplay to an ad hoc commission⁴. This progressively developed system, which has become more and more complex, still controls public intervention in cinema production in France.⁵

The inauguration of "qualitative" aid can be viewed as grafting on to cinema of a kind of cultural legitimization born from more prestigious sectors of cultural creation in France, such as literature and fine arts — which Malraux and his Musée imaginaire brilliantly represent. While the "automatic aid" created in 1948 represented a successful attempt to benefit national culture over outside "imperialism," the "quality" aid begun in 1956 introduced an instrument of selection, using criteria based on a vision of art belonging to a cultured elite, into national production of a medium that had hitherto belonged to the field of mass culture.

This selective aid, in conjunction with the effects of television and the emergence of other mass leisure activities, accelerated and oriented the mutation of French cinema toward a "two-speed" medium, "commercial" cinema on one hand, *cinéma d'auteur* on the other, while, on the whole, cinematic production in the preceding period, the period of "classic" cinema, had functioned with creators collectively placed into a capitalist means of production, regulated in a somewhat archaic fashion by the State, in a way peculiar to

France. Whereas, the new filmmakers demanded an individual position based on an elite culture, the thought was modeled on the nineteenth century's "great literature": Astruc's or Truffaut's admiration for Balzac is well known. Through the institution of advance on earnings, the State legitimized this new procedure, just when France's accelerated modernization saw the emergence of a new social class — young, cultivated urban professionals — who became this new cinema's "natural" audience, an audience in turn subsidized through the creation of art movie theaters (1955).

Approximately 150 filmmakers made a first film distributed commercially between 1957 and 1962 (an average of 30 per year, versus an average of 15 per year in the previous years); not a single woman was part of this group (Agnès Varda made her first feature length film, *La pointe courte* in 1954), which gives an interesting indication on the non-coincidence (not to mention contradiction) between modernization, creative renewal and the emergence of women in France at this time.

The position of many of these young filmmakers⁶ as members of middle or upper-middle class; their skepticism towards political engagement, which they saw as incompatible with artistic freedom; their ideological link with personalized Catholicism (through André Bazin) and the literary right, which was made up of the group of "hussards" (Roger Nimier, Jacques Laurent, Antoine Blondin); their fascination with American cinema; and their refusal to take a stand in French ideological debates: All of this forms the basis of and represents their profound implication in this phase of modernization, which strove to bury the highly conflicted society that followed the Liberation.

Thus, New Wave cinema is inscribed in French historical culture as a time when a new means of artistic expression was legitimized: Despite its means of production and consummation which make it seem like an industry, cinema "officially" rose to the level of a full-fledged art form because young creators were able to bend this instrument to the requirements of their own subjectivity, which is — in modern times — a necessary if not sufficient condition for being recognized as an artist. The young Turks revolted against "the tradition of quality"⁷ in the name of an innovative, creative capacity that scorns academic rules; New Wave cinema also shares qualities with the Romantic movement due to the male singular point of view which takes the place of the patriarchal collective that had sustained cinema as mass culture.

Michelle Coquillat⁸ effectively shows that, beginning with its most famous precursor — the author of *La nouvelle Héloïse* — Ro-

manticism has been self-reproducing in a way that is unique to a type of consciousness that ontologically associates creation and masculinity, while women are confined to the domain of daily routine, nature, reproduction. The craftsman, humbly subjected to the rules of Beauty, yields to the inspired thinker, the solitary prophet, who accepts no other social bond than the fraternity of artists. This valorization of individuality over social hierarchies and the collective environment is expressed in most Romantic texts⁹ through the joining of the male hero's tragic destiny and his being bogged down in a woman's love, resulting in the loss of his creative capacity, or — in a broader sense — his capacity to be himself, within the absolute autonomy of a self-producing personality. Michelle Coquillat takes note of the matrix of this Romantic outline in *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther*, which became the absolute reference for early nineteenth century French writers. Two rifts open up before the young poet: his own sensibility and passivity, which make him androgynous; and the woman's passivity; which comes between him and his creative desires. He must take control or die. Coquillat shows that behind the argument of unrealized love, the young poet's creative capacity is put in danger by his meeting Charlotte: his death is less a result of not being able to marry the young woman he loves than of the dissolution of his life's energy in this love, which makes him dependent on another, since male identity can only be built in splendid isolation. The Romantic hero's image is that of creator (of himself or of a work) who strives toward complete autonomy, as opposed to woman, who needs others in order to exist and who threatens to draw him into her everyday routine. Nineteenth-century French literature from Rousseau to Baudelaire saw the decline of this outline as the transition between Romanticism and Modernism occurred, exacerbating the link between woman and death.

This "ontological" misogynous dimension of Romanticism (which is not incompatible with very moving portraits of women) associates, in an exclusionary relation, the construction of male identity and the love bond with a woman, and it is found in most New Wave films, in the same tragic way that acts as a mask.

Within the framework of this essay, I would like to emphasize the relation to the political implied by this Romantic affirmation of a creative position associated with an ontological solitude.

At the time when they were making their first films, the filmmakers' ideological positions, and even the ideology of the works in general, were considered by critics and historians to be irrelevant, not to mention taboo, with the notable exception of the journal *Positif* which at that time virulently denounced the "rightist" tendencies

of most New Wave films.¹⁰ But the lack of communication between esthetics and politics allowed the dominant critical current to ignore these analyses, even when they were as well constructed and argued as the one offered by Gérard Gozlan: a long critical study on the ideology of André Bazin,¹¹ founder of *Les cahiers du cinéma*, and spiritual father of the young filmmakers who came out of it, an analysis of the use of ambiguity in the Catholic theorist's work as a refusal to take sides concerning social contradictions in general, and — more specifically — the choices concerning reality in any given film. The idea that a film is noteworthy because it "respects reality's ambiguity" became the thread connecting esthetic evaluations of Bazin and led him, for example, to prefer sequenced shots over editing, Welles over Eisenstein.

In *Paris nous appartient* (Jacques Rivette, 1960), Gozlan saw an example of this ideology of ambiguity in New Wave cinema: the more the plot is developed and the characters seek out the truth, the more "reality" grows dim. Art, in the form of a dead Spanish guitarist's recording of a piece of music before the start of the story, becomes the symbol of Truth sought out by all the film's characters — art, the vocation equally embraced by Gérard, the director who commits suicide at the end. Thus, the only genius who exists is the artist's genius, in place and on behalf of a necessarily illusory political and social engagement in a world characterized by ambiguity. According to Gozlan, Rivette did not attempt to understand the reasons which make us perceive the world as being obscure, but he constructs his film in a way which shows the viewer, regardless of his affiliation (left or right), that there is nothing to understand except (artistic) genius, which is always the victim of Evil. By defining this muddling of political categories as a typically rightist position, the ideological analysis of Rivette's film also exposes a distinctive characteristic of New Wave cinema: the emergence of a value system in which artistic genius becomes the measure of all things, in place and on behalf of politics and a moral code. As Godard's *Petit soldat* says, "If everyone has an ideal, there must be something that everyone doesn't have. I'm sure God has no ideals."

Through the analysis of several of this generation's films that present a relation with the political, *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (Louis Malle, 1957), *Le combat dans l'île* (Alain Cavalier, 1960), *La dénonciation* (Doniol-Valcroze, 1961), *Le petit soldat* (Godard, 1960), I would like to show how this Romantic claim to solitary self-reproduction implies a renewed questioning of the very idea of political engagement.

Ascenseur pour l'échafaud was produced in 1957 thanks to initial family funding, which has a way of legitimizing the subjective posi-

tion of its author. In effect, Louis Malle builds his first fictional feature-length film on a very provocative principle, in comparison with commercial cinema: the film's two stars, who play the pair of lovers around whom the plot is centered, are never together on screen. Rather, their separation organizes the story, beginning with the initial phone conversation in which the mistress (Jeanne Moreau) confirms to her lover (Maurice Ronet) that he must eliminate her husband so that they can love each other freely. Based on a contemporary detective novel,¹² Roger Nimier's¹³ adaptation emphasizes the point of view of the male character trapped in a plot where his identity is alienated. The hero's politico-military past is an invention of the screenwriter, as is the adulterous link between the two accomplices and their victim: in Noël Calef's novel, Julien Courtois assassinates a loan shark to hide his embezzlement of the fortune of a woman pursuing him with an intrusive love. She turns against him during the investigation, convinced he has spent the weekend with another woman.

Contrary to the novel, the character in the film played by Maurice Ronet, who became one of the new generation's favorite actors, is strongly anchored in the socio-political field: he is a former officer who served brilliantly in the war in Indochina (Dien Bien Phu had just "fallen"), and, who, having returned to civilian life after the defeat, is reduced to playing special agent for an oil magnate who is trying to get his hands on Africa's black gold. This cynical boss takes care of business in an ultramodern apartment building, placing the relation between decolonization and modernization at the heart of the film. The building's concierge, a disabled ex-soldier who honestly worships Maurice Ronet, his former captain, becomes unwillingly instrumental in the trap — the elevator — that swallows up our hero. The subtext of the film's early part is the lament of a heroic masculine identity, the soldier's identity, castrated by modernity, replacing the war's confrontations with (unequal) international commerce. The film's first scene, the lover's murder of the husband, ordered by the wife, symbolizes the decline of this man, which will conclude with imprisonment in the dark elevator, a mortal regression into a cocoon that definitively reduces him to powerlessness.

The link to the political is extremely ambiguous here: Maurice Ronet uses his identity as a veteran as a political engagement; he accuses the man he kills of being responsible for his demise because of the colonial abandonment he represents. But by assimilating this military heroism — physical courage, the ability to command — and political engagement, the film excludes collective and pacifist forms of militancy: political engagement has value when it allows individ-

ual affirmation of "virile" traits. It is evident how such a relation with the political can "naturally" lead to the activism of fascist groups, as it was developed by the Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS) a short time later.

Nevertheless, the film's ambiguity is also due to the fact that the hero seems only to be fallen, a loser still somehow protected by his past glory, moreover with the sad and slightly soft beauty of Maurice Ronet's face. We do not see the hero fulfilling his aggressive virility, in Indochina... The film's title, the same as the original novel, is insufficient because the film moves the principal responsibility for the crime onto the female character's shoulders: the male character, trapped by the elevator, is not shown as a criminal; he simply fulfills his destiny, the destiny of a man who has lost his autonomy before the story even begins. Furthermore, the film's conclusion reserves the real punishment for the female character, through the voice of Inspector Lino Ventura, "But you, Mrs. Carala, I don't think the jury will be very indulgent with you... and, I think, rightly so."

As with Romanticism, the tragic path of the male hero is accompanied by a deep misogyny which makes the hero the unknowing victim of the woman he loves. The film opens with a close up of Jeanne Moreau's face as she encourages Maurice Ronet on the phone before the murder, thereby emphasizing the role of the lover as a tool in the hands of the beautiful bourgeois woman who wants to be rid of an old husband (all original elements of the screenplay). Following this, Jeanne Moreau is distanced from the events of the film, but her wandering in night-time Paris sublimated by jazz music, does not make the viewer forget her initial responsibility in the tragedy her lover is mixed up in, first of all the elevator trap, then the double murder committed by the young hoodlum who steals his car. She is the unknowing but fatal instrument of destiny in killing off a man who has already been castrated by military defeat.

Ascenseur pour l'échafaud builds up an empathic relationship with a soldier lost in the colonial wars, a character whose originality was noted by the press of the time but who eventually became a cliché in American as well as in French cinema, a way of drowning the political fish in individual tragedies.

Despite the justifiably undeniable affinities of this Louis Malle film with an anachronistic Right as underscored by Roger Nimier,¹⁴ the three other films in my corpus seem to confront the question of political engagement head on: at least two of them got into trouble with the Gaullist censors because their depiction of the dirty Algerian War was a bit too precise. Produced in 1960 and 1961, they were released soon after the signing of the Evian Agreements. These

three films, whose authors are both screenwriters and producers, are however more in synch with New Wave characteristics.

Godard's second feature-length film, *Le petit soldat*, produced in 1960, was banned for three years. Despite Secretary of the Interior Louis Terrenoire's official reason, that the film justified desertion, it is also possible to believe that the way the film examined the front, in the middle of the Algerian War, and the forbidden subject of the secret war between the Front de libération nationale (FLN) and the French services on "neutral" Swiss territory, were also somewhat responsible. When the film was released in 1963, glorified by a subversive reputation, leftist critics were especially sensitive to the political confusion it spread.

Here is how Godard himself presented his film in *Les cahiers du cinéma* at the time it was being filmed:

"... (it's) the story of a French secret agent who refuses to carry out a mission, but who ends up carrying it out, after a few misadventures, including his arrest and torture by an enemy network. In short, though at the mercy of film distributors, once this film is decoded, it turns out to be the story of a man whose reflection in a mirror does not correspond to the idea he had conceived, a man who thinks that women should not live past 25, a man who likes good old Joseph Haydn's music, a man who would like to have the strength to make his way with a dagger, a man who is very proud to be French, because he likes Joachim du Bellay and Louis Aragon, besides, he is still a little boy, which is why I named him *the little soldier* (le petit soldat)."¹⁵

The most striking aspect of this statement is its complete lack of reference to the film's political dimension. However, Godard emphasizes the creator's elitist position, distancing himself from mass culture (the distributors) and from the story told (the story of a secret agent), while his Romantic heritage mixes "philosophical" and cultural considerations with the portrait of an aggressively misogynistic, "virile" and immature masculinity, a contradictory combination that invites the viewer to empathize with the character.

In this second feature film, Godard was, by his own admission, in greater control of his creative position than in *A bout de souffle*,¹⁶ which encompassed the writing of the screenplay. This is also the first movie with Anna Karina, who became, for Godard,— in an ancient Western tradition of sexually divided roles within artistic creation — equally the image of the "ideal" woman and the love partner of the first part of his artistic career.

Bruno, the film's male hero (portrayed by Michel Subor, a little known actor who corresponded to the same kind of "sweet young man" as Ronet and Trintignant) was an agent with the French secret service in Geneva in a merciless war against the FLN. The film opens with the hero expressing (through a special effect using an "interior" voice which will uphold a privileged relation with the viewer throughout the film) his desire to disengage himself from this fight he no longer believes in, in order to find himself. The assimilation (confusion) between secret agent and political activist, in other words between a paid professional and an amateur, is willingly maintained and finally "sublimates" the hero who refuses the mission he is assigned since he no longer believes, but this confusion concerning the two "camps" also allows FLN agents to be reduced to hired agents. On the one hand, militant activity is confused with the activity of a police state; on the other hand, the movie tells the tragic story of a man vainly trying to extricate himself from the trap of political allegiance in order to become himself. The film strives to show that the question of political orientation is derisory in relation to the "ontological" question of engagement itself, in so much as it alienates the (male) individual.

One of the film's key scenes is the torture sequence. Bruno, who has been kidnapped by the FLN, is seen handcuffed in a bathtub, successively undergoing burn torture, suffocation with a wet rag on his face, then the infamous electroshock, with electrodes attached to his ankles.

Any viewer even slightly familiar with the details of this dark period cannot help but notice that Godard shows "typical" torture scenes from the Algerian War, such as what Henri Alleg and a few others had courageously denounced after having undergone them in the French Army cellars, but this time carried out by the FLN upon meeting an (ex)member of the French secret service. This reversal, which, for its creator, intentionally derides a certain leftist conformity of the time,¹⁷ is obviously not neutral: it is, compared with the human and political reality of the Algerian War, which was at stake in a very uneven battle between a few courageous democrats and the French state machine, about nothing more or less than covertly taking sides by denouncing equally the horror of torture carried out by any group, very concretely discrediting the battle waged by the Algerian nationalists by showing them as torturers, whose victim moreover is a man we know to be considered a traitor by his former companions.

It is easy to see how this ideological position — ambiguous to say the least — is set up around the devaluation of the political in

general in relation to the mission the hero sets for himself — finding his own authenticity, his own identity, away from the beaten path. Bruno has more than one characteristic in common with Meursault, including his denial of colonial occupation.

The fact that he falls in love at the very moment that he decides to break away from his activist group establishes a link between his “sticky” romantic situation and his “sticky” political situation; this link comes to serve as the foundation on which the story is constructed — a link clarified by a discovery that the hero makes, but too late (love did its work!): Anna Karina/Véronika’s membership in the FLN. At the beginning of the movie, Bruno/Michel Subor falls in love with her when he sees her playing with a wind-up dog just given to her by an older man who turns out to be a member of the FLN. The long hair she constantly arranges like a narcissistic little girl fascinated by her own beauty, her blouses decorated with English embroidery, her billowing skirts, her very pronounced foreign accent that makes her sound as awkward as a child learning to talk, appear over and over again in the film, reinforcing the childish connotation of women, sapping the value of her political engagement. In the film’s final scene between the two lovers, which is actually a long monologue by the male character, the creator’s alter-ego, delivered to his nearly silent partner, Godard successfully imposes the male hero’s “ontological” difference, philosophically questioning himself about his identity. He is affirmed here as pending consciousness, while the female character is above all an image, whose misleading appearance will trap the hero. Even if Véronika does not consciously trap her lover, then at least her affiliation with the FLN puts Bruno in danger: his former friends from the French secret service kidnap the young woman in order to get information on their enemies, and in exchange for a (false) promise of her freedom Bruno finally agrees to commit the murder he had been refusing since the beginning of the film, in order to assure her freedom. The story’s manipulations allow only the hero’s suffering to be seen: he even profits from her death and suffering, which have been tossed into a no man’s land outside the narrative framework. While Godard shows at length how the FLN tortures Bruno, Veronika’s torture and murder by Bruno’s former friends are expeditiously dealt with in one sentence at the end of the film, leaving us with his psychological suffering as he says, “I was happy to have some time, because I needed to learn not to be bitter...”

Le petit soldat expresses (male) identity’s refusal to get bogged down in a collective allegiance resembling political engagement, when it comes to “taking sides.” Political confrontation disappears

behind a test of virility, as in the torture scene when the hero's interior voice affirms his determination not to give in, not because of political convictions, since he no longer has any, but because "he doesn't feel like" giving in to the orders of his torturers. As a result, his resistance becomes a pure test of physical courage, he proves he is a man because he is ready to risk his life "for nothing," other than the beauty of the gesture. This film brings to term the idea that there is no other engagement for a man worthy of this name, except engagement towards himself, in a tragic solitude that is the price to pay to build his (male) identity: in other words, finding engagement in oneself rather than having it depend on a collective other (political groups) or another individual (a woman).

Le combat dans l'île (1961) is directly linked to the creator of *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* since Louis Malle, strengthened by two commercial successes,¹⁸ supervised the first feature-length film of fellow IDHEC (the former name of the French National Film School) classmate Alain Cavalier. The film's classic construction doubly links him to his cinematographic godfather. Cavalier's screenplay opposes two typical characters of the period: the extreme right activist and the leftist militant, favoring the former in the film's story. The media of the time emphasized the film's political courage, which, for the first time in French cinema, clearly suggests the extreme Right's terrorist tactics, countering them with a militant democrat armed only with the strength of his convictions and his pamphlets. But certain newspapers caught on to the film's ambiguity, as it attempts to understand the path of the politically reprehensible character, played by the too charming Jean-Louis Trintignant: too charming because it risks creating a dangerously empathetic relationship with the viewer. Moreover, he is the one who dies at the end (against all semblance of reality) and whose wife (Romy Schneider) is "taken" by the winner of the "combat on the island," the leftist militant played by Henri Serre.

Even if Clément/Trintignant is a bad apple from a good family, from the beginning of the film, an off-camera voice "played" by the deep notes of Jean Topart takes on the task of making us understand this tragically misled and manipulated young man's point of view. The political dimension of his engagement is never discussed; through the enormous phallic instrument (a bazooka) that his wife finds in a closet, and which is intended to eliminate a journalist, it is understood that he must kill to prove himself a man. The murder is opportunely a success — technically speaking — and turns out to be a dramatization which he is duped by. No one dies, and the viewer can continue to feel favorably about the character... A symbolic fa-

ther figure, manipulative and indignant, (the leader of the activists) allows the hero to be relieved of all real responsibility in the terrorist activities.

In this description of political engagement, characteristics of Louis Malle's film resurface; it has no value other than as proof of individual masculinity, including virile warrior characteristics — physical courage, boldness, proof of murder — that the film describes as it expresses the hero's viewpoint.

And, as in the preceding film, such a definition of political engagement is "naturally" linked with the exclusion of women.

Clément is married to Anne/Romy Schneider, a former actress reduced to the role of loving wife, without the viewer being able to determine whether this was a voluntary choice on the part of the young woman. From the beginning this female figure is marked by an association with childishness and eroticism: during the course of a society evening she finds boring, she gets drunk, for which her husband slaps her violently before dragging her to bed for a passionate encounter. She is unaware of his terrorist activities and exists only in the realm of passion. The violence and domination he exercises over her (she is slapped a number of times) is chalked up to loving passion. The conflict the film is based on is the incompatibility between the protagonist's covert political activities, whose motivation is exclusively to prove his identity as a man to us and to himself, and his love for Anne, who, of course, cannot understand this need. A Cornelian dilemma where duty wins out, a decision which results in the protagonist losing everything, except his honor. While he is gone overseas pursuing the traitor, his wife finds comfort in the arms of a reasonable man with leftist affinities (Henri Serres) who, moreover, helps her return to the theater, and who soon gets her pregnant. The media of the time, especially female journalists, made note of the positive evolution of the female character, which is looked upon as emancipatory. When the film is viewed today, the nature of this emancipation is doubtful: the woman goes from depending on a violent and immature man to depending on a sweet and mature man, whose child she is soon expecting. After initially deciding on abortion, she ultimately chooses to keep the child, which results in her passing from the status of mistreated lover to that of beloved wife and mother. There is no exit from traditional female roles... The return to the acting profession appears in the film to be completely symbolic and ephemeral, like an event above all meant to affirm the Henri Serres character who initiated it. The couple's apparent "modernity" is covered over by the final episode, "the combat on the island," where the woman is nothing more than

an object of exchange, the final reward for whomever wins. Presented as Clement's final, desperate attempt to win back his wife, it fails, confirming the hero's tragic destiny.

The "chauvinistic" violence of his behavior in love and the fascist violence of his terrorist activities are sublimated by the ontological need to affirm masculinity, and by Trintignant's acting, the figure of a touching little boy capable of provoking the viewer's empathy, which is also sustained by the off-camera voice. The objective political categories (left and right) are significantly blurred by the lyrical vision of tragic masculinity that belongs only to Trintignant. Even if political concerns interest men only, worth comes not as a reference to a value system, but as a possibility of affirmation of masculine identity: the extreme right activist's shooting off the bazooka is incomparably more effective than the printing and distribution of political pamphlets which seems to be the principal activity of the leftist man...

The common point of the three films analyzed here is that they more or less build the viewer's identity from the point of view of a man who is politically and/or militarily linked to colonial concerns, at the very time when these concerns are turning out to be a historical failure. Thus, our three heroes are on the losing side, something each of these fictions takes up in its own way through each man's tragic destiny. Therefore the fascistic element of their original positions disappears for the viewer in favor of an empathetic relationship with the victimized hero. Moreover, though in different ways, Godard's and Cavalier's films both denounce the very validity of the political by replacing it with another problematic: that of identity itself insofar as it is irreducible to a social or political category. Both films carry the view beyond the political to the heart of (male) being.

Among the filmmakers who came from the dominant group of *Les cahiers du cinéma*, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze uses 1961's *La dénonciation* (equally based on an original script) to propose a "leftist" variation of this problematic. This filmmaker, who is a member of the journal's original group, belongs in fact to the earlier generation since he participated in the Resistance and, like Pierre Kast — another important resistant —, he claims to be "a leftist libertine," under the influence of Roger Vailland. His earlier films¹⁹ were elegant but somewhat conventional variations on this modern libertinage, and the press stressed the new maturity that Doniol-Valcroze demonstrated in this first political film. Only Bernard Dort expressed reservations concerning this film in which "the political disappeared behind the ethics of a late-coming Romantic 'hero' who dreams of playing 'soldier' like members of the OAS."²⁰

La dénonciation, from the filmmaker's original screenplay, links the period of the Occupation and the period of the Algerian War, through the story of "a man of the left," Michel Jussieu, (again played by Maurice Ronet), who is unexpectedly mixed up in the murder of an OAS activist, and who also remembers his past in the Resistance. This film presents no ambiguity concerning the value of political orientations at all: the group of extreme right activists is portrayed without indulgence, including its practices which bring to mind the Mafia, while the commissioner in charge of the investigation, played by Sacha Pitoëff, is an example of republican honesty and human intelligence.

But the story, accompanied by an off-screen voice which builds an empathetic relationship between the viewer and the hero, soon takes an introspective path, with repeated returns to the past focused on the hero's memories of the Occupation. Two key scenes apparently fundamental to the story become blurred, for the character and the viewer. First off, a scene following torture in the Gestapo's cellars, where a horribly swollen Michel is brought before the Nazi officer who expects him to talk. A young French interpreter takes advantage of his role to encourage Michel to save his life by talking since, as he says, the officer already knows everything. Michel does talk, outside the frame of the narrative, then escapes...

The second flashback occurs after the Liberation: Michel is called by the national authorities as a defense witness in the case of a collaborator (the interpreter), at the request of the accused. But Michel lacks the courage to reveal the uncomplimentary circumstances in which the young interpreter tried to save him. The interpreter is shot, but shows — through a sad smile that obsessively haunts Michel — that he understands his silence.

Little by little, the film builds on the blurred identities and political roles, and Michel ultimately decides, in order to reestablish his self-esteem, to stop "collaborating"; in other words, not to reveal the OAS's plot to the police in the present time of the story, even though the activists, knowing they have been discovered, have decided to kill him. The film closes with a lyrical scene in which the hero, driving his car towards certain death, is accompanied by a piece of perfectly joyous chamber music, and the off-screen voice delivering his spiritual will, "Michel Jussieu finally knows that courage is a simple and serious thing, he is finally free and happy." His final mental image is of "the young man with the sad smile," whom he had previously "condemned to death" by his silence, and whom he is going to meet, outside their political "camps."

The film's extreme complexity equals the complications it tries to manage. It is a matter of affirming, in the present time of the film, the validity of the filmmaker's leftist political values, while asserting the superior worth of the individual who decides to break free in order to fulfill his own destiny. It is all the more difficult to move beyond this contradiction when the main character, on whose point of view the film is built, personifies a certain political skepticism, since he no longer believes strongly enough in these ideals to take on the OAS, in contrast to his former network leader.

The story the film tells seems ultimately to be a long search for self, which also leads, in the purest Romantic tradition, to freedom and death.

Yet another point shared with the films studied here: the place and role of the female character. Michel Jussieu's wife, the beautiful Elsa (Françoise Brion), is built on a paradoxical model: she is at once an erotic figure (she performs a very knowing striptease for her husband that symbolizes her ability to maintain desire in the couple) and a traditional female figure who is doubly submissive: submissive to her powerful father — a cabinet member — whom she cannot resist calling on for help, bringing on her husband's death; and submissive to her role as wife and mother (they have a charming ten-year-old little girl), confined to private life. (Michel cannot talk to her about the same political things he talks to "us" about.) The film ultimately makes her responsible — even if unwillingly — for initially setting in motion the tragedy, when she speaks with her husband about the need to "collaborate" with the police in order to shed light on the activist's murder. The off-camera voice, speaking for Michel, clarifies the fact that "Elisa spoke the sentence she shouldn't have," which causes all the poorly digested events of the past to resurface.

She is also the one who sets in motion the fatal chain of events: "Michel understood that Elsa had let go... the die was cast... The time for choosing had passed..."

This is a very subtle example of the New Wave's "ontological" misogyny. This incredible woman, totally faithful and in love with her husband, who — because she is a woman and cannot understand what goes on in a man's head even if he is her husband, because of a desire to protect him against himself, in other words to keep him for herself — puts in motion his flight towards the only land that is completely free, death.

At the conclusion of this trip among the most explicitly "political" New Wave films, it seems that, beyond the convictions of one filmmaker or another, the systematic linking of politics and mascu-

linity suggests a heroic and warlike vision of engagement, an inheritance from the great novelists of the period between the two great wars: Godard and his alter-ego in *Le petit soldat* make explicit reference to the Spanish Civil War written about and "lived" by Malraux and Hemingway in order to express their nostalgia for the heroic intellectual.

But, in this historically and culturally different moment in France occurring as the 1960s began, the simple reconciliation between a fantasy of "virile" fulfillment, up to and including death, and the choice of a political "camp" is made impossible by the Cold War and the colonial wars. Increasingly, it seems even that this heroic "virility" is associated with the most retrograde political values. In a way, the emperor is naked.

In this context, the films we have analyzed proclaim above all their creator's difficulty in accepting this new given. As if the creator in our culture, even when he is sincerely "leftist," can only affirm himself with the most traditional masculine values: physical courage, the refusal of all social or emotional bonds, confrontation with death. As if the connection between creativity and "masculinity" were inescapable...

From this perspective, one can note that the only two films of this new generation whose creators are women, in the role of director or screenwriter, *Hiroshima, mon amour* (Resnais/Duras, 1959) and *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Varda, 1961) offer valued figures of unheroic soldiers (Emmanuelle Riva's German lover in the first, the draftee who meets Cleo in the second). These two films also belong to the "Left bank" movement whose ideological marginality to the New Wave I have already mentioned; a contrary proof that the blind spot of this moment of artistic renewal at the beginning of the 60s organically associates the political question with the "gender" question.

Translated by Dawn Cornelio

Notes

1. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and Reordering of French Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1995).
2. The policy of public aid begun with the Law of 1948 consisted, as we know, of paying a percentage of a previous film's box office receipts, based on a tax imposed on all films released in French theaters, to a producer in exchange for a guarantee that he would reinvest it in a new film production. Initially intended to be temporary, this policy aimed to partially use foreign (especially American) box office receipts to restart French cinema, which had suffered during the war and was subject to competition from Hollywood. Described as automatic aid, it fully realized its aim but was soon to produce a "perverse effect" due to the privilege granted to commercial hits at the expense of more "difficult" or innovative films.
3. Following is the exact title of Article 10 of the Law of July 24, 1953: "Creation of Funds for Development of the Cinema Industry"; financial support in the amount of

- 10 million francs is guaranteed to films "which serve the cause of French cinema, or which open new perspectives in cinematographic art or which make known the major themes and problems of the French Union"; added to this was a grant which could go as high as 10% of the funds, reserved for short films of quality.
4. Decree of June 19, 1959. After 1968, the commission, originally made up of government workers and producers' representatives, was opened up to producers and figures from the cultural world.
5. See René Bonnel's *Le cinéma exploité* (Seuil, 1978); Joëlle Farchy's *Le cinéma déchainé, mutation d'une industrie* (Presses du CNRS, 1992); and Laurent Creton's *Economie du cinéma* (Nathan 1994).
6. Within the scope of this article, I treat only the dominant group coming from or close to *Les cahiers du cinéma* and whose influence was a determining factor in the construction of the concept of *cinéma d'auteur*. The so-called left-bank filmmakers (Resnais, Franju, Marker, Varda) who called for a leftist engagement did not exercise the same collective influence, despite the importance of each one's work.
7. In a 1954 article published in *Les cahiers du cinéma*, Truffaut, using the infamous term of "French Quality," denounces all that French cinema from the 1950s holds to be true values, from such screen writers as Aurenche, Bost, Spaak or Jeanson to such producers as Yves Allégret, Decoin, Delannoy, Clément and Autant-Lara.
8. Michelle Coquillat, *La politique du mâle*, Gallimard, 1982.
9. Ruy Blas, *Le lys dans la vallée*, *La maison du berger*, *Les confessions d'un enfant du siècle*, *Le rouge et le noir*, ...
10. See "Feux sur le cinéma français," *Positif*, 46, June 1962.
11. Gérard Gozlan, "Eloge d'André Bazin," *Positif*, 46 and 47, June and July 1962.
12. Noël Calef, *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (Fayard, 1956).
13. With André Blondin and Jacques Laurent, directors of *Arts*, where the young Truffaut is a writer. Roger Nimier also did the adaptation of *L'éducation sentimentale* for Alex-André Astruc; he killed himself driving his sports car in 1962, at the age of 37.
14. For more on the anachronistic right in literature and French cinema, please see Pascal Ory's *L'anarchisme de droite* (Grasset, 1985).
15. *Cahiers du cinéma*, 109, July 1960.
16. See the interview with *Les cahiers du cinéma*, reprinted in *Jean-Luc Godard by Jean-Luc Godard* (Éditions Cahiers du cinéma, 1985) 218 and following.
17. At the film's premiere in 1963, Godard stated, "(Showing the OAS torturing) would have been too easy: at that time, the FLN was more likeable and it was more meaningful for me to show that group practicing torture and just suggesting that the French were doing as much... I'm not taking sides."
18. In 1958, *Les amants* confirms the "solidity" of Louis Malle's talent to the producers.
19. *L'eau à la bouche* (1959) and *Le cœur battant* (1960).
20. *France-observateur*, July 26, 1962.