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And so to bed: Jean Eustache, right, directs a scene in the apartment shared by Alexandre (Jean-Pierre L  aud) and his live-in lover Marie (Bernadette Lafont); in the same room, L  aud, Lafont and Fran  ois Lebrun as V  ronika, a *menage-   trois manqu  *, far right



With its sex talk and mocking of Sartre, the re-released 'La Maman et la putain' is a prescient post-'68 slacker epic. By Keith Reader

# THE MOTHER THE WHORE & THE DANDY

● Try to imagine a film set in early 70s Paris which definitively distils the emotional changes wrought by the May 1968 events, while making only passing reference to them. Or an amalgam of the cinema of Eric Rohmer and John Cassavetes whose central male character makes Woody Allen appear the epitome of laconic altruism. These evocations and more apply to Jean Eustache's *La Maman et la putain* (1973), now to be re-released after long being unavailable. The film – loosely, a love triangle set in and around Saint-Germain-des-Pr  s – is shot in black and white and lasts for three hours and 40 minutes, which might be expected to work against it in the era of omnipresent colour and the video clip. Yet of all the films I have taught, it remains the only one where I have come upon passionate students arguing about it exactly as though they were discussing real people – and this, I suspect, because rather than in spite of the extreme stylisation and hyperreality of the dialogue, which on first viewing may seem improvised but which was actually most meticulously scripted.

At first sight *La Maman et la putain* fits into a type of film of which French cinema is notori-

ously productive: the highly verbalised introspection and self-analysis of the over- or (depending on one's point of view) the insufficiently cultivated. One of the first sightings of this introspection was Jean-Pierre Melville's cameo role as the novelist Parvulesco interviewed by Jean Seberg in Godard's *A bout de souffle* (1959). Rohmer's countless nave-gazers are probably the best known, while the work of Richard Linklater or Whit Stillman indicates the influence of this tendency on American indie cinema. The cultural upheaval of May '68, a time characterised by fulsome and often highly public analysis of self and society, certainly favoured this kind of film-making. At a time when the "right to speak" was paramount, when people crowded into the occupied Sorbonne or Od  on theatre not only to overthrow the capitalist order but also to express their deepest feelings, and even to recount their dreams, verbal and emotional self-indulgence came to be perceived almost as a duty.

#### Tragic aftermath

It is easy to forget how sombre the aftermath of May was for many participants. The movement's

political failure, following so rapidly on the dizzy expectations raised, manifested itself in a record number of nervous breakdowns and suicides, as well as in a steady trek to the (generally Lacanian) psychoanalyst's couch. It is this downside to the "right to speak", the truly tragic element of May's release of energies, that Eustache's film so remarkably figures. The director's suicide in 1981, following on partial paralysis in a fall and significant professional and alcohol problems, certainly worked to reinforce this perception – but I had seen the film at least three times before then, and its tragic dimension had been clearly apparent to me. It is this dimension that is lacking in the recent *Ma vie sexuelle* (Paul Dedalus' *Journey*), and for me contributes to its irritatingly posturing character (though set a quarter century and more after 1968, Arnaud Desplechin's film nonetheless features central characters who graduated from the Ecole Normale Sup  rieure and are on the staff at Nanterre University, twin epicentres of the May movement).

In *Cin  matographe* in May 1982, Didier Goldschmidt describes *La Maman et la putain* as "bearing witness to the post-'68 period, bursting with



the slogans and private jokes of its time." The May movement's truly revolutionary impetus is generally considered to have died when a security guard at the Renault factory shot Maoist militant Pierre Overney in 1972, so the film's date (1973) places it firmly as a film of post-May disillusionment. The sneers at Sartre uttered by Alexandre (Jean-Pierre Léaud) and his friends clearly suggest this; so, more interestingly, do Alexandre's remarks to his former partner Gilberte (Isabelle Weingarten) towards the beginning of the film: "After crises you have to forget everything quickly, rub everything out. Like France after the Occupation, like France after May '68. You are getting back on your feet like France after '68, my love. Do you remember? We said that we'd had a narrow escape, we'd been lucky to have a childhood and we weren't sure that our children would have one in this new world where 17-year-olds are old men."

Taken in conjunction with a question Alexandre asks Gilberte - "How long does the average couple last? Five years? Seven years?" - this strongly suggests that the couple had met, as so many others did, during the May events. When

the film begins - and when it ends - Alexandre is living with the somewhat older Marie (Bernadette Lafont), who owns a dress-shop and subsidises his feckless café-haunting existence, though by the film's close it is difficult to say for how much longer the two will live together. On his side at least, their relationship is a comparatively open one, and there is a distinct echo of Sartre and de Beauvoir in the fact that throughout the couple address each other with the formal 'vous'. The crisis in their being a couple comes about when Alexandre picks up (in 1973 still a comparatively respectable if not actually compulsory activity) a raucously promiscuous nurse of Polish origins, Véronika (Françoise Lebrun); but this has probably been triggered by his unavailing attempt, in the film's opening sequence, to renew his relationship with Gilberte. This uneasy trio, a *ménage-à-trois manqué* (with Marie and Véronika as *maman*/mother and *putain*/whore respectively), dominates the action of the film, which ends with the probably pregnant and certainly drunk Véronika vomiting.

To the best of my knowledge nobody has ever vomited in a Rohmer film, and the insistently

grainy physicality of *La Maman et la putain*, its *mise en scène* of its characters' bodies in particular, is what reminds me of Cassavetes, who is once again fashionable, especially in France. As so often in Cassavetes, the sexual here is anything but erotic. The central sexual triangle is clearly about power, hilariously so in the scene where the two women kiss and cuddle while Véronika compares Alexandre's organ to the spout of a teapot. Alexandre in an earlier conversation has referred to the MLF (Women's Liberation Movement) as "women who are fed up with bringing their husbands breakfast in bed," exhibiting a distaste that Véronika, who has never even heard the initials, finds bizarre. In all manner of ways the film seems to me to distil the sexual disarray that characterised the aftermath of 1968, bookended as it is by the abortion Gilberte has had before it starts - an operation still illegal in the France of the time - and by Véronika's probable pregnancy and Alexandre's evident incapacity to cope with it, or anything else very much.

Its sexual politics were not the only thing that led to the film's being much criticised in France for its supposedly reactionary attitudes on its ►

◀ release. Alexandre's unnamed friend (Jacques Renard) flaunts extreme right-wing sympathies, as evidenced by his book on the SS and by the fact that Alexandre knocks at his door to the rhythm of the slogan "Al-gérie fran-çai-se". This dandyistic posturing comes through also in the sneering at Sartre. It should be remembered that the far right as well as the far left came to the fore in the years after 1968.

To allude to a phenomenon is not to endorse it, however, and what Eustache's film gives us, notably towards the end, in one of Alexandre's many monologues, is a kind of documentary montage of different May or post-May discourses: that is, different ways of dealing with the massive institutional, political and above all cultural crisis May represented. Alexandre starts by predicting that if ordinary people in the street begin to "freak out", interesting things are likely to happen (the surrealist side of the May movement), goes on to recount a hallucination that the motorway had become "something like the trace of an ancient civilisation" (ecology all but *avant la lettre*) and winds up with an ironic reference to "the least well-off social classes", a phrase derived from the programme of the electoral left defeated at the polls that very year. Once the revolutionary impulse of 1968 had run its course, the forces it unleashed found their way, precisely, into the spheres of personal interaction (from "freaking out" to psychoanalysis), environmental concern, and the electoral politics represented above all by the Mitterrand years. In this and other ways, Eustache's film seems remarkably prescient.

#### Emotional dependence

*La Maman et la putain* also gives Jean-Pierre Léaud the role of his career – a career almost comparable to that of Orson Welles for extraordinary precocity and subsequent bitter disappointment. Léaud's first role as Antoine Doinel, Truffaut's alter ego in *Les quatre cents coups* (1959), remains one of cinema's great portrayals of early adolescence; it also imprisoned the young actor in a part he was to reprise a further four times over a 19-year period, and seemingly in an engulfing emotional dependence upon Truffaut, whose tragically early death in 1984 intensified Léaud's already marked depressive tendencies. He has played few lead roles since then.

So Léaud's performance as Alexandre in *La Maman et la putain* – remarkable for its sheer verbal indefatigability and its combination of emotional vulnerability and insensitivity – currently stands as the apotheosis of a blighted career. His incessant monologuing and chronic indecisiveness – familiar from generations of Rohmer heroes, but also perhaps from Jean-Paul Belmondo in Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965) – acquire monstrously symptomatic dimensions, from the manic twitchiness of the Léaud screen persona to the hyperreal length of the film itself, paradoxically but accurately described by Goldschmidt as "an extract from a much longer film relating ten to 15 years of life". The constant use of fades between sequences contributes to this effect, as does the difficulty of knowing over how long the action takes place – a difficulty reinforced by the characters' unending sameness-in-difference, the manner in which Alexandre's monologues in



**Dandy in aspic:** Jean-Pierre Léaud gives his finest performance as the self-obsessed Alexandre, spinning endless talk in the post-'68 cafés of the Left Bank

particular loop round upon themselves Moebius-fashion. If these monologues have a tragic dimension which offsets their undeniably irksome self-indulgence, that tragedy, as the film's title suggests, is probably the oldest one in town – an Oedipal drama with Marie as the primary maternal focus (and variants of the same drama were playing on analysts' couches all over the Left Bank at the time the film was made). "To speak only with the words of others, that's what I should like. That must be freedom": Alexandre's words, in a monologue addressed (as it happens) to Véronika, echo notions of discourse and intertextuality which *La Maman et la putain* puts into play and interrogates quite as searchingly as anything in later-period Godard.

I speak of Marie as "the primary maternal focus" because fundamental to the emotional dynamics of the film is its redistribution of roles between her and Véronika as it nears its close. Marie's subsidising of Alexandre's infidelities, and her explicit permission for him to use their shared flat as a 'bachelor pad' while she is on a business trip to London, can be seen as placing her in the world of paying for 'services rendered' whose logical culmination is the sex industry. Véronika's possible pregnancy places her as the 'mother' at the film's close – though this has been suggested for some time by her increasingly charged attitude, at once loving and chiding, towards Alexandre. In the penultimate sequence, she delivers a monologue whose force puts it for me among the greatest of all cinematic moments, and which at one point expresses impeccably Catholic sentiments on sex and procreation: "If only people could see once and for all that screwing is shit. That there is only one really beautiful thing – screwing because you love each other so much that you want to make a child that is like us and that otherwise it's just sordid... You must only screw if you're really in love."

Unsurprisingly this attracted much criticism, but it seems to me that it quite literally calls out to be read in context. That context includes Véronika's Polish (and thus undoubtedly Catholic) origins and upbringing (we learn she was a virgin until she was 20) as well as the beginnings of a reaction against the 60s 'sexual revolution' which was to issue in the widespread embracing of feminist ideas and for many in France in a return to varieties of Catholicism. In a more specific textual sense, this film's mono-

logues can be said to be what Bakhtinians would call 'carnavalesque': and thus despite appearances, precisely *not* speaking with one voice. Alexandre's ambition to "speak only with the words of others", exemplified in his montage of post-May discourses, clearly recognises this. Véronika's final monologue juxtaposes a naïve Catholicism with, among other things, simultaneous affirmation and denial of the importance of sex ("Your sex Alexandre which gives me such delight, your sex Alexandre is quite unimportant to me"); a desire to return to a pre-sexual condition of unity with mother and father ("I could stay with you all the time, I'm so happy – I feel loved by both of you"); and a refusal of the very vocabulary of sexual condemnation ("There are no whores on this earth, shit, understand that").

Unlike Alexandre in his dandyistic deployment of the oxymoronic, Véronika – closer in this to what such theorists as Hélène Cixous were to term "feminine writing" – regurgitates her contradictions pell-mell, like an analysand neither caring nor seeking to resolve or reconcile them. In this respect her monologue is like an echo of Emmanuelle Riva's in Resnais and Duras' *Hiroshima mon amour* 14 years before, and the vomiting with which the film ends is the monologue's prolongation as much as its interruption.

#### Bringing it all back

As the generation of 1968, now twice as old as the film, segues smoothly from one mid-life crisis to the next, this seems as good a time as any to revive *La Maman et la putain*. For many in France, indeed, it has never gone away – and such apparently inconsequential lines as Alexandre's "Nobody these days says: 'I drank an excellent lemonade at lunch today'" function as talismanic catchwords among the film's aficionados. Well before I learnt of its impending re-release, I was in a Paris cinema watching Lucas Belvaux's *Pour Rire!* (1996): in it Léaud's character has to go to hospital at one point, and while waiting sees a nurse, probably in her late forties, go past. He asks her if they have not met before. She turns, replies "No, certainly not," and walks away and out of the film. Intertextual lightning struck as I recognised Françoise Lebrun, and from the reaction around me I was not the only keeper of the flame in the cinema. May there soon be many more.

All translations from the French are Keith Reader's own. *La Maman et la putain* opens on 17 October