

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Last Metro (1980)

Francois Truffaut

OVERVIEW

According to Roger Ebert's film review, of *The Last Metro*, Truffaut was in directing this film satisfying three cinematographic wishes: to take the camera backstage, where the possibilities both of making a movie and of showing the making of a work of art—in this case a play—were magnified; to reproduce the atmosphere of the German occupation of France, in which the events of the present film are embedded; to give Catherine Deneuve the role of a responsible woman, a subtle operation given the fact that her job is to assure the survival of her and her husband's theater, in the midst of life and death challenges. While it is Ebert's opinion that Truffaut succeeded in goals one and three, but failed in goal number two, due to inability to summon the war atmosphere, it is worth resting satisfied with Truffaut's clarity of self-analysis, as he reviews his intentions for the present film.

CHARACTERS

Marion Steiner	co-owner of the Montmartre theater
Bernard Granger	hired to act in the current theatrical offering
Daxiat	journalist with anti-Semitic newspaper
Lucas Steiner	husband of Marion
Arlette Guillaume	the costume designer

SYNOPSIS

In the theater itself Granger meets the very cold Marion Schneider, who is both the leading lady of the theater and its owner, and who, we quickly learn, is rigorously eager to keep the theater alive in uncertain times. Marion's husband, who is Jewish, is reputed—by Marion—to have fled the country, to South America, but in fact he is living in the basement of the theater itself. Marion brings him his food, discusses the day's production work with her husband, but he remains out of sight, able through a vent to follow the days' rehearsals.

The remainder of the film follows an inevitably intricate path. A vicious anti-Semite journalist attempts to obtain control of Marion's theater, and finds himself having to answer for it to Granger, who is outraged at the abusive behavior of Daxiat, the anti-semite journalist, toward Marion. Marion's reaction to the conflict is fury toward Granger, who though acting on behalf of Marion, as he sees it, has brought. out into the open the Resistance perspective of the theater.

After the war, Bernard returns to work as leading man in the (successfully surviving) theater, which is still run by Marion and her now freed husband. The play they act in was written by Lucas, during his confinement. At the curtain call, after the first night, Lucas, Marion, and Bernard stand hand in hand onstage, to receive the audience's applause.

STORY

Setting. The film centers around a small theater, in the Montmartre section of Paris. The time is 1942, in the midst of the German occupation of France. The immediate situation of the theater is perilous, because the owner, Lucas Steiner, is Jewish, and the Gestapo is actively attempting to drive Jews out of Paris, or to arrest and deport them. Fortunately for the theater, the scarcity of electricity, during the Occupation, has led to a bustling theatrical night life. Audiences flock to the theater, where there is light.

Another fact of life, in the Paris of this film, is that everyone must be off the streets before the late night curfew, and therefore must be able to catch the last metro home.

Womanizer As the film opens, Granger is hurrying down the street toward the Montmartre Theater, where he has been hired to play male lead in a new production. On his way he flirts with a good looking woman in a fur coat, asking for her number; when he arrives at the theater he finds the lady there, the theater's costume designer

Marion's secret . In the theater itself he meets the very cold Marion Schneider, who is both the leading lady of the theater and its owner, and who, we quickly learn, is rigorously eager to keep the theater alive in uncertain times. Marion's husband, who is Jewish, is reputed—by Marion—to have fled the country, to South America, but in fact he is living in the basement of the theater itself. Marion brings him his food, discusses the day's production work with her husband, but he remains out of sight, able through a vent to follow the days' rehearsals. Marion, married to a Jew and in sympathy with the Resistance, is trying to walk a fine line of theatrical impartiality, in order to keep the Occupation off her back; she wants her theater to prosper, and to give pleasure through art. Toward the end, the Gestapo hears the buzz, that Marion's husband has not left the country for South America, as she has asserted, but is still in France. He is of course in the basement of the theater

Party after the First night. The play starring Granger and Marion is a great success, and the cast attends a celebratory party at a nightclub, at which, as it happens, another party is also enjoying a night out. That other party includes Nazi officers and French anti-semitic intellectuals, among whom is Daxiat, the journalist mentioned above, whose personal goal is to take over Marion's theater, and who has written a calumnious review of Marion's current play. In the course of the evening, Granger starts a fight with Daxiat, for having insulted and verbally threatened Marion, calling her (already popular) play 'Jewish,' thus trash. Marion, as we noted above, is enraged at Granger for having thus drawn attention to her theater in a racially compromising setting. We come here into the ideological center of the play. Truffaut, interested from early in his career, in the art-ideology relation, is no friend of name throwing and inappropriate contaminations of art with vulgar politics. From this point on, Marion will have nothing more to do with Granger offstage.

Resistance Under the pretext of monitoring air raid sirens, two Gestapo agents search the theater where Lucas is hidden. Marion, desperate to prevent the discovery of her husband, turns in terror to Granger, who helps with the frenzied efforts to preserve Marion's ruse. When the Gestapo, soon after, arrest Granger's Resistance *confrere*, just before he and Granger are to meet in a secret rendez-vous, Granger decides to step back from the theater, and to devote himself full time to the Resistance cause. He decides to give up acting. As he returns to his dressing room to clean up his possessions, he meets Marion. She understands. They near each other, embrace, and make love on the floor.

After the war The war is over. Lucas has been freed for many months, and the theater, which has survived, is about to feature the new play which Lucas composed during his captivity. We switch to the theater, which is crowded, and to the faces of the enthusiastic crowd. On stage, under the glaring spotlights, Marion, Lucas, and Granger—who has returned to acting—hold hands and beam into the crowd. No one in the audience knows the irony of the history which binds the trio on stage.

THEMES

Art. Marion is a devoted theater owner and fine actress, who refuses to let her artistic standards be swept up in the passing judgments of wartime occupation. Her theater is drawing crowds, her plays are popular, and yet she is being threatened by the anti-semitic journalist, Daxiat, who would like to discredit her, so that he can take over her theater. It is thus that he calls her present play 'Jewish.' For the sake of her art, which she respects above all, Marion is infuriated when Granger assaults Daxiat, on the grounds that Daxiat calls her drama 'Jewish.' Marion values art itself before any label you can attach to it. She does not really want to accept the existence of any label that would expose an ideological coloring to her work.

Politics. The atmosphere of occupied France is naturally permeated with politics. Attitudes toward value in the arts, were strongly influenced by one's politics, as we see in the struggle between Daxiat and Marion. Daxiat used the notion of Jewish as though it were an appropriate term to describe a kind of art.

Occupation. In the restaurant to which Daxiat and his friends retreat, after the first successful night of the new play, we see that the hat rack near the cashier's desk is filled with neatly aligned Gestapo-officer hats. Throughout the film we acquire such small hints of the clamped down mode of the Paris of the moment.

Resistance. Resistance was the name of the game in 42 Paris, and we are informed by the BBC, in the course of the film, that Frenchmen found collaborating with the Germans were being listed and scheduled for arrest upon the completion of the hostilities. Marion, too, was in deep resistance, against the power tactics of the Gestapo, but for her the sure way to show resistance was to remain true to art and its values.

Secrecy. The world of the arts, in occupation France, was full of secrecy. It was dangerous to say what you thought, especially if you were connected with the Resistance. There was a brisk trade in fake documents and identities. Those who were Jewish, and lucky enough not to have been arrested, attempted to create fake birth certificates and passports for themselves. It was this climate of secrecy that Marion hated, and yet with her husband hidden in the theater basement she was implicated deeply in the world of the clandestine.

Lust. Because Marion's art-conscience was so strong, she remained a repressed theater owner/actress, true to her husband, placing the value of her theater, and the values of theater, above all else. From the start, however, she was attracted to Granger, and though for a long time she never yielded to this feeling, the events leading to Granger's abandonment of the theater build up in her a growing sense of how valuable he has become to her. Repressed lust overwhelmed her at the end, and she could no longer control it.

Irony. Irony is thematic to Truffaut's way of thinking. The final stage- scene shows the three principals holding hands on stage, and beaming at the enthusiastic applauding audience. Little does (or can) the audience know of the complexity of the relations among the principals, even of how much (or little) the principals know about their own relations among each other. Truffaut takes advantage of ironic opportunities like this, in order to enrich the literary texture of his work.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Marion Marion is both a theater owner, working carefully to keep her theater alive, during the difficult times of the German occupation, and to maintain her own high quality as a leading lady. In addition to these daily responsibilities, she has the challenge of feeding, living with, and discussing the day's drama with her husband, who is hidden in the basement of the theater, from where he can observe rehearsals on the stage above him.

Professional When Granger first meets Marion, she is in her business mode, professional as ice, cordial but restrained. Her acting is a masterpiece of that control freak obligation often left to women in today's professional world. Women become both powerful and fragile.

Realistic When the two Gestapo search the basement of the theater, Marion turns desperately to Granger, for help in throwing the guys off the track. She requires the male force-increment.

Parallels Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth, and Gertrude—Hamlet's mother—all come to mind, when we reach for 'modern literary women' dealing with a man's world, and yet concealing a female personality which cannot be concealed. These women are stately and independent, but in the end obligated to deal with the social power conventionally deposited in the male. As for the world of clandestine violence, in which the present Resistance film bathes, the fictional danger zones touched by Graham Green, in *The*

Power and the Glory, reach far into the world of the underground mentality. Greene's priest and Granger know the same clandestine, and high stakes, spiritual worlds.

Granger Granger is a robust resistance fighter with great talent and energy as a stage actor. It is he who controls the bomb required to blow up a German admiral; it is he who awakens the buried passions of Marion. True to Marion's theater, he returns after the war to continue his gigs at the Montmartre theater.

Confident As we first see him, Granger is chatting up a classy woman along the street, as he makes his way to his upcoming interview with Marion at her theater. He is boisterous, lively, and aggressive.

Patriot Granger is impetuously partisan. After the death of his fellow resistance fighter, in the church in Paris, Granger determines to retire from acting, and to devote himself to his work for the Resistance.

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