

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Masculin/Feminin 1966

Jean-Luc Godard (1930-

STORY

Background. *Masculin/Feminin* is divided into fifteen segments, whose significance is arbitrary, as the pace of the film constantly incorporates the aleatory of a momentarily changing life. The film is a fast paced incursion into the socially and politically chaotic power world of the West in the late sixties. One feels in the background the time's accelerated pace of events: *the liberation movements* (in Algeria, sub-Saharan Africa, Viet Nam), raising old values and cultures to question; the encroaching *globalism* of a crowding world, in which immigration is soaring; the pressure of youth culture which pervades the streets of Paris and other western capitols. All such trends are robustly tangible in a city like Paris, the capital of trend, sophistication, and intelligence. The whole film lives and breathes the Paris which creates and is created by the film image, so that Godard is later to say that the film before us represents the life we 'wanted to happen to live.'

Opening. The film opens appropriately inside an anonymous Parisian café, bare tables scattered over a bare space with a serving counter and bar in the background, rain spattered plate glass windows looking out onto the shadows, honkings, fast passing profiles of downtown city traffic. We close in on a few twenty year old students at different tables with their laptops, Paul is there, talking revolution and girls, reporting from inside an intelligence trying to catch up, on its own terms, with the conflictual and unstable world created for it by the elders.

Romance. Perhaps this section should be called '*interview one*,' for much of the film involves young people interviewing other young people, in quasi grown up political style, as when celebs or high style politicians (like Malraux or de Gaulle) rear back and answer questions in the grand manner. Or perhaps this section should be called '*romance one*,' for in fact the second scenario in the film, after the café scene, shows us the same Paul 'interviewing' an age mate, Madeleine, who sees herself as an upcoming young ye-ye style singer. An early twenties interviews an early twenties, in the fashion both of high sophisticated art talk and of asking the chick out for a date, and explaining that that probably would lead to 'sleeping together.' The 'sleeping together bit' comes in for development, bleeding into chatter about American and wider trends in birth control, in pop music styles, and in revolutionary protests, such as were playing out across the pond in the American sixties.

Raw materials. The film is off and running! But running where? The raw materials of the period run riot in the profusion of 'interviews,' student-age interactions, self-searches such as that of Paul, Madeleine, and Madeleine's two roommates, Elizabeth and Catherine-Isabelle; quests of a new generation to define itself off against a pompous and oppressive past, and against parents who (naturally) don't understand. Jokes are played: Paul diverts the attention of the chauffeur of the parked limousine of the American Ambassador, while his buddy, creeping up on the passenger side of the vehicle, spray paints: PEACE IN VIET NAM.

References. References splay off in all directions: to Godard's great friend-enemy-friend, the director Truffaut, to the music of Bob Dylan and the Beatles, to the presence of Andre Malraux as French Minister of Arts, to James Bond, and (directly or indirectly), to the French short story writer Guy de Maupassant, two of whose stories are loosely formative for plot elements in *Masculin/Feminin*, and to the American poet and short story writer, Leroy Jones. The mishmash of elements in this 'portrait of a moment in historical time' is not in itself a plot, but is rather the atmosphere in which a time is embedded.

Interviews. The interview becomes the category of a kind of episode in this film, which carefully separates itself from a genre like the documentary—which tweaks a materially real slice of life. There are

a number of interviews, boy interviews girl in simulation of the grand style media interview, which was by this time, promiscuously on the 'western media,' becoming the dominant portal into 'great events' for the 'media consumer.' Thus there is a kind of embracing irony to each of these interviews, a tease element; evident, for example in the prolonged (eight minute) interview by Paul of a beauty queen, who is getting her kicks out of pretending she knows almost nothing about birth control, but who is taking the whole interview, at the same time, as a flattering proposal.

THEMES

Politics. Though the majority of the actors in this film are young—ceiling around thirty; the majority around twenty—and though they are not (yet) involved in the nitty gritty we call politics—the business and turf struggles—the players in the present film are unmistakably blowing in the wind of the culture eco-system of their time—Vietnam and Algeria, civil rights and independence movements, Communist practice and administration. The world is turning increasingly global, the young of it know that the secrets of this unprecedented world are out there for everybody, and that they have their inalienable rights to belong.

Love. The major players in this film are living the feel of sexuality in the air, on the streets, but the blandishments of love, especially of married love, play little part in the culture Godard pin points here. The sexual generation highlighted here is what, in the film, is called the child of Marx and Coca Cola, that is of America and Communism—arguably the genetics of Woodstock and *The Armies of the Night*. There is free love in this social cocktail, but not much romantic love, with its inevitable need for a stable setting, a paid off mortgage, and a regular paycheck.

Sex. We visit Paul and Madeleine in bed, discovering one another, and asking some classic questions about the genetics of the body; we also follow Paul into a men's room scene, where he sees two men kissing in a stall. The men push Paul out, lock the door on him, and he—who is manifestly fielding a lot of new stuff, at this point—writes politically tinged graffiti on the stall door. It is like rough sex, or for that matter genital family sex, is not relevant to the erotic mood which ensouls the whole social scene the film unfolds for us.

Cinema. In Godard's *The Little Soldier* the chief character, who is a photojournalist, expatiates on the camera as the history maker fast enough, In its recording of events, that it can 'keep up with time.' The cinema is referred to as a 'camera-pen.' In *Masculine/feminine* Godard creates, he says, a film which is the life he would want to live. Does he in fact do that?

CHARACTERS

Paul, whose putative suicide concludes the film, is also our introduction to it, as he sits in the café, in downtown Paris, introducing us to the world as he sees it. He is a sophisticated, but inexperienced young person, eagerly on the look out for bright ambitious young chicks, and full of the view of himself as very left oriented and part of the political mood sweeping through Paris.

Madeleine is the ambitious ye ye singer chick, whose hollow but enchanting face, or doll like fascination with her hair, makes her a femme fatale for Paul throughout the film.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

PAUL (open)

Character Paul is the bright and soulful mid-twenties protagonist who represents for us the smart young sensibility of Paris during its sixties season of would be revolution, closeted sexual play outs, teen love of every sort, and a pervasive sense that the world is in the birth pangs of some new creature, the off spring of Coca Cola—everything 'American'—with Marx, the huge ICON of the liberating world where kids can create their own worlds. Paul is at his typical in interviewing, that is flirting with girls in the guise of taking an interest in their own ME, or chatting 'sophisticatedly' with his friends over the left leaning issues

of the revolutionary day. Paul's 'accidental' death, perhaps fittingly, leaves the watcher and listener wondering whether perhaps this young man suddenly felt the emptiness of a life in which fast pace didn't quite add up to meaning.

Parallels J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*(1951) highlights a protagonist, Holden Caulfield, who is a bright teen ager in the mold of Paul; curious, deeply adventurous, untried and quite imaginative; and open to whatever he could find out about girls. James Purdy's *Malcolm* (1959) deals with an inquisitive and naïve young man, fatherless, who falls under the spell of the odd and random forces of the big city; a brother of a sort to Paul. One could add, to the parallels to Paul, a raft of adolescent male *Bildungsromanen*: Alain-Fournier's *Le grand Meaulnes*(1913); Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922); or even Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*(1885).

Illustrative moments

Gregarious. Our first scenes of the film introduce us to Paul, the classical privileged Parisian twenty year old talking existentialism and revolution in a downtown Paris café. He is poised over his laptop, thinking great thoughts, and chatting up chicks, who are the female replicas of his own style and come on.

Interrogatory. Our next glimpse of Paul in action pits him in interview mode over against the beautiful, hollow ye ye girl, Madeleine, who is parrying his come on questions. He is flirting, looking for a break through, and at the same time asking intelligent questions.

Shocked. Paul is shocked to discover two guys kissing in a restroom stall, and backs out quickly when they tell him to leave. He is still an ingenu, in the midst of a busy city that is learning on its own.

Suicidal. Paul's demise is a matter of dispute. He is filming Madeleine in the apartment, when—this is the consensus—he accidentally steps back too far and falls off the back of a balcony. Is this the truth of it? Or did he kill himself?

Discussion questions

How would you describe the political climate in which this movie takes place? Have the younger people a firm grasp of their political world? Are they just playing revolutionary?

What is the function of the 'interview' in this film? Is it an ironic device, meant to poke fun at the still adolescent stage of the young people in the movie? Or is it a more serious comment on the times?

What image of America comes through in the film? What is the wider significance of 'Coca cola' in the comment that the world portrayed in this film is a child of Marx and Coca Cola?