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Marc Allégret, dir., *Avec André Gide*. 1951: Pierre Braunberger/Panthéon Productions; 2019: 2K restoration, Les Films du Panthéon/Les Films du Jeudi/Icarus Films, 2019. 92 min.

Review by Alison James, University of Chicago.

*Avec André Gide*, directed by Marc Allégret and produced by Pierre Braunberger, is a biographical documentary filmed during the last year of André Gide's life, completed in 1951 after Gide's death in February of that year and first screened in its current form in February 1952.<sup>[1]</sup> Recently restored by Les Films du Panthéon in association with Les Films du Jeudi, and distributed by Icarus Films, it integrates archival footage and still photographs alongside interviews and conversations conducted in the months preceding the author's death. It is framed as an elegy and a tribute, opening with images of Gide's funeral procession, and closing with a close-up of his folded hands in a mortuary position, followed by a fade to black. Between these two evocations of death, we find an intimate portrait of the Nobel Prize-winning author who was a major figure in French literary and cultural life in the first half of the twentieth century. The film aims to solidify his legacy while delving into the personal and intellectual qualities that characterize the man.

The film is divided into three parts, each approximately thirty minutes. The first, after the opening funeral scenes, evokes Gide's childhood and youth via family photographs, footage of cities and landscapes, and excerpts from Gide's own autobiographical writings. It takes us from Paris (the Luxembourg Gardens and Gide's parents' apartment in the rue de Tournon), to the ancestral lands of his father's and mother's families in Provence and Normandy, respectively (Paul Gide's family in Uzès; the Rondeaux family in Rouen and La Roque, his mother's château in Calvados). Following the narrative that Gide himself offered in his autobiographical work *Si le grain ne meurt* (1924), the film presents Gide's childhood as studious and constrained, marred by illness, moral severity, isolation, and moral severity. Gide's Protestant background features prominently, with the film emphasizing the rigidity of the family's religious outlook but also the mystical ecstasy experienced by the adolescent Gide, which conditioned his spiritual love for his cousin Madeleine. The early 1890s see the publication of Gide's first work, *Les Cahiers d'André Walter* (1891), as well as his entry, alongside his friend Pierre Louÿs, into the literary milieu where he would meet Jean Moréas, Henri de Régnier, Paul Albert Laurens, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry, Paul Verlaine, and Oscar Wilde. Gide's travels to Tunisia and Algeria in 1893-1894 are presented as an adventure of moral liberation, transforming Gide's initially religious fervor into the earthly, sensual one praised in *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897). Still, this narrative of desire and liberation is complicated by a digression that gives a more ambiguous light to Gide's "fervor" (12:18). Gide, filmed in 1950, reads a passage from *Si le grain ne meurt* in which the child

André recovers a marble that was trapped inside a cupboard door only to be disappointed with the banal greyness of the extracted object.[2] A passage from *Les Nourritures terrestres* describes the same dynamic of desire and disillusionment, privileging desire itself over possession of its object.

The second part of the film, titled “André Gide et son œuvre,” opens with an elliptical account of Gide’s troubled marriage to Madeleine and images of their home in Cuverville, Normandy, followed by an evocation of the journeys that take Gide away from home. The next sequence takes us to Gide’s apartment in the rue Vaneau, Paris, where Gide reminisces with Jean Schlumberger on the origins of the *Nouvelle revue française*. Photographs and archival footage show Gide’s past interactions with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Roger Martin du Gard, Marcel Coppey, and others. Back in the present of filming, Gide discusses justice and juries with the novelist and lawyer Maurice Garçon, recalling his own experience as a juror for the assizes court in Rouen in 1902. Gide’s political engagement and concern with social justice are further emphasized in the film’s account of his travels in the 1920s and 1930s to French Equatorial Africa and the USSR. Switching gears, the film returns again to 1950 and accompanies Gide to theatrical rehearsals for an adaptation of *Les Caves du Vatican*. We also see footage of Gide with the actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault, with whom he worked on a production of *Hamlet* and a stage adaptation of Kafka’s *The Trial* in 1946 and 1947.

The third and final part, “Janvier 1951,” collects scenes from the final months of Gide’s life. Earlier footage of Gide with his daughter, Catherine, precedes present-day scenes of Gide as a grandfather. The author’s playful side is further emphasized by images of Gide engaging in horseback riding, mountain climbing, chess, and cards. A reflection on Gide’s love of music provides a transition into an extended sequence in which Gide coaches a young piano student (Annick Morice) through a Chopin scherzo and offers a reflection on music, musical performance, and art. Gide’s concern with guiding the young is further illustrated with a passage from his 1947 speech to a youth congress in Munich, where he delivers a humanist message on the power of the few to maintain intellectual integrity in the face of totalitarianism. A passage from *Thésée* (1947), on serenity in the face of death, accompanies the final images of Gide’s face and then his folded hands, before the final fade to black.

The film is in black and white with a voice-over narration read by Jean Desailly, as well as readings of passages from his works by Gide himself. It has been very nicely restored with high quality images that maintain the smooth integration of the different kinds of visual material (photographs, archival footage, and sequences recorded by Allégret in 1950). The English subtitles (by Brent Keever) are well done overall, with the occasional error (e.g., “locusts” instead of “cicadas” [*cigales*] in the sequence on the Provençal countryside).

The Chopin piano music that figures at the beginning and end of the film (themes from the Ballade no. 4 in F minor and Prelude no. 4 in E minor, respectively) may provide a key to the film’s aesthetic approach. At the end of the piano lesson sequence, Gide observes that he is more interested in the intimate Chopin than in the composer’s larger orchestral works.[3] Perhaps taking his cue from this comment, Allégret offers a portrait of the intimate Gide, as seen by his close friends, and presents a life that is at once exemplary and ordinary. The author’s role as an influential literary figure and public intellectual is not erased, but it is rendered primarily through an emphasis on personal friendships and exchanges, with the camera favoring close-up scenes of Gide at home over Gide on the world stage. Images of the public figure are generally framed by

quiet moments of reflection: thus a series of photographs of Gide's journey to the USSR (including images of him delivering Maxim Gorky's funeral oration while standing next to Stalin) are followed by an interview with Pierre Herbart in 1950, in which Gide reflects back on his critical testimony in *Retour de l'URSS*. Toward the end of the film, a brief clip of Gide at a podium addressing the Munich youth congress immediately cross-fades into Gide rereading the same speech at his desk, pen in hand, positioning the viewer as an intimate listener, rather than a member of the crowd. To be sure, many sequences also evoke Gide's incessant movement and quest for adventure, whether via panoramic shots of the North African desert or images of power lines viewed from a moving train. However, the sequences from 1950 situate Gide primarily in the cocoon of his rue de Vaneau apartment. In an extended guided tour offered with Gide's accompanying commentary, we are immersed in this personal space by a series of tracking shots that takes us through the apartment's cluttered rooms before zooming in on certain objects: paintings, sculptures, books, photographs, letters (31:17-35:00). The papers lying on Gide's desk allow a brief digression into the past (a flashback, via older footage, to Gide's friendship with Valéry). Returning to the apartment, the camera takes us to the bedroom where Gide fell asleep for the last time, with the voice-over narration reminding us that this is now a post-mortem visit.

As the title indicates, the film aims not to be a work about Gide but a work made *with* Gide, suggesting proximity and collaboration in the creative process. Filmed during Gide's last months and completed after his death, it serves as a kind of testament. More subtly, the "*avec*" of the title also registers a long-term association that is somewhat elided by the film itself: the relationship between Gide and the filmmaker, Marc Allégret, who were lovers and then friends. Despite the intimate framing of the film, Allégret himself remains out of sight behind the camera, placing himself in the same position as the viewer/listener. As Daniel Durosay notes in his article on the film, another act of biographical elision removes the reference in a previous edit to the filmmaker's father and Gide's tutor, the Protestant pastor, Élie Allégret.[4] The film also remains almost silent on Gide's homosexuality, which is hinted at only in a few moments: an allusion to the "*particularité*" of Gide's nature (21:24); a brief shot of young boys stripping off and running to bathe outdoors as the voice-over describes Gide's awakening to his own desires in North Africa (22:55-23:06). The troubles of Gide's marriage to Madeleine, likewise, are hinted at without full explanation. The film models itself on the oblique allusions of Gide's *L'Immoraliste* (1902) rather than the transgressive sincerity of *Si le grain ne meurt*.

Allégret's personal association with Gide is most visible in the *Voyage au Congo* episode, midway through the film. Filmed during the two men's travels together in French Equatorial Africa in 1925 and 1926 and screened in 1927, *Voyage au Congo* was the work that launched Allégret's career in cinema after his earlier experiences with photography (like *Avec André Gide*, this film has also been recently restored by Les Films du Jeudi and Les Films du Panthéon).[5] The journey with Allégret also provided an impetus for Gide's own reflections on cinema and documentary.[6] In *Avec André Gide*, the *Voyage au Congo* sequence becomes a collaborative work in the fullest sense, combining images from Allégret's earlier silent film with a voice-over from Gide's travelogue of their shared journey—bringing together the author's and the filmmaker's perspectives on the beauty of a Massa village, for instance. This section of the film also includes additional sequences not found in the original *Voyage au Congo* film, such as footage of women doing manual work on road construction, accompanied by a voice-over commentary on the exploitation of indigenous workers.[7]

*Avec André Gide* often follows the logic of what Philippe Lejeune calls Gide's "*espace autobiographique*": a textual configuration of fiction, personal writing, and critical work that combine to reveal the author's image.[8] For instance, Gide's wife, Madeleine, is first introduced by the name Alissa, the self-denying protagonist of the story *La porte étroite* (1909), and is later associated with Marceline of *L'Immoraliste*; the latter work and *Les Nourritures terrestres* are presented as a transposition of Gide's self-emancipation from the rigidity of his Protestant upbringing. Beyond these biographical readings, however, one of the most striking aspects of the film is its attempt to portray the incessant activity of Gide's mind and the process of literary creation. Gide's works are present in all their materiality, as published books, handwritten notebooks, and papers on his desk, where we see Gide sitting pen in hand. We also observe him taking notes during his travels or correcting drafts of his work while walking in the Buttes-Chaumont Park. The intellectual and manual activity of writing is rendered through close-up shots of Gide's face and hands, while the images of Gide in conversation also draw attention to his faculty of attention and ability to listen.

After its first release in 1952, *Avec André Gide* gave rise first to enthusiasm and then to harsh criticism.[9] In a sense it has a built-in datedness, offering a nostalgic retrospective gaze even as a new generation of writers was coming to prominence in the postwar period. Despite the reflections on totalitarianism, a passing reference to the Occupation, and Gide's 1947 address to German youth, the film's account of Gide's life focuses on the prewar moment when the *Nouvelle revue française* dominated the literary scene. Some biographical sequences make uncomfortable viewing today (North Africa cast as the exotic site for Gide's hedonistic liberation from puritan repression, even if the sexual tourism that is explicit in Gide's autobiography remains implicit in the film). In his performances for the camera, Gide has a tendency to pontificate, especially in the excruciating piano lesson scene where he explains Chopin to a young woman. The scenes with his grandchildren are both moving and awkward in their staged naturalness. Allégret's film struggles to resolve the tension between its portrayal of an ordinary, down-to-earth Gide in conversation with his friends, and the posture of the great man speaking to posterity.

Nonetheless, *Avec André Gide* remains a fascinating work. It is a crucial historical document of the author's life and of the milieu in which he moved. Gide's own participation in its making gives the film a key place in his project of autobiographical self-construction, while the film also reframes his literary oeuvre as the fruit of intellectual exchange and collaboration. Finally, the film is a moving tribute to a friend, as well as an aesthetic endeavor in its own right, as Allégret attempts to capture through images and exchanges the shape of a life and the intensity of a mind at work.

## NOTES

[1] On the different cuts of this film and their original screenings, see Daniel Durosay, "Le document contesté: 'Avec André Gide.' Sa réception, hier et aujourd'hui," *Bulletin des Amis d'André Gide* 21/98 (April 1993): 287-292.

[2] For a reading of this passage, see Victoria Reid, *André Gide and Curiosity* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 252-253.

[3] On Gide and Chopin, see Maja Zorica Vukusic, "Gide et Chopin: Le parfait écrivain devrait être musicien," *Bulletin des Amis d'André Gide* 40/176 (October 2012): 309-352.

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[4] Durosay, “Le document contesté,” p. 228.

[5] Marc Allégret, dir., *Voyage au Congo*. Les Films du Panthéon, 1926. 115 min.

[6] C. D. E. Tolton, “Réflexions d’André Gide sur le Cinéma,” *Bulletin des Amis d’André Gide* 20/93 (January 1992): 61-71.

[7] Durosay, “Le document contesté,” p. 228.

[8] Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p.171.

[9] Durosay, “Le document contesté.”

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