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Alain Resnais, *Five Short Films*. 80 min. DVD (Icarus Films, 2022). \$398.00 U.S. and Claude Chabrol, Jean Douchet, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Eric Rohmer and Jean Rouch, *Six in Paris (Paris vu par)*. 96 min. DVD (Icarus Films, 2020). \$348.00 U.S.

Review by Tadas Bugnevicius, Columbia University.

“Is the short film really, as they say, the future of the cinema? I would go even further: Is it cinema at all?” Jean-Luc Godard raised these questions in a February 1959 review of the fourth annual Journées internationales du film de court-métrage. In two provocatively entitled sections, “Down with Short Films” and “Short Film = Anti-Cinema,” he claimed that the short film does not have its own aesthetic specificity that is distinct from that of the feature film.[1] Zeroing in on what that specificity is, he took the short film to task for not having “time to think.”[2] Such views contributed to a teleological notion of the short film as a curtailed form of full-length cinema. It was akin to film criticism which Godard in 1962 reframed as also transitional: “All of us at *Cahiers [du cinéma]* thought of ourselves as future directors... Writing was already a way of making cinema,” and in cinema, “the critical dimension is subsumed.”[3] Likewise, for Godard, the feature film subsumed the short film.

This logic was not good news for the greatest part of French cinematic production. It condemns a whole range of categories from the newsreel to the cartoon. The majority of the holdings at the Centre national du cinéma et de l’image animée are in fact short films. Thousands wait to be identified and sorted out. In the 1950s, France produced on average roughly 300 shorts films annually, as opposed to around 100 feature films. Despite that decade being often referred to as “the golden age” of the short film, it remains among the most frowned upon periods of French film history, in large part because of the systematic discrediting of *cinéma français* as a whole on the part of the group Godard refers to as “us”: François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Éric Rohmer. The diminishment of the short film was a corollary of that discrediting. While Godard and his peers praised individual filmmakers such as Alain Resnais and Georges Franju, they dislodged the then common understanding of the short film as institutional art.

Resnais was an exemplary proponent of this flourishing institutional art in the period between *Van Gogh* (1947) and *Le Chant de styrène* (1958), both included in the Icarus sampling of the director’s decade-long work in the short format. The conditions were favorable. First, demand was built into the exhibition structure reshaped by the Nazi Occupation. Theaters could accompany the feature film with a show of no longer than 1300 meters (about 47 minutes). The accompaniment was known simply as *le documentaire*, the expression *court-métrage* becoming current only later.[4] Second, there was state support, fought for and won. The best expression

of that fight remains the 1953 declaration of the Groupe des Trente, signed by Franju, Paul Grimault, Pierre Kast, Jean Painlevé in addition to Resnais, among others, which posited the short subject at the center of cinema's ecosystem: "Alongside the novel or the most substantial of literary works, the poem, the short story, and the essay are often sources of renewal because they supply fresh blood and energy. This is the role the short subject continues to play. In the end, its death would entail that of cinema, because an art that fails to move is an art that is dying." [5] It is worth remembering that the mechanisms of subsidy that France developed over the years to encourage feature-film production internationally was an extension of *la prime à la qualité* (1953-1959) designed to bolster the short film. Third, the development of the short film benefited from the participation of enterprising producers who, later, shaped the New Wave. Pierre Braunberger produced all five of Resnais's films included in the Icarus release, while Anatole Dauman funded the director's canonical *Night and Fog* (1955).

Van Gogh, *Paul Gauguin* (1949) and *Guernica* (1950) belong to what was at the time the most prized category of the short film, the so-called *film d'art*, the art documentary. They were most likely to qualify as "quality" films and earn their producers extra funding. The greatest share of *films d'art* dealt with visual arts, particularly painting. [6] Winner of the Oscar for the best live-action two-reel short subject in the 1950 Academy Awards, *Van Gogh* recounts the life of the eponymous artist through a voice-over spoken over images of his paintings. The camera is careful not to show the frames of the canvases filmed, which reduces the autonomy of each individual painting in favor of a fictional narrative space. The camera zooms into a window in *The Yellow House* (1888), then cuts to *The Bedroom in Arles* (1889) and zooms out, imposing a Hollywood-style continuity on two distinct paintings. It submits *The Potato Eaters* (1885) to analytical editing, breaking down the establishing shot of the painting into close-ups of faces and hands. Defending the film from detractors who felt that it distorted the painter's work, film critic André Bazin pointed out that *Van Gogh* is not a presentation of art: it is its own art, an assertion of film art. [7]

Paul Gauguin applies a similar formula. Again, the oeuvre of a painter is treated as raw material for the camera to fabricate diegetic space. Art historian Gaston Diehl returned as a scenarist, as did cinematographer Henry Ferrand. This time the film is more assertive. While the opening intertitle in *Van Gogh* reverentially says that the film merely "tries" to "trace" the life of the artist, the one in *Paul Gauguin* dryly states what the film is and does. *Van Gogh* is presented as "a film by Gaston Diehl and Robert Hessens," Resnais receiving a credit for "directing" only later in the title sequence. *Paul Gauguin* lists Resnais's name first and in a slightly larger font. This reminds us that film authorship is not given but constructed, and recalls a broader tussle between screenwriters and directors for authorship in the immediate years after WWII. In all five films, in fact, Resnais shares authorship with his team. But the biggest change occurs in the penultimate shot, which zooms out of *Breton Village Under Snow* (1894) until the frame of the canvas appears. The frame yanks us out of the fiction, just as the voice-over announces Gauguin's death.

This broadening of the picture continues with *Guernica*, which focuses on a collective tragedy rather than the individual life of a painter. Pablo Picasso's harlequins from the Rose Period (1904-1906) progressively give way to close-ups of faces wrapped in darkness from the more depressing Blue Period (1901-1904), figures used to imagine the victims of the bombing of Guernica carried out by the Nazi Luftwaffe and the Fascist Regia Aeronautica at the invitation of Francisco Franco. The film then mimics the cubist character of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) by intensifying cinematic techniques, camera movements over the canvas and its dissection and recombination

through montage, to evoke the atrocity. But there is a sense that the strategy of the previous two films is no longer sufficient. The film broadens its range of materials beyond painting to include photography, drawing, sculpture, and newspapers. New techniques include Henry Ferrand's animation, notably in the section where Picasso's figures, superimposed over shallow spaces, are riddled with holes to evoke execution by firing squad, harking back to Francisco Goya's unprecedented representation of wartime atrocity in *The Third of May 1808* (1814). *Guernica* epitomizes what Steven Jacobs has described as the anti-fascist mission of the art documentary to achieve "cultural emancipation through education." [8]

The remaining two short films in the Icarus collection are documentaries in the more usual sense of the word. *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) is about the Bibliothèque nationale de France which was at the time undergoing a process of modernization and expansion. It is among the most abstract of Resnais's shorts and hence the most beloved among the theorists. It posits two ideas: first, that libraries are an extension and organization of humankind's "universal memory," a term introduced by the voice-over narrator; second, that this memory is virtual and only actualized through individual readers. In the film, one such reader, shown at the end of a tracking shot, is Agnès Varda on her way to becoming a French New Wave luminary. These ideas can be traced back to Plato's *Phaedrus* and would interest such thinkers as Marshall McLuhan, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and Fredric Jameson. The film begins with a self-reflexive moment by showing the camera and the microphone and goes on to show the internal functioning of the library by following a book from its arrival to its stamping, labelling, and placement. The book in question is Jeannine Garane's *Mars*, a fake book concocted by Resnais's colleague Chris Marker, which confers to the film the playfulness of a thought experiment and to the "universal memory" a cosmic dimension.

Yet the short film in the collection that perhaps speaks best to our times is *Le Chant du styrène* commissioned by Pechiney. Traditionally an aluminium company, Pechiney was part of the industrial world's post-WWII turn to petrochemicals. "From the 1950s onwards, a wide array of naturally derived substances--wood, glass, paper, natural rubber, natural fertilizers, soaps, cotton, wool and metals--were systematically displaced by plastics, synthetic fibres, detergents and other petroleum-based chemicals," writes political scientist Adam Hanieh about the origins of our current synthetic modernity. [9] The film delights in showing us plastic in all its malleability. It comes in liquids, in granules, in rods, in sheets; through molds, it can be shaped into any object; through pigments, it can adopt any color. The voice-over describes the whole production chain involved in the making of plastic, tracing polystyrene to oil and coal. The fact that the spoken text, written by Raymond Queneau, is in intricate alexandrines invites us to treat plastic as a gimmick. And yet, over the decades, plastic has become an indispensable raw material sustaining the manufacture of goods, a pollutant of trans-planetary scale, and a symbol of postmodernity. The film's celebration of the novelty of plastic may appear too blissful, but its tracking shots through labyrinthine pipes and its vaporous ending anticipate our situation.

The anthology film *Six in Paris* (1965) shows a different facet of the short-subject ecosystem at the time. It is aligned with the *Cahiers*-based New Wave, auteurism, and fiction as opposed to institutional documentary. In the 1950s, Chabrol, Godard, Rivette, Rohmer, and Truffaut wrote, assisted, funded, and performed in each other's (almost) exclusively fictional shorts with the aim of getting attention from producers while gaining experience outside the regular film industry. One of their models was Alexandre Astruc who made an award-winning fictional short *Le Rideau cramoisi* (1953) and followed up with a feature in 1955. Unusually at the time, Astruc's short film

was a period drama and literary adaptation, and it deployed the voice-over, a documentary staple, for storytelling. It was rare for filmmakers to return to the short subject after directing features, but a notable exception was the anthology film. Between 1949 and 1969, there were no fewer than 26 such films. Alongside *Loin du Vietnam* (1967), also distributed by Icarus, *Six in Paris* is the best known. The production company Les Films du Losange, established by Barbet Schroeder and Rohmer in 1962, commissioned six filmmakers to make a fiction short around a Parisian location of their choice. They were to be written by the directors themselves and filmed in the flexible 16mm format. The film's French title translates as "Paris seen by..." and the opening credits tell us by whom: Chabrol, Jean Douchet, Godard, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Rohmer, and Jean Rouch.

The title of each segment refers to the chosen location. Chabrol's is *La Muette*, a neighborhood in the sixteenth arrondissement, one of the most affluent districts in Paris. The film affirmed Chabrol's growing predilection for slamming the dysfunctional bourgeoisie. The bourgeois meals, so recurrent in this critique across many of his films, take up a good chunk of the action here. The director himself plays the coarse maid-smooching husband while Stéphane Audran, his partner at the time, plays the lonely housewife. The fictional couple shows little interest in their adolescent boy who begins to wear earplugs in order to shut himself off from their bickering. But when an accident happens, he cannot hear it and go for help. The viewer shares the boy's alienation, not least because the film is muted whenever he wears the earplugs. There is an even more sinister resonance with the film's title which can mean "the mute woman." In the tragic end, the wife does become literally mute. The name of a posh location and the name of gendered silence coincide. The outside sequences shot on cloudy autumn days contribute to the bleak picture of Chabrol's bourgeoisie.

Douchet is better known as a writer who did much to shape, disseminate, and defend the legacy of *Cahiers du cinéma* until his death in 2019. A friend of Truffaut and company, he started writing for the journal in 1958. His segment on Saint-Germain des Prés in the sixth arrondissement begins as a pastiche of the documentary-style exposition through a roaming camera and a self-assured masculine voice-over rambling about the neighborhood's attraction to "American women students." This gendering is double-edged. On the one hand, by 1965 there was indeed a history of American women students spending their formative time in Paris, the most famous among them being Jacqueline Bouvier (Kennedy), Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis.^[10] The woman protagonist in the film is taking art classes at the Académie Julien which, since its establishment in the nineteenth century, welcomed women and foreigners. On the other hand, the film is not interested in the protagonist's intellectual curiosity, only in her entanglement with men. She is a sympathetic character, especially compared to the two men she encounters who are both depicted as crude and interchangeable, despite their vastly different social standing. Yet she does not break out of the epistemological position that the voice-over constructs for her in advance. Her depiction corresponds to a vision of "American women" implied by the all-knowing masculine voice-over.

Godard's segment goes to the core of the *Cahiers*-based New Wave's attitude toward women, which Geneviève Sellier describes as "reaffirmation of male domination by way of fiction."^[11] This is one of the reasons why the starting point of these filmmakers was fiction: to play around the facts of post-World War II reality such as the new visibility of young, smart, independent women and the assertive left. Neither Chabrol's, nor Douchet's, nor Godard's film accords the woman character self-consciousness; and in all of them, she is put through embarrassing or

violent situations. In Godard's *Montparnasse et Levallois*, we have once again a triangle of two unlikeable and interchangeable men and a sympathetic North American woman but once again she is reduced to the one-dimensionality of sexual curiosity. The first man, played by the real artist Philippe Hiquily in his Montparnasse studio, works on modernist sculpture of woman, thus embodying the relationship between the filmmaker "demiurge" and the "woman-child" which Sellier sees in Godard-Karina films. [12] The second man works in the automobile body shop in the suburb of Levallois. Like Hiquily, he wields a blowtorch and works on a "body"; like his double, he ends up calling her names and tossing her out. The American documentary filmmaker Albert Maysles, acting as the cinematographer, uses long takes and direct sound to create tension in the two confrontations, as dialogue has to compete with noise in this short film about the failure of communication.

Of all the participants in the *Six in Paris* project, Pollet is the least connected to the *Cahiers* crowd—and it shows. His *Rue Saint Denis* takes place in the central second arrondissement, on one of the older streets of Paris. After five brief shots of the neighborhood, the rest of the film takes place in a studio apartment owned by a dishwasher who brings home a sex worker. Despite opportunities to the contrary, this segment resists the clichés of the New Wave men and women and hews much closer to the ethos of secondary characters in the old-school cinema of René Clair, Marcel Carné, Jacques Becker, and Jean Renoir. The decrepit living space, the blaring radio, a silly ancestor gazing from a photograph framed on the wall resurrect the world of an over-idealized but egalitarian *petit people* in which the New Wave filmmakers were no longer interested. Sex is indefinitely delayed, as the assertive woman chaffs the timid mumbling *plongeur* and has him prepare a simple but cozy dinner, with cheese and coffee for dessert. Compare this to instant coffee mixed with lukewarm water under the kitchen faucet in Douchet's segment. Cramped in the small studio and alienated from modern-day Paris, the odd couple finds escape by talking about other places such as Cannes and Limoges. There is no New Wave over-indulgence in tragic relationships, only an unexpected light-heartedness in the face of everyday gloominess.

If Pollet's film takes places mainly inside, Rohmer's *Place de l'Étoile* is the most topographical of the short films in *Six in Paris*. Here control of space and control of character coincide. Like *Saint-Germain des Prés*, the segment begins with a documentary-like introduction to the location aided by a supercilious voice-over written and delivered by the director himself. After the film picks a specimen to be placed under observation—"Et voici notre héros, Jean-Marc"—the documentary gives way to fiction and the voice-over disappears. The protagonist in question works at an upscale men's clothing store and the narrative tension arises from an incident which forces him to deviate from his everyday route from the metro station to the workplace. The meticulous work with place and itinerary was possible in part because of Rohmer's deep familiarity with the territory. After all, the office of *Cahiers du cinéma* was just a few hundred meters away from Jean-Marc's station. But the descriptive intertitles with decorative initial capitals evoking medieval manuscripts undermine the seriousness of the protagonist's spatial drama. The narrator's epistemological superiority over characters, affirmed here, will remain a staple in Rohmer's subsequent work.

Perhaps the strongest piece in the collection, Jean Rouch's *Gare du Nord* combines topography, character development, and film technique to fabricate a story suspended between everyday reality and abstract parable. Between the brief opening and the closing shots that mirror each other, there is an apparent 16-minute long take, with a hidden cut, in which the camera observes

the outbreak of a quarrel over breakfast and then follows the young woman as she storms out for work, nearly has an accident crossing the street, meets a dream man who is everything her partner is not and who tags along until the transformative finale on the bridge overlooking the Gare de l'Est. Rouch's short film basks in contemporary history more than others in the collection, as the years of France's highest growth in the twentieth century (peaking in 1965) are felt through construction noise and conversations about real estate, social mobility, and holidays. The virtuoso long take is the technical form of the soaring fantasies that are very much in the air and yet so far away.

The latest *Six in Paris* DVD from Icarus comes without the few glitches that marred the 2008 New Yorker Films release, but also without the latter's useful interviews with Albert Maysles, Schroeder, and editor Jackie Raynal, and a contextualizing presentation by Richard Brody. There remains much more to be done in the future, however, depending on the availability of rights and prints. Beyond Resnais, we are still waiting for the documentary shorts of Jacques Baratier, Georges Franju, Pierre Kast, Ado Kyrrou, Roger Leenhardt, Georges Rouquier, and René Vautier among others. Among the anthology films, *Les Crimes de l'amour* (1952) which includes Astruc's *Le Rideau cramoisi* would find a keen public, as would *L'Amour à vingt ans* (1962), an early exercise in international new waves.

NOTES

[1] Tom Milne, ed. *Godard on Godard* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), p. 109.

[2] Milne, ed. *Godard on Godard*, (original emphasis) p. 110.

[3] Milne, ed. *Godard on Godard*, p. 171.

[4] Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, "Structures du court métrage français, 1945–1958," in Dominique Bluher and François Thomas, eds., *Le court métrage français de 1945 à 1968*, vol. 1 (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2005), p. 29.

[5] The declaration of the Groupe des Trente is included as an appendix to Steven Ungar, "Quality Wars: The Groupe des Trente and the Renewal of the Short Subject in France, 1953–1963," *South Central Review* 33/2 (2016): 40.

[6] For a useful list of *films d'art*, see Jean-Pierre Berthomé, "Les courts métrages d'art en France: 1946–1961," in Bluher and Thomas, eds., *Le court métrage français de 1945 à 1968*, vol. 1, pp. 107–109.

[7] André Bazin, "Painting and Cinema," in Hugh Gray, ed., *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 168.

[8] Steven Jacobs, *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 4.

[9] Adam Hanieh, "Petrochemical Empire: The Geo-Politics of Fossil-Fuelled Production," *New Left Review* 130 (July/August 2021): 27.

[10] Alice Kaplan, *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela Davis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[11] Geneviève Sellier, *Masculine Singular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 16.

[12] Sellier, *Masculine Singular*, p. 153.

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