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Zazie dans le Métro (Blu-ray)

(Criterion, 6.28.2011)

Of Louis Malle's early films *Zazie dans le Métro* is the most emblematic of the New Wave and arguably his most influential film. The director's third film, released in 1960, constantly calls attention to its technique, even having a character ask if it is the New Wave. Based upon Raymond Queneau's 1959 novel, the veteran surrealist's first commercial success, *Zazie dans le Métro* presents a visit to Paris by ten-year-old Zazie (Catherine Demongeot), who stays with her uncle Gabriel (Philippe Noiret), a female impersonator whose act, thankfully, is never shown, while her mother (Odette Piquet) cavorts with her latest boyfriend. Zazie is opinionated and foul-mouthed, qualities which reportedly led angry French parents, expecting to see a children's film, to drag their tykes from theaters. Zazie causes chaos ranging from a massive traffic jam to a lengthy slapstick fight in a restaurant. Malle's style matches the girl's frenetic energy and anarchic spirit: constant camera movement, mixing slow, normal, and sped-up motion in a single scene, and breathtaking shots of an ascent to the top of the Eiffel Tower. This style inspired such directors as Richard Lester, with *A Hard Day's Night*, and Jacques Tati, with *Play Time*. Malle borrows from everything from silent film comedy--he dedicates the film to Charlie Chaplin in a 1960 television interview--to American animation. The color scheme, created in part by American photographer and avant-garde filmmaker William Klein, in his role as visual consultant, approximates the look of cartoons with vibrant oranges, yellows, and reds and muted greens and blues. This use of color, beautifully captured in this Blu-ray, is the film's most distinctive achievement. Klein discusses the film's pop art background in an April 2011 audio. In "Le Paris de Zazie" assistant director Philippe Collin takes us to some of the film's settings as they appeared in 2005. Interestingly both Klein and Collin take credit for the borrowings from Tom and Jerry cartoons. Jean-Paul Rappeneau, who co-wrote *Zazie dans le Métro* with Malle, takes about how the director found visual equivalents to Queneau's unique style. Archival television interviews with Demongeot and her parents and with a stiff, nervous Queneau add little to appreciating the film. When a too-solemn Malle describes the film's "terrible vision of modern life," the interviewer responds that the director is frightening him, reminding Malle that it is a comedy, after all. A pamphlet by Ginette Vincendeau, author of a terrific Jean-Pierre Melville biography, provides more useful background. *Zazie dans le Métro* cries out for a knowledgeable commentary going into more detail about its influences and production and especially about the cast, about whom little is said in the extras. We don't learn what happened to Demongeot, though Malle's brother, in an earlier French DVD, said she became a historian.—Michael Adams

Movie: 9.0

A/V: 9.5

Extras: 7.9