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Review of Pierrot le fou

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Pierrot le fou
(Criterion, 2.19.2008)

“Film is like a battleground: love, hate, action, violence, death. In one word: emotion.” Samuel Fuller’s famous epigram during his cameo in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le fou* is a concise summary of the film itself. Not only does it have love, hate, etc., but it is a battleground on two fronts: Godard’s attempt to break away from genres and his need to exorcise Anna Karina, his frequent star and the wife who was divorcing him. Even without background about the turbulent Godard marriage, *Pierrot le fou* is fascinating. With this knowledge, approached from many angles in the excellent-as-always Criterion extras, the film has an emotional subtext that would not otherwise be evident.

Loosely based on *Obsession* by the crime writer Lionel White, also the source of Kubrick’s *The Killing*, *Pierrot le fou*, released in 1965, began production without a script, with Godard writing the next day’s scenes the night before. Though it has often been thought to have been improvised, Karina claims that every word spoken by the characters was composed by Godard. One of the many joys of la nouvelle vague is that even highly structured narratives can seem spontaneous.

For his story of a runaway couple, Godard initially envisioned a Humbert Humbert-Dolores Haze-like pairing, with Richard Burton and French pop star Sylvie Vartan. When neither proved available, he had to settle for Karina and Jean-Paul Belmondo, thereby gaining a completely different perspective on his story. Belmondo is Ferdinand Griffon, a bored bourgeoisie, who impulsively runs off with Marianne Renoir, his babysitter as well as his former lover. Godard has said that he was inspired by Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once*, itself inspired by Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. (See Mark Harris’ brilliant *Pictures at a Revolution* for Godard’s connection to *Bonnie and Clyde*.)

Though early Godard films such as *Breathless*, *A Woman Is a Woman*, and *Alphaville* were inspired by Hollywood genre movies, they are hardly slavish imitations of film noir, musicals, and science fiction. With *Pierrot le fou* he more obviously strives to subvert the conventions of crime movies, shooting most of the film in bright daylight, injecting humor with unexplained corpses lying about, making a car theft deliberately boring, and turning the tragic conclusion into a joke. The presence of thugs trying to recover stolen loot is almost an afterthought. All of these measures announce that Godard is outgrowing his Hollywood mentors and wants to do something more personal, if not political, as he did beginning with [Masculin feminin](#).

Then there is Karina, who married Godard in 1961 and starred in five of his previous films. The extras are vague about why the marriage went bad, suggesting that Karina was tired of being the director’s muse. In *Pierrot le fou* he seems torn between loving her and needing to vanquish her from his life, creating an emotional distance, if not vacuum, in the Marianne-Ferdinand

relationship. Godard fetishizes Karina in all their films, as the male gaze gang has noted. The way she is photographed in *Pierrot le fou*, especially in the close-ups, creates a sense of both affection and regret. Marianne, though far from glum, is never really happy. Something is missing, but she doesn't know what it is. Does she, Mr. G.?

Raoul Coutard's striking images of the Riviera are especially beautiful in this perfect 2.35:1 transfer. Godard delights in using the wide screen, putting his protagonists not only on the sides of the frames but at the top and bottom as well. Despite the film's melancholy tone, Godard also manages to have a good time, cramming *Pierrot le fou* with film and other cultural references.

Enjoyment and appreciation of what Godard is trying to do are enhanced by the extras. An accompanying booklet includes an excellent overview by Godard biographer Richard Brody, a 1965 *Cahiers du cinema* interview with the director, and Andrew Sarris' not-entirely-sympathetic assessment when the film was finally released in the U.S. in 1969. There are French TV interviews with Godard and Karina at the 1965 Venice Film Festival. "It's a film about painting," the enigmatic auteur says. "Well, not exactly." In an on-set interview mostly with Belmondo, Godard claims to be lazy, this from a man who made nine features and several short films in six years. In a 36-minute "primer" Godard collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin analyzes the opening scenes in detail, arguing that to "reduce Godard to content" is insulting to the artist.

In her prime Karina was luminous and never more so than in *Pierrot le fou*, offering substantial evidence why thousands of moviegoers went gaga over her in the sixties. In her prime Karina was a prettier version of Jeanne Moreau. At 67 she more closely resembles Moreau and even has her deep, raspy voice. (This, boys and girls, is another reason not to smoke.) In the new interview with her, Karina tries to explain her character: "Marianne is a bad girl but very modern." But she has little of interest to say.

Karina's reticence is made up for by the 53-minute "Godard, l'amour, la poesie," an outstanding 2007 French TV doc. Filmmaker Luc Lagier provides a concise bio of Godard, shows the 1959 soap commercial through which the director discovered Karina, and interviews Coutard, assistant directors Charles Bitsch and Jean-Paul Savignac, and critic Jean Douchet. (Karina is heard on the soundtrack only.) Savignac describes how Godard made the viewer feel as if Karina belonged to him. Lagier explains how Karina helped Godard discover his artistry and why their personal and professional collaboration was doomed to failure. *Pierrot le fou*, he says, represents Godard's farewell to Karina, to romanticism, and to the cinema, by which he means genre and conventional narrative. Ferdinand tells Marianne, "Life can be sad, but it's always beautiful." Godard shows that the same is true of the cinema.—Michael Adams