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## Review of Masculin feminin

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Masculin féminin  
(Criterion Collection, 9.20.2005)

“This film could be called the children of Marx and Coca Cola” reads a title card midway through Jean-Luc Godard’s *Masculin féminin*. The 1966 film is seen by some as central to the director’s break from conventional narrative and his increasing emphasis on politics, sociology, and philosophy. Godard’s films from *Breathless* to *Pierrot le fou* explore contemporary alienation from various angles, and *Masculin féminin* looks at how socialism and capitalism pull modern youth in different directions.

Paul (Jean-Pierre L aud) is an idealistic young man seemingly adrift in what he calls “the age of James Bond and Vietnam” until he falls for Madeleine (Chantal Goya), a burgeoning pop singer. Why the two become a couple is never quite believable, but European movies, especially French ones, are full of pairings that defy logic. Madeleine, whose goal is to make enough money to buy a Morris Cooper, sneers at Paul’s fondness for Mozart, and he never seems interested in her vacuous tunes or impressed by her increasing fame, with one of her singles trailing only the Beatles and Bob Dylan in Japan. Paul has never even heard of Dylan. (Is this the first reference to Dylan in a film?) Paul also flirts with Madeleine’s friends Catherine (Catherine-Isabelle Duport) and Elisabeth (Marlene Jobert, mother of Eva Green, star of *The Dreamers* and *Kingdom of Heaven*).

Godard’s technique includes alternating long and short scenes that often seem to have little to do with each other. We learn in the extras that the actors are wearing earpieces and are hearing lines or responding to questions from Godard, giving the film both awkwardness and spontaneity. Attention is drawn to the film’s artifice by its soundtrack going blank at times and dividing it into fifteen chapters, many with ironic titles. Some chapters are punctuated by random acts of violence: a woman shoots her husband, a man threatens Paul with a knife only to stab himself in the chest, and another man sets himself on fire (off-camera) to protest America’s role in the Vietnam War. Typical of Godard’s improvisational approach is Paul’s interrogating a ditsy young model about her political and social views. The unmoving camera bears down on the girl as she struggles to come up with answers. She cannot even name a country where war is taking place.

All is hardly as solemn as this description indicates. *Masculin féminin* has plenty of the infectious energy for which the early films of Godard and Francois Truffaut are famous. While Paul and the three women are watching a depressingly erotic Swedish film that seems to be a parody of Ingmar Bergman’s *The Silence*, he suddenly charges out of the theater, down an alley, and into the project booth to protest that the movie is being shown in the wrong ratio. There is a cameo by Brigitte Bardot, star of Godard’s [Contempt](#). Madeleine mentions *Pierrot le fou*, and Paul imagines himself as General Doniel, a reference to the Antoine Doniel

character Leaud plays in several Truffaut films. Paul claims not to like movies, though he is always looking for “the film we wanted to live.”

Holding everything together is Leaud, in the first of five features and one short film he made with Godard in two years. With his patented deadpan enthusiasm and offbeat charm, Leaud wonderfully incorporates what Godard sees as the conflicting emotions and motivations afflicting young people.

Neither Godard nor Leau, alas, participate directly in the extras, though Godard is seen in a Swedish documentary of his making the film-within-the-film. Godard collaborator Jean-Pierre Gorin says that the director’s failure to judge his characters made viewers uneasy in 1966. Critics Freddy Bauche and Dominique Paini praise Godard’s ability to expose the banality of everyday life and complain that reviewers failed to see that he was capturing the reality of consumerist society. Goya, a real-life singer whom Godard cast after seeing her sing on television, is seen in a 1966 interview talking mostly about her music. In a 2005 interview, she says Godard shouted, “You’ll never be an artist” after she refused to do a nude scene. The best of the extras is a conversation with cinematographer Willy Kurant, who says he was forced to use a heavy American Mitchell camera because Godard did not like French cameras. Kurant admits that communication with the director was sometimes difficult. The Gorin and Kurant interviews are in English, the others subtitled. A booklet offers an essay by Adrian Martin, who argues that the film is much more than a chronicle of the sixties, and a 1966 magazine interview with Godard. Paul should note that *Masculin feminin* is presented in its original 1.33:1, and the soundtrack is unusually clear and strong—Michael Adams