

Diary Excerpts - Dominique Païni

Watched “Lou Didn’t Say No” again, together with the festival jury. I am participating in a film-festival jury for the first time. It’s very likely that I will not repeat the experience. Too unbearable not to be able to impose one’s own tastes and preferences on the others.

During a first viewing of the film, I was curious and impatient about each sequence and each shot. This time, my attention was caught by completely different things. Still, it’s a film that I can’t watch with complete detachment. I had seen AMM’s previous films, and was particularly amazed by “The Book of Marie”: an absolute success. The actors just right, the mise en scene and editing equally so, such a fragile, essential, secret subject. With “Lou” I was more concerned right from the start, for several reasons. As I already knew the short film which Lou, the woman filmmaker in the film, shoots at the Louvre, I was interested in the way in which AMM was going to integrate “the little into the big”.

I amused myself by giving the characters the names of real people. Was I being caustic, or was it vanity? I prefer to call it caustic. Many of the film’s shots made me feel melancholy: already three years since I’d left the Louvre museum. “Lou Didn’t Say No” is an elegant film, as elegant as its predecessors. The characters come to life through polished, sometimes deliberately literary dialogue. (What I mean to say is, very “written” – a rare thing, these days). And for the most part, the characters themselves are simply beautiful. Marie Bunel is very attractive but perhaps a little too distanced. One wishes, as is the case with Aurore Clément in “The Book of Marie”, it were possible to come closer to her body, that her ample clothing concealed her less. But this is pure voyeurism on my part, since all that does not detract from her touching presence: a little destabilized but determined nevertheless, available for seduction, not always saying... no. In the film I recognize the personality of the actress I had met during the shooting.

The couple is the “favourite subject” of the film, and not one sequence deviates from the scenography of intimacy. Sometimes the subject is pursued with humour: such as the absolutely hilarious Louvre guard whose round, mustached face appears within a series of ideal marble faces, and who remarks to the learned (and handsome!) curator that a couple is not a group. Here we have, at the same time, the theme of sculpture chosen by Lou, the subject of the documentary within the fiction film, and the subject of the fiction film itself, which incorporates and weaves together the whole. From this point of view, “Lou” is a “modern” film – Chinese-box structure and mise en scene of intimacy – which extends the 1960s cinema of Rossellini, Antonioni and Resnais, the Godard of “Le Mépris”. The favourite subject of these filmmakers was precisely the couple on centre stage – in the double sense of being both the main characters and in a state of crisis. The disputes, the tensions, the confrontations, the “scenes” made by Bunel/Blanc, irresistibly evoke the mythical relationship scenes of modern cinema, from “Viaggio in Italia” to “La Notte”. AMM takes the risk of confining her film to one couple (another one breaks up in the face of both banality and the sad symbolism of ritual acts of marriage). Words are cruel weapons, even if their excesses and the “inflation of thinking” to which they lead are forgiven and forgotten in caresses. But the confrontation between bodies is violent. The unfolding of the shots and the links between sequences do not occur calmly. One has the impression that each part of the film, even the most insignificant, was conceived independently yet is also incontestably linked with the ones preceding and

following it – but without the smoothness which too many filmmakers today pursue at all costs, including the violence of what their images literally represent. For lack of formal harshness, contemporary filmmakers settle for mediocre ugliness. AMM's films are the radical opposite and, perhaps paradoxically, that is why they are shocking. Because her art empties the depiction of relationships – often so boring in others' work – of all naturalism, of all obscene indulgence for the ugliness of words and gestures. When bodies collide, they are carried by an unquestionable choreography. Perhaps the best example is the long dance scene borrowed from Jean-Claude Gallotta: an admirable pas de deux which recreates, almost indecently, erotic brutality and carnal tenderness.

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I'm still thinking about "Lou Didn't Say No". Definitely a rather disturbing film. It also draws its references from other arts, less contemporary, more intimidating, more solemn, like the statues of classical antiquity. In making a short film which "centres" around a marble couple (Mars and Venus embracing), Lou/AMM do not conceal their search for a reflection, an illuminating interpretation of the complexity of emotions. Although it was written by Rilke, the off-screen commentary of the little film made by Lou secularizes the mythological legend ("be careful..."). Inversely, the same commentary generalizes the banality of couplehood on an ethical and universal scale. Ultimately, this double movement may be used to describe the style of AMM's films: an attraction to "large form" in the service of small but painful everyday discontents. Her use of music and of beautifully written dialogue that sometimes recycles excerpts from great literary texts are not always accepted by everyone, but they constitute the filmmaker's absolute originality of style. For her, art, the arts, strip bare the obvious, the conformist, the clichés of life in society and as a couple. Sometimes a character's monologue seems to display a complete disregard for realism because of the way it is delivered. It is as if the characters are on display: their dialogues are more demonstrated than interpreted or represented, like those bouquets of flowers which decorate both conspicuously and ridiculously. But this disjunction – between filmic reality and the texts the actors are made to speak – lends the film what I would like to call a "critical strangeness" (in the sense of "disturbing strangeness"). There is no development within the characters from sulkiness to well-being: nothing, no detailed psychological process, explains the alternation between the two states. Fortunately, the film's metamorphoses remain unexplained. As with what we call mood, as in life itself, everything is unstable: anger and incomprehension are the inverse and the echo of passion and emotional secrets. These comings and goings are not only the whims of amorous disorder, but the very mechanism of love between impotence and mastery. All of which is conveyed by AMM even more in terms of the editing than through *mise en scene* alone – which also reveals her musical sensibility. Evidence of the happiness that breaks out in moments of harmony is everywhere. AMM uses music for those moments when the crisis recedes and the tension dissolves, to be replaced by grace. I remain overwhelmed by – I am still thinking about – Marie Bunel's beauty and her dancing, almost clumsy and a little stiff like the petals of flowers unfolding, to a sublime composition by Rossini. Piano crescendo, swelling choirs over night-time aerial shots of urban traffic. A musical flight of images to accompany the flight of love fulfilled. The Rossini music is ultimately a key to defining AMM's cinema. In that short piece, a

pretty and graceful piano theme, “without pretension” but vivace (in the Italian style of course: vivatche!), asserts itself, struggles, and is finally swept away by the grand form of the choir with its Verdi-like accents, which sweeps everything out of its path, elevating the images - and the viewer’s soul. That contradiction at the very heart of Rossini’s music seems to me to be the cinematic ideal to which AMM aspires.

During this second viewing I was struck by the film’s lack of modesty, which had embarrassed me the first time. The film’s real subject, beyond the couple, is in fact emotional indiscretion. Its counterpart is Lou’s own indiscretion – Lou, who listens to the existential pain of individuals on the brink of depression or banal social neurosis. I notice that, beyond the film’s formal rigour and the restraint of its narrative structure, AMM has made a film whose lack of modesty disturbed certain jury members. This lack of modesty is echoed by Gallotta’s pas de deux, whose precise theme is amorous, carnal and stupefying intimacy. This “quotation”, restaged especially for the film, eliminates the risk of clumsy psychologizing and instead lends the film’s subject a degree of abstraction. But most of all it is the brutality of the editing, the absence of any transition between the sequences and the shots, which reflects what it is that AMM wants to reveal.

I have kept the memory of the final sequence and its calm: the “friendly” smile of a woman seduced by men who trusted her. A film is finished. The feature-length film is over for us, and a short film concludes it by reminding us that the sound and the fury of amorous passion have not worn down the voice of the silence of art.

Translated from the French by Marcy Goldberg