And so, while in *Le beau Serge* the title character achieves a kind of redemption by being united with his newborn child thanks to the backbreaking efforts and, ultimately, sacrifice of the tubercular François, whose life may have been shortened by his treks through the snow, in *Les cousins* there is no redemption, and certainly no salvation: Charles must die in order to preserve the lifestyle is going to end up as we hear the apartment buzzer sounding to end the film. Both films are essential Chabrol. But there is no question that *Le beau Serge* might be seen more as a necessary step in the dechristianization of the director than as an independent statement in and of itself. *Les cousins*, on the other hand, brilliantly and cynically paves the way for the many very dark, brilliant, and cynical tales that will turn up in Chabrol’s oeuvre. I also need to add that *Les cousins*, unlike *Le beau Serge*, offers a quite effective musical score, in this case by Paul Misraki, whose cool and mildly jazzy strains perfectly complement the film’s milieu, as does some more unsettling and rather percussive music that lead us into the final scene.

Both of these black-and-white films have benefited here from their Blu-ray transfers, although I have not seen the original Criterion DVDs. *Le beau Serge* in particular allows us to take in all of the details, whether in the village or in the various outdoor shots, brought into sharp definition by the lighting and camerawork of cinematographer Henri Decaë. Both releases offer audio commentaries, if you are inclined to listen to them, and the *beau Serge* Blu-ray disc includes a wonderful documentary, directed by Francis Giroud in 2004, entitled *Claude Chabrol: Mon premier film*, which features Chabrol himself and other surviving members of crew and cast, in particular Brialy and Bernadette Lafont, who plays Serge’s oversexed sister-in-law.

There is also a somewhat annoying black-and-white segment from a 1969 French TV program that shows Chabrol revisiting Sardent. I would pick a bone with film critic Terrence Rafferty who, in the booklet accompanying *Les cousins*, suggests that, after *Les cousins*, the director would not “recover his form” until the 1968 *Les biches*, when in fact there are a good half-dozen outstanding films that followed *Les cousins*, in particular *Les bonnes femmes* (1960), an absolute masterpiece that desperately needs a decent DVD. I close by noting that chabrol is actually a word in the French language meaning a mixture of wine and broth. To faire chabrol is to drink this concoction directly out of the bowl, an act that we see in one of the director’s middle-period films, I think *Les noces rouges* (1973), which was shot near the region where the term originated.—*Royal S. Brown*

**Identification of a Woman**

*Produced by Giorgio Nocella and Antonio Macri; directed by Michelangelo Antonioni; screenplay by Antonioni and Gérard Brach, in collaboration with Tonino Guerra; cinematography by Carlo Di Palma; edited by Michelangelo Antonioni; music by John Foxx; starring Tomas Milian, Daniela Silverio, Christine Boisson, and Marcel Bozzuffi.* **DVD and Blu-ray, color, 130 min., with Italian dialogue and English subtitles, 1982. A Criterion Collection release, distributed by Image Entertainment, www.Image-Entertainment.com.**

With his late-career masterpiece, *Identification of a Woman*, Michelangelo Antonioni, aged seventy, returned to the themes, style, and milieu that gained him worldwide prominence in the 1960s. Following a series of films produced abroad—including *Blow-Up*, *Zabriskie Point*, *Chung Kuo Cina*, and *The Passenger*—*Identification was the director’s first film since Red Desert* (1964) to take place in contemporary Italy, among the decadent bourgeoisie, the director’s usual social setting.

Antonioni’s repatriation also produced a mellowing of style and a loosening of the austere compositions of his earlier work, without diminishing its painterly splendor (courtesy of Carlo Di Palma’s cinematography). Clearly recognizable as an Antonioni film, *Identification* nonetheless indicated a new direction in his oeuvre. Although it received a major prize at Cannes and was nominated for the Palme d’Or, a destructively negative review in *The New York Times* (“an excruciatingly empty work”) provoked its U.S. distribution to stop, thus diminishing its critical (and understandable) wail of a police siren subtly suggests a moral undercutting of the couple’s libertinism. After their second sex scene (the one featuring anal stimulation), Antonioni cuts to images that hint at the emptiness of the Niccolò-Mavi relationship. After their first sexual encounter, Mavi experiences vaginal pains; simultaneously, the distant, understated wail of a police siren subtly suggests a moral undercutting of the couple’s libertinism. After their second sex scene (the one featuring anal stimulation), Antonioni cuts to a painting of St. Peter’s Basilica, as if to reestablish the power of the Church and the superego. (In addition, as she reaches orgasm, Mavi narcissistically stares at herself in a nearby mirror.) Finally, during the third erotic escapade, after a beautiful shot of the couple having joyous “make-up sex” under a bed sheet, we cut to a row of unfilled bookshelves in the morning light, an apt
commentary on their empty relationship.

In addition to his abiding focus on “sick Eros,” Antonioni has always been a chronicler of social class in postwar Italy’s il boom. Here, in 1982, his sharp observations of the haute bourgeoisie remain intact, particularly in a stunning opening scene in which Niccolò’s discomfort is apparent as he meets Mavi’s vapid, icy, and haughty friends. At one point, Niccolò flicks his cigarette ashes into what he mistakes for an ashtray, only to learn that it’s actually a pricey bracelet, and that he’s just soiled an expensive embroidered lace tablecloth.

Sometime after this soirée is the film’s most meaningful set-piece: a drive and search through dense nighttime fog. Allusions imbricate intertextual references as Niccolò and Mavi, on their way to a country house built on (metaphorical) hollow Roman ruins, lose their way in a blanket of whitish-gray haze. Their verbal argument is as much a product of the vaporous environment as of their basic class and emotional incompatibility. This fogbound stretch of highway invokes the opening stanzas of Dante’s Inferno. Indeed, Mavi even asks, “Is this the right road?” while lost (literally, allegorically, symbolically, and anagogically) in the right road? while lost (literally, allegorically, symbolically, and anagogically) in this right road? while lost (literally, allegorically, symbolically, and anagogically).

The sequence also functions as a self-reflexive reminder of other Antonioni set-pieces: the photographic blowup scenes and tennis game in Blow-Up, the penultimate shot of The Passenger, the island search in L’avventura, and, especially, the fogbound dock in Red Desert. All these examples convey a similar sense of obscurity and inscrutability, the hallmark of Antonioni’s cinematic myths. Of course, reaching their destination (the country house) offers no clarity. Niccolò has difficulty stoking a fire in the fireplace, another correlative for the lack of real passion in the Niccolò-Mavi relationship. Likewise, despite all the iconography of the thriller genre—car chases, menacing gazes, mysterious figures, reported gunshots, and a thuggish “gorilla” in a gelato parlor—there is no ultimate resolution for the thriller subplot.

Narrative discontinuity (Niccolò is warned off Mavi in a flashback before he even meets her) gives way to characterological fragmentation. During one of the most spirited lovemaking scenes, Antonioni defamiliarizes the copulating couple into a melange/montage of isolated body parts (à la Godard’s A Married Woman)—hands clutching at the mattress, feet Nursing in ecstasy, fingers being sucked, contorting faces, orgasms observed in mirrors—to illustrate their partial, merely physical, dalliance. Antonioni’s recurring theme of the meaninglessness of contemporary Eros is also implied when a shopgirl caresses the genital region of a flat cardboard mannequin. As she hugs the male display figure, there is a cut to Niccolò and Mavi making love, with him caressing her vulva. This comparison between a two-dimensional substitute and flesh-and-blood sexuality contains obvious wit, but it is poignantly recalled later when Niccolò, having lost Mavi, forlornly pastes a photograph of Louise Brooks onto his rain-soaked window.

The issue of representation is brought up throughout the film, but representation is not merely an individual matter; indeed, the nearly nude photo of Mavi adorns not only her wall but also an issue of Time devoted to “Europe’s Women Today.” Thus, Antonioni points to the lackluster state of heterosexual ador (Europe and the concurrent riflusso, the withdrawal from passionate social commitment, as well as the mediaization and commodification of perverse eroticism. Finally, Mavi, who apparently has a string of lesbian liaisons in her past, drifts into another homoerotic pairing.

Like Sandro in L’avventura, Niccolò merely replaces Mavi with another woman, Ida (Christine Boisson), who physically resembles his lost lover. Ida, however, is Mavi’s exact opposite. A working actress, she has humble roots than Mavi (Ida has had to work from the age of fifteen to support herself), and seems more mature, assured, and less flighty than her predecessor. Niccolò’s first meeting with Ida involves her inadvertently closing a door in his face, a foreshadowing of the destiny of their relationship. In fact, after this initial short circuit, Antonioni completely elides the couple’s more substantial meeting and, instead, simply shows them together.

Ida eventually pieces together some clues that enable Niccolò to track down the long-departed Mavi. He observes her at the door of her lesbian lover’s apartment (ironically, now Mavi struggles to gain entry to her flat) and exchanges some quasimeaningful glances with her through a vertiginous spiral staircase and from the piazza below. Realizing the futility of pursuing Mavi, our hero is now free to commit himself wholly to Ida, a more emotionally open choice for him.

However, a complication arises: Ida is pregnant by a former lover. In a stunningly hesitant scene in a Venetian hotel lobby, Niccolò and Ida awkwardly and alternately draw closer to commitment and further away from it. Ida’s proposal of marriage and Niccolò’s eventual rejection of devotion are carefully choreographed amid the mirrors and chandeliers of the fashionable mise en scène. One is reminded of the “mutual pity” shared by Claudia and Sandro at the end of L’avventura, yet here the beauty of the natural scenery, plaintive cries of gulls soaring overhead, and a transistor Edward Grieg piano sonata are interrupted by the intrusive noise of a passing motorboat. This disruptive aural cue is our only intimation of the resolution of the affair, since Antonioni omits the obligatory farewell scene. Indeed, throughout Identification, the characters’ emotions are conveyed through subtle background visual details (a telling one-way street sign leading to Mavi’s flat; slogans for the Italian Socialist Party and a Communist hammer and sickle scrawled on walls; and natural landscapes) or subtle sound effects (the motorboat, police siren, and jarring New Age music).

After eliding, the details of the breakup with Ida, Antonioni merely cuts to Niccolò entering his apartment (this time he has his key!). As Niccolò looks out his window, we share his point of view: lush vegetation amid the oppression of the modern megalopolis, and, in particular, a peculiar tree branch he had stared at before. The precise meaning of this evocative burl may escape denotative exactness, but, like so many significant objects in the Antonioni canon, its connotations are myriad.

Niccolò, however, does not only stare out at that tree; he also looks out through rose-colored glasses and closes his eyes. The enraptured images that follow—Niccolò’s thoughts, imagine—are so jarringly inconsistent with all that has preceded them and yet, in their entirety, so perfectly apprised that each viewer must experience for himself or herself the sense of initial incomprehension and ultimate otherworldliness these sumptuous images propose. (It is a level shift anticipated by the unexpected—but ultimately-impeccable endings of L’eclisse, Blow-Up, Zabriskie Point, and The Passenger.) These ecstatic visions of a cinematic journey to the sun (to the accompaniment of extraterrestrial music) convey, on the narrative level, that Niccolò has found his next project, a science-fiction movie. On another plane entirely, they express a ludic aesthetic transcendence of the day-to-day cares of modern life: unsatisfying love relations, petty annoyances, and the corrupt social order. This shift into the postmodern world through a leap of the imagination is both classic Antonioni and a new direction in his thought. It has always been his theme that a revolution of the inner imagination is a necessary precondition to meaningful transformation of the outer world. Rarely have his figurations of that future (apart from the slow-motion explosions in Zabriskie Point) taken such concrete shape.

Thinking back, this finale was not entirely unexpected. Niccolò had been urged to write a sci-fi script by his precocious seven-year-old nephew; he had also read a newspaper article (“Expanding Sun Poses Threat to Earth’s Future”); and he’d even looked through a telescope at the fiery orb. Like his staring at the tree branch, his peering at the sun may conjure up existential reverie, but the final images of the film—the plans for Niccolò’s new movie—go beyond this, to try to make contact with a visionary future. The concluding shots of a sculptured, crystalline-like asteroid-cum-spacecraft approaching the sun and the riotous phantasmagoria of pastel greens, reds, and oranges that define its contours allow us to contemplate that future far more meaningfully than all the E.T.s, Close...
Encounters, and Star Wars combined. Antonioni suggests that we may be carrying all our unresolvable personal/societal problems into that postmodern future and that hope and despair, advance and retreat, fantasy and reality will coexist just as assuredly as they have in the past. As in L’Avventura, where we moved from an inactive volcano to a potentially active one, so in Identificazione of a Woman, Antonioni measures our progress in natural increments. We’ve moved from a fog-enshrouded night of confusion, entrapment, and disappointment to a sun-illuminated day of potential clarity, imagina
tive freedom, and aesthetic jouissance—albeit encased in a protective shield. Perhaps, as a species and as social beings, that is more than we can expect.

Criterion’s HD digital transfer/restoration was created from the film’s original 35mm negative and the soundtrack remastered from the original monaural track. It is a striking visual and aural achievement, without that airbrushed look or the “dead” sonic field of so many digital restorations. On the downside, this is one of the very few times that Criterion has released a “bare-bones” DVD. The only “extras” are the theatrical trailer and a useful booklet containing an essay by critic John Powers and an interview with Gideon Bachmann.—Frank P. Tomasulo

**Histoire(s) du cinéma**


In 1994, Jean-Luc Godard was commissioned by the British Film Institute to produce a cine-essay on the history of French film. The first part of Deux fois cinquante ans de cinéma français includes an interview with actor Michel Piccoli, then president of the French association organizing celebrations for the centenary of cinema. As so often in Godard’s work, what begins as a dialogue soon deteriorates into monologue as he criticizes the ideology of Piccoli’s project, in particular for ignoring that it wasn’t celebrating cinema as a technology or an art form, but as a commercial enterprise (1995 was one hundred years since the Lumière charged audiences to see moving images projected onto a wall); or that most French people knew nothing of their cinema’s history. In a marvelous ten-minute sequence, the camera fixes on Piccoli as he endures Godard’s off-screen barracking, reduced from an eager desire to debate with an old colleague, to respectful, bemused, thoughtful, frustrated, anxious, and confused silence.

Something of Piccoli’s experience here echoes that of the average viewer to the films of Jean-Luc Godard. Particularly seen as rebarbative are those works from 1967 on, when Godard renounced a joy in cinema and Anna Karina’s face for, firstly, misguided politics, then dense collages investigating the properties of sound and image, often using the latest audiovisual technology. Even admirers faced with a forbidding work like Histoire(s) du cinéma fall back on mere enumeration of its stylistic methods—the manipulation of imagery through editing, processing, overprinting, captions, or slow motion; the divorce of soundtrack from source film; the use of voice-over, narration, music, and speech—rather than grappling with what it might all “mean.” But then, meaning in the sense of clarity, argument, and communication was never on Godard’s agenda, as recently demonstrated by his use of garbled English subtitles in Film socialisme (2010).

This complexity is arguably what appeals to a certain class of cinephile, nettled by film’s continued second-class status among the arts. And so The Village Voice says “Godard is to his medium what Joyce, Stravinsky, Eliot, and Picasso were to theirs”; Jonathan Rosenbaum compares His-
toire(s) to Joyce’s notoriously difficult, even “unreadable” Finnegans Wake; Joycean scholar Colin McCabe declares Le mépris (1963) “the greatest work of art produced in post-war Europe.” Of all these statements, the comparison to Finnegans Wake is closest to catching the musical and riverine structure of Histoire(s), its plundering high and low culture, and, in particular the way each syntactical unit—the sentence, the “shot” (a woefully inadequate term for what Godard does to images in Histoire(s)—is composed of verbal and visual puns, plays on words, pictures and ideas, forking of associations that multiply indefinitely. Like Histoire(s), Finnegans Wake was a legendary work before its eventual completion, released in eagerly awaited (and judiciously stage-managed) installments, subject to impassioned exegesis by the likes of Samuel Beckett and rejected outright by vocal and influential nay-sayers. This resulted in a work more read about than read (or, in Godard’s case, seen). But the real reason Joyce is usually invoked is to propose Godard as a major twentieth-century mod-
ernist tout court, and to use him to raise the status of cinema in the hierarchy of the arts, in effect creating a canon of “quality” of the sort young Godard and his Cahiers du cinéma cohorts would have desired.

If Godard is no longer written about, discussed, or watched as he was in his 1960s heyday, those few who champion his late works do so in the hushed tones of religious acolytes. John Lennon once said that Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey should play in a temple twenty-four hours a day; latterly, it is Godard who seems the likely candidate for such treatment. Of course, he plays along with this in interviews, where the likes of Serge Daney (edited posthumously into Chapter 2a, “Seul le cinema”) and Yousef Iqashpour inform him how great and important he is, at length, with solemnity and appropriate high-cultural endorsement. You catch this pomposity in the grave way Godard himself intones, and often whispers, paradoxes, oxymorons, epigrams, and quotations in Histoire(s). His is literally an auteur-ial voice: shaping meaning and defining truth.

But is he? One of the texts quoted in His-
toire(s) is D. H. Lawrence’s famous warning about reading American literature: “Never trust the artist. Trust the tale.” There is a marked, but often overlooked difference between Godard the filmmaker and Godard the film-constructor. It is worth remembering that, in the years leading up to Histoire(s), Godard made at least three fiction films where he acted comic versions of his public persona: Prénom: Carmen (1982), Soigné ta droite! (1987), and King Lear (1987). In the first two, he plays a filmmaker having difficulty making films; in each he mutters Godardian wisdom and non sequiturs; and in each he plays a “madman,” a kind of idiot savant or holy fool uttering truths that are ignored in the “normal” but dishonest and
culture, and confining their focus specifically to American studio films (with a few independents thrown in), Quart and Auster offer up an impressive, if necessarily condensed, survey of the political, cultural, and cinematic developments of the last sixty-five years, from the end of World War II to the beginnings of the Obama presidency, from The Best Years of Our Lives to No Country for Old Men.

Although the authors are careful to suggest a variety of contradictory strains in the culture that manifest themselves in contemporaneous, yet ideologically divergent films, they do manage to trace a coherent historical/cultural narrative that moves from the optimism of the postwar era (despite the darker strains of film noir), through the cultural fragmentation and loss of national confidence of the late Sixties and the Seventies, to the reaffirmation of family values in the Eighties, and the terror and uncertainty of the first decade of the new millennium. Each of the book’s eight chapters (excluding the introduction) focuses on a specific decade and begins with a brief survey of the ten-year period’s significant political and cultural events—as well as changes in the film industry—before moving on to a thematically grouped survey of the period’s most significant films.

It must be noted that, because the volume is clearly tended as an introduction to thinking politically about film, a textbook for more progressive-minded college classes, much of the historical background tends to feel a bit like a remedial history lesson. Similarly, the authors’ selection of films for discussion—which they term “public classics,” those movies that have made the most impact on the culture—are items that have been discussed ad infinitum over decades of film criticism. Nonetheless, these choices are crucial, given Quart and Auster’s project. By juxtaposing the movies of the period to the films and reading the individual movies in relation to this history, the authors open up an easily graspable methodology and a way of looking at cinema as a cultural product that may prove revelatory to both students and nonstudents alike.

Quart and Auster’s assessment of many of Hollywood’s offerings, particularly during the studio era, tends to the negative. In evaluating the films of, say, the late Forties, they find that even features that take a stab at timely issues (i.e., the “social problem” movie) are highly unsatisfactory, since they focus solely on the individual’s plight while ignoring the larger historical/political context. This question of wider contextualization is one of the authors’ guiding critical principles, whether dealing with a particular bête noire, the “old John Wayne war films,” or more recent fare like Jonathan Demme’s Oscar-winning Philadelphia, which the authors brutally but accurately describe as “the type of skillfully, emotionally manipulative, self-congratulatory film that Hollywood often makes so that it can display its liberalism while simultaneously leaving the audience emotionally and intellectually undisturbed.”

But Quart and Auster aren’t here to take potshots at Hollywood. Most of their readings of individual films, while necessarily brief, given the book’s survey format, are fair-minded and offer praise for a given movie’s positive, progressive contributions or its aesthetic accomplishments while pointing out the work’s inevitable flaws. The authors’ feelings for Hollywood product begin to change in the Sixties, where they single out such works as Bonnie and Clyde for cautious praise, while still decri ing the era’s emphasis on increasingly apocalyptic films that offer plenty of societal criticism but neither adequate context nor any hint of solutions.

Quart and Auster seem to ease up a little in the longer concluding chapters that cover more recent Hollywood offerings. (The last chapter, dealing with the years 2000–2009, is new to the fourth edition.) While they decry the apolitical stance of a film like The Hurt Locker, the authors seem to give a free pass to at least two films—Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line and Paul Greengrass’s perni cious United 93—that don’t seem to fit their methodology since the usual concern with contextualization is eschewed. Still, as a thematically grouped overview of films dealing with our turbulent last decade, the new concluding chapter is invaluable.

Ultimately, what the authors suggest is not that Hollywood offers any sort of thematically or ideologically consistent picture of the world, but that it presents lots of different views as it attempts to grapple with different aspects of our society. One need not call it the zeitgeist, but, as Quart and Auster illustrate, what’s up there on the screen is intimately bound up with what happens not only in the White House and the Pentagon, but also in the private residences and inner thoughts of citizens across the United States.—Andrew Schenker

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