

## Notebook

### NYFF 2013. Mind, Body, Soul

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#### MIND



"There is an image, and people believe me when I say I make films, because, well, in the end...because we used a camera, and there is an image," muses Jean-Luc Godard to potential producers in his video pitch, *Petites Notes à propos du film Je vous salue Marie* (1983), shown at the

51st New York Film Festival's retrospective programmed by Kent Jones and Jake Perlin, Jean-Luc Godard - The Spirit of the Forms. "People think everything comes from the camera."

Sometimes I think the images come from inside myself. On rare occurrence, a picture unspools in front of me that in the moment has no antecedent in my mind. Its movement is that of a dream, spontaneously created, this instant's images connected only by the most opaque thread to those behind them. Its future images, those that follow what I am seeing, are not predestined by the reel of film in the projector, but are "generated on the fly," as they say in this digital era, in an unplanned and unexplainable collaboration between submerged thoughts and latent vision. They are created by my mind's eye.

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It always catches me off-guard, this cinematic flanking maneuver, slipping through my defenses of expectation, of assumption, of superiority. NYFF's surprise attack came in the form of *The Chase*—shown at the festival's miscellaneous retrospective program newly re-baptized “Revivals”—a 1946 noir directed by a gag writer for Harry Langdon (including the oneiric *Three's a Crowd*) whose name was unknown to me, shot by an Ophüls' cameraman, and penned by the scriptwriter that connects Nick Ray to Anthony Mann.

Its stark imagery reveals a world of threadbare vacancy found only in one's dreams or in certain Balthus paintings, and the logic which determines what scene will follow the one you are watching remains unknown to the audience. These narratively abrupt yet lugubriously toned story transitions may remain mysterious to us, but not, however, to its somnolescent actor-participants, Robert Cummings, Steve Cochran, Peter Lorre, and Michèle Morgan, all evincing the droopy-eyed stupor of sleepwalkers.

The story vaguely concerns a PTSD-suffering naval vet (Cummings) vaguely hired into the household of a vaguely conspiratorial (but certainly murderous) duo played by a disaffected Lorre and pencil-stached Cochran. Despite the latter's beautiful wife (Michèle Morgan as a screen sister to *I Walked with a Zombie*'s Edith Barrett and *Franju*'s Edith Scob), these two, standing or lounging around with nothing to do but exude luxurious menace, have a languorous, nuanced evocation of both gigolo brothers-in-crime and lazy homosexual lovers. The wife fantasizes of escaping to a Cuba represented by crashing waves so artificially rear projected that it makes *Vertigo*'s white-caps look like documentary, and Robert Cumming shows up on this beach semi-randomly, as dream-objects are wont to do, in an off-beat edit and agrees to flee along with her. As mirrors display unusually full reflections, windows and doorways more resemble secret passages rather than decor, and Havana turns into a crowd and shadow congested nightmare, there are lap dissolves like visions, visions like dreams, and a dreamtime loop suggestive of Ruizian infinity.

This is cinema of the mind all right (joining such other 51st festival selections as Kurosawa's *Real*, Renais' *Providence*, and Ruiz's *Life is a Dream*), wherein the structural causeways of the theatre audience's near-sleep state and the need/non-need to make sense of one image following another takes on labyrinthine ambitions, bound to be thwarted. The night before I saw *The Chase* I happened across a single splinter of *Star Trek: Voyager*'s “Waking Moments” episode, which features an alien race that seems to exist only in dreams, and who refer to those sleepers whom they encounter inside dreams as a “waking species”: a brilliant, science fiction'd evocation of televisual flow. A half a century earlier, *The Chase* swaps future science for present science, seeing trauma muffled below its no-frills, stolidly frictionless and starkly surreal surface. Yet the terrifying thing is that Cummings' veteran is himself too much a part of the surrounding stupor, of the half-formed romance, the permeated menace and repressed trauma; he can't be the source of these strange movements. There are no explanations for the characters' waking dreams. And so we are left watching the flickering light with just our own intimations of the instability of the mind's time and vision.

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## BODY



The mind is the place where two images meet in the cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, which has always been fascinated by the ways we see and understand seeing. Yet the filmmaker remains resolutely concerned with the body—the body transformed into an image. (Deleuze: “In Godard, the attitudes of body are the categories of the spirit itself...”, thus the NYFF’s retrospective title. Other body filmmakers on display at the festival: Tsai Ming-liang and Claire Denis.) Never has the body been more at the center of a Godard film than in *Hail Mary* (1985), in which he stages a crypto-melodrama between the body and the soul to tell the story of the Virgin Mary.

The body’s hypeman is Joseph (Thierry Rode), in love with gas-pumping Swiss teen Mary (Myriem Rousselais) for two years without once seeing her naked or getting a single kiss. Mary, of course, will embody the soul, but doesn’t realize it until the angel Gabriel & co. show up one petrol-fumed evening to inform her of her immaculate conception. Joseph wrests with himself and with his beloved over her paradoxical bodily state, pregnant but untouched and untouchable, while Mary twists and turns, caresses and clings to herself as if her body suddenly is some ill-fitting shell laid on her—or someone else’s—true being.

Trusting cinematic material to reveal (or cover) this soul, Godard puts the filmed body first and foremost in order to glimpse and understand what animates it. His centerpiece is the double-lanky Myriem Rousselais as a b-ball playing Mary who reveals privately to the camera and later, in a test, to her mutton-faced Joseph her “bells,” “loaves,” and “hedgehog”: a kind of exquisite, questioning—and certainly luxuriating—nudity and physical presence. The material recorded by the camera and the space it occupies is fully evoked by the images: blossoming flowers, spindly legs, craggy

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unshaven face, pert breasts, a high school gymnasium, cascading hair, blocky Euro-automobiles, rippling lake water, a 1980s Mary foreshortened like Mantegna's 1480s Christ. The only flatnesses are the moon and the sun, distant, repeated emblems and of godlike suggestion and watchfulness. The camera is unable to render them full, and instead leaves it to the wide, shining eyes of its characters to catch and absorb—or reflect, animated.

Joseph finally professes faith...or understanding...or canny acquiescence to Mary's profound epiphany of her existence, and the issue seems settled, body and soul united not necessarily as one person, but as a couple, two people accepting the both. (And we note a parallel here between Godard's long standing study of the ideal, of the difficulty, of combining work and love: body and soul.) When next we see the two, they are normal, married bourgeois parents, with Mary having to be reminded by a comically exasperated Gabriel that she should be praised for her struggle and sacrifice to remain a pure soul.

Yet despite the tempestuousness of Mary and Joseph's body-soul struggle, Godard's filmmaking is calm and eloquent, nearly untroubled in an era of troublesome productions. Whether we see Mary's soul or not is undoubtedly up to the viewer, but the tender sympathy of this resolutely materialist filmmaker remains resplendent in its beauty and voluptuous in its polyphony of cinematic records—in ways that all but immediately reveal the pulsing meaning and power within the images' forms.

## SOUL



It would not be surprising if Joseph's conflicted struggle to find the bodiless soul of Mary was, in part, Godard's inquiry into finding a soul in the image-records of material made by the cinema. And

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indeed, few in cinema brazenly carry the torch for the soul, few willing to take the risk of failing in order to find and retain the spark. It is truly something that in moving images needs a bearer, like the ending of Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia*: someone willing to take the burden, upon once discovering a glimmer, to hold it carefully, tenderly through the entirety of a picture. At the festival, Philippe Garrel, following a tradition wrought by Murnau, continues with *Jealousy* to invest the qualities of light with the humane delicacy and emotional nuances of shining souls. But for an even more pure example, we have to turn to Nathaniel Dorsky. Two of the San Francisco filmmaker's new works were presented on the same reel of film in the festival's Views from the Avant-Garde, *Song* and *Spring*.

*Song* is the darker hued of the two, showing texture behind textures, images as layers peelable as screens (doors, fabrics, movement) shift in the frame. Depth is later revealed through light, light distant from the camera and hidden behind things, the camera slowly racking focus to push us ever-so-gently through, to the light. Unlike some of Dorsky's previous shorts, these images don't feel found by a camera wandering shadow-obscured corners of the world, so much as ones called into being, a sense of the camera turned on and bringing forth this gentle luminosity.

Befitting its straightforward title, *Spring* showcases an active camera, mobile, pushy, so eager to film as to abut and touch its findings. It nearly seems to push open flowers, opening the season (and, surprisingly, the people in it) to the screen, a season both bustling, full of joyful commotion in the images, as well as slowly pulsating, camera-tough, frames webbed with detail. A repeated motif is of opening the aperture and letting in more light, undarkening the image, letting it breath in, deeply. Each of these films radiates soul, so much so that when the films cut to black to signify their ending, it feels like a rare, fragile light has truly been extinguished, even if the projector is still running and still throwing dark shadows on the screen. What follows that black is a group hush which can come only after the end of something held with such care and suspended with bated breath. ■