

An Exploration of Dissatisfaction Within Godard's 'Pierrot le Fou'

By Gracie Allen

During the filming of 'Pierrot le Fou' Karina and Godard, once each other's creative muses, ended their marriage. From this, one can imagine the extent to which the cast and crew were immersed in the semi-fictional world of protagonists 'Ferdinand' and 'Marianne'. Bringing these characters to life would involve understanding the mind-set behind betrayal and recklessness, but most importantly, behind dissatisfaction.

'Film noir' was characteristic of Godard's earlier works, yet even after having explored colour in 'Le Mépris' and 'Pierrot le Fou' itself, he stylistically returns to black and white. It may seem unfitting, therefore, that characters who are on a ceaseless mission to escape the void that is normality, are surrounded by such vivid colour and nature. In fact, the scene in which Ferdinand is arguably most at odds with bourgeoisie society (the compilation involving Samuel Fuller) is illuminated with intense reds, blues and greens. His dissatisfaction does not merely leave him melancholy, as black and white would perhaps suggest, yet it consumes him completely, and makes his desire to escape all the more intense. Marianne may seem to want to escape for different reasons, including her impulsive temperament, yet this desire can only be exercised within a setting that transcends social boundaries. Ultimately, the very action of 'escaping' is much more realistic for Ferdinand than it is for Marianne, reflected by the image of her compliantly sitting in the passenger seat of their getaway car. Anna Karina reflects upon her relationship with Godard in many interviews, and reveals her truth of frequently being left behind as he disappeared, possessing all that she relied on. Perhaps becoming Marianne was the one opportunity which Godard provided for Karina to emulate the enviable spontaneity which he exercised in his own life.

An appreciation of breaking the fourth wall, or at least having an awareness of it, can be seen in many of Godard's works, with one of the most interesting examples being the camera pointed towards the viewer in the opening sequence of 'Le Mépris', making the themes of the film all the more targeted. Within the film, a prime example would be Ferdinand turning around from the

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driver's seat and directing the statement 'all she ever talks about is fun' at us, he explains to Marianne that he was talking to 'the audience'. Along with the iconic shot of Marianne passing scissors along the field of view, the viewer often experiences a feeling of estrangement, yet this technique has much more of a significant purpose within 'Pierrot le Fou'. It is the protagonists' dissatisfaction with the abundance of normality in their lives that opens their eyes to something new entirely, rendering them much more aware. Ferdinand has been compared to the 'absurd hero', who according to Camus, must be 'superior to their own fate', if Marianne and Ferdinand are destined to exist within the society that they left behind, then they both become superior to their fates over the course of the film, not only through their escape but also through their awareness of an entirely different dimension.

This 'awareness' does not prevent the inevitable, however. As one may question the need for the death of the tragic hero, so appreciated by viewers, one may also question why Godard gave such an equally tragic end to characters previously portrayed as the epitome of liberation. The unfortunate reality is that the protagonists never did find an escape from dissatisfaction, after having explored two extremes of society, it could be argued that Marianne and Ferdinand had no true place. Even if Marianne had acted on her realisation that her life had in fact given her a purpose, a return to upper class society would have communicated defeat and even cowardice, an unlikely message from Godard. Ferdinand, on the other hand, cannot cope with his feelings which fall so far from the reinforced boundaries of his past, perhaps explaining his end.

'Pierrot le fou' has been seen as Godard's reaction to immense success, as he did not know what to make of it, Ferdinand also struggles to make decisions for his future after having 'escaped'. Notably, the shot succeeding the explosion is continuous, gradually panning across the horizon, which greatly contrasts the montage style of the rest of the film, consisting of isolated and fragmented scenes. Although one cannot ignore the blissful closing image, the penultimate line 'it's just the ocean' spoken by Ferdinand, undermines it completely, reinforcing the theme of dissatisfaction. Godard seems to use Jean-Paul Belmondo for films, from 'À bout de souffle' to 'Pierrot le fou', which blur the line between having no clear goals, and having a life-changing one.

Whilst much of the protagonists' scepticism stems from all that surrounds them, there is much to

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be said about their internal crises. Ferdinand's tailored suit represented normality in his Parisian life, yet maintained within a Mediterranean setting, it symbolises the opposite. It seems as though Godard never wanted the character to cohere with his surroundings, subtly contrasted by Marianne and her many changes of appearance; her trail of abandoned clothing a physical manifestation of character development.

Godard uses an ambiguous attempt of a couple to find their purpose, to express his own dissatisfaction with the destiny of cinema. As believed by British Film Institute critic Thomson, Godard warned viewers that cinema was a 'corpse', yet romance and romanticism were being drained from it as opposed to blood. 'Pierrot le fou' subverts the nature of Godard's previous works, the very fact that this film caused such a stir within the film community proves the director's belief that we become too comfortable with the content we consume. Perhaps dissatisfied with the boundaries he encountered himself, Godard encourages his viewers to disregard them.