

MADEMOISELLE

*“In Paris, she’d be a nobody;
here, she’s a goddess.”*

Young policeman (Paul Barge)

Many films have been inspired by or based directly upon works by Jean Genet, the French criminal who, via works such as *The Thief’s Journal* and *Querelle of Brest*, eventually became recognised as one of the greatest writers of the 20th century. But Genet worked on only two screenplays himself: the classic homo-erotic short *Chant d’Amour* (1950), which he directed; and *Mademoiselle*, upon which he toiled,

on and off (mostly off), from 1951 to 1956. But it wasn’t until a full decade later Tony Richardson’s symbolism-heavy adaptation, based on a script completed by another giant of Gallic literature—Marguerite Duras—bowed in competition at the Cannes Film Festival... only to be met by largely hostile reactions and dismissive reviews.

While *Mademoiselle* took no prizes on the Croisette, this austere sensual study of perverse psychology in a small village would later pick up two BAFTA nominations, including a win for Jocelyn Rickards’ costumes. The other nomination was for the cinematography by David Watkin, who uses a static Panavision camera to craft a remarkable series of striking widescreen images in inky, chiaroscuro monochrome. There are several firelit scenes which elevate the film into a quiet masterclass in cinematography, while the editing by Sophie Coussein makes particularly poetic use of dissolves as scene-transitions.

Indeed, *Mademoiselle* is on one level a tale of such visual power that it would probably be comprehensible if screened silent. This would, however, rob us not only of Duras’ irony-laced dialogue (“it’s not so quiet, out in the country,” muses an elderly cop) but also the intricate diegetic soundscape, crafted by Kevin Connor, which is audaciously and effectively deployed in lieu of the conventional musical score. Connor and Watkin, under Richardson’s supervision, combine to conjure an oppressively detailed sense of the natural world encroaching on human activities—in an area heavily reliant on the farming of animals.

The film’s nameless main protagonist—a schoolteacher known only as *Mademoiselle* (Moreau) is a newcomer to this bucolic but un sentimental environment. She is a haughty, educated, sophisticated loner regarded with awed respect by her proletarian neighbours. None suspect that she’s actually a one-woman crimewave responsible for the quasi-biblical disasters—floods, fires, pestilence—which have been afflicting their village, and which they instinctively blame on another outsider: itinerant Italian woodcutter Manou (Ettore Manni), a widower who lives in a humble shack with his teenage son Bruno (British newcomer Keith Skinner, who as an adult would write no fewer than ten books about another notably warped criminal mind, Jack the Ripper.)

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From the very first images, it's clear that *Mademoiselle* is the mischievously malignant culprit of the piece: this isn't a whodunnit, more of a whydunnit, though even here Duras (and Genet) withhold easy explanations or facile interpretations. A hotbed of jealousies, hypocrisies and brute xenophobia, this particular corner of *La France profonde* harbours all manner of malaises beneath its idyllic surfaces, as Richardson details in a film which provides a fascinating missing link between Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943) and Claude Chabrol's *Le Boucher* (1970).

It also warrants compare-and-contrast juxtaposition with Robert Bresson's minutely detailed explorations of French rural life such as *Au hasard*, *Balthazar*, hailed as a transcendent masterpiece when it bowed just months after *Mademoiselle* at the Venice Film Festival. And while *Mademoiselle* will never achieve that kind of status in the cinematic pantheon, the film is clearly much more than some kind of misbegotten international experiment. This is instead a meeting of minds, a unique cross-pollination of individuals with strong and diverse artistic and social visions, with Moreau—consistently compelling as she digs deep into this extremely demanding role—its jet-black, restless heart.