

06 March 2006 - 12 March 2006

# FRENCH FILM FESTIVAL



## 3 PERSPECTIVES

**Henri Langlois: Phantom of the Cinéma**  
Dir. Jacques Richard (128 min)  
09 March 2006 @ 4:30pm

About the time the government reinstates Henri Langlois as head of the Cinéma Française, quelling the cultural revolution of 1968, I head out into the lobby for a piece of chocolate chip banana bread. It is well past the halfway point, but not close enough to the light at the end of the tunnel, which is not to be misunderstood and assumed as a bad tunnel, but simply a long one.

*Le Phantome d'Henri Langlois* is indeed long for a documentary, 128 minutes, and this is the abbreviated director's cut, skimming an hour and a half off the official DVD version. But this is no creative documentation choosing what to and not to include in a filmic narrative, this is a faithful, textbook biography of the life of, not Langlois, but the Cinéma Française. It is as if director Jacques Richard can be heard protesting that he had no choice in the matter, that all the documentation in the film must be included in order to faithfully honor and narrate the Langlois legacy.

*Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Mulrooney writes, "The *Blue Angel*, Keaton, *Les Vampires*, Godard filming *Bande à Part* are briefly seen because Langlois rescued the first, met the second, had the star of the third working at the Cinéma Française, and inspired the fourth." Indeed, this is not a biography of Langlois, not because it doesn't chronicle his life, but because it chronicles so many other lives simultaneously—most notably the life of French popular culture from World War II to the late 1990s when the Henri Langlois Film Museum suffered serious water damage in the aftermath of a fire. It chronicles the life of the French New Wave and more interestingly the fervor and filmic elitism that preceded and birthed the New Wave and its creators. The slow assassination of this exclusive film society, which Langlois fostered, is the tragedy at the center of this film.

The interviews and story are thrilling, representing a sort of Biblical parable for film fans in which Langlois is Moses and leads all young cinephiles to shelter and cinematic success. Interviews and footage of French film stars and staples such as Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer and Chabrol dot the film's canvas like so many Seurat points. Interviewees also include cameramen, poets, politicians, journalists and Jack Valenti, who credits Langlois with inventing film preservation. Alfred Hitchcock even makes an appearance, though more as wax model than man.

Some of the director's artistic choices are questionable, such as the jarring opening and end credits which sharply bookend the charming, poetic tone of the rest of the film. The credits are painted in grating reds scored with music you might expect to be the theme song for a Charlie Sheen comedy. This shock takes away from the delightful opening clip of Langlois illuminating the difference between the shadowy street life of Lumiere films and the footage of a newsreel. The films, he explains, "are like a super-duper newsreel" (questionable subtitled, but charming nonetheless). Sometimes the interviews conducted are poorly directed, such as the street café conversation with Claude Chabrol which is all but obliterated by the deafening whirl of passing cars.

Like many artistic homages, the artist risks being too in love with his subject to know where and when to edit. Jacques Richard faces this problem but his contagious awe and veneration for Langlois lead us to turn a blind eye to the shortcomings of this documentary.

-CM

JOSHUA HUNTER BAUCHNER

CHLOE MALLE

ALEXANDER ZEVIN



**L'Intrus (The Intruder)**  
Dir. Claire Denis (130 min)  
10 March 2006 @ 7:00pm  
12 March 2006 @ 4:30pm

It is fitting that *L'Intrus* opens at a border. The film is built around borders, divisions between the three specific spaces and times upon which the film is constructed. The film traces an old French man, Louis, as he lives simply in the frontier between France and Switzerland, his shadowy contract for a heart transplant and his search for his son. The settings for these "events" (extremely undefined and free) exist in extreme contrast: rustic life in the snowy Alps, the bustle of postindustrial neon cities (one French and one Asian) and the pastel postcolonial marvels of Polynesia all bleed through director Claire Denis's incredibly beautiful images. These images, both shaky and still, drenched with and drained of color, are a common thread throughout, an overriding style that diminishes the borders between these places, aesthetically reducing them just as they are actively reduced by the forces of globalization.

It is these jarringly different images of places that also create borders of time. The film's narrative is loose, though it progresses linearly between the locales. Yet as old Louis moves eastward and forward through time, the film runs backwards over the borders of his life. We begin in his largely solo alpine life, a quiet existence primarily with himself—he is old and this is his chosen life. He then visits the cities, and we see his past life in some unknown business deal involving fake passports. It is the past that he wanted to erase, a past only reopened by necessity. Finally, he reaches Tahiti, at long last near to his lost son. Old footage depicting a young man's arrival at a South Pacific island (from a 1962 film, *Le Reflux*, starring the young Michael Subor, the actor portraying Louis) recovers his youth with worn old film stock and matching shots of a pure Tahitian beach. This footage of Louis as a juvenile adventurer recurs throughout the time he is searching out his metaphoric youth, his son.

Yet these times are not only personal, but also historical. There is the simple, rustic past of modern Asian cities and the hyper-capitalist business world of colonialism in Polynesia. Though not particularly clear in articulation (very little is in the film), this reading demonstrates Denis's commitment to something larger than Louis's specific story. Denis is one of the French Film Festival's biggest names this year, and deservedly so. *L'Intrus* is strikingly gorgeous, incredibly complex and compulsively watchable, reason in itself to hold the festival.

-JHB

**Classe tous Risques (the Big Risk)**  
Dir. Claude Sautet (110 min)  
10 March 2006 @ 2:00pm  
11 March 2006 @ 2:30pm

There are, according to Henri Langlois in *Fantome d'Henri Langlois*, two types of movie devotees: cinephiles, who sit close to the screen to enjoy the film as it is fresh, and cinephages, who sit in front so as to better scribble down the credits. Cinephages are nerds. They come away with no opinions, no sense of awe. Never mind that a fellow movie critic, sitting abreast of me, opened her notebook to scribble this Langloisian *bon mot* down. This is a movie review and not a forum in which to scandalize my colleagues. Her name is Chloe Malle.

My task is, instead, to review the French 1960s gangster film *Classe Tous Risques*. As a true lothario of the cinema, I take my cues from Langlois; we will proceed impressionistically. A perfectly credible approach in the case of *Risques*, which literally races through its opening 30 minutes with bank heists, car chases, the beatings of totally oblivious police officers, boat thefts, beach landings and illicit border crossings. One of the main characters, Abel Davos, a mobster of some girth, dyspeptic in the extreme, truculently French, which is to say dispirited, even brings his wife and two sons along for the ride. He is played masterfully by Lino Ventura, who, despite committing some atrociously unnecessary murders, is touchingly portrayed, a loyal man, a criminal of the old guard.

The movie revolves around a reversal in the crime film genre. Instead of a getaway we get a mind-bogglingly doomed break-in: the attempt of a successful expatriated mobster to make his way back to Paris, a city whose strange attraction is worth risking an open death sentence. The journey begins in Milan, on the Via Orefici, with a dizzyingly risky robbery carried off in broad daylight. A stunning example of neo-realism in action, the actors were mistaken for the real thing and chased down the block by a gang of Milanese. After many breathtaking (and possibly ill-advised) daytime crimes, people start to catch on. Eventually, Abel Davos ends up trapped in a flat in Marseilles with his two sons. The police have cordoned off the city. Desperate, Davos pleads with his old cronies, who now occupy positions of prominence in business and industry, to help him escape to Paris. When none of them can be bothered, a young freelancer is found who will hide Abel and his sons in the back of an ambulance and head back to Paris.

Davos is extremely lucky. Jean-Paul Belmondo, fresh from finishing Godard's *À Bout de Souffle*, plays this young unknown, Eric Stark. Of course Stark works alone. He is Eric Stark, played by Jean-Paul Belmondo, which is one way of stating concisely that he is absolutely unfathomably cool and thus completely unsuited to work in the servile and frankly uncreative world of organized crime. The movie, which is primarily a story of Davos's dissipation, is filled by Belmondo with a counterbalancing humor and almost unnerving charm. In one scene, Belmondo pulls over the ambulance to help a woman in distress (played by Sandra Milo), punches out her boyfriend, smiles into the camera and says: "Ce que j'ai de bien, c'est mon gauche!" (The best thing about me is my left!). If there is a more disarming ingenuously delivered line in French cinema, I would genuinely like to know. It is so striking, so *impressionant*, that my friend and I spent the rest of the day pretending to punch each other in the face, smiling at a camera that wasn't there.

The lengthy denouement of the film centers on Davos's growing determination to seek revenge against his former pals. The fulcrum of this section is the silently unfolding friendship of the two main characters, as Davos, moody and withdrawing, learns to trust Stark. Director Jean-Pierre Melville rightly finds their friendship far more moving, and believable, than the one between Jules and Jim in François Truffaut's so-called masterpiece. Claude Sautet's first feature film has been given second-tier status in the pantheon of French cinema for too long. Perhaps because it is simply too voluminous, too proficient in too many styles, for its own good: between neo-realism and the nouvelle vague, between the gritty drifters of film noir and the ultimately tragic figure of Abel Davos, *Classe Tous Risques* is all over the place, and that is what makes it great.

-AZ