



Sport de filles

Vagabond

The Films of Patricia Mazuy

BY LAWRENCE GARCIA

At the beginning of Agnès Varda's *Sans toit ni loi* (1985), Sandrine Bonnaire's vagabond Mona lies dead in a ditch, her skin caked with mud and discoloured by the cold of a harsh French winter. This image of frigid fixity looms over the film, which then skips back to tell a fractured tale of the weeks preceding Mona's demise. It might also be said to haunt the career of Patricia Mazuy, who got her start as the film's co-editor and, a few years later, cast Bonnaire in her directorial debut, *Peaux de vaches* (1989). While Bonnaire's presence makes the echo with Varda's film somewhat unsurprising, that unforgettable glimpse of death lingers throughout the films of Mazuy that followed—even to her latest, *Paul Sanchez est revenu!* (2018), which placed fifth on *Cahiers du Cinéma's* annual top ten list, and was subsequently presented in a career retrospective at New York's Film at Lincoln Center late last year. But crucially for the young director, who was in her early twenties when she first met Varda, this scene didn't serve as an aesthetic template so much as a kind of key memory, one that she carried with her in

the years that followed but employed to her own unique ends. As in a Western—the foremost genre antecedent of Mazuy's cinema—that fatal beginning became a site of departure, a point of origin from which her peripatetic career would chart its own course.

The reasons for this overall trajectory have much to do with the explicitly outsider perspective of *Sans toit ni loi*. Shot in the Languedoc-Roussillon wine region of southern France, the film was partially inspired by a drifter Varda had met during her travels, a fact acknowledged by the film's opening voiceover. And even Bonnaire's Mona, though she gave up her original name and a Parisian secretarial job for the life of vagrancy we observe, remains apart from the locals she encounters (many played by non-professionals from the region), those who were born to the earth, and whose birthright it is to till the ground. For Mazuy, a descendant of farmers from Bresse, such distance, such *apartness* from the land, was not an option: she's spoken of how her upbringing cultivated an ambivalence to the French countryside, as well

as to cinematic representations of rural life. It thus doesn't seem incidental that, as if reclaiming this territory, her films span the breadth of the country, from the farmlands of northern France to the rocky Var region of the south and the equestrian expanses of Lower Normandy. Like her more well-known contemporary Alain Guiraudie, Mazuy has a particular understanding of provincial ennui, and the itchy impulse to escape that it inspires. Bound to the earth, her characters long to sever their roots and remake themselves (and the world around them) anew, though their cruel fate is that the time for such action—the time of the Western—is behind them.

Still, for Mazuy at least, the founding fictions of that genre's heyday persist into the present. *Peaux de vaches* (which literally translates to "Cowhide," but is more meaningfully rendered as "Thick-Skinned"), opens with just such a mythic point of origin: a drunken night between two brothers that leads to a fire, which consumes their farm and leaves a man dead. A few years later, the older of the pair, Roland (Jean-François Stévenin), having completed his prison stint for the death, returns to find his brother, Gérard (Jacques Spiesser), now married to Annie (Bonnaire), and carrying on a life of outward contentment. Like a hero out of Anthony Mann, Roland is inscrutable and rife with complexity: at times reassuring and paternal (particularly in scenes with his little niece), at other times vaguely threatening, as if willfully stoking the animosity of the wary townspeople.

With all this in place—a Biblical conflagration, a tense homecoming, and a past shrouded in rumour and falsehood—we are not so far from the territory of the American oater. (Mazuy later said that she took her scenario from Clint Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* [1976].) But as the brothers' conflict can no longer play out in the open—the expanses of northern France having been taken over by enormous tractors and modern machinery—Mazuy compresses the film into a tightly coiled psychodrama. The resulting configuration of Roland, Gérard, and Annie establishes the triangle as the fundamental unit of Mazuy's cinema, whose characters often seem trapped between departure and return, always straining to an alternate route of escape. To Annie's bewilderment, Roland's presence incites a frightening madness in Gérard, which—like the meningitis that we learn had infected their farm's cattle years earlier, and which Gérard was attempting to cover up with the arson that Roland took the fall for—might seem like the product of a blood-borne contagion. Whatever its mechanism, it initiates a kind of transference between the two siblings, who over the course of the film trade personal attributes as well as blows. The triangle finally collapses when Annie throws in her lot with Roland and sets off with him down the open road, taking along only the regret of leaving her child behind.

The ambivalence of that ending channels directly into *Travolta et moi* (1993), Mazuy's contribution to the storied TV anthology series *Tous les garçons et les filles de leur âge*, which yielded acclaimed features from André Téchiné, Chantal Akerman, Claire Denis, and Olivier Assayas. (Unfortunately, no such recognition came for Mazuy, at least not in English-speaking circles.) Set towards the end of the '70s, Mazuy's hour-long feature centres on Christine

(Leslie Azzoulai), a teenage girl in small-town Champagne, who is first seen daydreaming about John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). When her parents leave on a trip, she ends up having to watch the family boulangerie (a situation that Mazuy, the daughter of a baker, no doubt experienced firsthand), but like Travolta's working-class Tony Manero, she dreams of weekend escape—in her case, an upcoming birthday party at a local ice rink, which she hopes to attend with her newfound crush, a Nietzsche-quoting knob named Nicolas (Julian Gérin).

This party, which constitutes the last third of the film, showcases Mazuy's gifts for orchestrating multiple lines of action—though what shouldn't be overlooked is the scene's subtle linkage with an earlier passage of Christine running her parents' store, which Mazuy directs with comparable precision, verve, and attention to staging. Though Christine would, of course, reject this implicit equivalence, she engenders it all the same, literally setting her old life aflame in a fit of adolescent despair before fleeing to the long-awaited *fête*, where the levelling power of movement—its alternately liberating and terrifying aspects—comes through most fully. As *Travolta et moi* reaches its climax, distinct details blur into vivid, breathless continuity: romantic attraction, jealous aggression, and sexual anticipation become confused, Christine's disco fever commingles with Nicolas' adolescent fascination with Nietzschean existentialism, and the ice rink, a space of frivolity and recreation, ultimately becomes a site of suicide. It's only afterwards that the film's title truly comes to bear, for though *Saturday Night Fever's* 2001 Odyssey Club might as well be an alien planet to this young girl from Champagne, some things transcend space. As Mazuy would later say, referencing an old *Le Monde* column where she compares Godard and the rugby player Jonny Wilkinson, it all comes down to "bodies in motion."

That central tension between the kinetic capacities of the body and the myriad reifications of class and milieu is present, to varying degrees, in all of Mazuy's films. Nowhere is this clearer than in *Saint-Cyr* (2000), a high-budget period piece adapted from Yves Dangerfield's novel *La Maison d'Esther*. Set in 1685—at the historical confluence of Racine's plays, the rising tides of Jansenism, and the transition to an increasingly secular, centralized state under the rule of Louis XIV—the film focuses on the Marquise de Maintenon (Isabelle Huppert), a consort of the Sun King, who founds the Maison Royale de Saint-Louis, a school for 250 young girls from noble but destitute families that aimed to broaden their studies beyond the dominant educational dogmas, and thus better equip them to overcome the disadvantages of their sex and station. Using the students' performance of Racine's *Esther* for Louis' court (a matter of historical record) as its narrative fulcrum, the film thus broaches the entwined matters of physical, social, and spiritual predestination, and the question of whether these can be overcome. Following its belated conversion into a convent, the school eventually closes, but it's a mark of Mazuy's method that she doesn't end on this doleful note; the structural finality of *Sans toit ni loi* is not to be found, either here or anywhere else in her filmography. Though both Mazuy's style and the Maison itself become increasingly gripped by stasis, *Saint-Cyr* saves one last burst

of energy for the very end as one of the students rides away on a stolen horse, in an exhilarating evocation of the heroine's immortal maxim in Ophüls' *Lola Montès* (1955): "Life is movement."

Mazuy followed *Saint-Cyr* with *Basse Normandie* (2004), which marked a decided break with her previous work in both style and subject: shot on low-grade digital video, it is a peculiar documentary-fiction portmanteau that chronicles the literal mounting of a two-hour solo performance of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, to be recited from horseback at the Paris International Agricultural Show by Mazuy's partner and co-director Simon Reggiani. At the time of the film's release, the pair were already scripting another project set in the equestrian world, though another seven years would pass before the completed film finally premiered at Locarno. Mazuy's most accomplished feature, *Sport de filles* (2011) stands at the conceptual and stylistic centre of her oeuvre. Not only does it explicitly acknowledge the filmmaker's thematic debt to the Western with its closing dedication to Budd Boetticher and Lee Marvin, but it also represents Mazuy's most exacting exploration of the functions of class, gender, and power within a cloistered and constrained world.

After Gracieuse (Marina Hands), a working-class horse handler, takes a position at a well-regarded stud farm, she attempts to break into the hierarchical world of competitive dressage with the help of Franz Mann (Bruno Ganz), the farm's chief trainer. Though he is a world-renowned former champion in his own right, and thus a gatekeeper for both Gracieuse and the film's other riders (all of them women, as per the film's title), his authority is delimited by his circumstances: now aged and with no pecuniary advantages of his own, he is an essentially emasculated figure, treated as little more than another prized creature by his exacting employer, Joséphine de Silène (Josiane Balasko). The film's balance of authority becomes even more complex as it quickly is made apparent that Joséphine has only hired Gracieuse in order to get her father to sell his farmland, which borders her own holdings; and, by emphasizing Teutonic dominance in the sport of dressage, Mazuy further expands this concern with power and territory to encompass the realities of French-German competition. (The German Franz is variously called a "slave" and a "whore," and told that his presence on a French stud farm is a "disgrace," while Gracieuse's father later claims that the quality of German horses is due to the Nazis having taken French stallions during the Occupation.)

As is often the case in Mazuy's oeuvre, these relations and shifts in power are drawn in spatial terms. Gracieuse is never more at ease than when she trains in the patches of forest near the farm, effortlessly executing her pirouettes amidst the mud and leaves, while the farm's formal training paddock, where wealthy, well-equipped riders submit themselves to Franz's critical eye, quickly becomes, for her, a site of alienation—and thus territory to be conquered. Accordingly, the dramatic trajectory of *Sport de filles* is that of a journey. So when Lee Marvin's greenscarf from *Seven Men from Now* (1956) makes an appearance around Gracieuse's left eye, establishing her as the film's outlaw figure, she goes rogue and drives 800 kilometres to a dressage competition in Frankfurt—which is the farthest any of Mazuy's heroines go to prove their worth.

But before she can do so, she must first learn that it's no longer enough to just clear the bar. Formerly from the world of horse jumping, where that is the sole concern, Gracieuse is initiated into the complex, arcane-seeming laws of competitive dressage. With their emphasis on precision, grace, and beauty divorced from their original (military) function, these traditions are of only specialized interest, and thus maybe not so different from the now-defunct codes of the Old West. The focus is on action: its gravity, its weight, and above all its rightness (or wrongness). Few viewers will be versed in the technical intricacies of a piaffe, travers, or flying change, but what Mazuy communicates so absolutely is the supreme pleasure that the riders take in the intimate knowledge of an action carried to completion—in the execution of movement that they feel, and thus *know*, is right. At the film's climax, Gracieuse recreates for Franz one of his decades-old dressage routines, which she had viewed through online archival footage and practiced to the point of exhaustion. But the effort pays off, and though the performance is entirely apart from the official dressage competition unfolding nearby, it is met with Franz's silent approbation. He speaks only when she finally falters, for there is no need to do so otherwise, which is as beautiful an expression of the Hawksian ethos as any scene I can recall.

Such an ethos certainly wouldn't be unfamiliar to a director who's experienced her fair share of professional frustration and wandered down sundry jagged, dead-end paths. But what *Sport de filles* affirms is the fact that true professionalism cannot rest on accolades. In the Hawksian tradition, the private knowledge of a job well done is enough—and indeed it must be, if we are to carry on without going mad. In their mutual understanding of this, Franz and Gracieuse are kindred spirits, able to recognize and respect in each other something that no one else seems able to. So, as in a Hawks film, their partnership sees the professional and personal (even sexual) intertwined, thereby opening it up to both romance and comedy. "I need your legs," Franz says towards the end of the film, offering her a life of adventure (and certain discomfort) on the open road—and she accepts, rejecting the easy monotony offered by her hometown beau. "I put blankets in the trunk, in case you sleep there," he continues, not entirely jokingly. In this ending, and the tinge of darkness glimpsed therein, there's something of the conclusion of Hawks' *The Front Page* (1931) remake *His Girl Friday* (1940), which sees Rosalind Russell's Hildy Johnson clambering after Cary Grant's Walter Burns, suitcases in tow, the pair forgoing a honeymoon to pursue yet another newspaper story. (It's perhaps worth noting that, akin to Hawks deviating from the Hecht-MacArthur original by making Hildy a woman, the genders of Franz and Joséphine were in fact reversed in Mazuy's original script.) There's comedy here, of course, but as Jacques Rivette, who admired *Peaux de vaches*, once observed of Hawks, "the comedy cannot quite dispel...the harsh feeling of an existence in which no action can undo itself from the web of responsibility."

This bitter view is never far from the surface of Mazuy's cinema, and perhaps never so pronounced as in *Paul Sanchez est revenu!*, which uses the template of the *policier* to craft a tale of proletarian tragedy and burgeoning class consciousness. Significantly, though, Mazuy's films never indulge in mere fatalism, instead



Paul Sanchez est revenu!



Saint-Cyr

holding it in tension with bursts of action and comedy, and a kind of genre play that seems more in line with the traditions of classical Hollywood than those of the international festival circuit. In this case, a rookie police officer, Marion (Zita Hanrot), attempts to track down Paul Sanchez (Laurent Lafitte), a mythic outlaw figure who, years after he burned down his family home (with his family still inside), has allegedly returned from exile. As might be expected, Marion undergoes the genre's requisite transformation from ingenuous initiate to practiced professional. But even more crucial to the film's impact are Mazuy's canny inflections to this familiar trajectory: the matter-of-fact inclusions of off-kilter details (e.g., Marion's pet turtle); the suggestive visual treatment of the Var region, juxtaposing its natural, craggy landscapes against concrete highways and ever-expanding construction; and the adroit handling of multivalent tones, in one instance conveying danger, eroticism, paranoia, and ridiculousness all at once. When Marion and Sanchez eventually meet—the former realizing, all too late, her affinities with the man she's hunting down—we arrive at a bitter victory that's by now characteristic of Mazuy's cinema.

Of the final scene of *Peaux de vaches*, Rivette remarked that “you almost have to be a filmmaker to appreciate it,” which may suggest

why appreciation of Mazuy has been slow in coming. While that may to some degree be changing, given the Lincoln Center retro, the fact remains that though Mazuy shares with many of her contemporaries an evident love of classical Hollywood traditions, she's mostly alone in the way she expresses them in her work—and thus less in sync with contemporary currents. An uncommonly protean figure, she's one of only a handful of working directors whose talents seem particularly, though not exclusively, suited to a studio system. Of course, no such future is in the cards for Mazuy, for we cannot escape our time any more than we can escape our bodies. But we can wander: not in the manner of Bonnaire's *Mona*, who says only, “I don't care; I move,” but in the true spirit of the Western, where movement is wedded to steadfast purpose and decisive conquest. For Mazuy's characters *do* care—and, though their obsessive fervour risks being mistaken for madness, their actions carry the conviction of a certain rightness of being, a harmony of body and movement that is no more and no less than a justification of existence. The founding image of Varda's film may retain its fatal force, but Mazuy's commitment to the open horizon carries another kind of assurance: you are the ground from which you came, but if you refuse to stay put, you will have succeeded in

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