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Modernity Leave: The Sexual Mother of the French New Wave & Beyond

Theodore Wansink

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Modernity Leave: The Sexual Mother of the French New Wave & Beyond

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in French and Francophone Studies from The College of William & Mary

by

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Accepted for Highest Honors

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# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgements** .................................................................................................................. 3

**Introduction** ................................................................................................................................. 4

Preface: The Dueling Discourse of Mothers and Movies ................................................................. 4

Genesis: A Plan for Examining the Sexual Mother .......................................................................... 7

Believing is Seeing: A Framework for Understanding Gender in the New Wave ......................... 10

**Situating the New Wave Mother: A Background on Motherhood, French Cinema, and the New Wave** .................................................................................................................................. 14

Moms Away: The Constant Mother of Early Twentieth Century French Cinema ......................... 14

I. The Interwar Period ...................................................................................................................... 15

II. Second World War ...................................................................................................................... 18

III. Post-War France ........................................................................................................................ 22

From Father to Son: Gendered Paradigm Shifts of the French New Wave ...................................... 26

I. Changing Status of the Mother in the 1960s .............................................................................. 27

II. Auteur Theory & The Dominant Gendered Ideal of The New Wave ........................................ 30

Now You See It: Two Tendencies in New Wave Maternal Representation .................................... 37

**Case Study #1 - Une force de nature: Mother as Fantasy in Jules et Jim** .................................. 42

Facing the Phallic Mother ............................................................................................................... 43

Weaponizing the Womb .................................................................................................................. 50

The Fantasy Beneath ..................................................................................................................... 55

**Case Study #2 - Lost in the Collage: Mother as Mouthpiece in Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle** .................................................................................................................................. 59

To Break the Gaze ......................................................................................................................... 60

Emptying the Mother .................................................................................................................... 67

Home Alone ..................................................................................................................................... 77

**Case Study #3 - Bad Coffee, Dirty Dishes, and Murder: Mother as Self in Jeanne Dielman** ........ 81

Different Perspective, Different Aesthetics .................................................................................. 82

From Auteurism to Autoethnography .......................................................................................... 89

Inscribing Motherhood ................................................................................................................... 93

**Conclusion** .................................................................................................................................... 95

**Abstract** ....................................................................................................................................... 100

**Reflections on Method** ................................................................................................................. 103

**Works Cited** .................................................................................................................................. 106
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Introduction

Preface: The Dueling Discourse of Mothers and Movies

The term “mother” comes loaded with connotations. Some are rooted in biology—almost by definition, Western culture expects a “mother” to have conceived and born a child. But even more than this, being a mother carries with it a social expectation. One need look no further than the English verb to mother, implying care and protection. To act out mothering, one must nurture. Referring to maternal care as an expectation that some childbearing women have is already disingenuous; it has nearly reached the status of a moral obligation. Since Rousseau centered the discourse of motherhood on a natural maternal instinct, it is assumed that an uncaring mother is unnatural and, by extension, immoral. Freud’s emphasis on the unconscious only placed more importance on the mother’s role as caregiver, with the mother then seen as responsible for the psychological well-being of her child well past their childhood.

Once we start to strip away these preconceptions of motherhood, we see the ideological contradictions at its core. What happens when a woman does not bear “her own” child? Or when a mother chooses not “to mother”? These questions rose to the forefront of the French discourse on motherhood in the 1960s. For the first time, the mother began distancing herself from these expectations that had once come to define her. The root of these inquiries is embedded throughout the French social landscape of the time: the influx of women into the workforce following the Second World War, the development of liberation movements inspired by the works of French intellectuals like Simone de Beauvoir, the legalization of contraception in 1967, and the development of new technologies, among them in-vitro fertilization and surrogate mothering. As a result, the
biological and social definitions of the mother started to dissolve, and a new paradigm of motherhood emerged.

At the same time that French culture was questioning the meaning of the mother, so was it reevaluating the meaning of cinema. The sixties saw the development of one of the most powerful moments in world film history: the French New Wave. These Parisian critics-turned-filmmakers considered the Cinéma de papa style to be outdated, unoriginal, and stilted. They instead sought to make films that reflected their vision of cinema—dynamic, realistic, iconoclastic. Many of these novelties were expressed formally, with filmmakers incorporating documentary-style realism, quick editing, and the flair of the auteur. But equally important were the new gender politics of these films—notably, the frankness with which they filmed sexuality.

The concomitance of these two paradigm shifts in French culture is not coincidental and should not be treated as such. To look at the French New Wave without examining the mother would be ignoring a figure at the heart of the discourses that the French New Wave was trying to capture. Unfortunately, film criticism and scholarship have adopted a fairly homogeneous approach to the legacy of the New Wave. In focusing primarily on its artistic merit, scholarship rarely analyzes these films as cultural artifacts. As a result, what these films reveal about gender and its representations during this critical period ends up buried. This becomes especially problematic given that every recognized New Wave director—with the exception of Agnes Varda—was a man. If these directors and films became the dominant images of French culture and sexuality of the 1960s, it is critical to see what they reveal about conceptions of gender during this period.

This gap in the scholarship stems from a few key differences between French and American academics. One part is conceptual limitations—there is no direct equivalent to
“gender” in French, with genre referring to grammar and sexe referring to biology. More generally, gender and cultural studies have been pioneered primarily by anglophone academics, with French film studies generally focusing on the formal, artistic, and philosophical elements of the New Wave. Genevieve Sellier started to address this scholarship gap with her book *La Nouvelle vague: Un cinéma au masculin singulier* (2005), in which she analyzes the male subjectivity at the core of the New Wave’s auteurist approach. Since that time, scholars like Kierran Argent Horner have expanded upon these ideas, but mostly in reference to female authorship concerning filmmakers like Varda. Until Melissa Powell’s recent 2018 dissertation *Mothering in the Third Person: The Absent Mother of French and English Cinema 1959-1979*, no work had focused on the figure of the mother, despite her integrality to the discussion of 1960s French gender politics and cinema.

Likewise, film studies scholarship rarely focuses on the mother as represented in film, especially in European cinema. Given the anglophone base of gender studies, most research on motherhood focuses on American cinema. E. Ann Kaplan’s work on woman’s film and melodrama in *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (1992) and the more contemporary *Motherhood Misconceived: Representing the Maternal in U.S. Films* (2009) are two such examples. This Americentric approach, while useful in beginning a discourse on motherhood on film, leaves untouched many of the trends in world cinema that had equal or more impact and which frame maternity differently. Also, this American scholarship tends to hone in on genres like classic Hollywood melodrama or horror. Applying these same frameworks to the New Wave—without accounting for the cultural, historical and stylistic specificities of this
movement—would be irresponsible. This necessitates a new framework for understanding
the mother in French film.

An analysis of motherhood as represented in the French New Wave needs to focus
on the sexualization of the mother. The Sexual Mother trope, a staple of the New Wave
cinema, is exemplary for examining the contradictions at the heart of representations of the
mother on screen. The mother is simultaneously represented as progressive and archaic,
sexually liberated and repressed by social labels. The films that feature her present a
fantasy of unattainable wholeness in a world that threatens masculine control and, at the
same time, these films critique and pull apart these fantasies, revealing the paradoxes
beneath. By understanding the sexualizing gaze of these films, we will understand these
films’ cultural anxieties surrounding motherhood, which will, in turn, illuminate gender and
sexual politics during this pivotal moment in French culture.

**Genesis: A Plan for Examining the Sexual Mother**

The first part of this study lays out the range of representations of motherhood in
French cinema of the early and mid-twentieth century. I begin with a background chapter
explaining the historic use of the mother in French cinema as foil to the father figure,
symbolic of traditional patriarchal institutions. Drawing on select films from the 1930s to
the 1950s, I track changes in the role of the woman. These changes are particularly
significant, since this time period was marked by fluidity in the power of the patriarchy and
in French identity. I will show how the core of this gendered model stays the same, with
mother as domestic icon, separated from the public sphere and from the films’ construction
of pleasure. Following this historical background, I will describe the new gendered
framework of the New Wave, explaining how the changing gender roles of the 1960s—in
combination with the growing popularity of an implicitly-masculine auteur theory—created a subjective masculine gaze. As I argue, the result is that the gendered dynamic no longer rests with the father or the mother, but rather with the youth, as expressed by the new sexual model of the 1960s: the young, masculine subject (an alter ego for the filmmaker) who pursues a Child-Woman. I also situate the Sexual Mother trope in context of other mothers of French New Wave, pointing to absence and sexualization as the main tendencies of maternal depiction in the New Wave.

The remainder of the study consists of three case studies of films that are part of the New Wave or its legacy. Each study involves a close reading of the film, including some formal analysis, along with significant contextual analysis, which anchors the film in visual culture and feminist psychoanalysis (as later explained in the framework section of this preface). Each case study reveals a different mode of maternal representation, each with its own perspective, motives, and visual language.

The first depicts the mother as a fantasy figure. As exemplified by *Jules et Jim* (Truffaut, 1962), such films align themselves with the point of view of a male character (alter ego of the director) and construct a fetishistic gaze towards the mother. Combining the Mother and the Prostitute, she is dangerous, whole, and irresistible. She gains her value in these films through her sexuality as well as her maternity—in effect completely alienating the woman from her body. The film thus constructs a fantasy of dominance over the abject mother that threatens male order.

The second mode of representation is the mother as a mouthpiece. As exemplified in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (Godard, 1967), or *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, this gaze presents the mother as a pseudo-protagonist, but still presents her through a masculine sociological gaze. The film’s reflexivity reveals the process by which
the mother is objectified and commodified by men, disrupting the dominant image of the housewife’s domestic bliss; however, its first-person perspective makes the gaze even more unapologetically masculine, reducing the mother to a cipher for discourse on consumerism while sidestepping issues of maternity key to 1960s French culture.

The third mode is mother as the self. This autoethnographic approach comes into play only after the New Wave, most notably in Chantal Akerman’s feminist landmark *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975). However, given Akerman’s reverence for New Wave cinema and appropriation of certain New Wave filmmaking approaches, I argue that *Jeanne Dielman* serves as a corrective response to the Sexual Mother trope of the New Wave, revealing the flatness behind the male fantasy by pairing radical aesthetics with a feminine shift in perspective. While still appropriating certain New Wave techniques, the film reinterprets auteurism to be more inclusive, crafting a mother figure that interpolates the female spectator.

In both of the New Wave modes of representation, the mother is the centerpiece of the film, but the gaze strips her of her subjectivity by refusing to engage with social issues of maternity. They allow for women to occupy several positions at once—mother, virgin, prostitute—but in a way that is fragmented, complicating expectations rather than paving a road for liberation. While *Jeanne Dielman* reveals the liberating potential behind both New Wave aesthetics and auteurist philosophy, examining the film within the context of the New Wave reveals the distant perspective from which the New Wave approaches the mother. Ultimately, the New Wave presents an alternate vision of patriarchal society based on the woman as embodying the “prostitute,” thereby making their bodies into spectacle for male pleasure and use.
Believing is Seeing: A Framework for Understanding Gender in the New Wave

In addition to shedding light on this previously unexplored trope, this project proposes a unique methodological lens to understand gender in the New Wave, combining two lenses: visual culture with feminist psychoanalytic theory. Studies of New Wave films tend to evaluate the films in the context of the directors’ lives or of other New Wave films, ultimately providing an insular view of the movement that interacts little with the sphere of French cultural studies. In combining elements of film studies and French cultural studies, this research seeks to contribute a more holistic view, approaching these films as both products of their cultural context and in the discourses of gender of the time. Each of the three case studies consists of a close feminist psychoanalytic reading of the film, anchored in archival materials that show how these films interacted with their cultural contexts. The materials used, mostly accessed at the Cinémathèque française and Bibliothèque National de France, are composed of critical reviews and promotional materials.

For the visual culture component, I am focusing on the sorts of ideas that Lisa Cartwright and Marita Sturken broadly outline in chapter two of their *Practices of Looking*. Sight is a social process—we learn to look. Structures of power and institutional discourses teach viewers how to look at different images in different ways.¹ Seeing is tied up with knowing—which is perhaps most clearly illustrated in the French verb *voir* (“to see”) being contained in both *savoir* (“to know”) and *pouvoir* (“to be able to”). In the context of the New Wave, the didactic nature of seeing means that any “meaning” behind these films lies not only in the film itself, but in any materials that would have similarly instructed audiences to see the mother in a certain light. By examining archival materials like critical

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reviews, published interviews, and even promotional materials, I will be able to better illustrate the variety of ways in which the milieu of New Wave films instructed the spectator to “see” the mother. This visual culture approach creates a common theory by which I can evaluate a range of visual artifacts—including films, articles, posters, and trailers. Such an approach allows me both to root my close reading in the cultural context and to contribute to French cultural studies as much as film studies.

That said, a visual culture approach needs to be balanced with a feminist psychoanalytic approach, in part because psychoanalysis was one of the dominant frameworks for understanding film at the time of the New Wave. A mainstay of film studies criticism since the end of the Second World War, Lacanian theory has adopted a new role in twenty-first century film criticism. It is the case that some contemporary scholars have questioned the presuppositions of psychoanalytic film theory. Film scholar Lisa Cartwright, in her book *Moral Spectatorship*, for instance, challenges the Lacanian view of empathy, suggesting the spectator does not reproduce the same feelings as the cinematic subject, but rather has an empathetic response that compels them to act—the difference between “I know how you feel” and “I feel for you”.

While this framework certainly raises helpful questions concerning the relationship between the spectator and the image, I argue that a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens has particular advantages in the context of a visual culture analysis of the New Wave. As I explore in later chapters, many New Wave films respond to and challenge psychoanalysis, making it integral to the discourse surrounding these films. The Lacanian discourse cannot be ignored if, for no other reason, then the films are responding directly to it. In the same way that critical reviews and promotional materials instructed audiences to see “the New Wave mother,” psychoanalytic

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theory framed much of the discussion surrounding New Wave cinema, making it a useful tool for more deeply grounding these films in their cultural context. In addition, given psychoanalysis’ wealth of knowledge on the mother-child relationship and on film theory (particularly concerning the New Wave), this lens will allow me to better compare my take on the Sexual Mother with existing scholarship. I will generally be using a psychoanalytic framework based primarily on the work of Jacques Lacan. However, to balance out Lacan and Freuds’ blatant phallocentric bias, I will incorporate feminist reinterpretations of psychoanalysis, mostly borrowing from Laura Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze as elaborated in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and Luce Irigaray’s idea of the commodification of woman as Mother, Virgin, and Prostitute as elaborated in “Women on the Market.”

In fact, a psychoanalytic lens serves as a particularly complementary lens to visual culture because of the ways in which gender is constructed through social technologies like cinema. Breaking from a feminist discourse based on sexual difference, film theorist Teresa de Lauretis expands on Foucault’s theory of sexuality as a “technology of sex” in her aptly named *Technologies of Gender*. She discusses how social technologies work with institutionalized discourses to create sexuality. In each viewing, a film constructs the gender of its characters, but also the spectator’s gender through self-representation. De Lauretis’ approach reveals the link between the cultural discourses surrounding both gender and the techniques of identification that make the two methodological approaches of this paper work so well in tandem.

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3 For a basic summary of the Lacanian view of the mother, as well as those ideas by Mulvey and Irigaray with which I will be interacting, refer to the Reflections on Method section.
The films at the focus of this study are more than works of art that provoke existential questions. They are texts that provide insight into a greater cultural imaginary of 1960s France—the collective anxieties, values, and symbols latent in French society that come to the surface of the construction of the film narrative. E. Ann Kaplan notes in *Motherhood and Representation* that latent cultural fantasies surrounding the mother tend to reveal themselves more readily in media that addresses a “mass” audience such as melodrama. However, while the iconoclast image of New Wave directors often intentionally subverted genre conventions, I see the financial success of films like *Les 400 coups* and the sheer weight of the New Wave’s legacy as evidence of their cultural impact. France in the 1960s has almost come to be defined by these New Wave images, speaking to their importance as cultural artifacts worthy of gender studies analysis. Through examining these films in the context of how they were received in their time, I aim to reveal the cultural anxieties and fantasies surrounding the Sexual Mother—or, in some cases, how these films challenge these fantasies. When put into conversation in this way, these two frameworks—cultural studies and feminist psychoanalysis—allow us to understand how the Sexual Mothers of the New Wave existed in the discourses of their time, inscribing their visions of motherhood in these now iconic films.
Situating the New Wave Mother: A Background on Motherhood, French Cinema, and the New Wave

Moms Away: The Constant Mother of Early Twentieth Century French Cinema

The mother holds a special status in fiction. Sometimes an embodiment of authority, other times a symbol of weakness, the mother serves as a window into a culture’s perceptions of personal relationships, gender, and its own future. As Aminatta Forna warns, mothers “are taking the brunt of our fear and despair over a collective failure towards the next generation,” with the mother facing more persecution during periods of especially intense instability.5 The mother is the ultimate scapegoat—while denied power in patriarchal society, she is imbued with the responsibility of raising the next generation. This anxiety is made visual through cinema. Because of the ways in which the concept of motherhood carries so many culturally-based connotations, we need to examine changing representations of the mother in French cinema during the interwar and post-war periods—two intense periods of changing maternal discourses in France. It is in examining the ebbs and flows of the mother’s on-screen image that we can best understand how the French New Wave reshaped it.

In this section, I will bring feminist histories on motherhood in conversation with longitudinal studies of gender in French cinema to construct a brief history of the mother in French cinema. I will draw most on the framework presented in Genevieve Sellier and Noel Burch’s La Drôle de Guerre des sexes to describe the dominant gender dynamics in films of the period: namely, a push-and-pull between more male and female-concentrated

representations. In applying their models specifically to the mother, I will show how pre-New Wave French cinema historically served the patriarch’s perspective. The mother, in contrast, was often depicted as missing or monstrous, depending on the status of motherhood in France. In any case, she retained a static role as the unsexualized “legal tender” of the French cinematic landscape.6

I. The Interwar Period

At the turn of the century, the child was seen as being at the forefront of the family. The essentialization of the child had been over a century in the making. Rousseau’s ideas of maternal love put forth in Émile (1762) are the first evidence of French society ascribing value to childhood as a life stage. With children now seen as inherently good, they needed to be protected, and motherhood was thus “invented.” These ideas only expanded throughout the nineteenth century by both the Industrial Revolution’s establishment of a nuclear family (contained in a private domestic sphere) and Sigmund Freud’s emphasis on the primordiality of the mother-child relationship. By the outset of the First World War, the child was seen as front and center, and the mother its loyal caregiver. The child’s worth was now emotional rather than merely economic, as reflected in French suffragist Hubertine Auclert’s assertion at the time that “For the savage, the child is an asset…but for the civilized people, the child is a duty.”7 In fact, most early feminist thought still saw the mother as indispensable if not desirable, espousing “maternalism,” or the praising of motherhood as the purest realization of mankind’s potential.8 This image of the centrality of

6 It is important to note that the discourse and representations surrounding the mother in this chapter pertains most to Western, white, middle-class mothers, as it is this group that French cinema tends to almost exclusively represent.
8 ibid., 2.
the child came to French screens even in the earliest films, with the Lumière Brothers’ depiction of two parents feeding their baby in *Le repas du bébé* (1896), featuring Auguste Lumière with his own wife and daughter (see Figure 1).

In a film no longer than forty-five seconds, we are presented with two doting parents feeding and tending to the girl, as if to inaugurate the century of the child—and the eclipse of the mother.

The First World War was the first pivotal moment in the French discourse on motherhood. E. Ann Kaplan marks the war as the shift from early modern mother to a high-modernist mother in the United States, with the war serving as a springboard for female liberation movements and political action. While the war also marked a paradigm shift in French culture as well, I would argue that ironically it was for completely opposite reasons. France had gone through a period of national reconstruction, with the mother as the central laborer. The first priority of the interwar period was repopulation. The French state immediately began taking advantage of any baby-making bodies, introducing a series of policies to promote natalism and stable marriages, including a new code of family law (*Code de Famille*) and governmental child allowances for married couples. The state similarly repressed key feminist policies, refusing women the right to vote in 1919, outlawing contraception (and any information surrounding it) in 1920, and discouraging

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11 Allen op. cit. 153.
women from working through the creation of the *Ligue de la Mère au Foyer* in 1932.\textsuperscript{12} Given the collectivist push towards reconstruction, much feminist thought of the time did not challenge this worldview. After the war pushed the discourse on the mother away from the independent mother and more towards a happy two-parent household, French feminist organizations began to lose their influence.\textsuperscript{13} The mother was needed to stay at home and care for the next generation, meaning she was quickly shuffled back into the home following the chaos of the First World War.

This same reactionary view on motherhood is evident in cinema of the time. Sellier and Burch pay particular attention to the “incestuous couple” of 1930s French film, a romantic ideal that appeared in over 300 films of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{14} The basic storyline goes as follows: an older man (the symbolic Father) ousts the younger man (Son) to claim a younger woman (Daughter). This model created a fantasy through which the masculine spectator could reconcile his fear and mistrust of women by confounding the father-child power dynamic with the male-female one, reinforcing a traditional patriarchal system. With the male gaze both aligning empathy with the strong older male character and creating visual pleasure from the younger woman, the mother is excluded from the romance, painted as undesirable, and pushed to the background.

One notable example is Jean Renoir’s film *La Bête humaine*, which tells the story of train conductor Jacques Lantier (played by Jean Gabin, the embodiment of masculinity in French cinema of the 1930s). Lantier gets swept up in a murder plot after falling for Séverine. The plot focuses on the woman’s value as “virgin” with exchange value. Séverine is effectively exchanged from her godfather Grandmorin to Roubaud to Lantier. The

\textsuperscript{12} ibid., 134, 152.
\textsuperscript{13} ibid., 133, 209.
mother, in contrast, is removed from the action entirely. Lantier’s mother only shows up for one expository scene in the beginning before disappearing completely from the plot, effectively losing her authority over the world of the film. In this brief scene, the film presents her as physically handicapped, glued to the seat of the lawn chair as if her essence was bound to the domestic space. She is far from sexualized, covered in a long dress and headscarf, formless and nonthreatening, which is especially evident in the cut from this scene to the next scene of the young Flore who is washing her legs in the river. The film thus presents a world in line with Irigaray’s assertion that the mother’s value stays fixed as private property while the virgin’s value lies in her potential.

I would argue that the “incestuous couple” and films like *La Bête humaine* reinforced the natalist worldview of 1930s France. The mother exists to provide emotional support and to keep up the care of the home, while the real action takes place in the male-dominated public sphere. Given the markedly masculine authorship of the films during the interwar period coupled with the backlash to feminist thought during the economic distress of the 1930s, it only makes sense that films of this period would align themselves with the patriarch. The mother creates the child and then she exits screen left.

**II. Second World War**

The Second World War shaped the status of mothers in very different ways than the First. France was not sending their sons off to fight. Instead, German Occupation meant

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15 Renoir, Jean. *La Bête humaine*. Kanopy Streaming. 18:35
that family units were kept intact, if not squeezed into a mold. Both the Vichy and Nazi
governments stressed the importance of traditional family values through their slogans
“Travail, famille, patrie” and “Kinder, Küche, Kirche,” respectively. These traditional
family values were not even particularly challenged by occupied France, as the discourse of
women’s rights in Europe had been shifting toward a more general human rights rhetoric
around the time of the war, paving the way for the Nazis in 1940 to disband feminist
organizations and outlaw feminist periodicals.\textsuperscript{16} The idea of a “patriotic mother” reigned
supreme, one who helped maintain national unity in a period of distress. This insistence on
the family in combination with the mother’s more active public role meant that “Issues that
were generally supposed to preoccupy women—fashion, beauty, make-up—took a back
seat, while the wartime ‘make do and mend’ ethos still dominated.”\textsuperscript{17} Between rationing
and underground Resistance operations, the home became a political battleground. As the
line between public and private began to fall apart, the mother’s control started to stretch
past the walls of the home.

Occupation-era cinema followed suit. The old model of the incestuous couple was
gone; instead, Sellier and Burch note an “eclipse of the father” by the image of the
desirable woman.\textsuperscript{18} Women achieved a privileged role in French film of the time in
response to their heightened wartime status—or perhaps more importantly, the national
emasculcation associated with occupation.\textsuperscript{19} Still, with cinema still being a male-dominated
institution, this new power appeared narratively by idealizing the woman rather than

\textsuperscript{16} Allen op. cit. 210.
\textsuperscript{18} Burch and Sellier op. cit. 90.
\textsuperscript{19} ibid., 99.
aligning empathy with her. Seen before through a lens of fear and suspicion, the woman of this period was put on a pedestal and treated like an effigy.

Given that the patriarch is implicitly tied to French identity, the father of Occupation-era cinema was similarly powerless, metaphorically castrated. Therefore, instead of this mesmerizing woman being paired with the virile patriarch, she is paired with the feminized _homme doux_ (soft man), often an artist with a more sensitive and less chauvinistic side. It is through the _homme doux_ gaze that the spectator approaches the world of the film and gawks at the idolized woman at its center. This is evident in the most successful movie of the Occupation era, Marcel Carné’s film _Les Enfants de paradis_ (1945). Set in the theatre scene of 1830s Paris, the film presents many male suitors trying to win the heart of the noble and elegant Garance. She ends up falling in love with the film’s protagonist Baptiste, a sensitive mime. While he has multiple father figures, they are all “réduits à des figures de vieillards indignes, défaillants ou dérisoires,” as Baptiste’s biological father is exploitative of his talents and Fil de Soie is a blind beggar at the bottom of the social ladder. Instead, the film valorizes the sensitive man’s nonthreatening masculinity above all else, rewarding him with the affection of this larger-than-life woman.

Figure 3: Nathalie discovers her husband's affair with Garance in the penultimate scene of _Les Enfants de paradis_ (1:24:32)

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Even in this dynamic, the mother remains an impediment to male pleasure. In *Les Enfants du paradis*, for instance, the main mother figure is Nathalie. She pines for Baptiste during the first half of the film, and it is only once Garance seems unattainable that they have a child together and settle down. However, she is not the object of desire. Although presented attractively with elegant dress and makeup, she is not sexualized visually in the same manner. Nathalie’s dress, covering her head to toe, explicitly contrasts with Garance’s low-cut and form-fitting clothing in the final scene of their encounter (see Figure 3). More importantly, the plot does not construct her as desirable, since—in her domestic vision for her life with Baptiste—she is represented as a sort of backup plan, over against the unattainable Garance, who is pursued by four different men. Part of Garance’s mystique comes from her coy rejection of her suitors and of the role of loyal housewife. In the same way that Irigaray describes the “prostitute” as gaining her value from her exchange and use between men, so Garance is presented as valuable because she is desired. The mothering Nathalie, on the other hand, shows complete dedication and loyalty to her husband and has responsibilities confined to the private sphere, which Baptiste ultimately rejects.

The Occupation mother was recognized as important, but only in this singular role. Seen in terms of Irigaray’s values of women, the film’s sexuate economy remains intact: mother exists for private use. What has changed, however, is what these films valorize the most. Before, the incestuous couple implicitly valorized the “virgin,” whose passivity to the patriarchal lover reflected the pre-war sentiments of virility in the French culture; however, the Occupation resulted in a valorization of the “prostitute.” The mother is a constant, remaining out of the market of exchange to make way for the visual spectacle of actually desirable women.

Seen in light of the changing motherhood of the time, it is not simply the emasculation of the country that resulted in the idolization of the woman in Occupation-era cinema, but also the collapsing of public and private spheres. The mother had unprecedented power. However, that power was linked to the expectation that the action be limited to the home, even if its ramifications extend into the public sphere. This created the bifurcated image of the Occupation-era mother; the psychoanalytic mother is put on a pedestal, but the actual mother is still pushed to the margins of film.

III. Post-War France

The post-war period was characterized by a clash of two visions of motherhood. As French women’s drive for independence began to grow, their voices began to coalesce and make themselves heard in the public sphere. However, at the same time, heightened standards of maternal care encouraged French families to be fruitful and multiply—which they did, as evidenced by the Baby Boom of the 1950s. French cinema of this period both reflected and contributed to this tension.

With the war challenging notions of gender roles and the public/private divide, turbulent debates began to spring up concerning gender roles. This new fluidity of gender roles prompted female writers to challenge patriarchal societal structure altogether. The most notable was perhaps the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 feminist landmark text *La Seconde sexe*. She refers to motherhood in terms of “servitude”, since “Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, she is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats...”

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itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new.” These ideas started to break the taboo surrounding feminine independence, with groups like Maternité Heureuse and Jeunes Femmes inspiring counter-cultural discussions and providing resources for those young mothers who faced Catholic pressure. While these groups rarely identified with the feminist movement proper, they created new platforms for women to discuss pertinent issues and to organize. This ideological reconstruction resulted in breakthroughs in the political status for French women, with women earning the right to vote and receiving more opportunities in higher education.

However, these changes did not come easily. They were challenged by a series of reactionary policies. Out of a “practical need to reconstruct the nation, and a desire to reaffirm a French virility humiliated by defeat and Occupation,” the French state implemented laws that reinstated pre-war patriarchal values. On a political level, the Fourth Republic had a clear aim to rebuild pre-war patriarchy as “Woman-as-mother was clearly the image that the new provisional government wanted to promote in the new France. Women’s specific contribution to the reconstruction of France was to be reproduction” This objective meant a slew of pronatalist policies to encourage the traditional family unit, including housing restoration, a social security system, and marriage loans for young couples designed to “encourage the establishment of young and fertile households.” Political and academic institutions also tried to change the discourse surrounding housewifery to elevate its status to that of a worthwhile occupation, offering classes in “domestic science” which included “Textbooks with words such as ‘science’ and

23 The Second Sex. op. cit. 98.
25 ibid., 156.
26 Duchen op. cit. 28.
27 ibid.; 30.
‘method’ in the title.” 28 More impactful than these reinstated family values was a literal punishment of woman. Alain Brossat explains that before a previously oppressed group can submit itself to a new state, a misogynist punishment is part of a carnivalesque ritual to “settle the score.” This is exactly what occurred following the Occupation. 29 French officials infamously punished French women who were known to have had sexual or romantic relations with German soldiers or collaborators, extending the “purge” of the Liberation period to sexual politics as well. As a result of these incentives and punitive measures put in place to preserve traditional family values, feminism did not particularly appeal to French women of this generation.

Sellier and Burch read French cinema of the time as taking part in this purging that Brossat describes, with film narratives punishing its women in a similar fashion. The strong patriarch came back in vogue; however, now instead of the father being in competition with the son for the daughter, there were more images of male fraternity like in Le Paradis des pilotes perdus (Lampin, 1949) and Au grand balcon (Lampin, 1950). 30 French cinema also punished the woman through harsher and harsher depictions of the mother: a common image being that of the evil mother or mother-in-law. These representations effectively demonized the mother to clear the name of the father. 31 In the films, the women are “excluded from the circuit of desire and [persecute] the main male characters,” 32 once again portrayed in comparison with desirable women and good fathers. The mother still serves as a point of comparison, an Other whose purpose is either to impede the male protagonist or leave the story entirely. While some films of this period recognize the working potential of

28 ibid.; 68.
29 Burch and Sellier op. cit. 218.
30 ibid.; 250.
31 ibid.; 227.
32 “excluded from the circuit of desire and [persecute] the main male characters,” ibid.; 117.
the mother, those films frame work and personal life as incompatible, with a common narrative being that of the internal dilemma of women in the workplace who end up choosing a life at home as a domestic housewife.33

This ideological reconstruction of the mother keeps her in the margins, devaluing femininity altogether in a conservative attempt to keep the mother at home. If Occupation-era cinema briefly handed cinema off to the sensitive man (while fixating on the woman), this new era snapped back to the patriarch, in line with French society’s desire for normalcy following the war—even if, as we will see, the reactionary harshness of these images would not last past the 1950s.

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From its incestuous couple of the pre-war period to the rebuilt patriarch after the war, French cinema has historically constructed dynamics of gender in a way that aligns empathy with the patriarch. The male perspective is conflated and intertwined with national identity, making the male gaze over the woman also a process of establishing a sense of nationalism. Across the board, the object of desire is therefore the “virgin” (gaining value from her potential, as with La Bête humaine’s Séverine) or the “prostitute” (gaining value from her scarcity, her quality of being desired so much that she is practically unattainable, as in the case of Les Enfants de paradis’ Garance).

In this model, the mother serves no meaningful role. She is either private property already “won” by the man, the private property of some other man, or as old and undesirable—all confirming the mother’s undesirability, in order to keep her in her domestic role. Not particularly sexualized, she instead is used as a foil for the feminine ideal of the time or erased from the narrative entirely. While Sellier and Burch’s titular term

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33 Burch and Sellier op. cit. 259.
“Battle of the Sexes” may seem to imply a push-and-pull between the mother and father, none of these dominant models display strong, independent mothers; if the father is representative of traditional morals and French identity, then the mother becomes the Other by which French identity can identify itself on screen. It seems instead that this push-and-pull is between the father and the son, with the mother filling in the space in between.

This growing schism between the growing role of women in the public sphere and the reactionary depictions of domestic femininity on screen would thus require a new cinematic model of understanding male-female relationships. It would take the youth-centered, auteur-driven approach of the New Wave to displace the “Battle of the Sexes” from the older to the younger generation, meaning the mother would adopt a completely new role—or rather, would be forced into a completely new mold.

**From Father to Son: Gendered Paradigm Shifts of the French New Wave**

Given the immense social changes taking place in France during the 1960s, it is only logical that French cinema would undergo its own revolution. The images of the New Wave appeared as just that—new. They were heralded for this quality of novelty, showing life as the youth experienced it, not only in their scandalous subject material, but also in their dynamic editing and naturalistic mise-en-scène. Thus grew an implicit link between these images and youth values. Regardless of their actual similarity to “real” French life in the 1960s, these films became emblematic of these blossoming youth movements. As audiences and critics began to reconceptualize the relationship between the filmmaker, the film’s gaze, and the spectator during this period, the male-female relationship took on a different dynamic. These new images of motherhood appear in part as in response to the
increasingly progressive ideas surrounding womanhood and maternity in the 1960s. However, the pre-eminence of auteur theory in French New Wave cinema meant that these values appeared selectively on screen, filtered through a subjective male point of view and without a desire to address the female spectator. As a result, French film became centered on the youth, excluding both father and mother and focusing on the romantic ideal of the young anti-hero (standing in as an alter ego of the director) paired with such figures as the Child-Woman.

I. Changing Status of the Mother in the 1960s

Tainted by biases and filtered through limited perspectives, cinema obviously does not serve as a direct reflection of the ideas of its time. However, given the close associations between New Wave directors and the changing social values of the 1960s, it is important to understand how discourse on womanhood changed during the time of the New Wave. While consumer culture limited the role of the woman in the home, growing discourse on motherhood, on the woman’s role in the public space, and on contraception meant new possibilities moving forward.

The idea of the *femme au foyer* still had cultural relevancy as one of the major images of femininity. However, the mother’s role within the home changed due to the rise of consumer culture that had started in the 1950s and peaked by the 1960s. Part of this commercialism came as a reaction to wartime rationing, as the dominant narrative describing consumer culture in post-war France was that “France was hungry and now it could eat its fill; the starving organism, lacking all nourishment, could gorge on newfound

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34 Literally translated as “women at the home,” equivalent to housewife.
abundance and prosperity.” By the 1960s, consumer culture was growing fast, with the home being the main battleground for consumerism as “The television had made its entry into over half the nation’s homes by the late 1960s.” With commercialism came a slew of home products that reaffirmed traditional gender roles and woman’s place in the home, working alongside a strong gendered binary that perpetuated gendered divides by branding certain items for particular demographics. As Kristen Ross explains:

The car was billed as “l’amie de l’homme” – user-friendly, that is, to soothe any anxiety provoked by the intrusion of strange huge machines into one’s daily life, and “man’s friend” also as a conjugal partner to what were commonly billed as “les amis de la femme”: household appliances.

These gendered divides not only reinforced traditional gender roles, but also changed the goals of housewifery in that “The task of both modifying and confirming the everyday fell squarely on the shoulder of women. Appliances [served as] new links between the woman and the society that created them, and they imposed a new set of comportments and behaviors.” Included in this was a new standard of female fulfillment that centered around French women’s competition among themselves and with American women (or at least their conception of the idealized American housewife). These gendered divides were only deepened by mass-produced images reaffirming what a mother and home should look like. Notably, the growing post-war phenomenon of women’s

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36 Duchen op. cit. 88
37 *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* op. cit. 24.
magazines circulated many of these images of the new brand of femininity, with the first
issues of *Femmes d'aujourd'hui* and *Marie-Claire* being published in 1950 and 1954,
respectively.\(^{39}\)

Though still largely relevant, the cultural image of the *femme au foyer* was also
beginning to be challenged, especially in the younger generation. Motherhood was
beginning to no longer serve as the default option for women. The growing consciousness
for women’s rights meant that the home began to be seen as a place of exploitation where
the man appropriates the work, time, and body of the woman.\(^{40}\) While commercialism
presented an image of mastery over the domestic space, there was also a recognition of the
working mother as representing a viable and acceptable goal for women. As Clare Duchen
points out in her analysis of women’s magazines of the time, “The ‘new woman’ (operating
in male territory but retaining her femininity) of the late 1960s was represented as the new
version of the successful woman in postwar France, and satisfied women of a certain
generation and class”.\(^{41}\)

This idea of motherhood as a choice was strengthened by the blossoming discourse
surrounding birth control and abortion. The child was seen formerly as “la conséquence
naturelle du mariage”,\(^{42}\) and reproduction as “un instinct, un devoir religieux et un autre dû
dé la survie de l'espèce”.\(^{43}\) At first, the debate surrounding contraception did not necessarily
challenge these ideas. Starting with the creation of the association *Maternité heureuse* in
1956, the fight for contraception was framed at first “au nom du bien-être des enfants à

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\(^{39}\) *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, op. cit. 78
\(^{41}\) Duchen op. cit. 190.
\(^{42}\) “The natural consequence of marriage”
\(^{43}\) “An instinct, a religious obligation, and another debt to the survival of the species”
ibid.;
naître, du couple et de la famille,” focused not on the mother’s choice but on the well-being of the family as a unit. If organizations fought for contraception, it was still in the name of promoting an ideal family life, reflecting how motherhood was still framed in terms of a social obligation rather than an opportunity for personal fulfillment. Only over the course of the 1960s did contraception come to represent emancipation, as it reflected more on the woman’s right to choose.

In short, consumerism presented both appliances and cultural images that reframed motherhood as a craft, keeping traditional family values relevant during an era of rapid modernization. Simultaneously, there was a greater push towards women having their own goals and desires outside of this framework, even if many of these changes would not reach the mainstream until the youth revolts of May 1968 and the subsequent launch of organized feminist movements in France. The 1960s can thus be understood as a critical moment for the French mother. She was stuck between contradictory visions of motherhood: on one hand, the mother “mastering” the home with scientific precision; on the other, the mother questioning whether this “mastery” is even a worthwhile pursuit in the first place. While the French pronatalist policies had tried so long to keep the traditional family unity together through incentives, it was at this point that these ulterior motives became apparent, and a growing consciousness among women would allow competing models of what constituted female fulfillment.

II. Auteur Theory & The Dominant Gendered Ideal of The New Wave

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44 Debest op. cit. 24
45 The contraceptive debate was further legitimized after having become a political issue in 1965 as a part of François Mitterand’s election campaign, allowing it to later become partially legalized as part of the landmark Neuwirth Law in 1967.
The French New Wave was intentionally iconoclastic in many ways, especially in its depiction of gender roles. Its films were intended to serve as the antithesis to the cinéma du papa, in terms of not only aesthetics but also content, as it showed the status quo of French youth culture as that of rebellion. Frequently, this anti-institutional drive aligned with progressive views of motherhood, but not always. The movement’s freedom from commercial pressures, in combination with its auteur-driven preoccupation with capturing the (presumed male) director’s subjectivity, led to a youth-centered vision of gender.

The movement’s valorization of auteur theory resulted in a paradigm shift in the purpose and meaning of cinema. Based on the French word for “author,” auteur theory privileges the idea of film not simply as a commercial product, but as an expression of an artist’s worldview. Film theorist Alexandre Astruc laid the groundwork for auteur theory with the publication of his 1948 article “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Caméra-Stylo.” In this article, Astruc describes film as representing the same kind of self-expression by the director in the way a writer puts pen to paper.46 This idea was further developed in the 1950s by theorists like André Bazin before the term cinéma d’auteur was coined by François Truffaut in his 1954 essay “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français.” According to Truffaut, the director is to not simply create the mise-en-scène and turn on the camera, but to craft their own vision as “auteurs qui écrivent souvent leur dialogue” and who “inventent eux-mêmes les histoires qu'ils mettent en scène.”47 Ardently advocating for this new framework, New Wave directors fought against the older tradition de qualité style of French cinema, which they saw as outdated and derivative. They valorized cinéma d’auteur as artistically authentic. The New Wave’s insistence on auteur theory helped shift

47 Truffaut, François. “Une certaine tendance du cinéma français.” Les Cahiers du cinéma 31 (1954). “authors who often write their dialogue” “often invent themselves the stories that they direct”
French public perception of cinema, understanding it less as a mass-produced commodity and more as a personalized piece of art. A film like François Truffaut’s *Les 400 coups* adopts a new meaning when considered as a quasi-autobiographical “Truffaut,” evaluated within a consistent body of work. What this means is that these filmmakers defined the terms on which they wanted their films to be evaluated.

On one hand, auteur theory helped the New Wave break with the traditionalist view of gender roles and expand the kinds of images of sexuality that could be shown on screen. Not only was auteur theory born out of an anti-institutional stance, but it also encouraged directors to explicitly weave their politics into the fabric of film. That led these directors to explicitly espouse certain youth values on screen. Notably, in reaction to the prudishness of 1950s censored film, the French New Wave depicted explicit, naturalistic views of sexuality. As film scholar Diana Holmes suggests, these films “opened up the erotic as a domain that could be explored and imagined in a candid and guilt-free way, potentially by women as well as men.”

This opening of sexuality as an activity of pleasure, even if limited to a male perspective, affirmed parts of the early feminist discourse surrounding women’s sexuality. In commenting on the sexual ideal ushered in by Brigitte Bardot, Simone de Beauvoir similarly stated that “The debunking of love and eroticism is an undertaking that has wider implications than one might think. As soon as a single myth is touched, all myths are in danger.”

The New Wave’s rupture with traditional cinema (associated with older generations) meant a similar fracturing of traditional family structures as represented in film. This is especially true in considering depictions of the parents. While cinema previously focused the role of patriarchy in the figure of the father and in his relation to the

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48 Holmes. op. cit. 168.
mother and other female characters, now the father barely appears: not masochistically castrated as during the Occupation, but simply nonexistent in the world of the film. As Sellier explains, “On peut y voir l’expression d’un malaise par rapport aux valeurs patriarcales, perçues comme castatrices et absurdes, ce qui rend difficile la soumission des jeunes hommes à la Loi du père.” The masculine ideal is thus displaced onto youth: specifically, onto a young male anti-hero, often faced with existential angst and whose story ends in tragedy.

On the other hand, even though these social changes surrounding motherhood were at the core of youth values, that did not mean that they translated easily to New Wave film. The continued masculine dominance of cinema on an institutional level—as well as the New Wave’s emphasis on the male subjective perspective—meant the continuation of masculine-dominated cinema, now colored with a new romantic ideal. By insisting on applying principles of art to cinema, auteur theory brought with it the valorization of the “solitary masculine writer” archetype from romanticism, only further alienating female spectators.51

This marks one of the greatest gendered divides between French and American cinema at the time. American cinema often contained hints of feminine points of view and even worked within genres like melodrama (often referred to as “women’s films”) which targeted a female audience and tended to speak more to the female experience.52 However, French cinema has a long history of using more gender-neutral genres and storylines, often silencing the female voice in the process. Auteur theory thrived in this context and found

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50 “We see here the expression of a malaise towards patriarchal values, perceived as castrated and absurd, that makes it difficult for the new generation to submit themselves to the Law of the Father.” Sellier, Genevieve, La Nouvelle vague: un cinéma au masculin singulier. Paris: CNRS, 2001. 91.
51 ibid.;
52 Holmes. op. cit. 165.
even more success thanks to structural elements of the French film industry that allowed them freedom from addressing female viewers. The *avance sur recettes* system starting in 1956 helped an independent art cinema develop through state subsidies, freeing many early filmmakers from commercial pressure. Many early New Wave films allowed the sort of artistic freedom which meant that they felt no obligation to appeal to a female market.\(^{53}\) Although such filmmakers may have been content that parts of their films resonated with young audiences, they saw any obligation to act as a “spokesman for a generation” as competing with their “creative freedom.” Therefore, they simply chose to avoid such pressures.\(^{54}\)

Given the aim of auteur cinema to be a reflection of the director himself, his masculine figure became manifest within the films. Notably, these films present young male “alter ego” protagonists who serve as lightly-veiled stand-ins for the directors themselves. As such, the New Wave film is intentionally constructed to be a subjective male experience. As film scholar Genevieve Sellier explains in *La nouvelle vague: un cinéma au masculin singulier*, auteur theory is based on a series of gendered divides that privilege this masculine singular viewpoint. As a result, the woman is always the object of the male gaze—even if she is not literally being watched by a male character, the camera presents itself from the perspective of the male character. She is often depicted as Other—mysterious, capricious—in a way that is ultimately destructive for the male protagonist.

These factors culminate in the dominant gendered framework of the New Wave. If the archetypal male figure is a young, existential anti-hero standing in for the director, his female counterpart is found in variations on the New Woman who similarly embraces these youth values. This most often manifests itself in the figure of the Woman-Child. She acts in

\(^{53}\) ibid., 166.
\(^{54}\) ibid., 157.
the adult world and may have aspirations but emanates bubbly youthfulness. Simone de Beauvoir notes this infantilization of in her essay “Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome,” in which she describes Brigitte Bardot as part of the new trend towards the “erotic hoyden,” i.e., “a new Eve by merging the ‘green fruit’ and ‘femme fatale’.”

As de Beauvoir explains, “The adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man, but the child-woman moves in a universe which he cannot enter. The age difference re-establishes between them the distance that seems necessary to desire.” In the same way that the incestuous couple of the 1930s conflated masculine and fatherly power, the lack of maturity of the Child-Woman serves as a compensation for the increasing power of the woman in the workforce.

While the success of Bardot following her breakout role in Roger Vadim’s Et Dieu créa la femme (1956) may have ignited this trend, this figure appears throughout New Wave cinema. Notably, Anna Karina fulfills a similar role in the films of Godard. Speaking on Godard, Jacques Rivette once noted “Have you ever noticed that he never uses women over twenty-five? […] an adult woman frightened him.” Such a statement is in line with his depictions of his muse and lover Anna Karina. Godard and Karina act out the old tradition of the artist and his model, with this idealization of Karina,

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56 ibid.
58 La Nouvelle vague: un cinema au masculine singulier op. cit 133.
with her trademarked schoolgirl costuming and capricious behavior. Her image is rooted in her innocence, with Godard constructing her as “une petite fille narcissique fasciné par sa beauté” according to Sellier.\textsuperscript{59} One need not look any further than Godard’s \textit{Une femme est une femme} (1962) to see evidence of this juvenile behavior. In the film, Karina works as an exotic dancer, but in private plays she has all the naïveté of a child. She is stubborn and headstrong in expressing her desire for a child, and when asked why, she responds only “Parce que” (“Because”), without offering concrete reasons. Male characters similarly treat her in an infantilized manner, with characters often referring to her as a girl, such as when Alfred tells her “Vous êtes une drôle de fille.”\textsuperscript{60} The imagined musical number and games she plays with her lover Émile only compound this construction of Karina as an imaginative hoyden, falling in line with Loshitsky’s assertion that the Godardian woman is “youthful and concerned with attractiveness in a narcissistic fashion.”\textsuperscript{61}

On one hand, Child-Woman incarnates pure youth, as she is “without memory, without a past, and, thanks to this ignorance, she retains the perfect innocence that is attributed to a mythical childhood.”\textsuperscript{62} On the other hand, she is fully adult, in her actions, in her sexual promiscuity, and in the fetishized gaze of the camera toward her body. In a framework where the young man is the protagonist, there is a need to establish his masculine power without the institutional masculine power that comes from being the patriarch. The figure of the Child-Woman therefore acts similarly to “virgin” of the 1930s, whose youth allows her to be subjugated to enhance male status in the world of the film. However, the sexualized gaze and openly sexual style of filmmaking conflates these values

\textsuperscript{59} “a little narcissistic girl fascinated by her beauty” ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{60} “You are a funny girl”
Godard, Jean-Luc. \textit{A Woman is a Woman}. 1961. iTunes. 14:08.
\textsuperscript{61} Loshitsky op. cit. 136.
of “virgin” and “prostitute.” Specifically, the Child-Woman combines the innocence and purity of the Virgin with the exchange value of the Prostitute. Even those women once assigned only to exchange value in male society are now also presented as having use value.

This fluidity of roles is key to understanding the gaze of these New Wave films. Where pre-1960s French cinema was uncomfortable representing women outside of the values of mother, virgin, and prostitute, New Wave films show women who straddle the boundaries. They exist partially in the grey areas, challenging the idea that a woman necessarily must claim any one of these three labels. However, as seen in the case of the Child-Woman, these films construct a new fantasy that selectively chooses characteristics from these three “values” of women. Instead of eschewing Irigaray’s schema, this fantasy rearranges it. These female characters break societal rules and throw off labels, but in a way that still serves masculine storylines, often evoking a certain pleasure or achieving some other goal. This reconfiguring of Irigaray’s schema, of course, is not limited to the Child-Woman, and is vital to understanding another key trope: the sexual mother.

Now You See It: Two Tendencies in New Wave Maternal Representation

The New Wave mother is either glaringly absent or overwhelmingly present. Films like Vivre sa vie and Week-End weave the mother into the premise of the film without allowing it to seep into the main action, eschewing the topic completely in favor of more salacious material. Alternatively, L’Année dernière à Marienbad and La Jetée construct bizarre, fractured worlds in which the existence of the mother would only seem jarring or unnatural. When the mother is present in the world of the film, she may be relegated to a
side character à la Pierrot le fou or Les Parapluies de Cherbourg. Alternatively, she may also find herself at the heart of the film’s tensions. In films like Les 400 coups, Lola, and Une femme est une femme, the mother is front and center, fetishized by the camera and framed as an object of desire. And in those films where the mother seems far from the action, issues of maternity still creep in: notably, the pregnancy in À bout de souffle that upends the plot. In each case, examining the image of the mother is central to understanding how the New Wave weaves its cinematic fantasies. Given cultural anxieties surrounding the changing role of women, these films present a series of sexual archetypes—from the Child-Woman to the Sexual Mother—which play out fantasies designed to please the (presumably male) spectator.

With this recognition, I argue that there are two key tendencies of New Wave filmmakers in their depictions of the mother: absence and sexualization. These two tendencies are not mutually exclusive and overlap in unique ways, which I will address in my specific case studies of the Sexual Mother. Still, understanding both tendencies on their own provides a useful framework for recognizing how different iterations of the mother evoke different masculine fantasies.

The Absent Mother trope can manifest itself in several ways across New Wave film. Often, this takes the form of a lack of mother figures altogether. Given the mother’s cultural associations with institutional femininity and values of the older generation, the absence of the mother reaffirms the proximity of these films to youth culture of the 1960s, constructing a world where the gendered ideal can prosper. Take, for instance, Pierrot le fou (Godard, 1965). Ferdinand leaves his wife Maria and their idyllic bourgeois family life to pursue a life of adventure with his lover Marianne in the south of France. These women present Ferdinand with two very different worlds, each anchored in their distinct forms of
femininity. While Ferdinand is interested in the deeper meaning of images as evidenced by his opening monologue about the painter Velázquez, the scene shifts to Maria, who talks only of commercial objects like her new invisible slip. The film associates motherhood with commercial greediness and superficiality. Ferdinand even says “J'ai trouvé une italienne qui a de l'argent. Mais elle ne m'intéresse pas tellement […] J'avais envie [de divorcer] mais je suis devenu trop paresseux;” his housewife represents masculine complacency and the spillage of consumerist ennui into the home. In contrast, Marianne is portrayed by Anna Karina, one of the quintessential Child-Women types of the New Wave. Her youthful demeanor is made obvious from her first conversation with Ferdinand, as he finds her sleeping with a Teddy bear in hand and a comic book in her lap, with her hair in buns, wearing a skirt and jacket not unlike a schoolgirl’s uniform (see Figure 5). In this way, the absent mother can be read as a strengthening of the gendered ideal of the young male protagonist and Child-Woman. The film constructs the housewife as emblematic of consumer culture, excess, and existential ennui, prompting the man to choose instead the youthful, dangerous, and more spontaneous Child-Woman. Once this decision is made, the mother becomes absent from the world of the film, an absence which allows for intrigue and danger—exaggeratedly so, given the film’s referential winks to action and crime film tropes.

63 “I found an Italian woman with money. But she doesn’t interest me that much […] I wanted to divorce her, but I’ve become too lazy.”
64 *Pierrot le fou*. 10:46.
This Absent Mother is not only physically absent, but also psychologically so. For example, in her thesis *Mothering in the Third Person*, Melissa Powell uses Lee Edelman’s theory of the Child to examine how French New Wave cinema privileges the point of view of the Child, in effect erasing the mother’s potential for subjecthood. These films “[require] the image of the mother, but [allow] her limited expressive possibilities,” often constructing an external gaze towards her, if not forcing her into the background, then removing her from the film altogether.\(^{65}\) In the context of the Child-Woman, this psychological absence often makes the mother’s character shallow, helping the film push her aside in favor of the younger feminine ideal. However, while the mother’s absence often constructs her as a kind of foil or threatening presence for the male subject, she can also serve as object of desire.

The second tendency of maternal representation in the New Wave, and my topic of focus, is the sexualization of the mother. Unlike in older French film and in youth cinema of the same period (like the British Kitchen Sink Cycle), the French New Wave has virtually no mother who is not sexualized and fetishized. These films feature mothers as prostitutes (*Vivre sa vie, Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*), exotic dancers (*Lola, Une femme est une femme*), or sexually promiscuous (*Les 400 coups, Jules et Jim, Une femme mariée*). Even when this sexualization is not as blatant in the film’s narrative, it is implicit in the gaze of the film. It is not as simple as the evil mother versus the desirable female lead as in earlier French cinema; the mother now occupies an odd in-between space. She is domineering and controlling, but in a sadomasochistic way, coupled with an Oedipal sexual gaze that gawks at her wholeness rather than rejecting it.

Laura Mulvey and Colin McCabe (in “Images of Women, Images of Sexuality: Some Films by J.-L. Godard”) and Genevieve Sellier in *La nouvelle vague: un cinema au

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masculine singular establish a dichotomy of New Wave women that can be useful in a discussion of the Sexual Mother. They describe two kinds of depictions of women in the New Wave. The first type, and the more common of the two, adopts the perspective of a male protagonist, constructed as the alter ego of the director. The women therefore represent the wants and fears of this protagonist made concrete in one character. To look at this, I will examine Catherine in Jules et Jim (Truffaut, 1962), the story of two friends who enter a dangerous love triangle with a larger-than-life woman. While its status as an adapted period piece with two protagonists complicates the idea of the alter ego, the film still constructs a shared masculine gaze that reveals masculine fantasies which surround domestic ennui and the changing status of women in 1960s France.

The second type of film constructs the woman as the protagonist—or at least purports to do so. In reality, the author adopts a sociological view that distances the spectator from the woman’s subjectivity, instead describing her with pity, distance, and alienation. In the context of the Sexual Mother, this approach is perhaps most evident in the chosen case study Deux ou trois que je sais d’elle (Godard, 1967). Given its production at the onset of Godard’s Maoist phase, this film’s gaze is unique, straddling New Wave fiction and the budding form of the video essay. I will analyze how the film’s unique form provides a critical eye on the sexualization of the mother while also limiting the subjectivity of the filmic mother. These two modes of maternal representation sexualize the mothers in distinctively different ways, and it is only in looking at the dynamics of the gaze that we can reveal the contradictions surrounding 1960s French gender politics.

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66 La Nouvelle vague: un cinema au masculine singulier op. cit. 132-3.
Case Study #1 - *Une force de nature*: Mother as Fantasy in *Jules et Jim*

The first type of New Wave film constructs its male gaze through an alter ego character, looking upon the mother as an object of pleasure. While this external nature of the woman is inherent to the language of cinema, these films stand out in how they use sexualization—a visual technique normally reserved for women with more “exchange value” like the Virgin or the Prostitute, but now applied to the Mother. From the monstrous yet alluring mother of *Les 400 coups* (Truffaut, 1958) to the mystifying exotic dancer in *Lola* (Demy, 1961), these figures are objects of desire, as intimidating as they are appealing. While cinema of the 1940s had these kinds of female characters, they often rejected maternity. However, for the sexualized mothers of the New Wave, their mystique, allure, and power come just as much from their motherhood as it does from their sexualization. This gaze is especially evident in François Truffaut’s 1962 film *Jules et Jim*. Often considered Truffaut’s *chef d’œuvre*, the film adapts Henri-Pierre Roché’s semi-autobiographical novel of the same name. It tells the story of a close friendship between two men which shifts when the mysterious Catherine enters into the dynamic. Both infatuated with her, the men enter into a love triangle through which she manipulates them with her capricious, unpredictable behavior.

In this chapter, I will argue that Catherine’s behavior towards Jules and Jim as well as the fetishistic gaze of the men construct her as a mother both socially and psychoanalytically. This dual role intertwines her motherhood and her desirability, making it a tool of male manipulation and giving the mother the same exchange value as the prostitute. It is this image of the woman that allows the creation of a masculine fantasy to overcome cultural anxieties surrounding the mother in France during the 1960. With the
mother’s domestic control spilling out into public sphere and with commercialism entering the home through domestic products, the “new” French mother blurred the lines between public and private. In the face of these anxieties, *Jules et Jim* presents a fantasy of male control and fulfillment.

*Facing the Phallic Mother*

Catherine embodies the mother in two ways, both of which establish her power in the world of the film. First, she serves as a symbolic mother to Jules and Jim, with her imposing presence evoking a fetishistic gaze on her body. As Mulvey suggests, one of the two ways of dealing with the castration anxiety through cinema is by ignoring the trauma, developing the woman into a fetish by sexualizing her. The mother herself thus becomes the phallus—the symbol of false wholeness that the subject latches onto, projecting unity in a world where there is none. This idea of the Phallic Mother aptly describes Catherine’s relationship to Jules and Jim. She is seen as all-powerful; deified and demonized, worshipped and feared, she retains a juvenile image of irresistible wholeness.

The film builds its fetishistic gaze on Catherine by establishing a masculine singular viewpoint. While the film’s status as an adaptation means that these protagonists are not explicitly alter egos of the director as in other New Wave films, *Jules et Jim* still aligns us with masculine characters who embody much of the free-spirited values of the New Wave. The film does not present scenes in which Catherine acts on her own, nor does it make us privy to information about her that Jules and Jim do not know. Instead, the film presents a limited narration focused on the point of view of the two men, starting and ending within their perspective. Jim even has a slightly more privileged point of view, especially in the second half of the film. In following him, we get to know the countryside and discover bit
by bit the truth behind Jules and Catherine’s marriage. Sellier emphasizes Jim’s narrative
dominance, explaining “Si *Jules et Jim* est un poème à la gloire de Jeanne Moreau, c’est à
travers le regard des deux hommes […] concrétisé par une voix off masculine qui privilégie
le point de vue de Jim, le Parisien et l’alter ego de l’auteur.”67 The ability of 1960s French
audiences to identify with the male perspective is implicit in the film’s critical reception,
although they tended to describe it in terms of narrative immersion as in the case of the
*Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* which wrote “En quelques images nous connaissons mieux
les deux copains Jules et Jim que si nous étions nous-mêmes leurs camarades et nous
découvrons avec eux le charme trouble et l’intelligente coquetterie de Catherine.” 68 Even
with its alterations to the New Wave’s patented alter ego format, *Jules et Jim* still manages
to place the spectator’s gaze alongside the two men, allowing us to see Catherine in the
same blinding light.

Unlike in *Pierrot le fou*, it is now the Child-Woman archetype who serves as the
foil to the object of desire. To allow for the valorization of Catherine as Phallic Mother, the
film pushes its Child-Woman to the margins of the film almost immediately. Complete
with a giggly demeanor, Thérèse exudes a buoyant energy and values childlike games, such
as when she starts playing “Steam Train” with her cigarette. However, once her caprices
lead her away to another man the following day, Jules accepts it without pain, noting that
“Avec Thérèse, ce n’était pas l’amour. Elle était à la fois ma jeune mère et ma fille
attentive.”69 Jules’ description paints her in maternal terms, but as a foil to the Phallic

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67 “If Jules and Jim is a poem to Jeanne Moreau’s glory, it is through the gaze of these two men […] solidified
by a masculine voiceover that privileges that point of view of Jim, the Parisian and alter ego of the author”
La Nouvelle vague: un cinéma au masculin singulier op. cit. 169.
68 “In a few images, we know the two friends Jules and Jim as if we ourselves were their friends and we
discover alongside them Catherine’s troubling charm and intelligent elegance”
69 “I didn’t love Therese. She was both mother and doting daughter at the same time.”
Mother. While the Phallic Mother is whole, Thérèse is described as having a split feminine identity; where the Phallic Mother exudes authority, Thérèse comes across with youthful obedience, embodying a young mother who is equal parts doting daughter. Her naïveté and simplicity allow her to be relegated to the background, dismissed by the male protagonists, and practically erased from the film’s narrative.

Thérèse is not alone. Rather, she is representative of the string of women that Jules and Jim encounter without ever latching onto—that is, until they meet Catherine. Jeanne Moreau’s presence overwhelms the world of the film and shifts the story’s focus with her threatening wholeness. Even from the first few seconds of the film, the film constructs her as phallic. Against a black screen, Catherine recites “Tu m’as dit ‘Je t’aime, je t’ai dit ‘Attends.’ J’allais dire ‘Prends-moi,’ tu m’as dit ‘Va-t-en.’” Before any images or character introductions, we are only presented with one whole, dominating voice. If we take Mulvey’s interpretation that film spectatorship replays the Mirror Phase by allowing identification with the screen, then this preface represents the pre-Mirror Phase. Kaja Silverman expands upon this idea in The Acoustic Mirror, describing how the mother’s voice in film has come to be understood as a “sonorous envelope” in which the child feels held, accompanied by competing senses of security and entrapment—a paradox that encapsulates the film’s opening audio. In these first few seconds, we have no images to identify with, only a woman’s voice, the spectator experiencing wholeness with the symbolic mother before they even recognize their own ego. However, instead of giving the spectator the wholeness expected from this phase, Catherine’s words already create a rupture, painting an image of a push-and-pull relationship. This moment is important; it is ephemeral, contradictory, and unsatisfying, but brings the spectator close to this wholeness.

70 Truffaut op. cit. 0:29.
It is only when the film cuts to the raucous montage of the opening sequence that the spectator is yanked back to the kind of empathy typical to narrative cinema.

This unattainable unity remains a theme throughout the film, constantly reconfirming Catherine as phallic. The moment she enters the narrative, the film focuses on Catherine’s face and describe her smile to being similar to that of the statue, all of which point to Catherine’s love as being eternal and ancient, implicitly coded as matriarchal. Also, in line with Mulvey’s description that the woman’s presence “[freezes] the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation,” the editing indulges in Catherine’s looks, spending a full ten seconds in nine different shots to show a frenzied montage of Catherine’s facial features. The plot stops in its tracks to indulge in pure feminine spectacle. While Thérèse’s femininity was mired in capriciousness and ambiguity, Catherine’s is “authentic,” with Jules referring to her as a “real woman.” Even more than a real woman, Catherine is presented as the woman—an eternal, mythical archetype of femininity. Even before meeting her, Jules draws his ideal woman’s face on a table—an abstraction that represents feminine perfection. This same face later mirrored in the ancient statue’s smile, which Jules and Jim obsess over. This motif is completed with the editing of excess that first presents Catherine to the spectator. The film presents her in a barrage of closeups and zooms (see Figure 6),

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isolating elements of her face in a way that abstracts them, showing her not as a person but as a collection of mythologically beautiful features. Her image is one of pure, classical femininity.

Not only does the gaze towards Catherine emphasize her dangerous wholeness, but so do Jules and Jim’s interactions with her within the diegesis of the film. Anne Gillian notes the ways in which the film frames their dynamic in the terms of mother-son:

“In the villa beside the sea, Catherine calls Jules and Jim ‘children’ on several occasions, and, on the beach, the male characters are constantly infantilized by the way the shots are framed: long shots of the two men frolicking in the waves like boys; close-ups of Catherine stretched out on the sand watching them, with a sulky expression.”

Because the spectator adopts this masculine viewpoint alongside Jules and Jim, Catherine also dominates the plot of the film as much as she takes over the men’s lives. Critics at the time similarly constructed Catherine’s presence as monumental. One critic from *Dernières Nouvelles d’Alsace* writes “Au vrai, ce nouveau film de François Truffaut ferait presque mieux de s’intituler : ‘Catherine’,” because the actress “impose aux spectateurs également son irrésistible présence.” A critic for *France Observateur* notes a similar phenomenon while noting of Catherine’s nearly mythological presence, writing “Jeanne Moreau impose sa présence, son passé, sa mythologie. Jules et Jim sont relégués au

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second plan, devenus les chevaliers servants de ce nouveau Minotaure : une vedette. […] Jeanne Moreau (Catherine) dévore Jules et Jim.”75 If this devouring of Jules and Jim was not evident enough in the film itself, critics saw it clearly in comparing the film to the original source material, which they argued was much more focused on the men’s friendship. As one critic for Le Figaro littéraire comments, “je ne puis être sur que le vrai sujet du roman est celui que le film permet de deviner : l’amitié. L’amitié contrariée par l’amour, ou par lui exaltée – mais l’amitié avant l’amour. Jeanne Moreau a renversé l’équilibre : d’un film sur l’amitié, elle a fait un film sur l’amour.” 76 As these critics’ responses reinforced at the time, Catherine’s status as the Phallic Mother stood out from traditional images of the doting housewife and even the buoyant juvenility of the Child-Woman of previous New Wave films, instead presenting a wholly new masculine fantasy.

Even the marketing material for the film reflects this narrative dominance of the Phallic Mother. In an ironic twist, very few posters for Jules et Jim actually feature Jules or Jim in any meaningful capacity. Take for instance Christian Broutin’s original poster design for French distribution (see Figure 1).77 Jules and Jim appear only as silhouettes in the background, their figure’s presented in muted earth tones that allow them to blend into the background. Visually, they attract no more importance than the house that mirrors them on the left side of the poster. In contrast, Catherine takes front and center. The bright orange tones of her hair in addition to her sheer size in center frame make it clear that she is

76 “I cannot be sure that the novel’s focus is the same as the films: friendship. Friendship in contrast to love, or exalted by it – but friendship before love. Jeanne Moreau has tipped the scales: from a film on friendship, she has made a film about love.” Mauriac, Claude. Le Figaro littéraire. Feb. 27, 1962.
the center of attention, further reinforced by the fact that only Jeanne Moreau’s and François Truffaut’s names appear in the film’s billing in the top left-hand corner. In fact, Catherine’s body language draws the attention to her stomach—instructing the viewer to see Catherine’s dominant image in part as a result of her maternal characteristics.

Similar trends are apparent three Italian posters for *Jules et Jim*. One includes a full figure of Catherine holding two drawings of Jules’ and Jim’s profiles, with her position in center frame giving her authority over the image. In a second poster, Catherine is presented twice; once alongside Jules and Jim in the racing scene, and again with her face taking up the entirety of the background of the image. And in the third poster, Jules and Jim are not even present—it is simply a film still of Catherine knitting with Sabine, once again cuing the audience to see her in her role as mother.

Analyzing the publicity material reveals another element to Catherine’s allure: her star power. Following her success in such Louis Malle’s proto-New Wave films *L’Ascenseur pour l’échaffaud* (1958) and *Les Amants* (1958), she had established herself as one of the key faces of femininity in the New Wave. In contrast, neither French actor Henri Serre (Jim) nor German actor Oskar Werner (Jules) had broken through into the public eye beforehand, leaving the stage wide open for Moreau. The marketing’s strong emphasis on Jeanne Moreau in combination with her star status alongside lesser-known actors would

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have cemented in the minds of French audiences her larger-than-life status in the world of the film, reinforcing her dynamic as Phallic Mother.

The film and the visual culture surrounding it both fixate on Catherine’s body as the locus of her power. From her face to her curves, she becomes a hypnotizing sexual force, playing the men off of each other while they are drunk off of desire. The men desire to be with her because they want to be one with her, accepting her threatening nature in order to enjoy her body. Just because she is unattainable in the film does not mean that she is to the spectator. In fact, it is this unattainable quality that only constructs her as more attractive to the male spectator. If cinema is rooted in scopophilia, then she becomes forbidden fruit, making her sexualization evoke even more visual pleasure. Her body becomes myth, sacrificed to the viewer to fulfill a male fantasy.

Weaponizing the Womb

It is not necessarily Catherine’s status as symbolic mother that has her stand out in representations of women. As we have seen of typical French cinema, the image of the whole or deified woman is nothing new, especially in looking to Occupation-era cinema. As we discussed, Les Enfants de paradis’ Garance is a kind of Phallic Mother, switching between men with a dominating gravitas not unlike Catherine. However, women like Garance gain this status in opposition to literal motherhood. Putting on the social label of mother neuters this possibility for feminine sexuality, as seen in her foil: the attentive, maternal Nathalie. As is common to stories ruled by the male gaze, as the sexual ideal falls in love with the male protagonist, she “becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is
subjected to the male subject alone.” To adopt Irigaray’s terms, her value shifts from that of the Virgin or Prostitute to that of the Mother, and in the process all her exchange value is converted to use value. What makes Catherine unique is her ability to serve as a literal mother in addition a symbolic one, not losing desirability in her role as mother, but rather gaining more. Unlike the Child-Woman, the Sexual Mother’s body has another tool at her disposal for the manipulation of men: her womb.

It is not necessarily her maternity itself that is being sexualized. In fact, the film constructs a dual personality: Catherine the mother and Catherine the seductress. When Jim first visits Jules and Catherine’s estate, for instance, she presents an overly-polite persona. The film does not give us an obsessive barrage of close-ups like that which first introduced Catherine’s character; instead, it shows her in a simple wide shot, barely acknowledged in the framing and practically devoid of sexual energy. If the audience expected spectacle, they will be sorely disappointed—in place of her rebellious sensuality, we are presented with an image of domestic serenity. However, as the awkwardness unravels, the film reveals the marital tensions beneath this seemingly calm façade. Over the course of this second half, the film presents Catherine as less and less maternal and more and more sexual, with her relationship with her daughter evaporating from the plot. Her motherhood and her sexual freedom are therefore mutually exclusive in the world of the film. This same discourse also reveals itself in critics’ reactions. Notably, one critic writing for Arts pitted Jeanne Moreau’s roles as mother as separate from her sexual appeal, writing that Jeanne Moreau “est délicieuse, tragique, drôle, irrésistible – jamais plus admirable que lorsqu’elle accepte d’être laide, se démaquillant par exemple, ou enceinte,” in the process equating

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79 Mulvey op. cit. 840.
80 “is delicious, tragic, funny, irresistible – never more admirable than when she accepts to be ugly, removing her makeup for example, or pregnant”
her pregnancy with ugliness. In splitting Catherine’s femininities into two distinct identities, her body achieves a dual use as both a vessel for male pleasure (through its fetishization) and for male fulfillment (through its maternalization).

Throughout *Jules et Jim*, the womb and the child serve as symbols of the relationship between the Catherine and her male suitors. Neither belong to Catherine. Instead, they are pieces in a game of masculine control: her womb a chessboard and her child, a pawn. Sabine serves as the most obvious example of the centrality of the womb. Outside of a feeble “Bonjour M. Jim,” Sabine is barely a character; her presence is vital to the world of the film, but she does not act in any way that affects the outcome of the plot. Instead, she purely acts as a symbol of control of Catherine. When discussing Albert’s romantic intentions with Catherine, he not only wants to run away with Catherine, but he also wants Sabine; it is not enough to win over sexual use of Catherine’s body, as he seeks out the child as a way to stake a claim in Catherine’s life. Similarly, Sabine is constructed as being inherently more linked to Jules, as Catherine says “Mais je lui ai dit, je t’ai donné une petite fille c’est assez pour moi. Ce chapître est clos, faisons chambres à part. Je reprends ma liberté.”

This discourse of the child as male property is especially significant given the almost non-existence of scenes of maternal care. Catherine escorts Sabine around and occasionally plays with her, but their relationship is stripped of any intimacy or significance. The mother-child relationship is not allowed to exist because the children serve no narrative purpose outside of as pawn for masculine pursuit of Catherine. This

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81 “But I told him, I gave you a daughter and that’s enough for me. This chapter is closed, let’s take separate rooms. I am taking back my freedom.”

ibid.; 54:15
satisfies the male desire to have some kind of ownership over the unattainable Phallic Mother but alienates the mother from her body.

This discourse culminates in Catherine and Jim’s idolization of their future children together. Similar to Sabine, the potential child serves as an incarnation of Jim’s relationship with Catherine; in order to consecrate their love, making life is the necessary next step. These children play a part in a greater fantasy of wholeness that Jim craves, as the narrator reads “Jim pensait aux enfants qu'il aurait pu avoir avec Catherine. Il les imaginait, plus beaux les uns que les autres. Une grande maison pleine. Il se disait aussi si nous n'avons pas d'enfants Catherine reprendra à ses aventures.” Catherine uses this same fantasy of familial wholeness to keep Jules in place as well, reassuring him that “On restera toujours ensemble, tous les deux comme des petits vieux avec Sabine et les petits enfants de Sabine.” Even when the child exists in the abstract, it is only used as a tool of manipulation of the men, Catherine’s body reduced to an elaborate man-trap. Furthermore, upon discovery of her pregnancy, Catherine asserts to Jim that “Ton amour est une partie de ma vie en moi.” The womb is not hers, but a representation of the masculine forces that act upon her: a space of conflict between men. Sellier similarly comments on the film’s contradictory politics on the womb, writing “le film établit un lien entre l’échec de l’amour de Catherine pour Jim et l’échec de sa maternité, comme si l’enfant était le signe indépassable de l’accomplissement amoureux, archaïsme surprenant dans un film dont les héros tentent de ‘réinventer l’amour’.” However, while she implies that the film equates

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82 “Jim thought of the children they might have had. He imagined a houseful of happy children. He also knew that if he had none, Catherine would take up her adventures again.”
ibid.; 1:27:34
83 “We will always stay together, an old couple with Sabine and our grandchildren”
ibid.; 1:24:33
84 “Your love is now alive within me.”
Jules and Jim op. cit. 1:30:30.
85 La Nouvelle vague: un cinema au masculine singulier op. cit. 169.
the child with romantic success, its significance is more one-sided, rooted in control over the woman’s body. Additionally, while film scholar Melissa Powell argues that the absent mother of films like *Les 400 coups* comes from the film displacing subjecthood onto the child, *Jules et Jim*’s more blatant sexualization of the mother means that the film constructs subjecthood differently. In positioning of the mother and the seductress in the same body, the film frames the womb as tool for male manipulation. As a result, the child loses subjecthood in the same way as Catherine, reduced to a symbol for male ownership over the woman’s body. If Catherine’s eternal beauty seems to transcend the brutishness of men, her womb serves as a bodily anchor that pulls her back under patriarchal control.

The sexualization and the maternalization of Catherine work together to fully strip Catherine from her own body. One need not look further than Jules’ letter to Catherine from the battlefront: “je pense à toi sans cesse, et non à ton âme car je n'y crois plus mais à ton corps, tes cuisses, tes hanches ; je pense aussi à ton ventre et à notre fils qui est dedans.” He misses her because of the value that her body provides, both as locus for sexual pleasure and vessel for childbearing. Catherine’s body is one of the tools at her disposal: that centerpiece which keeps the men in her life in awe and amazement. It is the source of her spectacle, whether as seductress or mother; however, as a result, her body is never her own. In the same way that the Child-Woman retains the potential of the Virgin and the attention of the Prostitute, Catherine’s maternity only makes her more valuable in exchange among men, combining the most desirable elements of the Mother and Prostitute.

“The film establishes a link between the failure of Catherine and Jules’ love and the failure of her maternity, as if the child were the unsurpassable symbol of romantic success, surprising archaism in a film where the characters are trying to ‘reinvent love.’”

86 “I think of you constantly, and not of your soul as I do not believe in that anymore but of your body, your thighs, your waist; I also think of your stomach and of our son who is inside” *Jules and Jim*. op. cit. 35:00.
Regarded as an object, exchanged among men for sexual pleasure as well as childbearing—her body becomes a battleground, a light show, but never a person.

*The Fantasy Beneath*

Catherine’s image seems contradictory—maternal and sexual, alluring but dangerous, whole but bifurcated. Some scholars have read this construction of Catherine as a Phallic Mother in the context of Truffaut’s life, given his saying that “J’avais une relation très difficile avec ma famille, en particulier avec ma mère, et j’ai compris il y a seulement quelques années que j’ai fait Jules et Jim pour lui plaider et obtenir son approbation […] dans l’espoir de lui montrer que je la comprenais.”\(^{87}\) In light of these comments, Anne Gillian reads *Jules et Jim* “like a palimpsest, reveals several different layers of memories in Truffaut that are joined together through a play of analogies,”\(^ {88}\) choosing to analyze this sexualization as a feature of Truffaut’s personal neurotics. Alistair Fox comes to a similar conclusion when he writes that “Jules and Jim had really been about his [Truffaut’s] mother”\(^ {89}\) Still, the success of the film, Jeanne Moreau’s acceleration into stardom, and the prevalence of similar images across French New Wave films all suggest cultural roots in the sexualization of the mother. As a result, it would be most helpful to look for what the Sexual Mother represents in the cultural imaginary of French society during the 1960s.

As previously explained, the conflict between cultural discourses encouraging “mastery” of the home and those pushing for liberation from motherhood resulted in an

\(^{87}\) “I had a very difficult relationship with my family, especially with my mother, and I only understood a few years ago that I made *Jules et Jim* to please her and to get her approval […] in the hopes of showing her that I understood her.” Truffaut, François. *Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut*. Ed. Anne Gillian. Paris: Flammarion, 1988. 144.

\(^{88}\) Gillian op. cit. 81.

\(^{89}\) Fox, Alistair. *Speaking Pictures: Neuropsychoanalysis and Authorship in Film and Literature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. 188.
image of femininity split in two. In this dichotomy, a woman was either a modern, working woman or a naïve, bored housewife. Both of these archetypes create crises of masculinity that the films of the New Wave attempt to play out through different sexual archetypes. The modern woman represents competition with the man in the workplace and potential emasculation, meaning that she “was competent, yet non-threatening; able to cope in a masculine world, yet remain ‘feminine’.”\textsuperscript{90} Given this threat, New Wave film instead constructs the young woman as Child-Woman— naïve, capricious, infantilized. As Simone de Beauvoir notes, “The adult woman now inhabits the same world as the man, but the child-woman moves in a universe which he cannot enter. The age difference re-establishes between them the distance that seems necessary to desire,” which implies that it is this infantilization that allows the man to reassert masculine power.\textsuperscript{91} While still perhaps threatening as a \textit{femme fatale}, this danger comes from her flaws, not her strengths. As a result, New Wave films often end up “punishing” her to achieve narrative resolution.

On the other hand, the image of the docile housewife comes to represent the man’s suburban ennui and naivete in the face of consumer culture. With these opportunities outside the home opening up for the newer generation of women, motherhood seemed less appealing as a prospect, as “the 1950s image of the happy housewife with the image current in the 1960s of the bored housewife.”\textsuperscript{92} This image of feminine complacency was only compounded by the effect of consumer culture, as it constructed a cultural image of the mother as the first line of defense against consumer culture. As Powell explains:

\textsuperscript{90} Duchen op. cit. 118.
\textsuperscript{91} “Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome” op. cit.
\textsuperscript{92} ibid.; 91.
“[…] the housewife is often a shallow dupe, threatening the authentic virility of the working-class male […] perceived as particularly powerless in the face of the changing culture of the everyday, becoming the home’s porous epidermis, through which modern consumerism and its ideologies seep into the domestic […] Already waist-deep in the symbolism of reproducibility, the mother figure often emerges at the centre of anxieties over the commodification of the human and the loss of unique identity.”

This image of femininity creates a crisis of masculinity linked to a loss of individualism, either through being tied to the sterile 1960s home or to the seemingly complacent wife. In this light, this Sexual Mother presents itself as the inverted, but related, image of the Child-Woman. She is dictatorial, and therefore strangely alluring. Not complacent with domestic life, she is independent, spontaneous, and unattainable. Her motherhood is converted into a tool of allure, which only strengthens her phallic image. The Sexual Mother creates the possibility for a universe where choosing a domestic life does not mean compromising the man’s sexual freedom.

What is key here is that this image can only exist in fantasy, as it is based on contradictions that the film refuses to engage with. Both feared and desired, she acts autonomously while still object of the gaze. She is whole but can never make the man whole. She is always out of reach but controlled under the male gaze. In looking to Irigaray’s model, she straddles both values of “mother” and “prostitute,” constantly offering the possibility of familial bliss in her womb but retaining power and allure in her sexuality. In constructing the mother as fantasy, Jules et Jim does not allow Catherine to be

93 Powell op. cit. 48, 64, 65.
a character in herself and alienates her from her body. As centerpiece of the narrative, she becomes a spectacle to act out male fantasies. It is fitting that the men first become infatuated with Catherine’s smile through a projected photo of a statue. Jules and Jim fall for an image of a woman—she is an abstraction, an idea. *Jules et Jim* elicits the same pleasure from the spectator, only to play out a deep-seeded anxiety right below the surface.
Case Study #2 - Lost in the Collage: Mother as Mouthpiece in

*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*

For every fantasy that the New Wave creates, it crushes two more. Reflexive to the point of playfulness, these films mock genre and blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction. As a result, traditional narrative film analysis techniques may fail to address the layers of metacommentary and intertextuality at the core of these films. This brings us to the second mode of representation concerning the mother. Unlike the external fetishizing gaze of *Jules et Jim*, this gaze focuses more on the mother’s point of view, eschewing the male alter ego in favor of a female centerpiece. In this category fall many of Godard’s films like *Vivre sa vie* (1962), *Une femme mariée* (1964), and *Une femme est une femme* (1961), which each follow women as they make decisions about their lives and relationships. All three female protagonists are mothers and are all explicitly sexualized. Nana in *Vivre sa vie* leaves her husband and child to live her own independent life as a prostitute; Charlotte in *Une femme mariée* is a mother who entertains two lovers, both of whom want another child from her; Angela in *Une femme est une femme* is an exotic dancer whose character is practically defined by her obsessive desire for a child. This category is considerably smaller than the first—after all, the New Wave’s auteurist approach inherently privileged a masculine perspective. This bias makes these films even more ripe for analysis, as they reveal how an inherently masculine singular perspective approaches female subjectivity.

As Mulvey and McCabe suggest, films that adopt a feminine protagonist reconcile this discrepancy by adopting a sociological approach, examining the woman’s perspective almost as if they were a subject to be studied from afar. Taking this framework a step further, I will argue that the sociological gaze on the mother reflexively critiques the male
gaze, but simultaneously abstracts the mother nearly out of the film. To examine the effect of this sociological sexualized gaze on the films’ representations of motherhood, I will look to Godard’s 1967 film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (henceforth referred to as *Deux ou trois choses*). Given the film’s fragmented, documentary-like focus on the life of a mother prostituting herself in the *grands ensembles* of the Parisian suburbs, *Deux ou trois choses* is one of the New Wave films with the most explicit sociological gaze and sexualization of the mother. I will begin by arguing that the film’s sociological gaze limits the pleasures of viewing (narcissism and scopophilia as identified by Mulvey), allowing for a deconstruction of the male gaze on the mother. I will then put forth that this new gaze shrouds the character of the mother by distancing us from the mother’s subjectivity, generalizing the plight of the mother to the scale of 1960s French consumer culture, and reducing women to cookie-cutter social values of the virgin, mother, and prostitute. The film is able to give greater insights about the fragmentation of the home but fails to apply these to motherhood in a concrete way.

**To Break the Gaze**

With the *camera à l’épaule* more accessible than ever, it only makes sense that New Wave directors began incorporating “realist” documentary film techniques. This sociological approach was not particularly new to New Wave cinema, as the term “New Wave” even came from a 1957 sociological survey about youth values. However, while a sociological approach is often more implicit in these kinds of female-oriented New Wave films, that point of view is at the core of *Deux ou trois choses*—even from the film’s origin.

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94 Translated as “Two or three things that I know about her.”
Godard found inspiration for the film in an article published in the news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* discussing housewives in the *grands ensembles* who partake in occasional prostitution, whom the author nicknamed *étoiles filantes*, or “shooting stars.” Godard used this two-page piece not only as inspiration, but also as direct source material, taking phrases verbatim from the text to use in his script about Juliette, a housewife played by Marina Vlady who leaves her home in the Parisian banlieue during the day to earn money as a prostitute. Basing his approach on such explicitly sociological material, Godard’s goal was always for the film to be equal parts fact and fiction. In Godard’s words, “Ce film est un essai, sociologique si on veut […] Il relève à la fois de la peinture et du roman,” while also incorporating elements of conventional narrative and documentary storytelling. This genre-defying approach manifests itself in fictional scenes of Juliette’s life, documentary shots of real construction in the *grands ensembles*, and sociological theory read aloud via voice-over. The film not only presents these genres side-by-side, but blurs the lines between them as well, most notably in having fictional characters acknowledge the camera during their interviews to evoke documentary conventions. Critics of the time picked up on these blurred boundaries, with the *Les Lettres Françaises* remarking that “Il continue d’y avoir du Jean Rouch en lui, étant entendu qu’il enquête sur les mœurs non des Noirs africains, mais des Parisiens.”

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96 “Large ensembles” literally. Large housing developments in the Parisian suburbs that became associated with lower-class housing and poverty in the 1960s.
98 “He continues to have Jean Rouch in him, with him looking into the customs not of African people, but of Parisians.”

Jean Rouch was an influential French ethnographic documentarist pioneering *cinema vérité* film in the years leading up to the New Wave.
This observational, detached gaze allows for the film to use the figure of the Sexual Mother less as a spectacle for male pleasure and more as a starting point for discussing female-specific issues—in contrast to the wholly fetishistic gaze of *Jules et Jim*. Instead of relishing in the image of the women and feeding the visual pleasure of narcissism, the film’s Brechtian breaks make the viewer aware of their own gaze, unable to identify with the image as in the Mirror Phase. The film is very explicit about the nature of the gaze from the first scene, in which Godard’s voiceover introduces the same woman twice: once as Marina Vlady (the actress), and again as Juliette (her character). This introduction immediately breaks the façade of cinema, preventing a straightforward identification with the characters on screen—the mirror talks back. To add another layer of reflexivity, Vlady refers to “Père Brecht” in her opening lines, acting as a *clin-d’œil* to the influence of his alienation effect\(^99\) on *Deux ou trois choses*’ self-referential breaks. As a Marxist, Brecht saw the reflexivity of his plays as a tool to force the viewer in a position to analyze the piece; it was a provocative tool to push the spectator to uprising and action. Godard seems to share this motivation in *Deux ou trois choses*. From the outset, he invites the spectator to analyze the nature of images, language, and French society, using a collage of images so diverse it can only be provocative.

In addition to destroying the potential for narcissistic pleasure, these Brechtian elements also destroy the pleasure of Mulvey’s second visual pleasure of cinema: scopophilia. The spectator does not fully assume the role of the voyeur. Instead, the film includes several fourth wall breaks, violently breaking the façade of fiction and putting the spectator face-to-face with their supposed object of pleasure. The film’s framing

\(^99\) The alienation effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt* as popularized by German playwright Bertolt Brecht, is an attempt to distance the audience by reminding them that they are watching a play through fourth wall breaks, overt set changes, and actors playing multiple characters. This way, the audience cannot passively identify with characters, but must critically evaluate the piece as its happening.
accentuates the confrontation of this encounter even more. The shots often frame the woman in center frame staring directly in the camera in a way that puts the viewer eye to eye with the women being sexualized, the spectator losing their anonymity in the process.

In addition, the film comments explicitly on this process in its analysis of consumer culture’s commodification of women through images. This is accomplished through a motif of posters. These idealized images appear in all sorts of settings, both public and private, most often showing off exotic travel destinations or attractive women. In nearly every interior shot, from clothing stores\textsuperscript{100} to the home itself,\textsuperscript{101} these vestiges of capitalism appear, showing the ubiquity of these images of perfection forced upon women (see Figure 8).

Given the film’s self-awareness, however, the film’s recognition of the gaze does not stop just there. The film not only points out this male gaze as used in publicity, but also applies it to film to imply the complicity of the cinematic gaze in this objectification of women. Take for instance the café scene in which Juliette looks over at the woman reading the women’s magazine.\textsuperscript{102} This scene creates visual associations between the overtly sexualized images of women in the magazine and the women in the café, cutting between close-ups that frame both of these women’s faces in the same way (see Figure 9). The film

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure8.png}
\caption{Posters: a near-ubiquitous visual reminder of social expectations}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{100} Godard, Jean-Luc. \textit{Two or Three Things I Know about Her}. 1967. Criterion Collection DVD. 18:22.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Two or three things}. op. cit. 31:33.
\textsuperscript{102} ibid., 25:18.
thus becomes about the gaze it partakes in by showing these women as living advertisements, limiting the possibility for scopophilia by constantly acknowledging it. The film still constructs some degree of visual pleasure in the woman as in the voyeurism of the bathing scene and the sexual humiliation of the airline bags scene. However, the film oscillates between fetishization and an uncomfortable awareness, meaning that this pleasure is displaced from the woman’s body onto the critical eye of the narrator; the film’s pleasure is in its provocation of the spectator, not necessarily in its sexualization of the woman.

By inhibiting the potential for scopophilia and narcissism, the film opens the potential to discuss new modes of femininity faced with the sexualization of 1960s French consumer culture. On a basic level, Juliette’s low socio-economic status as a housewife in the Parisian banlieue forces her to sell her body, showing how this commercialism makes women commodities just as much as the products. This discussion of sexuality is centered around the idea of this commercialized gaze. The gaze is at the forefront of Juliette’s sexual encounters, perhaps most notably her first one with the client known only as the young man. The scene features no actual sexual acts, focusing rather on the gaze associated with commercialism and the power it has. What is being sold or withheld in this scene is not sex, but the image of it. The act means nothing if it cannot be visualized, which is why the young man sets up a mirror on the side of the bed and why Juliette later asks if he wants to have sex à l’italienne so that he can see her better. While she is selling her image to him,
Juliette retains a level of control, as she is keenly aware of how she wants to be looked at. She asks him to not look at her undress, and while he does not understand why, since he will see her naked soon, she insists there is a difference—in controlling his gaze, she retains autonomy over her body. Similarly, when he asks why she is applying lipstick, she snaps back “Ça ne te regarde pas!” This refusal of the gaze is reflected of Godard’s specific acting advice for Vlady as well, as she explains in the following interview:

“Il m’avait dit que j’avais en fait trop conscience d’être une actrice qui veut avoir une attitude physique, une attitude d’esthétique. Évidemment j’ai appris ça parce que dans beaucoup de films que j’ai fait ce qui comptait c’était être belle et d’avoir une attitude d’une belle femme, une femme qui séduit.”

On one hand, this less seductive acting style suggests a reclamation of her power against men. Juliette’s direct dialogue and control of the gaze suggests that she is choosing to partake in prostitution not out of a deep-rooted desire to please men, but to forward her own goals. On the other hand, her preoccupation with the gaze is nearly an obsession and is rooted in the images of sexuality forced upon her through consumerism. The most potent visual metaphor for this process is in the framing of Juliette’s face. In the same way that the women’s faces are framed in photos and posters, Juliette’s face is similarly framed in the mirror while she applies a product to make herself more beautiful—not even to impress any man in particular, but to put herself more in line with the reproduced images of what

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103 “Mind your own business!”
104 “He had told me that I was trying too hard to be an actrice who wanted to have a physical attitude, an esthetic attitude. Obviously, I learned that because, in most of the films I acted in, what mattered was being beautiful and to have a beautiful woman’s attitude, a woman who seduces.” Allemand, Max. “Cinéma” on Two or Three Things I Know about Her. Criterion Collection DVD. 7:15.
“correct” femininity looks like as part of the French middle class. Still, while the film presents the sexual potential of Juliette, it rarely relishes in it, as evidenced by how the scene ends right before the actual sexual act is performed. Marina Vlady points out in an interview, “Juliette ne se prostitue pas pour manger. Elle a de quoi vivre. Elle veut s’acheter un décor, des robes.” Prostitution becomes a way for Juliette to continue to perpetuate the expectations that society has for her—in part related standards of physical beauty, but more importantly tied to displays of middle-class comfort and wealth through the purchase of certain commodities. Mulvey and McCabe elaborate on this:

“It is possible to argue that Godard's use of the image of the body is resolutely unexploitative. The length of the shots and the fact that the image of the body is not presented as spectacle makes us uneasy in the position of the voyeur. If we look at this woman's body then we are aware of our own look, which is not hidden in the folds of the narrative and the movement of the camera.”

With the sociological approach, Deux ou trois choses averts our eyes from the Sexual Mother and instead on the gaze that she experiences—both from society and from the spectator. Preoccupied with feminine beauty rituals, with multiple scenes in beauty salons and women’s clothing stores, the film presents and reproduces the cycle of how modern consumerist society presents limited images of womanhood, all while hinting at how the Sexual Mother can find agency in controlling the gaze.

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105 “Juliette does not prostitute herself to eat. She has the means to live. She wants to buy herself décor, dresses”

Emptying the Mother

While this denial of pleasure may appear “unexploitative” to scholars like Mulvey and McCabe, it leaves one obvious element missing from the mother: her character. Godard still privileges his own male viewpoint, which strips the mother of her proper voice. Furthermore, the film reduces the Sexual Mother to a symbol in the greater sociological message: a one-dimensional cypher of the ideas the films deems important.

While *Deux ou trois choses* does not take on the traditional New Wave masculine viewpoint (i.e. the one of *Jules et Jim* featuring identification with a male alter ego protagonist), Godard’s perspective is more palpable than in nearly any other New Wave film. He replaces the alter ego format of the earlier films with a more direct approach—an explicitly first-person film, more in line with the style of the essay film later made popular by filmmakers like Chris Marker. Godard’s voiceover leads most of the film, with the visuals often serving as a separate abstract visual track accompanying his sociological observations. The hushed, crisp tone of the voice suggests a proximity to the audience, adding to a sense of intimacy that aligns the spectator with Godard as if he were whispering in one’s ear. This personal point of view is important to understanding through what lens *Deux ou trois choses* presents its women. The omnipresent voiceover tracks the life and universe of Juliette, even going so far as to describe her smallest actions, evident from her character introduction in which he remarks “Maintenant, elle tourne la tête a droit mais ce n’a pas d’importance.”107 This establishes Godard’s position both as he who constructs the world and as he who imposes his own judgment on it. He takes his seat next to us, the

107 *Two or three things*. op. cit. 1:54.
spectator, to gaze upon the world of the film (and by extension, the mother) with a critical eye. Unlike in traditional narrative film, the spectator is not encouraged to empathize with the mother but is rather prompted to navigate this world alongside Godard’s voice of god narration.

Even when Godard is not literally speaking, his voice remains apparent in his characters. Part of this stems from the film’s unique methods of shooting. Godard would often feed Vlady lines, actions, and questions via a hidden earpiece, having her recite and react to his remarks in real time. Vlady explains that this unconventional approach limited her sense of control over her character, saying in an interview with the program Cinéma, “Quand il s’agit d’un dialogue entre lui et le comédien ou d’un monologue qu’il souffle au comédien, on ne peut pas appeler ça vraiment jouer. On cite quelque chose, on dit quelque chose.”

Similarly, in an interview with Le Nouvel Observateur, she refers to Juliette as the character “à qui je prête ma physique, car on peut difficilement, avec Godard, parler d’interprétation.” This new approach to character gives the character of Juliette a similar tone and subject matter as the voiceover of Godard: asking the same kinds of questions and reciting the same kind of theory. Critics at the time also cued audiences to see Vlady’s performance as restrained, with one critic noting how “elle répète sur un ton à peu près monocode les propos que Jean-Luc Godard lui a dictés” and another going as far to critique “la façon cruelle qu’il a de ridiculiser de pauvres filles en les poussant à dire n’importe quelles sottises devant la camera.”

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108 “When it is a dialogue between him and an actor or a monologue that he whispers to the actor, one cannot really call that acting. One cites something, one says something” ibid.; 4:30
109 “to whom I lend my physique, as one can scarcely speak of performance with Godard” “Marina Vlady craint d’irriter” op. cit.
111 “the cruel way that he ridicules poor girls in pushing them to say all kinds of stupidities in front of the camera”
actress Vlady rather than her character Juliette points to the effect of Godard’s Brechtian breaks on the perception of Vlady/Juliette. Because the façade of cinema is broken so frequently, the spectator no longer sees the monologues as the pleas of an oppressed housewife, but rather the mindless recitations of a helpless actress. As a result, the film further strips the Vlady/Juliette figure of subjecthood, making her a mouthpiece for philosophical statements and debates rather than a unique feminine voice in herself.

This shallowness of character is no mistake, but instead part of a greater push on Godard’s behalf to transcend character in favor of concepts. He explains in one interview that he was seeking to create this singular voice through “l’intégration des êtres humains, de visages, dans une sorte de panorama enfermée dans un seul et même regard.” This shows itself in the film through the film’s frequent use of one-off interviews with side characters which all retain the same philosophical, abstract tone. For example, when Juliette leaves to get a drink in the restaurant, the camera begins by tracking her from behind before resting on an unknown young woman, who gives a brief monologue about her lifestyle in the Parisian banlieue. Even when Juliette is not present, these same inquiries continue, such as when her husband interrogates the young woman in the restaurant about discourse on sexuality. The film thus juggles these voices, all provoking similar questions on similar themes. Certain critics praised this new approach, explaining that “Godard semble avoir définitivement rompu avec […] la création des personnages considérés en tant qu’individus vivant une aventure particulière”, in some ways contributing to the detached


112 “integration of human beings, of faces, in a sort of panorama enclosed in a single and same look”
“Godard: ‘Deux ou trois choses’,” op. cit.
113 “Godard seems to have definitively broken from […] the creation of characters considered as individuals living a particular adventure”
Sadoul op. cit.
gaze that allows for critical looks at feminine issues. However, this approach to character

denies the spectator the possibility to understand Juliette, much less identify with her. The

film presents her not as an actor, but as a mouthpiece and an idea for masculine discourse.

As the critic from the *Nouveau Candide* suggests, “Godard s’écoute et se regarde. Son film

est un essai sur Godard filmant;”\(^{114}\) in other words, the press noted that this panoramic look

which Godard evokes ends up being simply his own look, fully embracing the Godardian

perspective without really raising the voices of the oppressed that he claims to investigate.

This masking of the feminine voice, however, is not apparent given the film’s

premise. *Deux ou trois choses* chooses a topic ripe for discussion of the changing role of

the mother. On an obvious level, the phenomenon of housewives needing to prostitute

themselves for money in the *grands ensembles* is a uniquely female issue of the 1960s;

however, even on a less extreme level, the HLMs changed the place of the mother in the

home. The move to the *banlieue* often fostered a sense of isolation as the housewife was

“leaving Paris and becoming a housewife.”\(^{115}\) Claire Duchen for example explains how this

changed the conception of maternity in broader French culture:

> “The new housing estates mirrored—although in a socially differentiated way—the

middle-class suburbs described in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*,

replacing the 1950s image of the happy housewife with the image current in the

1960s of the bored housewife. Life in the *grands ensembles* put the boredom of

housewifery into sharp relief.”\(^{116}\)

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\(^{114}\) “Godard listens to himself and watches himself. His film is an essay on Godard filming.”


\(^{115}\) Duchen op. cit. 91.

\(^{116}\) ibid.;
This paradigm shift caused by the HLMs coupled with the growing discourse on forms of femininity that reject motherhood means that the mother is at the core of issues of consumerism. To hearken back to my earlier discussion on the status of the 1960s French housewife, the influx of consumerist goods in post-war France resulted in relentless advertising towards the mother, selling an image of domestic mastery through appliances and other modern conveniences. As a result, the mother became a primary target for advertising and, with time, a scapegoat blamed for the seeping of consumerism into the home.

However, in place of discussion of motherhood, the first-person nature of Deux ou trois choses clouds this struggle in a broader societal issue: the effect of consumer culture on the cityscape. The film is fragmentation put on screen, described by one critic as “les facettes d’un miroir brisé” that “pousse encore plus loin la mise en morceaux du miroir.” One need only look to the collage aesthetic of the film’s poster, which mixes and matches pieces of publicities and photos from the film to create an odd ensemble of incomplete images (see Figure 10). This fragmentation of meaning is present even in the title of the film, as the “elle” in Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle does not refer explicitly to Juliette; rather, as evident from the opening sequence, the “elle” refers more so to “la région parisienne.” However, the fragmentation contributes

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117 “pieces of a broken mirror” “push even further the piecing apart of the mirror” Sadoul op. cit.

to the obscuring of Juliette behind a sexualized image. The theatrical trailer written by
Godard suggests that this “elle” can be read in multiple ways, referring to “elle” as “la
cruauté du néocolonialisme” as well as “la call-girl moderne,” the dominance of the city
crowded in with Juliette’s plight as housewife. While Juliette’s dual role as mother-
prostitute is key to the premise of the film, as highlighted in nearly every piece of
promotion and reception, the film privileges the city over the character. We even hear this
process through literal silencing of the characters’ voices in its unconventional sound
design. Before the film presents images, the first sound is that of the low roar of urban
Paris, which persists and comes back throughout the film. This sound goes as far as to
explicitly make the characters’ voices unintelligible; the film introduces in voiceover the
monologue of another unknown woman explaining how she ended up in the banlieue, but
the white noise of the city grows in sound, overpowering her monologue until it is
impossible to understand. This muddled audio cues the audience to focus less on what
characters say and more on how the space is constructed and how elements are edited
together. Godard’s panoramic approach privileges the city over Juliette, as it is the cut-
aways to the city that glue the film together and give it cohesiveness, not necessarily any
plot surrounding Juliette or any defining character traits. Certain critics even go so far as to
erase Juliette in their commentary, with one critic writing that “Elle, ce n’est pas Marina
Vlady, l’interprète, c’est Paris, le nouveau Paris de l’avenir,” suggesting that the discourse

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119 “Original Theatrical Trailer” on Two or Three Things I Know about Her. Criterion Collection DVD.
“the cruelty of neocolonialism” “the modern call-girl”
120 Some more snarky critics painted this choice as a good thing, with G. Charenson from Les Nouvelles Littéraires writing “Les propos des personages sont insignifiants mais, heureusement, ils sont presque constamment couverts par les bruits de fond de la grande ville qui les rendent le plus souvent inaudibles” or “the remarks of the characters are insignificant but, luckily, they are almost constantly covered by the background noise of the big city, which often renders them inaudible.”
121 Two or three things. op. cit. 1:16:50.
surrounding the film similarly cued viewers to not seek depth in Vlady’s character. She is to be seen and not heard.

In addition to Juliette’s plight being pushed to the background of issues surrounding the city, even when she appears on screen, her story is incomplete as she is used as a mouthpiece and symbol. The voiceover insists that Juliette’s plight is “Toujours la même histoire,” explaining her background story in terms of a recurring trend and while showing footage of a different woman to further generalize her character. Different critics picked up on the emptiness of Juliette as a character, describing her by saying “elle n’est qu’un symbole”, and that she “fait ici figure d’archétype, de dénominateur commun ou d’image”. The character of Juliette is not a complete character, instead a cipher for the film’s ideology. If we do really only learn two or three things about Juliette as a person, it is because most of the time is spent musing on capitalism and consumerism in the abstract.

As explained above, the film’s most blatant attempt at recognizing feminine-specific issues is in its treatment of prostitution and sexualization above issues of motherhood; however, even this element can lose its feminine-specific connotations in the film’s fragmentation of meaning. Godard presents prostitution more as a metaphor for life under capitalism, as he says in an interview “pour vivre dans la société Parisienne, on est forcé à quelque niveau que ce soit […] de se prostituer.” In another interview, he more

122 “She is not Marina Vlady, the actress, it’s Paris, the new Paris of the future” “Marina Vlady craint d’irriter.” op. cit.
123 “Always the same story” Two or three things. op. cit. 15:30.
125 “is an archetypal figure, a common denominator or image” “Godard: ‘Deux ou trois choses’.” op. cit.
specifically equates advertising with prostitution, explaining “La publicité c'est la
prostitution. La publicité, c'est le macrotype. On est la pute des publicitistes,” in effect
cuing the viewer to ignore the woman-specific context to most prostitution at the time.\textsuperscript{127}
Even Vlady herself admits that she saw the film’s focus on the state of the prostitute as
marginal, saying in an interview:

“La prostitution n’est pour lui qu’un prétexte ou plutôt qu’un point-limite, une
caricature […] Je ne pense pas que Godard ait voulu faire un film ‘réaliste’ sur la
prostitution dans les grands ensembles. Il a voulu s’exprimer sur la société actuelle,
et aussi faire prendre conscience, alerter”\textsuperscript{128}

As a result, the film itself constructs prostitution in a metaphorical sense, drawing
implicit ties between prostitution and
modern society. This happens subtly
through visual cues in the mise-en-scène,
one example being the coordination
between Juliette’s blue and gray striped
jacket and the similar color palette of the
grand ensemble behind her (see Figure
11).\textsuperscript{129} A more notable example is the film’s constant inclusion of construction cranes, or

\textsuperscript{127} “Advertising is prostitution. Advertisements are the pimps. We are the prostitutes.”
\textsuperscript{128} “Marina Vlady craint d’irriter.” op. cit.
“Prostitution is only a pretext for him or rather a boundary point, a caricature […] I do not think that Godard
wanted to make a ‘realistic’ film on prostitution in the \textit{grands ensembles}. He wanted to express his thoughts
on contemporary society and also raise consciousness, alert.”
\textsuperscript{129} \textit{Two or three things}. op. cit. 1:14:01.
grues, which double as French slang for prostitutes. During the prostitution scene with the American client, the film cuts to footage of the cranes while retaining the audio track of the American yelling out commands. When he directs the women to “Turn this way,” the cranes rotate in the distance, further solidifying this association. These associations are amplified especially in the context of the scene. The American (made overtly so through his American flag T-shirt) directing the women around with bags on their heads sporting different American brands like Pan-Am and TWA serves as an overt metaphor for the oppressive process of commercialization of the body due to the invasion of American consumer culture (see Figure 12). This amplification of prostitution further generalizes the plight of the woman out into society at large.

The same generalization of women’s issues goes for issues surrounding the grands ensembles. In a preliminary description of the film sent to assistant director Charles Bitsch and producer François Truffaut, Godard wrote that the term “ensemble” meant to take on a “strictement urbain et architectural” meaning as well as “un sens plus général, celui justement d’ensemble envisagé comme en mathématiques, c’est-à-dire comme des structures totales où l’unité humaine de base est régie par des lois qui la dépassent, précisément parce que ce sont des ‘lois d’ensemble.’” This is translated into the film’s interweaving associations of the grand ensembles with commercialism, which is made most

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130 ibid., 54:40.
131 “strictly urban and architectural” “a more general sense, that one of an ensemble envisioned in mathematic, that’s to say like total structures where human unity is ruled by the laws that overtake them, precisely because these are the laws of the ensemble” Godard, Jean-Luc. “Examen du film dans son état actuel” in Two or Three Things I Know about Her. 1966. 1.
evident in the film’s final shot (see Figure 13). The arrangement of brightly colored consumer products including Ajax and Tide come are stood on end in such a way that resembles the *grands ensembles* themselves, serving as a visual representation for how the film uses the *grands ensembles* as a symbol for commercial culture. This image once again eschews the unique impacts of the developments on the housewife.

Even in contexts where the film seems to be opening up the discourse on motherhood, the dialogue completely circumvents it. While cleaning the dishes, a typical quotidian task emblematic of the changing role of the *grand ensemble* housewife, Juliette instead adopts the same kind of philosophical inquiry as in any other setting, musing on the definition of time and the limits of language. Her interactions with her son are similarly marked with this same political and philosophical tone, as he discusses his dream about the Vietnam War and asks the definition of language. The film presents the trappings of a discussion of modern motherhood while erasing the plight of the mother altogether.

*Deux ou trois choses* presents a misleading image. While the film may have a Sexual Mother at its center, it has zoomed out to the point where she is indistinguishable from the mass of other elements heaped together in editing—if not intentionally emptied as a character and covered up. The film does not cue us to take pleasure from her image, but rather to see her as a silhouette instead of a real person—a silhouette filled with Marxist ideology.

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132 ibid.; 1:27:12.
Home Alone

Even though Godard’s detached gaze masks explicit discourse on motherhood, the film still hints at certain issues of motherhood, most notably through its construction of spaces and interactions during the scenes of domesticity which bookend the film. *Deux ou trois* choses constructs the home as a site of fragmentation and alienation, where the mother floats from person to person, lacking a fixed identity and a fixed role in the domestic space. This vision is the closest that the film arrives at evoking a subjectivity surrounding the mother’s experience, examining the rupture that modernity has made in motherhood.

This maternal alienation is clearest in the film’s sound design in the HLM. While the film often presents long takes on specific characters, we hear off-screen sounds from other family members, including Robert’s persistent yelling of Juliette’s name while she does the dishes, Solange’s offscreen crying while Juliette is on the bed with Christophe, and sounds of the children playing while Robert mans the radio. The film even presents their interactions with this audiovisual tension, such as when Juliette discusses dreams with her son Christophe. Where a typical film may have presented the conversation in shot-reverse shot to emphasize the back-and-forth of their exchange, the first minute of this scene does not cut away from Juliette, having her stare off into the distance while speaking to Christophe’s disembodied voice (see Figure 14). The film’s off-screen sound suggests that, while the members of the family coexist in the same space and have constant traces of each to remind them of their

![Figure 14: Juliette’s conversation with her son lingers on a medium shot of her in bed, staring into space.](image-url)
presence, they never interact in any meaningful ways.

They are also interacting in spaces of transition and distracted to such a degree that they barely pay attention to one another. These conversations take place in doorways and stairwells, and the characters “listen” while playing with toy guns, listening to the radio, or leaving the world of the film completely by breaking the fourth wall. They speak at each other, but do not truly converse, as evidenced by Juliette’s silence following Christophe’s recounting of his dream.

The film also employs off-screen sound to generalize this experience to other families in the HLM apartments. Two long shots of the exterior of the HLM bookend the film, mirroring each other in movement and sound design. In both cases, the camera slowly pans across the sterile HLMs, seemingly devoid of life, while the audio paints a different story: countless children’s voices, overlapping and interweaving. All of these families live in close proximity, but due to the structure of the HLM, they never interact—the family units are just as alienated from each other as the family members are.

At home, the mother is alienated, bored, neutered. It is only when she leaves for the city and indulges in consumer culture that she feels alive and expresses her sexuality. The separation of the public and private spaces (denoted geographically between the banlieue and Paris) suggests that motherhood and sexuality are mutually exclusive. As a result, Juliette lives two different lives—one of a mother and one of a prostitute. Juliette even symbolically renounces her motherhood when she drops off her child to the brothel-daycare, full of the remnants of motherhood that these “shooting stars” leave behind. When she returns to the home, she covers up and assumes her domestic tasks. To hearken back to Irigaray’s sexuate economy, Juliette has the potential for value both as mother and as prostitute, but never at the same time. Instead of examining the mother’s sexuality, the film
bifurcates these two identities and treats them separately. McCabe and Mulvey suggest that “If one series of Godard's films assumes a woman's point of view, it is a point of view that is determined by her sexuality.” While it may be true of *Deux ou trois choses* as a whole, this observation fails to recognize the beginning and the end, and perhaps for good reason: at home, Juliette is a different person. The woman is either a prostitute to the consumerist system or an alienated housewife, conforming to the values of women described by Irigaray.

In presenting Juliette through this distanced gaze, this commentary is baked into the editing of the film, through which we see the mother as alienated from her family, other HLM residents, and her own sexuality. These observations are implied in the construction of the world of the film, which the film’s reflexivity equates with Godard’s point of view, not that of the mother. Still, the presentation of images that break from the “happy housewife” trope opens the potential for challenging dominant gender norms of the time. Fighting against dominant images of HLMs as suburban paradises away from the hustle and bustle of the city, this film provides an alternate viewpoint of these modern habitations—one that challenges the effects of consumerism on societal values, however limited in its mosaic approach.

*Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* presents a unique way of looking. To go in expecting characters, plot, or continuity editing would be misguided. Instead, Godard presents contradicting images, text without context, and characters without voices. And while this new approach allows for a reflexive look at the gaze on the Sexual Mother, it is this same distance that makes the mother just another footnote in an androcentric essay. While most of the figure of the mother serves as an ideological stand-in, the film’s form

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133 McCabe and Mulvey. op. cit. 59.
hints at some of these issues—maternal alienation, pressure from consumer culture, the fragmentation of the family. However, it ultimately frames these in a reductive way that refuses to show a femininity that does not conform to Irigaray’s three values for women. Once again, as in *Jules et Jim*’s gaze, *Deux ou trois choses* provides different sides to femininity in a single female character, but in a way that remains within the preexisting framework of possibilities for women at the time instead of constructing femininity as complex and fluid. This does not mean that the film fails as a critique of womanhood of the 1960s. The film’s choice to even acknowledge the plight of the bored housewife and the effects of consumerism in the home were still radical in their own right. Still, it is emblematic of the greater inability of the New Wave to develop new cinematic tools to capture the maternal issues that were at the forefront of 1960s French culture, as well as their complete disinterest in doing so in the first place. To find these tools, we would have to wait nearly a decade and shift our focus a few hundred kilometers north.
Case Study #3 - Bad Coffee, Dirty Dishes, and Murder: Mother as Self in Jeanne Dielman

While the New Wave developed a cinematic language incompatible with female subjectivity, this does not mean that each of its contributions to cinema was detrimental to the mother. In fact, without the possibilities that the New Wave opened, we would not have the most famous mother in francophone cinema: Jeanne Dielman. In her landmark film Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975), Chantal Akerman keeps the titular mother front and center for three and a half hours of cutting potatoes, washing dishes, and applying makeup—with the occasional act of prostitution slipped in. If the premise seems reminiscent of the sexualized mothers of New Wave cinema, it is no coincidence. It was Godard’s Pierrot le fou that inspired her to pursue filmmaking in the first place, and her fixation with Godard in her early career means that Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle likely served as a cinematic touchstone. Born in 1950, Akerman grew up with the New Wave, a part of the first generation of filmmakers to apply New Wave innovations in her own context—at the age of twenty-four, no less. But even with these inspirations being clear, Akerman is unmistakably of another era—one informed by American experimental film, feminist politics, and major paradigm shifts in the social scenes. To understand the legacy of the New Wave’s depiction of the motherhood, it is necessary to examine how this subsequent wave of filmmakers drew upon New Wave aesthetics and depictions of motherhood—challenging their vision of cinema in the process.

In this chapter, I will compare Akerman’s style with that of her New Wave predecessors and analyze how these aesthetic and political differences inform her depiction

of the mother. Pulling from the film, critical responses, and interviews with Akerman, I argue that *Jeanne Dielman* should be read as a response to New Wave depictions of the mother, inverting the model of the male alter ego and phallic mother to show the feminine perspective, paired with a radical shift in aesthetics that allow for radical empathy with the mother. I further argue that this cinematic language, although undeniably unique, can also be read as the application of New Wave desires of complicate the relationship between ethnography and fiction, now applied to the cultural context of Belgium during the 1970s.

**Different Perspective, Different Aesthetics**

*Jeanne Dielman* serves as a feminine counterpoint to the sexual mother narrative of the New Wave. While it presents a similar gendered model that evokes that of New Wave film, it inverts the story to show the perspective of the sexual mother rather than the male alter ego, revealing the disappointing reality at the core of the fantasy.

Given Akerman’s familiarity with the New Wave, it should come as no surprise that *Jeanne Dielman* presents a gendered model eerily similar to that of the films already discussed. Jeanne straddles the line between doting mother and prostitute, fulfilling both roles in the same domestic space. If Jeanne is meant to evoke the Phallic mother, then it is Sylvain, her son, that incarnates the typical New Wave hero. He is the one who has a full separate life away from the mother, socializing with friends at school, skipping class (not unlike Antoine from *Les 400 coups*), and interacting in the public sphere, only to come back home in the evenings. In such a subtle film, Sylvain’s oedipal desire is one of the more evident plot points, expressed in Sylvain’s recounting of his childhood urges to crawl into bed with mother so that “dad wouldn’t have a chance to thrust inside” her. The film also draws visual parallels between Sylvain and her male suitors that further elaborate the
potential of a fetishistic gaze (see Figure 15).

Furthermore, *Jeanne Dielman* evokes the New Wave in its mise-en-scene. As cinematographer Barbette Mangolte notes, the team was inspired by the New Wave mise-en-scene to include naturalistic décor and natural lights. Additionally, the film’s documentary-like look into the home evokes Godard’s politicizing of the domestic sphere; while *Jeanne Dielman*’s cinematography may differ in key ways, it still evokes an ethnographic quality meant to reveal how greater sociological issues make the home a battleground.

If the film seems to pull on New Wave tendencies, it inverts them just as quickly. This is evident from the very setting—no longer rooted in the dynamic Parisian cityscape essential to New Wave cinema, the story is instead displaced to Brussels. Historically recognized as a hub for francophone creatives seeking support outside of the strict French context, Brussels represents an alternative approach to French-language art. Akerman would certainly not be opposed to this, once stating in an interview that “La France ne m’intéresse pas”.

This positionality away from the anchor of French culture is made caricaturally evident in the film’s lengthy title, making the viewer hyperaware of the setting and thereby instructing the viewer to watch the film differently than they would a New Wave film. The choice of Delphine Seyrig also accentuates the

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displacement of the New Wave. Famous for her breakout role in Alain Resnais’ New Wave classics *Last Year at Marienbad* and *Muriel*, Seyrig’s star quality embodied the New Wave style; however, now removed from the dreamlike setting of Marienbad, the reality of the film sets in even harder. Critics similarly encouraged viewers to see the actress in a new light, with the Nouvelles Littéraires referring to Seyrig as “démarienbadisée.”¹³⁷ The combination of these factors means that even before the film starts, the viewer is cued to read the film’s mother with a different lens.

The most explicit New Wave inversion is the film’s insistence on following the mother. We are refused the son’s point of view, with the camera seemingly omnipresent in all aspects of Jeanne’s daily life, no matter how mundane. What is striking, though, is that Jeanne is not simply an alter ego of the female auteur; she still embodies the prototypical mother of the New Wave. In her interviews, Akerman often referred to the film as revealing some sort of hidden image, saying at the Venice Biennale that “Pour moi, *Jeanne Dielman* est un film qui commence là où un metteur en scène dit ‘Coupez!’.”¹³⁸ These comments instruct the spectator to look at the film in the context of the history of maternal depictions, putting the Jeanne in conversation with other cinematic mothers. And with this shift in perspective, Akerman also creates a radical shift in aesthetics. The camera reveals very limited insight into Jeanne’s subjectivity. Gone are the point of view shots, *camera à l’épaule* aesthetics, and existential voiceovers of the New Wave that infused the film’s eye with the director’s—those are reserved for the son of the New Wave, able to interact in the world on his own terms. Akerman’s shots are stationary with minimal editing or

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¹³⁷ “Un-Marienbad-ized”

¹³⁸ “For me, Jeanne Dielman is a film that begins where the director says ‘Cut!’”
intervention from the director at all. Belgian writer Daniel Robberechts wrote “Habitué par les films communs à être transporté de plan en plan (de façon à me faire “oublier le temps qui passe”) je me sens ici laissé à mon sort,” similarly instructing the viewer to interpret the film’s duration as a distancing from the mother.

The only hints of Jeanne’s thoughts are what she expresses in words; however, this sparse dialogue only seems to further obscure Jeanne’s inner life. When her conversations are more than practical courtesies, she gives the impression of hiding the true aspects of her life. For instance, when the cobbler asks her if her son listens to her, she responds affirmatively, even though we consistently see him repeatedly reading at the table despite her wishes. Even when she is given the platform to discuss her life through the letter to her sister, she encounters writer’s block and resigns to reading the newspaper instead. Akerman uses this distance to Jeanne to illustrate the limitations surrounding expressive opportunities for the mother. Even in a film solely dedicated to her experience, she lacks the platform to voice her emotions. The film builds a shared experience with the viewer around this palpable sense of lack—just as Jeanne lacks a way to communicate her pain, the spectator lacks the traditional narrative elements that allow full understanding of a Jeanne as a character. Instead of the eternal monologue of Juliette in Deux ou trois choses, Delphine Seyrig’s silence and deadpan performance imply a sense of interiority but keep the spectator at arm’s length. This is made abundantly clear in the killing of her client at the film’s climax. This scene serves as the culmination of all the thoughts that have been kept hidden from the spectator; while the spectator is given hints of frustration through the disruption of her schedule, even the motives behind that act go unexplained. This conflict is

139 “Accustomed to film that guide you from shot to shot (in a way that makes me “lose track of time”) I feel left to my own devices here.”
most evident in critics’ responses to the film, many of which tried to read into Akerman’s 
thoughts through her actions. *L’Humanité* wrote that her series of repeated actions “nous 
permet de sentir, de ‘déchiffrer’ ce qui se passe en profondeur derrière le masque de 
Delphine Seyrig.” Even more than a curiosity into Jeanne’s thoughts, critics seemingly 
tried to diagnose her. A surprising number of critics describe Jeanne in terms of a 
“neurosis,” from the *Libération*’s “la manifestation emprisonnée, destructrice d’une 
névrose” to *Le Quotidien de Paris*’ “une dame névrotique.” These reviews encourage 
the viewer to attempt the futile task of searching the film any sliver of subjectivity. 
Ultimately, we follow Jeanne, but do not understand her.

The film’s lack of traditional narrative, extremely long takes, and distanced 
cinematography all muddle any sense of interiority we are supposed to glean. Instead, we 
experience duration alongside Jeanne. While New Wave film’s establish empathy 
narratively by aligning the spectator with the protagonist’s pleasure, with their goals made 
explicit and their objects of desire constructed with visual pleasure, Akerman creates 
empathy through *pain*. The spectator waits as she eats a sandwich or makes meatloaf, 
witnessing the action from start to finish as she experiences it. The spectator is put in a 
position of physically waiting. Akerman has always stood by the physical quality of her 
films, once pushing back against an interviewer’s assertion that she is an intellectual 
filmmaker with the retort “je suis plus une cinéaste physique et sensation.”

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140 “Allows us to feel, to ‘decipher’ what happens in depth behind Delphine Seyrig’s mask” 
141 “the imprisoned, destructive manifestation of a neuroticism”
Accessed at the Cinémathèque française.
142 “a neurotic lady”
Accessed at the Cinémathèque française.
143 “I am more of a filmmaker of the physical, of sensations.”
expands on the idea of the physical in *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday* when she describes Akerman’s films as “corporeal cinema,” going beyond observational genres like neorealism or *cinéma vérité* to engage the spectator’s body. This coincides with one Belgian writer Daniel Robberechts’ assertion concerning the plotless nature of *Jeanne Dielman* as he writes “Dévier du modèle sacro-saint du récit constitue un grave péché culturel. Le spectateur est frustré de son produit habituel, il se trouve en situation de manque.” Robberecht’s reading encourages the spectator to read this duration as a transgression and boredom as a culturally-conditioned yearning. In this state of lack, the restless spectator must lean into their discomfort.

This contrast of the male idealization of the mother common to cinema with a hyperreal depiction of motherhood work together to limit the visual pleasure associated with the sexual mother. Akerman herself encouraged viewers to see her in this way, stating in an interview with *Libération* that “Jeanne Dielman peut représenter la femme idéale et lorsqu’on regarde la vie d’une femme idéale, c’est insupportable.” We join her in the uncomfortable reality of motherhood and are cut off from the scenes of sexual release with well-timed ellipses.

If this juxtaposition was not effective enough, the film also presents scenes that act out a rejection of idealization. When Sylvain first shares his past oedipal fantasies, she abruptly ends the conversation with “Il est tard maintenant. J’éteinds,” refusing to entertain his further questions. She also shows resistance to her son’s uninformed claims

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144 Margulies op. cit. 9.

145 Robberechts op. cit. 129.

146 “Jeanne Dielman can represent the ideal woman and when we see the life of an ideal woman, it’s unbearable.”


147 “It is late now. Lights off.”
about female sexuality; notably, when he would only sleep with men he loved if he were a woman, she responds “Mais tu ne peux pas savoir, tu n’es pas une femme.” 148 She also withholds her prostitution from her son. The film makes this withholding palpable through the mise-en-scene. Notably, the tureen and neon lights in the living room come to represent the secret of her secret prostitution. In her painstaking ritual, Jeanne always deposits the money in the tureen in the dark, neon-lit living room following her customer’s exit. The film depicts the nightly dinners from a similar angle, with the neon lights and tureen frequently in plain sight (see Figure 16). Mulvey asserts that this framing suggests an “Intrusion of the sexual in the space of the normal,”149 and I would further argue that this intrusion is a direct destruction of the son’s oedipal fantasy; the sexual potential of the mother is hidden in plain sight, out of reach for the son.

When we are shown the mother in these terms, the oedipal fantasy falls flat. Instead of idealizing a mother that looms larger than life, the film presents the mother as she is, plainly and painfully. The frantic energy of the New Wave mother is gone—spectacle replaced with claustrophobia, worship with numbness. The result is a vision of the housewife that not only challenges how European audiences understand the mother, but

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148 “But you could not know, you are not a woman.”
more importantly, how they understand the image of the mother presented to them by the French New Wave and beyond.

*From Auteurism to Autoethnography*

While the New Wave’s and Akerman’s aesthetics may be diametrically opposed, many of their motivations are not. In fact, while critiquing the gender politics of New Wave cinema, *Jeanne Dielman*’s approach draws on many New Wave ethnographic aspirations, reapplying them in the context of shifting ideas surrounding the feminism and the social sciences. It is this unique combination of influences combined with Akerman’s reinterpretation of auteurism that mark this new gaze on the mother as culturally significant.

Akerman still undeniably understood herself an auteur. She even latched onto her auteurist label as a way of eschewing a feminist label, claiming that her films were not feminist films, but “Chantal Akerman films”\(^{150}\)—despite the ultimate irony that *Jeanne Dielman* is often referred to as the most important feminist film. This auteurist ethos was key in the filming of *Jeanne Dielman*, as she had disputes with her sound recordist who wanted the team to make the film collectively.\(^{151}\) Her films present a uniform style—long takes on a stationary camera, and an absence of reverse shots, radical ellipses in editing, and one-sided dialogue that tends towards monologue—displaying a uniformity of style consistent with ideas of auteurism at the time. Critics, in turn, chose to present her in an auteurist light, remarking on the “La personnalité de la réalisatrice Chantal Akerman” in the film\(^{152}\) and attributing many of the film’s choices to Akerman’s singular vision.

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\(^{150}\) Margulies op. cit. 12.

\(^{151}\) Brenez op. cit. 25.

However, Akerman redirects the New Wave idea of auteurism in two key ways. First, she applied it to a feminine context. Succeeding as a self-proclaimed female auteur would have been sufficiently groundbreaking, but Akerman went further to seek out a uniquely feminine style of filmmaking. During a time when theorists like Laura Mulvey were beginning to uncover the masculine underpinnings of film form, Akerman applied the radical aesthetics of later New Wave cinema and experimental American cinema to show these unheard voices using unseen techniques, as explained above. Other feminist filmmakers began expressing similar narratives in films like *Janie’s Janie*, *Three Women*, and *Joyce at 34*—however, their more traditional ethnographic approach did not question the very language of cinema they were using to present these women’s stories. Akerman was unique in her combination of radical aesthetics and radical politics, beginning a tradition of feminist filmmaking that would continue into the 1970s with films like Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s *Riddle of the Sphinx*.

Second, Akerman adapted the New Wave’s ethnographic focus to reflect the shifting priorities of anthropology in the 1970s. That is not to say that the New Wave was not attuned to the sociological trends of 1960s France. The New Wave began as a way to redefine realism in such a way that made cinema a more versatile tool for examining Parisian society. This sociological spin most obvious in later New Wave works like *Deux ou trois choses* that approach the budding film essay genre, but even the earliest New Wave films incorporate elements of ethnography. The handheld documentary aesthetics paired with naturalistic settings and improvised acting resulted in a realism that looked at Parisian life in context, not reconstructed but filtered through the eyes of one who has experienced it himself. In fact, the term “New Wave” comes from a 1957 sociological survey about youth

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153 Margulies op. cit. 5
values published in L’Express entitled “La Nouvelle Vague: portraits de la jeunesse” pointing to just how much the movement was rooted in a new understanding of sociology of film.\textsuperscript{154}

Akerman took this sociological component in a different direction, beginning her career at a volatile period in the social sciences and ethnographic filmmaking. During the 1970s, the Annales school avoided a positivist, factual history by focusing on everyday people, and as Arlette Farge notes, women’s history movements contributed to these efforts to add to the historiography of overlooked peoples.\textsuperscript{155} These New History movements overlapped with the \textit{crise de la representation} in anthropology in which academics began to turn the ethnographic look inward—not only to one’s own society, but into oneself.\textsuperscript{156} By relying on an implicit trust of the auteur’s vision, the New Wave did not fully allow for this kind of reflexivity. Even those New Wave films like \textit{Deux ou trois choses} begin to hint at this new kind of ethnography, the “voice of god” approach establishes the same subject-object dichotomy that establishes a critical gaze.

Akerman challenges the critical gaze of the New Wave by shifting her auteurism more towards autoethnography. Based above all in persona experience, autoethnography turns the gaze of study onto oneself to make broader generalizations about society at the time. According to Sarah Pucill, whereas autobiographical film acts as a sort of diary, unapologetically stating one’s account of events instead, the autoethnographic film challenges the all-powerful voice of the narrator in the first place.\textsuperscript{157} One need look no


\textsuperscript{156} ibid., 7.
further than *Letters from Home*, in which Akerman reads letters from her mother over shots of New York or *Je, tu, il, elle* in which Akerman stars in her own film.

Even in a film like *Jeanne Dielman*, which does not explicitly pertain to her direct experience, we can read Akerman’s examinations of motherhood as exercises in self-reflexivity—not only because these are experiences adjacent to her own, but because her relationship with her mother is key to understanding her oeuvre. In several press interviews, Akerman stressed the personal aspects of this film, suggesting that it “renvoie à des images de ma mère quand j’étais petite”.

As Kiani writes:

> “Akerman parle d’elle et de sa mère dans la plupart de ses travaux documentaires, comme si se raconter passait toujours par le rapport maternel. Cet ‘allerretour’ constant entre le soi et la mère est l’expression d’une identité fluctuante, qui n’a rien de monolithique. L’histoire de sa mère est une partie de son histoire, une histoire qu’elle cherche avidement à se réapproprier (…) Le rapport à sa mère est celui d’une recherche de soi”

It is the specificity of Akerman’s film intertwined with its personal dimension that allows her characters to take on a nearly prototypical meaning. Margulies notes this representativeness of Jeanne as one of the key distinctions between *Jeanne Dielman* and *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*. She compares these works using Barthes’ idea of

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158 “Dans le plan des pommes de terre, il y a tout.” op. cit.
159 “Akerman speaks of her and of her mother in most of her documentary works, as if it were necessary to pass through the maternal rapport to tell her own story. This constant ‘back-and-forth’ between the self and the mother is the expression of a fluctuating identity, that is in no way monolithic. The story of her mother is a part of her own story, a story that she eagerly seeks to reclaim (…) The relationship to her mother is one of a search of self.”
Kiani op. cit. 7.
the mytheme, suggesting that Godard uses a structuring mode based on allegory that makes
Vlady’s body into allegory, whereas Akerman’s use of the mytheme of the
prostitute/housewife emphasizes her “exceptional typicality”. Her image is both
exceedingly normal and exaggerated, allowing for the film’s focus to extend the themes
further. Akerman expressed this herself when she referred to Jeanne Dielman as “Delphine,
ma mère, la vôtre, vous-même.” In turn, feminine spectators stressed the universality of
the film’s themes, as critic Evelyne Le Garrec of Politique Hebdo wrote “je vois ma mère
sur l’écran, qui devient au même temps un miroir, fascinant et angoissant.” Akerman
uses this reflexivity to push back against the pretention of objectivity in earlier
ethnographic film. In the process, she creates cinema that demystifies the mother and
encourages us to understand her experience in the context of greater systems of oppression.
It is in the personal that Akerman achieves the universal.

Inscribing Motherhood

Akerman’s cinema critiques, appropriates, rejects, and innovates. Constantly in
correspondence with the intellectual currents and cinematic trends of her time, her films are at
once intimate and grandiose. Ironically enough, Godard criticized Akerman’s rhetoric
surrounding this aspect of her filmmaking, recommending that she refer to cinema in terms
of “recording” rather than “inscribing.” In response, she quipped:

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160 Margulies op. cit. 147.
161 “Delphine, my mother, yours, yourself”
162 “I see my mother on the screen, who simultaneously becomes a mirror, fascinating and distressing.”
“You say that there aren’t images already inscribed and I say that yes there are images already inscribed, and it is exactly under those that I work: over the inscribed image and the one I would love to inscribe.”¹⁶³

*Jeanne Dielman* is the ultimate example of this inscription. Akerman does not aim to erase the legacy of the New Wave to make way for her own vision; she incorporates, corrects, and overwrites for a new generation of filmmakers with changing preoccupations. Each film is a culmination of different visions overlapping and intertwining: New Wave artists and American structuralists alike, ethnographers and feminists, and Akerman’s own singular vision at the outset of a new feminine cinema. With all of these images put together, we are left with Jeanne Dielman. She is both a mother and the Mother—her image transcending the personal and into the collective. Jeanne incarnates a story that has been told many times over in homes across Belgium and France, if not the world. Akerman’s unique restylings of New Wave tropes and philosophies are what allow *Jeanne Dielman* to achieve near-unanimous recognition the first feminist cinematic masterpiece, evident in every chop of the potato and every bite of the sandwich.

¹⁶³ Margulies op. cit. 19.
Conclusion

The mother figure is not monolithic. She is created, invented, and constructed differently in each cultural context, every time taking on new meanings. To understand motherhood as it is lived, the best we can do is try to understand the various discourses and images surrounding it. E. Ann Kaplan’s *Motherhood and Representation* puts it well when presenting the different discursive levels that the mother exists in. She describes the “real life” mother as unrepresentable. We can discursively understand mother historically (as a social role), psychoanalytically (as the object by which the subject defines itself), and fictionally (as characters in literature or film). However, the bodily mother—she who lives out motherhood—cannot be fully represented, neither in film nor in academic studies. This gap does not mean these discursive spheres have no effect on how the “real life” mother lives; in fact, it is in pinpointing the mothers at the intersections of these different discourses that we can begin to shape our conceptions of motherhood to be more inclusive. This more inclusive way of understanding the mother speaks to the power of the cinematic image. Film exists at the conjunction of these three discourses. It acts out psychoanalytic fantasy through its images and, in the process, transmits a vision about how the mother functions in society. This viewpoint made visual is why films serve as such potent tools for cultural analysis. When a cinematic movement has as much cultural weight as the French New Wave, it provides a window into how our understanding of motherhood shifted from woman’s “natural” role to a choice, while the mother figure herself shifted from backdrop to spectacle.

The New Wave inaugurated a new chapter for the mother as she was understood both socially and fictionally. Before the likes of Godard, Truffaut, and Akerman ushered in new ways of visualizing the mother, she was pushed to the background of French cinema,
an undesirable foil who was designed to be rejected. But with a new vision of cinema as representing the worldview of an auteur, the mother began to occupy a tangible position, albeit a complex one: oftentimes completely ignored, dominating the screen, or being co-opted into countercultural movements. As spectacle, she serves different purposes, either by playing out a fantasy of unattainable wholeness or by serving as a symbol for a male-centered discourse on women. Whether as sexual object, vessel for childbearing, or ideological mouthpiece, the mother’s body is not her own—she becomes a contested prize between male suitors as in *Jules et Jim* or a pitied consumerist slave as in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*. The masculine gaze of the auteur warps and owns her body, leaving little room for discourse on the most pressing issues facing the mother in 1960s France.

It is helpful to reappraise the Mother in context of Irigaray’s schema of the values of women in patriarchal society. In doing so, we see that the two dominant sexual ideals of the New Wave end up confirming a monolithic view of femininity reduced to pure sexuality. The Child-Woman combines the “prostitute” with the “virgin” while the Sexual Mother does the same with the “mother;” all that is left is a valorization of sexual liberty insofar as it serves the man. In claiming this “liberty,” these mothers are alienated from their bodies. Likewise, the spectators are alienated from the mother’s point of view, unable to identify with or understand her outside of this male gaze. In contrast, the men act out fantasies that confirm their role in the public sphere, be it superiority over a naïve, childish woman or perpetual spontaneity in a world where commercial ennui seeps into the home.

That said, painting the New Wave images of motherhood as monolithically negative would be missing the point. After all, these films were not aiming to construct a one-size-fits-all cinema, but instead to create distinct cinematic languages for different auteurs, each
adept at addressing different preoccupations and issues. While the more sexually free images of the New Wave mother open some possibility for this representation—by mere virtue of showing different possibilities for 1960s French woman—we truly see the progressive potential in those generations of filmmakers who followed and who then applied some of the subjective New Wave ethos to their own contexts. This is why it is crucial to look at the New Wave’s legacy in Chantal Akerman. Distinctly post-Godardian and critical of the New Wave’s omission of maternal images, Akerman shows how the conceptual tools laid out by the New Wave can craft narratives that look at motherhood head-on. Or, rather, they can do so, if in the hands of the right filmmaker. Her hyperrealist aesthetics and autoethnographic spin allow for more nuanced treatments of maternity that break out of the rigid roles allowed by the absent and sexualized mothers. The mother is no longer external; she becomes personal.

While focused on these three particular films and filmmakers, this study is intended to only be the beginning of this important discussion, not any definitive end. In limiting the study to the mother as depicted in French New Wave film, we inevitably end up focusing our attention on those mothers privileged by the French screen of the 1960s. Namely, this discourse applies most to the middle-class white French women—often conventionally attractive, most certainly unrepresentative of the range of French motherhoods of the era. This discourse is certainly still helpful; as the master discourse of early French feminist movements, this limited view of feminism served as the model for much of feminism in France at the time and had impact on all mothers of the era. However, to avoid feeding into the discourse of a monolithic image of the French mother, we must continue to see the range of identities expressed in these images. My hope is that this study inspires further
intersectional studies to examine how race and class also impacted these paradigm shifts in French cinema and motherhood.

Along the same lines, it would be worthwhile to examine the transnational effects of the New Wave’s images of motherhood. While Belgian film appears as the most obvious next application of this framework (given Akerman’s cultural weight and razor-sharp focus on the mother), it would be foolish to leave out those films in West Africa and francophone Canada that tackle similar themes. Notably, *La Noire de…* by “Father of African Cinema” Ousmane Sembène looks at the French household from a new aesthetic and political lens in the context of postcolonial Senegal, using a completely different political lens to construct the housewife. And the same wave of modernization that hit France in the 1960s was even more pronounced in Quebec, transitioning away from a Catholic-dominated society during its Quiet Revolution. This was a similarly crucial period in francophone Canadian filmmaking, with films specifically targeting the figure of the mother—not the least of which Anne Claire Poirier’s 1967 documentary *De mère en fille*, recognized as the first feature length film focusing on the status of women in Quebec. The ripples of the New Wave were powerful, both in the francophone world and in the world more generally. It is for this reason that it is crucial to examine how these new modes of storytelling illuminate ideas surrounding motherhood across cultures.

Additionally, while exceptional to the greater trends of the New Wave, several women also contributed to the New Wave in various capacities, bringing with them fresh ideas surrounding motherhood that similarly deserve closer study. Agnès Varda is the most obvious example. The only female director commonly associated with the New Wave, Varda crafted films with an auteurist vision while addressing themes of the male gaze and the place of the woman in French society. While outside the scope of this study, an
examination of her films like *L’Opéra-Mouffe* and *Le Bonheur* in the context of the Sexual Mother would serve as a vital counterpoint to the general masculine auteurist framework attributed to the New Wave. On the same note, this discussion of female perspectives would be remiss to leave out Marguerite Duras as well, the writer behind such New Wave classics as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and *L’Année Dernière à Marienbad* who went on to direct her own films in the 1970s. Both of these women challenge the essential masculinity of New Wave auteurism, allowing for the possibility of a competing maternal discourse in film of the 1960s.

In an ironic twist, the French New Wave is often framed in natal terms. Given the centrality of Astruc’s “The Birth of a New Avant-Garde” and Agnès Varda’s status as the “Mother of the French New Wave” (while rejecting the cinema of their “fathers,” *Cinéma du Papa*), one could say that the New Wave has been conceptualized as a gestation period for the new generation of movies. And yet, the same movement that aims to give life to a new form of cinema ultimately misrepresents its own mothers. Whether pushed out of the spotlight or illuminated in a fetishistic one, the mother is not welcome in the New Wave universe. She may be desirable, but she is alien, exterior. It is the responsibility of scholars to refuse such master narratives, uncovering the myths underneath them and challenging the canon. Despite its masculine bias, the New Wave arose out of a noble goal: to create cinema that reflected life as these filmmakers saw it. In privileging subjectivity, they pushed cinema a step closer to capturing the individual’s experience, whether for good or bad. It is hopefully this part of the New Wave’s legacy that will continue to push filmmakers to examine their preconceived notions about the world and create art that chooses not to distort, deify, or demonize, but to make cinema more inclusive.
Abstract

English

The 1960s saw radical changes in the discourses surrounding both cinema and motherhood in France. However, the French New Wave has traditionally been studied more so in terms of its aesthetic and theoretical contributions to cinema, not as cultural artifacts revealing conceptions of motherhood in 1960s France—despite their monumental impact on French culture and world cinema. Between the prostitute-mother of Vivre sa vie and the exotic dancer mother of Lola, one common trope of New Wave cinema has gone largely unexamined: the sexual mother. Using a combination of cultural studies and feminist psychoanalytic theory, this paper examines the sexual mother trope as understood in French New Wave films and as well as their critical responses and promotional materials.

The New Wave directors’ insistence on an auteurist approach to filmmaking imbued their films with a strong subjectively masculine perspective. As a result, they depict the mother as exclusively exterior to the spectator. The New Wave mother often serves as both a literal mother and a Phallic Mother, desirable to the male alter ego for both her body and her womb, as in the case of the exchange of Catherine’s body in Jules et Jim (Truffaut, 1963). Such narratives play out the cultural fantasy of dominance over the abject mother that threatens male order with her increased social status. Those films that make the sexual mother their protagonist, such as Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle (Godard, 1967), have some limited success in exposing the harm of the sexualizing gaze. However, their more ethnographic gaze on the woman does not permit the spectator to identify with the mother. Rather, the film abstracts her, using her body as a symbol in discourses surrounding consumerism. While these depictions range from fetishistic to hollow, the naturalism and auteurism of the New Wave paved the way for Chantal Akerman’s
deconstruction of motherhood in Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975). Akerman’s radical aesthetics and perspective reveal the flatness behind the sexual mother trope, critiquing New Wave images of motherhood. Akerman appropriates elements of auteurism to craft an autoethnographic approach that personalizes the mother’s story, revealing the feminist potential of certain New Wave ideas.

Français

Pendant les années soixante en France, les conceptions du cinéma et de la maternité tous les deux changeaient d’une manière radicale. De toute façon, la Nouvelle Vague a été étudiée plutôt pour ses qualités esthétiques et théoriques que pour ses messages implicites sur le genre et la maternité, malgré leur impact monumental sur la culture française et le cinéma mondial. Entre la mère-prostituée de Vivre sa vie et la mère danseuse exotique de Lola, une figure fréquente du mouvement reste toujours ignorée : la mère sexuelle. En utilisant une combinaison de la théorie de la culture visuelle et la psychanalyse féministe, cette rédaction examine la figure de la mère sexuelle comme elle est comprise dans les films de la Nouvelle Vague ainsi que dans leurs réponses critiques et leurs matériaux promotionnels.

La politique des auteurs a imprégné les films de la Nouvelle Vague avec une perspective forte subjective masculine. Par conséquent, ils représentent la mère comme exclusivement extérieure au spectateur. La mère sert souvent comme une mère littérale ainsi qu’une Mère Phallique qui est désirable à l’alter ego masculin pour son corps ainsi que son ventre, comme dans le cas de l’échange du corps de Catherine dans Jules et Jim (Truffaut, 1963). Telles narratives représentent un fantasme culturel de dominance sur la mère qui menace l’ordre masculin avec son statut social élevé. Ces films qui font de la
Reflections on Method

For those unfamiliar with the psychoanalytic theorists that I am referencing, this section serves as a brief discussion of those ideas by Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Laura Mulvey, and Luce Irigaray that are essential to my discourses surrounding the mother on film.

Freudian psychoanalytic theory describes that, during childhood, the child (assumed male) feels one and whole with the mother. Once he realizes that the mother lacks the phallus, he interprets the lack as a punishment, and the mother subsequently represents the castration anxiety. In this view, for the child to achieve healthy psychological development, he must instead identify with the father, accepting the Law of the Father. This is important to understand because it plays into the idea of the Abject Mother as E. Ann Kaplan describes it in the context of cinema—if the mother is to be rejected, then her spilling out into the public sphere is potentially harmful and must be resolved in the film’s narrative through symbolic domination.

Laura Mulvey applies this psychoanalytic narrative to cinema in her landmark essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” to describes what she calls the “male gaze” inherent to the language of popular cinema. Mulvey argues that the language of cinema is based around a “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure”\(^{164}\) meant to evoke a satisfaction for the spectators, as they are traumatized by constant reminders of their Lack. In this way, film satisfies two pleasures. The first is scopophilia; in the same way that Peeping Toms receive sexual satisfaction from watching forbidden bodies from a safe

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distance, the filmgoer gets the “illusion of looking in on a private world” which allows them to project repressed desire onto the performer. The second pleasure is narcissism; the film screen regresses the spectator back to the Lacanian mirror phase (where the child first recognizes themselves in a mirror), allowing them to get absorbed in the narrative and identify with what is on screen. Traditionally, this has meant that film is structured by a male gaze that makes the woman’s appearance “coded for strong visual and erotic impact” and gives them a quality of “to-be-looked-at-ness.” The man watches, the woman is watched; the man acts, the woman is acted upon; the man is active, the woman passive. Even if the woman is not an erotic object for the men within the film, the film’s form presents her as such to the spectator. By understanding how the gaze is constructed, we can both examine how auteur theory amplifies male control and more clearly articulate the kinds of pleasure that New Wave films elicit when they sexualize the mother.

Luce Irigaray describes the relationship between the social values of the mother and the prostitute in her essay “Women on the Market.” Re-working the ideas of Levi-Strauss and Marx, she concludes that modern-day society is based upon the exchange of women as commodities between male “consumers.” In the same way that capitalism gives humanity a way to control nature, so does this sexuate economy allow men to control the identities of women, taking the “natural” body of the woman and splitting her identity into two parts: use and exchange value (or private and social use). This patriarchal exchange-based system sustains itself by attributing three “market values” to women: the “mother,” which has all use value and no exchange value (the “legal tender” of the sexuate economy);

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165 ibid., 836.
166 ibid., 837.
168 ibid., 170
the “virgin,” who is nothing but exchange value; and the “prostitue,” who is able to straddle both exchange and use value. Irigaray’s framework will prove useful for comparing female figures in French cinema, as I will be able to see to what extent these films uphold or distort this traditional model.
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