

Critique

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*Marseille* - The Crisis of Narrative

*Marseille* opens with a woman framed from the back, driving a cab. She looks offscreen and enquires, ‘Do you know the way?’ The passenger replies in the negative. The woman falls silent and continues to drive. Like in most of Schanelec’s works, the journey is already afoot; we simply stumble across it.

Rudimentary details of a plot emerge. Sophie, a young photographer from Berlin, has done an apartment swap with Zelda from Marseille. She speaks awkward French, though she doesn’t talk much. Schanelec drenches us in detailed longeurs of her life. Sophie traipses through narrow alleyways strewn with parked cars. She rides a bus, impassively gazing out into the distance. She walks into the middle of a busy road and hesitantly takes a photo. She meets a young mechanic (Pierre) who lends her his car. Later, they meet in a bar and indulge in small

talk, the possible signs of a burgeoning relationship. She fumbles for a reply when asked why she decided to travel to Marseille. Pierre’s friend who works at a pizzeria arrives and interrogates Sophie (‘Are you a vegetarian? Carnivore? Alcoholic? Jobless? Virgin?’). Sophie gets the camera roll developed. She arranges the photos on a board. She and Pierre go dancing, where Sophie meets some more of his friends.

Sophie is the quintessential *flâneuse*. She doesn’t walk so much as saunter, driven equally by idleness as by a vague desire to uncover the mysteries of the city. No goal or end point seems to be in sight; Sophie bares herself to the indeterminate totality of human possibilities. Narrative action becomes suspended in favor of an embodied ‘cine-trance’, a curious amalgamation of movement and stasis,

perception and participation. In her saunters, the anonymity of the street comes to the fore. We encounter the tentative allure of unknown faces, of people wrapped up in themselves, destined only to walk by. For brief intervals of time, Sophie becomes one of them, an existence without responsibility, authority, or social identity. In a later scene, when asked what she photographs, Sophie thinks for almost half a minute and then replies, 'Streets'.

Maren Eggert (as Sophie) - the first of many fruitful collaborations - moves with a certain hesitancy, a lassitude of demeanor that automatically makes her a citizen of the street. In her, we see a face that is expressive in and through its resolute non-expressiveness.

One of Schanelec's professed reasons for moving from theatre to cinema was a yearning to do what couldn't be done in theatre - work with natural light and original spaces. Coupled with her decision to use direct sound, her work thus acquires a visceral quality, a pure unmediated presence of sounds and pictorial spaces in which the primacy of the moment asserts itself. Schanelec's characters are always already in and of the world, inextricably bound together with the filmed locations.

In her *Marseille Diary* (published on MUBI), Schanelec elaborates on her technique - she doesn't want to explain anything, only report. She further quotes Walter Benjamin: "present events, as it were, dry, draining them entirely of psychological explanations and opinions of every sort". There is an emphasis on the concrete materiality of the visible, a direct imprint of reality that eschews narrativization or causal logic. We become aware of the smell, touch, and taste of life passing by, of the weight that time and the attrition of 'boredom' lend to each gesture and action.

This everydayness assumes a paradoxical characteristic in her works - on the one hand, it belongs to insignificance, the raw 'there is' (*es gibt*) of the world, with no meaning beyond itself; and on the other, it acts as the site of all possible signification, of banal actions that become events in themselves. In *Marseille*, this ambivalence simultaneously creates and retracts meaning. Everything is fortuitous, but also instantly inevitable.

Sophie ambulates through residential streets and across bridges, occasionally taking photos of buildings and busy traffic intersections. Alone at a bar, she sits on a stool and furtively looks around, surrounded by the tumult of human voices. Doors open and close, feet scuffle by, clothes rustle. Outside, cars zoom past. The mundane becomes momentous, punctuated by epiphanous moments of spontaneous felicity, as in the long unbroken shot of Sophie and Pierre awkwardly befriending each other over drinks.

In Schanelec's films, the cinematic image reveals its truth to us precisely when it remains silent, when it has nothing to say.

Schanelec's cinema is one of formal ellipses and studied austerity. Elision of information becomes a signature concern, a deft ability to jump through image-sound blocks, such that the viewer is confronted with two parallel narratives - one that is seen and heard, and one that makes its presence felt through palpable absence. In *Marseille*, Sophie asks Pierre (Alexis Loret) where she can find a rental car. Pierre manages to procure one through a friend. We see the initial conversation, and then their subsequent meeting at a bar, where Sophie returns the keys. The in-between action - it is implied that Sophie travelled outside the city to the coast and the mountains - is omitted. A quote by Bresson - one of Schanelec's foremost influences - aptly summarises her method: 'One does not create by adding but by taking away'.

Ellipsis in her films functions not as a narrative technique but rather, in a Pialat-esque manner, as the narrative itself. Drama is ironed out, such that what is left is the before and after. Edits confound rather than clarify; certain moments are skipped in order to allow others to expand. This disjointedness adds to the feeling of alienation that the characters in her films experience, and in turn transposes the confusion onto the disoriented viewer.

This is exemplified by an astounding sequence in *Marseille*. From the rendezvous at the bar, where Sophie goes out dancing with Pierre, there's a sharp cut to Sophie waiting at a traffic signal. Vehicle headlamps create a bokeh effect in the background. A girl runs up to Sophie and explains in German that she had forgotten her cap at the

McDonald's cashier desk. Next morning (presumably), we see Sophie unlocking a door. Someone comes up to her and asks her where she had been. Marseille, she replies. With a direct (and brutal) cut, Sophie is revealed to be back in Berlin, waddling in her empty and spacious apartment, which Zelda apparently never made use of. New character introductions are abruptly made - Hanna, Ivan, and their son Anton. The camera lingers on, providing slivers of information about their lives. Sophie, whom we had followed for one-third of the film, now becomes a minor character in the story, occasionally disappearing from it altogether.

A sudden dislocation presents itself, a radical overhauling of the narrative that appears in the form of a gaping void. The lengthy Marseille episode turns out to be a preliminary interlude, intended to set the stage for the 'real' drama that will now unfold. The narrative is literally creating itself as it progresses. *Marseille* thus becomes as much about Sophie's journey as about the film's own self-reflexive coming into being.

These structural bifurcations are strewn across Schanelec's works, a consistent thematic concern that results in a multiplicity of storylines. Fragmented narrative departures abound; we are forced to posit a connection between separate events and activities. At the same time, character relationships are problematised and left unclarified, with only clues as to how they might be connected to each other.

Fragmentation is reinforced through framing techniques, the languid alterations between wide shots and tight, boxed-in compositions that collapse the plane into a two-dimensional frontality. Bodies thus appear as changing landscapes, awkwardly shifting in space and unfolding in time.

Gradually, more details emerge. Hanna is a theatre actress and Sophie's close friend. Her husband/boyfriend Ivan is a professional photographer. Their relationship seems to be quite rocky. It is vaguely intimated that Sophie might have feelings for Ivan. Ivan conducts a long-drawn photo shoot of female employees at a factory. The women shuffle nervously and take turns facing the camera. Schanelec cuts to three different angles of the same

sequence - a sideways shot of the women on the chair, a shot of Ivan setting up his camera, and a shot of the women from the frontal perspective of the camera, now a reproduced image. Hanna plays a minor role in a Strindberg play. The same scene is rehearsed three times. Hanna is unable to play her role convincingly.

There is no conclusion to be drawn, no psychological insight into character motivations. The scenes are simply snippets of their lives that Schanelec chooses to show us.

*Marseille* is not simply an experiment with cinematic narrative structure, but also one that subverts the narratives that affect us on an existential level, the fantasies that govern our identity. Schanelec's point is not something as banal as the fact that theatre, that is to say fiction, occasionally spills into real life, but rather something more radical: the two are simply not distinguishable. Rivette's influence is particularly evident here. Schanelec treats both the theatre rehearsal and Sophie's tryst with Pierre with the same objective reverence, refusing to cut away from what is unfolding on screen (the shots drag on for 7-8 minutes). In *Marseille*, roles are played onstage *and* off-stage, the only consolation being that the former ones are clearly demarcated. Both involve identification with a fictitious self-image, and a doomed attempt at uncovering the unbounded interiority of individual subjectivities.

Sitting by the poolside, Hanna spills her woes to Sophie. She is unhappy with Ivan, but unable to understand why. Words spill out of her mouth, jumbled and incoherent. Her tone becomes increasingly accusatory - 'Sometimes I think you only come because of Ivan or Anton... it's easy to admire Ivan when you don't have to put up with his arrogance or perfectionism...'

Sophie finally says, 'What are you talking about? What do you expect from me?' to which Hanna incredulously replies, 'Why can't you understand me?'

Sophie takes a deep breath - 'You're not really unhappy, it's just an act. You're acting because you can't stop acting.'

Both turn their faces away. A young girl rushes past them in a swimsuit. The argument gives way to oblique glances and silence. Schanelec's focus



is on orality rather than speech, where enunciations come tumbling out almost like involuntary gestures. The point is less to communicate than to expunge what lies inside.

A number of her films - including *My Sister's Good Fortune* (1995), *Passing Summer* (2001), and *Afternoon* (2007) - center on family/friend relationships and the inability to maintain them. Characters, caught in the (Chekhovian) stasis of their lives, constantly fail to communicate their inner turmoil; what they have to offer to the other is always lacking ('I don't understand' is one of the most common spoken lines of dialogue in her movies). Verbose and fiery monologues invariably end in misunderstandings and contradictions. The very fact that people expect to be understood becomes a miraculous feat in Schanelec's cinema.

*Marseille* concludes with another seismic ellipsis, perhaps one of the most rattling in recent cinema. On a similar whim that made her travel to Marseille in the first place, Sophie decides to go there again. The passing lights shimmer and dance on her face as she looks out the train window. In the soft light of what looks like early morning, Sophie hurries down the stairs and walks into the distance. There is a straight cut to the torso of a policewoman holding Sophie's shirt. She walks away. Sophie is revealed to be sitting on a chair wearing a yellow dress. A translator sits beside her, as Sophie is interrogated by an officer whom we never see.

A terrifying crime is alluded to. Sophie starts off with a dry account of the incident, her face a blank slate - 'Then I arrived, I went down the stairs... he told me to go, I went...' Midway, she segues into French, almost as if distancing herself from her native language (German) will afford some kind of closure. Her words become more abstract. Out of nowhere, she says "I want to listen to music", the film's final line. Tears spring down her eyes and she breaks down. Later, in one of the few moving shots of the film, the camera tracks along with Sophie as she slowly crosses a busy road and walks into the German embassy.

The jolt that we experienced at Sophie's sudden and unseen transposition from Marseille to Berlin is quadrupled. The shocking contortion into

violence obliterates our erstwhile 'readings' of the film. Narrative and plot wither away in face of an extreme tonal inflection.

The pure imagistic presence of the Marseille interlude now acquires a discursive dimension. Traces of memory, culture, and history begin to seep in. The sounds of a fight taking place in the background as Sophie ambles along a Marseille street, the 'exotic' music at the club to which Pierre and Sophie dance, Pierre's friend's contempt towards Sophie - who works at the pizzeria in Port Des Auffes, where the tourists go - all begin to take on a sinister meaning. The pleasantness of Sophie's stay is overrun by a feeling of dislocation; she now appears as a permanently vacationing urbanite stuck in industrial Marseille, a port city teeming with immigrants.

*Marseille* strives to reflect a fundamental truth of our lived reality - that a major part of our experience of life is inscrutable and ineffable, always subject to the vicissitudes of chance.

Harried interpretations of the crime abound - a deliberate incitement of violence against a privileged Berliner, a flight of fantasy resulting from bourgeois alienation...

Ultimately, all give way to a unique sensory experience, an emotive (non)understanding of what has transpired. *Marseille* disintegrates the moment one tries to apprehend it. Instead, what Schanelec seeks is a liminal response, one that bypasses the barrier of the denotative function of words.

In *I Stayed In Berlin All Summer*, Schanelec's character (Nadine, a writer) and Louis meet at a cafe to discuss Nadine's short story. Louis' criticism is to the point - it's over before one can engage with the characters, there has to be clarity in some form, it lacks a little editing... Nadine's reply is quite instructive - 'I want to evoke memories, like music. Sometimes you get a tune in your head but you can't sing it, yet you remember everything else about it: the moment when you first heard it, someone you were with at the time, or a feeling it evoked, but you cannot remember the notes, and you can't explain why you can't when it was such a simple, poignant melody. Then someone sings it and it all seems whole again,

that for a moment there is truth that can be grasped or that can even be endured.’

What is traumatic to bear is not the lives we lead but the thought of the myriad lives we could have led. Schanelec’s constant references to theatre, literature, and photography - apart from featuring as indicators of fictionality - function as earnest attempts to overcome this arbitrary dimension of life and capture what lies hidden and dormant beneath the surface of everyday reality (In *Passing Summer*, a photographer says that photographs help us see things that are usually hidden).

*Marseille* ends with unhurried shots of a beach. Sophie - barely distinguishable in her yellow dress - walks towards the ocean, one amongst many, a blip in the sea of humanity. Wave after wave caresses the sand. Days slowly turns into night. An existence without identity. A transitory respite from life. Things change, and yet everything remains the same.

(Photo Courtesy: MUBI.COM)

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