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CONVERSATION with JEAN EUSTACHE

By WADE NOVY

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Location and date: Berkeley, California, USA September 24, 1975

INTRODUCTION:

JEAN EUSTACHE had been touring North America, off and on, since ~~last~~ January 1975 when he brought his newest feature film "MY LITTLE LOVES" to the Los Angeles Exposition Film Festival. He came to the Pacific Film Archive, ~~in~~ in Berkeley, California, USA ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ September ^{of the same year} with a good cross sampling of his work including: "SANTA CLAUS HAS BLUE EYES" (1966, 45 Min.s/B&W) - A film on youth ^{ful} apathy, its hangups and wanderings, "LA ROSIERE DU PESSAC" (1968, 52 min.s/B&W) - A beautifully detached documentary, made in Eustache's native village with its famous annual competition to select the most pure virgin of the region, "LE COCHON" (1970, 50 min.s/B&W) - Another documentary, co-directed by Jean-Michel Barjol and Eustache (and edited by Eustache) on the slaughtering of a pig, French peasant style, "THE MOTHER AND THE WHORE" (1973, B&W) - A 3½ hour long epic on the inter-personal relationships of three young adults, this film was an unexpected box office success in its American Art theatre release, and "MY LITTLE LOVES" (1975, 122 min.s/Colour) - Eustache's new film set in a small Southwestern village in France, it deals with the coming of age of a young boy to the world of sexuality, deception — , and romance.

(To Editor: The following Introd. may or may not be used) ↓ (depending on Space Req.s)

I went to see "THE MOTHER AND THE WHORE" more than a ² ~~year~~ ^{ago} and I felt at the time that this film (in particular) would stimulate a lot of heated debate and attract a great many young people to see it because it seemed to reflect a lot of the current confusion and ambivalence that many young people express these days, both in behavior and conversation, either subtly or overtly. My prediction was, moreover, fairly accurate - the general reaction to this film was strong, both here and on the East Coast of

the United States. Essentially, the film is very deceptive in that it presents three young individuals, Alexandre, Marie, and Veronika, who are very attractive and at the same time marginally destructive, who on the one side can "act" very normal and say a great many things that make good sense, but who also don't act on their awareness. Somehow this quality of self-deception and its attendant woes struck a cord in those young Americans who went to see this film, with one of the results being that these same people either hated the film, or loved it, said it was real or unreal,.....and for those that angrily opposed it, the comment I most often heard was; " Marie is the only "normal" one of the bunch" - (she is the young woman who Alexandre lives with, and off). It seemed to me the character of Marie was just as lost as the other two characters in this film, but that she did possess a commercial business of her own (a dress shop) and the ability to keep silent in a humiliating and stressful situation (this is more normal?). The film ~~seems~~ seems to have ~~been~~ been a test (however subtly) of whether some young people can stand to look at their own illusive images and pain....or maybe its just another example of the old adage that audiences don't "see" anymore than they "want to" in any film. If it's any consolation, Jean Eustache was "surprised" at the tremendous popularity of "THE MOTHER AND THE WHORE" in this country and elsewhere, So, it was with a great degree of curiosity, on my part, about "THE MOTHER AND THE WHORE", that we began the following conversation: (Go to first page of conversation) --

WADE NOVY is an Independent film-maker, and writer. He lives in Oakland, California, U.S.A.

Conversation with JEAN EUSTACHEBy Wade Novy

September 24, 1975 Berkeley, Calif. USA

Wade Novy: I'm very interested in a statement you reportedly made ~~in Los Angeles~~ in Los Angeles, CA.where I understand you said that Art is like a mirror, and that it is important not to pay attention to the mirror itself, but to the reflection from it, would you explain what you meant by this statement (I hope I'm quoting you correctly) ?

Jean Eustache: What I said was it is necessary to render ones personality akin to a mirror in such a way that reality reflects itself in it. There's no point in being very original or very inventive. It's not worth the bother to have any ideas. The discipline I believe to be necessary is to abstract from oneself, to transform oneself into a mirror of reality. I don't at all believe in the "creator". What I find to be most important is when an artist has more or less reflected the period in which he is living, the "air" of the times. When your doing something like this it is important not to have any ideas, you must try and breath the air purely, the air of the times. Movies are very good for this work. The most difficult thing to do, though, is to capture the "light" of your story and period and locale. The same story can't take place the same way in two different locales, this would be to deny the influence of the "light".

W.N.: When your film "The Mother and the Whore" was first shown here in the USA the reaction, from the young people I've spoken to about this film, was very strong, *AND*I think these young people (who are around the same age as your characters) did, in fact, identify with the film, some ^{agreeing with} the reflection of themselves, and some not....

J.E.: I'm surprised by your comment, because when I made this film I thought I was going to shock people. When I talked to young people in France about making this film they reacted in disagreement with me; they said "I don't think like that". So I felt I really bothered their ideas about themselves. It's a film which is a series of monologues, of dialogues, of points of view, most of them uninteresting, and some interesting. I wanted the characters to embody the opposite points of view about everything that was said or thought during their time and period, and what I thought was; in every paradox there is always a reality, there's always a small part of a paradox that is very very true, very correct, and also less correct at the same time.... so I find it strange that you've said young people recognize themselves in this film, maybe it's true, but I'm surprised, I'm not sure about this.

W.N.: What I'm saying is—the reaction was very strong—some identified and others did, indeed, disagree with the film, but in my opinion those who were opposed to this film (and they were angry with it) also saw themselves...so here's your paradox.

J.E.: Yes, yes. That's interesting. I don't exactly know what to make of it. The film's greatest success was in Germany, more for instance, than in France. The success of this film is something I don't understand.

W.N.: Of the people I spoke to about this film, most of them rejected the characters of Alexandre and Veronika in favor of Marie, the one they saw as more like them, more "normal", ^{mostly} ~~but~~ this comment came ~~from~~ from those who were ~~more~~ opposed to the film.

J.E.: All three of them are neurotic in different ways. Alexandre and Veronika make their neurosis known in words, as opposed to Marie who is more silent. Perhaps Alexandre and Veronika are more likeable or more detestable, that all depends on the spectator.

W.N.: My feeling is that all three of them use each other in order to try and make up for their own feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, including Marie.

J.E.: Yes, yes. They all have power over each other, and they all try and hang on to each other, so as not to die. They hang on to each other in desperation, in the most hurtful ways....like someone who's drowning and doesn't know how to swim.

W.N.: I don't know what French desperation looks like, but ^{here} in America these people wouldn't be considered down and out, yet, at least not economically. ^{I WANT TO ADD} the people I mentioned, who saw and spoke to me about this film, were ^{MAINLY} middle class working young people.

J.E.: I agree, but these people (characters) don't know how to deal with their times, consciously or unconsciously, and so they become destructive. They are impotent to accept Life such as it presents itself. I wanted to take young people, and inversely of what's usually done in the cinema, I wanted to present very handsome young people who are dying of suffering. This is not usually the situation, usually handsome young people go towards Life with some hope, but here they try to destroy each other and they suffer terribly...they are helpless.

W.N.: From what I can see ^{here in the U.S.A.} there are ^{MANY} ~~many~~ young people ~~who~~ who are struggling for their emotional and economic independence, and I think this film, somehow, spoke to these people. Moreover I feel that ^{these} ~~many~~ young people ~~here~~ are functional (that is they have jobs and so on) but they are in some conflicts emotionally about accepting our contemporary society, such as it is ~~today~~ today.

J.E.: Yes, well I'm in complete agreement with you...It seems to me in the films up to now one didn't see this kind of story, one always saw films of social settings, and social combat that goes with ^{A PARTICULAR} ~~a~~ social problem. I purposely created characters who aren't doing anything, because I wanted to make an existential film, and not question social problems. It's not a question of whether the world is "just" or "not just"...it is a question of the human condition. It's not whether we need socialism or a liberal society, that's not it. I'm asking myself about the ^{PERSONAL} ~~human~~ human

essence ~~of the~~
 conditions, because the human condition is my fate, and man's fate.

W.N.: ~~This kind of film is~~ ^{not} made here, and I think this is also why the film was received so well;--because some young audiences here are very thirsty for what ^{you} filmed in France.

J.E.: It is for economic and commercial reasons you don't make this kind of film in the USA. The American film is a prisoner of its producers commercial opinions and the commercial arguments surrounding its production. An American ~~film~~ commercial film has to be justified financially, although I think independent producers could make a film like this in America. I can make this kind of inexpensive film in France, but of course we also have the money problems too. "The Mother and the Whore" was made very cheaply. When I made this film I was having a rough time in my life. I had made short films and medium length films, and they all had made some money, which is fairly rare, and they all got good criticism, but I still couldn't get any money for a long time to make a film, before "The Mother and the Whore". It was a very uncomfortable period for me, and it lasted a long time. It was due to this "Malaise" that I took up the subject of "The Mother and the Whore". I had personal reasons to make this film. It was a time of crisis for me, and there are these moments of crisis where I think : ... we are more receptive to the world, where we perceive Life around ourselves more clearly, and ask ourselves more questions than we normally do.....It is was during this time that I could tell you only what I felt--for each day at a time. "The Mother and the Whore" is a film I wrote in that present tense and it is a film in the present. I did it without thinking about it, and it's a film I ~~personally~~ ^{personally} detest because it is a film where I am speaking about myself. I don't like the image of myself in this film, but I needed to do it at the time. The whole thing is not past me yet.....

W.N.: It appears to me that your new film "My Little Loves", you are still dealing with a fateful situation, in which society forces certain kinds of images on us, in this case the young boy.

J.E.: "My Little Loves" is a story of a little boy who discovers the world, at least I hope it is that, that's what I wanted to do. The boy is naked to a world he didn't expect; because in essence when one comes into the world there is a promise, a promise of Life...this film, then, is a story of promises not kept. It is a little abstract, what I'm saying, ~~it is better if people see the film.~~
 "The Mother and the Whore" is a story of several deceptions. It is different in that it is a film where ~~nothing~~ nothing moves or develops, there is no evolution backwards or forwards, it's a story of a very neurotic crisis, it's at the same time a film of the ~~illness~~ illness of our time, besides the characters themselves. The only circular nature to the film is the fact that the characters don't learn anything in the end. In "My little Loves" the film "moves" because the boy is ^{still} learning, ~~he is~~ ^{still} learning about deception.

"The Rose of Pessac" is similar in the sense that I made this film as a document about my country at a certain time, ~~and~~ I don't play an overt role in this film, that is I don't take an obvious point of view, but this way of working is very similar to "The Mother and the Whore" where I felt I couldn't film anything else at the time but what I filmed....the age was like that ~~for~~ me, I couldn't do anything else. I made "The Mother and the Whore" precisely because I was lost in the situation it presents. The fiction films and documentaries, it's all the same.

W.N.: So, even if a film of yours is a documentary, couldn't one say then, say that they are all autobiographical?

J.E.: Yes, I often mention this to people who try and make an opposition between "invention" and "reality". I don't believe there is so called invention. Inventions are just as real as reality. As soon as sound and the film are put together it isn't reality anymore, it's fiction.

W.N.: How do you distinguish between something you've written, then, as fiction, and your documentaries?

J.E.: That's a difficult distinction, but even when I talk directly from myself I have the impression I am representing reality, because instead of turning the equipment on something out there, I just turned the camera around and directed it towards me. I don't see any difference between the films I wrote and the documentaries, except in the films I wrote about me I feel I have less control,... Although I have just as much necessity to do them. I see documentaries as fiction films, and *vica versa*.

W.N.: You mentioned "control" and I'm interested to know what you mean by this, what's your definition of control?

J.E.: Control is perhaps not too accurate a word. I think in all my films I'm expressing something which would get lost if I didn't say it. I have the necessity to say "civilization was like this or that". This is true of "My Little Loves" also....where I'm talking about (among other things) how the young men meet the young women ~~and~~ and love in a small village in France. The "rite" of how they get to know the young women. It's been that way there for centuries and centuries. In "The Rose of Pessac" I filmed a ceremony that has existed like that ~~since~~ since the Middle Ages. In "The Mother and the Whore", there is nothing exactly like this, there is no rite, unless there is one which existed on the Left Bank of Paris, Saint Germain des Pres, ~~a~~ ^{perhaps} a rite we will know later on was a rite. I didn't know if it was one when I was filming it. These rites carry a name, it's called "Civilization". I like to see these things in other films, these rites in common.

W.N.: Is there, possibly, a rite in desperation, or -

a rite of being unresolved, a rite to the kind of non-acceptance of Life situation that you create in "The Mother and the Whore" ?

J.E.: I don't know whether I experienced that at ~~that~~ the time, ~~and~~ also I feel this film is still in the present, ~~and~~ very much with me in the present. If desperation is a rite-I don't know, but this film is still ~~as~~ disagreeable to me as three years ago. It is a film which turns me back on myself, even now, and that's why I don't like it.

W.N.: If this question is too personal let's forget it, but I'm wondering what it is you haven't resolved in ^{the} creating of "The Mother and the Whore"? Is there something you still need to resolve about desperation?

J.E.: (laughing) Everything is still to be resolved! I don't at all believe that films can solve our (or my) problems, actually they make the problems last a little ^{bit} longer! Making movies is like someone who's dying of hunger and who has a little to eat from time to time, all it does is help him exist a little longer, it keeps his condition going a bit longer...It's odd, in the beginning I didn't know what kind of films I would be making, I didn't know that I'd be doing what I'm doing now.

W.N.: I'd like to ask you about the semi-classical structure of your films, about the form and content in your works...

J.E.: I don't raise the question of "content" in my work, I only deal with the question of "form". New things in Life require new forms. In order to say something new I invent a new form. The "classical" structure of my films is a trap because it's an "appearance" which hides something else.

W.N.: In "The Mother and the Whore" you create strong characters, and then it seems you also create a "distance" between them and us, this kind of thing reminds me of Robert Bresson's films a little, what do you think of Bresson?

J.E.: I admire Bresson a lot, but I don't know what ideas he has about this "distance" thing. His film is a synthesis, of course, of many elements. I don't like films which make the spectator participate in the action, for example; when there is a situation where the audience laughs at a cost to the character; because the audience knows more things about the situation in the film than the character does ... I don't at all like that. In the films I'm making the character always knows more than the public because that's very normal, because I know that, in reality, the public remains in its place, in their chairs, they never enter into the film, so when they try to enter into my film there is no door...When they ^{think they} enter the film, it is a trap, they don't enter;...when the film finishes they are perhaps x discontent to have remained on the outside, then they try to understand something, but there is nothing to understand, everything has been said. What makes a film "commercial" is when the audience "ends the film", that gives them a big satisfaction.

To give you another example; in the works which I like, like "A la recherche du temps perdu" (Remembrance of Things Past) by Marcel Proust, well, with this book the reader brings nothing, - the book closes on itself (or comes full circle by itself) and the reader when he has finished this book is on the outside, he can begin the book again, but he'll never enter into it. He doesn't have a place in it. His place is that of the reader only, and I try to do the same thing....it is my most difficult task: to keep the spectator in his place, to make sure that he has nothing to do with the peopleⁱⁿ the film. This is the "distance" I want to produce between the spectator and the screen. I make it so he never enters.

W.N.: If, for instance, in "The Mother and the Whore" you create untraditional characters, ~~don't you possibly risk a fascination occurring in the~~ spectator, and a loss of this distance you want?

J.E.: I don't believe so, I don't know, I don't believe so....you see it's the "duration" of the film, for it is very long, ..it is this that imposes the existence of the character. I don't believe the characters create any relationship to the spectator. It is the "duration" that forces a relationship between the audience and the characters. There is no effort on my part to do the other thing, to have them enter into a character. The longer the film lasts - the less the effort is for the spectator to get to know the characters, it is not a matter of "dramatic" construction, it is a matter of the duration of ^{the} time in the film. The knowledge of the characters progresses at the same pace as the film itself. This is why some people complain that the first hour of this film is dull; I've heard a lot of people say this, but I myself know that the first hour is the most successful part for me, and I know the result of my work. These people find this first hour boring because of the kind of pace they ~~impose~~ impose on the film when they sit down to watch it.... I never make camera movements to "dramatize" a scene, to make it more dramatic, for example; when the camera goes into closer angle it is so one can see more closely, it's not to make it more dramatic.

W.N.: You've mentioned some circumstances surrounding your creating "The Mother and the Whore"; is there usually some specific feeling or energy that is a major motivation for each film? What about your new film "My Little Loves" ?

J.E.: That depends. It's variable. In "The Mother and the Whore" it was great anger. For "My Little Loves" it was a scenario that I'd been thinking about for years, and couldn't manage to write...It's the most interesting exercise I've done, not the most successful, but the most interesting, because I tried to make a film that I would have liked to have made at the age of twelve years old. All the ideas that are in the film are the ideas I had when I was twelve years old, they are not the ideas I had at thirty years old. In the middle of all the difficulties in making this film; all the strange and unreal things, I kept my faith by remembering that

I was sure I had thought the things in this film at the age of twelve, and it seems I've succeeded a little in my objectives. The young boy in the film isn't very happy, and he steals away in thought, evades his reality by going to see American films (in particular) and he dreams about "Hollywoodian" actors and movies. This story, for me, has justified itself somewhat since it is being shown in Hollywood now;....so now Hollywood can go see a film of a boy who went to see its movies twenty years earlier. It is as if this love story doesn't just go one-way, it's as if the film was made for this exchange, now ^{it's} a two-way love affair. It is a film which ends on itself and comes full circle. If we talk about destiny, one can say he went to see American films so that one day Hollywood, in its turn, would go to see him, as if this exchange was foreshadowed when he was twelve years old, it was already "written" this would happen when he was twelve years old. It is not a film by an adult on a child, it is a film written by a child.

W.N.: This reminds me, I've never completely understood the European fascination with the American film; for my part I'm quite tired of seeing the "Hollywood" dream-world film....

J.E.: Now I am too, but when I was a child they were fascinating. In the 1950's, in France, what happened was all the American films since 1939 came out, ~~after the war~~...immediately after the war there was an immense number of American films in France, and they had a lot of importance there because the children liked these films more, -the American film was more spectacular than the European film.

W.N.: Since you seem to concentrate quite a bit on the collective [&] cultural "rite", how do you see the function of "habit" in your life, and work?

J.E.: I don't know. I'm the first one surprised to see that I'm beginning a scenario the way I began the preceeding ~~one~~, ~~etc.~~...this happens in spite of myself....this bothers me a little.

W.N.: I'm thinking "habit" and "ritual" are really tied together, and I see a lot of both of these in your films, I'm wondering if the function of "habit" is also a way of hiding our basic motivations and feelings?

J.E.: Perhaps I believe the opposite.....I like people who repeat the same gestures, the same hours of work, the same acts of leisure, the same restaurants every evening. I like Life as a mechanical thing, as a mechanism, that is why, in "The Mother and the Whore" the people go to the same cafes, and say the same things....that's what I want...I even force it to happen like that..... Can I tell you a little story?, then I have to be going...

W.N.: That's fine, please do.

J.E.: About ten years ago, Alberto Giacometti would eat at a restaurant in Paris called "La Coupole", every evening.

(contd.)

He always came in after midnite, and he ordered oysters, and I was there almost every nite, too. And I would see him, and he would take apart an oyster and then watch the man or woman opposite him, and he seemed so fascinated by the man or the woman that he would look at them for twenty minutes at a time, and he would do this until 2:30am in the morning. He had only eaten two or three oysters out of a dozen, and sometimes a man or woman, not knowing him, would look at him and you could see on their face; "what's the matter with that guy, what's the matter with him, he keeps looking". I had a friend who often came with me to this place, to look at him, and one night he said "I'm going to look at him" and my friend sat opposite him and just looked at him for two whole hours.....

W.N.: Is this, then, an example of one not caring about their "image" anymore?

J.E.: It's an example of what I like in a regularity of habit, it's pretentiousness, - it's in the gestures always repeated that one can approach the meaning of Life, the meaning of things.

W.N.: The fact, though, that Giacometti could allow himself to be so fascinated by others....isn't this a demonstration of a kind of maturity?

J.E.: Oh yes, certainly, but I'm talking about his last days....his last months.

W.N.: Does "acceptance" take that long?

J.E.: Perhaps, ..in order to accept it.

END (Of conversation)

Additional NOTES (can be used or not):

After the screening of "MY LITTLE LOVES" at Wheeler Auditorium/Pacific Film Archive U.C. Berkeley, CA. Jean Eustache responded to a question about his detached style in this new film by saying (and I'm para-quoting from memory) "because of the situation these days, I think it is better to make cinema in a more appropriate style to fit the times, and that is to film that which is ^{dead}; I purposely made the characters in this film appear puppet like and wooden" (I got the feeling Eustache was ^{SADDED} ~~by~~ by the disintegration of his countries' traditions which used to really bring people together....before TV and sensationalistic fantasy films-escapism).....and later...."I want to go back to the origins of cinema, when people knew they were watching a film" (He uses many almost "walk on" kind of ^{Set-ups} in "MY LITTLE LOVES" which most often close with a "fade-out"....He used a lot of "Fades" in "THE MOTHER AND THE WHORE" as well).