

Document Citation

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| Title | À nos amours: Pialat's time piece |
| Author(s) | Dan Sallitt |
| Source | <i>Reader (Los Angeles, Calif.)</i> |
| Date | 1984 Nov 16 |
| Type | review |
| Language | English |
| Pagination | |
| No. of Pages | 2 |
| Subjects | |
| Film Subjects | À nos amours (To our loves), Pialat, Maurice, 1983 |

A Nos Amours: Pialat's Time Piece

L.A. Reader
11/16/84



A Nos Amours

★ ★ ★ 1/2

A NOS AMOURS

Directed by Maurice Pialat
Written by Arlette Langmann and Pialat
With Sandrine Bonnaire

By Dan Sallitt

Maurice Pialat, the French director best known for his 1980 film *Loulou*, doesn't give us easy access to his art. His work seems at first a welter of disorganized realism, strikingly authentic but shapeless. In the early scenes of his films, we can appreciate only his keen eye for gen-

uinely life-sized behavior and his choice of social settings that most film makers ignore. But the passage of time reveals Pialat's brilliance—because time is his subject, the most conspicuous element of his universe by dint of its seeming absence.

Suzanne (Sandrine Bonnaire), a pretty fifteen-year-old, is introduced during an outdoor rehearsal for an all-girl play. Because Pialat shapes his narrative with complete indifference to exposition, we need quite a few scenes before we can latch on to a plot; the irregular storytelling style will later seem a key to the film's power, but it is undeniably an obstacle to our emotional involvement

at first. Slowly, we piece together the situation: Suzanne is away at summer camp; the older boy who takes her away for a weekend boating holiday is her brother Robert (Dominique Besnehard); Suzanne's boyfriend Luc (Cyr Boitard) has pitched a tent in the fields outside the camp and waits for Suzanne to steal away for periodic visits.

The events of the film's first fifteen minutes constitute a turning point in Suzanne's life, but nothing in Pialat's style hints at this. Still a virgin, Suzanne fends off the sexual advances of Luc, who complains of her growing indifference. But shortly afterward she meets an American boy at a camp party and impulsively sleeps

with him. Her misery at the mechanical affair wears off, and she throws herself into a series of casual sexual relationships.

Pialat's camera, here as in the rest of the film, is as intentionally inexpressive as his engineering of the plot. Actors cross the foreground of the image at arbitrary moments, as if Pialat were filming with a hidden camera; violent wobbling in previously stationary shots is tolerated. The visuals are not willfully garbled, a la Casavetes, but none of the compositions have much intrinsic emotional force. Pialat wants to eliminate, as much as possible, our sense of the artist actively intervening in the presentation of the material; this illusion of artlessness breaks down as the film progresses, with well-calculated effect.

What is in front of the camera, on the other hand, demands attention for its remarkable truthfulness. As in his 1979 *Passe Ton Bac D'Abord (Graduate First)*, Pialat's depiction of the interaction of teenagers is devoid of dramatic exaggeration or romanticized emotionality. We see adolescence with its guarded emotions, its easy contempt and cruelty, and its moral complacency, all qualities that are usually glossed over because they muddy the clean lines of identification and drama.

A jarringly abrupt scene transition brings Suzanne back to Paris, where she breaks up with Luc and runs into trouble reconciling her increasingly loose lifestyle with the demands of her troubled lower-middle-class family. Her father (played by Pialat, in an excellent performance), buckling under the strain of a bad marriage, responds with unthinking brutality to his daughter's increasing defiance. Yet the father-daughter relationship is unusually close, as we learn during an affecting late-night conversation after Suzanne returns from one of her flings. Confessing that he is about to leave home, the father shows his willingness to confront the changes in his daughter, an attitude that contrasts startlingly to his behavior earlier the same night.

The father's departure throws the family into chaos. Suzanne's mother (Evelyne Ker) cracks under the strain of solitude and the undisguised contempt of her daughter. The violence between them is mediated by the brother Robert, who, feeling the need to take his father's place as head of the household, tries to curtail his sister's promiscuity with beatings and verbal abuse. What is remarkable about these family scenes is the comprehensiveness of Pialat's portrait. His casual time-jumps juxtapose scenes of upheaval with scenes of resigned coexistence and even unstated affection. Again, Pialat abandons the clear dramatic line of Suzanne's emotional crisis (though the topic is never far from our minds) in favor of a genuine representation of the complexity of family bonds. If Pialat always gives us the impression that his films contain the first true depiction of whatever milieu he focuses on, it is not merely because he deals with areas of society that are rarely treated in films, and not even because of the amazing realism of the performances, but because his vision is sociologically rounded and complete—a rare achievement in a work of fiction.

About halfway through the film Pialat's style seems more conspicuous than it did at the outset—only because its power is cumulative, not because of any actual change. Years slip away imperceptibly between the rough-edged scene transitions, but we don't perceive the passage of time until a stray line of dialogue tips us to the changes in the characters' lives. All Pialat's directorial decisions—the documentary immediacy of the acting, the emphasis on ambient sound and light quality, the sudden openings and closings that turn scenes into scene fragments—serve to undercut our sense of time and locate every moment in an eternal present. Memory has no place in Pialat's style: Rebelling against the dictates of conventional narrative film making, he refuses to give weight to repetitions or consequences, turning each scene into an autonomous event. The duty of supplying the film with a sense of time devolves upon us, and Pialat's vivid present-tense observations take on a powerful double aspect as we locate them in the film's history.

To suppress time is to suppress drama, and the apparent randomness of what we are shown is Pialat's method of neutralizing the pull of the past on his improvisatory interludes. The everyday events that Pialat chooses to show often run counter to the pattern of Suzanne's life, just as our day-to-day experiences rarely reflect our own direction. Overarching unhappiness isn't incompatible with hours or days of unthinking pleasure in Pialat's universe; a great many moments of violence or passion can be assimilated into a life dominated by ennui. The longer we live with the characters, the more we tune into the solemn dichotomy implicit in Pialat's style: The abstract (time) vies with the concrete (the present) for control of our outlook and our emotions.

Slowly, Suzanne's destiny becomes clear. Her first love, Luc, with whom she broke up in an early throwaway scene, may have been her last chance at happiness. Romance and sex are temporary means of staving off emptiness; love may no longer be an option for her. Occasionally she articulates these sorrows in vague attempts to make contact with her father, her brother, a lover; mostly she finds whatever consolations the present offers. If her story is a tragedy, we can only find that tragedy on the abstract plane to which Pialat's concrete style paradoxically guides us.

Pialat's 1967 feature debut, *Me*, garnered scattered praise when it arrived in America in 1970, but *Loulou* is his only film to spend much time on the art-house circuit. From what little evidence we have—and more would certainly be welcome—*A Nos Amours*, his sixth feature, appears to be his finest work yet. ■