



SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022: 94=

Pierrot le Fou

It would be as hard to remake *Pierrot le fou* as it would be to forget it. Somehow its rueful lovers have to be reconciled to changed times. The film is 44 years old now [at time of writing], which is older than the two central characters whose remains drift away in the sea and the sun. Many things have gone with those two – the Vietnam War, that particular type of sports car, the possibility of an audience that will understand when Ferdinand (Jean-Paul Belmondo) starts to do a Michel Simon imitation. But the last time I looked, the south of France was still there and it was still possible for escaping souls to go south ‘like spirits through a mirror’. If you drive your car into the ocean on an impulse today, there may spring up the brief arc of rainbow that crowned the spray in the summer of 1965. But is it the same rainbow?

No, you can’t go back: the real Belmondo has had a stroke and Anna Karina perhaps now resembles the Princess Aïcha Abadie (who appeared as herself in the film) more than she does Marianne Renou. But no one makes that kind of fatal summer romance any longer, the one in which a couple break out of and lives because they have realised they only live once, or because they are tempted to replay *Lolita* in the Midi – not a little girl and a grown man this time, but a pairing in which he talks to her with words and she looks at him with feelings. (That comes from the film and sounds as plaintive as mid-1960s feminist speak, but it’s not far from the novel *Lolita*, where Humbert has the achy feelings and the heroine pours her hipster slang into his avid ears.) These days you might do it again as a story about a director and an actress who drift apart while they are making a film called *Pierrot le fou*.

But wait a minute: as so often, Godard made not just his own film but an autopsy (or analysis) of it at the same time. Godard had acquired *Pierrot*’s literary source – Lionel White’s American novel *Obsession* – as early as February 1964. The book concerned the affair between a young woman and a much older man. Godard’s first thought on casting was Richard Burton as the man, and he considered Sylvie Vartan as the girl. When he came to make the film he settled for Belmondo and Karina (only seven years apart in age). Something else had happened in the meantime: Karina had made *Le Voleur de Tibidabo* with Maurice Ronet. They had an affair, and Godard and Karina were divorced in December 1964.

So *Pierrot le fou* is an account of the breakdown of a love affair, but it is played out by two people – Karina and Godard – who had already lived the story in reality. So why did they relive their own torture? Well, Godard always said at the time that he did not know how to make a film without Karina – *Pierrot* was their sixth film together in four years. He added that he was afraid she might not have a career without him. And maybe he, or she, but never quite the two of them at the same time, dreamed of a reconciliation. The obvious comparison is with Welles’ *The Lady from Shanghai*, an enterprise entered into after the estrangement of Welles and Rita Hayworth, yet playing with the prospect that they might fall in love again if doing it on camera.

Richard Brody’s account of the film’s making in his excellent book *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard* does not paint a sentimental picture of what happened. The couple could hardly talk to each other, and when they did it was in snarls and groans. Moreover, Karina had to see that

the scenario of *Pierrot* was depicting her as the wanton, betraying figure, the woman who had given up on the austere, lonely Jean-Luc (even Jean-Luc the misogynist). How could she trust the ordinary viewer of the film to see that Godard was a secret enabler in her disloyalty, urging her on by coldness and disdain, and being the complaisant husband who almost directs his wife's affair – everyone would have had to have seen *Le Mépris* to get that point.

Perhaps Karina also guessed that just a few murderous, smouldering glances into the camera would establish her point of view. On film, Marianne's restless desire to do something – to move, dance, sing, kill and pout – is so refreshingly at odds with the self-regarding pose of Ferdinand, who only wants to read and write, eventually filling the Techniscope image with his bleak little poems in red and blue. So the movie goes a long way to undermining the most Godardian qualities: intellect, language, reflection and analysis are constantly put to the test by colour, light, movement, space and the variety of apparently improvised human performances. That encompasses not just Karina's pacing-tiger act, but the unexpected narrative by Raymond Devos, the lecture on film dynamics by Samuel Fuller, the street theatre Vietnam show, the brief lives of passers-by, and the whole array of quotation and meta-reference that crowd together in the movie.

Pierrot always felt like a summer-holiday film, but Brody makes clear that it was the most costly and awkward to shoot that Godard had attempted. The Techniscope system was new and director of photography Raoul Coutard needed a lot of side lighting in interiors to get a balanced image. The schedule was June to July 1965, with the picture opening at the Venice Film Festival on 29 August, but the production was as technically complicated as the emotional situation it sought to exploit was delicate. Still, it was Godard's ninth feature in six years, continuing his rapid reappraisal of Hollywood genres – which was regarded as a record-breaking pace until Rainer Werner Fassbinder hit his stride in the 1970s.

Just as Ferdinand is a man who can inhale the smoky atmosphere and intrigue of Velázquez (and *Johnny Guitar*) into his own life, so *Pierrot le fou* stands clear as one of the New Wave films that addresses the value of cultural reference and so many thousand hours lived in the dark. Belmondo's Ferdinand has antic passages, but he is a person forever fascinated by a book, a quotation from Céline or a glimpse of Jean Seberg at the movies. (Of course, Seberg was Godard's first onscreen betrayer in *Breathless*, where the dying Michel calls her 'dégueulasse'.) Whatever Ferdinand does or thinks in the movie he refers to the library – thus a wickedly quick onscreen caper is a collage of Conrad, Stevenson, Jack London, Faulkner and Raymond Chandler. The hero is named Ferdinand after the director's favourite writer of the moment, Céline, whose *Journey to the End of the Night* Godard contemplated filming. But Marianne knows how to piss him off by identifying him as the idiot clown – *Pierrot*. He is too short in life to have another name.

From the nearly crushed music (by Antoine Duhamel), with its heart-breaking plunge into lyricism, to the flaming summer colours by Coutard, *Pierrot le fou* is a film made out of scorched nostalgia; and don't be surprised if the burning turns out to be a hint of torture. It is a movie about dismayed dreams, smothered smiles and resentment bubbling up like blood from the wounds. It is also a work of savage contrasts: on the morning after the first lovemaking, the great Bassiak song 'Jamais je ne t'ai dit que je t'aimerai toujours' is cut against the off-hand discovery of a corpse in the next room. Similarly, jokes and tragedy keep stepping on each other's toes.

Perhaps Anna Karina sometimes felt that Godard had only put her in this film to humiliate her – because she was his and cheap (the shadow of prostitution is never far away in Godard). But I don’t think anyone has found the film short on the pain present in love. When Welles looks at Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai*, it is an American tourist gaping at a famous but absurd pin-up, but when Godard looks at Karina we feel the ruin and despair at being left. Still, it’s likely that Godard the ironist and analyst only made the film because of that masochistic urge to have an ex-lover stub out her last feeling with every look into his camera.

So I still find it a great film, and a warning signal that romance and romanticism were blood being drained out of the corpse called cinema. It’s as if Godard – one of the greatest readers of the medium we have ever had – foresaw that he could hardly make romantic films again. The process of finding the girl, teaching her to act, of having her in life and on the screen would turn camp after *Pierrot*. It’s as if he realised that life had worked out in such a way by 1965 that he was trapped at the start of a long downward slope.

Yes of course the rest is ‘interesting’ and valuable. But in the years 1960 to 1965 (very competitive years, let us admit), Godard was without equal at vamping old story forms with the bittersweet tone of the best pop music of the era. To this day, *Vivre sa vie* and *Pierrot le fou* find their form, their cutting and their way of seeing in the regret with which a horribly bright, learned noirist is drawn into the *plein soleil* of summer cinema. This is why Godard always wore dark glasses – against the sun.

David Thomson, *Sight and Sound*, May 2009

PIERROT LE FOU

Director: Jean-Luc Godard
Produced by: Rome-Paris Films, Paris, Société Nelle de Cinéma et Cinematografica S.p.A.
Presented by: Société Nouvelle de Cinématographie, René Pignères, Gérard Beytout
Photography by: Raoul Coutard
Editing by: Françoise Colin
Colour by: Eastmancolor
Filmed in: Techniscope
Laboratory: LTC
Music by: Antoine Duhamel
Sound: René Levert, Antoine Bonfanti

uncredited
Production Companies:
Productions Georges de Beauregard (Paris), Dino De Laurentiis Cinematografica (Rome)
Producer: Georges de Beauregard
Production Manager: René Demoulin
Assistant Directors: Philippe Fourastie, Jean-Pierre Léaud
Written by: Jean-Luc Godard
Based on the novel Obsession *by:* Lionel White
Camera Operator: Georges Liron
Art Director: Pierre Guffroy

Cast

Jean-Paul Belmondo (*Ferdinand Griffon*)
Anna Karina (*Marianne Renoir*)

uncredited
Dirk Sanders (*Frank, Marianne’s brother*)
Raymond Devos (*man on the pier*)
Graziella Galvani (*Ferdinand’s wife*)
Roger Dutoit, Hans Meyer (*gangsters*)
Jimmy Karoubi (*the dwarf*)
Christa Nell (*Madame Staquet*)
Pascal Aubier (*2nd brother*)
Pierre Hanin (*3rd brother*)
Princess Aicha Abidir (*herself*)
Samuel Fuller (*himself*)
Alexis Poliakoff (*sailor*)
László Szabó (*political exile from Santo Domingo*)
Jean-Pierre Léaud (*young man in cinema*)

France/Italy 1965
110 mins

SIGHT AND SOUND GREATEST FILMS OF ALL TIME 2022

The General

Sun 1 Jan 12:10; Sun 29 Jan 15:10

The Leopard (Il gattopardo)

Sun 1 Jan 14:10; Thu 5 Jan 18:40; Fri 20 Jan 14:00

Sunset Boulevard

Sun 1 Jan 15:50; Fri 27 Jan 14:30; Mon 30 Jan 17:50

Metropolis

Sun 1 Jan 17:55 (+ intro by Bryony Dixon, BFI Curator); Sun 15 Jan 14:40;

Mon 30 Jan 16:30 BFI IMAX

L’avventura (The Adventure)

Sun 1 Jan 18:05; Sun 22 Jan 15:20; Mon 30 Jan 20:15

Touki-Bouki

Mon 2 Jan 13:40; Tue 31 Jan 17:40

The Red Shoes

Mon 2 Jan 13:50; Tue 24 Jan 18:05

Once Upon a Time in the West (C’era una volta il West)

Mon 2 Jan 15:20; Sat 7 Jan 17:15; Sun 15 Jan 16:15 BFI IMAX

Get Out

Mon 2 Jan 18:40; Fri 6 Jan 17:50

Pierrot le Fou

Tue 3 Jan 18:10; Wed 4 Jan 20:30; Thu 19 Jan 20:30

My Neighbour Totoro (Tonari no Totoro)

Tue 3 Jan 18:20; Sun 22 Jan 10:00 BFI IMAX; Sat 28 Jan 13:40

A Man Escaped (Un Condamné à mort s’est échappé)

Tue 3 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 20:30

Black Girl (La Noire de...)

Tue 3 Jan 20:30; Thu 12 Jan 18:15 (+ intro)

Ugetsu Monogatari

Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

Madame de...

Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

Yi Yi (A One and a Two...)

Wed 4 Jan 18:40; Sun 22 Jan 14:00 (+ intro by Hyun Jin Cho, Film Programmer, BFI Festivals)

The Shining

Fri 6 Jan 20:10; Tue 10 Jan 20:10; Sat 21 Jan 20:30 BFI IMAX

Spirited Away (Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi)

Sat 7 Jan 12:10; Sun 22 Jan 12:30 BFI IMAX

Tropical Malady (Sud pralad)

Sat 7 Jan 13:50; Mon 9 Jan 20:40

Histoire(s) du cinema

Sat 7 Jan 16:30

Blue Velvet

Sat 7 Jan 20:30; Fri 20 Jan 20:35; Tue 24 Jan 21:00 BFI IMAX

Sátántangó

Sun 8 Jan 11:15; Sat 21 Jan 13:30

Celine and Julie Go Boating (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)

Sun 8 Jan 14:45; Sat 21 Jan 17:00

Journey to Italy (Viaggio in Italia)

Sun 8 Jan 18:20; Mon 23 Jan 14:30; Fri 27 Jan 20:50

Parasite (Gisaengchung)

Mon 9 Jan 17:50; Wed 18 Jan 17:30 BFI IMAX

The Gleaners and I (Les glaneurs et la glaneuse) + La Jetée

Wed 11 Jan 20:30; Mon 23 Jan 18:10

A Matter of Life and Death

Thu 12 Jan 20:40; Sun 22 Jan 11:30

Chungking Express (Chung Him sam lam)

Thu 12 Jan 20:45; Tue 17 Jan 20:50; Sat 21 Jan 14:15

Modern Times

Fri 13 Jan 17:45; Sun 22 Jan 13:10

A Brighter Summer Day (Guling jie shaonian sha ren shijian)

Mon 16 Jan 18:30; Sat 28 Jan 16:00

Imitation of Life

Wed 18 Jan 20:30; Wed 25 Jan 14:30; Sun 29 Jan 12:30

The Spirit of the Beehive (El espíritu de la colmena)

Thu 19 Jan 18:00; Sat 28 Jan 13:50

Sansho the Bailiff (Sansho Dayu)

Fri 20 Jan 17:45; Thu 26 Jan 17:50

Andrei Rublev

Thu 26 Jan 18:40; Sun 29 Jan 17:20

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup