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How to Love: Thoughts on the 55th New York Film Festival

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Oct 5, 2017

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The big question is how Europeans—judging by their cinema—find so much time for love. It's as if the entire day is available for one long *cinq a sept heures*. Could it be the shorter French work week? A second question concerns how much new light these filmmakers shed on a perennially rich subject.

Lensed in grainy black-and-white by Renato Berta (*Au Revoir les Enfants*), *Lover for a Day* is Philippe Garrel's latest meditation on the anatomy of love, seen through the prism of a provocative triangle. The opening shot zeroes in on Jeanne (Garrel's daughter Esther) sitting curbside with a suitcase and bawling her heart out, presumably after getting bounced from a lover's apartment. In my view, we've watched entirely too many women in film bawling their hearts out over faithless lovers. The scene suggests that French male *auteurs* might not have gotten the memo on how feminism has reoriented women's concerns, at least this side of the pond.

In stark contrast, the following scene finds a young woman in the throes of ecstasy with an older professor in the university's john. Ariane (Louise Chevillotte) turns out to be the lover of Gilles, an older professor (Eric Caravaca) who happens to be Jeanne's father. Jeanne, left homeless, moves in with Dad and Ariane, who's roughly her age. The juicy triangle reconfigures in nicely unpredictable ways.

What's new for Garrel is the exploration of female pleasure through the portrait of Ariane. While much attached to Gilles, she's a sexual free agent, poses for girlie magazines, and can't resist the occasional "lover for a day." (Garrel favors extreme close-ups of Chevillotte's freckled, wholesome

face, which belies her true nature). Before long, there's another guy, another *toilette*. "Your pussy is your plaything," Gilles tells her, before giving her the boot. Oh hell, it's refreshing to see a woman give a man a taste of his own Don Juan.

The script of *Let the Sunshine In* from Claire Denis, who shares screenplay credits with Christine Angot, suggests the two women pooled their worst experiences with piggish or otherwise unacceptable men and inflicted them on Juliette Binoche. Isabelle is a Paris-based painter—and looks as much like one as Zsa Zsa Gabor, but I guess directors can't *always* cast Binoche as an actress.



Again, as in *Lover for a Day*, characters stretch time, day and evening, in amorous pursuits. Denis' film takes as a given the primacy of love, without which life is empty. Yet real, lasting love eludes Isabelle, who at 50 has a long CV in romance. This seems partly because she masochistically hangs with such types as a married banker (an excellent Xavier Beauvois). Post coitum—and he's not much of a lover, Denis implies—he tells Isabelle: Don't ever imagine I'll leave my wife. And: You're charming, but she's extraordinary. (Given how Binoche illumines the screen with her luscious presence, that must be some wife.) At least when the banker announces, "I've just flown in from Brazil and felt like banging you," she slams the door in his face.

Female masochism is so yesterday, though perhaps it still resonates with younger women—if Hannah Horvath in "Girls" is any indication. More provocative is Isabelle's amorous fiasco with an actor (also married) played by terrific Denis regular Nicholas Duvauchelle.

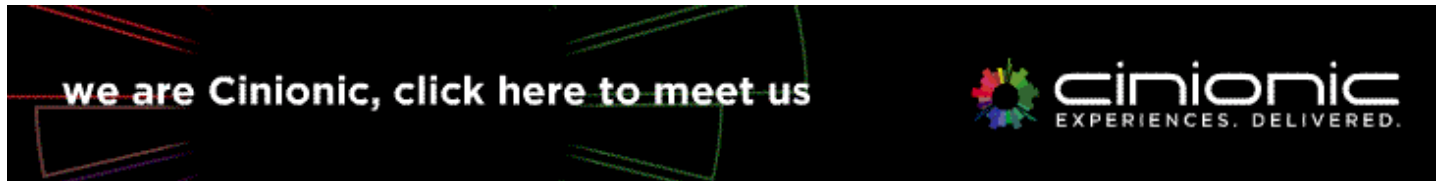
The set-piece of *Let the Sunshine In* trains an amused and jaundiced eye on the couple's push-pull maneuvers after a date, as they sit in the actor's car and Isabelle hopes to continue the evening in her apartment. She gets her wish, but it's a pyrrhic victory: The guy's response to her hunger/eagerness for love is to reject her. We had sex too soon, he objects, explaining with Jesuitical skill that "there's no longer a 'beginning.'" As if she alone were responsible! It's a squirmingly funny moment and designed to incite the rage of female viewers.

The actor's response seems a throwback to a period when women were required to play coquette and manipulate male gratification. In the world according to Claire Denis, such ploys appear to be alive and well.

Curiously, the only happy—or, rather, bittersweet—love story among the press screenings I sampled was the rapturous love between a 17-year-old boy (Timothée Chalamet) and an older male graduate student (Armie Hammer) in Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name*.

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