

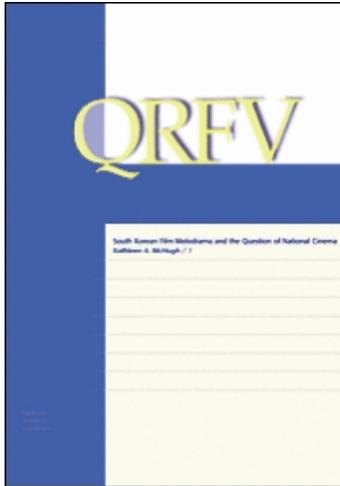
This article was downloaded by: [Shaviro, Steven]

On: 5 October 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 927599655]

Publisher Routledge

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Quarterly Review of Film and Video

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713648686>

La chienne

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Online publication date: 04 October 2010

To cite this Article Shaviro, Steven(2010) 'La chienne', Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 27: 5, 442 – 444

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10509208.2010.495020

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2010.495020>

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Anyone who has seen *The Miracle* knows there was one and only one reason why the film was made: to showcase the acting talents of Anna Magnani. The film's quasi-religious theme and touches of symbolism were certainly a far cry from the harsh realities of war-torn Italy captured by Rossellini in the first two films of his neorealist War Trilogy: *Roma, città aperta* (*Rome, Open City*) {1945}, which introduced Magnani to American audiences, and *Paisà* (*Paisan*) {1946}. Yet, if only to serve Magnani's performance, Rossellini remains faithful to the neorealist style by shooting on location (in Maori on the Amalfi coast) and his use of the long take, which punctuates the despair and exhaustion of the homeless Nanni as she climbs up and down the endless flight of steep stone stairs that outline the village.

Neorealist films were hardly "star vehicles" in the Hollywood sense because they typically focused on ordinary, working class people, played by a mixture of professional actors and non-professionals who were cast because they looked the part. While her performance is best described as a "tour-de-force," Magnani's Nanni is, by Neorealist standards, authentic with no trace of self-consciousness that characterized the star turns of the Hollywood Methods Actors of the 1950s.

When *The Miracle* was first shown in Italy, it was paired with another short and released under the title *L'Amore: Due storie d'amour* {*Love: Two Stories of Love*} (1948). The second film, another Rossellini/Magnani production, was a film version of Jean Cocteau's 1932 riveting monologue/play, *The Human Voice*, in which Magnani gives a heart-wrenching performance as a desperate woman having a complete emotional and mental breakdown while talking on the phone to her lover who is getting married to another woman the following day. The opening credits of *L'Amore* include a title card—a quote by Rossellini that states in clear and simple terms why this film deserves a place on your video shelf: "Questo film é un omaggio all'arte di ANNA MAGNANI" {"This film is a homage to the art of Anna Magnani."}

Stephen Tropiano is the editor of the *Journal of Film & Video* and the author of *Obscene, Indecent, Immoral, and Offensive: 100+ Years of Censored, Banned, and Controversial Films*.

La chienne

STEVEN SHAVIRO

La chienne (1931) is Jean Renoir's second sound film, and undoubtedly one of his greatest. The movie is neither a comedy nor a tragedy, we are told a bit disingenuously in the film's puppet-show Prologue, but just "the eternal story of the man, the woman, and the other man." The man in question is the ironically named Maurice Legrand; he is played by the great Michel Simon, who also starred as a crusty old geezer in Renoir's *Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932) and in Jean Vigo's *L'atolante* (1934). At the start of *La chienne*, Legrand is a slave to dismal routine, convinced that life has passed him by. At work, he is a timid and punctilious accountant; at home, he is continually being humiliated by his insufferable, domineering wife Adèle (Magdeleine Bérubet). Legrand's only escape from his stifling petit bourgeois life comes on Sundays, when he paints for his own amusement, unaware that his artistic efforts might have value in the eyes of connoisseurs. But his life changes when

he meets the woman in the story—the femme fatale, Lulu (Janie Marèze). Legrande falls in love with Lulu, and imagines starting life afresh with her; he remains naively unaware of her relation to the other man—her lover and pimp Dédé (Georges Flamand). Lulu, with Dédé's help, takes Legrand for everything he has, inveigles him into robbing his employer, and even makes money by selling his paintings, which she pretends to have painted herself. This is all a set-up for disaster, of course—but that's not quite what actually happens.

La chienne is something of an experimental film for its time, both in its violation of genre expectations, and in its stylistics. It prefigures Renoir's later films by using direct sound, real locations, long shots with much background detail, and extended tracking shots with relatively deep focus—none of which were common in 1931. The film also exhibits Renoir's lifelong fascination with the tension between real life and theater. On the one hand, *La chienne* is very much a realist film, in the sense that André Bazin later attributed to Renoir. There's always a feeling of life and movement extending beyond the frame; the long shots and long takes—often of actual Parisian boulevards, complete with ambient street noise—continually give us a sense of the larger social environment in which the characters live. On the other hand, the film continually calls attention to its own theatricality: both with its puppet-show prologue, and with the way that it presents turning points in the plot as set pieces, whose cinematography and editing are ostentatiously different from how they work elsewhere in the film.

Consider the key moments of Legrand's evolution, as he discovers that Lulu has been betraying him with Dédé all along. When Legrand sees Lulu and Dédé in bed together, the scene is shot, first through the window from outside, and then from the other side of the apartment, through two framing doorways. Then, the next morning, when Legrand confronts Lulu with his knowledge of her betrayal, and she just laughs at him, the scene is conveyed to us in a shot-reverse shot pattern, which is otherwise almost never used in the film (Renoir generally prefers to show conversation in two-shots, with very little cutting). And finally, when Legrand kills Lulu, and sets up Dédé to take the fall, we get an elaborate parallel montage between street musicians performing outside Lulu's building, and long shots of the actual murder (the camera first focuses on a cat on the balcony, then tracks in through the window to Lulu's apartment). All of these scenes deliberately call attention to their own artifice, in contrast to the free-flowing realism of the rest of the movie.

Essentially, *La chienne* is an anti-bourgeois (or anti-petit-bourgeois) fable. Legrand starts out as a prisoner of both business and domesticity. He feebly imagines relief from this imprisonment, in the twin forms of painterly dilettantism and romantic fantasy. But in the course of the film, he actually does escape from both his miserable marriage and his own illusions. His murder of Lulu, for which he feels no remorse, is presented as an act of liberation. Legrand ends up as a tramp, homeless, happily déclassé, and utterly unconcerned with the bourgeois appearances and values that had previously ruled his life. Along the way, Renoir also gives us scathing portrayals of the art world (where the artist is entirely at the mercy of the critic, who in turn fawns before the rich collector) and of the procedural bureaucracy of bourgeois justice (in the harrowing sequence where Dédé is tried, falsely convicted, and executed for Lulu's murder).

La chienne is based on a novel by Georges de la Fouchardière, which also served as the source for Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945). The two films have almost identical plots; yet the differences between them are quite large, and instructive for the way that they show up the divergent aesthetics of the two directors. (Renoir and Lang also both made films based on the same Zola novel—*La bête humaine* (1938) and *Human Desire* (1954)—but in both cases with somewhat less felicitous results). Lang casts Edward G. Robinson against type in the Michel Simon role, with the wonderfully salacious and slovenly Joan Bennett as the

woman, and the even more wonderfully unctuous and sleazy Dan Duryea as the other man. Lang turns the constraints of the Hays Code to his advantage, giving us a noirish account of the protagonist's wounded interiority, helpless sense of inferiority, and morbid wallowing in guilt. There's something almost sadistic about the way that Lang's camera relentlessly tracks Robinson's many humiliations, culminating in his inability even to kill himself, as he is tormented by obsessive hallucinations of his victims' sexual enjoyment.

What I've just been describing sounds almost impossible to top; yet I'd argue that Renoir more than holds his own in this comparison, and that *La chienne* is even a greater film than *Scarlet Street*. In part, this is because of Simon's intense performance, as Legrand both suffers from the constrictions of his experience, and yet ultimately shows himself to be superior to the situations in which he is trapped. Beyond this, there is Renoir's refusal to pull punches, or to palliate his social critique. While Renoir's scrupulous objectivity in *La chienne* might seem to prefigure the famous maxim (from *Rules of the Game*) that "tout le monde a ses raisons" ("everyone has their reasons"), in practice this means that the film celebrates Legrand's exodus from the social order. Renoir refuses to condemn Lulu and Dédé, but by the same token he condones Legrand's murdering of them with no remorse, as well as Legrand's final indifference towards the art masterpieces that he has created. Indeed, Renoir's vaunted "humanism" finally comes down to this: an anti-moralism, or rejection of the very possibility of judgment, that is every bit as thorough and demanding as any actual moral code could be. *La chienne* is a relentlessly iconoclastic film; it is only this which allows it to be, also, a celebration of freedom.

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The Private Affairs of Bel Ami

SUSAN FELLEMAN

This story of a charming, narcissistic, and scheming bounder whose successes are achieved through a series of sexual liaisons with Parisian women secured its director's reputation, according to the *New York Times*, for "censor-proof depravity." Albert Lewin's *The Private Affairs of Bel Ami* (1947) was the MGM producer-turned-writer/director's third directorial outing. Based on Guy de Maupassant's novel *Bel-Ami* (1885), it was also the third and last film released by Loew-Lewin, a short-lived production company formed by Lewin and his friend, David L. Loew, son of Marcus Loew. Sexually suggestive and perversely feminist, the film revolves around Georges Duroy, a male object of female desire, played somewhat stiffly by Lewin's favorite actor, George Sanders, who had starring and principal roles in Lewin's two prior films, *The Moon and Sixpence* (1941) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), and features impressive performances by Ann Dvorak, Angela Lansbury, and Katherine Emery.