Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Honor Thy Father's Obsessions

Sophia Stein · Thursday, July 11th, 2013

Justine Malle, daughter of the great French film director, Louis Malle, has made a film about her relationship with her father and his premature death from a degenerative disease. Her father died some eighteen years ago, at age sixty-three, when Justine was only twenty. The narrative feature *Jeunesse* (*Youth*) charts the sexual awakening of Juliette, as this coincides with the deterioration of her father over a year. It is a meditative reflection on life and intimacy from daughter Justine, who studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, and who up until now has worked as a translator and documentary filmmaker. “I only saw him a few times [during the year before his death], occupied as I was by my studies, and by my passion for a young man who was later to become my husband,” Justine explains. *Jeunesse* is the filmmaker’s attempt to reconcile her personal identity with her legacy as the daughter of an undisputed master of film; Louis Malle directed such films as, *Phantom India*, *Lacombe*, *Lucien*, *Pretty Baby*, *Atlantic City*, *My Dinner with Andre*, *Au Revoir Les Enfants*, and *Vanya on 42nd Street*.

I recently had an opportunity to chat with an extremely jet-lagged Justine Malle upon her arrival from France at the Hotel Carlton in San Francisco. *Jeunesse* was featured in contention for the New Directors Prize at the San Francisco International Film Festival this past spring.

A scene from Justine Malle’s film YOUTH

Sophia Stein: In *Jeunesse*, you capture the intimacy of fathers and daughters talking candidly. As a young girl, you said that your father gave you, “the little sense of security you had.” How so?

Justine Malle: At twenty, I saw my father as my security. He was everything to me. He was practically my reason to live. I guess father-daughter relationships can be really, really intense. And this one was very, very intense. We didn’t really have a traditional father-daughter relationship. He didn’t want my brother and I to call him “papa” or “daddy;” we called him “Lulu.” It wasn’t fraternal, it was something more along the lines of a friendship. He was very attentive to how my intelligence and my sensibility were developing, what books I was reading. I could feel that was very important to him. Even though we didn’t necessarily have long conversations about books or films (it would be just one two sentences), I could feel that he was attentive to my growth. He would comment, “Oh that’s a very pretentious thing to say.” He wasn’t harsh … but sometimes he could be. We never lived together, but he was very present. I think he and my mom separated when I was one-and-a half. He wasn’t married to my mother, or to my [half-] brother’s mother. He was married to Candace Bergen, his last wife, and to another woman before.

S2: Do you remember when and how you learned that your father was a filmmaker? Do you

remember when you became aware of the significance of his work?

JM: Everybody was obsessed with him — my mother, all of them were obsessed: "What is he filming?" "Which actors is he going to get?" I didn't go on set very often, but we always talked about the problems that he might be having. When I was six, I remember my mother brought me to see *My Dinner with Andre*. The thing is — here in France, he's very important! I know he's respected in the U.S.; perhaps he's even more loved in the U.S. than he is in France. But in France, he has this standing – this importance that he doesn't obviously enjoy in the U.S., because he is more of an auteur type of filmmaker. I think my sister (who lived in the U.S.) and my brother (who lived in Germany), were not as affected by his celebrity, as I was growing up in France — with this kind of, "Oh, she's Louis Malle's daughter!" and all that. I grew up watching his movies, but I was conscious of his fame, before I was conscious of the quality of his work. There was so much respect for his work from his collaborators and all the people around, that I could sense that.

S2: In Jeunesse, Julia is watching *Phantom India*, and she says that the scene with the fishermen always makes her cry. I assume that detail is autobiographical; what about it made you cry?

JM: Just his voice. He has that accent of the 1960's. There was a very different way of speaking in the 60's. He didn't speak like that when I knew him, so I liked hearing him in his youth. Why did it make me cry? Because he wasn't a man who talked about how he felt. And in that voiceover, it's very intimate. In that specific passage, he talks about nostalgia, his very deep sense of having lost youth.

S2: Is this your favorite of his films?

JM: My favorite is *Vanya on 42nd Street*, which I find to be a masterpiece. I am very happy that it's his last movie. I feel that there is a real progression towards simplicity and total, transparent mastery in his work. As a landmark in French cinema, *Lacombe, Lucien*, from the political, historical, and aesthetic aspect, is very important. But my favorite film, the one I find most accomplished is *Vanya*.

S2: What did you learn, as a filmmaker, from watching your father's films?

JM: Curiosity for all forms of human behavior; a sense of complexity of human behavior, of nuance; a certain "recueille"– a certain distance; a lack of complacency and sentimentality, certainly. That's many things.

S2: How many years after his death did you wait to make this film? Was the process therapeutic for you?

JM: I started working on it when I was thirty-five. So it was fifteen years after his death. It took me four years from my first idea of the script to the end of the process. So, it was a long time. In part, it was therapeutic, as any art form is. But I feel like by saying that it is therapeutic, it is like saying that it was not an artistic process somehow.

S2: I don't think in the United States that we devalue art as therapy. For example, Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* —

JM: I loved Sarah Polley's film. Completely. See, I have no problem with art as therapy, but at least in France, people think differently. They have a little bit of a problem with it. Or maybe I'm just self-conscious about it.

S2: How did making *Jeunesse* change your perspective of your father's death?

JM: I came to understand a lot of things. I think I underestimated the guilt that I was feeling at the time, because when he fell sick, I was starting to want to distance myself from him and his world. I had wanted to get into this very intense intellectual thing [studying philosophy at the Sorbonne]. I

felt almost as if I had caused his sickness. I also felt very guilty about reacting with anger and distance. I guess, I've kind-of forgiven myself for that. So I think that making the film gave me a certain perspective on why I reacted the way I did.

S2: At what point in the journey, did the structure of the four seasons, from denial to acceptance, become clear?

JM: At first, I was trying to make a fiction of the story. I wrote draft after draft and wasn't getting anywhere. Then I went to see this writer, and she said, just tell me how it happened, and we'll see how we can structure it. She came up with the seasons. We wanted to film during several seasons, but we didn't have enough money to realize that fully.

S2: There is a scene in *Jeunesse* where Juliette confesses to a stranger on the train all that's transpiring with her father, and she asks the stranger to kiss her. Was that an autobiographical detail?

JM: Yeah, that was a totally embarrassing moment of my life.

S2: It is so human, so resonant. That relationship between sex and death is something that you must have studied and thought about a lot as a philosopher?

JM: I have studied much more abstract problems.

A scene from Justine Malle's YOUTH

S2: On a less abstract note, you shot in your father's former home?

JM: I never wanted to shoot it there because it's a house that I share with my brother and sister, and I didn't think that they would permit a film crew. But the crew ended up being eight people, so it was o.k. When we realized that we were going to have so little money, we knew that we had to shoot it there. It was amazing. I can't imagine having shot it anywhere else. Especially that office! That house for me is a complete metaphor of my father. I can't dissociate it from him at all. His ghost is really, very very present there.

S2: You make me laugh, because I think of my own father, who is so in love with his house — he has a love affair with his home.

JM: My father had a love affair with his home! People would visit — my brother would come with his friends and he would be, "Oh, my God, what are they going to do!" It was terrible. He wanted a completely exclusive relationship to this house. So I am happy, in a way, that I documented that house — as it is! Because it still is the way it was twenty years ago. It's a house where everything is super-old. And it was old in the "60's, when he bought it!

S2: When Juliette encounters an older man who is available for a relationship in the film, she turns him down, claiming she's "looking for more." I wondered what she meant by that?

JM: Juliette is really in love with the other guy. She is just looking for sexual experience [with the older man]. Also, I guess that she can't really accept the fact that someone is nice to her.

S2: You have stated: "The daughter of a director, who wants to become one herself, must kill the father, whilst bearing in mind, his legacy." Can you elucidate?

JM: To think of myself as a director would mean to compare myself to him, Louis Malle, who is this kind of ideal. I have been extremely critical of his films for a long time. He is certainly not my favorite French director. I tend to prefer the work of directors who are more raw, I would say – less mastered. People like Philippe Garrel (the father of Esther Garrel, who plays Juliette in the movie) and Jean Eustache — who are a little more violent in the expression of feelings. Something less, in a way, seductive. "Kill the father" in the sense that I have to be myself. But it's not either/or. I can take things from him, and be myself. It's not, "I'll have nothing to do with him at all; I'm doing my

own thing" — which would be absurd, because I am very influenced by him.

S2: Did he do anything before his death to lay the foundation for your career as a director?

JM: The only time I asked him, when I was eighteen, I said I think I would like to be a director, and he said, "No, no … certainly not at this age, that's a very bad idea. You have to live. You have to do other things. You have to study." Oh, no, no, he wasn't supportive at all of that idea. Absolutely not. I think he knew how difficult it is, even as successful as he was, it was extremely difficult.

S2: Do you think being a filmmaker is nature or nurture? Innate or a learned skill?

JM: I have a lot of difficulties with that question. For example, I didn't go to film school. I have problems with learning the craft. I have a problem with filmmaking as a craft form, but I know that it is also that. I feel like it should be immediate and about what you feel. So I am very mixed about that.

S2: You studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. At what point did you turn your focus to filmmaking?

JM: I always wanted to direct film really, but I'd always disclaimed it as not intellectual enough, not serious enough for me — in a way, as too easy. (I thought it was super-easy?!) I tried for years and years to become a high school philosophy teacher, and it is very difficult in France to become a high school philosophy teacher. At some point, I was like, o.k., I've had it with this, and I'm going to do what I want to do! Something that will probably be easier for me. Filmmaking didn't turn out to be easier. *Jeunesse* opens in France [in July], and for the moment, I'm trying to put my mind on other things. I have two kids — a baby and an eight year old. I am translating a play. I like to translate. My next film will probably be a narrative feature, but I'm kind of letting it come by itself.

Director Justine Malle