

## Interview with Macha Meril by James Blue (August, 1965)

**Blue:**

I'd like to know what you think of Godard's work.

**Meril:**

Godard's purpose is not to make great films. There are two sorts of cineastes—cineastes who witness, like Godard, and visionary cineastes, like Fellini, Welles, Eisenstein—all the great ones. To me, those are greater than Godard, but Godard is very important. Because he has his own language. To my mind, profound meanings don't exist in the films of Godard. But don't tell him I said this.

*A Married Woman* was the perfect subject for him. He knew about it. It was more or less autobiography. And it came at just the right time, because he made it right after *Alphaville*, which was too big a subject for him. And he messed that up. Did you see that film?

**Blue:**

Yeah, I personally reacted rather strongly to it because I felt resonances with it. It haunted me. I felt he was grappling with something that....

**Meril:**

Of course, the theme was huge. But it was not for him. He feels there are greater minds than his, and he has a yearning for this big, grand subject. But he doesn't know how to do it, and it's not right for him.

He's the person I know with the fewest opinions...there are no opinions at all. I don't know what he thinks about anything-- movies, politics, women, dogs, food. I never knew that somebody could be like this.

His whole life is organized around photographing things, stealing things from people. It's extraordinary. He has no vision of his own, there is no thought, there is no morality, there is no opinion. It's a great asset to be a director who has a vision of the world, who is a poet, like any of the directors we admire, such as Fellini or Bunuel, but it can be harder for them to make pictures. Whereas Godard, it's mainly talent, and he uses it. He's very lucky. And that's why he makes more films, more easily than the others.

**Blue:**

When I interviewed him, I said he was looking for "happenings" all the time. I mentioned the American quest to create something spontaneously, which would be artificially provoked, but which would end up being a real event. And he said, yes, that's what I'm trying to do. I want to make it happen somehow. Make it real.

**Meril:**

Oh, he does more than that. He's a swiper. He wants the stuff that's really happening. What he takes, he does not interpret at all. What's interesting about him isn't what he takes, it's how he takes it.

People write and write about the meanings of his films. They have none, I swear, and I know.

It's sheer talent. It's real cinema. He's a true cineaste.

**Blue:**

Of course, this doesn't stop people from drawing something out of it. You know, the spectator gets to mess with it.

**Meril:**

Of course. Godard has given them this opportunity. It's all form, and something to behold. I think that it's advancing the language of cinema. I must defend it to the death because it's important. Cinema is young, just 50 years old. Thanks to guys like Godard, it's more defined in relation to the other arts. It's more and more cinema, really.

Another thing that I think is very rare, and I don't know anyone who knows this as well as him: Movies are more akin to music than to painting or anything visual. It's all lengths, rhythms and timing. What is in the frame, what is truly happening before the camera, doesn't matter as much as the length of footage you use. And this, Godard understands. I know his cutter very well.

**Blue:**

What do you mean by what's true before the camera?

**Meril:**

When I hold this glass, it takes me two seconds to lift it up. He knows that for this particular shot, even if it's not quite natural, I need to take four seconds to raise it.

**Blue:**

He directs you to do this.

**Meril:**

This is the only precise, real direction that he gives. Timing, he says. And he's right, because that's the whole thing.

**Blue:**

Even if it isn't natural in real time, for the actor.

**Meril:**

Yes. it's not true to say that he improvises and that he takes from reality. It has nothing to do with cinema vérité.

**Blue:**

It's confusing because it sometimes has that vérité look about it.

**Meril:**

I don't think he's fully achieved what he's after yet. I think *A Married Woman* came closest and was his best, honestly.

**Blue:**

I think it's beautiful. I saw it four times in England.

**Meril:**

Yeah, because it's pure.

He watched very carefully what was being filmed. He was at the camera all the time, looking through the lens...which he never does. I heard that in his previous films, he let Coutard take care of everything in the framing and photography.

I talked to his cutter, Agnes Guillemot, who's a very good friend of mine. And she said to me that she had almost nothing to do because it was all prepared in the shooting. It's not because it was cheaper that way. He knew, while we were shooting, when we need to fade, when we need to black out. He doesn't need to see it on the flatbed. It's how he feels at the time of filming. It's like a composer who makes music and who knows how long a note should last. And the editor just had to put things together because there was nothing more to calculate. The beginning and end of shots were already decided.

**Blue:**

Did she find that this was more true with *Une Femme Mariee* than with *Les Carabiniers*?

**Meril:**

Yes, she says it was the most successful.

**Blue:**

Did you have the feeling you were playing the wife of Godard? Did the autobiographical elements cause you any embarrassment?

**Meril:**

Not at all. I think he took me because I was the opposite of his wife. He did this on purpose. He needed someone very different, or it would have been embarrassing. He needed to talk things out in his marriage, even more than he needed to make the film.

**Blue:**

You thought there was a psychological need for him to do this film?

**Meril:**

Absolutely. It was an open letter to his wife, yeah.

**Blue:**

And he felt that he had to use someone who wasn't his wife.

**Meril:**

Not only different, but the opposite.

**Blue:**

How do you feel that he directed you to be different from his wife? Is it that you were much more open?

**Meril:**

Oh yes, because I am not, how to say, *irregular* in the sense that other women can be. I'm not. I'm precise, not *unconscious*.

When you decide to make a film with Godard, you take a risk, like you take a risk with every film, because you never know how it's going to come out. You risk losing part of your dignity in every role (I'm not just speaking about this one). When you do it with Godard, you have an even bigger risk because you don't have a script and you don't know what you're going to shoot. And on top of that, you don't know what he's going to steal from you that you don't want to give.

**Blue:**

You felt that he was after something unconscious from you?

**Meril:**

He does that with all his actors. I talked about this with Claude Brasseur and Sami Frey, who did a marvelous film of his, *Bande a Part*. Did you see that one?

**Blue:**

I didn't see it, no.

**Meril:**

Along with *Une Femme Mariee*, it's his best, a marvelous film. It has a story! It turns out he knows how to tell a story, which nobody knew.

Well, when I decided to make a film with him. It was a big decision, because I knew that I'd have to fight things out with him.

**Blue:**

You already talked to other actors and heard about how he works.

**Meril:**

Not only that. Here comes a guy who says, "I want you in my film." He doesn't tell me what it is, what he wants. Nothing about it except he needs a girl. I don't even know why me more than another actress. He doesn't give you a script, or the story.

**Blue:**

When you first met for the role, what did he say to you?

**Meril:**

Oh, it was very funny the first time I saw him. He came here to my apartment one evening. I had just come back from a marvelous trip to Egypt, in a great mood. I went to see my agent. I wasn't working much at this time, hadn't worked for eight or nine months. I told her I was heading to the South of France, where I have a piece of land, for four or five months, to write and do other things. I said to her, "If you come across a part for me, let me know." A few hours later, as I was just about to buy my ticket, she calls me and says, "Godard is just leaving my office and he says he wants a girl, a healthy looking girl, for this part. He wanted Stefania Sandrelli, but she's pregnant and can't do it. So I talked about you because I'd just seen you." This is the way it is with her; she'd seen me two hours before, and so I came to mind. "Well, do you want to meet him? I'm not sure whether anything will come of it." I said, "Alright, why not?"

So he calls me and asks if he can come see me after dinner for 10 minutes. I gave him my address, and he said, "I'll come at 9:00." At 9:00 *punctum*, he rings the bell, not one minute before, one minute after. He comes in and sits right there on the chair. And for one hour and 15 minutes, he didn't open his mouth. He didn't tell me about his film or ask me any questions. So I talked and talked. And talked. I was enjoying myself, because I didn't care. You know, I have a principle. All the films I'm not hired for are bad.

**Blue:**

Wait, what?

**Meril:**

It's very simple. If I'm not wanted for a film, it must be bad. So I was very relaxed. I wasn't worried at all. I didn't really care. It was just interesting to meet him.

The next day I called my agent. I told her "I believe that's settled. I talked like a magpie for an hour. You have to mark this one lost." She said, "No, actually, he called and said, 'Okay, I'll take her. I finally found an actress who talks all the time. I won't need to write any dialogue.'"

And then I met him and I said, "Please tell me something about it before I give my final answer." He said, "Well it will be something like Bergman's *The Silence*." (laughs) I said, "Please be clearer," And he said, annoyed, "All these actresses, they always want explanations." I couldn't sleep all night after that and wondered whether I should do the film. I didn't know a thing about it. Finally, I decided: Let's live it up. Let's live dangerously.

Throughout the making of the film, I had to do two things at once. I had to help him as much as I could, because I admire him very much. I think he's important, and I wanted the film to be good. So I had to be nice and helpful. But I also had to watch every minute what he was doing and try to understand what he was going to ask from me and not put myself in the position where he'd ask me things I didn't want to do or didn't want to say. It's very difficult without a script. When you have a script, at least you can prepare what you can do. But with him it's very different.

I wanted him to be content because artists can be sensitive and extremely fragile. Actors have to be, you know, healthy and conscious people. The conventional idea is that it is the actors who are children and the director, their father. On the contrary, it's the director who is a little boy that everyone has to help to make his film.

It was a strange relationship all through the film because I don't think he really understood what I was doing. I was using all my gifts to be funny and to show that I was happy to do it. I was very excited and in a very good mood.

**Blue:**

You felt very much on your own, in a sense.

**Meril:**

Yeah, more than I had ever felt before.

**Blue:**

Did that give you any feeling of insecurity?

**Meril:**

No, quite the contrary. But I think that the two other actors that worked with me were very unhappy because they didn't like being left without some direction. Because he doesn't say a thing. He just says you walk from the window to the door. He doesn't say, "You are to look like this, think like this."

**Blue:**

Tell me about the first day on the set. Was this the first time you had met him since your meeting here in the apartment, or had he seen you again?

**Meril:**

We had lunch several times after that.

**Blue:**

Did he talk about the film?

**Meril:**

No, he just wanted to know more about me. He didn't talk about the film at all. He wanted to see how I ordered food in the restaurant and the way I dress and the way I walk and just matters of comportment. I don't think he really cares about what other people think or care about. He's a fascist in that regard. He uses people. But that's alright, I'm not criticizing him.

**Blue:**

He just wanted to see what he had as material.

**Meril:**

Voila, voila. And you know, it was funny because he sees everything, and he gave me little details. He wanted my hair to be exactly that length and not more, and he wanted it to be a shade darker (the film was black and white, so it was hardly noticeable). Still, the things he asked me to do were an improvement.

I should add that he has terrible taste--the way he dresses himself, what he eats, where he lives. You know it's not to be believed. He said to me, "I never can dress the girls in my in my films. It's always my wife and she has her own ideas, but this time I'd like to do it." And he asked me to wear exactly what she wears (laughs).

But finally, I wore what I wanted to wear, because it was necessary with this particular film. The film was half fiction, half reportage. There's a half that's me, but you would never know which half. There are certain sentences, certain looks, certain dresses. During the shooting, when I'd come on the set, I had to determine what kind of day it was. Was it a day in which I had to insert myself as Macha? Was he going to put me in front of the camera and leave me to do whatever I wanted?

**Blue:**

Would he forewarn you?

**Meril:**

No, I just felt it. There were other days where I just had to be a tool, you know, not say a word and just deliver the dialogue and do what he says. When he writes the dialogue, he writes it the minute before we shoot. But once he's written it, you cannot change a word, because if you do, he cuts immediately. Even if it's good, he cuts. So all these things I've heard about him favoring improvisation, It's absolutely false.

**Blue:**

Doesn't he use improvisation at certain moments?

**Meril:**

Yes, a little. For example, the "TV interview," as I call it. I had a microphone hidden under my ear. And he was at the end of the room speaking to me, very low, asking me questions. Personal questions, like are you happy now? What do you think about love? Things like this. I tried at first, and it was awkward to speak as if I was the girl in the film, or the idea that I had of the girl in the film (which was, after all, *mine*)-- a lazy, unconscious sort of girl. But the way he asked me the questions, I couldn't escape. He knew me, and I blew up, and was forced in the end to speak as myself. And this he used, and kept in the film.

So he uses improvisation, but it's directed improvisation. He asked me questions, pushed me in certain directions. And there it is. Without realizing it, he is a little fascist because he wants people to contradict themselves. He wants to ridicule. People ask whether he likes or dislikes his characters. He doesn't think anything, he just....

**Blue:**

He wants to provoke.

**Meril**

Yes.

**Blue**

Let's go back to your first day of shooting. You didn't have a script, you didn't have any directions. You must have been in a terrible emotional state.

**Meril:**

No, I was very excited. I always knew that I was able to do it. That sounds very conceited, but it's absolutely true. I was calm and extremely confident. I knew his limitations, because I know his films, while I had great confidence in his specialties as a director. When he picked me for the part, he didn't know my capabilities. He just saw me and found me *sympathique*. He didn't know that I would carry it off so easily. He couldn't know how ready I was.

**Blue:**

So you were full of confidence the first day on set.

**Meril:**

The first thing we did was me walking under the poster, you know, with the big bra. This was easy for him to do.

**Blue:**

You feel that it was therapeutic for him to start easily like this?

**Meril:**

Yes, yes. It only took a month to shoot this film, but we didn't shoot every day. Certain days, he didn't feel like it. Other days, he didn't know what to shoot.

I have a certain theory about him. I think his problem is that one hour and a half is too long. This is a length that has been decided by the distributors, but they're stupid. He should aim for 50-60 minutes, that's his ideal length. He's intense and knows what he's doing at the start, but then the last 25 minutes, he just fills up the time.

**Blue:**

Do you have a feeling then, that he didn't have a scenario at all?

**Meril:**

Well, he had an idea.

**Blue:**

Did he explain it?

**Meril:**

It was to be 24 hours anchored by the continuous physical presence of the woman. I was in nearly every shot, my image or my voice.

I was happy about one thing. I believe that acting is over. Acting is not interesting anymore and it's not needed. The words and the atmosphere are powerful enough. You don't have to show what you feel.



You need no expression at all. It's more that you have to know how to move, when you have to lift an arm or an eyebrow. Sometimes, if I was smiling, he would prevent me from doing that.

**Blue:**

He would say, "Don't do that?"

**Meril:**

Don't do anything. And he was right, and I was very happy with this.

**Blue:**

But, for the film, he was getting an intense interior quality.

**Meril:**

For any film. Do you think Humphrey Bogart did any acting when he lifts an eyebrow? That's Godard's secret, what he understands.

**Blue:**

Yeah, of course. He's taken a lot from Bogart.

It's funny because I had the impression of a multiplicity of things going on, all very thought out.

**Meril:**

You have to let the spectator be free to interpret. You can't force him with too strong an expression. I kept my voice very normal, very familiar, like I'm talking with you now.

**Blue:**

But then he provoked you into stronger expressions for your interview scene, where you got more excited.

**Meril:**

Just as I am now, in this interview. You see me, you know this is my personality, this is how I express myself. But I wonder, if he could have kept the film to an hour, like I said, he would have cut the scene. He didn't really need it, although he couldn't resist. When you have an actor that has a certain personality, it's a temptation to flaunt it. But I don't think the greatest films do this. Personally, I don't think that Marilyn Monroe movies are great, but you go see them because she's extraordinary. That's not the highest aspiration for a film. He's in love with his wife, and he can't resist showing the way she smiles and the way she looks. And I think it's the worst thing in his films.

**Blue:**

When you first had to perform a scene with dialogue, how did you both approach it?

**Meril:**

Very quickly, he felt that he could rely on me. Technically, I have a good memory. I'm willing to help make his film, which is important. When you feel like a serious actor-- like the other guy working with

me who plays the husband, who is a real *actor*, it's tougher. I'm not an actress, so dialoguing with Godard was easier for me. He needs real professional actors, but also deprives them of a lot. I was grateful to be in the film. I didn't have stage fright. I was relaxed. I was willing to cooperate and work hard. We worked day and night. I was doing my own makeup. I had no makeup girl, no wardrobe girl. I did everything myself. I enjoyed it, and it was stimulating. This freed him very much because he could think more of the image, the lighting and camerawork.

**Blue:**

When he gave you lines, were they on paper or did he just tell them to you?

**Meril:**

No, on paper, handwritten.

**Blue:**

Just before the shot?

**Meril:**

Yeah, yeah. We did the shots once or twice most of the time, although one time, we did a scene thirty times. It was the one with Philippe when we recite the apartment ad. And it was difficult to learn the lines, because Godard writes like he speaks. He's Swiss, you know, so it's not very French sometimes (laughs). So we're laughing and telling him this. And it turns out, this time, it wasn't his writing. We were shooting in a model apartment of a new building, and their publicity was stupid and funny. You know when we speak about the windows and the entrance and wood floors. It was very long, over two minutes, and so stupid that it was impossible to remember. He could have done it in little pieces, because Philippe especially was having trouble remembering the lines. He had just come from Rome and hadn't slept for two nights. I also struggled. And Godard was enjoying this. "You see, it's not my dialogue, and you're still having trouble!" We spent two hours on this, in the middle of the night. And two hours for him is a lot because he is also producing, so he's complaining about losing money and his holiday time in Biarritz. Finally, we finished it.

**Blue:**

What about the conversation scenes with your husband and with the lover. How did he direct you?

**Meril:**

All physical. Stop here, don't walk in any further, turn around. Never any psychology. You have no idea what the scene means. And what are we supposed to be feeling at the moment?

**Blue:**

Did he shoot it in order?

**Meril:**

More or less, yeah.

**Blue:**

Does he rehearse or does he shoot immediately?

**Meril:**

No, we rehearsed.

**Blue:**

What corrections did he offer?

**Meril:**

I'm trying to remember. Sometimes he tells you, "After he says his line, don't answer until I tell you." Because as I told you, he cares most about the timing. And sometimes it makes no sense. I feel like I should be answering right away. And still, you know, he provokes something. If I answer two seconds later, I say it differently. I don't think he could explain why he does that and when and how and...

**Blue:**

Can you think of a moment where you did something that he didn't like?

**Meril:**

Yes, possibly when I was looking too sweet, too nice, too gentle. Certain close-ups when I was too cute. He'd always cut that down.

**Blue:**

So what would he say to cut it down?

**Meril:**

Oh, he'd stop it. Very harsh, you know. He can be very brutal, very unpleasant. Always courteous and polite, but when it's not like he wants, he stops it. It's like he's in pain.

**Blue:**

He would bawl you out, would he?

**Meril:**

Never with me, but I heard him sometimes blow his top. He's mad when something technical doesn't work. When somebody tells him that the lamp is broken and there's nothing to replace it, he goes mad. And I understand this. It's always so difficult to make a film. In France, it's terrible, because they always have excuses. I always called the day before to make sure the shoot was on. It was awful.

And then the things we shot outdoors, in the street, it was like burglary. The camera was in a window, and I didn't know where they were. You know he'd give me a little signal, like a spy. No one knew that the film was being shot.

**Blue:**

These are the shots when you change taxis.

**Meril:**

Yeah, when I cross the street.

**Blue:**

You said that he gives some gestures very precisely, but he would never give you anything on an emotional level.

**Meril:**

With gestures, he'd never ask me to do something that he hadn't seen me do. I always had the feeling that he was really drawing from me. Directors often want us to look like their wives or to do things that represent their erotic or other ideas, but these do not correspond to who we are. Godard obviously has, especially in this film where he's thinking of his wife, a certain idea of women. But he never made me feel ill at ease. He'd change his plan to accommodate me. For instance, I walk very fast. I have a very big wide pace like this and that gave him some problems, but he worked with it. We would joke about it.

**Blue:**

Can you recall moments when he'd ask you to perform a gesture that he'd seen you do, or when you'd suddenly recognize that he'd taken something from your behavior?

**Meril:**

Oh yeah, all the time. All the close-ups, when I do this with my hair, or when I behave like this. All the time he was taking it. And words too. For instance, when I say, "I wonder where all the people in the street are headed. Maybe one of them is going to commit suicide, and who is responsible?" Well, he took that from a conversation we once had in a restaurant on the Champs Elysees. We hadn't said a word for five minutes. I looked out the window at the people in the street and said, "It's funny, all these people so in a hurry, what do they do, where are they going? I'm interested in everybody." Godard added, "Maybe one of them will commit suicide and we're responsible." That's where that came from, and there were also little jokes he took from me. I never mentioned it.

**Blue:**

But what effect did this have on you? Did it make it easier for you to play the part?

**Meril:**

More difficult rather than easier. Because I was troubled by it. I'd ask myself all the time whether I wanted this part of myself in the film? This belongs to me. At the same time, I admire Godard, and I wanted the film to be good, and I was flattered that he felt he needs my contributions. After a while, I saw that he took other things from the maid, the concierge, from everybody.

**Blue:**

Were there any other improvised scenes besides the interview?

**Meril:**

Oh yes, the scene with the girls at the swimming pool, when the fashion editor and I come. The girls were real models and the editor was a real fashion editor. I happen to know a little about fashion and about how these girls work, and he doesn't. So he just let me talk, so he wouldn't have to write anything. That scene was reportage.

**Blue:**

But nevertheless, it's a fiction film. Did you get any sense of him attempting to blur the separation between fiction and reality?

**Meril:**

No, no. There is no crookery like in a Vadim film. Vadim tries to carry into his films the atmosphere in which he lives. When he makes a film with Brigitte Bardot, he talks to her, he makes her drink champagne, so that she's all set up for the shots he is going to shoot. Godard, not at all. He respects the collaborative process of making movies way too much for that. Godard loves the work, and the involvement of his crew. He likes to say "Lights, Camera" and from the moment he says "Action," everyone is working. I think that's still a big deal for him. He's not an amateur. It's not cinema vérité. He's really quite serious and he needs the full apparatus of production—the actors, technicians, production managers, everyone--so that he can work, and learn.

I think it's pure cinema. We don't yet know very well what that is, but it's no longer like in the theater. The director controls more, is there every second. That's not a great thing for actors. I am a film actress. If I really wanted to do serious acting, I would do theater. True actors love the theater because there, they are all alone. Wonderful! It's fun for them. Me, I do film acting because I love cinema and I think it's marvelous. The best way to observe what's going on in cinema is to be in the thick of it, as a performer. The whole enterprise is available to me. It's as if you wanted to learn how to perform a surgical operation, the best way is to be the patient. The sick have the best view, right? (laughs) This is why I make cinema, why I act. But a real actress wouldn't like cinema, unless she has the temperament of a slave, which is often the case. I know there are a lot of women who have this temperament, and that's fine, I'm not judging them. I went along because I love cinema and I love Godard. But for me, as an actress, it was rather barbaric. It bothered me to do all this undressed stuff and to explain that I wanted to go this far and no further. It was very annoying. But that's the price I paid to be able to talk to you about Godard like this, to understand Godard as well as I do.