

AVA LUNA ON SERGE GAINSBOURG

WORDS BY CARLOS HERNANDEZ
ART BY MARIE DEMPLE



LES AILES DE LA ROLLS



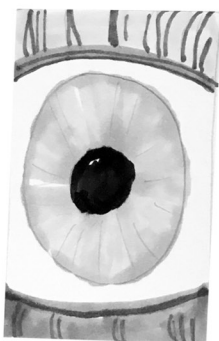
UNE ROUE DE VÉLO



LES CHEVEUX ROUGES



LA CHAMBRE QUARANTE-QUATRE



L'ŒIL DE LA FILLE



LA JUNGLE DE NOUVELLE-GUINÉE



A DADA SUR SON DOS



QUATORZE AUTOMNES
ET QUINZE ÉTÉS



JANE

I confess, it was with American privilege that I first listened to Serge Gainsbourg. I imagine he was the type to call us an ignorant nation for only speaking our one language, and thus his eyes probably rolled from beyond the grave when I first listened to "Histoire de Melody Nelson," in my parents' house in Brooklyn, rapt, not understanding anything. I heard first the skittering bass and restrained drums, crawling from the floor like a sleeper Isaac Hayes, torn open by a sudden interjection from an orchestra whose swells ached with a heartbreak simultaneously polite and mischievous, and his voice, whispers from a sullen hypnotist. The sonic alchemy was like an alien interpreting rock and roll, a savant nonchalantly tossing off a thing of beauty and then scoffing after it. He was playing keep-away with my favorite toy, tossing it over my head, waiting til I was red-faced with frustration, and til the toy was all scuffed up, before deciding to give it back.

He's in control, he has the power. But there, at the end of Track 1, a second voice, a woman's voice: What's your name? he asks. "Melody." Melody what? "Melody Nelson."

OK, so he's singing about a woman. Surely a romantic interest, a consenting adult. Could this be a moment of vulnerability? Could this be just another love song? After all, Serge Gainsbourg was a romantic, as famous for his series of beautiful wives as he was for his own work. In fact, the voice we are hearing is the voice of Jane Birkin, the most beautiful of all. But the character Melody Nelson is not a grown woman -- as I would soon discover, she's meant to be fourteen years old. And as this story goes, our narrator sweeps her into a romance whose consummation is either real or inferred or imagined (or all three), only after running her over with his Rolls Royce.

Such violence, Serge. Wresting these sounds into a space of your own design, and then, too, Melody Nelson, fourteen, too young to consent, too feeble to resist. You created her, you hit her with your car, you made her the object of your

lust. Really, you made her everything you needed her to be in order to dominate her.

I did see a young woman get hit by a car one time, on 32nd St. It was many years ago, but an image has stuck with me, her sitting back up, eyes glazed over, her hand held against her head, a trickle of blood between her fingers.

Why even fall back on old memories? Goodness, just now when I sat down to write, I nearly forgot that just a few weeks ago I was in a car crash myself. My partner almost lost her life when her car blew a tire and we swerved into an 18-wheeler. If the symbology of violence and trauma loses its romantic sheen when you're calling your insurer from the side of I-10, then let's talk for a little while about the symbology of a middle aged man whose gaze is transfixed by a Lolita of his own design.

~

I don't want to spend very much time here discussing Serge Gainsbourg's story, or the decisions he made during his career an actor and musician. If you would like to learn more, I would actually recommend Darran Anderson's 33 1/3 book dedicated to him, which is very eloquent, and which paints a portrait not just of the man but of the context in which he lived.

Consider these words a sort of rebuttal, or at least a second part to a conversation which seems oddly absent from the literature. Darran, in all his wise analysis, remains an apologist for Serge. And in fact, just about every other bit of writing I've come across that intelligently discusses Serge's work, without rejecting it outright, has always read something like this:

"Serge Gainsbourg meant to shock. He sought, through the medium of pop music, a place amongst the great existentialists and surrealists. He drew from Nabokov, Bunuel, pulp films, comic books, glam. He tackled the boundaries of what the Bourgeoisie might have considered proper, by singing about the macabre, ugly, and animalistic parts of sex and love. It stands to reason: as a Jewish boy in Europe, he fled the Nazis, lost much of his family to the holocaust, and much of his regard for humanity along with them."

We're better served by Darran's own words:

"He chose to sing of reality, to acknowledge that every aspect of human affairs, especially love and sex, are ludicrous, messy, and duplicitous. He was called a

cynic when he was the only honest one left."

And...

"To adopt the knee-jerk response against Gainsbourg seems to be to adopt the mindset of the 'St Petersburg Cossacks'" -- he refers here to a group of religious zealots who terrorized Nabokov for writing Lolita. And you know what? I agree with Darran. It would be a shame to hit the snare that Serge himself set up for us, feel the outrage he meant for us to feel, and walk no further.

In fact, this whole case is pretty intoxicating for someone like me. Serge was an ugly man. He felt alienated from the culture around him. He was shy and clumsy, a misanthrope. A romantic figure, a great artist, he weaponized his art, packed it up like a trojan horse, sent it to the front lines to blast apart the mores of Bourgeois Europe.

How about this for a story: he spent much of his career writing bubblegum hits for young female singers. He once wrote a song for a young star named France Gall about sucking on lollipops. Neither she nor any of her handlers could figure out, until it was too late, that the words were a metaphor. Subversive? Dramatic? yes yes yes, if you ask the men who write the history. But how about young Ms. Gall, weeping in her house, afraid to show her face? When a female person is violated, does it comfort her to know that it was just a joke, that "it had nothing to do with her?"

~

I want to use this space to ask a question. It's a question that's on the tip of these writers' tongues, until it seems their fraternal sentimentality gets the better of them:

What about Melody Nelson? The human, the teenage girl? What about girls, what about women? These stories, the stories of sex and depravity and animal lust, stories meant to shock and offend and challenge the normative bourgeois, they all rely on the women just off of center stage. Without Melody, there would be no Serge. No Humbert without Lolita, no Alex DeLarge without "the old in-and-out."

But what about her? What about them? The fact is, Melody is not a real person. She, like Serge's narrator, is a fiction -- a fiction written by Serge, a necessary reflection of our Leading Man, a figment, an echo chamber for all of masculinity's



L'ÉTOILE JUIF



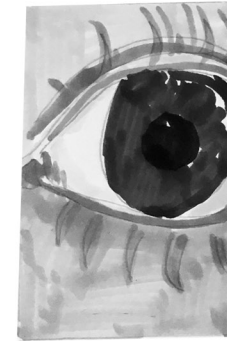
SERGE



BARBARELLA



LA SUCETTE



L'ŒIL DE L'HOMME



LE COLONNE DE LIT

basest impulses. Her only function, her only reason to exist, is to be lusted after. She's a real doll, a porn website -- she's there for Serge only when it's time for him to whip it out, and then retreat back into nothing.

Our Leading Man's serenade to Melody is really just a masturbation session -- Melody consents to his gaze just as Serge consents to look in the mirror, like a bronzen Patrick Bateman. Melody is Serge. (Or maybe just part of Serge...)

Let's say that the story of Melody Nelson is meant to be shocking. Let's even allow that, by expressing shock, we the listeners are playing into Serge's plan -- that our delicate sensibilities are blasted apart by his lurid ammunition. OK then, his weapon against us has worked -- his stick of dynamite, his pistol, his music, his Melody.

People speak of "objectifying women." This here, this is the ultimate objectification. A weapon is an object, and Melody is a weapon. Never mind a bikini-clad model selling beer -- this is literally a case of a female-body-as-pistol, Serge's finger on the trigger.

(Imagine that! The figure of a woman, as a stand-in for a penis!)

Serge's art looks inward. It grasps towards the spot where the soul ought to be, and finds only a desert. Tragic, but nothing new: just flip through the pages of some of our existentialist boyfriends, Sartre, Dubus, Henry Miller, for more

cases of men wandering through a moral wilderness. What Serge reveals to me, though, are the ways in which this journey so resembles a colonization. Serge colonizes the female body, removes her voice, leaves only giggles of submission.

~

Serge acted in dozens of movies, so it's only fitting to talk about *Histoire of Melody Nelson* with a bit of film theory. Laura Mulvey might have a few words to say about the album. She even coined a term, "Male Gaze," to describe a culture of Hollywood cinema in which "women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." I would highly recommend her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, to anyone interested in how Freud might decode some of the patriarchal architecture of popular movies.

I wonder what she would have thought of *Barbarella*. Apparently it was one of Serge's favorites. A very hip old sci-fi movie, extremely campy, starring a mostly-nude Jane Fonda, who lives in a future world where violence does not exist. Yet, she is a soldier -- sent by the (male) President of the United States on an intergalactic mission, using "the weapons available to her." Is she empowered? Is any soldier empowered? Dress up our young men in uniform, dress our young women in lingerie, and send them to the front lines.

If *Barbarella* does not exist beyond the boundaries of the male gaze, let's conjure

a different sort of female lead -- Cleo from 5 to 7 is a film by Agnes Varda, which was made in the same country as *Histoire de Melody Nelson* and fully ten years earlier. Cleo shops and gossips and struts around for the first half of the movie, but then in a moment of emotion tosses off her wig and is very suddenly transformed -- her humanity laid bare, she converses with a dear friend, ruminates on all of her insecurities, walks alone through the streets of Paris... If Agnes lets Cleo augment her own reality, command her narrative, and invite or dismiss the gaze of the world around her and of us, the unseen audience, how can Melody be empowered to do the same? Could Serge possibly conceive of a universe in which Melody Nelson makes a decision for herself?

~

Let's talk about Jane Birkin. She was Serge's wife at the time that he made this album, her photo appears on the cover, and her voice is the voice of Melody. The album was even dedicated to Jane. "Without Jane there would be no record," says Serge. ("Though he never ran over me on a bike, nor was I a minor," Jane points out.)

We assume that Melody is merely a mirror for Serge, but let's pursue a thought experiment for a moment. What if that isn't true, and instead Jane had a major role in creating this fiction? She's a real person, after all. She supported his politics (and so did her whole family: her brother once described Serge as "a true socialist"). And in fact they worked together frequently: on their most famous collaboration "Je T'Aime (Moi Non Plus)," two lovers moan on a microphone, a consensual erotic moment between husband and wife.

Is Melody just Jane? Jane plays Melody, Jane is the likeness of Melody. Does that make Jane Melody? If not, why not? Why choose a fourteen year old phantom, instead of his real life spouse, as the accomplice for this project?

Serge, the misanthrope, just like the filmmaker Buñuel and other minds of their generation, wanted to unmask the bourgeoisie, to portray their wealth as macabre and their morals as deluded. "We can even suggest that his deliberate courting of outrage was just an ongoing part of his efforts to expose us to who we are in all its unpleasant but undeniable forms," says Darran.

So in order to expose a macabre aristocrat, Serge must become one. He must be a man in mid-life crisis, contemplating his own mortality. He must violate a powerless space to reaffirm his strength. After all, what is bourgeois if not a colonizer, a class whose culture and wealth is built on the backs of workers and annexed foreigners? Melody must be young, because she must be powerless,

she exists to be conquered. In Serge's own words: "The eroticism comes, no not from the heat of the pressure, but from the contact between a young, under age virgin girl and a man who has taken some hard knocks."

The violent march of capital: A frail body is hit by a shiny Rolls Royce. The child victim is sexually submissive. The violent march of capital: There's literally a track on the album dedicated to describing the savages of New Guinea. The link is clear: we are all colonizers, we are all pedophiles, and thank you Serge for showing us.

I so wish that Jane were the one who created Melody, gave her a politic, gave her a voice. I so wish we could point to Jane as that strong woman who looked after Melody's interests and made sure she was safe. But no luck for us: Jane's only credit is "vocals."

~

There's a wonderful essay that converses with and references Laura Mulvey's. It's called *The Oppositional Gaze*, by bell hooks. I want to head home with a passage from this essay, and the reason will become quite clear:

"The politics of slavery, or racialized power relations, were such that the slaves were denied their right to gaze. ... Since i knew as a child that the dominating power adults exercised over me and over my gaze was never so absolute that I did not dare to look, to sneak a peep, to stare dangerously, I knew that the slaves had looked. That all attempts to repress our/black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.'"

bell hooks understands in a way that I could not possibly, the extent to which gaze connotes the real power to dominate -- but she also understands that the inverse is true, that if Melody were granted the gift of sight, the ability to look back, if that object were suddenly granted subjectivity, that the universe would open up and that a power that she had never known would rush into her.

I bet Serge understood this too. After all he was a victim of the holocaust, a child branded by the icons of genocide. Maybe he could not allow Melody a gaze as his own sort of revenge.

But enough playing apologist. Let's imagine a different sort of story, complete with sex, passion, violence, power dynamics, dangerous encounters, near-life

experiences. One person hits the other with a car. They are swept into a whirlwind romance. We all sit and listen to the story and maybe even root for Our Leading Person, because they've found a real connection, a moment of understanding, a romantic and sexual encounter whose consummation is a universe that was born of consent, a gift given to each other and to everyone.

And if we require perversity, if we require that their tryst shake the foundations of society and reveal to us the basest of all our human desires, maybe we could look where Serge couldn't -- within our lovers themselves. Just go ahead, Serge, and ask them what turns them on. Hear their voices, feel the gravity of their gaze as it fixes on you. You might just find some shock value right there, in a space where masculine strength is not a metaphor for the March of Capital, where it suddenly no longer feels necessary to batter all your female characters, a space where power is derived from the art of listening.

~

My partner asked me recently if there was any value in dredging up the kind of old artwork that relied on shock value to offend. We've absolutely moved on, she points out. Nobody would argue that *Histoire de Melody Nelson* could fly in 2016. I had to confess to her that, perhaps, this is a selfish project for me. "Kill Your Idols?" Well, Serge is hardly my idol, and plus he's already dead. But the truth is, I am moved when I listen to this record, I was moved when I was younger and I am moved still. The palette of Ava Luna, not to mention countless other artists (ever heard Beck's *Sea Change*?) owes it a great debt. I felt that I owed it to myself to spend some time mulling it over.

After all, what does it say about me? I, just like plenty of men my age, and from my socioeconomic position, move about the world with aspirations born of privilege. I aspire to be a romantic and mysterious figure. I want that my artwork ought to push boundaries and display the possibility of an unknown world to complacent listeners, shake the lazy bois from their la-z-bois. I aspire to be a feminist, and elevate the voices of the non-males around me, even as I aspire to sexual power, to attract the opposite sex. I believe these things are compatible.

There still exists a culture of maleness for whom personal power involves throwing women under the bus. That might seem backward and horrid to us in 2016, but they are living in the same timeline as Serge Gainsbourg, just as are Nabokov and Stanley Kubrick and every other man whose artwork debases women for the sake of a shock.

I would argue that Serge was a progressive. Feminist? No, but yes a progressive. In his own mind, he fought alongside the great artists of the 20th century toward a vision of a better world. But his vision was skewed, he made choices that might not stand up under our lenses, his art might not fly today. He could have done better. I want to learn from his decisions, the roads already traveled and shocks already absorbed, and think of the ways that I could do better too.

SPECIAL THANKS TO CHRIS LEE



LES MURS DU LABYRINTHE



L'AZUR ET L'AÉROPLANE



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