

## “Frances Ha” & “La Notte” on DVD & Blu-ray

Brian Doan



**“Frances Ha” and “La Notte” are now available from The Criterion Collection on dual format DVD/Blu-ray.**

Insinuating herself into a dinner party full of people she doesn’t know, the title character of “Frances Ha” (2013) is asked what she does for a living. “Ah, it’s kind of hard to explain,” she replies, in a manner that betrays both insecurity, and a self-awareness of how that insecurity can be deployed. “Because...what you do is complicated?,” her dinner companion asks. Her response says nothing and everything: “Ah, because I don’t really *do* it.”

Noah Baumbach’s “Frances Ha” and Michelangelo Antonioni’s “La Notte” (1961) set their characters adrift. That sense of what both characters and the films themselves “do” is a surprisingly knotty one: On the one hand, they “do” nothing in any traditional narrative sense, but there is so much happening on the level of form, and within the characters’ heads, that the viewing experience is a rich, exciting, exhausting one. These are coded suspense films that fail to resolve their mysteries, and are all the richer for that.

Frances (Greta Gerwig, who co-wrote the film with Baumbach) expresses herself in self-deprecating jokes and awkward physical play as means of delaying an internal reckoning that she dreads; the couple at the center of Antonioni’s drama (Marcello Mastroianni and Jeanne Moreau) never drop their cool public masks—by the end of the film, their attempts to tear them off are futile. Frances clings to old friends, dead-end jobs, and dated college stories because doing so might keep her in permanent stasis, the future always just an imagined “story of us,” as she says to her best friend Sophie; in “La Notte,” the threat of closure (in the form of a dying man in a hospital) is the first thing we see, but the personal connections Frances clings to have been washed away for Antonioni’s lovers, who’ve forgotten even their most intimate memories.

Both films establish loose temporal frameworks—the sense of a year passing in “Frances Ha,” a single day in

“La Notte”—that allow for a more anecdotal, digressive sense of story, tone, and style (describing his inspiration for “La Notte,” Antonioni described a party full of “certain episodes, certain small moments I had noted”). On one of the new Criterion disc’s extras, digital artist Pascal Dargin, who supervised the transfer of “Frances Ha” from digital color to black-and-white, comments, “People behind digital...are trying to represent reality,” he claims. “But reality is *boring!*” While their location shooting, blend of professional and non-professional actors, and keen observational detail link both movies to long traditions of cinematic realism, they are less interested in social documentary than in intertextuality and interiority: Each is a series of artful gestures away from the definitive and towards ambiguous, open moments of surprise (what, on a visual level, Baumbach describes as a look that captures both “shadow and motion”).

Drifting is also a sensation the films extend to their viewers, and it presented me with an interesting writing surprise. I’ve had these two discs, both out from Criterion in spiffy new, combined DVD/Blu-ray sets, sitting at my house for two months. I watched them each at least a month ago. And I liked them both quite a bit, particularly “Frances Ha,” which is both the saddest and the most optimistic movie Baumbach has ever made. The booklet essays of “Frances Ha” and “La Notte” (by Annie Baker and Richard Brody, respectively) are thoughtful, searching, and poetic; the extras on each disc are informative (if, in the case of “La Notte,” a bit repetitious in their emphasis on architectural themes); and the inclusion on “La Notte” of an essay by Antonioni, and on “Frances Ha” of two creator interviews (between Baumbach and mentor Peter Bogdanovich, and between Gerwig and Sarah Polley) offer lovely and playful insights into process. The transfers are as gorgeous as you might imagine, and the aforementioned extra about how “Frances Ha” used digital video to achieve a silvery, filmic look is fantastic.



I took notes, I re-watched scenes, I thought about them a lot throughout the winter holidays. I remembered the bombed-out fragments of wartime buildings through which Moreau strolls in “La Notte,” the lush decadence of the jazz dance at the nightclub, the cut of Mastroianni’s voice at a party when he gets upset at a misquoted literary passage; I pondered Adam Driver’s porkpie hat in “Frances Ha,” the slumped-yet-hopeful walk of Gerwig, and the way a roommate keeps telling her, with affection, that she’s “undateable.” And yet, every time I sat down to write this piece, I froze.

I kept thinking of two moments in particular: the sequence in “La Notte” when Mastroianni and Moreau attend a

late-night party at the home of a wealthy industrialist, and the brief moment of euphoria in “Ha” when Frances runs through the city streets to David Bowie’s “Modern Love.” The former is slow, full of tracking shots across the modernist house and the inky evening blacks of its backyard, while the latter is brief, kinetic, and so in thrall to the energy of the song that it feels like a delirious music video break in Frances’s otherwise downward spiral of a life. The irony is rich in each—the party is less release than existential weight, both beautiful and numbing; Frances’s excitement comes from having made new friendships that won’t be as meaningful as she hopes—but what really stuck was the sheer untranslatability into words of their effect on me. I wanted less to explain the scenes than just share them with Cinespect readers—to point excitedly and say, “Look! Don’t you see it? Don’t you *feel* it?”

“It’s not really work, it’s just the power to charm,” David Bowie sings in “Modern Love,” and the self-deprecation of that line is one that often haunts cultural criticism, whose purpose is so often framed as making work of charming objects. But to paraphrase Frances’s dinner party response, is that really what criticism does, or should do? What if we took Bowie’s lyric less as a tossed-off description, and more as a challenge for what film writing could be? Might it look like Baumbach’s description of another English pop genius’s work in one of the extras, when he compares filmmaking to Paul McCartney’s “Ram”: “It’s both kind of a punk rock idea, in that...you’re doing things like getting a sound you like...because it sounds better in the bathroom. But the songs are so crafted, and they’re big-*sounding*”? What would a criticism be that charmed, that got that balance of “so crafted” and “punk,” that could be acute without shying away from the big sound? It might lead us from the ennui-laden despair of Antonioni’s couple to something that is, to use one of Frances’s recurring words, *magic*.