

## Film Review

# Jane by Charlotte

Film review by **Leila Dubois-Barnes**

**T**his documentary film was written and directed by Charlotte Gainsbourg and is about her celebrated mother, 'the most French of British artists Jane Birkin' (*Le Monde*, 2023). Cutting through their shyness, mother and daughter discuss transmission, filial love, motherhood, ageing, sickness and loss. There is no script, the only rehearsal is when duetting the well-known song, *Je t'aime moi non plus* (1969), written by the late Serge Gainsbourg, Charlotte's father. Subtly provocative and unsettling in Gainsbourg-Birkin fashion, the aesthetic dimension of the film is magical.

The fast unsteady motions that open the film signal the atmosphere of a concert about to begin. Jane makes her entry on stage singing. Graciously she engages with the Japanese audience and honours the memory of Serge – introducing in the process the absent father. The applause is immediately followed by panting sounds. Charlotte's? We see bits of urban scenes

with an electro-rock soundtrack and hear the distinctive murmuring voice of Charlotte. This creates a sharp dissonance with the melodious overture of the philharmonic orchestra. These moments of quiet backstage and of exciting fast-paced scenes with intermittent taking flights, are a keynote of the rhythms and the mood of the film. Jo, Charlotte's daughter, gracefully comes and goes amidst reveries and the tensions derived from the enigmatic 'beautiful' mother and 'intimidating' daughter. 'Isn't it a bit gloomy?' wonders Jane. 'No, not all, it's actually very pretty,' replies Charlotte, mindful of the aesthetic value of realism.

On the seashore, on a train, in Tokyo or on a roof top in New York, Charlotte films sensitively with simplicity. Time is ebbing away. She is holding the camera, perhaps a transitional object, and artfully places the dual unity of life and death, light and darkness, presence-absence in the conception of her project. There are moving intimate images of



bygone days and of loved ones projected here and there. Present and past blend with ordinary living, just as humour ‘so British’ (as the French would say) offers refreshing interludes between the emotional storms that are inevitably being created when two people come together. The aesthetic turmoil that is aroused by the manifest beauty of the object, namely the mother, is harmoniously negotiated, if not sublimated (Meltzer, 1988). ‘The intention,’ said Charlotte to Jane by way of introduction, ‘is to look at you like I have never dared looking at you...the camera is basically an excuse’. It is about looking, touching, and being touched, and us to-ing and fro-ing alongside, in and out, attending to our own reverie and fantasies.

Depending on the area of experiencing, through various angles, perspectives, and location, we get to have a close-up look at ‘parts’ of the mother: her skin, hands, or face. Jane, in all her casual self, engages so naturally and elegantly with the camera, that one wonders if the object itself isn’t imbued with special qualities – that of embodying different parts of the mother, public and private alike. The beauty of a woman self-aware, well into her seventies, who has survived the loss of a daughter (Kate) and suffered from cancer, who is so exposed to overwhelming emotions and exposes herself to the camera in all

her nakedness, is simply a profoundly humbling experience. ‘At some point you don’t recognize yourself’ said Jane over Bach’s *Above and below B Minor*, conveying a sense of foreboding.

Under the clouds of mortality, Jo runs in the wilderness. Here and there we see a tear discreetly wiped away. We learn that mother and daughter were estranged after Kate’s passing.

Throughout, there are scenes equated with reciprocity and receptivity. Homes have a significant place. In Jane’s home in Brittany or Serge’s in Paris, Charlotte’s camera captures the stillness of a room or a view. Here and there memories ‘of other lives’ embedded in ordinary objects are seized with the same intensity and details. Time is suspended. Jane’s interior is spacious and welcoming – the ‘mess is a kind of a mild illness’. Serge’s is darker and obscured. It is remarkably preserved in its original state. ‘It’s like Pompeii,’ Jane exclaims.

The lively creative union between the parents and the knowledge of the father permeates the film. In an early scene, in a tranquil, leafy Japanese garden, Charlotte is not yet holding the camera. Instead, she looks up (to the cameraman?) for clues. ‘When you were fourteen,’ Jane recalls, ‘I was dying to see you naked... I asked

you to touch your breast... I found you so beautiful’. As we lean forward, to catch the drift of any fleeting nuances of Jane’s self-disclosing ‘tactile’ fantasy, Charlotte appears unfazed. We are surprised to even find ourselves in the position of peeping through a keyhole in disbelief witnessing yet another intimate intercourse à deux. Aside from it being not unusual for the Gainsbourg family to be seen sharing beds – as in the video of the song ‘Lemon Incest’ (featuring Charlotte with her shirtless father), there is a sense of the shadow of the object – the father is alive in the mother and daughter’s mind and that knowledge generates life, love, and an infinite creativity capacity to be in the world. In fact, the language between Jane and Charlotte is French, the language of the father. Interestingly both admit that each was made to feel particularly special by her father.

The film ends on the seashore. From a distance, Charlotte is filming. In a whisper she tells her mother how much she loves her: ‘The more I look at you, the more I love you...’ In the final scene, mother and daughter unite in an embrace – two bodies becoming one.

If there was to be a film exemplifying the concept of the good breast as a supremely good object, the recognition of

the parents’ intercourse as a supremely creative act and the recognition of the inevitability of time and death, *Jane by Charlotte* could be that film (Money-Kyrle, 1971). Jane passed away last summer. In this moving tribute, Charlotte honours the memory of her parents thanking each of them individually for having loved the other so much.

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*Jane by Charlotte* (2021). Directed by Charlotte Gainsbourg. Jane Birkin, Charlotte Gainsbourg, Jo Attal, 1h28mns, DVD, Jour de Fête Distribution. [www.imdb.com/title/tt14851374/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt14851374/)

Words in italic are quotes from the film, translated by me.

## References

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