

Cézanne and I (Cézanne et moi): The relationship of painter Paul Cézanne and novelist Émile Zola

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Written and directed by Danièle Thompson

Cézanne and I (Cézanne et moi) is a 2016 film, now available on Netflix, directed by Danièle Thompson, about the relationship between French painter Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) and novelist Émile Zola (1840-1902). The lives and times of these two extremely complex artists inevitably raise a host of issues.

Zola, the author of *Thérèse Raquin* (1867), *L'Assommoir (The Drinking Den*, 1877), *Nana* (1880), *Germinal* (1885), *La Bête humaine (The Beast Within*, 1890) and two dozen other novels, was a leading exponent of Naturalism in fiction and theater. His works were denounced as obscene and vulgar by critics, but they eventually won him enormous popular and financial success.

Zola is also well known for his courageous stance in the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906), in which Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French-Jewish artillery officer in the French army, was framed up on charges of providing military secrets to the German embassy and imprisoned on Devil's Island. The case became a dividing line between reactionary and socially progressive forces in France. In 1898, Zola published his famed *J'Accuse ... (I Accuse ...)*, denouncing the highest levels of the military for their obstruction of justice and anti-Semitism. Dreyfus was not completely exonerated until 1906.

Cézanne was an immensely gifted and committed painter, whose distinctive work was deeply influential for artists in the early 20th century and beyond. The Spanish painter Pablo Picasso is quoted as saying that Cézanne was "the father of us all." Belonging to the same generation as Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and a decade younger than Édouard Manet and Camille Pissarro, Cézanne held himself apart from the Impressionists and others, striving for something he considered more classical and substantive. He is often called a Post-Impressionist. Critics refer to his "aloofness or austerity" and the "very restricted part which decoration plays in his work" and pay tribute to "his resolute concentration of all his energies on what for him is essential."

Albert Barnes and Violette de Mazia wrote that Cézanne's earliest painting "reflects strongly the influence of the Venetians (especially Tintoretto), Caravaggio, Ribera, Zurbarán, Rembrandt, the brothers Le Nain, the seventeenth century Dutch painters and Delacroix, Daumier, Courbet and Manet." Only in the last decade of his life did Cézanne begin to attain a measure of recognition for what had been considered by the critics to be "ugly" and "awkward" work.

Astonishingly, these two future major figures attended school together in Aix-en-Provence in southern France and became fast friends. Their eventual falling out has traditionally been attributed to

the publication in 1886 of Zola's novel, *L'Œuvre* (generally translated as *The Masterpiece*), the portrait of whose central figure, painter Claude Lantier, owes a good deal to Cézanne. In fact, it seems more likely that their friendship had cooled long before the publication of Zola's book. They had different ideas on art and society—Zola, generally a man of the left, and Cézanne, particularly as he aged, a conservative increasingly consumed by his Roman Catholic beliefs.

In any event, Thompson's film takes as its fictional starting point an encounter between Cézanne (Guillaume Gallienne) and Zola (Guillaume Canet) in 1888. The painter visits the now wealthy author ("You got what you wanted ... success, home ...") and berates him over the Lantier character in *The Masterpiece* (Thompson acknowledges she invented the scene). Zola argues that the fictional figure was rooted in many sources. Cézanne reads a passage from the novel that obviously refers directly to their childhood in Aix.

Cézanne et moi proceeds from there in a series of flashbacks to recount their relationship and respective struggles. In the 1860s, Cézanne splits his time between Paris, where he inhabits the edges of circles including Manet, Renoir and others, but sometimes ends up sleeping on the street, and Aix. The painter comes from a wealthy, nouveau riche family (his father was a milliner turned banker), who disapprove of his career as an artist.

Zola, from a much humbler background, subsists on next to nothing, along with his widowed mother Émilie (Isabelle Candelier). Zola defends the budding Impressionists in articles, written against the official academic artistic trends and their defenders. "I'll always side with the underdogs," he explains. One of Cézanne's former models and perhaps lovers, Gabrielle, or as she calls herself now, Alexandrine (Alice Pol), becomes Zola's wife, and the painter feels betrayed.

Several years later, Zola announces his plan to write a series of novels following a single family, to create a picture of French society. "Like Balzac," Cézanne comments drily. But, says Zola, there are "no workers in Balzac." No writer, he suggests has ever remembered the workers.

The film goes back and forth in time. In 1888, Cézanne asserts that Zola, who now lives in a lavish house, has "befriended the bourgeoisie you hated." Zola dismisses the charge.

Back in the early 1870s, the war with Prussia and the Paris Commune leave the city "in chaos." It's the Republic now, Zola asserts.

With no apparent interest in politics, Cézanne explains that he wants to paint "the fluidity of the air, the heat of the sun and the violence of the rocks."

At a dinner party, where Zola, Guy de Maupassant, Pissarro, Renoir and others are present, Cézanne makes a scene, drunkenly insulting other guests. He goes out, and in one of the film's more poignant sequences, overhears the others as they criticize his brutishness, his "awful paintings" and so on.

In one of the final segments of their 1888 confrontation, Cézanne denounces Zola's picture of him in *The Masterpiece*, in which the painter-hero ultimately hangs himself in part over his frustration with being unable to complete his "masterpiece." A "pathetic, impotent loser—is that how you see me?" Zola turns on his accuser: "I'm sterile ... there are no more *Nanas* or *Germinals*... You come to finish me off. You insult me ... You're heartless, which is why you'll never become a great artist."

(In fact, of course, ironically, Claude Lantier is a largely sympathetic figure, whose dedication to art is nearly absolute. Zola writes, for example: "Ah! what an effort of creation it was, an effort of blood and tears, filling Claude with agony in his attempt to beget flesh and instill life! Ever battling with reality, and ever beaten, it was a struggle with the Angel. He was wearing himself out with this impossible task of making a canvas hold all nature; he became exhausted at last with the pains which racked his muscles without ever being able to bring his genius to fruition. What others were satisfied with, a more or less faithful rendering, the various necessary bits of trickery, filled him with remorse, made him as indignant as if in resorting to such practices one were guilty of ignoble cowardice; and thus he began his work over and over again, spoiling what was good through his craving to do better.")

A final opportunity for a reconciliation between Zola and Cézanne comes in 1896, but this time too, only pain and misunderstanding result.

There are interesting moments and ideas in *Cézanne et moi*. The film is seriously and intelligently done. The artistic environment in Paris, the state of social life, the natural beauty of Provence are effectively evoked. The acting is fine, Guillaume Gallienne as Cézanne is particularly remarkable.

This is a generally appealing film, one that holds the attention. The personalities involved, the historical and intellectual issues at stake are sufficient to engross the viewer.

But there are oddities or anomalies in Thompson's work, the most important of which can only be explained with reference to some of the cultural and ideological difficulties of our time.

First of all, in the apparent interest of creating some sort of symmetrical psychological opposition, Thompson casts Zola as the poor boy who climbs the social ladder and Cézanne as the product of a prosperous family who nearly starves (he eventually inherited wealth when his father died in 1886)—this much is more or less true. But then, in addition, the director insists on making Zola into a repressed petty bourgeois, while her Cézanne is a leering, bohemian "womanizer." A bohemian he was, but Cézanne, in his personal relations, was extremely stifled, fearful and mistrustful of women and intensely reclusive. Virtually every biographer shares a version of the same account—"Cézanne could not bear any physical contact (an uninvited touch of the hand caused him to fly into a rage)." (Gilles Plazy)

Why carry out this sort of psychological injustice?

More significantly, Thompson has chosen to leave entirely out of the picture (except for one brief reference) the Dreyfus affair itself. True, this is much more a biography of Cézanne, told, so to speak, from Zola's point of view. Still, the Dreyfus case, along with the 1871 Commune (also largely excluded), was the great event that convulsed

French society.

The director apparently wanted to concentrate on Cézanne's private woes and sufferings. But why should that concern and the broader social concern be mutually exclusive?

Zola's role in the Dreyfus affair is well-known and deeply inspiring. It forms the center of the Hollywood film, *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), which featured a number of left-wing performers, including Paul Muni (as Zola) and future blacklist victims Gale Sondergaard and Morris Carnovsky, and was directed by left-wing German émigré William [Wilhelm] Dieterle.

Shamefully, the Warner Brothers film does not once mention anti-Semitism nor use the word "Jew" in the entire film. This was one of the miserable accommodations the film studios made to official anti-Semitism, or worse still, their commercial prospects in Nazi Germany. Nonetheless, Dieterle's work is an obvious anti-militarist, anti-fascist effort. Muni, in one of his most effective performances, declares toward the end, "To save Dreyfus, we had to challenge the might of those who dominate the world. It is not the swaggering militarists. They're but puppets that dance as the strings are pulled. It is those others, those who would ruthlessly plunge us into the bloody abyss of war to protect their power ..."

Cézanne held reactionary views in regard to the Dreyfus affair. Renoir and Edgar Degas were open anti-Semites, while Pissarro (who was Jewish), Monet, Mary Cassatt, Paul Signac, Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard were Dreyfus supporters. To his credit, however, unlike Degas and Renoir, who shunned "the Jew" Pissarro in the street, Cézanne, notes one historian, "appeared in a 1902 exhibition catalogue [during the height of the affair] as a 'pupil of Pissarro' and recorded a magnificent tribute to that 'humble and colossal' figure."

There is no intellectually defensible reason to excise this critical event from a film dealing with the lives of Zola and Cézanne. One has the sense that either the filmmaker finds the events too complicated and troubling or simply has little interest in them. It is hard to say which is worse. *Cézanne et moi* could have been far more intriguing and challenging than it is.

Let's leave the last word to Zola in *The Masterpiece*, who puts these sentences in the mouth of Cézanne-Lantier: "Ah! life! life! to feel it and portray it in its reality, to love it for itself, to behold in it the only real, lasting, and changing beauty, without any idiotic idea of ennobling it by mutilation. To understand that all so-called ugliness is nothing but the mark of individual character, to create real men and endow them with life—yes, that's the only way to become a god!"



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