



Anaïs in Love

Director: Charline Bourgeois-Tacquet

Country: France

Date: 2021

A review by Wendy Ide for *The Guardian*:

She's a familiar character. Skittish, self-absorbed, seductive and terminally unreliable, Anaïs (Anaïs Demoustier) is the latest incarnation of the chaotic femme, the slightly more world-weary European spin on the "manic pixie dreamgirl" trope that is a fixture in the American indie movie circuit.

Loosely inspired by the gamine free spirits of the French New Wave, the chaotic femme tends to be in her late 20s or early 30s and at an impasse in all aspects of her life, with a tendency to sabotage the elements that threaten to succeed. She spends an inordinate amount of time running: the chaotic femme is always late, has great legs and favours short skirts, all the better to flit through various photogenic European city backdrops. Like her predecessors – Julie in Joachim Trier's *The Worst Person in the World* and Paula in Léonor Serraille's *Jeune Femme*, Anaïs ought to be insufferable. She's feckless, enragingly disorganised and has the attention span of a three-year-old in the throes of a sugar rush. She's part glitterball, part wrecking ball. In real life you would avoid her like a norovirus omelette. But filtered through the forgiving lens of first-time writer and director Charline Bourgeois-Tacquet's peppy comic love triangle, she becomes a fascinating, intoxicating presence.



The key to bringing magnetism to a superficially annoying character is, as always, in the casting. Just as Renate Reinsve flooded Julie in *The Worst Person in the World* with an itching, restless intelligence that explains her fickle lack of focus, so Demoustier works a similar alchemy with Anaïs. Often cast in intense, passionate roles – she was fiercely serious opposite a more flamboyant Romain Duris in François Ozon's *The New Girlfriend*; intellectually agile in *Alice and the Mayor* – here Demoustier gets to show a more playful side. Anaïs is an incorrigible flirt. She seduces in order to reject, and is comfortably certain that all her (many) failures and transgressions will be forgiven thanks to her considerable charm. And in this she is correct. She is utterly beguiling. There's a pivotal scene in which Anaïs, in the audience at a literary event, catches the eye of the speaker. And Demoustier so supercharges her performance with charisma, she almost seems to sparkle.



It's a performance that works in tandem with the film-making to give depth to the woman we see on screen. We are introduced to Anaïs – running, of course – to the accompaniment of a scurrying, tumbling piano score, like panic-induced palpitations in musical form. Her full-tilt movements are shadowed by a camera that seems to be as easily distracted as she is. It picks up on the essential details, however – the way that, having finally dumped her half-on, half-off boyfriend and embarked on an affair with Daniel (Denis Podalydès), an older man, her eyes slide away from his hungry gaze, as though she is already casing out an escape route.

But while her relationship with Daniel is over almost before it starts, Anaïs is increasingly fascinated by his author partner, Emilie (Valeria Bruni Tedeschi, delivering her trademark breathy, slightly dishevelled sexy/neurotic shtick), connecting at first with her writing and then through a chance encounter on the street. Impulsive and instinctive as always, Anaïs drops everything, including her dissertation, a job and her cancer-stricken mother, to place herself in Emilie's orbit.

The reward is a sensual brushing of hand against thigh on a beach, a chime of synchronicity on the dancefloor and a cloud-parting moment of realisation. There's a reason why all of her relationships have failed until now. Why she unceremoniously turfs her men from her bed after sex. The film's arc might not leave Anaïs as a better person exactly – the apparent disregard for her mother's deteriorating health suggests that empathy is markedly absent from the emotional baggage she hauls – but she does end the picture closer to taking control of her destiny rather than constantly trying to outrun it.

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