

Opposite: Cover of the 1976 Godard Special Issue of L'Avant-Scène Cinéma.

the “betweenness” identified by Kaja Silverman and Harun Farocki as a crucial element in *Passion*, 1982, a film which for them represents a “larger experimentation with asynchronicity”.³ The asynchrony, the non-coincidence, in *Passion* are ascribed an explicitly political value, as in the meeting of woman trade unionists at the factory in which Godard’s experimentation with sound/image disjunction means that the words “float once again ‘between’ all of those present”.⁴ What is interesting for us here is the persistence of this kind of politicised sound/image dissociation into the early 1980s, the time at which such experiments in superstructural revolution, and indeed belief in the possibility of socialist revolution *tout court*, were beginning (at least) to run out of steam. Asynchrony, that is to say, is there on both sides of the camera, in the time and conditions of the film’s making and reception quite as much as in the formal strategies it deploys.

I have quoted John Lennon on Elvis, who became a *petit soldat* more or less as Godard was shooting his film of that title, for two reasons. One is that in my more rebarbative days I was wont to compare Godard and Truffaut to the Lennon and McCartney of New Wave filmmaking—though the analogy of course broke down, indeed became asynchronous, when the “wrong one” died prematurely. The other, more serious reason is that Lennon’s remark suggests a Manichean view of Elvis’s work—the good earlier years and the bad later ones—similar to “the crude digest of images and stereotypes purveyed by much contemporary Godard scholarship” denounced by Michael Temple and James S Williams:

The story is well known: something political happened around 1968 which led to a series of unwatchable films, before Godard then headed for the French provinces to make TV, returning to cinema only in the early 1980s with *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*. This produced in the early 1980s some late masterpieces by an Old Master, after which the old fool isolated in his Swiss retreat appeared to lose the plot.⁵

The crucial difference, of course, is that Elvis’s post-Army records continued to be widely heard and to sell in vast numbers, despite their well-nigh universal critical dismissal and neglect. Godard’s more recent films have experienced the opposite fate, being extremely difficult to see, often extremely difficult to watch, but it sometimes seems all but impossible to avoid reading about. The (at best) restricted availability of virtually all his work over the past decade and a half has not stemmed the torrent of words devoted to it—rather the reverse. It is almost as though those words represented a verbal compensation for the inaccessibility (in two senses) of the images to which they relate. The asynchrony that is so important in the filmic texts seems to have bled out into the time and conditions of their reception, which can be seen as constituting something very like a *mise en abyme* of the sound-image dissociation characteristic of all his work, but most markedly of the later years. This is illustrated by the notorious *bon mot* from *Vent d’est*, 1969: “Ce n’est pas une image juste, c’est juste une image” (“It’s not a just image, it’s just an image”), often taken by those hostile to Godard as a distillation of the supposed postmodernist view that no text can ever actually refer to anything at all, but (I hope) to be given slightly subtler treatment here.

The Godard industry began in earnest in the aftermath of 1968, when Godard ostentatiously withdrew from the production and distribution circuits of the art-house cinema. The major theoretical developments of the ensuing decade, centring around *Cahiers du cinéma* in France and *Screen* in Britain, represented something like a high noon of political formalism in which the disruption of the viewing subject’s relationship to the filmic text was the *sine qua non* of a revolutionary cinema. Godard, with or without Jean-Pierre Gorin or Anne-Marie Miéville, was a totemic figure in this context. The fact that his



Opposite: **Geneviève Galéa and Catherine Ribeiro** during the making of *Les Carabiniers*.

stylisation acts to place them between the unreflecting collaboration of Lucien Lacombe and the perhaps no less unreflecting consumerism of the latter-day tourist industry—out of synch with both, but precisely thereby drawing a powerfully implicit parallel between them.

Bande à part was for long widely regarded as a minor Godard, but has attracted more critical attention over the past decade, culminating in the recent reissue of a new print. Barthélémy Amengual's 1993 monograph marked an important reevaluation of the film, describing it as at once Godard's most realistic and his most classic work.¹⁰ It may well have been these very qualities that led to the film's comparative neglect at the time when the formal-political experimentation of the Dziga Vertov period dominated discussion of Godard. Yet the "quite deliberate discrepancies" that for Amengual characterise the film unobtrusively prefigure the more florid asynchronies of much of the later work.¹¹ The "minute's silence" observed by the three central characters, one of whom says that it "can last an eternity", in fact lasts for only about 45 seconds. Amengual also draws attention to other significant asynchronies in the film, during the Madison dance sequence and in Godard's various voice-over interventions—these in what he has described as "the most realistic of Godard's films, if not the only one".¹² Amengual's prolonged deconstruction of that realism serves to show how the coincidence of word and image that is an important part of any conception of cinematic realism is continually undercut from within.¹³

That coincidence is "an important part of cinematic realism", but not the only one, for it leaves out of account the referential dimension. Godard may have invited us to do this with his proclamation of intent "not to make political films, but to make films politically", but acceptance of such an invitation is not obligatory, and is almost bound to impoverish our reading of his work. After all, the Godardophile "*Cahiers*/Screen orthodoxy" of the 1970s finally, and ironically, fell foul of developments in the 'real world'—most notably the waning of belief, including Godard's own, in the possibility of revolutionary social change—and now appears, for all the excellent work it produced and its undeniable importance in promoting serious debate on the moving image, as flawed by its symmetrical occlusion of on the one hand the referent, on the other the audience. *Bande à part* clearly reached a much wider audience than virtually all Godard's post-1968 work, and draws upon a largely popular-cultural set of referents—one reason maybe why it influenced Quentin Tarantino who pays tribute to the Madison sequence in *Pulp Fiction*, 1994. Yet this "popular" world is systematically intruded upon by, and in its turn intrudes upon, the more "serious" worlds of high culture and (post-) colonial politics—not in the postmodern form of pastiche (which apart from anything else is arguably all but impossible in black and white), but rather by way of an approach akin to montage, deriving its effects from the collision of habitually asynchronous or incompatible elements.

Five years after *Bande à part*, the explosion of May 1968 was to bring the politics of culture to the fore. Godard's foretelling of this in *La Chinoise* and *Week-end* is itself foretold in the farcical English lesson in *Bande à part*, where the rote-learning approach to Shakespeare—albeit in a private language school rather than in the State academy—figures the dreary centralisation of the French educational system. The cultural dereliction of the suburbs, not yet even partially redeemed by the advent of rap and tagging as in Kassovitz's *La Haine* of 1995, is almost as inescapable a backdrop to this film as it was to *Les Carabiniers* and would be—moved several degrees up-market—in *Deux ou trois choses*. The ethos of cultural consumerism is memorably lampooned in the sequence where the trio visit the Louvre in record time, beating the previous-American-best of nine minutes and 43 seconds. (I have no evidence to



Opposite: Anne Wiazemsky as Marie
in Robert Bresson's *Au hasard,
Balthazar*, 1966.

suggest that this “record” really existed, but *se non è vero è ben trovato*.) But the film’s political frame of reference is not confined to the cultural, as the invocation of committed writers such as Jack London and Louis Aragon may suggest. It also contains a number of references to colonialism and the post-colonial epoch, in that respect constituting an intertext with *Les Carabiniers* with its *mise en scène* of the supplanting of colonialism by tourism. Franz/Sami Frey says after the English class that the United Kingdom is finished as a world power and that its place will be taken by China. The cousin of Arthur/Claude Brasseur was at Diên Biên Phu, the battle which in 1954 put paid to the French colonial presence in South-East Asia. In anecdotal, almost throwaway form these allusions refer to major sites of Godard’s political concerns in the decade ahead: Vietnam from 1965 and *Pierrot le fou*, China of course from *La Chinoise* of two years later.

More striking to an audience today, however, is the reference to the former Belgian colony of Rwanda. This occurs when Arthur and Franz are waiting idly outside Odile/Anna Karina’s house, reading passages from the newspaper to each other to pass the time. A couple of banal *faits divers* are followed by a story about ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda, which had obtained its independence only the previous year. I saw this film for the first time at London’s National Film Theatre in 1994, when the conflict was at its fiercest and featured prominently in the broadsheet press, and the sharp intake of audience breath was clearly perceptible. What is perhaps most powerful about this reference is the banality of the context in which it is embedded. Ethnic cleansing—to use a term not then invented—is placed on an everyday, uneventful footing, as though in support of Debord’s theses on the levelling, banalising effects of the spectacle. (The visual metaphor of spectacle is essentially a dead one for Debord, whose analyses do not particularly privilege the moving image over other types of mass media such as the press.) It would, I think, be difficult even to argue that the violence described in the article serves as some kind of contrast to the violence of the film’s final shoot-out, which as almost always in Godard is stylised and choreographed. The characters’ lack of response to the article is so marked, and the shoot-out so distant from the earlier scene in time, that the two “killing fields” are radically, and as it were unhelpfully, other, refusing any assimilation into a political context that would become Godard’s only from about 1965, which is as good a date as any to situate the onset of his *engagé* period. *Pierrot le fou* makes explicit connections between its central couple’s crime spree and the violence in Vietnam, most clearly when Pierrot/Ferdinand/Jean-Paul Belmondo and Marianne/Anna Karina stage a satirical playlet about Vietnam for the benefit of some American sailors. *Bande à part*, by contrast, has more in common with the widely-observed nihilism of *Le Petit soldat*, 1960. The film’s asynchronous universe is one in which violences of different kinds sit side by side without connecting tissue, whether humanistic (“this is the dreadful world in which we live”) or dialectical (“these are only apparently dissimilar aspects of the dominance of capitalism in which its fall is also inscribed”). To that extent, *Bande à part*’s asynchronies make it, I would argue, a darker and less good-natured film than its overall tone may seem to suggest.

La Chinoise and Week-end

The one characteristic of the May 68 events on which all observers agree is their unexpectedness. Pierre Vianson-Ponté famously opined in *Le Monde* of 15 March 1968 that “France is bored”, and even when student protests at the new university of Nanterre, in the western suburbs of Paris, spread to the Sorbonne and rapidly brought all French universities to a halt it was difficult to imagine that within a few weeks the very survival of the Fifth Republic



Opposite: **Isabelle Huppert, Roland Amstutz, Jacques Dutronc, and Nathalie Baye** in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980.

they are meant to be read as related pieces. We chose this way of raising certain issues with respect to the film (violence and enunciation, pornography and eroticism, the citation of the work of Marguerite Duras and her fictional inclusion in the film) in order to give readers a sense not only of the importance that we afford to Godard's work, but also the complexity of our relation to that work as it bears on our own project, namely, the examination of women and representation in film and the other arts.¹⁹

The editors closed their introductory remarks with the following comments:

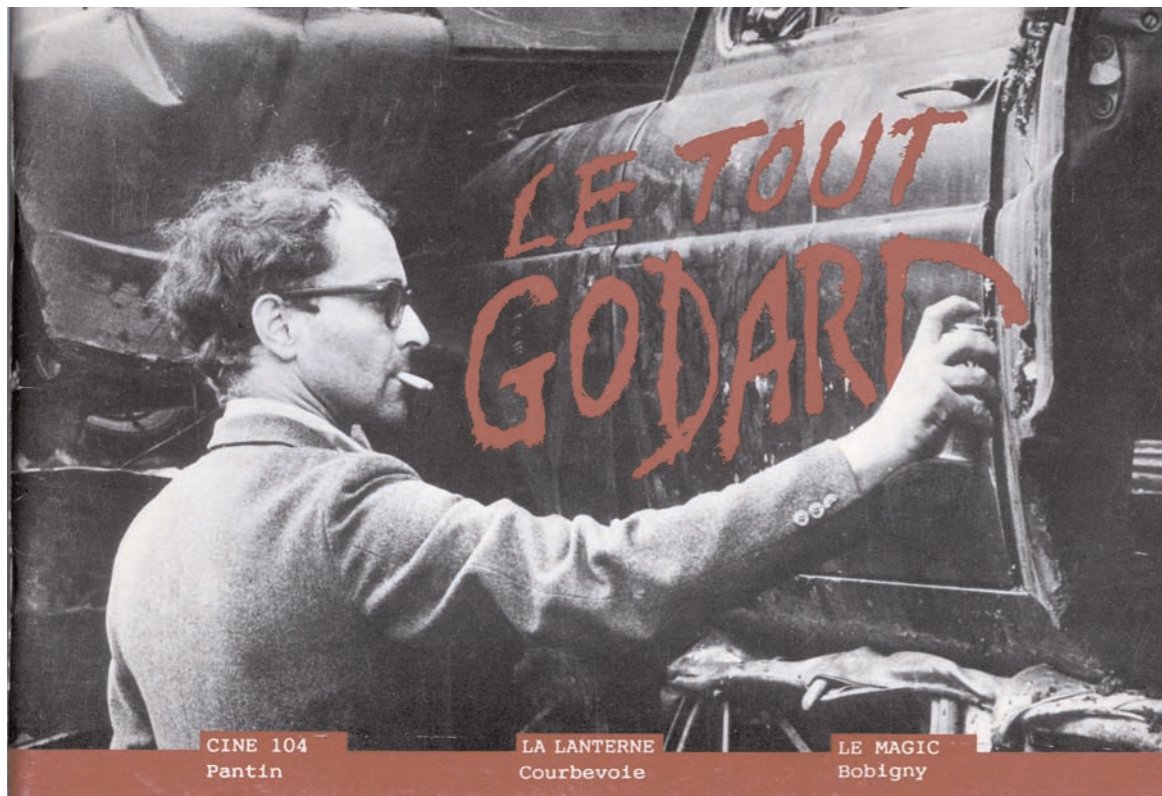
Like many others, we have been very curious about Anne-Marie Miéville's contribution to the more recent films and television programs, where her role as collaborator has been readily, if a little vaguely, acknowledged by Godard. We tried to communicate with her directly, by sending questions about her views on these projects, her working methods, and her film, photographic, video or written work apart from Godard. Unfortunately, there was no response. We still hope to discover more about her contribution, clearly a considerable one, and publish this in a future article or review.²⁰

If Godard has been (irritatingly?) vague about Miéville's contribution to "their" work, he has presumably been equally as vague about the limits of his own contribution in the statements to which the editors refer. But they don't say that they have attempted to contact Godard, or that they would be interested in so doing.²¹ Only Miéville, it seems, can clear these matters up and she is silent.²² It appears that, according to some kind of unstated auteurist default, Godard's contribution is not what is really in question.

Yet, as the last paragraph of the editorial introduction makes clear, part of *Camera Obscura's* political project requires that Miéville must now be taken into account, not just as any collaborator with Godard but as one who may well be an author in her own right, whether or not she co-directs "his" films. By the time *Sauve qui peut* was distributed, it was known, again rather vaguely, that Miéville had been involved in certain filmmaking projects outside of her collaboration with Godard.²³ Despite the fact that the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the apogee of academic debates about the "death of the author", it can be seen that feminist film theory needed female filmmakers in its theorising of "women and representation in film and the arts". At the very least, it could not allow them to continue to be sidelined or ignored. In representing this desire the editorial introduction unavoidably bespeaks some of the contradictions of the debates about the practices of critical auteurism at this time.²⁴

But what exactly does *Camera Obscura* want from Miéville? While the editors do not set out collectively to prove that Godard's work has changed with *Sauve qui peut*, and that therefore Miéville's role in this change should be investigated, two out of their three individually authored articles on the film do explore these ideas tangentially. In her article on the film, entitled "Pornography, Eroticism", Constance Penley (noting, along with other critics that "Paul Godard is a fictional character but he is also meant to be Godard") writes that "[i]n the masochistic fantasy of this film Paul Godard is destroyed by the women, or at least by his passivity in relation to their greater readiness to seek change".²⁵ She continues:

Women, then, in this schema, acquire a certain superiority, but it is at the price of a difference defined as essential (in their nature) and as necessarily bound to extinguish its opposite. The film offers a strikingly different narrative repartition of the terms of masculinity and femininity, but because it leaves unquestioned what it sees as the natural fascination of women, these terms sort themselves out, finally, according to a logic of male masochism as the response to a failed aggression against these idealised women. *Sauve qui peut* begins with a celebration of femininity in its essential difference—Denise in stop-action riding her bicycle in the country [...]—and ends with the imagined consequences of this difference for men—Paul dying in the street.²⁶



Is there a place for Godard's cinema, itself so desperate to be included in the great tradition of Western art, in this world of *mémoire courte*, in which the contours of history and culture have taken on the chimerical shimmy and insubstantiality of the digital image derided in the second half of *Éloge de l'amour*, 2001? When New York's Museum of Modern Art mounted in 1992 a retrospective of Godard's work post-*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980, Jonathan Rosenbaum wrote an essay entitled "Eight Obstacles to the Appreciation of Godard in the United States".² The eighth impediment cited by Rosenbaum, "hermeticism and declining interest in intellectual cinema", has only escalated in the intervening decade. Mocked, ignored or reviled, Godard's late work has suffered increasingly limited exhibition, even as his films from *À bout de souffle*, 1960, to *Week-end*, 1967, have become canonic. The early films, however, exist mostly in a televisual universe of cropped Scope, murky resolution, and, when broadcast, commercial interruption, and have been subsumed into postmodernist culture as hip tropes of violent knowingness. Never easy to see, the films from the Dziga Vertov period have all but disappeared from availability, and are rarely discussed any more.

To organise a comprehensive Godard retrospective is an act of resurrection, and the challenges facing the curator who dares this task reflect, indeed manifest, Godard's own concern with the recovery of the past. Its success depends on the retrieval of both material and memory—not merely projectable copies of all of his films and videos, but also of a sense of their influence and importance, and of the cultural and political knowledge required for their understanding. At a time when the two corrupt mercenaries of *Les Carabiniers*, 1963, would probably be running for election to the US Senate, and when our numb culture—malled, wired, and logoed—is not so far from that of *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, 1967, in which, Godard once said, "dead objects are always alive and live people are often already dead", this trinity of retrieval would seem a dubious, if not hopeless, undertaking.

Détective: "Cinema projected, and men saw that the world was there." The liturgical meaning Godard assigns the cinema, especially in *Scénario du film Passion*, 1982, might suggest that the projected light that bodies forth his buried, lost, or perished images in a retrospective is an act of transubstantiation. But that "miracle" is made possible only when its material is available, and few directors pose as daunting obstacles to exhibition as Godard. His prolific output over more than four decades in many formats and media, including a profusion of commissioned and sponsored works, some of them with uncertain or disputed rights, combined with the increasing emphasis on the marketable of both film distribution and film preservation, has resulted in a state of near unattainability. Like one of Godard's many hapless detectives, the curator must first wend his way through an Orphic maze of fashion houses (Marithé et François Girbaud) and corporations both public and private (France Telecom, Darty), international aid agencies (UNICEF) and rights organisations (Amnesty International), American studios (Paramount, MGM/UA, Columbia) and private collectors, government cultural institutes (the Swiss Pro Helvetia and French Ministry of Foreign Affairs), cinémathèques, libraries, and archives on several continents (including Asia and Australia), the estates of obscure writers and the interneecine, highly coded world of French film production and distribution (Gaumont, Canal Plus, INA, *et al*). Some works listed in the master filmography turned out to be apocryphal or non-extant, while one or two others were withheld by their commissioners. Others belonged to Godard himself, some only by default. In the case of *Nouvelle Vague*, 1990, one of his greatest films and scandalously undistributed in Britain or the United States, the producer originally refused me permission

Opposite above: "Le Tout Godard" retrospective, Paris 1989.

Below: 1960s "Revolte Phantasie & Utopie" season, Berlin 2002.



refusing the homogenising dictates of the predominant image (1.85, the filmic equivalent of the euro), and reactionary, clinging to antique, obsolete beauty.

This unnerving discovery, which suggests that some of late Godard has been shown and seen, therefore taught and analysed, inexactly, was compounded by the vexing issues that surround projecting *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Legendary in its absence in North America, where it has been unavailable since the initial versions of various chapters were shown then withdrawn, *Histoire(s)* poses many problems for a retrospective. Should it be shown with subtitles for an audience that does not speak French? Godard has balked at the possibility, and has dragged his feet on providing an English translation. And, if it is shown with subtitles, how to translate the text, both written and spoken, with its poetic density and word-play, its tight braid of invective and aphorism, and how to elide and condense so that the eye and mind are not entirely preoccupied with reading? (The text, after all, is for him the enemy.) Moreover, should the work be projected at all, given that ephemerality tends to make the experience occlusive or overwhelming, especially for a neophyte audience? Exegesis of *Histoire(s)* has often depended on a denial of its very being, i.e. montage, isolating and arresting images or moments or texts that, when projected as they are intended, come as a flood tide of thought and philosophy, a sluice of teeming text and imagery that flashes, stutters, and dissolves, which surely cannot be apprehended or absorbed in a “no going back, no pausing or stopping” single viewing.

Polyphonic, structured by refrain and counterpoint, with chorale-like sequences, Godard’s impossibly profuse and associative opus calls to mind such idiosyncratic musical works as Sorabji’s *Opus clavicebalisticum*, Nancarrow’s *Studies for Player Piano*, or Messaien’s *Catalogue d’oiseaux*. Its sheer omnivorousness and the simultaneity of its many modes make it the summum of Godard’s work. Encompassing, even oceanic, it comes closest to his dream of possessing and remaking the world through the medium and material of cinema. However, *Hélas pour nous*, is a work that forfeits its essence when its montage is suppressed in close analysis, and all but precludes anything but fugitive comprehension when projected for a first time audience. The unwary may respond to this monster of montage, this onslaught of thought in a way opposite to the viewers who sat, transfixed then frightened, by the oncoming trains in Lumière’s film (invoked in Michel-Ange’s innocent reaction in *Les Carabiniers*)—initially confused and apprehensive, then, as they submit to its daunting inundation, mesmerised: ironically for a work of such intellectual density, a reaction approaching rapture, non-thought.

Bonjour Tristesse

The forlorn and mournful are more common in late Godard, however, nowhere more so than in *Éloge*, which anchored the second half of the retrospective. The film’s distributor, recognising that it had limited commercial appeal, readily agreed to make our exhibition the sole Toronto release, and its great success—all five screenings sold out—led to a subsequent, albeit brief and unprofitable, art-house engagement.

Cultural and political memory are synonymous in *Éloge*. Contentious as ever, Godard has produced, as the film’s title suggests, a requiem for a world of art, politics, and philosophy that has been colonised and subdued by international capital, and a bitter screed against a state in which resistance is impossible and everything is for sale, even history and the individual “gaze”. Its first half filmed in black and white, in images of such clarity, density, and lustre that they seem to have been shot on nitrate stock, *Éloge* employs a series of settings charged with political meaning (e.g. the old Renault factory

Opposite: *agnès b.* exhibition, Paris 1986.