

DAVID WILLS

Introduction

OUI, BIEN SÛR ... OUI, BIEN SÛR

A complicated story – all mixed up

There are good reasons for maintaining that, during the five or so years before *Pierrot le fou* was released in 1965, Western cinema had for the second or third, and perhaps last time in its history, been reinvented. Within that perspective, the first reinvention would have been the innovative theoretical approaches to film-making developed by Eisenstein in the 1920s; the second, Italian neo-realism; and the third, the French New Wave. Jean-Luc Godard was foremost among the group of cinéastes for whom a journalist coined the term *New Wave*, and his 1960 feature *A bout de souffle/Breathless* was considered a pioneering moment in breaking with certain of the restricting practices of the cinema of the time while also renewing enthusiastically the possibilities that the medium seemed to offer. The New Wave directors, often friends and associates but never a coherent movement, were a group of mostly young practitioners like Godard that included François Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda.

By the time of *Pierrot le fou*, Godard's films had variously been acclaimed at festivals (*Vivre sa vie/My Life to Live*, 1962) or forbidden release by the French government (*Le Petit soldat*, 1960/63), attracted the collaboration of stars like Brigitte Bardot (*Le Mépris/Contempt*, 1963) or flopped at the box office (*Les Carabiniers*, 1963). The director was nothing if not notorious, and to

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this day, as he continues to make films that more than occasionally intrigue and fascinate a jaded audience of critics and spectators, he remains widely respected as the enfant terrible of cinema.¹

Godard, born in Paris in 1930 into a Swiss family, initially intended to write fiction, but his interest in cinema led him to contribute to a series of film journals, including the *Cahiers du cinéma* founded by André Bazin, and to frequent the film clubs and *Cinémathèque* where he met many of the filmmakers who would become his fellow travelers. Eventually, with the help and financial support of that same network, he began to make his own films. But there was much to distinguish him from other New Wave directors, not the least reasons being his improvisational approach to script and to shooting, and his editing practice, in particular his use of what came to be known as the jump cut, which unsettles the viewer by giving the impression of jumping to another scene before the preceding one has played out as we would expect it to from our training as spectators of classic film and of theater.² Viewers of *A bout de souffle* who have been weaned on MTV will of course be less surprised by the jump cut than was the audience of 1959, but conversely, we might argue that it is thanks to the innovations of Godard that a film like *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) can be conceived of. Similarly – for the idea of the jump cut allows for sequences to be inordinately lengthened as well as shortened – we can see the timing and direction of Quentin Tarantino, for example the remarkable opening diner sequence of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) or the extended bantering scenes in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), as conscious homages to the possibilities created for cinema by the New Wave, possibilities that much contemporary film, in its desire for the perfect illusion, leaves unexploited. For in the final analysis, Godard resolved to make his films about cinema, or at least about the image. He was from a generation that was enamored of films, and indiscriminately devoured them, a group of filmmakers whose literacy in terms of cinema was at the time unsurpassed. For him, the only subject of the films of that period was “cinema itself,”³ and indeed the same might be said of all his work. It constitutes nothing so much as an

interrogation of the possibilities of the image, of the role of the image in our culture, and as such is unique in the history of the cinema, and of the culture and the century that has adopted the moving image as one of its most popular art forms.

In accounts of Godard's work, the period of *Pierrot le fou* is also referred to as the "Anna Karina years," and the director's personal and professional collaboration with the Danish actress playing the film's female protagonist, whom he married in 1961, structures the work of 1960 to 1967.⁴ These were also the years of Godard's greatest commercial success, and indeed critical reaction to *Pierrot* was, in France at least, the most positive the director was ever to receive. He had bought the rights to Lionel White's novel *Obsession* in 1963, and intended to make the film with well-known actress and singer Sylvie Vartan, and then with Richard Burton. Finally Godard was able to pair Anna Karina, working with him for the sixth time, with the antihero par excellence of *A bout de souffle*, Jean-Paul Belmondo, in order to tell "the story of the last romantic couple" (N&M, 216; B, 263). But two days before shooting was to begin, he had nothing to go on apart from the book and the idea for a certain number of sets. Lines were therefore rehearsed on the set, or improvised, and the film was shot, in Godard's words, "like in the days of Mack Sennett . . . the whole last part was invented on the spot, unlike the beginning, which was planned. It is a kind of happening, but one that was controlled" (N&M, 218; B, 265). Filming took place over two months, July and August 1965, on the Côte d'Azur, on the island of Porquerolles, and finally in Paris, in reverse order to the events of the film. It was shot in cinemascope by Raoul Coutard, who had worked on all of Godard's feature films up to that point, who would remain with him throughout the Karina years and return again in the 1980s. Jean-Pierre Léaud, Truffaut's favorite actor, was a director's assistant (and a film spectator in one scene), and the producer Georges de Beauregard, another faithful collaborator, financed the film.

Pierrot follows the adventures of Ferdinand (Belmondo), fleeing a stultifying bourgeois existence, and Marianne (Karina), his free-spirited lover, in their escapades through the south of France en

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route to a romantic utopia they never find. The film begins, after a series of autonomous shots, with Ferdinand sitting in the bath reading to his daughter from a book about the artist Diego Velázquez. He is then seen dressing for a cocktail party where, as his wife reminds him, he should behave properly so as to impress potential employers because he has recently been fired from (or given up) his job in television. The baby-sitter, supposedly the niece of friends who arrive to accompany Ferdinand and his wife to the party, is Marianne.

The scenes at the party, filmed through different-colored filters, include parodies of advertisements for cars and women's beauty products, as well as the short appearance by Samuel Fuller and his definition of cinema as "emotion," which becomes the focus of much and varied discussion in the contributions that follow. The party shows up the sterility of Ferdinand's existence, leading to his precipitate departure and return home where he offers to drive Marianne back to her house. It is only once the couple is in the car that the spectator understands they have already been romantically involved. The scene ends with a short exchange resembling a series of vows: "I'll do anything you want," says Marianne; "Me too, Marianne," replies Ferdinand; "I'm putting my hand on your knee," "Me too, Marianne"; "I'm kissing you all over," "Me too, Marianne," although the characters continue to stare ahead out of the car windshield (*A-S*, 76–8; cf. *W*, 37). This, however, becomes the point of rupture in Ferdinand's life and the point of departure for what will amount to a permanent flight, from Paris, from family, from the law, from enemies, ending only with the death of both protagonists at the end of the film.

The next morning Pierrot (he keeps reminding her that his name is Ferdinand, but, as she replies, one can't say "mon ami Ferdinand" as in the song "Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot") and Marianne wake up at what we take to be her apartment, but it is an apartment containing crates of guns as well as a dead body, and they are interrupted by her "uncle," whom they knock unconscious in the first of a series of slapstick scenes, before fleeing Paris for the countryside en route to the Riviera. The rest of the film is a

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Marianne and Pierrot the next morning



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series of mostly unconnected episodes from that escapade with, on the one hand scenes of a tense and finally fractured relationship between Pierrot and Marianne, and on the other hand, a disconnected story of gunrunning for royalists in Yemen, and Marianne's supposed or actual infidelity with the person she has introduced as her brother. A number of these scenes are memorable for their cinematic or theatrical resourcefulness. There is the semi slapstick of a roadside garage sequence that reminds us of Godard's respect for early cinema as well as the fact that Pierrot is an obvious reference to the *commedia del arte* theatrical tradition (A-S, 80; W, 44–5). Another sequence, revealing Godard's increasingly vocal political sensibilities and the increasing importance of opposition to America's involvement in Vietnam, has Pierrot and Marianne performing a minimalist theatrical piece for some attentive Americans whom they proceed to rob (A-S, 92; W, 70–2). There are also musical numbers (A-S, 78, 93; W, 38–9, 73–4), a scene where Pierrot undergoes a wet-towel torture that was used by the French in Algeria (A-S, 96–7; W, 80–1), and a humorous sequence by comic Raymond Devos (A-S, 106; W, 100–1).

In the relationship with Pierrot, Marianne seems to be continually raising the stakes in terms of what she expects from him, and lowering them in terms of what promises she will keep. He never seems to know what he really wants and appears powerless to attain it, as if since the beginning he had been drifting and then drawn into Marianne's sphere of influence. But she is by no means a simple character. Indeed, it has been well pointed out that the female character in many of Godard's films, and in *Pierrot* in particular, is presented on the one hand as strong, almost masculine – wielding a gun or a pair of scissors, asking forthrightly for what she wants or expects – and on the other hand as an unattainable romantic ideal.⁵ As if to demonstrate his frustration at being unable to pin her down, and on the pretext of her infidelity, Pierrot finally kills her, calls his wife in Paris but fails to get through, then paints his face blue and winds a whole arsenal of dynamite about his head before lighting the fuse. In what can be taken as his first and last decisive act, he tries to extinguish the fuse with

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INTRODUCTION

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Marianne as violent otherness

his hand, but, unable to see it, dies in a flash of flame and smoke against the brilliant blue of the Mediterranean sea and sky.

THE END OF CINEMA?

It seems that the years 1967–8 would have marked an important break in Godard's filmmaking, even if that period had not also been contemporaneous with the upheaval in French social, cultural, and political life that took place in May 1968, when students and workers took to the streets en masse to demand that the country begin to chart a new, more open course. The events of that period have been discussed extensively, and Godard's part in them was not negligible, arguing for the closure

of the Cannes festival, participating in the “Estates-General of Cinema” and in various “agit-prop” film productions.⁶ But the increasingly political slant of Godard’s cinema was already explicit in the films immediately following *Pierrot le fou*, and especially in *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Week-end* (1967). Godard ends his 1966 film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle/Two or Three Things I Know About Her* with a famous shot of detergent and other consumer product cartons representing an urban wasteland, stating that he has to start again from square one. The press kit for *La Chinoise* includes the following statement: “Fifty years after the October Revolution, the American industry rules cinema the world over. . . . [W]e too should provoke two or three Vietnams within the vast Hollywood-Cinecittà-Mosfilms-Pinewood-etc. empire, and, both economically and aesthetically, struggling on two fronts as it were, create cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely, and bonded in friendship” (N&M, 243 [translation modified]; B, 303). And although *Week-end* and *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil* (1968) may be best remembered, respectively, for the longest tracking shot (of a traffic jam) in film history, and the participation of the somewhat puzzled Rolling Stones, those films lead much further than their parodic treatment of consumer culture might suggest.

Between 1969 and 1972 Godard renounced what he saw as the bourgeois capitalist ideology of individual authorship, and his films were signed by the Dziga-Vertov Collective, based on his association with the Maoist Jean-Pierre Gorin. Yet by 1972, with *Tout va bien*, starring Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, the larger collective had reduced to the single Godard-Gorin couple. It was clear, however, that Godard was seeking in every way to create a different cinema, not just to make political films but, as he maintained, to make them “politically.”⁷ For financing he turned most often to television, but the producers were not always keen to have the films shown. His topics were internationalist – Britain, Prague, Italy, Palestine – but all within the framework of explicit Marxist critiques. His desire was to turn the film screen into a blackboard, an interface for active debate rather than a medium

for passive consumption. With hindsight it is easy to say that this experiment by Godard failed, but then we would have to ask how success could be measured, given his avowed desire to renounce commercial cinema.⁸ Godard continued to pursue such nonmercantile goals when, in 1974, he formed an association with Anne-Marie Miéville, and moved his operation from Paris to Grenoble, and from film to video, and for the following five years concentrated on programs designed for television or classroom use. His return to mainstream production with *Sauve qui peut (la vie)/Every Man for Himself* in 1979 was much heralded, and through the 1980s he again began to make films at the rate of about one per year. The fact that he is now at work on a somewhat open-ended video series entitled *Histoire(s) du cinéma* means on the one hand that he takes film to be a dying, or rather dead art, whose histories can now be written. The end of cinema is something, as he stated in 1965, the year of *Pierrot*, that he awaits “with optimism.”⁹ He harbors no illusions about reaching a wide audience – he never did, in fact, but was previously able to count on an informed and interested art house and college circuit reception – and certainly from the point of view of one who decried some thirty years ago the hegemony of Hollywood, little has changed to revitalize a monolithic, and hence ossified art form. On the other hand, Godard’s continuing work means he will persist, however obstinately, to present his views, to insist that in spite of our consumption of images, a habit which seems to increase exponentially with each technological leap, we have not even begun to understand their meaning and functioning.

“OUI, BIEN SÛR; OUI, BIEN SÛR”

In a telling moment about halfway through *Pierrot le fou*, when the characters seem to have reached an impasse in their relationship, Pierrot asks Marianne whether she will ever leave him. She replies, “*Mais non, bien sûr*” (“Of course not”). “*Bien sûr?*” he persists. “*Oui, bien sûr*” (“Of course”). . . . “*Oui, bien sûr*” (“Of course”), she replies, repeating herself. Ferdinand’s first question

and Marianne's reply are spoken over the image of a pet fox. The second exchange is over an extreme close-up of Marianne's face. After each of the two "*oui, bien sûr*" replies, she turns from addressing Ferdinand and looks directly into the camera (*A-S*, 89; *W*, 61). Somewhere in there, between her first "*non*" and second two "*oui*"s, between her "no" and her "yes," between her first and second "yes," between him and her, or between her and the camera or audience, the truth should lie. But it remains an enigma, or at least divided into half-truths and lesser fractions whose disintegrating force structures the whole film and parallels the explosion of Ferdinand dynamiting himself at its end.

In French, a "yes" that contradicts a "no" is normally "*si*" rather than "*oui*." So Marianne does not really reverse her response from "no, of course (I'll never leave you)" to "yes, of course (I'll leave you)." Grammatically speaking, her "*oui, bien sûr*" reinforces her previous affirmation of fidelity. It can properly be translated as "no, of course not."¹⁰ What I am suggesting, however, is that within the simple fact of a repetition, even one that seems to offer an exact replica, like a photographic image of itself, there falls the structure of difference that leads all the way to falsehood and contradiction. And it is telling that that repetition is punctuated by two "takes" of Marianne looking at the camera, as if the whole problematic and dilemma of photographic truth were being brought to bear on this cinematic moment, taking *Pierrot le fou* well out of the context of a romantic fugue and even of an existential quest, and reinserting it in the abyssal space of an interrogation concerning its own status as film.

In facing the camera and in "addressing" the audience not with her words, but with her gaze, Marianne might be looking to say any number of things about her and Pierrot, seeking an ally in the spectator as she does in fact with a direct address monologue later on. Thus we might understand her to be saying here, "Can't you see I'm telling the truth; why doesn't this jerk get it?"; "Can't you see I'm trapped into telling a lie? He understands so little about me we're bound to break up; he wants me to be faithful but on his terms"; "Whether I answer yes or no his jealousy will only con-