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Introduction

I am a painter with letters. I want to restore everything, mix everything up and say everything.

– Jean-Luc Godard¹

Mention the films and videos of Jean-Luc Godard, and superlatives will flow from his admirers. He is “the one film-maker who never disappoints me,” says D. A. Pennebaker, a documentary filmmaker who once worked with him. His 1963 drama *Contempt* is not just an excellent film but “the greatest work of art produced in post-war Europe,” according to Colin MacCabe, a longtime supporter. “The unspoken debt to Godard,” writes critic Michael Atkinson, “has become a holy title filmmakers can never, it seems, hope to pay in full.”² Others revive the out-of-fashion word “genius” to convey the extent of their enthusiasm.

It was not ever thus. *Positif*, one of France’s most respected film magazines, described him in the early 1960s as a “bureaucrat with a taste for celluloid . . . a pretentious canary . . . an unrepentant spoiler of film . . . a press agent for himself.” French director Jean-Pierre Melville, who played a minor character in Godard’s early *Breathless*, later said his movies were “anything shot anyhow.” The communist newspaper *L’Humanité* called the erstwhile Marxist a “parlor nihilist.”³ Superlatives indeed.

As these comments show, Godard’s reputation has undergone more than its share of ups and downs. A journalist writing in 1963 called him both “the most idolized of the New Wave directors” and “the most unpopular man in the French cinema.”⁴ His renown within the art-film establishment reached a high point in the middle 1960s, when such movies as *A Married Woman* and *Masculine/Feminine* played in commercial theaters on both sides of the Atlantic and his peregrinations at the Cannes

and New York filmfests attracted a bevy of fans who literally followed in his footsteps every moment they could. By the late 1980s, however, even many film students were just dimly aware of him, and one mid-1990s critic regretfully called him “an invisible film-maker for almost a decade.”⁵

There are many reasons for this decline. Those not attributable to Godard himself include a climate of increasing political and cultural conservatism, a slide in the international prestige of the French film industry, and a lamentable dwindling of American interest in non-English-language films. To these must be added Godard’s own penchant for provoking and at times alienating his audience. Even his most accessible works contain an unusual share of challenging material, and when he actually sets out to be difficult – as in the politically radical films produced in the years around 1970 – the results are almost as troublesome for devotees as for the uninitiated. Then too, people who admire one phase of his career often find themselves puzzled or put off by another; and those who study one phase in an effort to plumb its mysteries – delving into Brecht, for example, as a key to his 1960s aesthetic – may discover that another period is shaped by a very different set of concerns.

Such problems notwithstanding, Godard’s stock has been rising once more as cinema heads into its second century. Moviegoers interested in postmodernism and multiculturalism have recognized his work as a precursor and paradigm of important developments in these fields. Video-cassettes and laserdiscs have made his complicated films available for the repeated and detailed viewings they demand. Perhaps most important, Godard himself has never stopped plugging away at his activities; by the late 1990s he has become such an integral part of the moving-image landscape that any scholar, critic, or buff is likely to be at least vaguely acquainted with his importance as an artist, innovator, and provocateur. As of 1998 his filmography contains more than seventy works, from short and feature-length movies to videotapes and television series of various lengths, and it is still growing at an impressive rate. Skeptics whose sensibilities are out of tune with these works may find such prolificacy to be one of Godard’s problems, complaining of “too many images,” just as the emperor in *Amadeus* complained of “too many notes” in Mozart’s music. Nonetheless, expressivity bred from spontaneity and improvisation has been central to Godard’s methodology from the start, and the speed of his production is inseparable from its fecundity, variety, and complexity. Equally important to his approach is a healthy disdain for what might be called the Cinema of Common Sense, rooted in stories that appear “compelling” and “entertaining” because they reinforce the illusions by

which we have learned to live. Such cinema has dominated the commercial film industry for most of its existence, and Godard's career amounts to a continuous mad dash to outstrip, outfox, and outrage it.

These two qualities – a love of spontaneity and a rejection of transparent storytelling – form clearly visible threads tying together even the most disparate works of Godard's career. They will also link the different readings and analyses in this book. In the pages that follow, it is worth bearing in mind an anecdote Godard has repeated many times in many circumstances, including the momentous *Histoire(s) du cinéma* video series that sums up his personal view of motion pictures. When he was a boy, fond of inventing tales to excuse the mischief he often got into, relatives and teachers would invariably tell him to be more responsible and *not make up stories*. When he grew up and became a filmmaker, fond of using cinema as a philosophical tool rather than an entertainment machine, producers and collaborators would invariably implore him to be more responsible and *make up stories*. Like his alter ego Jerzy, the filmmaker-hero of his extraordinary *Passion* (1982), he has never lost sight of this lifelong irony. He has never capitulated to the grownups, either.

Although few would guess it from the rebellious and even revolutionary tendencies that have guided his career, Godard's roots are anchored solidly in Europe's upper middle class. He was born in Paris in late 1930 but became a citizen of Switzerland when his parents (both from Protestant families) moved there during his infancy.⁶ His father was a respected physician, and although his mother also had interests in this direction, she pursued a life of culture in accord with tastes acquired during her wealthy childhood. Jean-Luc went to school in the Swiss town of Nyon, where his father had a private medical clinic, but traveled often to Paris, where his mother's family lived. He attended the Lycée Buffon in Paris and then the Sorbonne, starting there in 1947 and receiving an ethnology certificate after three years, although some accounts say his attendance at classes was sporadic at best. Between the late 1940s and middle 1950s he held various modest jobs, some of which – as assistant TV editor, camera operator, and gossip columnist for a French newspaper – pointed toward his future as a cinéaste. He also traveled briefly in North and South America, courtesy of his father, whose relations with Jean-Luc then turned sour enough to end his financial support and make the young movie lover increasingly dependent on employment in and around the film industry. A more abrupt family trauma came in 1954, when his mother died in a traffic accident that clearly inspired more than one searing moment in his

films, including the fatalistic crash at the climax of *Contempt*, made nine years after the tragic event.

It was in the late 1940s that Godard became a regular patron at the Paris Cinémathèque and various Left Bank film clubs. There he met André Bazin, editor of the journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, and four future filmmakers – François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, and Eric Rohmer – who would later join him as core members of the New Wave group. Approaching his cinematic self-education with the same enthusiasm and originality that would characterize his work as a director, he began contributing articles to a number of publications: the *Gazette du cinéma*, which he founded in the early 1950s and for which he wrote under the Germanized pen name Hans Lucas; *Les Amis du cinéma*, another minor periodical; *Arts*, where he published numerous reviews, interviews, and polemics; and *Cahiers* itself, which had been founded by Bazin and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze in 1951 and became Godard's best-known affiliation.

A clear picture of the *Cahiers* scene is essential for understanding Godard's early career and subsequent development as an artist. Bazin, one of European cinema's most influential critics and theorists, had an admirable openness to new talents and fresh voices. His views on film were shaped by a firmly held set of aesthetic and moral principles, however. Most important, he had invested much of his critical capital in the idea that realism is the essence of cinema.

This countered the view of such influential theorists as Sergei Eisenstein and Rudolf Arnheim, who believed cinema's power comes less from its ability to replicate the actual world than from the filmmaker's ability to manipulate visual representations – through camera work, lighting, laboratory processes, and above all editing – into original creative forms. Not so, wrote Bazin in many essays. Cinema's natural calling is to reproduce reality, he contended, and the filmmaker's job is to facilitate this process. The aim of great directors should be to photograph and record the realities around them as directly and objectively as possible, then transfer those images and sounds to the screen with a minimum of interference. If the subject is compelling, and if the filmmaking is clear and conscientious, art will be served and audiences will be deeply moved.

In accord with this view, Bazin's favorite films included dramas by Italy's gifted "neorealist" school of the mid-1940s to mid-1950s, which told homely human-interest stories (*Umberto D.*, *La Terra Trema*) and topical tales (*Paisan*, *The Bicycle Thief*) via straightforward, no-nonsense techniques. He also admired American productions by Orson Welles and Wil-

liam Wyler that used imaginative camera positions and lengthy deep-focus shots to include a great deal of visual information in a single take rather than cutting frequently from one shot to another. His most compelling arguments often grew from his opposition to unnecessary editing, which can disrupt the illusion of reality by calling attention to a controlling human hand. A single cut will destroy the credibility of a filmed magic act, he pointed out, since spectators will assume the rabbit was sneaked into the hat while the camera was switched off! In such a case, the celebrated device of montage badly serves all aspects of the cinematic enterprise – the skill of the performer, the integrity of the performance, and the audience’s desire to believe what it sees.

Godard and his friends shared Bazin’s excitement over Roberto Rossellini’s eloquent compositions, Jean Renoir’s superb organization of deep-focus space, and Welles’s brilliant camera maneuvers; but the young critics also had interests that diverged from Bazin’s concerns. For one, they had no prejudice against montage: quite the opposite, in fact, since a clever or expressive cut seemed just as admirable to them as a long “sequence shot,” a series of “reframings” within a single take, or any of the other devices that Bazin saw as aesthetically (and morally) superior to editing.

More broadly, they developed keen enthusiasm for a notion that would have profound influence on their criticism and their filmmaking: the ideal of personal cinema. Bazin was not hostile to this, but he disagreed with some of its implications and foresaw negative results – such as an unhealthy emphasis on subjective impressions over objective representations – if it were elevated into a critical principle, a filmmaking credo, or (as quickly transpired) both. Undeterred, the New Wave critics pushed ahead with their *politique des auteurs*, a phrase that is often translated as “auteur theory” but actually signals a policy of support for filmmakers as personal “authors” of their works. Inspiration for this came from critic Alexandre Astruc, whose concept of the *caméra-stylo*, or “camera pen,” suggested that filmmakers should use their equipment as spontaneously, flexibly, and personally as a writer uses a pen.

Taking this literally (so to speak), Godard and his colleagues pieced together a new value system based on the degree of personal expression they could locate in a filmmaker’s work. To facilitate this, they refined the definition of the word “auteur,” using it to indicate the single individual most responsible for whatever personal expression (if any) a movie yielded up under critical analysis. Most movies are not works of art, they recognized, but mere entertainments assembled with varying degrees of competence; such films are made by technicians and craftspeople who may be skilled

at their trades but cannot be called auteurs. The marks of the latter are (a) a distinctive vision of the world comparable to that of a capable novelist or painter and (b) enough strength of personality to channel the efforts of all the film's contributors (writers, designers, performers, editors, musicians, and so forth) in such a way that this distinctive world view is effectively conveyed by the finished work. Since directors are usually in the best position to exercise such creative control, auteurs usually tend to be directors, although strong screenwriters, cinematographers, and even performers have been known to usurp this function. (No matter who directed a Marx Brothers movie, one auteur theorist notes, it always came out a Marx Brothers movie.)

Armed with these ideas, the young *Cahiers* critics combed through world cinema – especially that of Hollywood, which impressed them with its vigor and variety – on the lookout for signs of personal expression in pictures dismissed by “serious” reviewers as soulless commercial products. They continued their personal-cinema adventure when they became filmmakers, launching the New Wave movement with works whose sensibilities were forged not within film schools (which barely existed) or studio apprenticeship systems (a conservative force) but within the private confines of their own personalities. Central to their project was a desire to escape the inauthenticity of French studio productions. Instead they sought the living immediacy of the streets, shops, apartments, and other settings that had shaped their own young lives. This linked them with the neorealists, who likewise favored real-life environments for their films.

Unlike their Italian contemporaries, however, Godard and his peers also welcomed a different kind of realism – the realism that grows from a cheerful acknowledgment that cinema is in fact cinema. Leapfrogging over some of Bazin's convictions, they were less interested in film as a “tracing of reality” or a “window on the world” than as a pliable art form whose sophisticated formal elements (framing, texture, editing rhythm, etc.) are just as pleasurable as narrative and representational content. Hence the freewheeling combination of openly fictional storytelling, vividly real backgrounds, and brashly cinematic articulation in such early Godard films as *All Boys Are Called Patrick* and *Breathless*, as well as other seminal New Wave statements such as *The 400 Blows* and *Paris Belongs to Us*, which put Truffaut and Rivette on the map of brilliant new talents.

Theory does not translate into practice automatically, of course, and Godard had to work his way toward *All Boys Are Called Patrick* and *Breathless* through a series of preliminary experiences. In 1954, two years after

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Excerpt

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his *Cahiers du cinéma* writing debut, he took his earnings as a laborer on the Grand Dixence dam in Switzerland and financed a seventeen-minute film about the structure, *Opération Béton* – a conventional nonfiction movie, in the view of most critics who have commented on it, despite its use of music by Bach and Handel, composers not usually encountered in the context of public-works documentaries. During the next year he produced and directed a ten-minute short about a prostitute, *Une Femme coquette*, which he also photographed, edited, and wrote under his Hans Lucas pseudonym. (It was inspired by “Le Signe,” the Guy de Maupassant story that would figure in *Masculine/Feminine* years later.) In 1956 and 1957 he parlayed his modest but growing list of credentials into film-editing jobs and a stint in the Paris publicity office of Twentieth Century-Fox, one of the most powerful Hollywood studios. After directing the twenty-one-minute short *All Boys Are Called Patrick* from a Rohmer screenplay, he spliced together *Une Histoire d'eau*, often regarded as one of his most revealing early works since it accompanies documentary footage – shot by Truffaut for a film about a flood, then scrapped when the project was abandoned – with verbally complex dialogue invented by Godard independently of his colleague, who was nonetheless credited as screenwriter and codirector.

The final pre-*Breathless* short was *Charlotte et son Jules*, with Jean-Paul Belmondo as a man trying vainly to entice his former lover back into his life. Godard directed it from his own screenplay, and also dubbed Belmondo’s voice, showing the multitalented confidence needed by a fledgling auteur with ambitious hopes for the future. This confidence emerged more forcefully than ever in the feature-length *Breathless*, where key contributions from many collaborators – among them Truffaut, who wrote the initial scenario, and Belmondo, who got to speak with his own voice this time – were woven into an artful, edgy tapestry that clearly reflected Godard’s still-emerging but already recognizable artistic personality.

Fascination with filmmaking as an avenue for personal expression, shared by all the young critics-turned-directors of the New Wave group, allowed Godard a quick start on what would become a career-long project: turning cinema away not only from the tired clichés and studio-bound artifices of mainstream entertainment films, but also from the fundamental roots of these formulas in what he increasingly saw as a sadly unjust and materialistic society. This meant rejecting or at least questioning many social, cultural, and political notions generally accepted as the common sense of our age.

Godard's rejection of commonsense filmmaking takes different forms at different stages in his career, and in the early work especially it is grounded more on intuition than on fully elaborated theories. *Breathless* (1960) behaves like a "normal" naturalistic movie when the camera travels through a palpably real world hunting for palpably real images; yet a combination of factors, including a need to make the film shorter and tighter, led Godard to counterbalance his reality effects with editing strategies so conspicuously eccentric that they sparked debates over his basic competence as a filmmaker. The most widely noted of these strategies was his use of jumpcuts that catapult the action from one image to another without the smooth transitions that nearly all directors since D. W. Griffith had taken care to provide. Quick-witted critics immediately grasped how this jagged, unruly montage heightened the jagged, unruly mood of a story propelled more by the whims of its characters than the dictates of a predetermined story. Others sniped at the movie's collisions between realism and formalism, calling these arbitrary and even anarchic.

Ever unpredictable, Godard stayed on the experimental trail that *Breathless* had blazed. At the same time, he came close to agreeing with that movie's detractors, commenting in 1962 that a goal of his second picture, *The Little Soldier* (1960), was "to discover the realism . . . the concreteness" that *Breathless* had missed.⁷ The images of *The Little Soldier* are certainly "concrete," recalling the documentarylike realism that Godard admired in Rossellini's films; but again his reality-based shooting style merges with storytelling tactics – shifting attitudes toward characters, a protagonist with whom it is hard to identify – that transform what might have been a straightforward show-and-tell drama into something much more elusive. Godard described it as a "film about confusion" made "from the viewpoint of someone who is completely confused."⁸ Not completely missing are confusions of his own, rooted in political and cinematic ideas that are still half-formed in many respects.

Godard's next movie, *A Woman Is a Woman* (1961), turns in a different direction, placing "reality factors" such as improvised dialogue and direct-sound recording into counterpoint with studio sets and musical-comedy conventions. The result is full of "discontinuity . . . changes in rhythm . . . breaks in mood,"⁹ alternately confirming and contradicting the film's seeming affection for old-fashioned Hollywood entertainment. Different in style and content from the earlier pictures, it also gives little hint of the deep-rooted seriousness that would characterize Godard's subsequent features. *My Life to Live* (1962) and *Les Carabiniers* (*The Riflemen*, 1963), more mature in both artistic inventiveness and sociopolitical

analysis, use urban prostitution and the rapaciousness of war as metaphors for the dehumanization Godard increasingly associates with industrialized society. *Contempt* questions the very possibility of personal and artistic integrity in today's world through its story of a screenwriter facing a marital crisis as he rewrites *The Odyssey* for a mercenary Hollywood producer.

Although these films combine radical sociocultural critiques with bold conceptions of film aesthetics, they do not entirely discard the grammar and syntax of traditional cinema. The same is true of *Band of Outsiders* (1964), an experimental comedy-drama about tangled romance and bungled crime; *Alphaville* (1965), an allegorical reworking of science-fiction themes; and *Made in U.S.A.* (1966), an offbeat thriller with political overtones. Godard's impatience with the legacies of conventional film continued to grow during this period, however, reaching unprecedented intensity in *A Married Woman* (1964) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965), which transform familiar genres (domestic drama, road movie) into shapes so unfamiliar that unadventurous critics wrote them off as irrelevant avant-gardism. The stakes escalated further in a string of extraordinary features stretching from *2 or 3 Things I Know about Her* (1966) and *La Chinoise* (1967) through *Weekend* (1967) and *Le Gai Savoir* (1968). The latter film, consisting largely of political dialogues between two young Maoists named Émile Rousseau and Patricia Lumumba, marked the last straw for Godard skeptics and the end of the road even for many sympathizers, who found the photogenic performances by Jean-Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto to be scant compensation for the rigors of Godard's near-total commitment to eradicating traditional (read: bourgeois, superficial, commonsensical) pleasures from his work.

Little did these anti-Godardians dream that far from reaching the limits of his experimental trajectory, the ornery director was just warming up for some *really* audacious pictures. Deciding that the very act of signing his films betrayed lingering influences of decadent individualism, he joined with Maoist filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin and a small number of like-minded associates to form the Dziga-Vertov Group, a collective dedicated to overthrowing capitalist-imperialist ideologies of all shapes and sizes. In the words of *Pravda* (1969) – the movie, not the newspaper – information conveyed through sound and image “isn't enough” to change society “because it is only the knowledge perceived by our senses; now we must rise above this perceptive knowledge, we need to struggle to transform it into rational knowledge.”¹⁰ Godard's break with the wellsprings of common sense – consensus, tradition, even perception – was now close to

complete. In their place was a single-minded determination to understand social reality afresh via the rejuvenating insights of Mao Zedong's philosophy. Godard called the project "making political films politically." Detractors called it replacing one set of epistemological blinders with another.

Several factors converged to end the Dziga-Vertov Group period. The most urgent was a near-fatal motorcycle accident that Godard suffered in the early 1970s, one result of which was his close relationship with Anne-Marie Miéville, who – in addition to helping with personal care – supported his interest in video experimentation and encouraged him to engage with narrative again, albeit in forms that remained thoroughly unconventional. A more generalized reason was the conservative sociopolitical climate that developed in Europe and the United States as the tumultuous 1960s gave way to the disillusioned 1970s and the reactionary 1980s. Godard remained a stylistic and philosophical radical, but his filmmaking became less overtly ideological, replacing its passion for political issues with a focus on aesthetic and spiritual matters. He pursued a growing curiosity about television and video technology; he renewed his exploration of traditional European culture in offbeat narrative features like *Passion* and *First Name: Carmen* (1983); and he revealed a genuine (if eccentric) religious streak in *Hail Mary* (1985), the last of his films to receive widespread attention from the general public – no thanks to its challenging style or exuberant beauty, but rather to a noisy controversy stirred up by Christians who disliked the idea of exploring the Virgin Mary's story through working-class characters trying to figure out God's will in a contemporary Swiss setting. Godard spent the rest of the 1980s and 1990s alternating between film and video production, directing art-house features like *Hélas pour moi* (1993) and *For Ever Mozart* (1997), and completing his long-term video series *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, perhaps the greatest capstone of a career at once incredibly varied in its interests and incredibly single-minded in its refusal to do any of the things other people expect of it.

Such are the basic facts of Godard's life and work, many of which will concern us again at appropriate points in the chapters to come. Before proceeding to close readings of individual films, however, it will be helpful to discuss some key aspects of his approach to cinematic style and content. In this area, few issues are more important than his fundamental stance toward the influence of entertainment, diversion, and spectacle on everyday social and political life. *Alphaville*, the 1965 science-fiction movie that has become one of his most frequently revived works, provides