

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

# Jean-Luc Godard



DOUGLAS MORREY

---

**Jean-Luc Godard**



Manchester University Press

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

DIANA HOLMES and ROBERT INGRAM *series editors*  
DUDLEY ANDREW *series consultant*

**Jean-Jacques Beineix** PHIL POWRIE

**Luc Besson** SUSAN HAYWARD

**Bertrand Blier** SUE HARRIS

**Robert Bresson** KEITH READER

**Leos Carax** GARIN DOWD AND FERGUS DALEY

**Claude Chabrol** GUY AUSTIN

**Claire Denis** MARTINE BEUGNET

**Marguerite Duras** RENATE GÜNTHER

**George Franju** KATE INCE

**Diane Kurys** CARRIE TAR

**Patrice Leconte** LISA DOWNING

**Louis Malle** HUGO GREY

**Georges Méliès** ELIZABETH EZRA

**Jean Renoir** MARTIN O'SHAUGHNESSY

**Coline Serreau** BRIGITTE ROLLET

**François Truffaut** DIANA HOLMES AND ROBERT INGRAM

**Agnès Varda** ALISON SMITH

FRENCH FILM DIRECTORS

# Jean-Luc Godard

DOUGLAS MORREY

**Manchester University Press**

MANCHESTER

Copyright © Douglas Morrey 2005

The right of Douglas Morrey to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*Published by* Manchester University Press

Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA, UK

[www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk](http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk)

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for*

ISBN 0 7190 6758 8 *hardback*

EAN 978 0 7190 6758 7

ISBN 0 7190 6759 6 *paperback*

EAN 978 0 7190 6759 4

First published 2005

14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05                      10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Typeset in Scala with Meta display  
by Koinonia, Manchester

For my father,  
who introduced me to cinema,  
to politics and to philosophy



# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| LIST OF PLATES   | page viii |
| SERIES EDITORS' FOREWORD                                   | ix        |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS   | xi        |
| <br>   |           |
| 1 Necessity or contingency: Godard as film critic, 1950–59 | 1         |
| 2 Scenes from domestic life: 1960–65                       | 8         |
| 3 Outside: 1960–62   | 31        |
| 4 End of the beginning/beginning of the end: 1966–67       | 47        |
| 5 Schooling: 1968–72                                       | 84        |
| 6 Home movies: 1974–78                                     | 106       |
| 7 Love and work: 1979–84                                   | 132       |
| 8 Smiling with regret: 1984–90                             | 165       |
| 9 The sense of an ending: 1991–96                          | 196       |
| 10 Old man river: 1998–                                    | 219       |
| <br>   |           |
| CONCLUSION   | 242       |
| FILMOGRAPHY  | 244       |
| SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY  | 263       |
| INDEX  | 265       |



## List of plates

|   |   |         |
|---|---|---------|
| 1 | Michel and Patricia at play in <i>À bout de souffle</i> . © Optimum Releasing | page 81 |
| 2 | Fighting over cars in <i>Week-end</i> . © Gaumont                             | 81      |
| 3 | The Salumi sausage factory in <i>Tout va bien</i> . © Tartan Video            | 82      |
| 4 | The violence of difference: <i>Sauve qui peut (la vie)</i> . © Artificial Eye | 82      |
| 5 | Godard by the lake in <i>JLG/JLG: Autoportrait de décembre</i> .<br>© Gaumont | 83      |
| 6 | Edgar and Cécile in <i>Éloge de l' amour</i> . © Optimum Releasing            | 83      |

All stills reproduced courtesy of BFI Stills, Posters and Designs.

Every effort has been made to obtain permission to reproduce the images in the book. If any proper acknowledgement has not been made, copyright-holders are invited to contact the publisher.

## Series editors' foreword

To an anglophone audience, the combination of the words 'French' and 'cinema' evokes a particular kind of film: elegant and wordy, sexy but serious – an image as dependent upon national stereotypes as is that of the crudely commercial Hollywood blockbuster, which is not to say that either image is without foundation. Over the past two decades, this generalised sense of a significant relationship between French identity and film has been explored in scholarly books and articles, and has entered the curriculum at university level and, in Britain, at A level. The study of film as art-form and (to a lesser extent) as industry, has become a popular and widespread element of French Studies, and French cinema has acquired an important place within Film Studies. Meanwhile, the growth in multi-screen and 'art-house' cinemas, together with the development of the video industry, has led to the greater availability of foreign-language films to an English-speaking audience. Responding to these developments, this series is designed for students and teachers seeking information and accessible but rigorous critical study of French cinema, and for the enthusiastic filmgoer who wants to know more.

The adoption of a director-based approach raises questions about auteurism. A series that categorises films not according to period or to genre (for example), but to the person who directed them, runs the risk of espousing a romantic view of film as the product of solitary inspiration. On this model, the critic's role might seem to be that of discovering continuities, revealing a necessarily coherent set of themes and motifs which correspond to the particular genius of the individual. This is not our aim: the auteur perspective on film, itself most clearly articulated in France in the early 1950s, will be interrogated in certain volumes of the series, and, throughout, the director will be treated as one highly significant element in a complex process of film production and reception which includes socio-economic and political determinants, the work of a large and highly skilled team of artists and technicians, the mechanisms of production and distribution, and the complex and multiply determined responses of spectators.

The work of some of the directors in the series is already well known outside France, that of others is less so – the aim is both to provide

informative and original English-language studies of established figures, and to extend the range of French directors known to anglophone students of cinema. We intend the series to contribute to the promotion of the formal and informal study of French films, and to the pleasure of those who watch them.

DIANA HOLMES  
ROBERT INGRAM

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to the following for advice and encouragement, materials and hospitality: Steve Cannon, Paul Hatswell, Leslie Hill, Roland-François Lack, Chris Perriam, Phil Powrie, Keith Reader, Douglas Smith, Michael Temple, Ginette Vincendeau, Mike Witt.



## Necessity or contingency: Godard as film critic, 1950–59

Little is known about Jean-Luc Godard's early life and, although the first authoritative biography of the director was published very recently (MacCabe 2003), the details of his youth remain somewhat sketchy. Godard was born in Paris in December 1930 to Swiss parents. His family were rich protestants, his father, Paul Godard, a doctor and his mother, Odile Monod, the daughter of a banker belonging to 'one of the most illustrious families in France' (MacCabe 2003: 5). Godard enjoyed a comfortable and cultured upbringing, acquiring a literary sensibility that would inflect the whole of his career in the cinema. His maternal grandfather was a friend of the poet and essayist Paul Valéry. Godard began to study anthropology at the Sorbonne, but dropped out, and the subsequent decade of his life was spent drifting between various occupations. It is this period of Godard's life in particular that has given rise to speculation, rumour and apocryphal stories. He avoided military service in both France and Switzerland and travelled in North and South America. Having distanced himself from his family, he survived on various little jobs, notably in Swiss television, but is also known to have resorted to petty theft on more than one occasion. Indeed, it was stealing from his own family that provoked a definitive rupture (Douin 1989: 12–13). But, if Godard's break with his family has frequently been stressed, MacCabe volunteers that this may have been the only way for Jean-Luc to 'separate himself from a too much loved and too seductive world' (MacCabe 2003: 4). The questionable nature of some of the tales surrounding the director's youth is reflected in Godard's own admission that, while working as *attaché de presse* for 20th Century-Fox in Paris, he amused himself by making up stories which would subsequently be reported as true in the press (Douin 1989: 17). What is certain is that, throughout the 1950s, Godard distinguished himself as a film critic, first in *La Gazette du cinéma*, then in the journal *Arts* and, most famously, in the hugely influential *Cahiers du cinéma*.

Along with other critics at *Cahiers du cinéma*, including Truffaut, Rivette, Chabrol and Rohmer, Godard's writing on film in the 1950s played an important role in shaping the canon of great film directors that would influence the development of both French and anglophone film studies. Godard was a particularly sensitive commentator on the new American cinema, two of his finest articles being devoted to Hitchcock (Godard 1998: 77–80; 101–8) with others extolling the virtues of Nicholas Ray and Anthony Mann. But Godard was also a firm supporter of those directors who were about to change the face of European cinema, most notably Ingmar Bergman in Sweden and, among his contemporaries in France, Chabrol, Truffaut, Franju and Rouch. Godard's writing on cinema is thoroughly infused with a literary sensibility, frequently offering comparisons between filmmakers and writers: Joseph L. Mankiewicz is compared to the Italian novelist Alberto Moravia (Godard 1998: 71) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951) likened to Goethe's *Faust* (Godard 1998: 79). This evocation of literary parallels needs to be understood in the context of the '*politique des auteurs*' propounded by *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s. Filmmakers were routinely elevated to the status of great artists and thinkers, directors considered to be solely responsible for the style and meaning of a film. In Godard's determinedly romantic image, a director is as alone on the filmset as the writer before the blank page (Godard 1998: 129). But, if a certain polemical value is attached to these comparisons, the cinema, for Godard, is by no means a *literary* form. He is critical, for instance, of the films of Elia Kazan that are too beholden to theatrical and literary models (Godard 1998: 75–6). For Godard, cinema is not, first and foremost, a narrative form, but rather a new way of *seeing* (Godard 1998: 81). It is the attempt to define the specificity of cinema that led Godard to grapple, throughout his career as a critic, with the paradoxes of cinematic realism. As this question will remain central to Godard's work as a filmmaker, it is essential to gain some sense of the issues involved.

Readers who find Godard's films difficult or wilfully complicated may be surprised to learn that, as a critic, he frequently expressed his admiration for the simplest kind of cinematic realism. 'Le vrai cinéma', he wrote in 1950, 'consiste seulement à mettre quelques choses devant la caméra'<sup>1</sup> (74). As late as 1959 he opined: 'la première forme du talent aujourd'hui, au cinéma, c'est d'accorder plus d'importance à ce qui est devant la caméra qu'à la caméra elle-même ... Autrement dit, le fond

1 'True cinema consists simply in putting a few things in front of the camera.'

précède la forme, la conditionne’’<sup>2</sup> (193–4). Cinema, Godard argued, was ‘[le] plus religieux des arts, puisqu’il place l’homme devant l’essence des choses’’<sup>3</sup> (81). In these remarks, then, there is a rather surprising echo of André Bazin’s evangelical rhetoric about cinema, a tendency to highlight the cinema’s miraculous ability to *reveal* a world in mise-en-scène, rather than its capacity to *construct* a world through montage. The intriguing paradox of cinema which has fascinated Godard for over fifty years is its tendency to present the viewer *directly* with real life while at the same time suggesting that that life lies *elsewhere*. As he says of Mizoguchi, ‘L’art de Kenji Mizoguchi est de prouver à la fois que “la vraie vie est ailleurs”, et qu’elle est pourtant là, dans son étrange et radieuse beauté’’<sup>4</sup> (124). The result is that those films that appear the most simple are often the most inexhaustible for the critic, such as Nicholas Ray’s *Bitter Victory* (1957) which Godard called ‘le plus direct et le plus secret des films, le plus fin et le plus grossier’’<sup>5</sup> (121).

Yet elsewhere, Godard appears to contradict himself. On one hand, he says that cinema reveals the essence of things, but, on the other, he argues it is only the formal properties of films that confer this essential quality, this apparent necessity of the world on display. This is notably the function of montage: a skilful montage, argues Godard, ‘métamorphosera le hasard en destin’’<sup>6</sup> (92). It is also true of other cinematic techniques. Discussing the use of close-ups in Hitchcock’s *The Wrong Man* (1956), Godard writes: ‘La beauté de chacun de ces gros plans ... naît de l’intrusion du sentiment de la nécessité dans celui du futile, de l’essence dans l’existence’’<sup>7</sup> (102). One can sense in these remarks the influence of André Malraux, whose work on the history of art would be plundered again by Godard some forty years later for his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98). Godard borrows from Malraux a definition of art as ‘ce par quoi les formes deviennent style’’<sup>8</sup> (107), that is to say the means by which a series of specific technical choices come to represent an individual’s *essential* expression.

If Godard believes in destiny, then, as he himself says of Hitchcock,

2 ‘The first form of talent in cinema today consists in granting more importance to what’s in front of the camera than to the camera itself ... In other words, the content should precede, and determine, the form.’

3 ‘the most religious of arts, since it places man before the essence of things’.

4 ‘The art of Kenji Mizoguchi is to prove at once that “real life is elsewhere”, and that it is nonetheless here, in all its strange and radiant beauty.’

5 ‘the most direct and the most secret of films, the most subtle and the most vulgar’.

6 ‘will transform chance into destiny’.

7 ‘The beauty of each of these close-ups is born from the intrusion of a sense of necessity in one of futility, of essence in existence.’

8 ‘that by which forms become style’



'Il y croit, le sourire aux lèvres' (89), he believes in it but with a smile, or a smirk on his face. Godard suggests that, in Hitchcock's films, the sense of fatality or necessity in the plot is often brought about through the most obvious or commonplace of cinematic effects. But this is the central paradox of cinema: it can only reveal the essential nature of things by showing their surface appearance, through superficial techniques. All of which suggests that there is no essence to things beyond that which *appears* to us through the evidence of the senses. If the essential nature of reality and the techniques which allow us to apprehend it are thus inseparable, then so too are the two poles of cinematic creation. In the debate between montage and mise en scène, Godard's position is clear: 'On ne sépare pas l'un de l'autre sans danger. Autant vouloir séparer le rythme de la mélodie'<sup>9</sup> (92). This consideration also leads Godard to conclude that, in the cinema, fiction and documentary are similarly inseparable. Even in the most artificially contrived film narrative, the *real world*, caught on film, will nonetheless make its presence felt; even the most rigorously factual documentary, by virtue of being organised through montage, partakes of fictional construction. The two forms are necessarily linked in cinema: 'Tous les grands films de fiction tendent au documentaire, comme tous les grands documentaires tendent à la fiction ... Et qui opte à fond pour l'un trouve *nécessairement* l'autre au bout du chemin'<sup>10</sup> (181–2). Godard will exploit this imbrication of fiction and documentary throughout his career in cinema and indeed it is one of the most frequently discussed aspects of his work among his early critics and commentators.

In the cinema, then, the question of whether the reality on display is *essential* or *constructed*, whether it is *necessary* or *contingent*, can be summed up with the following kind of childish logic: one says not 'il faut filmer ça parce que c'est beau, mais: c'est beau parce que je l'ai filmé comme ça'<sup>11</sup> (127). The problem of necessity and contingency is one of the oldest and most intractable in the history of philosophy, but also one of the most essential since it raises questions of the nature of time and causality and the possibility of human freedom. The question is how a situation that does not exist at one point in time can come to exist at a point in the future. How does a situation that exists only as a

9 'It is dangerous to try to separate one from the other. One might as well attempt to separate rhythm from melody.'

10 'All great fiction films tend towards the documentary just as all great documentaries tend towards fiction ... And whoever chooses one *necessarily* finds the other at the end of the road.'

11 'I must film that because it is beautiful, but: it is beautiful because I filmed it like that.'

*possibility* at one moment become a *reality* the next? Why are some possibilities realised and not others? This has given rise to a logical conundrum which states that, since something cannot exist and not exist at the same time, a possibility cannot emerge gradually but may only be realised *instantaneously*. But such would suggest that it was not a possibility at all but rather a *necessity*, in which case human will disappears. Worse, since the existing world has been shown not to be a consequence of the possible, it must logically be impossible! (Vuillemin 1984).

For the French philosopher Henri Bergson, this logical problem arises out of a confusion between time and space or, better, out of time considered in terms of space. Time considered in terms of an infinite series of discrete moments and experienced in terms of a succession of distinct states of consciousness is, in Bergson's analysis, simply time conceived as space, as an infinitely divisible expanse (Bergson 2001 [1889]: 68). This notion of an abstract homogeneous space is what allows us, as conscious subjects, to perform higher operations of reason like counting and abstraction. But our conception of time 'n'est que le fantôme de l'espace obsédant la conscience réfléchie'<sup>12</sup> (74). For Bergson, time, or rather *duration*, is not a quantity to be measured but an intensity to be experienced. The confusion of space and time affects questions of free will and determinism, necessity and contingency, because we tend to represent free subjects hesitating between two choices like forking paths, in other words a *spatialised* representation. If you take away this spatialisation, says Bergson, you are left with little more than the puerile truism that 'l'acte, une fois accompli, est accompli'<sup>13</sup> (137). The *possible* is simply abstracted retrospectively from the real which already exists. Bergson solves the problem of how possibilities are realised by talking instead about the virtual and the actual. Whereas the real appears in the image of the possible, eliminating thereby other possibilities, the actual does not resemble the virtuality that it incarnates. Actualisation proceeds not by the elimination of possibilities but by the *creation* of productive *difference* (Deleuze 1998 [1966]: 99–100). Time can be represented spatially, concludes Bergson, if we are talking about *spent* time ('le temps écoulé'), but not if we are talking about the time of *now*, flowing present time ('le temps qui s'écoule'), and it is precisely this latter which is the time of the free act (Bergson 2001 [1889]: 166). Duration is that

12 'is merely the phantom of that space with which reflective consciousness is obsessed'.

13 'the act, once it is accomplished, is accomplished'.

which is *other* and *multiple* without being *several*, without being *countable* or *divisible* (Deleuze 1998 [1966]: 35–6).

All this may seem rather abstract and distanced from the films of Jean-Luc Godard, but it is worth pointing out that, since cinema, more perhaps than any other form, is an art that exists in and is created from space and time (the literal recording of space *existing in time*), it is particularly well placed to address these questions. Indeed, Godard wrote in 1957, with implicit reference to Bergson, ‘Les données immédiates de la conscience, Alfred Hitchcock, une fois de plus, prouve que le cinéma, mieux que la philosophie et le roman, est aujourd’hui capable de les montrer’<sup>14</sup> (Godard 1998: 104). Meanwhile, in *Alphaville* (1965), when asked about his religious beliefs, Lemmy Caution (Eddie Constantine) will reply ‘Je crois aux données immédiates de la conscience’.<sup>15</sup> It is worth remembering, too, that Gilles Deleuze’s famous and influential books on cinema repeatedly turn to Bergson for inspiration. In this book we will see how Godard’s cinema explores some of the most fundamental philosophical questions – the nature of time and consciousness, the problem of language and the communication between subjects, the questions of causality and human freedom – through the recording, often in the simplest of ways, of space and time, space in time.

Naturally, it has not been possible to study all of Godard’s films in this volume (the director’s numerous short films, for instance, are not discussed herein). Nonetheless, I have sought to cover as many films as possible and, crucially, to give equal weight to each period of Godard’s half-century in cinema. With the exception of the work of the 1980s, where the themes and methods employed are considered so similar as to allow the films to be taken as a unit, films are studied individually in order to help orient the reader within the otherwise bewildering range of influences and ideas that intersect in Godard’s cinema. While determinedly pursuing the philosophical inclination of Godard’s work, I have tried throughout to ground this theoretical interpretation in passages of close and concrete textual analysis to illustrate how the director’s ideas take shape on the screen.

14 ‘Alfred Hitchcock proves, once again, that the cinema is today better placed than philosophy or the novel to show us the immediate givens of consciousness.’

15 ‘I believe in the immediate givens of consciousness.’

## References

- Bergson, H. (2001 [1889]), *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, Paris, PUF/Quadrige.
- Deleuze, G. (1998 [1966]), *Le Bergsonisme*, Paris, PUF/Quadrige.
- Douin, J.-L. (1989), *Jean-Luc Godard*, Paris, Rivages.
- Godard, J.-L. (1998), *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, Tome 1: 1950–1984, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma.
- MacCabe, C. (2003), *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70*, London, Bloomsbury.
- Vuillemin, J. (1984), *Nécessité ou contingence: L'aporie de Diodore et les systèmes philosophiques*, Paris, Minuit.

## Scenes from domestic life: 1960–65

### À bout de souffle

From Godard's film criticism to his first feature, *À bout de souffle*, filmed in twenty-one days in 1959 and first released in March 1960, the transition was smooth. Godard once famously remarked that writing film criticism was, for him, already a kind of filmmaking: 'Écrire, c'était déjà faire du cinéma, car, entre écrire et tourner, il y a une différence quantitative, non qualitative'<sup>1</sup> (Godard 1998: 215). We will see later how *À bout de souffle* picks up some of the philosophical issues addressed in Godard's writing, but this debut feature represents a prolongation of Godard's criticism first and foremost through its proliferation of cinematic references, through the sheer joy with which it exhibits its cinephile culture. The film opens with a dedication to the Hollywood B-movie studio Monogram pictures before the title – huge capital letters filling the screen but with no further information on cast or crew – suggests a homage to, and a declaration of kinship with, the Orson Welles of *Citizen Kane* (1941) (Marie 1999: 53–4). Actual Parisian cinemas feature a number of times in the film as hiding places and *lieux de passage* and a young woman is seen selling copies of *Cahiers du cinéma* on the street. Above all, though, the film's narrative testifies to a deeply ingrained familiarity, an internalised identification with Hollywood genre cinema. *À bout de souffle* tells of a petty car thief Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) who returns to Paris from the south of France in order to collect some money from an associate and try to persuade a young American student, Patricia Franchini (Jean Seberg), to leave with him for Italy. On the way back to Paris, however, he is stopped by the police and kills an officer, provoking a manhunt that will eventually lead to his death.

1 'Writing was already a kind of filmmaking because, between writing and filming, there is a quantitative, not a qualitative difference.'

Michel Poiccard clearly models himself on the heroes of American gangster films, most notably Humphrey Bogart, whose mannerism of wiping his thumb across his lip is appropriated by Michel. At one point, early in the film, Michel stops to look at a poster of Bogart (or ‘Bogie’ as Michel calls him) in *The Harder They Fall* (1956), and Godard briefly cuts the sound to give a particular intimacy to this personal communion between the two men. Indeed, this generic imitation in the film is so evident that *À bout de souffle* is not simply an imitation of film noir, but becomes instead a film *about* imitation, ‘explicitly foregrounding and problematising the notion of imitation as such’ (Smith 1993: 66). In this way, the serious tone of the original genre gives way to a much more playful atmosphere in Godard’s film. Godard himself remarked that, although he thought he was making his own *Scarface*, it was only afterwards that he realised he had made *Alice in Wonderland* (Godard 1998: 219). The prologue sequence, in which Michel drives back to Paris, sets up this playful tone. Michel may be a gangster, but he is not a terribly convincing one (Cerisuelo 1989: 49; Smith 1993: 67) and, as David Sterritt points out, he ultimately comes across as rather childlike (Sterritt 1999: 48). In this opening sequence, he chatters away and sings to himself and plays with a gun he finds in the glove compartment of his stolen car, generally enjoying the sound of his own voice and the countryside he passes through. Yet, at the same time, the sequence constitutes a fairly classical narrative exposition since Michel’s monologue reveals his character’s motivations (to return to Paris to collect the money and persuade Patricia to leave for Italy), while the sudden murder of the policeman, unexpected even to Michel and disorientatingly filmed in a series of extreme close-ups and rapid cuts, installs the narrative tension that will be sustained until the end of the film.

This mixture of playfulness and reverent cinematic homage is also to be found in the film language that Godard employs in *À bout de souffle*. The film became famous for its use of jump-cuts, and it may be difficult for today’s viewers, familiar with the ultra-rapid editing of music videos and advertising, to appreciate how disruptive this technique appeared to contemporary spectators. When a sudden cut to a different angle appears within the same scene without being motivated by a movement or a gaze, the image appears to give a little jump, an effect scrupulously avoided in classical continuity editing. The large number of jump-cuts in *À bout de souffle* arise from Godard’s desire significantly to reduce the running time of the film without sacrificing whole scenes. The results can have a variety of elliptical and ironic functions, but most of all contribute to the dynamic rhythm and crackling energy of the film (Marie 1999: 73–4). In contrast to these very brief shots, Godard also

uses a number of long takes, most notably of Michel and Patricia walking together in the streets of Paris, such as the shot on the Champs Élysées famously filmed with the camera in a post office trolley. As Michel Marie comments, these shots ‘associent le couple dans une durée continue dont ils ne peuvent s’évader’<sup>2</sup> (Marie 1999: 75). Finally, Godard demonstrates his affection for film history by ending various scenes with an iris out, a technique which had fallen out of favour since the days of silent cinema. Godard uses this form of cinematic punctuation notably following Michel’s communion with Bogart and after his own rather burlesque turn as a passer-by who identifies Michel from a picture in the paper and points him out to the police.

The playfulness of *À bout de souffle* is visible, too, in the lengthy central scene between Michel and Patricia in the latter’s hotel room which, at twenty-four minutes long, constitutes by itself around one third of the whole film. This tendency to balance his generic action narratives with extraordinarily long sequences representing the domestic life of a couple is one that, as we shall see, characterises the whole of the first period of Godard’s career. This is representative of what Serge Daney has identified as a general movement in European cinema between 1960 and 1980 away from stories of male heroes and towards ‘un cinéma qui laisserait apparaître les femmes’<sup>3</sup> (Daney 1994: 114). The blueprint for most critical analyses of Godard’s representation of women was provided in 1980 by Laura Mulvey and Colin McCabe. They recognise Godard’s importance in giving greater visibility to women in cinema and they appreciate, in later films, his examination of the commodification of sexuality within a capitalist economy. But Mulvey and McCabe identify a significant problem in Godard’s depiction of women: there is an automatic and simplistic equation, they argue, between women and sexuality; in other words, women in Godard’s films are only ever portrayed *in terms of their sexuality* (McCabe 1980: 85). Geneviève Sellier, picking up this argument, suggests that the long central sequence in *À bout de souffle* presents the stereotype of a woman who does not know what she wants (Patricia hesitates for a long time before finally sleeping with Michel) (Sellier 2001: 282). Implied in this argument is the criticism that, because women on film are presented from a masculine point of view, their desire tends to appear as an unknowable enigma. This is particularly true of the *femme fatale* in film noir, but Steve Smith, who analyses *À bout de souffle* in terms of film

2 ‘bring the couple together in a continuous duration from which they cannot escape’.

3 ‘a cinema which would make room for women’.

noir, gets into difficulty when he tries to assign Patricia to the category of *femme fatale* since, as he is forced to admit almost in spite of himself, ‘sex is not ... the focus of prohibition and transgression in the film’ (Smith 1993: 71).

On the contrary, what is most striking about the central scene in *À bout de souffle* is, once again, its *playfulness*. The sequence sees Michel repeatedly getting up and going back to bed, while Patricia is constantly dressing and undressing: she returns home in one dress, changes into shorts and a jersey, wears Michel’s shirt after they make love and finally puts on another dress before going out. The pair play at hiding and revealing their faces (Michel with the bedsheets, Patricia with her hands in front of the mirror) and copy each other pulling faces before the mirror. They read to each other and listen to music, perform banal domestic chores, but above all *play games*. Patricia suggests a staring contest, betting Michel will look away before she does, while Michel playfully threatens to strangle Patricia if she does not smile before he counts to eight. All of which suggests that the sexuality and the gendered identities on display are not *fixed* at all, but are so many masks to put on and take off, so many performances to adopt and abandon. Michel plays the selfish and sulky child, the tough misogynistic gangster, but also the sensitive and sensuous lover; Patricia is the confident independent woman, the flirtatious *coquette* and the vulnerable *gamine*. The whole scene is one long, slow dance of mutual seduction, but one could argue that it is led, if at all, by Patricia, who sleeps with Michel but only when she is ready. And it should be pointed out that, while Patricia is dressed, as we have said, in a variety of outfits, Michel spends the whole sequence dressed only in his underwear (and occasionally his hat), his impressive torso on display throughout.

Michel’s repeated attempts to telephone his associate during the scene serve to remind us of the generic narrative, but the urgency of Michel’s flight from the police is forgotten as Godard fills the mid-section of his film with what is essentially dead time of the sort that would typically be expunged from classical narrative cinema. However, these long minutes spent with Michel and Patricia are vital in cementing the spectator’s identification with the characters. As Michel Marie has demonstrated (1999: 85–6, 91–3), the sequence is constructed principally around long takes, which give the spectator a sense of evolving in real time with the characters, while the predominant framing in close-up allows for a rare sense of intimacy. If the playful qualities of *À bout de souffle* are doubtless largely responsible for the affection in which it is held by film lovers, there is also a more sombre side to the film – and its sense of passing time – which prevents it from becoming a mere frivolity. For a



film which registers on screen and in the memory as so *vital*, it has a surprising preoccupation with death. Early in the film, Michel witnesses a fatal accident in the street and, later, tells Patricia about it. In Patricia's room, Michel tells a joke about a condemned man and, in a moment which seems to encapsulate the film's uncertain tone, asks, while playing with a teddy bear, 'Est-ce que tu penses à la mort quelquefois? Moi, j'y pense sans arrêt'.<sup>4</sup> Patricia admits she is afraid of getting old, a sentiment which finds an echo in lines from a Louis Aragon poem that Godard incongruously substitutes for the soundtrack of a western while Michel and Patricia hide out in a cinema: 'Au biseau des baisers/Les ans passent trop vite'.<sup>5</sup> Patricia also reads Michel the last line of William Faulkner's *Wild Palms*: 'Between grief and nothingness, I will take grief'. Meanwhile, Michel's expression of fatigue conveys a weariness with life itself: in Patricia's room, he says 'Je suis fatigué, je vais mourir'<sup>6</sup> while, at the end of the film, shortly before his death, he sighs, 'Je suis fatigué, j'ai envie de dormir'.<sup>7</sup>

There is doubtless a generic element to this preoccupation with death: these many references to death are so many premonitions which give a sense of fatality to Michel's death when it occurs at the end of the film. But there is perhaps more to be said about the treatment of death in this film. It might be tempting, initially, to give an existentialist interpretation: the morbid references are there to remind us that these characters are faced with stark choices which may ultimately lead to their death. As in the theatrical situations of Jean-Paul Sartre, this would then be a device with which to highlight human freedom and the necessity of taking responsibility for our choices. Both Michel and Patricia are faced with such difficult choices at the end of the film. Patricia must choose whether to run away with Michel and implicate herself in a life of crime, or give him up to the police and return to her career as a journalist. She chooses the latter. As a result, Michel must choose whether to run or to stay and face the consequences, and he too chooses the latter course of action. But there is still another approach we could take to death in Godard's film. The existentialist position implies a virile, stoical view of death as something which can give us greater knowledge of ourselves and our essential freedom. But, as Maurice Blanchot suggests, 'en cette mort véritable s'est bel et bien dérobée la mort sans vérité, ce qui en elle est irréductible au vrai, à tout dévoilement, ce qui jamais ne se révèle ni

4 'Do you ever think about death? I think about it all the time.'

5 'With the sharp cut of kisses/The years pass too quickly.'

6 'I'm tired, I'm going to die.'

7 'I'm tired, I want to sleep.'

ne se cache ni n'apparaît'<sup>8</sup> (Blanchot 1969: 50). This *other* death is of no use to us, it cannot be appropriated, understood or in any way *overcome*, for it is properly unknowable. It is that which haunts life without being, in any way, a part of life but without, either, being its opposite; it is, rather, that which is unthinkable from within life, that outside of thought which drives the process of thought itself.

Something of this sort would seem to be suggested by the conjunction of *looking* and *thinking* in *À bout de souffle*. Like most, and indeed perhaps all films, *À bout de souffle* is organised around a series of looks, but there is a rare degree of self-consciousness about the looking in this film, and also a sense of *futility* attached to it. On three separate occasions, Michel or Patricia, caught looking at the other, will say 'Rien: je te regarde'.<sup>9</sup> Patricia tells Michel, 'Je voudrais savoir ce qu'il y a derrière ton visage. Je regarde depuis dix minutes et je ne sais rien, rien, rien',<sup>10</sup> and later, 'On se regarde les yeux dans les yeux et ça sert à rien'.<sup>11</sup> Michel, meanwhile, seems preoccupied with the reflection in Patricia's eyes: 'Dès que tu as peur ou que tu es étonnée, tu as un drôle de reflet dans les yeux'<sup>12</sup> and, under the covers, says, 'C'est drôle, je vois mon reflet dans tes yeux'.<sup>13</sup> It is as if Michel and Patricia were looking for a kind of essential being in the other which isn't there, or rather which is nowhere *else* than in the superficial features they can see. Michel: 'Ton sourire, quand on le voit de profil, c'est ce que tu as de mieux. Ça, c'est toi'.<sup>14</sup> The *essence* of a person is to be found nowhere else than in their appearance, caught, as it were, unawares (as Maurice Blanchot puts it, this is 'ce que nous ne sommes autorisés à regarder qu'en nous en détournant'<sup>15</sup> (Blanchot 1969: 52)), as when Michel suddenly grasps Patricia's face in his hands and says 'Des fois tu as un visage de martien'.<sup>16</sup>

Thought is discussed in similar terms in *À bout de souffle*. Michel and Patricia talk about what they are thinking and discuss their desire to know what each other is thinking, but again there is a sense of futility to

8 'this veritable death has been sidestepped by a death without truth, by that which, in death, is irreducible to truth, by that which never reveals nor ever hides itself, nor ever appears'.

9 'Nothing: I was just looking at you'.

10 'I'd like to know what's behind your face. I've been looking for ten minutes and I know nothing, nothing, nothing'.

11 'We gaze into each other's eyes and it's completely useless'.

12 'Whenever you're scared or frightened, you have a funny glint in your eyes.'

13 'It's funny, I can see myself in your eyes.'

14 'Your smile, seen in profile, is your best feature. That's you.'

15 'what we can only see by turning away from it'.

16 'Sometimes you've got a face like a Martian.'

these questions. 'Tu ne sais pas à quoi je pense',<sup>17</sup> says Patricia, and Michel, 'Je t'aime, mais pas comme tu croies'.<sup>18</sup> Patricia complains 'Je voudrais penser à quelque chose et je n'arrive pas'<sup>19</sup> and, in a line which, as Jonathan Rosenbaum points out (1995: 20), Godard borrows from Ingmar Bergman's *Sommarlek* (1950), 'J'essaie de fermer mes yeux très fort pour que tout devienne noir. Mais je n'y arrive pas. C'est jamais complètement noir'.<sup>20</sup> Thought appears here not as something with a fixed and identifiable content or being, but as a *process* in a constant state of becoming. If you try to fix your mind on a single thought it appears impossible (if only because you are *also* conscious of the effort to concentrate on this one thought), and in this impossibility we glimpse precisely that unthinkable outside of thought which continues inexorably to drive thought forward.

These questions of the inexpressible, the unapproachable, are also raised in the film's treatment of language which has drawn much comment. Michel Marie has called *À bout de souffle* 'a tragedy of language and of the impossibility of communication' (Marie 1990: 211). As David Wills points out, there is no 'pure' language in *À bout de souffle*, no transparent channel for communication: language is always mediated through various forms of translation (Wills 1998: 155). Naturally this is partly because Patricia is American and repeatedly has to ask Michel to explain the words he uses. But, at the beginning of the film, Michel also corrects the grammar of a *French* girlfriend, even though he himself talks almost entirely in slang, a kind of language within a language. Meanwhile, Michel and Patricia's misunderstanding is not only a function of their different nationalities, but more generally of the way in which they use language: as Marie suggests, Michel begins a kind of soliloquy in the film's opening sequence 'which Patricia's replies merely bounce off, without any real communication ever being established' (Marie 1990: 207). At the end of the film, Michel laments, 'Quand on parlait, tu parlais de toi et moi de moi. Alors, tu aurais dû parler de moi, et moi de toi'.<sup>21</sup> But the difficulty of communication is shown to be a necessary consequence of the slipperiness of language, its inability to fix definitive meanings. Patricia demonstrates this when she pronounces the phrase 'Of course' with three different intonations, implying

17 'You don't know what I'm thinking.'

18 'I love you, but not the way you think.'

19 'I want to think about something but I can't.'

20 'I'm trying to shut my eyes very tightly so that everything becomes dark. But I can't. It's never completely dark.'

21 'When we talked, you talked about you and I about me. But, you should have talked about me and I about you.'

three different meanings. The ease with which language can be detached from its referent is shown on two occasions in Patricia's room when she refuses Michel's compliments. When she denies that she is beautiful, Michel concedes 'Alors tu es laide' ('Then you're ugly'), though the sentence contains no less affection than the previous one. In exactly the same way, Michel replaces 'Gentille et douce Patricia' ('Sweet and gentle Patricia') with 'cruelle, idiote, sans cœur, lamentable, lâche, méprisable',<sup>22</sup> at which she smiles in agreement.

The problem of language in *À bout de souffle* reaches its conclusion in the final scene in which Patricia misunderstands, or mishears, Michel's dying words. Although this scene is frequently discussed, commentators have paid insufficient attention to the fact that Michel's line is *already* ambiguous for the spectator: exhaled with his dying breath, the line could be either 'C'est vraiment dégueulasse' or 'T'es vraiment dégueulasse'<sup>23</sup> (Wills 1998: 160 n. 4). The policeman who has shot Michel in the back brutally cuts through this ambiguity as he repeats the line to Patricia: 'Il a dit "Vous êtes vraiment une dégueulasse"'.<sup>24</sup> In the final shot of the film, Patricia stares directly into the camera and asks, 'Qu'est-ce que c'est "dégueulasse"?' ('What does "dégueulasse" mean?') before wiping her thumb over her lip in an imitation of Michel's imitation of Bogart. It has been suggested that this look-to-camera implies an admission of guilt on Patricia's part and, as Charles Barr puts it, that her 'failure of verbal understanding stands for a failure of moral understanding' (in Cameron 1969: 16). I suggest it would be more precise to say that Patricia's final look testifies to the immense gulf between words (a word, for instance, like 'dégueulasse') and deeds, to the unbridgeable distance between Michel's last words and the irreducible event of his death. This look cannot be reduced to a single emotion like guilt but instead allows us to glimpse, on Patricia's 'Martian' features, an uncontrollable *otherness*. This otherness is the terrible chasm that yawns between Patricia's desire, her actions and their consequences: the *difference* inherent in causality itself.

### Le Mépris

Godard's most expensive film (largely thanks to the presence in a starring role of Brigitte Bardot), and one of his most successful, has also been written about more extensively than most. There are a number of

22 'cruel, stupid, heartless, pathetic, cowardly, hateful.'

23 Either 'This is really shitty' or 'You're really shitty.'

24 'He said "You're a real shit".'

sensitive appraisals of *Le Mépris* (1963) in print, and I can hope to do little more here than summarise their conclusions. The film received a theatrical re-release in France in 1981 and, on this occasion, Alain Bergala admired its *airiness*, writing: 'Je ne vois que certains films de Dreyer ou d'Ozu pour être aussi aériens, déliés et musicaux'<sup>25</sup> (Bergala 1999: 15). As a result, Bergala suggests that the film seems somehow *out of time*, as though it could belong to any era of Godard's filmmaking, even to any era of cinema. This is perhaps also partly due to the imagery of classical mythology employed in the film and its timeless Mediterranean landscape. *Le Mépris*, adapted from a novel by Alberto Moravia, tells of Paul Javal (Michel Piccoli), a scriptwriter who is working on an adaptation of the *Odyssey* for the American producer Jeremy Prokosch (Jack Palance) and the German director Fritz Lang (playing himself). In the course of this project, his wife Camille (Bardot) falls out of love with him.

Despite its apparent timelessness, the film is closely related to others in Godard's first period by the presence of another lengthy domestic scene, in fact the longest of all at nearly thirty minutes. Once again, this scene constitutes a bravura demonstration of the creation of cinematic space. The sequence begins with a long take, the mobile camera following Paul and Camille as they move from room to room in their apartment, setting the table, running a bath and so on, a fluid, dynamic space gradually being created. The spectator's sense of the apartment is also created in offscreen space as Paul and Camille repeatedly call to each other from different rooms, an effect which serves to emphasise their separation and the increasing alienation of the couple – it provides, in Jean Narboni's words, a kind of 'montage dans le plan' ('editing within the shot') (Narboni 1964: 68). The discord between Paul and Camille is further stressed by the fact that they are repeatedly separated within the frame by doors, partition walls and objects of furniture (Marie 1995: 107). At the end of this long sequence, although Godard has the couple sat facing each other, his camera pans slowly back and forth between them past a white lampshade that suddenly appears unnaturally large. As Dave Kehr comments, the image suggests two people 'unable to inhabit the same frame but forced into the same shot' (Kehr 1997: 22). These techniques ultimately serve to create a domestic space that is at once familiar and strange: it is, as Harun Farocki notes, 'a nonunderstandable space' (Silverman and Farocki 1998: 43).

But this peculiar space is in the image of the characters who inhabit it, as their happy, comfortable relationship is slowly degenerating into tension and mutual mistrust. The whole apartment scene turns around

25 Bergala's adjectives are not easy to translate: 'I can think of only a few films by Dreyer and Ozu that are as light, as nimble, as musical'.