



WILEY-BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO FILM DIRECTORS

**A Companion to
Jean-Luc Godard**

Edited by
Tom Conley and T. Jefferson Kline

WILEY Blackwell

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Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors

The Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors survey key directors whose work together constitutes what we refer to as the Hollywood and world cinema canons. Whether Haneke or Hitchcock, Bigelow or Bergmann, Capra or the Coen brothers, each volume, comprised of 25 or more newly commissioned essays written by leading experts, explores a canonical, contemporary and/or controversial *auteur* in a sophisticated, authoritative, and multi-dimensional capacity. Individual volumes interrogate any number of subjects – the director's *oeuvre*; dominant themes, well-known, worthy, and under-rated films; stars, collaborators, and key influences; reception, reputation, and above all, the director's intellectual currency in the scholarly world.

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A Companion to Jean-Luc Godard

Edited by

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WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2014

© 2014 John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Wiley-Blackwell is an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, formed by the merger of Wiley's global Scientific, Technical and Medical business with Blackwell Publishing.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to Jean-Luc Godard / edited by Tom Conley and T. Jefferson Kline.

1 online resource.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

ISBN 978-1-118-58699-0 (Adobe PDF) – ISBN 978-1-118-58701-0 (ePub) – ISBN 978-0-470-65926-7 (cloth) 1. Godard, Jean-Luc, 1930—Criticism and interpretation. I. Conley, Tom, editor of compilation. II. Kline, T. Jefferson (Thomas Jefferson), 1941— editor of compilation.

PN1998.3.G63

791.4302'33092—dc23

2014004782

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

Cover image: Jean-Luc Godard during a press conference in Zurich, October 1993. Photo: akq-images / Niklaus Stauss

Cover design by Nicki Averill

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Introduction

Tom Conley and T. Jefferson Kline

Cinephiles of the generation of the editors of this volume will no doubt agree that, together, we measure much of our lives through our relation with Jean-Luc Godard. Each and every one of his films stands to some degree as a point of reference in what we recall and no sooner regain of our lives past and present. Not one leaves us indifferent. The films dazzle. They engage and enrage. Some inspire, others leave us wondering why we're bored, fraught with anger and frustration, or ready to engage dialogue. Hence the difficult beauty of the greatest *auteur* of the last 50 years, the director of over 80 features whose names are so familiar that they can be said, each title in its own way, to belong to its viewers' psycho-geographies, in other words, to the mental maps that as spectators we draw to fashion a sense of the space and time of our lives. Godard's films are points of reference – markers, even beacons – from which we often survey ourselves and what we have done or how we have lived with cinema. Some time ago, in *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (1985) (in English, as *In the Metro*, (2003)) anthropologist Marc Augé remarked that the names of the subway stations dotting the intersecting lines on the map that Parisians know like the palms of their hand can be imagined as place-names on the imaginary cartography we draw when thinking of our destinies. Like Augé in his memoir, albeit in our lives in our relation with cinema, we may have had a “Saint-Placide” phase (near the Arlequin) that gave way to a memorable “Saint-Michel” moment (close to the Champollion), or even a relation with “Mabillon” (near the Studio-Christine) and, further away, with “Étoile” (the Mac-Mahon). Such is the restive force of Godard's films in our memory: in one way or another each one can be said to mark a critical passage in the montages we unwind when thinking about where we were, what inspired us, what caused us to think afresh and anew, what drove us crazy, and what continues to do so. The films leave an indelible imprint on us at the moment we see them, whether on the heels of their production or, no less, in retrospective.

We can wager that, when recalling *À bout de souffle* (Breathless) when we saw it for the first time, we and no doubt every reader of this Companion, will smile in recall of the marvel that the way the liberation of the camera went with our heartfelt liberation *into* cinema. Its verve, its nonchalance, and its intensely reflective underside liberated us, when we were enthralled with classics, from a constricting “tradition of quality.” And, those of us (say, of Anglo-Saxon ilk) who saw it in 1960 or 1961, cannot help but remember how it liberated us from the yoke of a repressively puritanical culture of the 1950s. Or, looking back, after viewing it for the umpteenth time, *À bout de souffle* forces us to think again about the nature of post-war cinema and the French Liberation; about France and the Algerian War; about globalization, the imposition of democracy and capitalism, and the *mondialisation* of the seventh art; about how its articulation engaged critical theory, be it deconstruction, gender theory, or philosophies of iteration.¹ The same can hold for any number of films all the way up to *Notre musique* (Our Music) and *Film socialisme* (Film Socialism). Godard's films belong to their moment but, because they are all essays, indeed critical objects, they traverse the time of their making and speak to us in a variety of ways, as cinema *qua* cinema, as an engagement with issues related to politics, and at the same time to different modes of thinking that we associate with writers, poets and philosophers alike, who have been part of the great intellectual upheavals that we associate with structuralism, deconstruction, neo-Freudian analysis, and even (although the term is a misnomer) post-modernism.

Most of the readers of the Companion are not of the generation born into film with *À bout de souffle* or *Bande à part* (Band of Outsiders). Many will have come to Godard at a later moment and will have

lived with the films less chronologically than in the fashion of a mosaic, in flickers and flashes, in viewings of different facture = in theatres, on YouTube, by way of cassettes and DVDs = coming from every direction. This substantial and, we wager, extensive group of viewers will have returned to the early Godard to discover where the genius is rooted and how it develops; to ask why certain films continue to perturb or, in a justly psychoanalytical vein, why they *work on* our ways of thinking and doing; to see where the character of the medium and its history are summoned.

The articles gathered in this volume have been chosen to reflect the destiny of a collective appreciation of Godard over a half-century. From the assemblage we note three points of reference that mark a good deal of the work. First, and indelibly, it cannot be doubted that the early cinema, having lost nothing of its brash vigor, continues to inspire new reading. *À bout de souffle*, *Bande à part*, *Vivre sa vie* (My Life to Live), *Le Petit Soldat* (Little Soldier) and other features, all shot at the cusp and in the immediate wake of 1960, and perhaps finding a capstone in *Pierrot le fou* (Pierrot the Mad), tell viewers what it means to rejuvenate a medium that by then, it was collectively felt, had “become history.” These films were not in dialogue with their forebears for the sake of finding an alcove for themselves in a future pantheon of film history, but more forcibly to use the medium differently, vivaciously, ephemerally, and with a fresh critical and technical idiolect. Many of the authors in this volume bring us back to a moment that, when we see what Godard was doing with the cinemas he inherited, we are inspired over and over again to look backward and forward, in an intellectual swish-pan of sorts, in a glance both appreciative and interrogative. What he did in these films remains a model for what can and ought to be essayed now: especially now that, utterly transformed, under the impact of new technologies we witness cinema anchored more than ever, alas, in inherited modes of narration and representation. In their return to the early Godard, the Godard of the hand-held camera and 16 mm black-and-white film stock, some of our authors show that it is incumbent upon us – viewers, filmmakers, critics, amateurs alike – to turn the cinemas that seem to be at a light year's distance from the digital age into *critical objects* of aesthetic, political and philosophical import in our own.

In their chapters, the authors tell us that, seen today, *À bout de souffle* is an intellectual stratigraphy, a film of layered sensation whose ostensibly haphazard composition, on the fly, catching impressions at every turn, leads us into darker recesses of literature and history. Much like Patricia and Michel's descent into the basement of a movie theater, whose space in classical myth would belong to an infernal realm, ours happens to be a discovery of *noir* of times past when we hear Richard Conte's voice (in Preminger's *Whirlpool*) as if he were ventriloquizing the love story that ostensibly drives the narrative. Today the film becomes a maze or labyrinth of virtual places and spaces requiring archeological study. It can be wagered that the fabled race through the Louvre in *Bande à part* now tells us how, as the camera follows the youths running down the gallery, the paintings seen in passage in fact accelerate drastically what art historians had called the passage of a “Spirit of Forms” (Faure, 1930), the cavalcade of “Life of Forms” (Focillon, 1942), or a blazing “Metamorphosis of the Gods” (Malraux, 1960) under the high ceilings of the fabled edifice. The sequence would share something with the associative frenzy we later witness in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (History(ies) of the Cinema), where art, history, and cinema are in productive conflict. To be sure, if issues of gender and gaze have generated truculent re-readings of cinema, *Vivre sa vie*, *Une femme est une femme* (A Woman is a Woman) and *Masculin-féminin* (Masculine-Feminine) can be seen as works not only seminal to the development of a feminist consciousness in cinema but sites that we can set on the *Carte de Tendre* of our own moment, when we are mistakenly led to believe that the struggle for women's parity has been won. In a related sense, like the most seminal works in the classical tradition (*Intolerance*, *October*, *Sunrise*, *The Rules of the Game*, *Stagecoach*, *Citizen Kane* ...) Godard's features of the early and

middle 1960s change the lives of the younger generations of viewers who encounter them for the first time. Chantal Akerman avowed long ago that upon seeing what she once recalled as “Pierrot le gangster” she knew then and there that she had to become a filmmaker. Like her, when we see them not so much in the surf and undertow of the “New Wave,” but as films and nothing else – not as historical objects but as cinema – these features continue to show us how to look at the world differently.² A striking paradox of a feature such as *Pierrot* may be that, although it is deeply entrenched in a classical tradition of narrative cinema in its resemblance to *You Only Live Once* (a film which director Fritz Lang had first titled “Three Time Loser”) and its anticipation of an American “new wave” (which might be an oxymoron) in *Bonnie and Clyde*, it remains, above all, a webbing of associations of contextual forms and images, like the hero himself, gone wild. Abundant quotations and allusions from literature (Céline, Rimbaud, Balzac, Robert Browning ...) mix with art (Richard Chamberlain, George Siegel, Jasper Johns ...), philosophy (Leibniz ...) as well as cinema (the *Nickel Odéon*, Julien Duvivier, Sam Fuller, ...), such that a classical form gives way to a moving collage.

Second, readers of this Companion will note that *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*), *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (*Two or Three Things I Know About Her*) and even *La Chinoise* (*The Chinese Woman*), features that, although they now belong to an early Godard, draw a distance from the first films. Our contributors look to these films to sort through a number of issues. One concerns iteration and deixis (to whom or to what is addressed a remark, from where, and with what effect) that reveal hidden dialogue and define the spatialities of Godard's cinema. Others take up color, that for the director becomes a means for producing tensions that become visible when the placement of blocks of highly contrastive fields turn the screen into a flat surface or something resembling an unprimed canvas. In Godard's color films of that moment the hardedge style of Ellsworth Kelly and Pop Art come forward while they both entertain and reject symbolic meaning (colors of national flags) and even their “deconstructive effect” may or may not be aligned with psychological topics (passion, melancholy, etc.). When seen in the context of what critic Jacques Aumont famously called Godard's *profondeur de surface* (depth of surface), these films present variegated “landscapes” by which, with adjacent or overlaid shards of writing, in the mode of what one contributor calls the play of *collage* and *décollage* the strident contrasts of color flatten their volume and, hence, engage critically what otherwise they would represent aesthetically and geographically: the rugged rock cliffs around Capri (in *Le Mépris*) refer both to the backdrop of the Aegean archipelago of Homer and recall the outcroppings below the Sierras in Southern California, the telluric world where thousands of American westerns had been staged from Griffith to Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher and also, curiously, the literary source for *Bande à part* (!); a piece of green field in a Parisian suburb on which boxes of detergent, placed to mime the presence of miniature low-cost apartment buildings (in *2 ou 3 choses*), signal the effects of cleansers of capital that will sanitize the image; a play of black and white, obtained from words scribbled in chalk on blackboards (in *La Chinoise*), cue the strident reds, blues and yellows, as if confirming André Malraux's remark in *Saturn* (Malraux, 1957) that the great painters Rembrandt and Goya, to emphasize the force of their lines, insert blotches of saturation and absence of color in their paintings. The studies of these early color films allow us to reflect more generally on Godard's interrogation of the sublime or, in visual terms, the nature of an “event.” As we recall from the same film, when Maria Vlady crosses a square in Paris, uttering in voice-off an impression of a sudden but ephemeral sense of being-in-the-world, the cityscape becomes part of that event, what philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls a “nexus of prehensions” where environment and sensation come together and then separate, but where also whoever experiences the event – it could be Vlady and ourselves as we watch the sequence over and again – feels how time and space are at once objectified and

subjectified.³ It would seem that *Le Mépris* would avail us of minuscule events in the world of things grandiose, notably the sword-and-sandal epic that *Le Mépris* cannot be. On the other hand, *2 ou 3 choses* would cast in question the nature of habitability and the “events” experienced (or in the film itself, *invented*) within the confines of a new apportioning of space designed to control subjectivity – the constrained time and space of a new Haussmanization.

Our memory of the vivid and strident colors of these films allows us to appreciate what acquires a deceptively mimetic quality in some of the later films. *Passion*, in part a collage of *tableaux vivants*, deals with the ways that refracted light can be seen as a material pigment, what the cinematic painter squeezes from tubes and puts on a wooden palette, with the exception here that the chromatic virtue of Kodacolor (we recall how Godard dedicated some of his cinema to Kodak) and its variants can be seen on the surface of a positive film stock the artist holds up to light or threads through an editing machine. And much more: moving from interiors carefully lit for maximum effect of chiaroscuro in context of artifice, *Passion* eventually leads to a country setting where a “natural” world offsets the painterly aspect of the visual citations from Delacroix and other artists that we might have already glimpsed in Godard's early cinema. Contrastively, apart from its development of religious material that might be imagined to be alluding to the reduced palette favored among paintings of Reformed leanings,⁴ *Je vous salue, Marie* (Hail Mary) moves between the registers of line and color in the breathtaking landscapes Godard draws from the Cantons of Geneva and Vaud. They are in the director's homeland, surely, yet their color fields cannot be removed from religious wars or from Godard's own distanced idolatry of his homeland. Which comes forth in *Prénom Carmen* (First Name: Carmen), in the nighttime scenes of traffic moving about the Parisian periphery, that are intercut with the narrative, in order, it seems, to have color be exactly what comes “before the name, before the advent of language that would codify and drastically mitigate its sensory force. In *Pierrot le fou* Godard had made the point in his quotation from Rimbaud's color sonnet, “Voyelles,” remembered when the destitute hero's voice is heard, as he runs to a promontory standing against the blue sea to explode himself from a condition of being the nexus of primary colors into pure light, seemingly shrieking, amber sticks in his arms, to complement the blue paint on his cheeks and the red tips of the sticks he carries, as if to yell *Oh*. And later, *JLG/JLG, autoportrait de décembre* (JLG/JLG Self-Portrait in December), the shorter “winter” film, plays on tonalities of grey in nature so fervidly that for more than one viewer the many shots of the cold waters of Lake Geneva swashing over a shore of pebbles of different hues recall the abstract paintings of Mark Tobey. The stark contrasts of sky in the background of sensuous close-ups of the speakers on board ship at the outset of *Film socialisme* cannot be discounted from this train of vision and reflection. All this to remark that indeed Godard's innovations in chromatics that come in the early and mid-1960s change utterly our sense of the colorings of the complex rhetoric of his cinema and, by extension, of our appreciation of film in general.

Third, readers of this Companion will note how more than one of our authors are drawn to the *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. The epic has become a decisively pivotal work, both in Godard's oeuvre and, more generally, in what we might call the “epistemological rupture” between analogue cinema and the age of video and digitization. The *Histoire(s)*, neither rehearsing nor staging a quarrel between “ancients and moderns,” the analogues and the digitals, in the mode of the Montagues and the Capulets (*King Lear* notwithstanding, Shakespearean references abounding in *Notre musique ...*) anchor past cinemas in technologies that, ostensibly new and fresh in the 1980s, have since been refined in unforeseen ways. When we look at the innovations at work in *Histoire(s)*, Godard's office, the setting of the scene of creation belongs to a décor that is already history – if only because the electric or autonomously driven typewriter on which the guru hunts and pecks was already being

supplanted by the televisual word-processor; or because the whirl of 35 mm film stock winding through a Steenbeck or Moviola flatbed table seems quaint, even if, when the speed of the passage of the looping film stock accelerates or decelerates, we hear shrieks and growls that seem to be commenting on what we are witnessing. Surely, in the shots spliced between the multiple citations, the stench we smell of the fat cigar that Godard suckles as he hits the keys brings us back to the pre-code years of *tabagie*, of the smell of cafés when intellectual “labor” was a function of tobacco and coffee. Surely, too, when Godard seems to be miming Montaigne (“without difficulty and effortlessly, having a thousand volumes of books around me in this place where I write,” he said in “De la physionomie” (Of physiognomy)), selecting offhand quotations from any number of books at his arm's reach, he indulges in an economy that in 1988 seems to be a manual search engine no less efficient than the web browsers we use to validate or substantiate our intuitions or memories. Different technologies, indeed contrasting modes of cataloguing and chronicling the world, are in conflict. The digital medium allows Godard to graft almost effortlessly images and texts from the archive of cinema for a design that renews and brings untold dynamism to the tradition of the living and changing legacies of form in the arts, reaching back to the Malrucian imaginary museum and forward to the art of the installation (like that which was mounted at the Centre Pompidou), that he turns toward a sense of history that we can affirm to be far broader and much more subjectively accurate than what we obtain from textbooks and timelines. For starters, Godard shows us how any history of cinema can only be in the plural and how, as in French, *histoire* is a cliché in its received meaning of “his story” (in the feminine) and a “history,” he insists over and over again, as Lucian of Samosata had shown in his comic *True History*, both a chronicle and a fiction, the latter becoming more real when the former is grafted upon it. And here Godard intuits well the politics and aesthetics of the “historiographical operation.”⁵ The historiographer had traditionally crafted his fiction (the chronicler's gender generally being “masculine”) to flatter the prince for whom it was destined: thus, in the middle of *Histoire(s)*, we see Godard negotiating with the editors and syndicates behind its programming, indicating that aesthetic politics, and poetics are in constant commerce with each other.

The authors of articles on the *Histoire(s)* make the point saliently. They reach into the intricacies, indeed the secret spaces that might be located along the interstices of the many quotations. They show us that, when confronted with the vicissitudes of inhumanity for which, throughout the twentieth century cinema has been a terrible witness and often self-interested recorder, the director is afflicted with melancholy, the malady of genius. Godard shows to the world horrors that traumatize viewers in the manner of opening over and over again a wound that a victim refuses to allow to heal while, concomitantly, he strives to fulfill the promise of cinema by delivering images *after* the Holocaust would have put an end to their creation or production.

In Godard's film the “just is” of a historical image, what would be at once its mix of fact and facticity becomes its eventual “justice.”⁶ Beyond the ways the myriad manipulations show that historical veracity is of a substance of silly putty, the film, our authors note, figures in a typological scheme. The vision is one of a figural realism in which juxtaposition of images past and voices present yields a glimpse of an end of cinema, much like the end of time in a medieval or an early modern worldview, world in deprecation but a world, either including or bereft of humans, without end. Whatever film will have become, or into whatever new media it will have been transmogrified; or, no matter how much we mourn its passing: it will nonetheless be.⁷ The authors show how *Histoire(s)* thus extracts fragments from films anchored in collective memory, however unsettling, from agendas for which they had been used. Belonging to an archeology or a stratigraphy of millions of given films, in the new and mixed format that Godard crafts from some of them, he enables us to invent myriad itineraries through the troubled fantasies that shape much of our cinematic archive. Montage, the images and the

fragments the director obtains when he cracks them open and reconfigures them through digital means now figure in a political aesthetic tied to a practical theology. A plural history with the sibilant silence of an s between parentheses, Godard's film will remain a point of urgent reference for film studies now and for years to come.

In this volume these three foci – the early cinema, the post-new wave work, the *Histoire(s)* – have as complements important studies of what some enthusiasts of Godard otherwise “would prefer not to” address, namely, the highly political cinema of the later 1960s and some of the off-beat films, some of which are of recent vintage, that seem highly circumstantial. The elder viewers of “a certain generation” mentioned above note invariably, as do the authors of specialized accounts of films including *Sympathy for the Devil*, *A Letter to Jane*, and *Tout va bien* (All's Well) – these and other titles having had highly mixed critical reception – that every film is indeed integral to the oeuvre. Frequently literary historians praise authors who, although they may be varying on a singular vision, create highly different works in different modes and genres. For the French canon such is Chrétien de Troyes, Rabelais, Corneille, Diderot, Hugo and Balzac; and in cinema, Godard. In two seconds a viewer discerns Godard's surface tensions of letters, words, figures, and forms, and in not many more his treatment of landscape or portrayal of human figures. The art of rupture, breakage, or *brisure* quickly becomes a commanding trait of the signature. Thus the politics in the lesser films, for which the director had been taken to task, whether in the post-1968 period or in some of the unlikely sequences in *Notre musique* or *Film socialisme*, remain forcibly and creatively critical.

Film socialisme makes the point especially clear. What one of our contributors believes may be his last feature defies categorization and nearly description. Originally billed as a “holocaust” film, it appears to take the form of a travelogue for its first 30 minutes, but neither fits *that* category nor does it treat *any* particular subject, but ranges from shadow plots involving the disappearance of a huge treasure of gold during World War II to the distress of a French provincial family to a chaotic return to the setting of the luxury liner. The soundtrack includes at least seven different languages all of which are rendered into subtitles in “Navaho” – a technique that reduces long swaths of dialogue to three or four word summaries. If Godard is at his most provocative in this film, it is merely the latest version of a provocation that began in 1956, perhaps even with *Opération béton* (Operation Concrete) and has spiraled into a career that has produced some 70 full-length films (and another 30 short subjects) and spanned a period of some 65 years and an astonishing variety of subjects and approaches. Here, as “editors,” we continue to ask ourselves and our readers, ending on the very point of interrogation that Godard puts in view in his takes of the lobby of the Sarajevo Airport in *Notre musique*: how could any single volume capture such an oeuvre? In response, in collaboration with our authors, we have tried to capture the *character* of Godard's quest as measured and sensed in some of the most startling of his many exorbitant and provocative activities. We thank our authors and editor for the occasion to do so. And we mourn the passing of Phil Watts, to whom we dedicate this volume.

Notes

- 1 James Tweedie takes up globalization and the work of *Cahiers du cinéma* in his *The Age of New Waves* (Tweedie, 2013); Hunter Vaughan studies how the movement with which Godard was affiliated produces a cinema that *becomes-philosophical* in *The New Wave Meets Philosophy* (Vaughan, 2012); time and again David Rodowick returns to the late Marie-Claire Ropars-Wuilleumier's pathfinding “Erratic Alphabet” (Ropars-Wuilleumier, 1981), a reading of the deconstructive process of letter and image in *À bout de souffle*, in his writings that extend from

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