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Reviews and Discussion

Jean-Luc Godard: The Logic of Images—Two Reviews


Reviewed by Ian Duncan
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The year 1968, to many but a transient phenomenon, was for Godard a genuine turning point in his cinematic practice. Godard's work around and subsequent to 1968, up to Sauve Qui Peut (La Vie) (in progress when MacCabe's book was written and since exhibited at Cannes), is the focus of this book.

Whatever else it might be, Sauve Qui Peut marks something of a return for Godard—to the commercially recognizable (if not commercial) cinema, to the use of stars, to large-scale public exposure. Much of the work discussed here is unfamiliar in Britain or America: the hard-line Maoist films made with the Dziga-Vertov cooperative (1968--1970), the collaborations with Jean-Pierre Gorin (1972), and the Sonimage work for film and television with Anne-Marie Mieville (1974--1980). MacCabe explicates these projects in terms of specific political concerns, and re-views earlier films in the light of these concerns: what is surprising is the emergence, unexpected and malgré lui no doubt, of Godard's humanistic quest for private truth and integrity, through and beyond the political engagement.

Godard's 1968 withdrawal from conventional structures of production/distribution is shown as a wider inquiry into the possibilities of "making films politically" (p. 19). Whatever one might feel about the result, MacCabe is certainly right to locate Godard's recherche at the center of current concern and debate as to the status and operations of mass media forms; it is with the process, rather than the achievement, that our interest is engaged. The commercial cinema audience is (somewhat simplistically) posited as re-reduced, economically de-signed, from its specific socioeconomic situations/relations, to the lowest consumer denominator of "willingness to surrender a certain sum of money" (p. 58), which determines a necessary coincidence of sound and image, with the former dominant (correct, defining the image) in documentary, the latter dominant (defining the soundtrack) in fiction. It is not enough to control the means of production, establish alternative means of distribution; renewal must come within the sound-image relation, deconstructing its received "unity." MacCabe demonstrates how Godard's search for redefinitions has involved rigorous attention to every level of production: the images and sounds themselves (a "correct" analytical soundtrack in tension with fragmented, "open" images, as in British Sounds, 1969), the relations and status of those working on the film (stars and fledgling actors in Trois Vies Rien, "amateurs" and "experts" in the TV series "Six Fois Deux"), the technologies involved. Thus Godard has been concerned with laying bare the money determinations in the cinematic process, by deconstructing our ways of seeing: a structuralist subjectivism is already figured in the pro 1968 work, where objects are not ontologically absolute but placed in a contextual and specific set of relations; hence the crucial role of advertising in films such as Une Femme Marree (1964), where the images are re-located in terms of their production and consumption.

In this context, Godard's montage is seen as a refusal to fix unity, although the example given (the Hornuss game from Sauve Qui Peut) reveals this as a question of degree: "the heterogeneity of field" (p. 44) operates within a limited or directed aleatorism, like that practiced by certain composers, rather than a Cage-like "random camera": Godard asserts that reality is not "out there" to be captured by the camera, but is constructed by the production-consumption process, the technology itself.

The political film requires a different relation to its audience, according to the terms posited above:

it must be a participant in the reality that it attempts to articulate rather than presenting itself as an observer that can show us the truth of any situation. Insofar as politics is a complex set of struggles ranging from the economic to the ideological, it is impossible simply to represent it to people who, in that very relation, find themselves placed outside those struggles: rather it must address specific audiences in specific situations. [p. 54]

This meant new methods of work for Godard, within the cooperative context of the Dziga Vertov group. The addressing of a politically specific audience (preaching to the converted) meant, however, that the political became over-determinant: all practices are "defined in terms of the political." We, outside the post 1968 Maoist audience for these films, may not accept the soundtrack's "voice of truth" (alarmingly anti-feminist, in the example from Vent d'Est cited on pp. 60--61) as the higher unifier into which the image and all other voices, however differentiated, monolithically resolve. This, according to MacCabe, is what makes these films so "oddly formalistic" (p. 63). The Maoist discourse of Lotte in Italia (1970), with its
emphasis on the extension of the political to every field, "conceptualizing subjectivity in terms of class," indicated a movement toward a more Althusserian position: that there is no emancipation or "zero degree" from the ideological instance as "false consciousness," no point of transparency or truth: only the analysis of particular ideological struggles, specific practices within the system they constitute. This formulation, too, rests on the assumption of a standpoint—the political—which Godard was to understand increasingly as meaning a reductive comprehension of those specific practices. Thus, Godard's Sonimage films move away from politically closed forms to pose their political concerns in the terms of some of these specific practices, of which sexuality receives detailed discussion.

Many of Godard's weaknesses and contradictions are revealed in his treatment of women. Even his Dziga-Vertov tracts show a repressive masculine equation of woman with sexuality, an uneasy complicity with the object of his analysis: a formal subversion/demystification becomes very difficult and at best ambiguous with the choice of so culturally loaded an image as the nude female figure, as MacCabe and Mulvey are scrupulous to point out, "ignoring the complex social determination of women's position in favour of an image of woman outside any social or economic context" (p. 87). On one level misplaced, the equation is on another re-asserted. MacCabe and Mulvey's discussion is particularly alert here. Numéro Deux (1975), as Godard's "most thorough and self-conscious attempt to depict the problem of sexuality under capitalism," extends the parameters of the sexual problematic to describe frustration, imprisonment, and violence pervading the whole nuclear family unit, and poses again the question of how to "effect a conscious and political interaction between the cultural forms of representation on one hand and economic and social relations on the other" (p. 100). To a large extent, the contradictions remain. Godard is notably evasive (and inaccurate) in the interview at the end of this chapter: "my originality is that I don't make any distinction between man and woman.... I don't think about whether it should be a man or a woman" (p. 102).

Glossing over the alternately simplistic and sophistical maxims of Sonimage—"Before appointing a minister of posts, perhaps we should ask if one needs or wants to write a letter, and to whom and why (to do what) and against what?... Sonimage is a manufacturer of light in the sense of throwing light on a situation to see it clearly or, on the contrary, to draw the veil" (p. 140)—MacCabe points out that Godard's evolving communications theory (it appears he is now disenchanted with television, despite its centrality to his concerns) tends toward a reductive, nihilistic negation of the effectiveness of any political action. With resolution to a "correct" soundtrack and destructive violence (ransacking a supermarket) at the end of Tout Va Bien, Godard's problems with the articulation of a successful political form heralded the failure of the European left in the 1970s and its legacy of terrorism; the formula to begin the class struggle "everywhere at once" is "morally powerful but politically vacuous" (p. 71). Godard's subsequent directions are defined in ambiguous terms by MacCabe: the recent films reintroduce ethical concerns "in a form, intellectually familiar from Nietzsche, but more readily available in a variety of popular radical traditions, of an emphasis on confronting one's own determinism in an encounter for which no else can prepare you" (pp. 74—75). The vauness and confusion over pronouns (however rhetorically effective) indicate, perhaps, unwillingness to describe Godard's progress in humanistic terms. It is toward solitude, private and individual resolutions, that Godard's more recent theory and practice seem to be going: a communications model based on ignorance and blockage as to "message," a privileging of single moments of communication (epiphanies? MacCabe brings Joyce in elsewhere) when "everywhere changes places" when the individual "loses itself," somewhat obscurely, "in the effort of showing an image to someone else" (p. 153), over and above social forms of communication, which are stereotyped, repetitive, and hence able to communicate nothing. With the refusal of social meaning, and thus possibilities of communal action, repetition maintains us in a hermetic isolation. "To participate in the established forms... is to lose what is specific to your experience and situation" (p. 154). Godard's poetics of emargination assume the terms of an elitist withdrawal, a legacy of the romanticism MacCabe elsewhere identifies.

Nor does MacCabe hesitate to open up the contradictions here: Godard's alternative cinema, given the improbability of any realization of the production-distribution system he proposes, only works and engages our interest insofar as it is Godard's: a "star" himself, a name "constructed by traditional relations of production and consumption" (p. 147) that makes Sonimage possible. And MacCabe suggests that it is this commitment to Godard that makes us willing to forego "the necessary pleasures and struggles of stereotype" and risk boredom. The book was written, one feels, on the defensive (the witty opening sequence), as much to investigate MacCabe's own doubts as to refute the usual philistinist dismissals: there is insecurity at the height of this debate in the use of adjectives suddenly given to the France/tour detour... project (1978): "astounding complexity," "an image of quite extraordinary force," "an extraordinary zoom shot," "an extraordinary montage" (pp. 149—151).
MacCabe is bold to bring up the issue of audience alienation and it is not a trivial one. The problem stands unresolved, as perhaps it must. On this point, as most others, Godard himself, in the interview extracts appended to each chapter, is amusingly, exasperatingly evasive, retreating from MacCabe's sharp questions into specious analogies. Godard (with some slyness, one feels) poses as the ingenuous, misunderstood, misunderstanding, macho inarticulate, just "looking for the truth"—perhaps.

MacCabe's description of theoretical issues and specific films are highly readable (so much for recent tired sneers about the necessary "obscenity" and "jargon" of this kind of Marxist-structuralist analysis); the accounts of "polyphonic" narrative forms and camera strategies; and (with Mulvey) women, are particularly stimulating. We are provided with a provocative and on the whole convincing account of Godard's recent directions, indispensable for anyone interested not just in the specific topic, but in the wider issue of political engagement and fictional/media forms.


Reviewed by John Paul Russo
University of Miami

And anyway, what is an object?
—Godard

In their Literary Criticism: A Short History, William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks described the method of New Criticism in terms of slowing down a film, stopping it from time to time, and reading it frame by frame. The danger lay in losing sense of the work as a whole, the difficulty in deciding when and where to limit the interpretation of polyvalent symbols or allusive references. But the advantage was in giving the interpreter time to allow the image to yield up its meaning. Its relation to its narrator, its ambiguity, antithetical concepts, paradoxical resolutions, and the patterns of its organicity. Great poetry should be able to stand the test of close analysis. Or rather, on this view, poetry is great to the degree that it could stand the test of this particular method of analysis.

What is true of poetry is also true of film. Alfred Guzzetti has approached Jean-Luc Godard's Two or Three Things I Know About Her in a broadly New Critical spirit. He respects the organicity of the work. He treats the film as film and not another thing, not an essay of Marxist analysis, not a play on the screen, not a pattern of images and sounds, but all together combined in their effect on the viewer. He comes to terms with "the persona of the director" himself, a voice-over commentator on (and critic of) his film as well as its author. The analysis of this 85-minute color film extends to the French text, sound, music, blocking, and cutting, and to the 285 shots (in black and white), with reference to many more. Godard's French text, Guzzetti's own translation, a description of sound effects, bar references to two Beethoven quartets, and the shots are printed on the left, with running commentary on the facing page. The book is handsomely published, as well it should be: this study is a landmark in the history of film criticism.

Guzzetti calls his theoretical procedure "empirical, since it begins from an organization of the seen and the heard" (p. 5). To one critic who argued that this method masked "the value judgment I relieve explicitly in this introduction" (that the film is "one of the masterpieces of the sound cinema," p. 4), Guzzetti replies by asserting his freedom to make value judgments. "It is true that, in interpreting what the film signifies at each moment, I accede to its terms in some very fundamental way and thus forgo a vantage point from which to articulate a more far-reaching criticism." By "far-reaching," one supposes Guzzetti means political or philosophical. On the other hand, he does not hesitate "to venture value judgments about many portions" of this and other films by Godard throughout the running commentary.

On what grounds are these value judgments made? "The organization of the seen and the heard" is Godard's organization, the object. Guzzetti's responses to the object are his original facts; he does not claim a dialectical relationship to it. Instead, he carries on his analysis most frequently in terms of two well-known questions: (1) What did the artist set out to achieve? and (2) How well did he achieve it? A filmmaker himself, Guzzetti explores all aspects of the media; a professor of visual studies and a scholar of literature and philosophy, he unpacks the cored bales of philosophy, politics, literature, and allusion to other films. But the final judgment is chiefly an aesthetic one. Thus, Guzzetti criticizes Sequence 15 as "thin and tedious": it is 14 minute long (longest of the film's 18 sequences) with conversations on language, meaning, sex, utopia, communism, and a parody of Flaubert's Bouvard et Pécuchet. But he praises Sequence 12 for its "complexity and beauty" (p. 4), "one of the richest and most complex segments" (p. 123)—an important clue. Beauty arising through a unified complex is a New Critical tenet. "The service station scene is, in my view, one of the richest and most beautiful in the cinema. Its every detail of imagery,
phrase, and construction is brilliantly imagined and executed. It not only succeeds in mobilizing, elaborating, and advancing the entire complex of events and ideas developed throughout the first half of the film, but does so with precision, economy, and inventiveness.” (p. 226). (Precision and economy are also New Critical values.) Another writer, he admits, might have found that Sequence 12 is an “artist’s-over-indulgent theatricalization of his problems” or that Sequence 15 impresses as an admirable “attempt at self-criticism.” But Guzzetti bases his value judgments largely on aesthetic complexity, on the success to which the artist combines the realms of reference and adjusts them within a medium on aesthetic realiztion.

There is of course a third question on which one bases value judgments: Is the work, finally, any good? Here Guzzetti links beauty with philosophic depth: “the film is the most complex and profound work of the most interesting and inventive filmmaker of our time” (p. 4).

What is happening here is an exhaustive empirical critique of an artist who insists on a dialectical one. Godard makes a Brechtian effort at including himself and his audience within the film, although this effort is not without some ironic undercutting. Guzzetti, however, resists inclusion. He cannot be “hypocrite lecteur [voyeur], mon semblable, mon frère,” the film’s Baudelairean refrain. Godard’s most dazzling forays into the dialectical relationship of subject and object call forth an impressive interpretation of that presentation on its own empirical terms. The result is conflict and excitement. In the end, the only dialectic is one of intelligence.

In one scene, for example, the dialectical theme arises in the midst of Juliette’s attempt to attract a potential client in a cafe. As Guzzetti points out, Godard’s voice-over commentary is dramatized by his whispering, as if he were present and unwilling to disturb the players or the characters they play. Proceed in upon himself, recollecting from his observations, the tormented Godard reaches his most metaphysical speculation as the camera settles on the swirling surface of coffee:

Maybe an object is what permits us to relink . . . [Silence] . . . to pass from one subject to the other, therefore to live in society.

(The young man looks at Juliette. She returns his gaze.)

He looks down again.

since social relationships are always ambiguous, since my thought divides as much as it unites, since my speech brings nearer through that which it expresses and isolates through that about which it is silent.

(He looks at her again, then back down. She returns his gaze, then looks away.)

since an immense guilt separates the subjective attitude I have of myself

(Actually sound clinking of spoon.)

from the objective truth that I am for others, since I do not cease to find myself guilty although I feel innocent, since each event transforms my daily life, since I ceaselessly fail to communicate——

(The spoon enters the frame and stirs the coffee.)

I mean, to understand, to love, to be loved——

(The spoon leaves the frame.)

and each failure makes me experience my solitude. since . . .

(Juliette looks up, off left. Shots of bartender, glistening faucet.)

since I cannot tear myself from the objectivity that crushes me.

(Shot of the swirling surface of the coffee in the cup.)

not from the subjectivity that exiles me, since I am permitted neither to lift myself to being nor to fall into nothingness, I must listen, I must look around me more than ever at the worlds my likeness, my brother.

(Room sounds slowly fade up.)

Guzzetti’s interpretation of the sequence moves smoothly from the actors in the scene, to the Sartrean philosophical problem, to an earlier film by Godard where a bartender similar in looks to the one here is “a figure of atavistic sexuality.” Guzzetti writes:

This reading is not to diminish the philosophical meanings of the sentences, rather to remind ourselves that they occur in a narrative film, indeed in the first scene of it in which the mediating director has intruded into the space of the narrative. Seen in this perspective, the long deferred conclusion—“I must listen, I must look around me more than ever”—though vague as a philosophical resolution, is precise as a response spoken by the persona of director in reference to the situation of the film. . . .

[p. 139]

When Guzzetti ponders the referent of “hypocrite lecteur,” he suggests the young man, Juliette herself, the spectator, possibly “le monde.” But the critic himself is curiously absent from the list: le dialectique echappé.

Godard was 36 when he shot Two or Three Things I Know about Her, his thirteenth film, in 1967. He had begun to write about film in 1950. With Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette, his colleagues on the Cahiers du Cinéma in the 1950s, he believed criticism ought to be a necessary preparation for directing. In an interview in 1962 Godard said:

I have always wanted, basically, to make a research film in the form of a spectacle. The documentary side is a man in a particular situation. The spectacle comes when one makes this man a gangster or a secret agent. In Une Femme est une Femme the spectacle comes from the fact that the woman is an actress; in Vivre Sa Vie, a prostitute.
As Guzzetti points out, these twin values of “research” and “spectacle” inform all Godard’s work. *Breathless*, his first and most commercially successful film, leans toward spectacle: the narrative is well plotted; its characters are convincing psychological wholes; its director remains on the periphery. *La chi nee* (1967) is quasi-documentary and militantly political in Marxist-Leninist terms; characters are fragmentary; the director involves himself in the action: some shots have the effect of posters. An idea, not a story, organizes the film. We are in the domain of research.

It is possible to view Godard’s career from 1959 through the mid-seventies as the gradual disappearance of spectacle in a swamp of research. Perhaps he has no film in which he finely equilibrates his twin imperatives. *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* comes closest to such a balance and may well be his most representative film. Godard summons all his strengths and suppresses many of his excesses, though research wins out over spectacle. The error of overtrumping runs through Godard’s work as a whole. It is absolutely fatal to art. One does not disagree with this or that idea per se; ideas objectionable to reason can be aesthetically justified. Rather, one objects to their imperfect combination in the medium and the total effect over the viewer. Thus, when Guzzetti claims that this film is “the most complex and profound work of the most interesting and inventive filmmaker of our time” (p. 4), I find myself in disagreement, both on the basis of aesthetic realization and philosophic content. With due respect for Godard’s achievement I think of other author-directors that I would place above him: Bergman, and Bergman above all for his cinematic pilgrimage is unparalleled; Fellini, certainly. Then, if Resnais and Antonioni are not finer directors, it can at least be said that they have finer films. On the American side of things, Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (1978) deals more effectively with the rupture of the social integument than does *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*. Besides, *The Deer Hunter* treats the problem more successfully in emotional terms. But, as Coleridge said, let us not introduce an Act of Uniformity against poets.

The title of Godard’s film cannot be translated easily: “Her” refers to the actress Marina Vlady, the character Juliette Janson which she plays, or the Paris region (*la region* is feminine) in which the film is shot. At the outset Godard speaks: “This is Marina Vlady. She is an actress. She is wearing a midnight-blue sweater with two yellow stripes. She is of Russian extraction. Her hair is dark chestnut or light brown. I don’t know which exactly.” The actress replies “Yes, speak as if quoting truths. Old Brecht said that.” She turns her head to the right and Godard comments: “Now she turns her head to the right but that isn’t important.” We are amused; we know we are going to enjoy all this. Then Godard: “This is Juliette Janson. She lives here. She is wearing a midnight blue sweater with two yellow stripes. Her hair is dark chestnut or else light brown. I don’t know which exactly.” Juliette informs us that her husband makes the equivalent of $225 a month. She turns her head. Godard comments: “Now she turns her head to the left but that isn’t important.” But, of course, it is crucial; Godard has simultaneously transformed one sign-system (actress/cinema) into another (housewife/capitalism), has renounced his “responsibility for her actions,” and has pointed “with irony to the convention of film narrative according to which the action is portrayed as an spontaneous event” (p. 33). This slight act of turning the head is one of the first of the “one or two things,” finally many many things, Godard will know about her.

The film concerns the social and economic effects of Gaullist prosperity in the mid-sixties. A new suburb of Paris is being carved out. There are many shots of bulldozers, building sites, girders, and concrete. Abrasive construction noise fills the air. There is not a single shot of old Paris (one recalls Pompidou’s taunting remark to those who were resisting his modernization: “Dear old Paris—it’s all over”). The housewives in the new high-rise apartments have taken to daytime prostitution, often with marital consent. They wish to supplement the family income in order to buy the consumer goods that are everywhere forced upon their attentions. Godard displays these goods now and again; there are signs, advertisements, scenes of buying and selling. Magazines show alluring pictures. “The Gaullist regime puts on the mask of reformer and organizer while wishing only to record and regularize the natural tendencies of big capitalism,” Godard remarks in a voice-over. Juliette is one of these housewives. The film follows her through perhaps a day, with her son, with a young client, with another who turns her down, with her husband in bed at night. Her lovely face is often impassive and sometimes betrays depression. Other women enter and depart. Through all Godard comments, some 28 times, on the situation or his own mental state.

The central thesis of this film and also of much of Godard’s work is that the self is forced to prostitute itself, to profane, to vulgarize itself, in the service of the Other, Nothingness, Capitalism. This prostitution extends from the housewives, to the director “whom modern life forces into prostitution,” to the camera itself which, in Guzzetti’s commentary, “at best evinces untruths and at worst is a party to voyeurism,” to the audience (p. 129).

This theme reaches its fullest treatment in the twelfth sequence, and the failure to follow up on the ambivalent resolution of this sequence is seen as the most serious aesthetic and philosophical flaw of the film, an unfinshed symphony, though satisfying itself. The sequence takes place in a service station with a car wash where Juliette’s husband Robert is
employed. Godard’s problem, as he admits, is how “to give an account of events,” of “exactly what happened” at “about 4:10 P.M.” when living in society has become like living “in a giant comic strip.” As Juliette chats with Robert and the car goes through the wash, the camera eye falls on various objects and signs and the narrator ponders what line he should take to pursue his rendering of reality. There are several options. Naturalistic realism: the car-wash is the twentieth-century equivalent of Zola’s laundry in L’Assommoir. Literary symbolism: the autumn leaves remind him of Faulkner’s Wild Palms. Personal reflection: he resumes his dialectical reflections. Are objects separate? Do their relations penetrate the being of one’s own self? What media can one trust? Language, image, sound? Referring obliquely to Francis Ponge’s Le parti pris des choses, Godard seems to yield to the ordinary life of things. It might be startling politically, but he would have been comfortable with Wallace Stevens’s injunction, “Let be be the finale of seem,” that is, let ordinary appearances give way to, not be inconsistent with, the real truth of things (“The Emperor of Ice-Cream”):

In the case of the image everything is permitted, the best and the worst. In front of me everyday good sense has come to restore the broken step of my reason. Objects exist, and if one gives to them a more attentive ear than to people, it is precisely because they exist more than people. Dead objects are always alive. Living people are often already dead.

As the car emerges into the sunlight we get an “answer” to the problem of rendering reality. Guzzetti notes that this sequence “consolidates the insights of common sense and tries to lay to rest the battery of preceding doubts and questions.” Godard confesses his hope for “happiness in a world where men and things will at one and the same time know harmonious relations.”

That is my aim. It is in the end as much political as poetic. Should I have spoken of Juliette or of the leaves? Since in any case it is impossible really to do the two together let us say that both were trembling gently at the beginning of the end of an October afternoon.

Guzzetti finds this conclusion too “literary and precious” because we have not in fact seen Juliette “trembling.” The farewell kiss seemed perfunctory. A more serious problem, however, is whether this credo is sufficient to bridge the philosophical abyss that the film open up. Despite references to Ponge, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Wittgenstein, and an excursus on the doctrine of internal relations, we have no logical arguments. Instead, a logic of images has revealed a qualified Romantic experience, a moment of vision: the loveliness of a late afternoon (but it is late, and it is October), autumn leaves, the kiss, the ritual purification of the car wash, a bright red car. On the other side, the scene is informed by anomic; Juliette is often expressionless: the camera focuses on ugly things, on a very damaged car, on signs, on the spinning numbers of francs per liter on the gas pump. When the scene closes with three bars from Beethoven’s Sixteenth Quartet we feel that something must have been revealed. But what exactly? We cannot be certain.

Aristotle said, “many poets dramatists tie the knot well but unravel it ill.” What might have been a climax turns out to be the source of new themes that radiate through the remainder of the film. In Sequence 14 a pornographer who speaks English and wears a T-shirt with an American flag on it photographs Juliette and a friend, their heads covered by airline handbags, with occasional shots of the horrors of Vietnam. It is the most poorly realized sequence in the entire film, and its symbolism is so laden that only the comic episodes in the following sequence enable the film to regain momentum. In this sequence there are several conversations in a loud café; during the whole time an elderly woman is playing on a pinball machine. In a side booth a young girl questions a Nobel Prize winner “Ivanoff” on a variety of issues, one of those interminable conversations that make the French film so intellectually credible and enjoyable (Eustache’s The Mother and the Whore, 1973, remains one of the best conversations of the 1970s):

Girl: What will the morality of communism be?
Ivanoff: I think that it will be the same thing as now. (He autographs his book.)
Girl: Yes, but what does that mean?
Ivanoff: Looking out for one another, working for one’s country, loving it, loving the arts, science . . .
Girl: Then what will the difference be?
Ivanoff: With communism, that will be easier to explain.

The comic response to these lines masks the fact that we are dealing with cruder and less interesting materials, and Guzzetti concedes that the "film is running out of energy." The final scene, husband and wife reading in bed, does not advance the thought-structure of the film. Godard’s commentary mixes obliqueness and hope: “I set out calmly on the road of dreams and I forget the rest. I forget Hiroshima, I forget Auschwitz, I forget Budapest, I forget Vietnam, I forget the minimum wage, I forget the housing crisis, I forget the famine in India. I’ve forgotten everything except that, since I’m reduced to zero, it’s from there that I shall have to set out again." He has become the hero of his film (Juliette said she is false if she stay the same, true if she changes). His reduction to zero represents a destruction of the old self and a point of setting forth, the way the French calendar began from
zero after the Revolution. Final shots of consumer products on the lawn seem as studied as a French parterre. The direction of Godard’s career will be toward “research.”

Notes

1 In his preface Guzzetti extends his gratitude to several of his teachers, including the late Professor Heuben A. Brower (who studied with I. A. Richards) and two of Brower’s students, Richard Poirier and Anne Ferry.

2 “In a Chinese, Jean-Pierre I éaus, after a declamatory statement, ‘We need violence,’ says (evidently to Godard), ‘You’re laughing; you think I’m showing off for the camera not at all!’ whereupon Godard cuts to a reverse angle, showing the enormous camera. In Godard’s Far from Vietnam, we see him delivering a monologue while standing next to a 35-mm Mitchell. Paraphrasing Vertov, he titles this film Camera-Eye, which, in conjunction with the imagery, expresses a distinction as much as an identity. In light of this it cannot be surprising that his post-1968 filmmaking collective should be named ‘the Dziga-Vertov Group’ and that its films should, like Vertov’s, take pains to show, and account for the role of, the apparatus” (p. 226).


Reviewed by David Carrier
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Aestheticians study in the abstract questions that art critics study in the concrete: what is art? why has it value? how do we interpret it, and why do we disagree about such interpretations? These books—two of the three great recent ones in aesthetics!—both start with ontological questions: to describe art we must first determine what artworks are.

Consider visual artworks only. Obviously—someone carrying a Marden would certainly agree—they are physical objects. But if paintings are physical objects, why do we disagree about their interpretation when we don’t ordinarily disagree about descriptions of objects? We agree about the shape and weight of this journal, but not, probably, about how to describe the art illustrated in it. Interpretation of art is complex in part because sometimes facts “previously unnoticed or dismissed as irrelevant, can suddenly be seen to pertain to the work” (Wollheim). Interest in broken brush strokes leads to admiration for Guardi; and we see Louis’s color, “embedded in, or pressed down upon, the surface” as strikingly like Goya’s. Restorations also raise such questions. If the painting Bacchus and Anadyne is a physical object made by Titian, then how can we object—and many people did—to cleaning it? When that physical object darkens, the painting darkens also. If we prefer the restored work, perhaps that is because we think of the painting as an arrangement of colors embodied only contingently in that object. The painting is incorruptible.

Even if artworks are physical objects, how we interpret them depends upon beliefs about qualities we can’t see just by looking at them. Danto has a wonderful example. The same color pattern, a red square, could represent the Israelites crossing the Red Sea just when Pharaoh’s army drowned; express Kierkegaard’s mood; consist of the ground for an unrealized Giorgione; or be a non-representational, nonexpressive minimalist work. Analogously, we call The Polish Rider expressive because of how we think Rembrandt made it. An identical-looking object made by spinning paint in a centrifuge might not be expressive. Also, how we interpret a work depends upon when and by whom it is made, features often not determinable by visual inspection alone. Thus, a Morris hemp pile could not have become an artwork in the seventeenth century “because the concept of art had not then evolved in such a way as to be able to accommodate it” (Danto). And a depiction of a subway station anticipates the later motifs of Rothko if it were made by him, but not if it were made by Hopper.

Why do we value art? Saying “art is expressive” could suggest that it merely gives experiences we might have had in a world without art. Seeing a sunset, I may feel a Watteau-esque sense of transience. The advantage of Turner’s paintings, Ruskin said, is that seeing them lets us easily view scenes which appear only rarely in nature. Danto and Wollheim find this view unsatisfactory. It is because the materials of art present unpredictable “difficulties that can be dealt with only in the actual working of them,” Wollheim says, that “they are so suitable as expressive processes.” Imagine how differently we would see paintings if we thought that paint never dripped or smeared. Artistic representations, Danto argues, are not just substitutes for what they represent. Lichtenstein’s painting of Lorain’s diagram of a Cézanne portrait is, unlike that diagram, an artwork: “It is a transfiguration of the portrait. The viewer must know the portrait, know the Lorain diagram, accept certain connotations of the concept of the diagram and infuse the portrait with those connotations.” Saying an artwork expresses a feeling is not to imply that the feeling can be identified independently of the work. But though we can’t paraphrase the feeling, we can use criticism or other possibly contrasting works to help someone “get it.” “We can compensate for how little we are able to say by how much we are able to do” (Wollheim).