

The art and politics of filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard (1930-2022)

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French-Swiss filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard died September 13 at his home in Rolle, Switzerland, at the age of 91.

Godard came to prominence in the early 1960s as a member of the French “New Wave,” which also included such filmmakers as François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol and Jacques Rivette. Like many of the latter group, Godard was first a film critic in Paris, often associated with the magazine *Cahiers du Cinéma* (founded in 1951).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Godard made a number of politically radical films. The mass general strike of May-June 1968 in France figured prominently in his development at this time. From the mid-1970s onward, disoriented by national and global events, Godard experimented with images and sound in a series of increasingly gloomy, incoherent works. Many of his later films are virtually unwatchable.

Godard’s body of work, which includes nearly 50 feature films and dozens of shorter ones, is peculiar in that, at the time of his death, it could be argued that he had not directed a genuinely significant work in half a century. The key to that does not lie in the filmmaker’s mysteriously losing his touch, although no doubt there was a personal intellectual decline (almost a dissolution), but in the political and artistic environment in which he worked for decades, dominated by demoralization and pessimism.

As idiosyncratic as Godard’s evolution and final artistic destination may have been, they were, in the final analysis, nothing more than the unique “welding together” of moods and traits common to a generation or more of once left intellectuals: disappointment with history and society in general; a repudiation of any orientation to the working class as a force for social change; a misanthropic blaming of the population for war, ecological damage and other catastrophes; impressionistic, anti-scientific responses to the end of the USSR; susceptibility to “human rights” imperialism; a rejection of a class perspective in favor of identity politics; skepticism about the possibility of truthfully representing reality in words or images; and hostility toward rational, coherent thought.

Between 1960 and 1967, Godard directed 15 feature films that made an impression on a younger generation in particular, including *Breathless* (1960), *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*, 1962), *Le petit soldat* (*The Little Soldier*, 1963), *Contempt* (1963), *Alphaville* (1965), *Pierrot le Fou* (1965), *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Weekend* (1967).

These early New Wave films were a breath of fresh air in many ways. They were made without so many of the constraints of 1950s cinema. Godard took various genres, shook them up and rolled them out like dice: crime drama, musical, science fiction, comedy, political thriller. From one moment to the next characters could recite poetry, make love, philosophize, fire guns, protest the Algerian or Vietnam war. Literary and film allusions, advertisements, paintings abounded, frequently in an intriguing, pointed fashion. Young people appreciated the impudent humor, the sensuality and, generally, the anti-establishment, anarchic goings-on and, at the same time, the attempt to create something greater

than mere entertainment. It was during these years that Godard asserted that the “cinema is optimistic, because everything is always possible, nothing is ever prohibited; all you need is to be in touch with life.”

Some of the films, like the mannered *Breathless*, the precious *Band of Outsiders* (1964), were over-praised. Godard spent too much of his time making cinematic goo-goo eyes at Anna Karina, his wife and leading lady, in *A Woman is a Woman* (1961), *Alphaville* and *Pierrot le Fou*, for instance. His greatest commitment in those days was to the treatment of the conflict between romantic love and society in a purely individual, chaotic manner, an approach that was already a little threadbare. In its own way, the New Wave’s direction and distinct limits, with its semi-libertarian elements, revealed and futilely protested against the continued domination of French society and especially French workers by a Stalinist bureaucracy and intellectual establishment. Godard never took this problem on directly and when, in the aftermath of 1968, enormous historical and theoretical issues were posed by the eruption of revolutionary struggle, and the upper middle classes sharply move to the right (including his onetime friend André Glucksmann), he collapsed.

Godard’s most successful films were his most formally conventional. *Contempt*, based on a novel by Alberto Moravia, is the story of a left-wing writer who submits to a vulgar American producer during the filming of a version of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Veteran German director Fritz Lang (playing himself) is trying to make the film in accordance with Homer’s text, while the producer wants to introduce philistine, modernistic motives, reflecting his own outlook and behavior. The writer essentially uses his beautiful wife (Brigitte Bardot) as a means of gaining favor with the crude Hollywood figure. She grows increasingly disdainful of her writer-husband.

Prostitution is a recurring theme in Godard’s films. *Vivre sa vie* (“A Film in Twelve Scenes”) follows a young woman, Nana (Karina), forced into selling herself in Paris because of economic difficulties. The immediate mechanics of prostitution are explained. The 85-minute, black-and-white film is compact, brief, matter of fact, perhaps self-consciously so, but effective. Nana’s quasi-accidental death at the end, however, is unnecessary and unconvincing.

In *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, “Her” is both a middle class woman, another prostitute, and also, according to a promotional poster for the film, because each of the following is a French feminine noun (“elle”), “the cruelty of neo-capitalism,” “prostitution,” “the Paris region,” “the bathroom that 70% of the French don’t have,” “the terrible law of huge building complexes,” “the physical side of love,” “the life of today,” “the war in Vietnam,” etc. Godard indicated that he wanted “to include everything: sports, politics, even groceries. Everything should be put in a film.” He didn’t include everything, that can’t be done, and the film is somewhat dry, essayistic, but it is intriguing, as a study of French suburban life and an indication of his growing political concerns. *Married Woman* (1964) is also worth seeing.

It is significant that prostitution, on the one hand, and anarcho-terrorism

or “armed struggle,” on the other, recur in Godard’s films, at least in the earlier and even middle works. Indeed, many of the broader points in the films revolve around these phenomena: prostitution, with its cynical, prurient element and quasi-suggestion of willing participation, not collective economic exploitation, and individual acts of violence, not conscious, mass political struggle.

La Chinoise is important in Godard’s work because he deals here with an explicitly political theme, a small group of Maoists sequestered in a well-to-do Paris apartment. The film very loosely takes inspiration from Dostoyevsky’s *Devils* (also known as *The Possessed*), the Russian novelist’s attack on nihilism, terrorism, socialism and other “Western isms.” In Godard’s work, the Maoists debate among themselves about culture, violence and related matters. Very little light is shed on anything. Copies of Mao’s Red Book lie around in heaps and fill the bookshelves. In one discussion, the cell’s leader, Véronique (Anne Wiazemsky, Godard’s second wife), advocates dynamiting “the Sorbonne, the Louvre and the Comédie-Française.” She ends up taking on an assignment to assassinate the visiting Soviet Minister of Culture, despite efforts by her former professor, Francis Jeanson (a well-known opponent of the Algerian War), to convince her otherwise.

There are two especially noteworthy aspects in a negative sense about *La Chinoise*. First, after the fact, Godard was credited for being prescient in discussing a “revolutionary” grouping on the eve of the May-June events. In fact, the film, with full intent or not, exudes the overriding feeling that these people are living in cloud cuckoo land, that their talk of revolution is thoroughly out of step with everyday French life. An opening title, presumably written by Godard or Wiazemsky (who had leftist inclinations), reads, “The French working class won’t politically unite nor go to the barricades just for a 12% rise in wages. In the foreseeable future, there will be no capitalist crisis great enough for the workers to fight for their vital interests by a general revolutionary strike or an armed revolt.”

A year later a capitalist crisis impelled the workers into a general strike, which could have led to revolution except for the role of the Communist Party, assisted primarily by the Pabloite forces of Alain Krivine and Ernest Mandel, along with the Maoists.

Second, there is the issue of Godard’s attitude toward the Maoist cell. Objectively, he does not offer a flattering picture (not as unflattering as Dostoyevsky, of course, but an ideological-psychological connection to the original source remains). Its members are largely petty and thuggish, juvenile and confused, getting by on ideological scraps at best, a thousand miles distant from the mass of the population. In the end, they encourage one member to commit suicide, kick out another for heresy and participate in a thoroughly reactionary and pointless terror plot, largely from subjective motives and frustrations. Wiazemsky’s Véronique has more than a hint of sadism about her. It is revealing that Godard’s portrayal of the Maoists was seen by many at the time (and ultimately by him, it would seem) as a political *endorsement*.

With radicalism in the air, Stalinist youth organizations and sections of the middle class in France in the 1960s supported Maoism because of Mao’s rejection of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech in 1956. Though he did not rehabilitate Trotsky, Khrushchev admitted that Stalin had framed and murdered the Old Bolshevik leaders of the October revolution and committed atrocious crimes. Despite Khrushchev’s cynical attempts to limit the scope and impact of his revelations, the speech made clear the mortal hostility of Stalinism to Bolshevism.

By endorsing Mao and celebrating armed struggle and “popular resistance,” Stalinist middle class youth and intellectuals claimed they were “breaking with” the Communist Party. They were not, however, making a Marxist, i.e. Trotskyist critique of the French Stalinists’ rejection of a struggle for state power and for socialism in such revolutionary opportunities as the 1936 French general strike and the 1944-1945 Liberation from Nazi-Vichy rule. That is, they still oriented to

Stalinist union bureaucracies that worked to politically straitjacket or strangle the workers.

It is a sign of intellectual bankruptcy that Godard would make common cause with the Maoists for the next several years. More than anything else, however, this points to the still unfavorable conditions for the genuine Marxists in the late 1960s, the continued domination of the working class by Stalinism, social democracy and various anti-Trotskyist “left” currents.

In this regard, it is worth noting that Godard had contact with the British Trotskyists of the Socialist Labour League and gave an interview to its *Newsletter* in 1968. Through the SLL’s assistance, Godard was able to film a sequence of car workers addressing their problems, which appears in his *British Sounds* (1969), produced by individuals who were sympathetic to the SLL. The hour-long film as a whole expressed the problems of Godard’s “political” films generally. Various scenes are thrown together that do not make any compelling argument: a reactionary, racist broadcaster, a nude woman walking through an apartment while a voiceover reads a feminist text, university students involved in agitprop, etc.

Nonetheless, the anonymous, Trotskyist-influenced workers’ comments are worth preserving, because they are among the few clear left-wing statements in any of Godard’s films of the time, despite all their blood-curdling, pseudo-revolutionary rhetoric. The workers’ discussion begins on the subject of back-breaking speed-up and piece work and expands to the broader situation:

–“You can never overcome industrial problems whilst they belong in the hands of the employing class. The only way that you can ever overcome any industrial problems, indeed, in this country is the question of the property relationship of the industries concerned.”

–“This is capitalism. As far as I’m concerned, we’ve got to have a socialist world. We’ve got to have a world where the production is planned for the benefit of all the people who live in the world.”

–“*The Times* has produced figures, not so long ago, of the idle rich and the profits that they’re living on. [They’re] just purely living off the interest. They’re going to the racecourses and that while we’re slogging our guts out in the factories. It’s about time that we had a distribution of the wealth in this country and there’s a fairer share for all. It’s not fair that we should be working our fingers to the bone day in and day out while these people are at the racecourses and elsewhere.”

–“Capitalism is far more than just the inequality of wealth within a capitalist nation-state. It’s far more than this. ... Capitalism to exist must have millionaires, and it must have people who are impoverished. It must have this, but more than that, it must internationally have whole sections of the world which are impoverished.”

–“The workers in this country thought that [the] Labour [Party under Harold Wilson] would be putting into power a socialist government ... Every man that voted Labour is suddenly awake to realize that it is not a socialist government. It is a capitalist government!—It’s a better capitalist government!”

–“So what’s before the working class? Do we carry on supporting these tired old traitors? No, we can’t. What is needed in this crisis is the building of a new political party for the working class. A political party that is committed to Marxism, that is committed to communism, that is prepared to lead the working class in their struggles to overcome all these other parliamentarians.”

During the great 1968 general strike, Julia Lesage in *Jump Cut* (“Godard and Gorin’s left politics, 1967-1972,” 1983) reports that “Godard along with other filmmakers made unsigned three-minute ciné-tracts [composed of still shots]. The tracts’ anonymity served to abolish the famous-director cult and to protect the maker. Many ciné-tracts showed shots of political graffiti or the action on the barricades.” The “ciné-tracts” are available here. They are striking, but not particularly enlightening. This was Godard’s recipe for the “tracts”: “Take a photo and statement by

Lenin or Che, divide the sentence into ten parts, one word per image, then add the photo that corresponds to the meaning either with or against it.” This essential method, with all its potential arbitrariness and superficiality, would become a mainstay of Godard’s filmmaking.

Godard did make a more interesting work during this time, *A Film Like Any Other* (1968), shot in the months following the French general strike. It records a conversation among a mixed group of students and young workers, male and female. No one is identified, nor are the individuals’ faces shown for the most part, perhaps for security reasons. There is no one in the conversation who has a clearly worked out analysis, although a slightly older individual seems to be influenced by anarcho-syndicalist views. The meandering discussion involves criticism of the Communist Party and CGT (CP-dominated union federation) and how students can “help the workers.”

The soundtrack of *A Film Like Any Other* includes unidentified voices that from time to time momentarily drown out the worker-student conversation, introducing an array of historical, social and cultural allusions. There are references to Vietnam, the Spanish Civil War, Che Guevara, Mao, Rosa Luxemburg, the Moscow Trials. Out of the blue, a woman’s voice observes that Trotsky “is supported by the Red Army and the students. He hesitates to unleash them against the Party apparatus which Stalin has taken in hand.”

On the basis of the available information, Godard appears to have greeted the May-June events with genuine enthusiasm. His response to and perspective on the developments, however, were inevitably shaped by his own class and ideological history and the intellectual atmosphere that dominated left artistic circles. The entry of millions of French workers onto the political scene *objectively* put the lie to a host of anti-Marxist conceptions that had flourished in the postwar period, which wrote off the working class in the advanced capitalist countries in particular as a revolutionary social force. But the general strike did not and could not by itself solve the historical crisis of working class leadership, the continued domination over masses of workers and the oppressed by the Stalinist, social democratic, Maoist and bourgeois nationalist movements.

In the end, Godard and others attributed the defeat of the mass movement in large measure to the French population’s being under the sway of advertising, consumerism and sexual repression, and other psychological or moral defects, in the manner of Herbert Marcuse and many other left intellectuals of the day. Thus, in Godard’s eyes, the urgent necessity to undo the effects of bourgeois ideology in film, television and elsewhere by peeling back or tearing apart the images, deconstructing and “unpacking” them and supposedly exposing their false assumptions. Contemporary cinema did not need to be criticized or opposed primarily because of its social substance and themes, but because of its “traditional,” and therefore “discredited,” aesthetic.

This was a false, anti-materialist view, which gave far too much weight in fact to secondary and tertiary matters, but, more importantly, it also permitted Godard and others to sidestep the central problem of the dominance of the French Communist Party and, related to that, the history and fate of the Russian Revolution and Trotsky’s titanic struggle against the Stalinist bureaucracy. There is no indication, despite the occasional references to Trotsky in his films and Godard’s own contact with the British Trotskyists, that the filmmaker ever presented himself with these questions.

Both because it was difficult to do and because it cut too close to home, Godard never examined—aside from ineffectual swipes at the Communist Party—the politics and policies of the parties and leaderships actually responsible for the defeat in 1968. In fact, as noted, he maintained ties to one of the trends, Maoism, that had played a rotten, disorienting role during the strike movement.

In 1967 Godard encountered Jean-Pierre Gorin and they eventually formed the so-called Dziga Vertov Group, which lasted until 1973 or so.

During that time Godard eschewed personal authorship in favor of this supposed collective. Gorin (born in 1943), who received his baccalaureate in philosophy in 1960, writes Erik Ulman in *Senses of Cinema* in 2003, subsequently enrolled “at the Sorbonne. Here he took part in the seminars of Louis Althusser (including that defining the theory of the ideological state apparatus), Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault.”

Moreover, according to Lesage, Gorin was a member in the mid-1960s of “the UJCM (Union de Jeunesses communistes—Marxistes-léninistes). This was one of the two principal Maoist or Marxist-Leninist organizations in France before May-June 1968, when the government outlawed both.”

To what extent Gorin, or Godard, thoroughly accepted or absorbed postmodernist irrationalism, Althusserian “anti-humanism” and Maoism-Stalinism was never clear. In public presentations, the pair favored provocation and paradox in place of coherent arguments or commentary. In any event, these trends, along with various spontaneist and anarchist currents, were very much in the air. All shared certain characteristics: intense subjectivism, a tendency to view the working class as “bourgeoisified” and non-revolutionary, and a deep aversion for Trotsky and his revolutionary-Marxist analysis of the Soviet Union and Stalinism and struggle for the Fourth International.

The artistic and ideological results, as found in the work of the Dziga Vertov Group, were systematically disastrous.

It is more useful to discuss some of the general conceptions behind films such as *Le Gai Savoir* (*Joy of Learning*, 1969), *Le Vent d’est* (*Wind from the East*, 1969), *Luttes en Italie* (*Struggles in Italy*, 1969), *Vladimir et Rosa* (*Vladimir and Rosa*, 1971), *Tout va bien* (*Everything’s Going Fine*, 1972) and *Letter to Jane* (1972) than to discuss them individually in detail. With the exception of *Tout va bien* (the disintegration of a leftist middle class couple’s relationship for which a factory occupation provides a mere scaffolding, with Yves Montand and Jane Fonda), each quite consciously lacks a comprehensible narrative and presents itself as a radical departure.

Godard-Gorin did not want to make “political films,” they explained, but to “make films politically.” They rejected “bourgeois representation.” They did not want to “fall into the ideology of being true-to-life.” They were “moving away from something I call drama” (Godard).

In *Le Gai Savoir* (which borrows its title from the 1872 work by Friedrich Nietzsche), a tedious and static 95-minute conversation on a dark sound stage between two characters, this exchange takes place: “Let’s start from zero,” the male character says, referring to the artistic state of affairs. “No,” replies the female character, “it is necessary to return to zero first.” Interspersed with the lines of dialogue, the film presents a series of images, with elliptical words or phrases inscribed on them, whose connections, such as they are, remain entirely in Godard’s head (or in the collective thinking of Godard-Gorin).

Whether Godard consciously meant to refer to critic Roland Barthes’ 1953 work *Writing Degree Zero* or not, again, such ideas proliferated in the French intellectual air. Barthes urged the draining of drama, narrative and texture from literature, on the grounds that they were inevitably bound up with power and order, and called for “a colorless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language.” The French New Novel (*Nouveau roman*) of Alain Robbe-Grillet and others had been working away along similar lines since the mid-1950s.

In relation to *Le Gai Savoir*, critic James Monaco wrote glowingly in *Jump Cut* (1975) that “we have no easily comprehended narrative in *Le Gai Savoir*. Neither do we have a linear, logical exegesis. What we do have is a cluster of qualities and tentative ideas.” It was necessary, Monaco went on, “for Godard that the film not deal with tangible actuality. That would make it just another false mirror of reality. The film must be *presentational* and avoid the fallacy of the *representational*. It cannot—no film can—reproduce reality honestly. It can only produce itself.

In order for it to do that honestly, it will have to reinvent itself after discovering what it is exactly about the way film is used today that makes it false.”

Ruth Perlmutter, in the same publication also in 1975, argued that Godard “relies on the agitational properties of radical disjunctions that have little or no correlation.” She referred to his “Brechtian interruptions (brief inserts of pop culture mythologies)” and “his exaggerations of the filmmaking process.” Perlmutter does hint at the “arbitrary” character of his choices. However, Godard, she continued approvingly, “calls all relations into question because of his earnest desire to shake up what is going on in the head. ... It is at Zero, at first principles, at the spatial location where sounds and images can be isolated and freed of each other, that we can change what goes on in the head.”

Another comment, from *Critique* in 1969, suggested that Godard had come to realize that since “even the most uncompromising artistic experiments are compromised in the end by being absorbed within the bourgeois religion of art; and given that even a work of art with a high dosage of potentially subversive elements ... is all too easily emasculated, absorbed, and co-opted by the simple bourgeois reflex of hailing it as a masterpiece ... then the time has come when the only way for art to be revolutionary is to destroy itself, to destroy even the most advanced artistic values, to break down the cult of the ‘masterpiece,’ to produce purposely flawed works of art which the bourgeoisie will not even recognize as art, and which will therefore escape being absorbed and emasculated, and will preserve intact their revolutionary power.”

The same piece in *Critique* refers to a comment by American academic Royal S. Brown that “the word ‘bourgeois’ has come to represent, both philosophically and aesthetically, a much broader concept than that of a simple social class. Today the word implies an entire mentality, a middle-of-the-road way of life involving a halfway materialism justified by a religious confidence in the inexorable operation of a cause-and-effect absolute, and a halfway absolutism whose whole *raison d’être* is bound up in totally materialistic goals.”

We cite these passages at length to underscore the fact that Godard and Gorin were working on the basis of ideas that had nothing in common with Marxism. There are strong traces here of Nietzsche’s philosophy, various “left” trends in the USSR in the 1920s (ProletCultists, Productionists, Constructivists, Formalists), Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School, Barthes, emerging postmodernist trends (Foucault, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, etc.) and various subjective-voluntaristic political trends, including Maoism, of course. This is the language and opinion of much of the middle class left at the time.

Godard and Gorin make a fundamental error, first of all, in asserting that because artistic images do not encompass objective reality *absolutely*, they cannot reflect it with *relative* truthfulness. To “throw overboard” artistic work because of its inevitable incompleteness and class distortions, because it does not declare war on the entire bourgeois order, is a “leftist” stupidity and act of vandalism of the first order. Trotsky and Voronsky had polemicized scathingly against these conceptions 40 years earlier in the Soviet Union.

Complementing this, Godard and Gorin argue that because the capitalist class controls the various media and its ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch, therefore all art work of our epoch is bourgeois and reactionary, and, by definition, invincible, impenetrable. This notion denies the *objectively* truthful role of artistic cognition. Every artist belongs to a definite social class and his or her art is always influenced by that. However, the serious artist, like the serious scientist, is capable of going beyond his or her prejudices and registering important truths about reality. Sterile, metaphysical “left” theories of this type never consider that a given film or novel may encourage critical thoughts and feelings.

The argument that existing art must be destroyed, reduced to “zero,” is entirely reactionary, and, in the context of the terrorist threats uttered

in *La Chinoise* and the anti-cultural, anti-intellectual conduct of the Maoist Cultural Revolution, going on at the time, has sinister implications. During this period Godard made the notorious statement, “There is only one way to be an intellectual revolutionary, and that is give up being an intellectual.”

Lenin, in his arguments against the proponents of Proletarian Culture in 1920, argued powerfully that Marxism had “won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”

Godard-Gorin insist that it is not the mission of art, nor is it even *possible* for art, to make sense of reality, but merely to undermine existing conceptions, to “shake up what is going on in the head.” This is an irresponsible and false idea. The task of any genuinely left-wing artist is to educate the reader or viewer as to the actual state of things, to expose and demystify the official version of social life as propagated by the bourgeois media and establishment generally and to encourage critical thinking and conscious, rational opposition along definite lines.

The numerous references to German playwright Bertolt Brecht are inappropriate. Brecht was guilty of serious intellectual and political errors, above all, remaining silent about the crimes of Stalinism and generally apologizing for the Soviet bureaucracy and the Communist Parties, but he never advocated the type of fragmentation, disruption and distortion of “bourgeois” image-making as an operation in itself proposed here.

Godard and Gorin, despite the endless wordiness of their films, reject rational argument and the necessity of artistically transforming and working through social problems, proving the artist’s themes through drama, revealing essential truths through the artistically organized collision of social forces. Drama itself is treated as one of the illegitimate “meta-narratives” that postmodernism will subsequently repudiate.

This supposed war on “bourgeois representation” replaces genuinely innovative artistry, which educates, delights and moves audiences, with moralizing and lecturing, with the bludgeoning of the spectator. More precisely, the Dziga Vertov Group (as opposed to the original Vertov, the Soviet filmmaker) alternate for the most part between dour, mind-numbing lectures (“All areas of bourgeois ideology maintain the permanence of capitalist relations of production”) and buffoonish and amateurish episodes that insult the viewer, all of this distant from and inaccessible to a working class audience.

In that regard, it is very important to note that none of these “radical” films examine or provide any insight into the actual concrete social and political conditions in France, Italy, Britain or anywhere else. By implication, such an examination is disdained, as another example of “the ideology of being true-to-life” and at best a waste of time.

Godard and Gorin claimed to be Marxists during these few years. Along with an entire milieu, however, they rejected any emphasis on the actual probing analysis of politics and social life. For them and many others in the late 1960s, “revolutionary” practice, as indicated previously, meant individually overcoming bourgeois consumerism, moral conformism, prevailing sexual mores and such.

This emerges sharply in a film such as *Struggles in Italy*. The title, one assumes, must be deliberately provocative. The work was almost entirely filmed in Godard’s apartment. It says nothing whatsoever about the tremendous class battles taking place in Italy in 1969, which had revolutionary potential. The “struggles” in question are the purely internal conflicts experienced by a middle class student, as she seeks to revamp her political, psychological and sexual life in a more “revolutionary” manner.

Le Gai Savoir and subsequent films introduce innumerable images, accompanied, as noted above, by obscure and even hermetic comments. This is identified as “returning to zero.” However, the assumptions

underlying the choices are never indicated. On what basis has the imagery been chosen, according to what principles and social orientation? Godard became given to largely *arbitrary* (and as the years went by, capricious and inexplicable) pronouncements, oracular comments without substantiation or proofs. Wild statements and impressionism, a delirium of images proliferate.

In *Here and Elsewhere (Ici et ailleurs, 1976)*, a dispirited documentary (“It’s not going well anywhere. Nowhere,” “Our hopes have been reduced to zero”), Godard asserts in his commentary that “Little by little, we’re replaced by uninterrupted chains of images, enslaving one another.” In an approving comment about Godard’s film, the post-structuralist philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote that “things are themselves images, because images aren’t in our head, in our brain. The brain’s just one image among others. Images are constantly acting and reacting on each other, producing and consuming. There’s no difference at all between *images, things, and motion.*” There is nothing in Godard’s subsequent work to suggest that he rejected this kind of unrestrained idealism.

The unhappy story of his filmmaking after the 1970s is one of continuous decline, as formerly left intellectual circles in France and elsewhere, and he along with them, experienced a severe, prolonged degeneration and shift to the right. Godard never explained (nor did Gorin, who went off in 1975 to teach at the University of California, San Diego) why and when he ceased considering himself a “Marxist” and an advocate of the “proletarian cause,” but his films, one might say, provide an answer.

These demoralized efforts nearly blend into one another in one’s memory.

Every Man for Himself (1980) is a nasty film, with pornographic touches, about generally selfish, unpleasant people (“I don’t feel like having ideas anymore,” “I’m not drunk, I’m finished”). Godard’s *King Lear* (1987), which for all intents and purposes has nothing to do with Shakespeare’s play, is a travesty, a positive embarrassment, with Godard performing and making a fool of himself. Various unfortunate figures participate, including Norman Mailer, Burgess Meredith and Woody Allen. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, Godard directed *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* (1991). Eddie Constantine in his Lemmy Caution persona wanders disconsolately around the newly unified country. “It’s over, all that,” we learn. A cheery hotel maid greets Caution with “Arbeit macht frei,” the Nazi motto at Auschwitz.

We reviewed *For Ever Mozart* in the *International Workers Bulletin* after it was screened at the Toronto film festival in 1996. The film was as obscure as many of his others, but its references to Sarajevo were obviously a concession to the US and NATO-led “human rights” campaign that justified imperialist intervention in the region. Our comment may have been a bit generous overall (we had not had the opportunity to see many of Godard’s films over the previous 20 years), but it concluded by defining *For Ever Mozart* as “primarily a product of intellectual and moral exhaustion. Godard’s film exudes disgust for humanity, self-disgust and disgust with the cinema. The world is populated, according to this work, by equal numbers of murderers, philistines and whores.”

At a press conference in Toronto, as we noted in the IWB, when Godard declared, “‘It’s over,’ and later, ‘There’s less hope,’ he was clearly referring to more than the period in which it was possible to make a certain type of film.”

In response to the new film’s references to the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, this writer asked Godard if he felt that the US and other Western governments had made use of images of genuine suffering in Bosnia to advance their own, political and economic interests.

In his reply, as the IWB pointed out, “the filmmaker turned certain correct points into a further indictment of humanity.” Yes, of course, he

said, “They [the US and other Western governments] are not innocent people.” The aim of using terrible pictures, he went on, was to make the viewer unable to look at them anymore. “You don’t even look, unless it’s your cousin or your mother. Then you say, ‘Oh God, it’s my mother.’ But even if it’s the mother of your girlfriend, it’s okay.”

Godard continued, “TV is made to forget. We see Sarajevo, okay, we forget in two seconds. ... It has no meaning at all, even what we are thinking has no meaning. And this is the way we want it, in fact. I can’t quit smoking; a lot of people can’t quit looking at TV.”

On the WSWS in 2001, we commented that Godard’s *In Praise of Love* (2001) was “a cold and uninvolved work and largely incoherent,” and continued, somewhat intemperately, “Really, enough is enough. Godard was a leftist for a few years some decades ago. He was disappointed by the difficulties and abandoned the political struggle. That was his right. On the basis of his disenchantment, however, Godard has now taken it upon himself to judge the human race. Incredibly, someone in the film declares: ‘It’s not a question of whether man will continue, but whether he has a right to.’ Even in this day and age, presumption and self-importance have their limits! One thinks of the poet Heine’s reply to a similarly empty-headed and philistine ‘question’: ‘And the fool expects an answer...’”

Similarly, in 2004, the WSWS termed *Notre musique (Our Music)* “a gloomy, pompous and self-pitying meditation on humanity’s rottenness.” In 2010, we condemned *Film socialisme* as an “incomprehensible jumble of misanthropy and self-importance [that] has nothing to do with socialism and would represent a step backward in filmmaking were it to be taken seriously.” *Goodbye to Language* (2014)—“It is not animals who are blind. Man ... is incapable of seeing the world” and *The Image Book* (2018)—“The act of representation almost always implies violence towards the subject of representation”—carry on in the same dismal fashion.

Godard, who represented something significant in the 1960s, had sadly become the embodiment of disorientation and impotence. For all his cleverness, poetic sensibility and artistic mobility, he had not proved able, any more than anyone else, to “outwit” or outflank great historical problems and currents. Again, however, even at the price of being repetitive, the fundamental issue was not personal or individual weakness, but the fate of a generation. Godard’s decline has been mirrored, to one extent or another, in the general decline, with the exception of a few bright spots, of French filmmaking. By and large, the ability to depict the vicious ruling elite and the grasping middle classes, including its “left” element, has vanished from French cinema in the past 40 years. (Chabrol’s *A Comedy of Power* in 2006 was one of the exceptions.)

There are numerous serious political and cultural difficulties in our day, many of them the consequences of the decades of reaction and stagnation that punished Godard and other artists so pitilessly. But the decks have also been substantially cleared. The various national-opportunist labor organizations (Stalinist, Maoist, trade union) have been seriously undermined. The two great classes on a world scale are preparing themselves for a decisive showdown. There are very few “competitors” today fighting over the banner of Marxism. In any meaningful sense, the Trotskyist movement is the only socialist tendency on the planet. The conditions are emerging that will make it possible for the important artists to face up to the central questions of the epoch, those upon which the fate of masses of humanity depend.



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