

## 1 Luc Moullet: 'Jean-Luc Godard'

('Jean-Luc Godard', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 106, April 1960)

In the four months between the sneak preview and the first public showing of *A bout de souffle*, on 16 March 1960, Jean-Luc Godard's film has managed to acquire a notoriety never before achieved, I think, by any film prior to its release. The reasons for this notoriety are the Prix Jean Vigo, and the appearance of a record, a novel which is a distant relation of the film and an unfaithful rendering of it, and in particular press reviews indicative of a passion as strong – and unprecedented – in its panegyric as in its destructiveness.

Of all the films now being made by the newcomers to French cinema, *A bout de souffle* is not the best, since *Les 400 coups* has a head start on it; it is not the most striking – we have *Hiroshima mon amour* for that. But it is the most representative.

This point about the type of film it is means that *A bout de souffle* will be a great deal more successful than other films by young directors. It is the first film to be released in cinemas whose audience is essentially made up of 'the public at large', the 'average public' which is untouched by snobbishness. This is the fulfilment of what for ten years has been the new generation's most cherished desire: to make films not just for the art-house audience, but films which will be successful on the magic screens of the Gaumont-Palace, the Midi-Minuit, the Normandie, Radio City Music Hall, Balzac-Helder-Scala-Vivienne. *A bout de souffle* is not dedicated to Joseph Burstyn, or even to Warner Bros. or Fox, but to Monogram Pictures, the Allied Artists of yesteryear. In other words, it is a homage to American cinema at its most commercial – to which we shall return.

Jean-Luc Godard was born on 3 December 1930 in Paris. He studied in Nyon and then in Paris, where he gained a certificate in ethnology. Hence his passion for Rouch and his desire to become the Rouch of France. *A bout de souffle* is a little 'Moi, un Blanc',<sup>1</sup> or the story of two perfect fools.

During his first year at the Sorbonne (the preliminary year when, as is well known, students have nothing to do), he discovered the cinema,

thanks to the Ciné-Club du Quartier Latin, true source of today's new generation. Between 1950 and 1952 he wrote seven or eight articles in the Bulletin of the Ciné-Club ('Cinema is the art of lofty sentiments'), the *Gazette du Cinéma* (where he wrote one of the first pieces on Mankiewicz),<sup>2</sup> and *Cahiers du Cinéma* ('Defence and illustration of classical construction'),<sup>3</sup> which in general are eccentric and mediocre, accurate at odd moments and incomprehensible most of the time. Godard himself did not think them of any great importance since he nearly always signed them with a pseudonym, such as Hans Lucas. He broke with his family, sowed his wild oats, then did his little world tour – to the two Americas, that is – before returning to Switzerland where he worked as a labourer on the huge Grande-Dixence dam, to whose construction he dedicated his first short film, *Opération béton* (1954), which he financed with what he had saved from his pay. This is an honest documentary, straightforward and with no frills, if one disregards the very Malraux-like commentary: all his life Godard was to show himself to be a great admirer of the author of *Les Conquérants* (1933). In this first effort we can already see the principle which governs Godard's work and personality: that of alternation – after Malraux, Montherlant. An introverted ethnologist, scrutinizing the slightest gesture or look of other people, but without revealing what he is thinking behind the mask of thick dark glasses which he always wears, Godard is a disquieting personality precisely because he appears to be totally indifferent to what in reality affects him more than anyone.

This continuous displacement, maintained at times with a complacency which we would be wrong to fault since it gives us him in his best mood, explains why Godard is also the most extrovert of film-makers. The most important thing for an individual is not what he knows or what he is, but what he does not know and is not. Without denying himself, indeed to enrich himself, the individual tries to be what he is not. This is the theme that Chabrol, a friend of Godard, examines with varying success through the opposition of two characters. If Godard is a great director, it is because his natural reserve and esotericism, characteristic of his early writing, have pushed him towards a necessary, intentional and artificial extroversion which is much more significant than the same quality in those most effervescent of directors, Renoir and Rossellini. So Godard jumps from the Ciné-Club du Quartier Latin to the Incas, from the Sorbonne to manual labour. We love only the opposite of what we are.

Godard will sometimes do what he likes but is not, sometimes what he does not like but is. He will sometimes take lessons from Preminger and Hawks, and at other times do precisely the opposite: *A bout de souffle* comprising a synthesis of these two tendencies. So, after the openly conventional *Opération béton* came the very personal *Une femme coquette* (1955), a variation on the theme of everyday life in the streets of Geneva and on that fascination with cars which comes directly from *Viaggio in Italia* (Rossellini, 1953) and *Angel Face* (Preminger, 1952). But how inferior is the pupil to his masters, with his childish and pretentious esotericism!

There's no sense at all in this, no direction to this mediocre attempt at film-making. This same confusion can be found in Godard's later contributions to *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1956–7).<sup>4</sup> Then, after the production of *La sonate à Kreutzer* (Eric Rohmer, 1956) and a brief appearance in *Le coup du berger* (Jacques Rivette, 1956), the break comes with *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* (1957), which Godard prefers because it is slighter than his later short films, because it respects the rules of traditional comedy, because it is less like him, and because it was a big public success.

In the Luxembourg Gardens, Patrick meets Charlotte, makes a pass at her, and asks her out for the evening. Five minutes later he meets Véronique, who only the audience knows is Charlotte's room-mate: same story. The girls exchange many a secret about their admirer, whom they suddenly see embracing a third girl.

This sparkling little film works well because of the precision of its construction, the vivacity and originality of its dialogue, and the humour of its variously rehearsed effects in the two pick-up scenes. And in particular because of the remarkably engaging spontaneity of the two women when they are together in their tiny apartment, portrayed with an authenticity hitherto unknown in French cinema. There was Becker and Renoir, of course, but the girl they pictured was the pre-war girl, not the girl of today. And what grace there is in these heroines, much more so here than in *Une femme coquette*. The sparseness of the artificial effect created by a superb piece of editing (Godard, who worked as a professional editor on other directors' films around 1956–7, does not make unmatched cuts unless they are intentional and, as here, knows how to edit within the rules of editing, something a Richard Quine or a Denys de la Patellière might well envy him for)<sup>5</sup> – this sparseness chimes in very well with the naturally artificial grace of these little flirts. As with Cocteau, in the highest artifice there is realism and, especially, poetry.

For the second time the pendulum had swung towards the commercial, and this – together with his work for a weekly paper (*Arts*, from 1957 to 1959)<sup>6</sup> which hardly sanctioned esotericism – helped him to clarify his thoughts: from then on the articles he published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* were both very comprehensible and very personal. The article devoted to *Bitter Victory* (*Cahiers* no. 79)<sup>7</sup> is without any doubt the finest evocation of the work of Nicholas Ray.

Then another complete change with *Charlotte et son Jules* (1958), Godard's best short film and one of the most personal ever made. Just a few set-ups in a single apartment, shot in one day for 550,000 old francs. No one has done better for less.

Charlotte gets out of her current lover's car (Gérard Blain) and goes up to her ex-lover's room (Jean-Paul Belmondo). He greets her with a display of just about every attitude a man can show towards a woman: wily, paternal,

condescending, he soon turns to pleading. Charlotte, who hasn't uttered a word, says to him, 'I forgot my toothbrush', and leaves.

No one before has articulated this comprehensive and dizzily spinning evolution of the ideas and feelings which are so much part of Godard, or in so concise a manner – twelve minutes, the time it takes to smoke a quarter of a cigar. We have here two remarkable actors, the artificial spontaneity which in Godard's previous film was that much more pronounced, and in particular, rounding off this astounding physical and moral whirligig, the hero's splendid soliloquy. With a comedy, Godard can express his own ideas through the medium of his characters. If these ideas seem likely to shock people, he gets round that by making the character articulating them appear comic. This is how in *Charlotte*, as in *A bout de souffle*, he can deal with the most serious problems which people have to face without losing his lightness of touch, and frequently finds an answer to them with exceptional elegance and understanding. What is so admirable is that his intellectuals manage to say very serious things so very naturally, without being pompous or boring. No one before Godard has been capable of giving concrete expression to a language which has always seemed very abstract – which accounts for our surprise and our laughter. As a film critic, Godard has a feeling for the verbal expression and likes to spin out his sentences, with a rhythm tuned to the easy pace of multiple clauses which allow only a moment or two for breath before their eight or ten syllable ending: a style which allows him to write a line, as an exercise, which carries us with no disruption or discontinuity from Père-Lachaise to Kilimanjaro, from Camus to Truffaut. This is the best possible dialogue, and for an actor the easiest, most natural and most fluent. Like all Godard films, *Charlotte* was post-synchronized; and since Belmondo was no longer available after the filming, Godard devised a way of dubbing his hero himself by carefully ensuring that he did not speak until a moment after Belmondo had opened his mouth. This has the effect of accentuating the element of fantasy in the text, while at the same time marking the gap between what the character says and what he is thinking. This character already shares some of his creator's characteristics – at once admiring, sceptical and disenchanted as far as women are concerned – thereby revealing in himself Godard's own double nature, a detachment that is both real and feigned. Like that of von Sternberg in *The Saga of Anatahan* or Cocteau in *Le Testament d'Orphée*, Godard's narration is superb: they are all directors who, by lending their own voice to the film, give it as it were a new physical rationale. The very soul of the director is heard in counterpoint. Godard's naturalness, at once nonchalant and resolute, as well as the way he has of lowering his voice for each effect, is testimony to a perfect harmony between film and film-maker, and testimony to his sincerity.

Audiences as well as nit-picking critics have cried horror in the face of so revolutionary a concept of film dialogue, a concept which also regener-

ates the art of cinema. On the same pretext of amateurism – a ludicrous notion given that the films are so dissimilar – both *Charlotte et son Jules* and *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* were turned down by the selection committee of the Tours festival. If *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick* was applauded when it was released, while its companion piece *Un témoin dans la ville*<sup>8</sup> was hissed down, *Charlotte et son Jules* was jeered by people who just a few minutes later were to applaud *L'Eau à la bouche*.<sup>9</sup> It's a pity that the film's technical flaws, even though turned to good effect, should cause such a stir in the audience; to like *Charlotte et son Jules* you don't need to know that Godard himself dubbed the film. In fact, this derision stems from the snobbishness of those critics and people in the audience who insist on letting everyone else know that they recognize the technical tricks, though what they ignore is that the voice-gap is so obvious it can only be intentional.

Also in 1958, Truffaut shot *Une histoire d'eau*, the story of two young people who flee the suburbs and their floods to discover Paris and love. Despite one or two amusing touches, the shots he took were uneditable. Truffaut handed over to Godard, who filmed some linking shots, cut it all together, wrote a commentary, and in the end saved the film. How? By accentuating the film's disjunctiveness so as to give it the style of a natural ballet. First by means of syncopated, chopped up editing – there was just not enough material – of the kind he admired so much in *The Wrong Man* (Hitchcock, 1956) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1954), which he used on his own account in *Une femme coquette*, and which he was subsequently to employ with devastating success; and secondly by means of the endlessly serpentine commentary, reminiscent of the immensely long sentences of his most recent critical articles. Even more than in *Charlotte*, the text overlays the image. Puns and word plays accumulate, to an extent that the audience loses its bearings, can't keep up with Godard's hallucinating improvisation, and can only pick up snatches here and there. We should not forget that Godard made these two films in the wake of his admiration for *The Quiet American* (Mankiewicz, 1957),<sup>10</sup> which partly inspired in him this renewal through dialogue and the penchant for constructing a film like a swirling current which ends in a fall.

The spirit of Resnais is here too, each gag arising out of a close relationship between shot, editing and commentary but with the additional qualities of grace, humour and insouciance. Out of an amiable, harmless little story Godard made a frenzied poem. This is one of the high peaks of the art of cinema, reaching on the level of film synthesis what in *Charlotte* Godard had reached only on the level of subject and dialogue.

Then, after several scripts written for other directors and a remarkable performance in *Le Signe du Lion* (Eric Rohmer, 1959), Godard made *A bout de souffle*.

*A bout de souffle* began as an outline written by Truffaut, which Truffaut himself and Molinaro wanted to adapt. Godard chose it . . . because he didn't like it. 'I think it's a good system,' Truffaut commented in *Radio-*

*Télévision-Cinéma*. 'Working freely on a project, but one to which you feel close enough to be drawn to it. This gives you enough distance to judge the work and cut down its weaknesses, and at the same time you're sensitized to it.' Godard originally wanted to make a film about death and heroes obsessed with death. But being too lazy to write a script before starting to shoot, he let himself be guided by inspiration, relying on just a few lines of direction. In fact, the theme was reduced to just the occasional, though brilliant, notation.

*A bout de souffle* was shot in four weeks (17 August–15 September 1959), on location (interiors and exteriors), without sound, in Paris and Marseille, and for 45 million old francs – the minimum possible when you consider that the producer had to pay a celebrated international star like Jean Seberg. The camera was almost always hand-held by the cameraman himself, at one moment hidden inside a hand-cart steered by Godard so as to get passers-by into the shot.

Michel Poiccard, anarchist car thief, kills the motorcycle cop who is chasing him. In Paris, he looks up his American girlfriend, Patricia Franchini, and becomes her lover again. He persuades her to leave for Italy with him. But the police discover the identity of the killer and track him down. Patricia gives Michel away and he is casually shot down by the police.

A perfect theme for a thriller. Godard originally wanted to make a commercial film within the rules of the genre. But in the end, partly out of laziness and partly because he likes to take risks, he decided to dispense with all the elements of the genre except plot and physical action. He was not trying to uncover the hidden soul of the genre's conventions, as did Hawks and all the great Americans and as he himself tried to do in *Tous les garçons s'appellent Patrick*. Godard preferred the straight French approach to the American double game. He is not discreet; he paints his characters' psychological quirks in black and white. This is no longer the uniquely interior depth much vaunted over the previous five years by the young absolutists of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, but a depth which is both interior and exterior, and by that token anti-commercial. What I mean is that Godard finds his expression in his dialogue as well, since *A bout de souffle* – like *Hiroshima* but on a more serious level – is a dialogue between two lovers a little lost amid the problems of their time. This ambivalence in *A bout de souffle* will ensure a twofold success with audiences: the Champs-Elysées snobs will be gratified in their own way, and the mass audiences who thrive on action and gags will be sufficiently entertained to forget about the occasionally difficult esoteric element in certain sequences. For audiences to like a film doesn't mean that they have to like it for the whole ninety minutes (producers afraid of upsetting audiences should never cut a few shots out of their films: they should either leave them as they are or remake them from scratch). Twenty or so strong elements are enough to keep audiences involved.

What's new about *A bout de souffle*? To begin with, the way the characters are conceived. Godard never uses a particularly precise line in the way he sketches his characters; instead, he follows – consciously – a series of contradictory directions. Godard is an instinctive creator, and rather than logic *per se* (which he was happy enough to follow in his first, tentative efforts, but which he is now too lazy to follow – and I don't think it interests him), he follows the logic of his instinct. He explains this in *Charlotte et son Jules*:

I seem to be saying something,  
But that's not so; but then that's not so either.  
From the mere fact that I say a phrase,  
There's necessarily a connection with what comes before it.  
Don't be bewildered,  
It's Cartesian logic.  
But yes,  
I'm deliberately speaking as in the theatre.

A film is not written or shot during the six months or so allotted to it, but during the thirty or forty years which precede its conception. The film-maker, as soon as he types out the first letter of his script on his typewriter, only needs to know how to let himself go, how to let himself get absorbed in a passive task. He only needs to be himself at each moment. This is why Godard doesn't always know why a certain character does this or that. But he only needs to think about it for a moment, and he always finds out why. Given a certain kind of behaviour, even contradictory behaviour, there's no doubt that one can always explain it. But with Godard it's different: everything comes together, chiefly because of the accumulation of little details, for the simple reason that Godard has thought of everything in a natural way, by standing in for his subject. The psychology – freer, invisible almost – is consequently more effective.

Our two heroes possess a moral attitude hitherto unknown in the cinema. The erosion of Christianity since the end of the last century – which Godard, being of Protestant origin, is very conscious of – has left people free to choose between the Christian concept of a shared human existence and the modern deification of the individual. Both notions have their good points, and our heroes oscillate between one and the other, feeling a little lost. This is why the film is stamped with the seal of the greatest of philosophical schools, the sophists.

*A bout de souffle* is an attempt to go beyond sophism; as with Euripides, to adapt sophism to reality, from which can emerge happiness. Belmondo had already said to Charlotte:

I'm not cross with you, yes I am cross with you,  
No, I'm not cross with you, or rather yes,  
I am cross with you. I don't know,

It's funny, I don't know.  
I'm cross with you for not being cross with you.

And Patricia says:

I don't know if I'm free because I'm unhappy, or if I'm unhappy because I'm free.

It's partly because she loves Michel that Patricia informs on him, and it's partly because of a liking for originality and for having the last word that Michel wants to give himself up to the police: the changing attitudes of our times can sometimes produce a complete inversion of conventional psychology, turning it into its exact opposite. One result of this perpetual to and fro movement is the lure of the *mise en scène*, commonly encountered in all great films since their authors are also their directors. Fascinated by their dizzy behaviour, our heroes detach themselves from their own selves and *play* with these selves to see what effect this will produce. In the last shot, by a supreme irony, as Michel dies he makes one of his favourite comic faces, to which Patricia responds. An ending which is at once optimistic and harrowing – harrowing because comedy intrudes into the heart of tragedy.

Critics have already pointed to the differences in the way the man and the woman behave; differences which were admirably highlighted by Jean Domarchi's article in last month's issue.<sup>11</sup> Patricia is a little American intellectual who doesn't have much idea of what she wants and who ends up by informing against the man she loves. Like Charlotte, she is a much less sympathetic personality than the man, who is sparkling, quick-witted and with an astonishing lucidity in among a fair amount of tomfoolery. Should we see a misogynist in Godard? No, because this misogyny is external, confined by the subject matter. It reflects the contradiction which is at the root of a man's real love for a woman – an admiration combined with a certain amused contempt for the kind which, in the encounter of reason and taste, prefers man to woman. Those who say they want their films to be 'the work of a man who loves women, who says so, and who proves it' are in fact misogynists, because they tip the balance in favour of women in the way they choose their subject, and because they hire the country's most attractive actresses and then don't direct them or direct them badly: they don't know how to reveal their qualities. Once again this alternation between what one is and what one would like to be: 'I am not what I am', as Shakespeare said. Whereas the association of Godard and Seberg proved to be a magnificent one, doubtless because there is in Seberg that dialectic to which Godard is so drawn. By affecting a masculine appearance in the way she lives and with her boyish hairstyle, she is all the more feminine. It's well known, of course, that a woman is much sexier in trousers and with her hair cut short, since this lets her purge her femininity of its superficial aspects.

But one's respect for Patricia increases when she telephones the police. This is an act of courage. She resolves in the end to extricate herself from the awful quagmire in which she is trapped. But like all acts of courage it is a facile solution, and Michel bitterly reproaches her for it. He takes full responsibility for what he is; he plays the game, doesn't like Faulkner or half measures, and goes right to the heart of his constant dilemma. But he plays the game too well: his death is the natural sanction demanded at one and the same time by logic, by the audience and by morality. He has gone too far, wanting to set himself apart from the world and its objects in order to dominate them.

It's here that we see how Godard, while literally sticking close to his hero, at the same time very slightly detaches himself, thanks to his other personality, that of the objective, pitiless, entomological film-maker. Godard both is and is not Michel, being neither a killer nor dead – quite the opposite in fact. Why this slight superiority of the author over his character, which bothers me a little? Because Michel is only Godard's virtual double. He makes real what Godard thinks. A good illustration of this difference is provided by the scene where Michel goes out into the Paris streets and lifts up women's skirts. *A bout de souffle* has been criticized for having an essentially psychoanalytical rationale. Certainly it's with the cinema that psychoanalysis begins or ends; but when the film-maker is aware of the idiosyncrasies of his mind and of their vanity, they can become a source of beauty. *A bout de souffle* is an attempt at liberation through film: Godard is not – is no longer – Michel because he made *A bout de souffle* and Michel did not.

We may note that the form of the film wholly reflects the behaviour of its hero, and indeed of the heroine. Better, she justifies this behaviour. Michel, and Patricia even more so, are overtaken by the disordered times we live in, the continual moral and physical changes and developments that are uniquely of our era. They are victims of this disorder, and the film is therefore a point of view on disorder, both within and without. Like *Hiroshima* and *Les 400 coups*, it is an attempt – more or less successful – to overcome this disorder: less successful, as it happens, since if it were successful the disorder would no longer exist. To make a film on disorder whose structure is not itself imbued with disorder seems to me the surest condemnation of that film. What I admire in *Les 400 coups* is that throughout the film, thanks to Truffaut's detachment and, particularly in the final sequence, to the harmonious working out of the plot, disorder is resolved by order; and also that Truffaut is here at one and the same time a young man and an old man of seventy. Yet there is a little more natural mischief in this than openness; the artist is only one person at the time he is making the film, and any development at the centre of the work is necessarily an assumed one, either in its origin or in its conclusion. Godard's superiority to Truffaut, then, lies in the fact that where Truffaut applies himself to the task of making our own civilization fit a classical

framework, Godard – more honestly – seeks a rationale for our age from within itself.

In art, according to some people, value is order and disorder is its opposite. I don't agree, since the essence of art is that it has no laws; even public esteem is a myth which it is sometimes convenient to scotch. As always with Godard, the *mise en scène* creates this image of disorder in two different voices: first, by naturalness, freedom, the risks of invention. Godard takes from life everything he finds there, without selecting; or, more precisely, he selects everything he sees and sees only what he wants to see. He omits nothing, and tries simply to reveal the meaning of everything he sees and everything that goes through his head. Continuous, natural breaks in tone create this image of disorder. And one shouldn't be at all surprised if, during a love scene, there is a sudden transition from Faulkner to Jean de Létraz.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, when Godard makes a play on words, it's either a good one or a very bad one, in which case we laugh at his intentional mediocrity. What Godard reveals is the profound unity which comes out of this disorder, this permanent external diversity. It's been said that the film is not structured and that neither it nor its characters evolve, except in the last quarter of an hour and then only slightly. But that's because Godard is against the idea of evolution, just like Resnais, who reaches the same conclusion by the totally different method of a work which is highly structured. This notion is in the air: the camera is a mirror taken along a road, but there is no road left. Like *Hiroshima*, *A bout de souffle* could have lasted two hours, and it did last effectively two hours on the first cut. The remarkable *Time Without Pity* (Joseph Losey, 1957) shows evidence of a very precise construction and of a constant forward movement, but how arbitrary this seems. Godard, on the other hand, follows a higher order, that of nature, the order in which things appear to his eye and his mind. As he said above: 'From the mere fact that I say a phrase, there's necessarily a connection with what comes before it.'

The film is a series of sketches, interludes which are at first sight unconnected, like the interview with the writer. But the mere fact that they exist gives these episodes a profound relationship with one another, as with all life's phenomena. The interview with Parvulesco sets out clearly the main problems our lovers have to solve. Like *Astrophel and Stella* (Sir Philip Sidney, 1581), *A bout de souffle* is formed out of little separate circles which, by the end of the sequence or the sonnet, turn out to be linked by an identical cone at a common point – Stella in Sidney, Patricia or something else in Godard.

The nature of the effect, so long as there is an effect in the shot, is immaterial. This is what realism is about. Hence the preponderance of little ideas, gags. Godard has been taken to task for his accumulation of private jokes which are only understood by cinephiles or Parisians. They won't be understood by a general audience, but that won't bother them because with a few exceptions they won't notice them. It's true that they

will miss a lot. But the fact is that many great works of art are by nature esoteric, starting with Aristophanes, who is unintelligible without footnotes. A work has a greater chance of attaining immortality the more precise and comprehensive its definition of a time and place. Even the classical directors indulged in these private jokes (Griffith as much as Autant-Lara), and we usually miss them because they no longer mean anything to us. The scene where Michel looks at Patricia through a rolled up poster and kisses her is a homage to an unreleased film by a minor American director. It's not necessary to know the film to enjoy the effect, though it's less successful than in the original.

Godard can be more legitimately taken to task for the ideas that don't work. Lighting the lamps on the Champs-Elysées has no point at all.

And what purpose is served by the titles which loudly proclaim the fundamental differences between the French language and the American language, this Apollinaire film with dialogue by Boetticher, the absence of credits? Original, amusing, but no more than that.

This is not too irritating, though, because one detail follows fast on another and there is no time to notice that one of them doesn't work.

Whereas in a Doniol-Valcroze or a Chabrol film (*A bout de souffle*, incidentally, is the best contribution to cinema by a man in tortoise-shell spectacles) one notices how much less frequent, and less good, the effects are.

What I've just said is incorrect, and I apologize for it. Because the unique thing about Godard is that everything you can say about him will always be right (at the same time as doing what he says, he also sticks to his principle: 'I always do the opposite of what I say,' he admitted to Michel Leblanc in the December 1959 issue of *L'Etrave*). No critical comment on Godard can be wrong, but it will always accumulate errors of omission, for which I will be fiercely taken to task by Godard. For film truth, as a reflection of life, is ambiguous, in contrast to the truth of words. In *L'Express* (23 December 1959), Godard let us into his secret: 'I must admit, I have a certain difficulty with writing. I write: "It's a nice day. The train enters the station," and I spend hours asking myself why I couldn't just as well have written the opposite: "The train enters the station. It's a nice day" or "It's raining". With films, it's easier. Simultaneously it's a nice day and the train enters the station. There's an inevitability about it. That's where you have to go.'

Which explains both the appeal of criticism for Godard and his aversion to it, as something which allows him to clarify the disorder he perceives. Periods of disorder and advance, like the eighteenth century and the twentieth century, as opposed to periods of greater stability and creation, like the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, in which certain people of genius stand out, witness the triumph of self-reflexion, the striving towards synthesis (hence the multiple references in *A bout de souffle* to painting, cinema and literature). These periods are essentially marked by the work of critics (neither Racine nor Molière really practised criticism, as opposed to Voltaire and Diderot who did little else) with a natural gift

for synthesis. And to talk of synthesis is to talk of the considerable importance of editing. Today we have a whole range of creator-critics and editors and no one has a clear lead over the others. Of the new generation, there is no single name which *can* be separated from the rest. If *A bout de souffle* is better than *Hiroshima*, that is because Godard had seen and written about *Hiroshima* before he started his own film; not because Godard is better than Resnais. So if you want to become very famous today, don't go into the creative arts, go into politics. The young French cinema is the work of very different personalities, but it is also partly a collective work. There are some who go a little further, others who go a little less far; the difference is quantitative.

But I'm wrong about this, since Godard achieves this *tour de force* of being, on his own terms, both very like Rossellini, as we have seen, and not like Rossellini at all. Which is why one often thinks of Resnais. Godard observes reality scrupulously, while at the same time he tries to reconstitute it by means of flagrant artifice. All new directors, from fear of the risks of film-making, have a tendency to plan their films carefully and to make grand stylistic flourishes. In *Charlotte et son Jules*, for instance, we saw decor being used as scientifically as in a Lang film. This explains the editing style of *A bout de souffle*, where flash shots are skilfully interwoven with very long takes. Just as the characters' behaviour reflects a series of false moral connections, the film itself is a suite of false connections. Only how beautiful, how delightful these false connections are! In fact, though, this is precisely what is least new in the film: the simple and systematic expression of the theme by means of construction, editing and choice of angles. There's nothing especially clever about tilting the camera every time a character is prostrate. Aldrich, Berthomieu<sup>13</sup> and Clément have done it all their lives, and it rarely works. Nevertheless, there is method in it when, in the same travelling shot, we jump from Seberg and Belmondo on the Champs-Elysées to Belmondo and Seberg on the same Champs-Elysées passing by the shadows of De Gaulle and Eisenhower in procession. The implication is that the only thing that matters is oneself, not the external political and social world – and by trimming the shots in which the generals appear the censors have reduced them to mere entities, ridiculous puppets. The implication also is that what will remain of our age is *A bout de souffle*, and not De Gaulle or Eisenhower, like all statesmen pitiful if inevitable tinpot figures. There is method also when, in a very different way from *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1957) and *Les Cousins* (Chabrol, 1958), the great Coutard's camera rolls and rolls and rolls, always in tempo with the mind of the protagonist. This has a precise meaning. It is a very classical expression of modern behaviour.

But what gives *A bout de souffle* a slight superiority over that other formal film, *Hiroshima*, is that with Godard spontaneity transcends form (which completes and consolidates it), whereas with Resnais spontaneity is involved only in the direction of the actors. Another aspect of Godard's superiority is that he is dealing with something that is concrete, whereas

recollection, forgetting, memory, time are not concrete things; they are things which have no existence, and like Christian doctrine or communism are not subjects serious enough to be treated by a language as profound as that of the screen. The fact that *Hiroshima* is not suited to a *concrete* evocation of these problems is nevertheless fascinating, in that it helps to give expression to something which is very different.

Godard could not perhaps steel himself to represent the disorder of our times in a clear-cut way or head-on; and so relied on the facility of technique to help him out. There is no conflict between point of view and what is shown, as there is with Truffaut; but that may be the price you pay for perfect sincerity. Although in my view *A bout de souffle* would have been no less inspired if it had been deprived of this artifice.

In fact, I think *Hiroshima* proved that it was necessary to resort to certain devices in order to reproduce a vision of the contemporary world, where both physically and morally our field of vision is conditioned by a great deal of artifice. Cinema which looks at the world from above ends up by being obsolete. Where Resnais half succeeds, and his imitators – fashion-followers like Pollet (the excellent *La Ligne de mire*, 1959), unthinking directors like Hanoun (*Le Huitième jour*, 1959) or Molinaro (*Une Fille pour l'été*, 1959) – fail lamentably, Godard succeeds in getting us to accept that this modern universe, as metallic and threatening as science-fiction, superbly represented by Jean Seberg (who may be less 'alive' than she is in Preminger's films but is more lunar in the cracked surface of her being), is a universe of wonderment and great beauty. Godard is a man who lives with the times, as is demonstrated by the respect he has for those emblems of a specifically modern civilization such as cars or the comic-strips of *France-Soir*.<sup>14</sup> The real civilization of our times is not that reactionary civilization of the right, incarnated by *L'Express*<sup>15</sup> or the plays of Sartre and characterized by its denial of what is and by its morose intellectualism; the real civilization is the revolutionary civilization of the left, as represented by, among other things, those celebrated comic-strips.

This is why it would be wrong to compare Godard with Rousseau on the theory that they are the greatest French-Swiss artists. If Jean-Jacques offers us nature in opposition to the artefact, Jean-Luc reclaims modern civilization, the city and the artefact, with a hundred per cent interest. Following the American tradition (in the best sense of that phrase) of Whitman, Sandburg, Vidor and even Hawks, he accomplishes art's highest mission: he reconciles man with his own time, with the world which so many constipated pen-pushers – who are frequently not best placed to judge, knowing nothing else – take for a world in crisis, a world which crucifies man. As if man were no longer capable of self-revelation in a world which seems to torment him. For Godard, the twentieth century is not an enormous affront to the mind of the creator; it is enough to know how to see and admire. The strength and beauty of his *mise en scène*, whose realization can offer no other image than that of serenity and optimism, enables us to discover the profound grace of a world which at

first sight seems terrifying; and it does this through a poetry of false connections and of doom.

Translated by David Wilson

## Notes

- 1 The reference is to anthropologist-film-maker Jean Rouch's first feature-length film, *Moi, un Noir* (1957). Until 1960 and *Chronique d'un été*, which focussed on a group of Parisians, Rouch's work had been wholly concerned with Black Africa. For details of Rouch's work, see Mick Eaton, *Anthropology-Reality-Cinema: The Films of Jean Rouch*, London, British Film Institute, 1979.
- 2 'Joseph Mankiewicz', *Gazette du Cinéma* 2, June 1950, translated in *Godard on Godard*, pp. 13–16. Other Godard articles from the *Gazette* also appear in this book.
- 3 'Défense et illustration du découpage classique', *Cahiers* 15, September 1952, translated as 'Defence and Illustration of Classical Construction' in *Godard on Godard*, pp. 26–30.
- 4 Godard's contributions to *Cahiers* are translated in *Godard on Godard*: see Appendix 2, Volume 1, and Appendix 2, this volume.
- 5 Richard Quine, mainstream American film director, b. 1920, active especially in the 1950s and 1960s; Quine's *Pushover* (1954) has been taken to be an influence on Godard's *A bout de souffle* (see interview with Godard translated in *Godard on Godard*, p. 175). Denys de la Patellière, French mainstream director, b. 1921, feature films since 1955.
- 6 Godard's contributions to *Arts* are translated in *Godard on Godard*.
- 7 'Au-delà des étoiles', *Cahiers* 79, January 1958, translated as 'Beyond the Stars' in *Godard on Godard* and reprinted in Volume 1, Ch. 14.
- 8 Directed by Edouard Molinaro, 1959, with Lino Ventura.
- 9 Directed by Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, 1960.
- 10 Godard's review of *The Quiet American* appeared in *Arts* 679, 22 July 1958, translated in *Godard on Godard*, pp. 81–4.
- 11 Jean Domarchi, 'Peines d'amour perdues', *Cahiers* 105, March 1960.
- 12 Jean de Létraz, popular French comic playwright.
- 13 André de Berthomieu, 1903–60, prolific commercial French film director.
- 14 *France-Soir*, Paris evening newspaper.
- 15 *L'Express*, French liberal weekly news magazine, modelled on *Time* and *Newsweek*.

('Le plus pur regard', *Cahiers du Cinéma* 108, June 1960)

Generally speaking, Chabrol's latest film has had a mixed reception from the critics to say the least. While few may have hated it outright it is interesting to note that those who liked either the whole film or parts of it – from, say, Pierre Marcabru to René Cortade and Claude Choublier – were hard put to find the easy (or uneasy) justifications one might have expected. So much so that one has to ask if *Les Bonnes femmes* has been properly understood. It's as if those who did recognize it as Chabrol's best film, the one in which he himself goes 'to the limit' (Choublier), were themselves unable to carry their arguments through to the end. It's a pity for instance that Pierre Marcabru, whose reservations outweigh his praise by far, failed to work his analysis out fully: each of his statements about the film ultimately comes out right or wrong depending on whether it is applied to one element or the film as a whole; each provides ammunition for condemning the film, whereas were it to be developed and related back to the particular moment it characterizes, it might actually pass to the pro side. These statements set the tone which has marked virtually the whole critical response to the film. If I may quote briefly: 'If I weren't afraid of raising a smile I would say that the characters lack a soul. . . . There's a certain way of looking down on them from above, a fear of being compromised with them, a way of keeping a distance, a guardedness. . . . After *Le Beau Serge* one had hopes of better things. This is a director who refuses to show his hand. And he doesn't have much to say.' But the truth is not so simple, as we shall see.

It will by now be clear, I think, that I regard Chabrol's last film as not just his masterpiece, but the high point of the new French cinema as a whole. I have no wish to offend the keenest supporters of *A bout de souffle* – I flatter myself I can count myself among them – but is Godard's film really the crowning point of the new wave, as people have claimed? It is certainly an *auteur* film, but then is it really those film-makers who are *auteurs* first and foremost that take a language forward? I would say rather