



Véronique à vélo by Berny Hi and Chystene Ells.

IN THE SPIRIT OF JLG: NOTES ON THE FILMPOOL GODARD PROJECT

By Christina Stojanova

The cinema is not an art which films life: the cinema is something between art and life. Unlike painting and literature, the cinema both gives to life and takes from it, and I try to render this concept in my films. Literature and painting both exist as art from the very start; the cinema doesn't.

Jean-Luc Godard

Empires crumble, my friend, republics founder and fools survive.

Bande à part / Band of Outsiders (1964)

The Regina-wide celebrations of Jean-Luc Godard's 80th birthday last year were launched by the conference *Sonimage: The Legacies of Jean-Luc Godard*, organized by and held at the University of Regina (Sept. 16-18, 2010), and went through to the end of December, featuring various related festivities. Indeed, Regina artistic intelligentsia should congratulate itself on the tenacity with which each and every of these multidisciplinary projects – involving dance, photography, installation art, discussions – flaunted its inspired take on the spirit and letter of JLG's legacy. The unequivocal crown jewel of this unique undertaking is – the Filmpool International Godard Project, which resulted in thirteen short films made by JLG film buffs from around the world.

Godard and New Media

Indeed, Godard is one of the few film masters whose unique film style is so tempting – and readily yielding – to witty recreations, imitations, parodies, and pastiches. It seems that generations of film buffs cannot have enough of his early, mostly black and white films – eleven features and ten shorts made between 1955 and 1966. Understandably, the ones associated with the so-called anarchic period of the French New Wave – from *À bout de souffle / Breathless* (1960) to *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965) and *Masculin Féminin* (1966), before Godard seriously embarked on his ‘revolutionary’ and politically conscious phase with *Made in USA* (1966) – have invigorated most of the Godard Project participants. Yet the three shorts, inspired by his revolutionary films, represent witty – albeit uneven – tributes to the revolutionary films Godard produced under the auspices of Dziga Vertov Groupe between 1970 and 1972, which I have described elsewhere as “amongst the most radical attempts to problematize not only the aesthetic and ideological aspects of the interaction between image, sound and text, but also the technology behind them.”¹

Action (1.08) by Slovakian Jan Adamove, for example, could be traced to *Tout va bien* (1972), where the expensive broadcast equipment in the Parisian studio of the American network Jane Fonda’s character works for, is shown as intellectually stifling as the brightly coloured TV studio, cluttered with expensive electronic equipment, where Adamove’s audio-visual experiment is shot. The creative impotence of contemporary media is emphasized by the audio track, which consists only of edited moments of silence and gasps of the three participants – one man and two women – whose body language further reveals infinite boredom and intellectual helplessness.

ECM 55B (5.27) by the Saskatoon filmmaker Ian Campbell delves further in the absurdities of contemporary technology and its formidable power to turn humans in its mere accessories. It is a meta-cinematic commendation of Sony’s eponymous multipurpose mic by a Godard look-alike, shot in black and white from a moving camera while roaming through the mysterious-looking streets of Saskatoon and extolling enthusiastically on equipment that allow for making of low-budget films, like Godard’s most recent, *Film Socialisme* (2010), for example.

Rant (1.30) by Winnipegger Andreas M. Goldfuss, on the other hand, is only tenuously related to the project by way of linking this all-purpose black and white sketch – which ironizes the clash between self-important (political?) orators

and their audiences, whose off-screen jeers dominate the sound track – to Godardian experiments in shocking discrepancies between sound and image.

Interlude: Decoupage

For the most part, Godard’s early film has been described recently by Michael Marie (*The French New Wave: An Aesthetic School*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2002) and Ginette Vincendau (*The French New Wave: Critical Landmarks*, BFI, 2009) as an *avant la lettre* exercise in post-modern genre collage and thematic intertextuality, steeped in aesthetic eclecticism. A tendency shared by his closest rival, Francois Truffaut, and very well exposed through decoupage in the eponymous short by Halifax director Claire Hodge *Decoupage* (5’15’)². Although the rationale for its inclusion in the Godard Project remains ambiguous – it is the only one unrelated to Godard – it ‘decoupages’ analytically a scene from Truffaut’s 1966 cult homage to American gangster genre, *Tirez sur le pianiste / Shoot the Piano Player*. By alternating images of two characters moving alternatively backward or forward on a loop, first within twelve and then within six frames of a split screen, the filmmaker does a good job highlighting the accidental, even chaotic nature of both narrative and style, also typical of Godard’s contemporaneous oeuvre.

Love and Sex According to Godard

Yet Godard’s substantial contribution from the period is not only in the sphere of cinematic artistry but also in his bold plunge into the uncharted territory of the radical psychological and social changes, brought on by growing consumerism and the overall Americanization of French society and culture, and the ensuing crisis in human relations. Godard – like his New Wave colleagues Truffaut and Rohmer – is therefore intently interested in the looming gender clash, whose early signs he captures in the endemic estrangement, confused communication and inevitable loneliness that plague his romantic couples, and captured with dramatic eloquence by his 1963 masterpiece *Le mépris/Contempt. Breathless* (1.40’) by the Bulgarian-Canadian artist Bilian Velkova (Saskatoon), *La manière que nous disons au revoir / The Way We Say Good-bye* (9.18’) by Californien filmmaker Rory Dean Smith and the Spanish entry *Numen* (6.56’) by Alba Curos are steeped in the sexual tension and transcendental longings that have made

1 Christina Stojanova, “Jean-Luc Godard and Ludwig Wittgenstein in New Contexts,” in *The Legacies of Jean-Luc Godard*, edited by Douglas Morrey, Christina Stojanova and Nicole Cote (WLUP, forthcoming).

2 A term, closely associated with the French New Wave filmmaking practice, coined by Andre Bazin and explained by Noel Burch in his *Theory of Film Practice* (Princeton UP, 1981) as “the practical breakdown of the film’s construction into separate shots/sequences” -- pre- or postproduction.

Contempt— along with its antecedents *Breathless* (1960), *Une femme est une femme/ Woman Is a Woman* (1961), and especially *Vivre Sa Vie/ My Life to Live* (1962) — a lasting symbol of the confused modern sensuality. *Breathless* is a visual impromptu on Serge Gainsbourg and Anna Karina haunting duet *Ne dis rien* from 1967, revealing via changes in colour regime the overwhelming power of a fleeting exchange of glances between a boy and a girl, riding on the opposite stairs of metro escalators.

A curious attempt at balancing out Godard's intense heterosexual romances, *La manière . . .* is a pastiche with a homosexual bend, inspired by the botched relationships and visual style of — among others — Godard's *Bande à part / Band of Outsiders* (1964). It tells the story of two men, living together as roommates, who have come to the critical juncture when they should either admit their homosexual attraction or part. As it happens, the underemployed artist-photographer Eddie is quite comfortable with his sexuality, while Jerrie, the down-to-earth breadwinner, lives in denial, nursing memories of his previous girlfriend Becky. It is not difficult to discern here allusions to the extant potential for such a development in the complicated emotional relations between Franz, Arthur and Odile, the famous trio from *Bande à part*, were it not for its definitive finale, which leaves Arthur dead during the aborted robbery of Odile's aunt money. As for Franz and Odile, they disappear with the money in question on a phantasmagorical trip as Godard's unreliable voice over narration reports on a backdrop of exotic still images.

In any case, Rory Dean's tribute to Godard does an excellent job in emulating Raoul Coutard's signature camera angles from behind the characters, indoor panoramas and plain-air portraits, like the ones framing a beautiful girl on the beach through the lens of Eddie's camera. What makes this film truly Godardian, however, is the postproduction intervention in its black and white colour regime (amounting to what the director calls a "whimsical palate") and in its sound design. It is its dubbing in formal French, articulated with deliberate indifference which, when juxtaposed with its otherwise simple narrative, creates a third meaning of unexpected existential dimensions and psychological sophistication.

Godard and the Feminine Mystique

Numen, or divine intervention as its title translates, is one of the few films in the project without direct links to Godard's oeuvre. And yet its visually elaborate, black and white style and essayist ambiguity point to one of the prominent motifs in the early Godard poetic: the capricious yet inseparable

nature of love and art, implied here by an *image a clef*: a Zoetrope device, featuring a jumping clown on a string and set in motion by a gorgeous young woman, wearing an iconic little black dress. Her face soon emerges as a superimposed apparition on a glass wall, as if summoned by the brush strokes of a middle-aged artist. The rest of the film shows the artist pursuing his muse — or his elusive love — through a maze of streets, iron grids, and even more walls, only to see her drifting further away. And when he is about to give up, she reappears again superimposed on the glass wall of his longing mind.

Unlike the muses of Truffaut, Rohmer, and Chabrol, Godard's girls have shown a distinct propensity of



From the film *Breathless* by Bilian Velkova.

becoming cultural – and fashion – icons. The disappearance of Marie-Christine Barrault from public imagination could be understood in light of what Alan A. Stone writes in his portrait of the director, republished on the occasion of his death last year. “Rohmer’s actresses,” he says, “are never larger than the women they portray.”¹ While the obliteration of Stephane Audran’s name from the roster of New Wave muses could be explained with her dramatic divorce from Claude Chabrol, who sustained her star reputation, it is much more difficult to explain Jean Moreau’s sinking into oblivion. Her fame as Truffaut’s greatest muse at the time rivalled and even surpassed that of Anna Karina, Godard’s muse and wife from 1961 to 1967. But then no New Wave actress is remembered for her impeccable taste in casual clothes and shoes, including the famous “little black dresses,” as Karina or Jean Seberg are, maybe because elegance is just another attempt at fulfilling their ineffable longing for harmony and beauty.

This important aspect of Godardian feminine dominates the short *Ecole des filles / School for Girls* (3’) and *A Band Apart* (4’). Shot by Jeannie Mah, one of the most ardent Godardian fans in Regina, and inspirational god-mother of the entire Regina Godard season, *Ecole* never shows the face of its heroine, but only her long shapely legs – which we assume belong to Mah’s credited co-author, Cindy Richmond. By just prancing about or walking up and down a staircase in an unnamed location (which insiders would easily identify as the Filmpool’s very own staircase), she showcases various types and colours of beautiful shoes – from casuals to a-la garçon to sandals to ballroom ones. Mah’s *pars pro toto* type of artistic approach is an ingenious way of surmising her reverence to Godardian elegance on a

¹ *Boston Review*, at <http://bostonreview.net/BR24.3/stone.html>

shoe string budget. The director of *A Band Apart* – yet another tribute to Godard’s 1964 cult *Bande à part* – hails from New York, which features prominently in his black and white film. The famous Madison dance Odile, Franz and Arthur perform at a pub is replicated with gusto here by three contemporary lookalikes, who also dabble as models for a wide variety of elegant casual clothes. Even without the deadpan irony of Godard’s voiceover commentary, the dancing trio mounts a highly entertaining show on various landmark locations throughout New York – at the Flee Market Cafe, at a metro station, in the yard of Lincoln centre – thus offering a playfully delightful, truly Godardian take on the film’s *joie du vivre*. Something Godard would condemn only three years later in his vehemently anti-consumerist *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her / 2 or 3 Things I Know About Her* (1967), where Marina Vlady’s character – an intelligent woman and caring mother – prostitutes herself to be able to afford beautiful clothes. That is why when Arthur’s lookalike takes off Odile’s trademark Fedora to collect some cash from bystanders at the shooting site, one is tempted to paraphrase Mr. Segalet’s infamous remark, made at the beginning of the original Madison dance scene. Indeed, ideologies crumble, economies founder, and only films that celebrate life survive.

Les état des choses hétérosexuelle according to Godard and Saul

The participants in the Godard Project have rightfully grasped the fact that Godard’s complex female characters were the first to intuit the benefits but also the disadvantages of dismantling traditional gender roles, and the ensuing responsibilities they would have to shoulder for the social and emotional survival of

heterosexual coupledness. There is something irresistibly innocent, yet rife with melancholic longing and existential angst in these heroines, sharply contrasted with the boyish naiveté of their charmingly immature partners—elusive and shrewd, fragile and resilient, sexually tempting and intellectually provocative. Godard’s heroines linger much longer in the viewer’s mind than their men, still stuck in their old world fantasies.

Although related mostly to the statuesque figure and sad eyes of Anna Karina – the star of six out of his ten early features – Godard’s unique take on modern femininity radically subverts the coetaneous canon – especially the Hollywood one – by introducing Jean Seberg as the tom-boyish *femme fatale* (*Breathless*) and Brigitte Bardot as an equally reluctant sex symbol (*Contempt*). It is probably the much lesser known, but exquisitely magnetic Anne Collette, who articulated Godardian vision of the new woman in the famous shorts *Charlotte et Véronique, ou Tous les garçons s’appellent Patrick* (1955) and *Charlotte et son Jules* (1960), where she initiates the archetype of the cool (post) modern seductress, whose mind and perennial smile are equally *fatale* for her infantile peers of the opposite sex. It is probably the quite common social and emotional gap between the intellectual, but lonely Charlotte, and the charming, but irresponsible Patrick that has attracted Gerald Saul (Regina) to pay homage to Godard’s famous short.

Tout les garçons s’appellent William / All Boys are Called William stands out thanks mostly to its *clin d’œil* approach to the world of Godard, thrown in high relief by Saul’s signature deadpan humour. By pushing the limits of self-reflexivity *ad absurdum* – Saul re-acts Godard’s original short *Tous les garçons s’appellent Patrick* to accommodate



Vivre Sa Vie by Jean-Luc Godard (1962).

his nine-year-old son William as the title character – the film makes a startling revelation about the current *état des choses* of heterosexual relations. Like his prototype Patrick (Jean-Claude Brialy), William idles around, trying to make the acquaintance of Charlotte, a nine-year-old version of the original one, whom he chances upon on the terrace of U of R’s Education building (and not, as Godard’s short has it, on a Jardin du Luxembourg terrace in Paris). Along with following almost verbatim Godard’s narrative development and mise-en-scene with its black and white colour regime, the film pays meticulous attention to its dialogue. Translated from the original French, it is spoken in English and re-translated back into French for

the subtitles, which in itself is yet another source of comic discrepancy. After having exhausted his arsenal of platitudes about Charlotte’s beautiful eyes, the colour of her coat and such, William (William Bessai-Saul) finally succeeds in wooing Charlotte (Teagan Kaldor-Mair) away from reading a monograph on Orson Welles, but not before she delivers her long, feminist-inspired monologue. Contrary to the overly sexualized claims of the “bourgeois misogynist Freud,” Charlotte explains her change of heart by referring to the “seminal text by Laura Mulvey on Visual Pleasures,” according to which women should counter the dangers of becoming “objects of the gaze, symptomatic of heterosexuality in crisis” by returning that gaze. Far from being perturbed

by this intellectual out pour, however, William interjects with another battery of well-worn *ancien* phrases like “all girls say that,” “I have not picked up a girl in nine years” (sic) and “what about an ice-cream.” His outdated strategy seems to work quite well in the situation at hand as we watch the two of them disappearing together towards the ice-cream joint under the playful sounds of Beethoven’s *Rondo a Capriccio*, delivered – in a much lighter manner than the uncredited pianist featured in Godard’s original – by the U of R Department of Cinema’s very own Erik Sirke. Thus by seriously blurring the boundaries between Godardian pastiche, intellectual satire and self-irony, *Tout les garçons* delicately suggest that – in art as well as in life

– plus ça change, the more things stay the same.

A Woman On Her Own

With *Vivre ma vie* (4'), Dave Turcotte from Saskatoon deconstructs Godard's 1962 original *Vivre sa vie* not only by replacing *sa* with *ma* and thus emphasizing the agency of his heroine *vis-a-vis* Karina/ Nana's existential defeatism. He features her as a wholesome and self-sufficient young woman on the backdrop of flowers and vegetable gardens in bloom, thus mitigating the dramatic tension of her monologue. And reminding us, by way of contrast, about Nana's entrapment within ugly urban landmarks like that infamous whitewashed wall, occupying the whole screen...

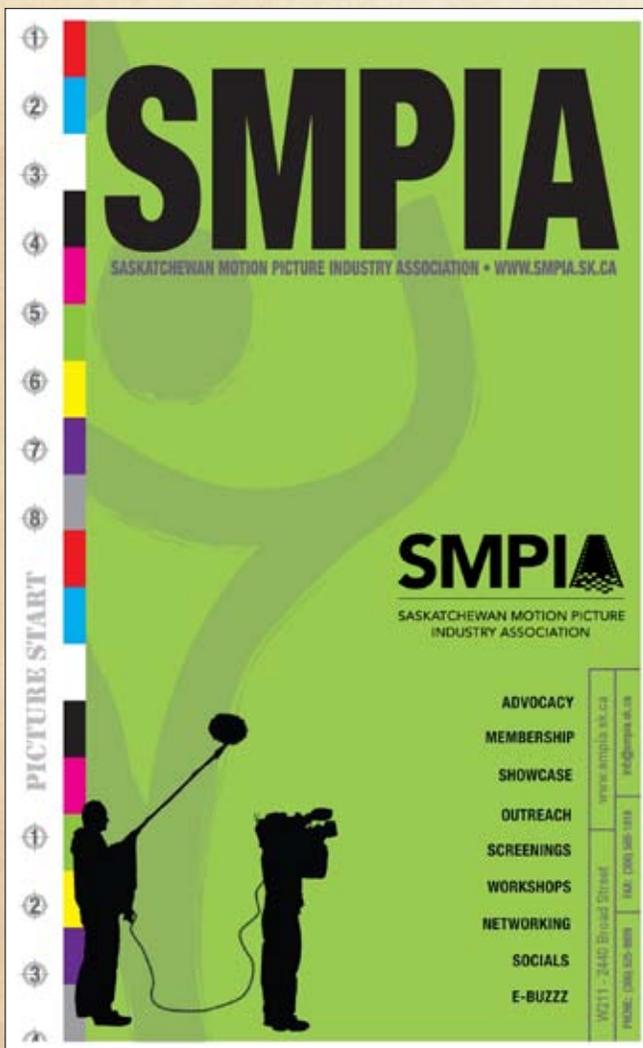
The film *Véronique à vélo* (10') by Chrystene Ells and Berny Hi (Regina) opens with its eponymous heroine growing restless and peeking every so often out of her

romantic arbour, tucked under a lace-like cascade of leaves, and under the sounds of Debussy's *Clair de lune*. She is anxiously anticipating, as the female French voiceover and the English subtitles diligently inform us, a meeting with a certain Richard, who has given her a pair of earrings, which unfortunately do not go well with any of her clothes. In tune with Godardian concept of beauty, Elizabeth Malnyk's Véronique is statuesque, almost translucent, and obviously dresses well so it is a pleasure to watch her trying on piece after piece – including a Fedora hat – from her diverse wardrobe. Unable to find the right match for the earrings, and disappointed with Richard's failure to show up, Véronique gets on her bike and heads off towards Wascana Lake to throw the earrings out as in the meantime she has also decided she does not love Richard anymore.

What follows is one of the most poetic rides through Regina streets and parks ever seen on film, exquisitely revealing what the French Impressionists call the city's "visual rhythm," based on the heroine's emotions, emphasizing its "mystical, photogenic aspect," which "gives us access to a realm beyond our everyday experience."¹ On her way, Véronique first meets Hal the Clown, flying his balloons against a dull brick wall to no cheerful avail. Later she chances upon yet another, considerably more upbeat, surrealist encounter, with four female dancers, dressed in black, who make their way in and out of the frame following a rhythm, vaguely remindful of the Madison dance in *Bande à part*. The second meeting with the dancers is of particular interest here as it brings together in a sumptuous whole all styles that have influenced the filmmakers thus far. Véronique, on her bike, occupies the lower right corner of the frame, drenched in the crispy, early autumn light so typical of Claude Monet's painting. Behind her, in the middle ground, a wooden bridge over the Wascana Lake is seen, which the dancers mount performing their absurdly ritualistic dance, while Véronique turns to the camera with a smile and a wink in a truly Godardian manner. The film ends with a close up of Véronique on her bike, still wearing the earrings.

Like *Je rêve de Paris / I Dream of Paris* (4') by Regina filmmaker Yvonne Abusow, which sees Regina's Scarth Street as a sun-lit Parisian street, harbouring female street clowns, accordion players, flirtation, jealousy and all the trappings we have come to associate – rightly or wrongly – with France, *Véronique à vélo* has no immediate prototype in Godard's oeuvre and does not even pretend to have one, a laudable *tour de force*, bearing in mind how exclusive French culture in general and Godard's cinema in particular could be.

¹ David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, McGraw & Hill, 2010, p.77.



Within the larger context of the Godard Project, with its diverse and bold takes from near and afar on the cinema of JLG, the four Regina shorts are particularly precious as they succeed in capturing the elusive essence of Godardian intellectual, emotional and stylistic universe and in transplanting it to Regina, which I hope makes explicitly clear what Godard meant when he said that cinema, as a “form between art and life . . . both gives to life and takes from it”. And maybe therefore only films that truly celebrate life wherever and whenever it happens – in Paris as well as in Regina – survive the test of time.



Scene from *Véronique à vélo*.



Filmmaker Rory Dean.

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