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'British Sounds'

A coherent Godard political film

BILL NICHOLS

British Sounds was made in the spring of 1969 and is one of the first of Godard's overtly political films. It has taken nearly three years to reach Los Angeles, however, and even now it has been made available for a limited theatrical engagement only due to the determined efforts of a group of women who are attempting to raise funds for a new magazine entitled *Women in Film*.

A more clear-cut indication of the imaginative bankruptcy of Los Angeles theater owners would be hard to imagine since *British Sounds* is one of Godard's most precise, concrete, explicit, detailed and engaging films in quite some time. It far surpasses the foggy meanderings of revolutionary will in *Winds From the East*, the hasty collage of *Pravda* and the utter incoherence of *A Film Like Any Other*. *British Sounds* has the luminous clarity of *Contempt*, *Breathless* or *Pierrot la Fou* although it is no longer a part of their world but a critique upon it.

Shot in color with a (for once) easy to hear sound track (in English), *British Sounds* utilizes a simplicity that is nothing less than astounding in its resonance and range of provocative implications. There are in the fifty-odd minutes of film only six principal images around which Godard structures his critique of the bourgeois: we begin with a long tracking shot of the MG sportscar assembly line while we hear extracts from the Communist Manifesto. The second image is the most well-known and the most audacious. The camera is

stationary, focused upon a flight of stairs. A nude woman walks up and down the staircase a number of times while the sound track is dominated by a woman's voice describing the oppressed condition of women. Just as Duchamp's nude deflected our consideration from her sensuous appearance to the process of time and motion, Godard's nude confronts our stereotypic reactions to screenland nudity through the oblique challenge of the verbal commentary. A later shot is a static frontal shot of the same woman's naked mid-section again coupled to a revolutionary analysis of the women's oppression. Godard has found the perfect correlation of sound and image to attack our previous conditioning and to drive us out of the detached, passive state of erotic voyeurism into a direct, immediate reflection upon our own reaction. We are forced to consider what the words imply not just for the unity of the film but, even more, for our own lives. The use of the nude woman is one of the supreme examples of the genius of simplicity by which Godard is able to probe the deepest levels of a problem and yet reach and provoke the broadest possible range of people. It is a quality he himself sometimes loses sight of in his pursuit of the complexities of the materialist dialectic in other films, but in *British Sounds* Godard has blended restraint with rigor in perfect combination.

The other images include a television announcer offering a variety of racist, chauvinist, elitist arguments which have been culled from speeches by spokesmen for the free world and democratic way of life like Wilson, Pompidou and Nixon. This commentary is contrasted to the conversations of a group of Marxist, over-30 workers who discuss their problems and needs which is in turn contrasted to the more diffuse militancy of a group of university students who are rewording a Beatles song.

Godard's final images are more abstract in one sense but no less precise and powerful in their ability to connect us with a real, material struggle of class interests. One is of a clenched fist, spattered red with blood and positioned among patches of earth and pure white snow. The whole arm slowly inches across the ground until it reaches and raises a solid red banner. The sound track blends together several revolutionary songs from various countries to complete a portrait of the emotional qualities and state of will that accompany the revolutionary analysis that has preceded and, in fact, created them (rather than the converse possibility where moral or emotional fervor supply the locomotive power to revolutionary movement). His final image is the one most often used for publicity: a clenched fist smashing through a paper flag of Britain—the reality of revolutionary struggle destroying the apparent reality of bourgeois mystification or, as Godard

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Godard, Resnais, Alvarez films

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announces at the beginning of the film:

The bourgeoisie creates a world in its own image —Marx.

Good.

Comrades, let us begin by destroying that image.

Together with *British Sounds* the program features one of the very rare theatrical showings of Alain Resnais's absolutely unforgettable poetic-documentary of Nazi concentration camps, *Night and Fog*. Although the film is only a half hour long it has the haunting power

to overwhelm the mind until it seems not only like a much longer film but like an entire cosmos that has been evoked and that will not abandon us. It corrodes and etches itself into the memory like no other film I have ever seen and yet it is not didactic, not militant, and not embittered. In fact, it is the disparity between the calm, almost lyric but totally unrestrained narrative and the sometimes ghastly images that creates much of the film's haunting power. If you have never seen *Night and Fog* it alone is far more than enough justification for catching this program.

Finally, Cuban cinema-verite film maker Santiago Alvarez is represented by his brief, poetic homage to Ho Chi Minh — *79 Springtimes*. This film has also not had a theatrical release in Los Angeles despite its availability and despite its unity of mood, brilliance of technique and absence of false sentiment. Taken together the three films are fine examples of what a publicity flyer for the event calls "The Art of Politics;" each in its own right is a major example of artistry and revolutionary purpose; combined they are a remarkable study of contrasting styles and political intent that undoubtedly comprise the single most important film event of the holiday season.

The films will be screened at midnight at the New Vagabond (2509 Wilshire Blvd.), Dec. 21 through 26. Given our local theater owners track record, this will probably be your only chance to see these films for quite some time; try not to miss it.