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# Godard's 'Band of Outsiders' Returns With Its Charms Intact

KENNETH TURAN

In the thirty-five years since its American release, Jean-Luc Godard's lyrical gangster romance *"Band of Outsiders"* has been as difficult to revisit as it is impossible to forget. Starting today, the first part of that equation is going to change.

Rialto Pictures, masters of the quality re-release, have struck a new 35-millimeter print of this rarely screened film and added fresh subtitles in the bargain. Now it's possible not only to understand why "Outsiders" has so many passionate advocates (Quentin Tarantino named his production company "A Band Apart" after the French title), but also to actually feel where that passion comes from.

For this is not one of those classic films we appreciate rather than enjoy, not something we understand on an intellectual level as important in its time but have difficulty connecting to in the here and now. The wonderful thing about "Band of Outsiders" is that the daring elements that jazzed audiences then have the same power to intoxicate all these years later.

One of the architects of the French New Wave's reinvention of the movies, Godard had free-spirited, boundary-breaking insights into cinema's possibilities. Film was alive for him, something to be played with in ways no one else had imagined. In "Band of Outsiders," the writer-director was in an especially good-humored frame of mind, and the most lively and sophisticated kind of fun resulted.

The director adapted his story from a standard American thriller, Dolores Hitchens' "Fools' Gold," but its plot is the least involving thing about it. Even dialogue is less important than the allusive voice-over, read by Godard himself, and neither are as critical to the success of "Outsiders" as the filmmaker's fascination with speed and movement, with his gift for joining music, images and activity on-screen.

A kind of cockeyed caper movie about love and crime fueled by the unmistakable air of fatalistic French romanticism, "Band of Outsiders" begins with a pair of very small-time crooks, the sensitive Franz (Sami Frey) and the cocky, toothpick-chewing Arthur (Claude Brasseur). They drive to the outskirts of Paris in their battered Simca to case a house where they believe a large sum of crime syndicate money is theirs for the taking.

That information has come from Odile, played by the pixieish Anna Karina, at that time Godard's wife and ultimately the star of seven of his features. Odile is a flirtatious gamin with a mysterious face who can be as naive as the knee socks and plaid skirt with a big safety pin she wears.

Odile is attracted to both men but is ambivalent about helping them procure the money that apparently belongs to a mysterious friend of the girl's guardian. This story played out in a very



traditional way in the novel, but in Godard's hands it was the opposite. For one thing, the director uses that unique style of hip voice-over to make us complicit in the film's playfulness. "To late-comers, we offer a few randomly chosen words," he proclaims at one point.

Later, after his characters seek a minute of silence, he first indulges them by even cutting the ambient noise off the screen and then comments, "A real minute of silence takes forever." (According to the press notes, Godard cheated: His minute lasted but 35 seconds.)

Even more characteristic of the film's appeal are its frequent bursts of spur-of-the-moment lunacy. For no reason and with no warning, Arthur and Franz throw themselves into a mock reenactment of the death of Billy the Kid. They play at bullfighting, using a bicycle as the bull. They and Odile run through the Louvre at top speed, breaking, Godard mock seriously declares, "the record set by Jimmy Johnson of San Francisco."

The most justly famous of these apparently spontaneous but in fact carefully rehearsed sequences is the moment when Odile, Arthur and Franz break into a syncopated version of a then-popular dance called the Madison. It's a completely joyous scene that Tarantino quoted with a similar moment in "Pulp Fiction"—the John Travolta-Uma Thurman retro dance number.

No matter how many bouquets you throw in its direction, however, the truth about "Band of Outsiders" is that words are not up to capturing its elfin charm, not even up to hinting how beautiful Paris looks in Raoul Coutard's unconsciously romantic photography. Although Godard talked a lot about his theories and his methods, if he had a secret, it was a gift for creating irresistible images. "Band of Outsiders" shows him at his most amusing, and that is no small thing.

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