

Document Citation

Title	Jean Luc Godard
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Source	<i>Boston After Dark</i>
Date	1970 Apr 29
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Godard, Jean Luc (1930), Paris, France
Film Subjects	One plus one, Godard, Jean Luc, 1968 British sounds (See you at Mao), Godard, Jean Luc, 1969 Weekend (Week-end), Godard, Jean Luc, 1968

BOSTON

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AFTER
DARK

April 29, 1970

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Godard

Mailer on the Moon

by Fred Weisel

Commercial magazines seem to enjoy hiring writers for assignments outside their field of knowledge. Presumably it is for the sake of confusion and sales, the two often being inseparable. Two years ago Esquire hired Genet and Southern to cover the Democratic convention. Life hired Eugene McCarthy to write a piece on the World Series. And McCall's hired Lynda Bird Johnson to write about anything. The latest is Norman Mailer doing a bit on space travel for Life.

On Sunday night Mailer came to Harvard to read from his new book, *A Fire on the Moon*. The book ostensibly deals with the flight of Apollo 11 and 12. This might seem like a curious subject for a writer like Norman Mailer, and indeed Mailer shuffled awkwardly through his prefatory remarks as he tried to explain why he had written his book. He admitted that it was strange "to be my age and write a book without sex in it." Apparently, last year he had found himself in need of money, and so he accepted a Life magazine offer to cover the space shots and prove that he could put his stylistic stamp on even the most unlikely subject. Thus, thankfully, his book does not claim any objectivity. "I tried to be as wild or dependable or sober or extravagant as possible." Because of his lack of familiarity with technical data, Mailer described *A Fire on the Moon* as "a distressingly difficult book to write," but then there was the money and "prose is never so much prose as when written under obligation."

As in his other two journalistic pieces, *The Armies of the*

Night and Miami and the Siege of Chicago, the new one is written in the third person, the main character remains the same — Norman Mailer, this time disguised as someone named Aquarius. To take some of the stiffness out of his subject, Mailer relies heavily on those slowly developed metaphors that move anyone with a liking for the unexpected connection of disparate elements, and make others (including several vocal members of the Harvard audience) impatient.

In the first excerpt that he read, Mailer drew a facetious connection between the iron of the stars and the metal of the astronauts. The iron that we use comes from deep within our planet. It is machined and polished into a finished product. We, too, have iron inside us, and the astronauts — always blue or greeneyed, fairskinned, healthy — and from the very core of our humankind — are machined and polished in the mills of our training centers until they are ready to be sent back to the planets. This full, cyclical process — this choice of *men* seemed so appropriate to Mailer: "The Wasp has emerged to take us to the stars."

After a delightfully satirical piece on the planting of a metal flag that had been bent so as to appear furled by the wind, Mailer launched into several long sections from the second half of his book. For the most part these were about Norman Mailer living in Provincetown during the summer of '69 and writing a book on the moon shot. To his annoyance Mailer found that his artist friends in Provincetown had ignored the event. Mailer

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Jean-Luc Godard

by Joel W. Haycock

"We oppose both works of art with a wrong political viewpoint and the tendency toward the 'posters and slogan style' which is correct in political viewpoint but lacking in artistic power. On questions of literature and art we must carry on a struggle on two fronts."

—Mao

At the end of *Weekend*, the word *fin* appears on the screen, becomes *fin du conte*, then extends to *fin du cinema*. The break between Godard's "Early Period," in which he maintained at least a nominal allegiance to narrative movie-making, dressing up more radical works in conventional trappings, and the later films, those that rely almost exclusively on forms of intellectual montage, can arguably be traced to those words. In *Weekend*, the extreme alienation of the bourgeois characters prevent their personal development, creating an aimless drama in which the landscape of capitalist society is the real subject. The end words sum up Godard's realization that bourgeois narrative (*conte*) cinema, as defined by the American film (individualized characters exploring and reacting to their settings), cannot serve as a vehicle for anti-bourgeois statement. What he came to feel through *Weekend* is the necessity for a unity of politics and art, of subject and approach, and eventually of action and idea.

The two 35 mm films Godard made after *Weekend*, *Le Gai Savoir* and *One Plus One*, were increasingly abstract. While *Le Gai Savoir* made a gesture toward the narrative film, its two characters declaim rather than speak through personal ex-

perience, and no event can have prolonged meaning for them; despite their continuous presence, the film has no dramatic unity. *One Plus One* is further abstracted—there are no characters, no attempts to unify the film dramatically. (Godard's anti-dramatic intentions account for his decision not to include the completed version of "Symphony for the Devil.") Instead we have pieces of the social fabric interknit to make political as well as formal statements. The structure both of the film as a whole (the dialectics of cultural imperialism—black music/white musicians), and its parts (the tracks in the junkyard, for example, can be broken down into political units), are subject to analysis on two fronts. To understand this film or the ones to follow we must be, in Godard's delightful phrase, "cinemarxists."

Speaking at Harvard last Monday, Godard stressed the need to make "political films politically." In 1968, after finishing *One Plus One*, he formed the Dziga Vertov Group. In doing so, he extended his idea of the unity of political content and cinematic structure, of subject and approach, to include the act of film-making itself. This means two things: first, that decisions be made collectively, and second that every formal decision have ideological coordinates.

Godard has said that "You can't make a revolutionary film on a reactionary editing table," extended that reads you can't make revolutionary art and cling to the bourgeois notion of the artist. Every morning, as Godard tells it, the Group meets together to plan the day's shooting. These plans are made as

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From Godard's latest film

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logical outgrowths of political discussion, and only after establishing ideological priorities. When the tour finishes, Godard will return to Palestine, where the Group has spent five days shooting and six weeks in debate.

As you can probably guess, big-money producers are not particularly intrigued by Godard's journey toward a unity of politics and art. In fact, Godard is broke, and he and Jean-Pierre Gorin, a comrade of the Dziga Vertov Group, are doing their ten-day, seven-stop American tour solely for financial reasons (at the outside, it will net them \$2,500 after a split with Grove Press. *See You at Mao*, the film the two are touring with, and the second film made by the Dziga Vertov Group (the first was *A Film Like Any Other*) cost \$5,000 to make (16 mm in color—*Breathless*, Godard's first feature, cost \$90,000, 35 mm b/w). Godard was given \$12,000 to produce it by English television (ITV); they didn't take it, however, so he kept the \$7,000. "The only thing," he says, "that a Hollywood film-maker and a militant film-maker have in common is money."

After viewing *See You at Mao*, it's not hard to imagine the problems English television had with it. Godard claims that in bourgeois and revisionist movies the image dominates the sound. *One Plus One's* soundtrack competed successfully with the picture; *See You at Mao's* sound dominates the image. Godard explains this by saying that "an image is always apolitical—only the sound is political." There exists a natural dialectic between the two. This idea dictates the peculiar formal qualities of *See You at Mao*. An illustration: in one sequence a five-minute set-shot shows us a nude woman walking up and down stairs. Two

different sound tracks are laid over, one of a woman reading a Woman's Liberation Manifesto, and another of a man saying things like "Marxist-Leninist dialectical" and blotting out parts of her speech. Now, a shot of a nude woman can have no political meaning; but this sequence, and two more of nude women that follow after, suggest a whole range of complex meanings—invoking ambivalent responses to the question of the nude's exploitation as a sexual object, and general questions as to the success of the whole idea. Can any sound make this image political?

The other images are mainly of workers, in the factory, the street, or in political discussion—always shown in groups "because at that time the workers were the most progressive element in England." Intercut with the worker images are deliberately childish graphics—a fascist speech shot in b/w to simulate television, shots of students composing political songs to Beatles' tunes (what's more dialectical than, "You say U.S., I say Ho"?), and a closing skit in which fists smash through the British flag: and a hand, smeared with blood to look like a beast (the Red Dragon?), painfully reaches for a red flag.

The soundtrack sets some of these images in dialectical relation (most notably the brilliant

opening-track down an assembly line, during which the sound consists of shrill, piercing factory noises and snatches of Marxist-Leninist history), but not others. For instance, intercutting the racist-fascist commentator with shots of workers doesn't qualify as dialectical. Godard is the first to admit this lack of unity, which he attributes to bad politics, in particular a failure to express a Marxist-Leninist link between the students and the workers. "It was a progressive step," he says, "but since then we have gone far beyond it."

Indeed, since *Mao* Godard has completed three other films—*Pravda* (1969), shot in Czechoslovakia; *East Wind* (1969), filmed in Italy with Danny Cohn-Bendit; *Struggle in Italy* (1969) filmed in Rome and Paris; he is now working on *The Arabs Will Win*. He is happy only with the last, and probably only until it's completed. None of them are revolutionary films—"a revolutionary film can be made only when the revolution is completed. I don't know what a revolutionary film is." But each he feels to be an elevation of the ideological struggle to a new level. And unlike the American Left, which places its highest priority on arousing people to action, convinced as they are that the program of the revolution is formulated in the making of the revolution, Godard now places the highest priority on the ideological struggle. "The ideological struggle must be won before the political struggle can begin."

Godard once said that each of his early films was about a character who had an idea and followed that idea to its end. Godard too has an idea, and he is following that idea to its logical conclusion. He believes that the radical impulse is somehow whole, that the dissociative principle we have lived with

since Eisenstein's demise—the schism between formal and political radicalism—is a failure of our imaginations. Only when he reaches the end of that idea will we know what it can mean. Until then we know what it can't mean: a return to the old cinema, the cinema of Fuller and Hawks. As Dziga Vertov (the pseudonym of Denis Arkadievich Kaufman, Soviet film-maker and theorist) wrote in 1922: "Intestines of experience/out of the belly of cinematography/slashed/By the reef of the revolution/there they drag/leaving a bloody trace on the ground/shuddering from terror and repulsion/All is ended." *Fin du conte. Fin du cinema.*



All Godard photos by Timothy Carlson