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The Soho News, October 15, 1980

EVERY CRITIQUE FOR ITSELF

Jonathan Rosenbaum

FILM



Nouvelle Puritanism: Godard re-views sex

Every Man for Himself
Directed by Jean-Luc Godard
Written by Jean-Luc Godard, Anne Marie Mieville and Jean-Claude Carriere

Gloria
Written and directed by John Cassavetes

Tih Minh
Directed by Louis Feuillade

As the latest lovely, desperate film by one of the most brilliant filmmakers alive, Jean-Luc Godard's *Every Man for Himself* should be seen by everyone interested in movies or in life, without hesitation or delay. There are more ideas here per cubic second than one could find in a month of Paul Mazursky (or Ingmar Bergman) "think" pieces, and for this reason alone, Godard's latest comeback is worth an hour and a half of anyone's time.

Don't let yourself get tripped up by the unfortunate masculine English title. The French that it strictly translates, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, is genderless, save for the feminine article preceding the parenthetical "life." (Ian Christie of the British Film Institute suggests *Run for Your Life* as a workable alternative.)

If I consider *Sauve qui peut* a relatively minor work in Godard's canon — infinitely preferable to the tortuous Dziga Vertov Group films (roughly 1968-70), but less interesting, ambitious or groundbreaking than either *Ici et ailleurs* (1974) or *Number Two* (1975) — I also readily acknowledge the necessity for Godard to make movies for Vincent Canby, Francis Coppola and Andrew Sarris as well as for myself and my friends. Indeed, the fact that Godard is no longer being quarantined and relegated to "the esoteric reaches of world structuralism" (an odd fantasy term employed in Sarris' last book, *Politics and Cinema*, that faintly conjures up the Red Menace of the '50s) should be regarded as cheering news for everyone.

Godard's commercial comeback involves stars, characters, plot, lush outer-space music, crisp 35mm photography and humor, in addition to softcore sex (viewed from a quasifeminist perspective). A few years ago a woman avant-garde filmmaker angrily insisted to me, in reference to *Number Two*, "Bare ass is bare ass — I don't give a damn how many video screens you put it on." Then as now my counter-argument would run roughly as follows:

1. Unlike *Sauve qui peut*, *Number Two* de-eroticizes sex and nudity with a puritanical exactitude that rivals that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Jean-Marie Straub. And unlike some of my colleagues, I don't consider this process to be an entirely negative one, even if it sells popcorn. (Would it really be so awful and dehumanized to have at least a couple of *un*-erotic ads for jeans on TV?)

2. Godard's troubled sexuality — a cumbersome central factor in most of his films — was cogently described by Susan Sontag in a 1968 essay: "It has been noted that many of Godard's films project a masochistic view of women, verging on misogyny, and an indefatigable romanticism about 'the couple.' It's an odd but rather familiar combination of attitudes."

To this description, one should add the no less familiar voyeurism, evidenced in *Sauve qui peut* in the peekaboo shot of a prospective prostitute showing her breasts to Isabelle Huppert (a prostitute and her prospective pimp) — an unexpected glimpse that Godard has to cut *back* to from a cutaway exterior shot in order to show. In relation to the particular talents of Godard's latest employer, I think it wouldn't be entirely inappropriate to dub this the Coppola Touch — or, better yet, the Coppola Feel. (For comparable guilty pleasures, cf. *The Conversation*, or the *Playboy* cuties in *Apocalypse Now*.)

3. Arguably, the most that one should expect from Godard in any film is the translation of these problems into wider, nonautobiographical terms — problems of life and politics, language and representation, exposition and spectacle. For better and for worse, these are all problems that can produce poetry; and because Godard — like Eisenstein, Snow and Kubrick — is concerned with both the science of poetry and the poetry of science, use of his own problems as a starting point seems to me perfectly legitimate and, indeed, obligatory. (No wonder he is criticized as a poet *and* as a scientist — unlike lesser directors, who qualify as neither.)

As one feminist critic recently pointed out to me, who else *but* Godard has consistently succeeded in situating his sexuality within a social context? It sounds awfully European to say this, but *all* issues are viewed dialectically by Godard, giving him an analytical edge over most of the rest of us. Thus his social context always promotes an analytical understanding of how sounds and images are produced *and* read — including bogus and aberrated ones.

Example of a bogus sound: Huppert or her character faking an orgasm. Example of aberrated images: a farmgirl baring her ass to a row of cows (seen), Jacques Dutronc's ("Mr. Godard") character's erotic fantasies about his preteen daughter (described). Examples of translation: Huppert's impersonation of a client's preteen daughter winds up being performed for an unseen female voyeur (speculative). Another businessman-client, ordering a complex, hilariously mechanistic orgy — aptly compared by Richard Corliss and others to a Rube Goldberg machine — says at one point, "That's enough image, let's work on the sound" (analytical).

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