

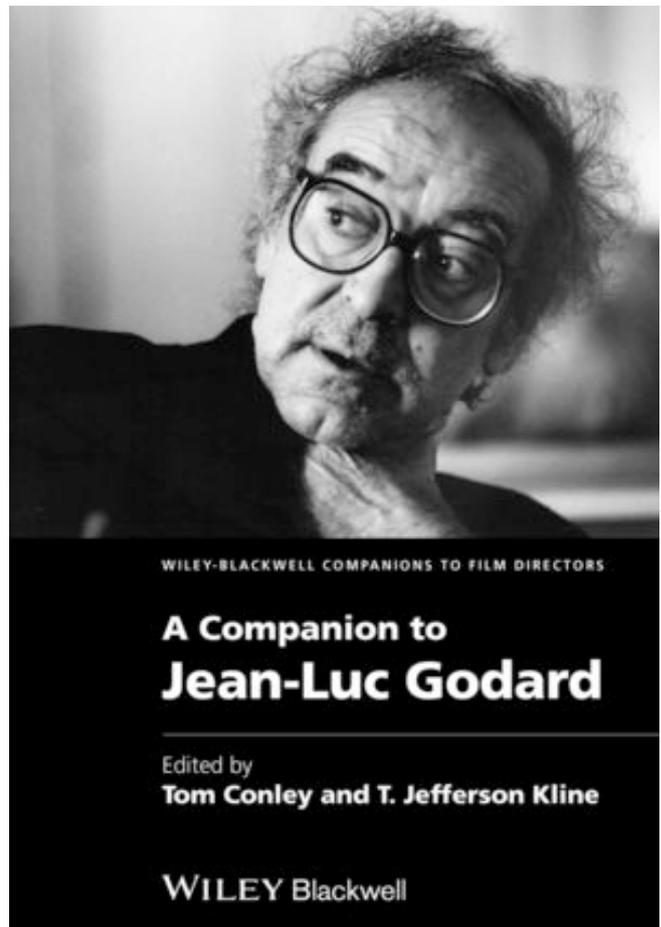
Conley, Tom & T Jefferson Kline (eds) (2014) *A Companion to Jean-Luc Godard*. Malden, MA / Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

It is always a particularly daunting challenge to find something new to say about Jean-Luc Godard. No other filmmaker, with the exception perhaps of Alfred Hitchcock, has been written about so frequently – by what are now three or even four generations of critics and scholars – and none has been so central to the evolution of film theory. Where Hitchcock's work shaped the development of feminist and psychoanalytic film theory, Godard's has been crucial to the articulation of Marxist and post-Marxist approaches (Rancière, Badiou, etc.), as well as to theorising the transition from analogue cinema to digital intermediality.

The Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Film Directors series have a difficult brief to fill: enough coverage of canonical works to sell to university libraries, but enough original scholarship to wind up in an index of highly-cited articles. Some volumes in the series achieve this balance with remarkable dexterity: Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau's *Companion to Jean Renoir*, for example, is a major intervention in the already crowded field of publications on the director, assembling a formidable team of some of the world's most eminent French cinema scholars to re-visit and re-appraise the whole of Renoir's oeuvre with insight and originality. The *Companion to Jean-Luc Godard*, while it features work from a handful of recognised Godard experts (Marc Cerisuelo, David Sterritt, Michael Witt), and a collection of well-established French cinema scholars (Martine Beugnet, Tom Conley, Elizabeth Ezra, Jean-Michel Frodon, T. Jefferson Kline, Steven Ungar), also contains a number of contributions from relative newcomers to the field. While the will to bring fresh sets of eyes to Godard's much discussed corpus is, in itself, laudable, an inevitable problem is that some of these writers have not done the scholarly groundwork in 'Godard studies', and so present as original observations that are likely to be fairly familiar to more seasoned followers of Godard criticism and interpretation.

It is hardly novel to suggest, as Kline does regarding *Bande à Part* (1964), that Godard draws our attention toward the arbitrary nature of the connection between image and sound, inspired by the Saussurean demonstration of the arbitrary link of signifier to signified; nor is it very original to notice that Godard's melancholic turn to the past in the 1990s is part of a wider cultural phenomenon of reflection on the troubling legacies of the twentieth century (Elisabeth Hodges on *JLG/JLG: Autoportrait de Décembre* [1994]). There is, inevitably, some discussion of Godard's depiction of gender, but it rarely rises above the, by now rather commonplace, observation that the director is, at bottom, an essentialist on this question. We have known this for decades but the accusation is more pertinent with regard to some films than others, and the book misses the opportunity to explore these internal divergences and to examine what, nonetheless, makes Godard's filming of women distinctive, even among male auteurs with a penchant for much younger actresses.

Similarly, while there is welcome coverage of films that are under-represented in the existing literature (*Une Femme est une Femme* [1961], *Les Carabiniers* [1963], *Bande à part*, *The Old Place* [1999], *Notre Musique* [2004], *Film Socialisme* [2010]), this *Companion* also takes its cue from the vast majority of career overviews of Godard's work by ignoring, almost in their entirety, the late 1980s, surely the



least-reported period of Godard's career. The broadly chronological organisation merrily skips the half-decade between *Je Vous Salue, Marie* (1985) and *Allemagne Neuf Zéro* (1991). Given this, one wonders whether it was necessary to have three separate essays on *Le Mépris* (1963) out of a total of thirty-three chapters, bearing in mind that Godard has made over eighty features and, further, that Steven Ungar himself states, in one of the three essays, that 'any elevation of *Le Mépris* above (or below) Godard's other movies is debatable and perhaps nothing more or other than perverse provocation' (144). These articles re-state the received wisdom about Godard petulantly adding a deliberately alienating nude scene of Brigitte Bardot at producer Joseph Levine's instigation, a cultural myth that historian A. T. McKenna persuasively demonstrated to be without any foundation.¹

Nonetheless, there are, happily, several original, well-researched, and carefully argued contributions to this book. Kareem Roustom, a composer, offers an extensive appreciation of Michel Legrand's score for *Une femme est une femme*, analysing it as a kind of pastiche of the classical film score that achieves its transgressive effects only by first demonstrating its thorough familiarity with the conventions of film music.

Ludovic Cortade suggests that *Le Mépris* expresses a nostalgia for classical landscapes (that is, the landscapes of the classical world) that demonstrates Godard's Romanticism. Cortade also relates this to the influence of André Bazin, who was educated at the École normale supérieure de Saint-Cloud, where 'geography became an ideological tool in order to create a social network of citizens attached to the new regime [i.e. the French Third Republic]' (158-9). But, Cortade continues, any residual

nationalism in this view of geography was eradicated by the influence of Malraux and Renoir, and their respective visions of universal humanism. Cortade concludes that Godard is caught between a Bazinian belief in the ontology of the photographic image and a Valérian recognition of the inevitable critical distance produced by being in language: 'Godard films the landscape as if he had simultaneously to reveal the presence of its beauty through belief and the secret of this beauty through distance.' (163).

Further interesting reflections on the relationship between Godard and Bazin are provided by Douglas Smith, who suggests that Godard's aesthetic may be less one of collage (as famously suggested by Louis Aragon) than one of *décollage*, a modern art practice associated with tearing and de-contextualising of found posters. As Smith explains, the term has associations of both 'coming unstuck' and 'taking off' (in economic and aviation terms associated with *les trente glorieuses* in France). Smith further suggests a re-reading of Bazin that regards his view of cinema as a kind of 'décollage' *avant la lettre*: when Bazin talks about the photograph being like a fingerprint, Smith argues, he implies that 'the photographic image removes a layer of skin from the reality before the camera' (219), film *tears strips off* reality.

In 'Godard's Remote Control', John Hulsey presents a Debordian / Foucauldian reading of *2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle* (1966), a film 'suggesting a social order organised massively around the corporate manufacture of desire' (265). Hulsey calls Godard's whispered prompts to performers 'one of the film's most radical and underexplored propositions'. He sees it as a 'serializing operation' working together with the image that 'critique[s] the alienating seriality of the contemporary Parisian cityscape and its grid of regulation and control' (268). At the same time, Hulsey notes that this technique constitutes a kind of dictation, a traditional exercise in French schools and, as such, looks forward to Godard's critique of education and experiments with pedagogy in *France tour détour deux enfants* (1977). The director's prompts place the performer in a different relation to the text – 'the actor is prevented from affectively recuperating the text's dramatic movement' (269) – suggesting influence from both Brecht and Bresson. Hulsey surmises that Godard's whispers in the earpiece may mix together dialogue prompts with direct questions and stage directions, and 'it is in these moments when command and action, question and response, dictation and repetition are confused that the governing logic of the system emerges most forcefully into view.' (271).

Michael Witt presents a brilliantly researched archeology of the Sonimage period of collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville on 'home-made' video works. Witt notes the influence upon that corpus of four theoretical matrices: information theory, Althusserian 'ideological state apparatuses', Foucauldian biopower, and the exemplary model of leftist writer and activist Robert Linhart. Witt demonstrates how video technology allowed Godard and Miéville to set up a kind of practical critique of centralised, monological media in France, the television series *Six fois deux* (1976) and *France tour détour deux enfants* serving as a kind of deconstruction of mainstream television. As Witt comments, 'not the least of Godard and Miéville's achievements in *Six fois deux* is that of having succeeded in making conventional television look strange' (330). The significance of Godard and Miéville's subversion is shown by the fact that Antenne 2 'sabotaged' *France tour détour* by showing it, not in a late afternoon weekly slot as planned, but in a late-night Ciné-club hour, leading Godard

to comment that 'The time of broadcast was deliberately chosen to wreck my work' (quoted, 333).

Naturally, many commentators in this *Companion* discuss *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1998) and related works. Of these essays the best is probably Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli's careful consideration of Godard's controversial discourse about cinema's failure to 'witness' the Shoah. Ravetto-Biagioli demonstrates a more thorough awareness of Holocaust Studies than many of those who have asserted their opinions on this subject, and her essay is supported by voluminous footnotes. Still, I fear it may, ultimately, be over-generous to Godard – something of a recurring tendency in this collection, which seems, on the whole, reluctant to criticise the maestro. Ravetto-Biagioli focuses on Godard's pointed use of Christian imagery in key sections of the *Histoire(s)* addressing the Holocaust: images from Bresson's *Les Anges du péché* (1943) over footage from Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, or the now infamous use of Giotto's 'Noli me tangere' superimposed over George Stevens' images from the Liberation of the camps. This has been seen by some as a rather dubious sacralising or Christianisation of the Shoah, but Ravetto-Biagioli seeks to re-evaluate it, suggesting that the uncomfortable fit between these images can be seen as 'questioning the relationship of Christian values in the production of the Holocaust' (465). This is a neat idea, but simply asserting this interpretation is inadequate without further supporting evidence from *Histoire(s)* or surrounding texts. Godard's work, from the early 1980s onward, is full of Christian imagery and, while some of it may be irreverent, my own suspicion is that most of it is used without irony. A thorough study is needed of the role and significance of this imagery in Godard's work, since it is ubiquitous in what now accounts for three fifths of the director's active career in filmmaking.

These essays are the highlights of a book that too often comes across as hastily assembled. Too many of the chapters read as collections of observations without a clear argument or research question. In addition, for a book that has apparent ambitions to being a work of considerable prestige (large format, high-quality paper, hefty price tag), there are a surprising number of typographical errors, ungrammatical sentences and questionable translations (*Cléo de 5 à 7* becomes 'Cleo, May – July' [96]). We are even treated, more than once (46, 60), to the classic undergraduate Spellchecker oversight *À bout de soufflé*. At one point, too, after being told that Nana (Anna Karina) in *Vivre sa vie* (1962) 'will look sad throughout much of the film' (89), we are directed to a screenshot of the actress grinning giddily during the film's famous dance sequence. Referencing is also inconsistent, sometimes following the Harvard author-date system of in-text references, sometimes using footnotes and, most often, a combination of both. Such problems are evident in nearly every chapter of the book.

My own impression, when teaching films by Godard, is an awe-inspiring sense of just how much analysis remains to be done of these often very familiar films. But the work outstanding is not of global evaluation, theoretical interpretation or historical reconstruction – all done exhaustively by many very qualified scholars over the decades – but rather the patient work of detailed description of and commentary on specific passages from the films. How do individual shots create their effects on us as spectators, and how are these effects amplified through combination with the surrounding shots and films? Unfortunately, as with so many books in academic film studies, the *Companion to Jean-Luc Godard* seems largely

to consider such close reading to be somehow beneath its dignity. In this regard, as a response to a filmmaker whose work offers unparalleled richness and a wealth of unanswered questions, this book ultimately constitutes a regrettably squandered opportunity.

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¹ A. T. McKenna, 'Guilty by Association: Joe Levine, European Cinema and the Culture Clash of *Le Mépris*', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* (2009).
<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2009/june-2009/mckenna.pdf>