

# 'To Realise the Ideal': Miscellaneous Remarks on Godard's Conceptual Processes Apropos of *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*

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Made in 1979, Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* occupies a uniquely pivotal position in the director's career, representing as it does the closing, culminating opus of one decade and the inaugural work of another. It is not, however, my intention to address the specified film in a direct way. I shall instead be talking *around* it, so to speak, with a view to exploring something of how Godard actually *conceives* his works. It is my hope that in adopting this approach my observations may acquire some more general relevance to Godard's work throughout the 1980s and beyond.

In embarking upon his first mainstream feature since *Tout va bien* (1972) Godard found himself faced with the problem of how to incorporate something of the technical and conceptual flexibility and freedom which he had attained as the co-director with Anne-Marie Miéville of Sonimage, a kind of private audio-visual research institute for the production of innovative film, video and TV. As a partial answer to this problem, Godard devised a new format for himself: the 'video-scenario', which would not only assist him in his lifelong endeavour to circumvent the constraints of the traditional, fully written script, but would go on one step further in enabling him to conceive and couch his ideas in visual – as opposed to verbal – form from the outset.

This tension between writing and images is evoked at the very beginning of the prototypical video-scenario, *Scénario du Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1979), which opens with a close-up of a typewriter loaded with a sheet of paper bearing

photocopied images of the film's three principal actors, Jacques Dutronc, Isabelle Huppert and Miou-miou (replaced in the completed film by Natalie Baye). These images rise up through the machine as the paper feeds through it whilst the print head moves back and forth typing the film's title over the images. Meanwhile, Godard comments offscreen upon these two axes of movement: one vertical, one horizontal, and on the order of precedence between words and images. He goes on to talk about the three characters whom he relates to differing abstract vectors of movement, a theme I shall return to presently. There is little of any narrative significance in this video-scenario beyond talk of a desire to leave the big city, a desire originating with Denise (Miou-miou) who acts on it and aspired to by Jacques (Dutronc) who lags behind.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond this, Godard muses on a variety of subjects relating to the production of the film – the role of music, for example; the use of an idiosyncratic form of slow motion; ideas of how to generate dialogue in and through images and to circumvent the banal ping-pong of conventional dialogue scenes; the possibility of having his cinematographer scrutinise, compare and discuss certain qualities of light – all delivered in Godard's typically free-associative, metaphorical style. Of particular concern to me here, however, is his discussion of certain basic items of film grammar, most notably dissolves and superimpositions, such as occur quite frequently in his video work, much less so in his films.

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Up until the late '80s and the era of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98), Godard's use of electronic visual effects in his video work, whether alone or in collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville, was comparatively economical and restrained, with him often seeming to prefer to really delve into one particular technique, one grammatical figure, one image even, to see what he can discover there and perhaps to find the germ of a kind of story. Such is most definitely the case with the discussion of dissolves in the *Scénario du Sauve qui peut (la vie)*. Whilst Godard does include a number of concrete examples, he also explains that:

when I talk to you whilst seeing. . . not images, the beginnings of images, embryos, you may think that I seek to show you images of the film as they will be. I seek rather to show you how I will organise them, what system; in other words, if one was in biology, not a human form but what system gives rise to the forms.

It is somewhat puzzling therefore that there is only one quite brief and seemingly arbitrary dissolve in the whole of the finished film. The reasons for this are partly technological and economic. Godard has an aversion to complicated and expensive cinematic post-production techniques which interfere with his desire for spontaneous creation and discovery, obliging him to surrender control of his work to laboratory technicians – hence the appeal of the more domesticated medium of video. As Godard remarked in 1995:

On video, I love doing superimpositions, real superimpositions, almost as in music, where movements mix – sometimes slowly, sometimes brutally – then something happens. You can have two images at the same time, much like you can have two ideas at the same time, and you can commute between the two, which, to me, seems very close to childhood.<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, and in some way which seems unfathomably personal to Godard, this use of video superimposition is not an end in itself but rather a means towards the conception of entire works which may not in themselves make use of

this technique. What, in the end, is a dissolve or superimposition? It is, in typically Godardian fashion, a process by which two images combine to produce a third; it is an image in and of transition; an image of movement, literal and metaphorical.

In attempting further to retrace something of the conceptual process which led to *Sauve qui peut*, one can also make profitable recourse to its immediate successor, the 11-minute video-originated short film, *Lettre à Freddy Buache* (1981), whose clearly circumscribed subject matter – a commissioned portrait of the city of Lausanne – allows one more readily to perceive certain conceptual and structural principles whose presence in *Sauve qui peut* is somewhat obscured by more complex thematic concerns.

In the following extract from the director's own voice-over commentary which runs throughout the film, Godard outlines his envisioned approach to the task he has been set:

I thought there was something between the . . . fine, I told them: the sky and the water, but. . . whilst shooting, little by little, I saw that it was between the green and the blue. You remember. . . it was Wittgenstein who said, what if one was mistaken, if one had. . . if one called blue, green. Good! That would be just. . . for Lausanne that would be just, changing the meaning. You see, after a good deal of research, I thought that two or three shots would suffice. A green shot, a blue shot and how it passes from green to blue, how one descends from green to blue, or how one goes back up again, and between the two, there is grey. There are circles, there are forms, but there are no straight lines... it starts when there are no straight lines, and the city is made up of straight lines.<sup>3</sup>

In Godard's portrait, Lausanne is defined through a series of abstract co-ordinates. He recalls how he would often cross the city to get from Vevey to Geneva, from east to west and vice versa, ascending and descending since the city itself is one which ascends and descends. Up, down; east, west: a vertical axis and a horizontal axis. Then there are the three colours or wavelengths: a green shot, a blue shot and a grey shot each with its assigned spatial

orientation – *en haut*: a high shot, *en bas*: a low shot, and a shot *au milieu*: in the middle.

This is Godard in his guise as physicist *manqué*: Lausanne is reduced to an algebraic formula, an equation in which a handful of terms produce all the matter in the universe whose interactions engender in their turn – almost as an afterthought – the city's human inhabitants. It is through this detour into physics that Godard discovers, in *Lettre à Freddy Buache*, the origins of fiction:

Look at [the Voyager Saturn space probe], it takes two photos, there are four years of work for the scientists afterwards. And there, I have tried to . . . it interests me to try to look at things a bit. . . a bit scientifically, to try to find all in these movements of the crowd the rhythm, to rediscover the starting point of fiction, because. . . because the city is fiction. . . the green, the sky, the forest, it is. . . it is the novel, the water, it is the novel, the city is fiction, and it is the necessity of fiction, and it must be beautiful for that reason, and those who live there are. . . are often magnificent and full of pathos, even in a very rich country like. . . like this one here.

Or, to paraphrase the hero of Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959), 'Oh fiction, what a strange path I had to take to reach you!'

Having observed this physicist's approach to the fictional process in a pure state in *Lettre à Freddy Buache*, one can then discern something similar in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*. For instance, in a brief written scenario for the film,<sup>4</sup> Godard refers to three cardinal co-ordinates designated poetically as: *l'enfer* (hell), *le milieu* (the middle) and *au-delà* (beyond). As laid out in a diagram on the frontispiece of this scenario,<sup>5</sup> each of these points also corresponds to one of the three principal characters: 'hell' being the province of the provocatively named Paul Godard (referred to in the scenario by the single name, Jacques); the middle ground that of Isabelle; whilst 'beyond' is assigned to Denise. The related distinction between the concepts of 'high' and 'low' is also posited from the very beginning of the written scenario in a way which anticipates the schema of *Lettre à Freddy Buache* whilst also giving

notice of the film's distinctly quotidian narrative content. The scenario opens with the following passage (my emphasis):

The beginning is in the mountains. A locale which is called The Place.

They show her what she will have to do at the farm (or the little factory). She can start right away if she wishes.

But Denise says that first she must go *back down*. She has to settle her affairs, in particular to let her apartment by the side of the lake. She has a meeting with someone who has agreed to take it on.

She will come *back up again* to start on Monday.<sup>6</sup>

This distinction is underlined a little further on with the introduction of Jacques/Paul as 'a man [attempting] to emerge from hell',<sup>7</sup> and is postulated with extraordinary economy in the opening shot of the finished film. This comprises a long, slightly faltering pan of some 360 degrees leftwards across a blue sky lightly feathered with cloud. It is accompanied by an ethereal musical theme of great fragility and beauty performed on piano and synthesisers by the film's composer Gabriel Yared. In a trope of impeccable succinctness these Elysian associations are counterbalanced at the beginning and end of the shot by the distant offscreen rumble of traffic noise on the soundtrack: an infernal counterpoint to the transcendent beyond.

Returning to the quasi-scientific aspects of Godard's conceptual approach, these are best exemplified in the case of *Sauve qui peut* with reference to the director's following remarks:

It wasn't a question of making a single departure and a single arrival but of making three different rhythms. There was a high speed, that of the female intellectual played by Natalie Baye . . . , there was another person of medium speed for whom one must eat to live or live to eat, must buy and sell (the definition of commerce, something which weighs very heavily). The most obvious character within this scheme is that which people call a whore or a prostitute . . . . And then there was the character of the man who is to some extent me but in the end not really . . . ; this is someone who does not move.<sup>8</sup>

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And so we turn from the three colours of *Lettre à Freddy Buache* to the three speeds or velocities of *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, as once again a kind of algebraic formulation is used to generate a fiction concerning human beings in what one might describe as a relativistic, Einsteinian conception of narrative.<sup>9</sup>

This universal, abstract field of dynamics finds concrete expression in both the formal and diegetic aspects of the film, most obviously in the latter case through Denise's preferred mode of transportation, a bicycle, which serves as an index of her pursuit of a new way of life closer to her ideal. This motif is already present in the written scenario where a connection is made between the means of locomotion and an altered mode of perception, as in the following passage:

It is the end of the afternoon. Denise takes her bicycle and heads off below. It's a good three hours' journey. But Denise loves that: her eyes traverse the landscape at the speed of her legs.<sup>10</sup>

True to Einstein's theories, the perceptions of an observer depend on how they are moving. This connection is explored further in two letters written by Godard to Wim Wenders and Alain Tanner during preparations for *Sauve qui peut* in the spring of 1979.<sup>11</sup>

In his letter to Wenders, Godard mentions having recently read Werner Herzog's book *Of Walking in Ice*,<sup>12</sup> the record of a hike from Munich to Paris which Herzog undertook as a kind of shamanistic pilgrimage to visit the *grande dame* of German film criticism Lotte Eisner, who was seriously ill in hospital at the time. Endorsing Herzog's own alleged estimation of the book as 'his best film', Godard ascribes its success to the fact that:

he went on foot and this produced a different kind of hearing and vision. I think that even a tracking shot which follows somebody, one goes too often by car to really be able to think at walking speed.

But that is what Herzog has done in this book and his ability to make images has returned to him as a result.<sup>13</sup>

The letter to Alain Tanner finds Godard engaged in a genially caustic critique of Tanner's film

*Messidor* (1978), in which he makes an unfavourable comparison between the expressive capabilities of the two leading actresses and those of a group of cows (!) in a series of three photos shot by an unnamed photographer, in a landscape similar to one traversed by the said actresses during the film. Godard's remarks are as follows:

it seems to me very apparent that [these cows] have three different expressions whereas your actresses have always the same one . . . and that this absence of expression . . . could perhaps be imagined whilst they were in a car but not whilst they were on foot.

. . .

Contrary to all that is said and written, the gaze of these animals is anything but neutral. It is a truly critical gaze deserving of a place in a real cinema journal if such a thing existed.

In fact, that which they criticise, these cows, is not that filmmakers travel by car, it is that even if they come to shoot in the fields their gaze always goes at 120kmh.<sup>14</sup>

Further evidence of Godard's work on speed can be found in *Sauve qui peut's* renowned slow motion sequences. However, rather than discuss the aesthetic impact of these sequences, I would prefer to indulge in a brief digression on certain moral implications regarding their capacity for undercutting the widely perceived pessimism of the film. I say this with reference not so much to the beauty of the relevant sequences as to their permutational characteristics, as witness Godard's own remarks:

As soon as you stop one image in a movement which comprises twenty-five (which isn't enormous, it's five times the fingers of your hand, something you can still conceive of) you see that a shot you've made, depending on how one stops it, suddenly there are . . . all the possible permutations between these twenty-five images, representing billions of possibilities.<sup>15</sup>

I would argue furthermore that this permutational potential is also implicit in the structure of the film as a whole. Godard famously described *Sauve qui*

peut as his 'second first film'<sup>16</sup> and indeed there is a strange casualness in the way it is put together redolent of the kind of film which could only be made by a novice, by someone who barely knows what a film is or how to make one. There seems nothing definitive in the way the material is ordered, everything, in structural terms, appears provisional, contingent, as though the same elements could be reshuffled in any number of different ways. In my view these characteristics give the lie to any notion of the film as a once-and-for-all statement of sexual, socio-economic or political pessimism. Godardian pessimism must in any case be understood according to its own peculiar terms. As he himself has said:

People interpret much too much. If I say that I can't run the hundred metres as fast as an Olympic champion, there's nothing pessimistic about that.<sup>17</sup>

And then, reverting to the scientific analogy, there is cinema as a diagnostic tool turned in this case upon a paranoid, aggressive male sexuality which he admitted at the time was based on 'my own observations, and from my own sexual experience.'<sup>18</sup> Hence the way in which

images can show you something in your life you don't want to see . . . . But it's not dangerous. A lot of people don't want to go to the doctor. They don't want to know what kind of disease they have, or how a disease might look. Maybe I can look because my father was a doctor. I was raised not to be afraid of certain categories of truth.<sup>19</sup>

I should like to close now with a few remarks on Godard's use of music. In his video *Scénario du film Passion* (1982) Godard speaks with great fervour of his desire 'to see a scenario' rather than write one, thereby placing particular emphasis on the faculty of vision. However, given that Godard has long been known as a filmmaker who devotes equal attention to the auditory aspect of his work, it seems equally appropriate to speak of his *hearing* a scenario, a process in which music plays a particularly prominent role as reflected by Godard's claim in *Scénario du film Passion*: 'I am blind; music is my Antigone'.

Often, of course, the two faculties go hand in hand as in the sequence from the fourth episode

of the television series *France Tour Détour Deux Enfants* (1977–8),<sup>20</sup> in which the workaday gestures of a trio of café waitresses are lent an august and courtly grace via the good offices of videographic slow motion, coupled with an aria from Handel's opera *Rinaldo* whose words appear anything but arbitrary in their striking new context:

Lascia ch'io pianga	Let me weep
la cruda sorte	my harsh fate
e che sospiri la libertà.	and sigh for liberty. <sup>21</sup>

Gravity and grace indeed . . .

The richness, compression and economy of sequences such as this is nothing short of staggering and one has no difficulty in believing how such a simple audiovisual cell might have the potential for expansion into an entire feature film. For example, how this particular segment can be seen as embodying the whole of *Passion* (1982) in embryo. Indeed it is my belief that to understand how this might be so is to come significantly closer to a true understanding of Godard's creative processes.

One sees something similar in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* in Godard's deployment of an aria from another opera, *La Gioconda*, written by Amilcare Ponchielli in 1876.<sup>22</sup> The aria in question is heard in the first full scene of the film where it is sung live and unaccompanied by the soprano Monique Barscha, whose offscreen voice plagues Paul Godard from the hotel room next to his and who shadows him, still singing, into the lift and through the lobby. Following this early appearance, one must then wait some 80 minutes until the end of the film to hear a brief fragment of the orchestral accompaniment pertaining to this lone female voice when, at the urging of her mother, Paul Godard's estranged teenage daughter Cécile abandons her stricken father after he is run over in a possibly fatal car accident, followed as she does so by a lateral tracking shot in the background of which is revealed an orchestra playing the pertinent theme. (Note that no integral rendition of this aria reuniting voice and accompaniment appears anywhere in the film.)

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Again, the lyrics to this piece of music have a relevance to the action which is far from incidental. The aria occurs in its original context during the final act of Ponchielli's opera when, having given up the love of her life to the noblewoman whom he adores and having lost her mother to a sinister abduction plot, the humble street singer La Gioconda contemplates the cruelty of her fate with the following words [The italicised line is, perhaps significantly, omitted in the film during a pause in the singer's exertions]:

Suicidio!	Suicide!
In questi	In these
fieri momenti	awful moments
tu sol mi resti,	you alone remain to me,
e il cor mi tenti:	you alone tempt me:
Ultima voce	Last voice
del mio destino,	of my destiny,
ultimo croce	last cross
del mio cammin.	of my journey.
E un di leggiadre	Once upon a time
<i>volavan l'ore;</i>	<i>the hours gaily flew by;</i>
perdei la madre,	lost now is my mother,
perdei l'amore.	lost is my love.
Vinsi l'infausta	I overcame the consuming
gelosa febbre!	fever of jealousy!
Or piombo esausta	Now I sink exhausted
fra le tenebre!	in the darkness!
Tocco alla meta . . .	I am reaching the end . . .
Domando al ciel	I only ask heaven
di dormir queta	to sleep quietly
dentro l'avel.	within the grave. <sup>23</sup>

Just as the Handel aria brought a heightened sense of dignity and emotion to the mundane servitude of the waitresses, so here does the Ponchielli bring an element of delirious melodrama to the otherwise mundane demoralisation and despair of Paul Godard. To the possibly small number of spectators familiar with the piece, the aria also provides a rather shockingly blunt premonitory statement of said character's apparent death wish – right at the beginning of the film.

In formal terms, the deployment of this aria first as unaccompanied vocal and then as voiceless accompaniment serves forcibly to split

the music open, so that the body of the film can be said to occupy an imaginary space *inside* the music analogous to the way in which the camera penetrates the imaginary space of the paintings restaged as *tableaux vivants* in *Passion*.

In addition to this aria, *Sauve qui peut* is graced by a brilliantly effective and unconventional score by Gabriel Yared whose enormous contribution merits far more attention than I am able to give it here. Intimately associated with the aria, the score is in fact based largely upon a short instrumental phrase specified by Godard and derived from Ponchielli's opera where it first appears during the overture to the Fourth Act and shortly thereafter in the aria itself. It is this phrase which is played live by the orchestra following Paul's traffic accident. Hence the film is permeated by this motif which weaves its way from beginning to end in a variety of guises and through numerous transformations, some more recognisable than others. To this extent, bearing in mind the associations of the theme, it might be said that the entire film – and not just the Paul Godard character – is haunted by the spectre of suicide.<sup>24</sup>

However, despite the grim sentiments of the *Suicidio* aria, there does exist a strong sense in which music functions in the film as the vehicle of certain paradoxically utopian associations of which the characters themselves are vaguely aware and which they attempt to actualise in their efforts to reorganise their lives along more congenial lines. Always out of reach, the music seems to tease the characters with intimations that life might offer far greater resources of pleasure and satisfaction than their current circumstances afford whilst the permutations which Yared works on his musical source material might perhaps be seen as in some way reflecting these faltering, imperfect, provisional attempts to realise the ideal.

## Notes

- 1 Quotation derived from the French transcription of Godard's voice-over commentary prepared by Philippe Dubois and published as Jean-Luc Godard, '*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*: Quelques remarques sur la réalisation et la production du film', *Revue Belge du*

- Cinéma*, 22–23 (Spring/Summer 1988), 118. All translations from French-language sources are my own.
- 2 Henri Béhar, 'Jean-Luc Godard Press Conference at the 1995 Montreal Film Festival', <http://www.filmscouts/interview.cfm?File=2800>
  - 3 Quotations from the commentary of this short are derived from the French transcription published as Jean-Luc Godard, *Lettre à Freddy Buache* (Lausanne: Editions Demoures, 2001).
  - 4 Jean-Luc Godard, 'Sauve qui peut (la vie): Scénario' in *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, ed. Alain Bergala (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma/Éditions de l'Étoile, 1985), pp. 445–8.
  - 5 *Ibid.*, p. 446.
  - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 445.
  - 7 *Ibid.*
  - 8 Jean-Luc Godard, 'Propos rompus', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 316 (October 1980), 12.
  - 9 I believe a note of caution is warranted here given that Godard's references to scientific discourse are apt to condemn his commentators to one of two extreme positions, i.e. to brainless credulity or derisive cynicism. I am reminded of a comment made recently by one of the two directors of photography on the film, Renato Berta. Recalling his encounter with Godard, Berta remarked that:
 

I found myself faced with someone who was a bloody pain in his theorising and a genius in what he did.

Be that as it may, one wonders to what degree these two traits can be separated. My own view, for what it's worth, is that, whilst maintaining a healthy scepticism, one should judge by results: if the product is deemed to be of merit then the means are in some degree vindicated. (Berta quotation from an interview by Jean-Marc Lalanne in *Cahiers du cinéma*, 560 (September 2001), 29.)
  - 10 Godard, 'Sauve qui peut (la vie): Scénario', p. 445.
  - 11 See *Cahiers du cinéma*, 300 (May 1979), 24–7 and 32–5 respectively.
  - 12 First published in German as *Vom Gehen im Eis* (Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1978). British edition trans. Marje Herzog and Alan Greenberg (London, Jonathan Cape, 1991).
  - 13 *Cahiers du cinéma*, 300 (May 1979), 24.
  - 14 *Ibid.*, 32–5.
  - 15 Godard, 'Propos rompus', 12.
  - 16 For example, in Derek Malcolm, 'Godard comes out fighting', *Guardian*, Wednesday 1 October 1980, 10.
  - 17 Colin McCabe, 'Every Man for Himself', *American Film* (June 1984), 33.
  - 18 Derek Malcolm, p. 10.
  - 19 Katherine Dieckmann, 'Godard in his "Fifth Period"', *Film Quarterly* (Winter 1985–6), 6.
  - 20 The sequence in question also appears in abbreviated form in the video *Scénario du Sauve qui peut (la vie)*.
  - 21 Italian lyrics and anonymous English translation from booklet accompanying the compilation CD: *The Glories of Handel Opera*, Decca CD 458 249–2, 2000, p. 23. NB. The rendition of *Lascia ch'io pianga* featured on this CD is *not* the one used by Godard; I have referred to this recording for the sole purpose of quoting the lyrics.
  - 22 In discussing the role and origins of the music in *Sauve qui peut* I am deeply indebted to Gabriel Yared who kindly consented to be interviewed by me at Abbey Road Studios, London on Thursday 27th September 2001.
  - 23 Italian lyrics and anonymous English translation from booklet accompanying the 1997 reissue of the 1959 recording of Amilcare Ponchielli's *La Gioconda* conducted by Antonino Votto with the Orchestra e Coro del Teatro alla Scala di Milano featuring Maria Callas et al, EMI Classics 3-CD set 7243 5 56291 2 8, pp. 165–7. I have, in the interests of clarity, adjusted the punctuation. NB. I have referred to this recording for the sole purpose of quoting the lyrics; no part of this or any other pre-existing recording of *La Gioconda* appears anywhere in the film, all pertinent extracts having been specially performed live on set.
  - 24 On the other hand, it may not be wholly implausible to suggest that the film represents an extended paranoid fantasy on the part of Paul Godard himself.