

THE CURRENT CINEMA

The Civilization of the Rump

IN the series of fifteen full-length movies that Jean-Luc Godard made in eight years—from “Breathless,” in 1959, through “Weekend,” at the end of 1967—he burned away the fat of conventional moviemaking. His films were fine-drawn, quick, lyrical. After a twelve-year stretch of polemical movies and experiments with film and video, he made “Every Man for Himself.” This 1979 picture, which he calls his “second first film,” has opened here and has been widely hailed as a return to his great, innovative work of the sixties. It’s wonderful to feel the pull of Godard’s images again, to feel the rhythmic assurance. There was a special, anarchic sensuousness in the hasty, jerky flow of a Godard film. And there still is. In “Every Man for Himself,” he demonstrates his nonchalant mastery; he can still impose his own way of seeing on you. But the movie may also make you feel empty. More than the fat has been burned out of “Every Man for Himself”: the juice is gone, too.

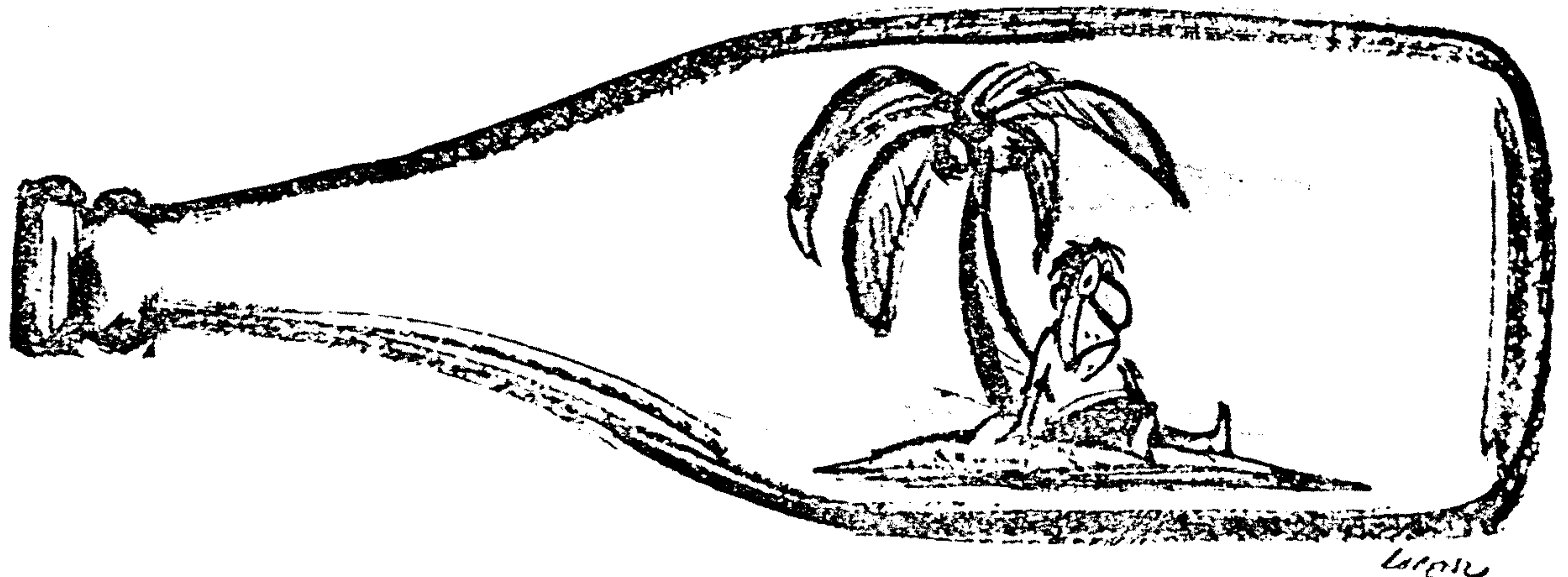
The film is about money and people selling themselves—their minds or their bodies. The setting is a nameless Swiss city, where the lives of the three main characters are loosely intertwined. Paul Godard (Jacques Dutronc), a video filmmaker who works in television, has left his wife and daughter. Now he is distressed because Denise (Nathalie Baye), a colleague at the video center, is leaving him. Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert), a practical-minded prostitute, has only a marginal relation to the two others: she has plied her trade with Paul for a night, and she meets Denise when she arranges to rent the flat Denise is giving up. These characters (and the people around them) have lost hope, are without direction, and don’t take pleasure in anything. Sex has become an aberrant, mechanical way to connect, and work yields no satisfaction. They go through the motions of living and searching, but they’re dead—and they don’t deserve to live. We might almost be back in the world of Anto-

nioni, except that Godard has a gagster’s temperament.

His philosophical shorthand jokes give the film a dry whimsicality. The camera may suddenly have a lapse of attention and wander off from the ineffectual principal characters (ineffectuality is a rule of life here) to follow the more entertaining movements of a passerby. Or Godard will toss a joke into the background of a scene: two young motorcyclists yell “Choose!” to the pretty girl with them; one of the men slaps her face, hard, and between slaps the battered girl refuses, crying, “Your turn to choose.” Godard may also locate his flip jokes in the relation between image and sound. All through the movie people keep asking, “What’s that music?” The gag itself is used as a refrain. At the beginning, Paul is in his hotel apartment; the voice of an operatic soprano that comes from the suite next door irritates the hell out of him, and he bangs on the wall. Then when he leaves, the voice goes with him, like a Fury. But Godard doesn’t bring off his old tricks with the surreal snap they once had; he doesn’t seem as sensitive as he once did—the shadings are coarser, heavier. Sometimes the jokes are like clever, dispirited imitations of Godard’s wit. How can anything be really funny when the people on the screen are so drab, so emotionally atrophied?

As Paul Godard, Jacques Dutronc never smiles; he’s glumly dejected in a chic way. His hair swings across his forehead and onto his big specs. (He must see everything through elephant grass.) You don’t notice that he has eyes—they’re anonymous—and his voice says that he doesn’t feel a thing. Nathalie Baye’s Denise is less dislikable, maybe because her glumness

seems to run deeper. When Denise, who is in emotional flight, is seen going to the mountains on her bicycle, with her dark hair streaming behind her, she’s tantalizing, and you want to see her more closely, yet when you do her anxious uncertainty makes her opaque, null, and you don’t have any particular reaction to her attempt to find a new way to live. Isabelle the prostitute takes up much of the second half of the picture, and any picture that features Isabelle Huppert is likely to be somewhat numbing. (Right now, if you want to go to the movies she’s hard to avoid, though it’s worth the effort.) Huppert is never completely *there*, but she isn’t any other place, either. She drags her feet across the screen, her voice is placid and toneless, and her face is closed—not enigmatic, just closed. She hardly changes expression; she just gives you a little glimmer of something that is so small and wan no camera yet invented could turn it into an emotion. You feel that she expects the audience to find magic in her matter-of-fact passivity while she remains uninvolved—a visitor on the set. Godard does ritual homage to the delicacy of her features by posing her in a still-life with flowers and in a window that serves as a portrait frame, but it’s not her face that gets the attention. In Godard’s 1965 “Pierrot le Fou,” Belmondo says, “After Athens, after the Renaissance, we are entering the civilization of the rump.” Prophetic words, and Godard does his bit to usher it in with Huppert. Though her pale, freckled face and her light-reddish hair make her seem fragile at the top, she’s sturdy from the waist down, and he gets a lot of action out of her round, plump, adolescent-looking bottom. It’s licked, spanked, and violated; there are times when you could swear that it pouts as eloquently as her face. And when Huppert isn’t on-screen a dairymaid shoves her bare



behind in the impervious faces of some cows.

"Every Man for Himself" lacks the friction that came from the multiple ideas and points of view in Godard's sixties films. He's still employing his provisional, trying-it-on style, but his thinking is absolutist, and the satirical bits have nothing to bounce off. It's all a statement of the same melancholy theme. Paul is corrupted, and so he mopes and displays malaise, like a mannequin. Godard's films were always full of mannequins—they acted out their dreams, strutting and posing and having a good time; they got so far into their dreams you couldn't tell if they were the real thing or not. You don't think at all about the limp, burnt-out Paul Godard. Who would want to know more about him? You can see what he is: he's the spirit of selling out. At the end, Paul Godard has been struck by a car; the driver speeds off, and though Paul's estranged wife and his daughter are among the onlookers, no one comes to his aid. He is left to die in the street, or perhaps to live—nobody bothers to find out. And this isn't a joke, it isn't irony—it's simply Godard (who was in a near-fatal accident some years ago) accusing us of deserting him. When he was making ascetic revolutionary tracts, audiences gave up on him, other filmmakers wearied of being denounced by him, and the press gradually lost interest in him. And so there we all are—the onlookers, who do nothing to help him. He's saying, "You're all hit-and-run drivers." His political extremism has been replaced by a broader extremism—total contempt, shaded by masochism. This film says that we don't care about him, nobody cares about anybody, and he has given up on us. It's Every Man for Himself.

One of the blessings of Godard's sixties films was the absence of psychology: the characters did what they did, and the films didn't ask why. Suddenly we're confronted with a Godard movie in which the hero is named Godard (and Paul, after Jean-Luc's father), and in which he is unwanted by the woman he wants, is suffering moral rot, and is left to die alone. It's a masochistic film about rejection: Godard can't think of any reason for these people *not* to reject his surrogate. Both women in the movie have at least the will to go on and try something different, whereas Paul is at the end of his rope. Godard is saying, "This is what people are, this is what life is, there's nowhere for Paul to go." The

car that hits him seems providential.

What made Godard's impulsive style so sharply exciting in the sixties was that his films were of the moment yet kept that moment fresh. He was the master of digressions that would spontaneously connect in a way that made you laugh while your head was spinning. Having got rid of the impedimenta of conventional storytelling, he brought fiction and documentary together, along with essays, parodies, love lyrics, dances, and questions—endless aesthetic and political questions that threw you happily off balance. His way of incorporating the topical, the transient, and the accidental subverted your schoolbook ideas of drama, and he tweaked your empathic involvement with his characters by offhand changes of tone. Neatness was never his goal; nothing was developed systematically. When he showed us the new consumer culture and urban anonymity, he also had an eye for the pop fun of this new soullessness; he understood how seductive amorality in the young can be. His films were more contemporary than anyone else's; they were full of the signs of the future which were all around us but which we hadn't quite become conscious of. Godard let us see the scary comedy of dissociation: the billboards and brand names and news events and revolutionary heroes that had all become part of the comic-strip look of the environment. "Every Man for Himself" does have some of the flavor of here and now, but though the picture wanders all over the place, it never comes together; it has no center. If it were possible to have lyricism without emotion, that might describe the film's style. Godard shows no love for his characters and none for his principal actors.

This is the only one of Godard's non-didactic pictures on which his name doesn't appear as writer or co-writer; the credit goes to Jean-Claude Carrière, who has often been Buñuel's scenarist, and Anne-Marie Miéville, who has worked with Godard before, and who co-edited this film with him. (Godard has said that the ideas were suggested by some of the writings of Charles Bukowski, who also did the English subtitles, along with Barbet Schroeder and Jean-Pierre Gorin; the three must have had a good time with the dialogue, which is translated in tough-guy slang.) Godard has explained his not having a writing credit by saying that he isn't a good script-writer, but when have his scripts been

written? He developed his own distinctive mix of narration, monologues, and interviews partly to take the place of prepared dialogue. Here the narration (which is all in women's voices) isn't up to his standard. Mostly, it labors the themes of what we're seeing; reading from her journal, Denise apostrophizes "that thing in each man which silently screams: 'I am not a machine,'" and she offers abstract, damp thoughts about work and boredom and movement. Actually, the film was developed from a videotape, used like an artist's sketch for a painting; this may be why Godard's credit reads "A film composed by Jean-Luc Godard." My guess about why his name isn't among the writers is that in some roundabout way he's expressing his scorn of scripts and scripted films—a scorn that perhaps he alone among directors is fully entitled to, and not even he on this film.

This is the only time I have ever felt that the smattering of narrative in a Godard film wasn't enough; there's so little going on in "Every Man for Himself" that you want more drama. The movie features that old standby, the prostitute as metaphor, though Godard himself said in an interview that "the whore's trade . . . brings more money to dried-up scriptwriters and producers than to pimps." His follow-up remark was "I myself am only a whore fighting against the pimps of cinema." When Isabelle holds out on her pimp, she is pulled into the back of his Mercedes and made to repeat after him, "No one is independent, not the whore, not the secretary, not the bourgeoisie, not the duchess, not the maid, not the tennis champion, not the schoolgirl, not the farm girl." And we supply "Not the filmmaker." (There's a big difference between selling yourself and not being independent, but they've been merged here.) Godard had already used up this prostitute metaphor. It was central in "My Life to Live," and it was better there. When Anna Karina represented the whore, we could believe that she kept an area of feeling to herself; with Isabelle Huppert, there is no one under the makeup. Godard returned to the theme in "Two or Three Things I Know About Her," and it figured to a lesser extent in several of his other films. This time, he makes it more explicit and all-inclusive than ever before. He's saying "Everything is for sale." It's simplistic cynicism, like that of the barroom pundit who tells you, "Every man has his price." We are supposed

to accept it as a basic truth of capitalist society that, like everyone else, Paul has sold himself and that this has infected his consciousness. He says, "I make movies to keep myself busy. If I had the strength, I'd do nothing." Who can believe that the actual Godard would rather do nothing? He doesn't make the movies of someone who'd rather do nothing. He wants to make movies, all right, but he also wants to get back at us. It's apparent from this film that he feels mistreated, neglected, and, as he said recently on a Dick Cavett show, "pushed away."

The look of "Every Man for Himself" isn't inhuman, though what it's saying is; that's its poignancy. Godard shows us the soft shadings of what might have been. During moments of degradation, he cuts outside to a sunset, or to traffic that sparkles the way it does when you look through a windshield in the rain and everything is crystalline. The light is similar to the light in Godard's sixties movies, but with a pearly radiance; the faces and colors have a tempered edge. He doesn't use his old comic-strip boldness; he's willing to let things blend. It could be that he wants to break our hearts. The countryside is plushy in an almost banal, rhapsodic way.

Godard tries something new—an analytic stop-motion technique that freezes an action into a series of stills. Every now and then, a scene or part of one (beginning with Denise on her bicycle, during the titles) is decomposed in this way, and an ordinary action is turned into something formal, extravagant, even frightening. The effect is like that of Muybridge's studies of motion in the late nineteenth century; Godard appears to be reinvestigating the start of movies, looking at the images that constitute a movement. (This may have some relationship to his accident and the injuries to his own body.) Like the devices that Godard employed in the past to keep movie-making in the viewer's consciousness, this one makes you more aware of the formal properties of a film. And it also has a rapt quality, like freeze-frame endings when they were new. (I dread to think how others may employ it—it could get really bad.) It's effective here partly because there's so little dramatic excitement that the film holds us largely by its graphic power anyway. We experience Godard's search for greater graphic meaning in the images as his way of controlling time and slowing life down—of saying that maybe things have been rushing

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by so fast that he's been missing something. (He's almost *escaping* to this stop-motion.) His editing rhythm is so subtle that these stills don't seem to slow the film itself down, except in one sequence, when Paul and Denise are grappling physically and the double emotion revealed is too obvious—fighting/embracing. The sequence has a line of signpost dialogue—Paul says, “We can't seem to touch without bruising”—which carries the obviousness even further. You feel Godard is trying to pull something complex out of the scene that isn't there; when this grappling was shown on the Cavett show, it was reassuring to hear Godard say he wasn't pleased with it.

The alienation in “Every Man for Himself” has a “commercial” aspect, which is new in Godard's work: almost all the audience laughter comes from sex jokes and the deadpan attitudes toward weird sex. Godard startles the audience by the raw gutter language that Paul uses when he talks about how he'd like to make it with his eleven or twelve-year-old daughter and when he's talking directly with her. (It's like some crazy literary form of exhibitionism.) And Godard tickles the audience by showing Isabelle dropping her panties and lifting her behind for inspection while she looks blankly detached. Bought sex is treated as gadgetry: a businessman who wants an orgy sits at his desk and, like an inventor arranging a mechanical hookup, tells the three other participants what to do; when they are all linked fore and aft, he says, “The image is O.K., let's do the sound,” and he tells them what cries to produce and when. The sex scenes are demonstrations of how joylessly corrupt everyone is; Godard appears to be a catatonic moralist and a giggling pander in the same film. His intentions don't fuse into wit—they stay separate. It could be that he's too despairing to be really funny. Even the somewhat dubious poetry—when he slows down the action into stills—seems a gesture of despair. I got the feeling that Godard doesn't believe in anything anymore; he wants to make movies, but maybe he doesn't really believe in movies anymore, either. Maybe he has given up caring what they're about; it could be that the sex scenes are there to sell the picture—that self-contempt and contempt for the public have come into play, and that along with the experimenting he is doing some conscious whoring. —PAULINE KAEEL