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In search of Godard's 'Sauve la vie (qui peut)'

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Abstract

This article examines a little-known compilation film titled *Sauve la vie (qui peut)* that Jean-Luc Godard created in 1981 within the framework of a series of lectures on cinema history that he delivered in Rotterdam in 1980-1981. To make this compilation film he combined sections from his *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* with extracts from four other films. Based on archival research, the article considers the context for the screening, the film's structure, Godard's wider engagement with the filmmakers whose work he incorporated, the prints he used, my attempts to reconstruct the film, and its reception in 1981 and today.

Keywords: compilation film, film festival, Jean-Luc Godard, Robert Linhart, Rotterdam

This article examines a little-known experimental compilation film that Jean-Luc Godard constructed and showed within the framework of a series of lectures on cinema history that he delivered in Rotterdam in 1980-1981.[1] In February 1981, during the 10th edition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam (Film International 1981),[2] his film *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) was shown six times. In addition he prepared a 'special edition' of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) as part of his lecture series retitled as *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) and which screened only once.[3] To make *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) Godard took a print of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*), excised parts of it, and combined what remained with extracts from four other films from the Film International collection.

We know from a number of contemporary articles (notably a detailed description of the structure of this compilation film by Charles Tesson, who was present at the screening) that the films that Godard cut into *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) were (in this order) *Staroye i novoye* (Old and New, Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov, 1929), *Cops* (Edward Kline and

Buster Keaton, 1922), *La terra trema: Episodio del mare* (The Earth Trembles, Luchino Visconti, 1948), and *Czlowiek z marmuru* (Man of Marble, Andrzej Wajda, 1977).[4] Since the publication of Tesson's article and a handful of others that appeared at the time *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) has been almost completely forgotten. None of Godard's recent biographers (Colin MacCabe, Richard Brody, and Antoine de Baecque) discuss it. Indeed the latter is the only one to mention Godard's Rotterdam venture at all, albeit in a single sentence and which is accompanied by a footnote giving incorrect information.[5] The only place where I have come across any reference to *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) in writing after 1981 is in Jan Heijs' and Frans Westra's 1996 biography of the founder and director of Film International, Huub Bals, in which the authors note its existence in passing within the context of a valuable discussion of Godard's Rotterdam lecture series.[6]

This neglect of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) is particularly curious given that it acquired something of a mythical status at the time, especially among those who were at Film International 1981 but did not know that the screening was taking place. This was the case with the critic Martin Auty, who expressed his frustration in a report for London's *Time Out*: '[n]ot having been warned of the authorial intervention in advance, most people (myself included) missed this legendary screening.'[7] There are various possible explanations for this absence of attention to a work by one of cinema's most discussed filmmakers: it was shown only once; it was seen by a relatively small number of people; few written accounts of it exist; and it was disassembled afterwards (or rather, its constituent reels were returned to the films from which they had come).

1 Godard in Rotterdam

The most direct antecedent to Godard's Rotterdam lectures was his 1978 lecture series in Montreal where he had sought to investigate cinema history by juxtaposing 14 of his 1960s films with a range of other films or selected reels from other films. What motivated him initially in this venture was a desire to deepen his understanding of the relationship between his own work and the discoveries of his predecessors with a view to reinvigorating his filmmaking practice.[8] He started off a little tentatively in Montreal with double bills of complete films such as *À bout de souffle* (1960) and Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* (1945). However, from his third lecture on he became more audacious, screening a selection of reels from between three to five films in the morning which he felt resonated suggestively with (or that he recalled having helped him at the time) the example of his own work that was shown in the afternoon. These screenings were followed by an improvised talk. Through the juxtaposition of this material he sought to create what he called 'a connecting thread, like a film, a musical theme'.[9] These are the films he combined for the third Montreal session, which was devoted to the theme of 'women': *Nana* (Jean Renoir, 1926), *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1928), *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1924), *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932), *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954), and his own *Vivre sa vie* (1962).[10] It does not take a great leap of imagination to see this and the other similar montages that Godard created in Montreal as virtual compilation films whose conception and form directly anticipate *Sauve la vie (qui peut)*.

Two years after the Montreal lectures Monica Tegelaar convinced the Rotterdamse Kunststichting (RKS, or Rotterdam Arts Foundation) to make a substantial investment in Godard's emerging film history project which would eventually become *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.[11] The RKS was closely linked to Film International, which was founded in 1972 by Huub Bals at the initiative of the RKS's director at the time Adriaan van der Staay. Tegelaar had joined Film International at its inception and gone on to assume a key programming and acquisition role alongside Bals. The attraction for Godard of collaborating with the RKS and of the sizeable payment he would receive in exchange for delivering this further series of talks was primarily that it would enable him to buy a telecine machine which would allow him to transfer clips to video and then manipulate them videograpically.[12]

The original intention was that he would deliver 11 two-day lecture/screening sessions in Rotterdam to a group of approximately 15 participants selected by Tegelaar and Bals, and that these would lead to the production of 10 videotapes.[13] The group was made up mainly of Dutch filmmakers (Rolf Orthel, Frans van de Staak, Rudolf van den Berg, et al.) and critics (Hans Beerekamp, Pauline Terreehorst, et al.). Given the low number of surviving archival documents relating to the talks reconstructing their order and number is a challenge. Jean-Claude Biette, writing in September 1981, mentions only two, while Heijs and Westra list three. In addition, François Albera recalls a number of occasions when Godard was scheduled to produce something for the talks or to attend in person, so he would ask Albera to bring some of his art school students to Pierre Binggeli's video studio in Geneva where they would record improvised discussions about cinema which Godard would send to Rotterdam on U-matic video cassette.[14]

As far as I have been able to establish only the following events took place:

- 23 October 1980: first session (no screening).
- 4-5 December 1980: screening/discussion of reels from *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Tokyo Story* (Yasujiro Ozu, 1953), and *La règle du jeu* (Jean Renoir, 1939).
- February 1981: creation of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*).
- 1981 (precise date unknown): creation by Godard, accompanied by François Albera, of another new narrative out of reels from five films including *Cops*, *The Earth Trembles*, and *Man of Marble*.[15]
- 19 June 1981: montage of extracts from *Il grido* (The Cry, Michelangelo Antonioni, 1957), *Varieté* (Ewald André Dupont, 1925) (probably), *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Kenji Mizoguchi, 1953), an unknown German silent film, *Umberto D.* (Vittorio De Sica, 1952), and *Old and New*.

My research into these talks suggests that Godard's heart was not in them from the outset. 'He didn't really do them', Tegelaar put it to me simply.[16] Her sentiment is echoed by van den Berg: 'he hardly took the trouble to appear at all, and I can't recall one single eye-opening remark'.[17] On one occasion Godard simply failed to show up.[18] In Albera's opinion 'it was above all a question of getting the cheques'.[19] In addition we should note the impact of a major fire in the Film International archive that occurred during the night of 18 February 1981 and which destroyed approximately 250 films, leaving a little over 100 titles for Godard to choose from for the subsequent sessions.[20] In December 1982 Godard finally informed the RKS that he was unable to complete the project to his satisfaction and offered to repay their investment.[21]

1.1 Sauve la vie (qui peut)

Godard is no stranger to chopping up his own work. He has edited virtually all of his own trailers and has regularly sampled his films in his video essays. Already in the early 1960s he was cutting clips from other films into his own (e.g. the sequences from Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* in *Vivre sa vie*). When looking for precursors to *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) within his œuvre we should also recall that he had previously experimented with the macro montage method that underpins it not only in his lectures but also in films such as *Un film comme les autres* (1968) and the emblematically-titled *One Plus One* (1968). In addition, during the late 1970s at the time of his preparations for an ultimately unrealised film project on the role of the mafia in the construction of Las Vegas and the birth of Hollywood, he was planning on cutting extracts from classic Hollywood films into his fictional narrative.[22]

As suggested above it is only a small step from Godard's montages of film reels in his lectures to his creation of an actual compilation film. Nevertheless *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) is of a different order to these other montages and constitutes a unique experiment within his œuvre and perhaps within film history.[23] To appreciate its organisation it is helpful to be familiar with the structure of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*). The original film is divided into six parts, numbered from -1 to 4, with each of the three main parts (1, 2, and 3) that follow the two-part prelude (-1 and 0) being associated with a named theme – 'L'Imaginaire' (The Imaginary), 'La Peur' (Fear), and 'Le Commerce' (Business) – and with one of the film's three main characters: Denise (Nathalie Baye), Paul (Jacques Dutronc), and Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert). The film is dominated in terms of screen time by 'Le Commerce' and the various strands of the narrative come together in the aptly-titled finale (part 4) 'La Musique' (Music).

To create his compilation film Godard set aside the prelude but used the majority of 'L'Imaginaire', 'La Peur', and 'La Musique' together with the opening and closing sections of 'Le Commerce'. He then interspersed selected sequences from the other four films into these extracts. Here is Charles Tesson's crucial eye-witness account of the film's composition:

We begin with 'L'Imaginaire': Nathalie Baye in the countryside and at the printing works, followed by the procession and cream separator sequence in *Old and New*. Return to Dutronc, without Duras, the meal with his daughter, and then, with N. Baye, the question of their apartment. Then Keaton arrives (in *Cops*), loads the furniture, takes charge of the removals, and travels all over town. 'Le Commerce': Dutronc and Huppert at the hotel, and still the advertisement for the four-room apartment. 'Le Commerce' (continuation): an extract of *The Earth Trembles*, that long conversation between the two brothers, when one of them decides to sell himself to the mafia. 'Le Commerce' (again), with the office scene directed by Roland Amstutz, then Huppert's arrival just as Dutronc throws himself at Nathalie Baye. The arrival of *Man of Marble*: documentary footage of Birkut's rise (his settling into an apartment with his wife) and fall. Then Krystyna Janda goes to the airport to seek out a filmmaker (and this one, by contrast with Duras, we see). Then the film ends with Dutronc's fall as he is hit by a car.[24]

This description combined with research into the Film International prints now held in the EYE Film Institute Netherlands archive enabled me to visualise the structure of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) and to then piece together a digital approximation of it using Final Cut Pro.

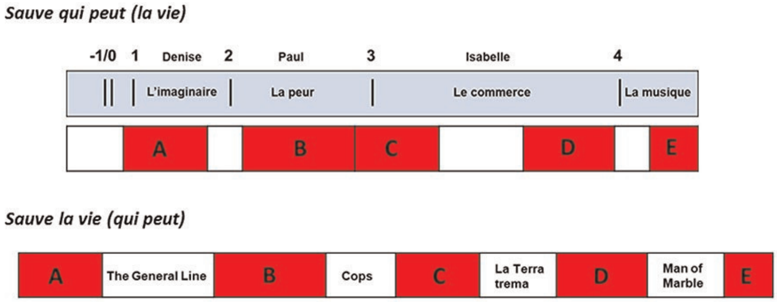

Sauve qui peut (la vie)
-1/0
1
Denise
2
Paul
3
Isabelle
4
L'imaginaire
La peur
Le commerce
La musique
A
B
C
D
E
Sauve la vie (qui peut)
A
The General Line
B
Cops
C
La Terra trema
D
Man of Marble
E

Fig. 1: The structure of Sauve qui peut (la vie) and Sauve la vie (qui peut).

2 The source films

Although I was able to view copies in the EYE archive of all the films that Godard combined to make *Sauve la vie (qui peut)* it is difficult to know for certain whether they are all the actual prints he used. Only two of the archival prints I viewed – *Old and New* and *Man of Marble* – were 35 mm. The others (*Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, *Cops*, and *The Earth Trembles*), which are the only prints of these films in the archive, were all 16 mm. With the print of *Old and New* the situation is straightforward – the reel in question coincides directly with the sequence used in *Sauve la vie (qui peut)*. The case of *Man of Marble* is more complicated since in this instance the reels

Fig. 2: The source films in the EYE Film Institute Netherlands archive in September 2013.

last approximately 20 minutes each, so the projectionist would have had to start in the middle of the second reel. As for the 16 mm prints although there is no reason why Godard should not have used a combination of 16 mm and 35 mm prints and projectors, 16 mm distribution reels are much longer than 35 mm ones, so again only sections of the 16 mm reels could have been used.

My principal doubt relates to the print of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) itself. The EYE archive holds only a two-reel 16 mm distribution print of this film, subtitled in Dutch, which came from Film International. I suspect that Godard did not use this print but that he employed a 35 mm print instead – partly because it would have been technically complicated to show five separate sequences from two 16 mm reels. More significantly, the third sequence from *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) described by Tesson runs across a break between the two reels of the 16 mm print, so two projectors would have been required to show this single sequence. It therefore seems much more likely that Godard would have used sections of each of the five reels of a 35 mm print, as the contents of and breaks between the 35 mm reels coincide much more naturally with the sequences described by Tesson.[25]

I shall now turn to the films that Godard cut into *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*), beginning with *Old and New*. As already indicated the third reel of the silent unsubtitled 35 mm print of this film in the EYE archive coincides exactly with the film's third 'act', which also directly matches the sequence described by Tesson. This 'act' comprises the peasants' religious procession followed by the celebrated cream separator sequence with its heady combination of rapid editing, spectacular lighting, numerical inserts, and orgasmic imagery. Within the context of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) there is striking thematic symmetry between the erotic imagery of the cream separator scene (which is the second sequence in the compilation film) and the mise en scène of sexual blockage in the extract from *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) that constitutes its seventh sequence.

Eisenstein has been a longstanding reference for Godard. He looms large in *Histoire*(*s*) *du cinéma* where nine of his films are sampled, including *Old and New*.[26] This is an example of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) functioning as a laboratory for *Histoire*(*s*) *du cinema*; in the series' opening episode, *Toutes les histoire*(*s*), Godard pays tribute to the dynamism of post-revolutionary Russian filmmaking which is exemplified here by the ecstatic faces of the members of the farming collective from the same cream separator sequence of *Old and New*, who are marvelling at the power and potential of their new machine.

Godard had been fascinated by *Old and New* long before he used it in

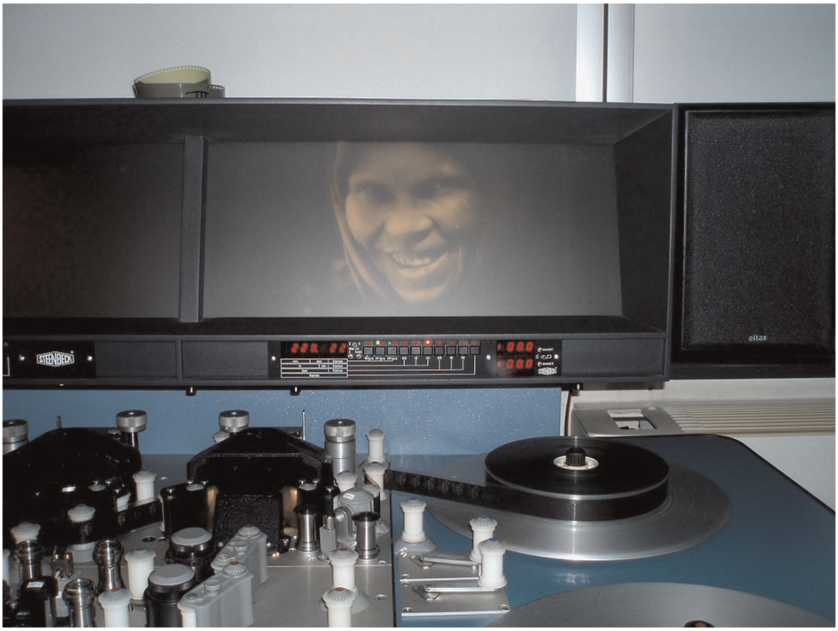


Fig. 3: The beginning of the third reel of Old and New on a Steenbeck in the EYE Film Institute Netherlands archive.

Toutes les histoire(*s*) and indeed before *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). He was already evoking it (via its original title *The General Line*) as an important reference in the video 'script' for the film *Scénario de Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*), where Denise is characterised in terms of a quest to explore the unknown and to investigate what is happening 'behind the general line'. There are several reasons why this film might have appealed strongly to Godard during this period: it is Eisenstein's only film to tackle a contemporary subject; it has a highly experimental form; its themes of city and countryside, and of the interrelationship of love and work, chimed directly with Godard's concerns at the time. It also provides an eloquent lesson in how to film nature and animals in particular, and one senses strong echoes of *Old and New* in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*), notably in the shots of cows and horses, in the brief sequence of a tractor ploughing a field, and in the scene (reused in *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*)) depicting Denise's visit to a milking parlour on a farm.

Buster Keaton is also an important presence in *Histoire*(*s*) *du cinéma*. Five of his films are referenced, although not *Cops*. The sequence that Godard uses is the gag-filled first half where we follow Buster's fortunes as he seeks to become a 'big business man'. The only print of *Cops* in the EYE archive is a silent 16 mm one from Monopol Apollofilm in Prague,

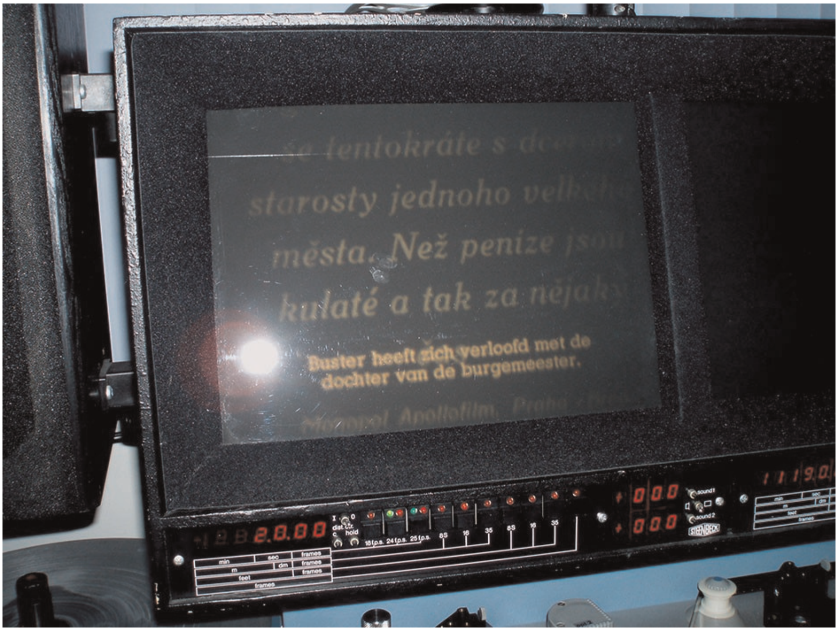

starosty jednoho
města. Než penize jsou
kulaté a tak za nějak
Buster heeft zich verloofd met de
dochter van de burgemeester.

Fig. 4: The Czech intertitles and Dutch subtitles on the print of Cops *in the EYE Film Institute Netherlands archive.*

which has Czech intertitles subtitled into Dutch. As in the case of *Old and New*, since this is the only print of this film in the archive it is very likely that it is the one that Godard used in 1981. Assuming this to be the case and given that the entire film is contained on a single reel it is difficult to know precisely where Godard cut from *Cops* back to the third sequence in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*). Following Tesson's description it seems likely that he would have cut directly after Buster's attempt to revitalise his exhausted horse with an impromptu visit to the 'goat gland specialist', Dr. Smith. This scene concludes the first phase of the narrative and precedes an intertitle announcing the police parade that occupies its second half.

The thematic importance of *Cops* in the context of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) lies in its treatment of love, class, and money, and of ordinary people making ends meet in difficult economic circumstances. In these respects it is close to and resonates productively with *The Earth Trembles*. However, there are other important considerations. In interviews at the time of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) Godard evoked Keaton on several occasions (alongside Charlie Chaplin, Harry Langdon, and Jerry Lewis), expressing great admiration for how these comic filmmaker-performers worked with space, for the geometrical precision of their shot compositions, for their attention to framing, and above all for their timing and skill as performers;

also for their rigorously choreographed routines and, crucially, for their ability to suddenly shift gear in a flash from the pace and rhythms of normal movement to extravagant gesture and back again. 'It's in their performances that they created different rhythms', as he put it.[27] It is worth recalling in this context that *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) like the television series *France tour détour deux enfants* before it is partly a film about the human body. Informed by a knowledge of pre-cinematic motion studies and by the theorisation and use of slow motion by filmmakers such as Jean Epstein and Dziga Vertov, Godard and Miéville sought in *France tour détour deux enfants* to use altered motion to investigate the programming of the body, to scrutinise the conditioning of the human infant as a docile subject of capitalism, and to cast moments of non-conformity and resistance in relief.[28]

The placement of the sequence from *Cops* within the context of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) provides a good example of the forethought that Godard appears to have invested in the compilation film's composition. This sequence follows directly on from a scene in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) depicting cinemagoers queuing to see Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931), another film that explicitly showcases the balletic potential of the body in cinema. In *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) there is a strong sense of *Cops* having taken the place of *City Lights* and, when the sequence from *Cops* begins, of our suddenly finding ourselves inside the cinema we have just seen from the street (in the extract from *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*)), watching *Cops* alongside the fictional audience from *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*). This feeling is reinforced by the complaints of the infuriated cinemagoer in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) regarding the lack of sound in the cinema, which lead directly into the silence of *Cops*.

Sauve la vie (*qui peut*) establishes a suggestive set of correspondences between *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*), *City Lights*, and *Cops*, notably through their shared exploration of an expanded palette of gesture. In the context of Godard's quest in *France tour détour deux enfants* and *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) to investigate the programming of the body we can see why performers such as Keaton and Chaplin were so valuable to him – the unpredictability and extremity of their gestures offer the possibility of corporeal transgression within the framework of cinema's normal rhythms and running speed. This interest on Godard's part in Keaton and Chaplin which is explicit in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) and *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) culminated in the pronounced slapstick dimension of his next film, *Passion*. This connection also illustrates the extent to which *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*), sandwiched as it is between *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) and *Passion*, was as much a preparatory

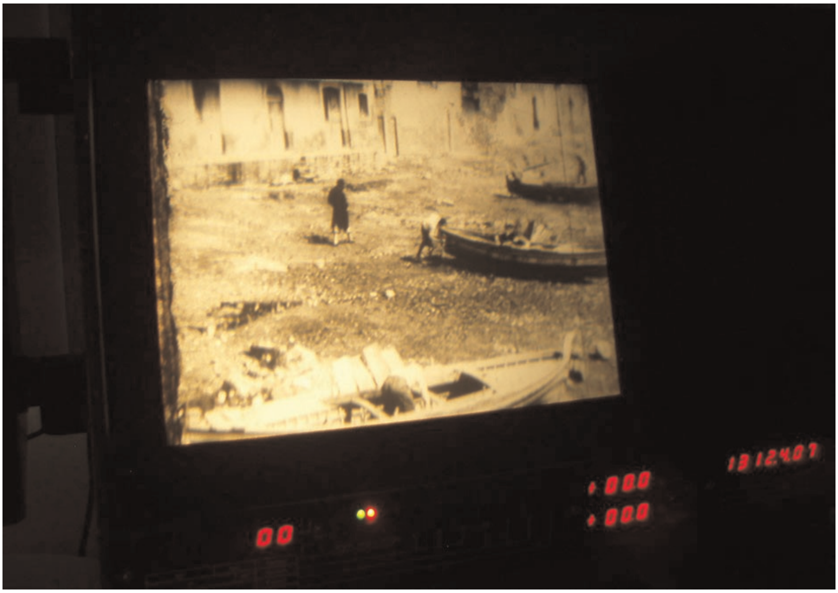


Fig. 5: The start of the third reel of The Earth Trembles *on a Steenbeck in the EYE Film Institute Netherlands archive.*

sketchbook for *Passion* as it was a critical reflection on *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*).

Turning to *The Earth Trembles*, Visconti has been a major reference for Godard from the outset. This film is cited three times in *Histoire*(*s*) *du cinéma* where Neorealism is central to his thinking. The film's function in *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) is arguably relatively straightforward, so I shall simply recall here its status as a documentary-inflected narrative that tackles the topic of ordinary people confronted with near-impossible choices in the face of severe economic hardship. As with *Cops*, the only print of *The Earth Trembles* in the EYE archive is a 16 mm distribution print with Dutch subtitles. Since it is the only print and it came from Film International it is again very likely that it is the one that Godard used in 1981.

According to Tesson the sequence that Godard employed is that of the lengthy conversation between the two brothers, 'Ntoni (Antonio Arcidiacono) and Cola (Giuseppe Arcidiacono), just before the latter resolves to leave his native Sicily. The third reel of the EYE print begins with the short scene depicting Cola's encounter with a shadowy stranger on the beach, which leads into the lengthy anguished conversation sequence. Assuming that this is the print that Godard used it seems logical that he would have begun the sequence from the start of the reel. However, as in the case of *Cops*, since the 16 mm reel lasts a good deal longer than the extract used it is impossible to know for sure where he ended the sequence. A likely place, so that it does not become too long, is directly after the brothers' conversation just after 'Ntoni tells Cola that they must stay and fight in their home village (timed from the beginning of the reel this sequence lasts just over 10 minutes). It is possible that Godard let the reel run on a little, perhaps as far as the moment that Cola, watched by 'Ntoni, joins the stranger and his associates in a café the following morning (giving a sequence length of just over 14 minutes).

Finally, I shall address *Man of Marble*, which was a relatively new film at the time of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*). After winning the International Critic's Prize at Cannes in 1978 the film went on to provoke heated debate in France, with *Cahiers du cinéma* publishing not one but two opposing reviews written by Jean-Paul Fargier and Serge Daney. Fargier tore into it, dismissing it as superficial, phony, and peopled by wooden characters.[29] Daney, by contrast, suggested that one should not judge *Man of Marble* using the same criteria that one would apply to a comparable feature made outside the constraints of recent Polish propaganda and censorship and proceeded to argue that what was essentially at stake in the film was the salvation of cinema in a country whose population had long since lost faith in the capacity of films to tell the truth.[30]

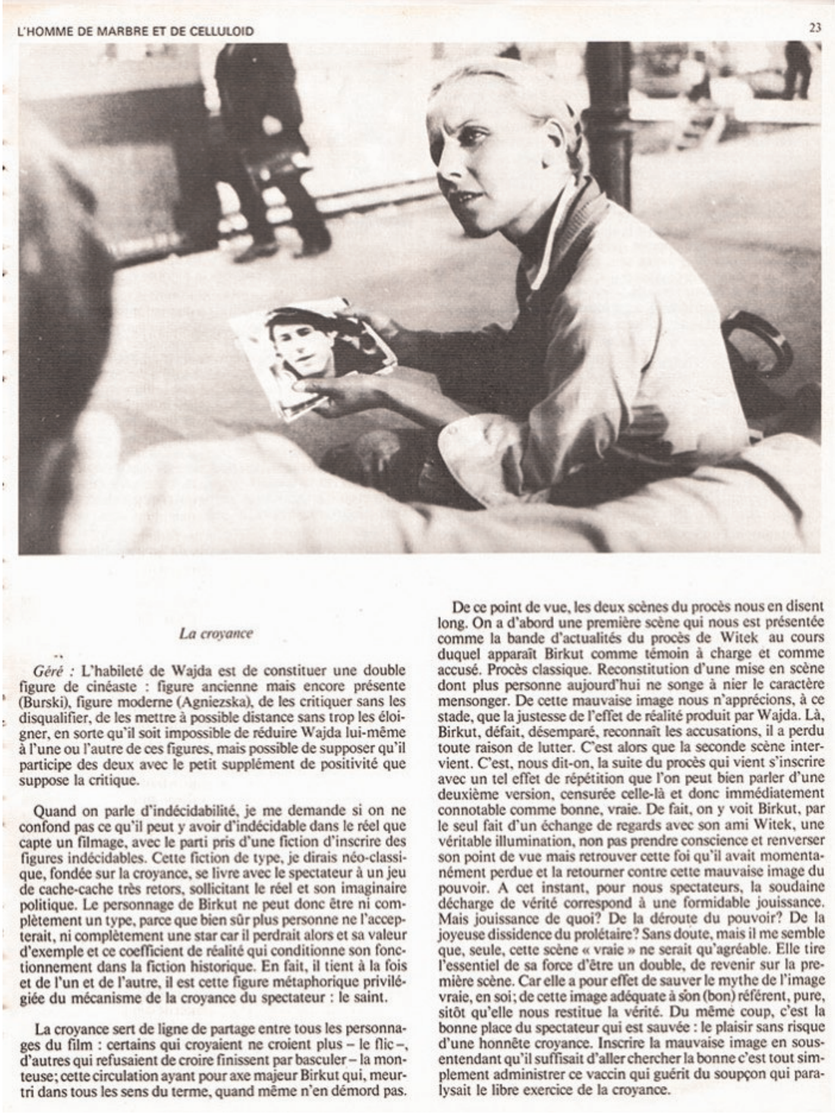
These two articles were only the beginning. Three months later *Cahiers* returned to the film in a thirteen-page roundtable discussion involving the historian François Géré, the philosopher Jacques Rancière, the sociologist and political activist Robert Linhart, and two members of the *Cahiers* editorial team, Pascal Bonitzer and Jean Narboni.[31] All the participants deemed aspects of the film to be interesting or important. Narboni proved the most sceptical while Linhart mounted a passionate defence of what he considered its ambition and historical significance. For him it constituted a landmark in the cinematic representation of Eastern Europe, Stalinism, and the Polish Stakhanovite 'model worker' movement, which had successfully forged a new way of representing postwar Eastern Europe and opened a breach that had in turn created an opportunity for a more complex, nuanced discourse on the topic in the future.[32]

The key point for our purposes is that two months later Godard guest edited the 300th special issue of *Cahiers du cinéma* in which he included a lengthy visual essay on *Man of Marble* and Eisenstein's *Oktyabr* (October 1917 [Ten Days that Shook the World], 1928).[33] This essay constituted both a reflection on Wajda's film and a manifesto for a new form of iconographic film criticism in magazines; it also involved a direct engagement with the *Cahiers* roundtable. Godard cut up and recycled some of the images that had been used to illustrate the debate, notably a still of Agnieszka holding out a photograph of construction worker Mateusz Birkut (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz) who is the subject of her film-within-the-film. (Godard flipped the original so that it is back to front, a technique he has used quite frequently with both still and moving images [including in *Histoire(s) du cinema*] as a means of facilitating a dialogue between images.)

In his visual essay Godard largely set aside the contents of the roundtable. The main theme that he retained from it was one that had already been a key point of discussion in the initial *Cahiers* reviews of *Man of Marble* – Krystyna Janda's unusual performance. Fargier had been exasperated by what he considered her frenetic hyperactivity which he viewed as a mask for the underlying insubstantiality of her character.[34] Godard, too, was struck by what he termed her 'terribly exaggerated performance'[35] and indeed his interest in this aspect of the film is explicit in his essay's subtitle: 'Comment joue Krystyna Janda' (How Krystyna Janda acts).

As with Chaplin and Keaton the attraction of Janda's performance style for Godard undoubtedly lay in the way in which it resonated with his quest in this period for fresh corporeal rhythms and a new vocabulary of gesture. Again, as with Chaplin and Keaton, *Man of Marble* in this respect announces *Passion* and indeed in his earliest treatment for the film, written in January 1981 (the month before the *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) screening), he pointed to Wajda's recent films as an important reference in relation to his next feature.[36] In addition, in his subsequent image-text treatment for *Passion* which is dated 15 March 1981 (a month after the screening) we find continuing traces of his visual essay and of his reflection on *Man of Marble* together with ample evidence of the impact of Wajda's film on his developing project – not least in the guise of Jerzy Radziwiłowicz himself who would go on to play the role of the filmmaker, Jerzy, in *Passion*. On a material level some of the photographs of Birkut/Radziwiłowicz that Godard recycled in his treatment for *Passion* are familiar from the documents with which he had already engaged, including one from the *Cahiers* roundtable.

The 35 mm print of *Man of Marble* in the EYE archive came from Film International. As noted above the sequence described by Tesson comprises the second half of the film's second reel and lasts just over 10 minutes. In it we follow Agnieszka from the small screening room in which she has been viewing archival material relating to Birkut to the airport where she hopes to interview acclaimed filmmaker Jerzy Burski (Tadeusz Lomnicki). The reel and sequence end with Burski and Agnieszka driving away from the airport. This section of *Man of Marble* contains plenty of examples of



L'HOMME DE MARBRE ET DE CELLULOID 23

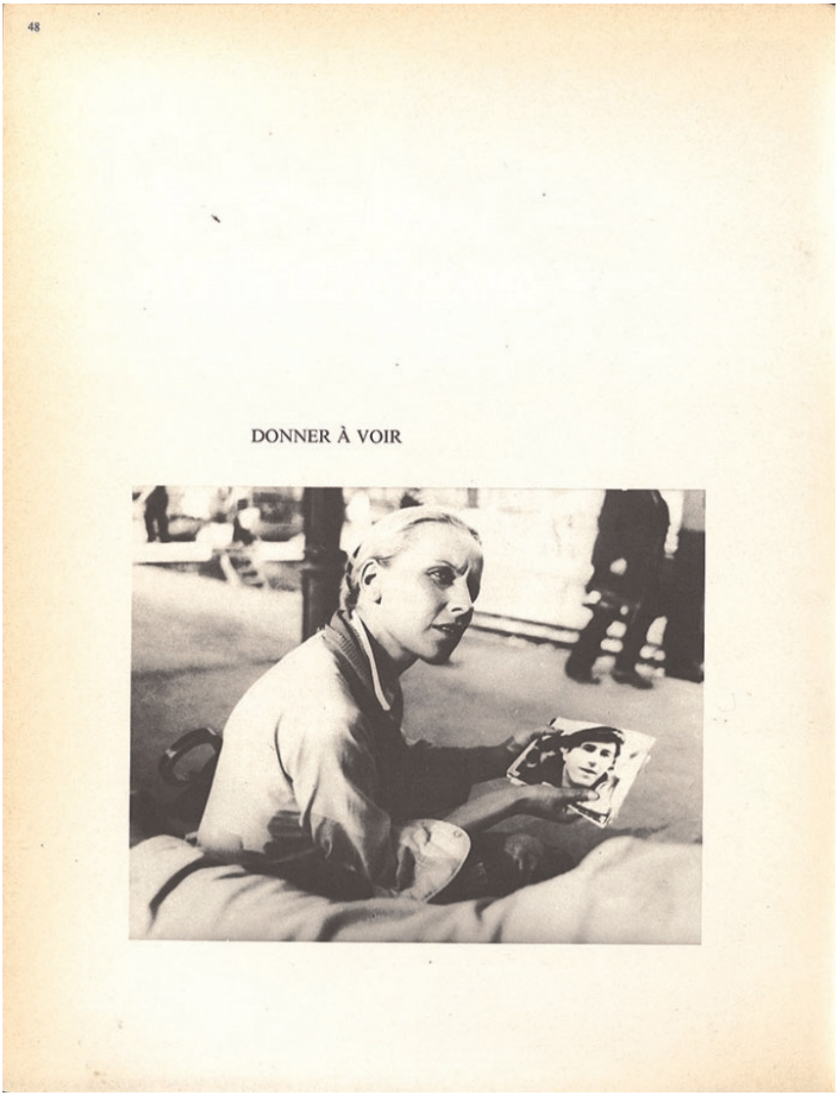
La croyance

Géré : L'habileté de Wajda est de constituer une double figure de cinéaste : figure ancienne mais encore présente (Burski), figure moderne (Agniezska), de les critiquer sans les disqualifier, de les mettre à possible distance sans trop les éloigner, en sorte qu'il soit impossible de réduire Wajda lui-même à l'une ou l'autre de ces figures, mais possible de supposer qu'il participe des deux avec le petit supplément de positivité que suppose la critique.

Quand on parle d'indécidabilité, je me demande si on ne confond pas ce qu'il peut y avoir d'indécidable dans le réel que capte un filmage, avec le parti pris d'une fiction d'inscrire des figures indécidables. Cette fiction de type, je dirais néo-classique, fondée sur la croyance, se livre avec le spectateur à un jeu de cache-cache très retors, sollicitant le réel et son imaginaire politique. Le personnage de Birkut ne peut donc être ni complètement un type, parce que bien sûr plus personne ne l'accepterait, ni complètement une star car il perdrait alors et sa valeur d'exemple et ce coefficient de réalité qui conditionne son fonctionnement dans la fiction historique. En fait, il tient à la fois et de l'un et de l'autre, il est cette figure métaphorique privilégiée du mécanisme de la croyance du spectateur : le saint.

La croyance sert de ligne de partage entre tous les personnages du film : certains qui croyaient ne croient plus – le flic –, d'autres qui refusaient de croire finissent par basculer – la monteuse; cette circulation ayant pour axe majeur Birkut qui, meurtri dans tous les sens du terme, quand même n'en démord pas.

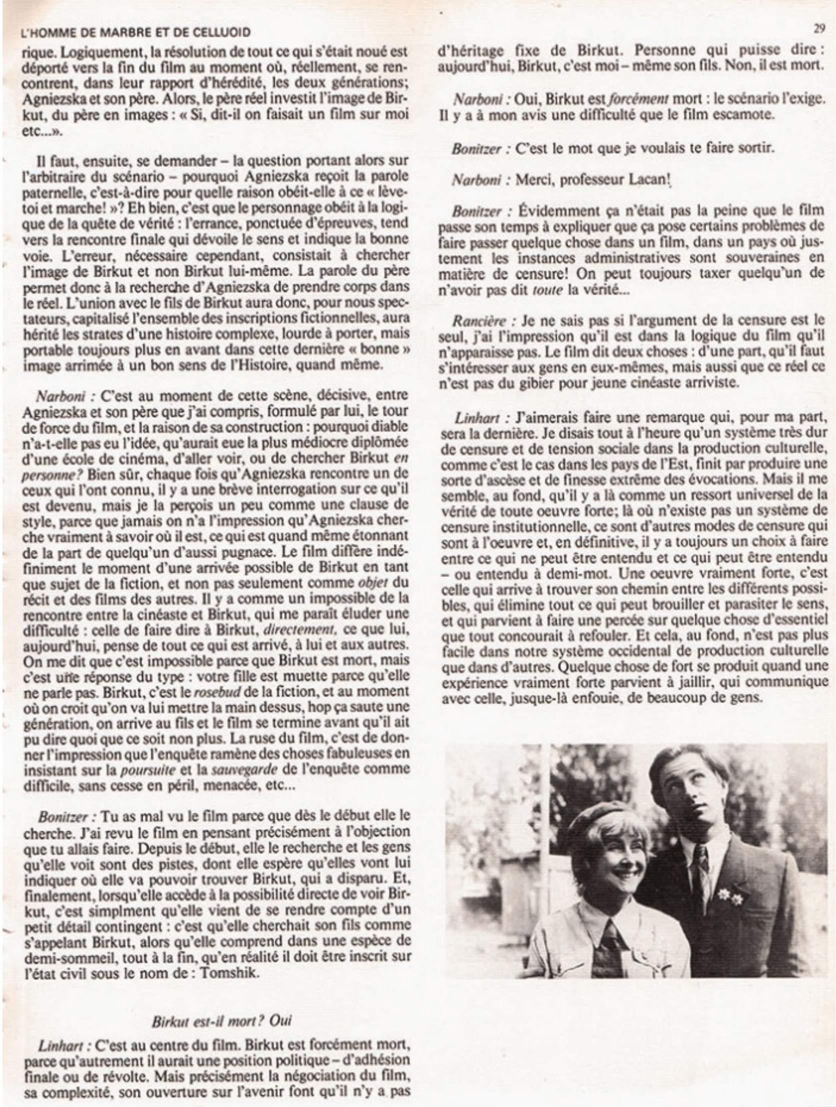
De ce point de vue, les deux scènes du procès nous en disent long. On a d'abord une première scène qui nous est présentée comme la bande d'actualités du procès de Witek au cours duquel apparaît Birkut comme témoin à charge et comme accusé. Procès classique. Reconstitution d'une mise en scène dont plus personne aujourd'hui ne songe à nier le caractère mensonger. De cette mauvaise image nous n'apprécions, à ce stade, que la justesse de l'effet de réalité produit par Wajda. Là, Birkut, défait, désemparé, reconnaît les accusations, il a perdu toute raison de lutter. C'est alors que la seconde scène intervient. C'est, nous dit-on, la suite du procès qui vient s'inscrire avec un tel effet de répétition que l'on peut bien parler d'une deuxième version, censurée celle-là et donc immédiatement connotable comme bonne, vraie. De fait, on y voit Birkut, par le seul fait d'un échange de regards avec son ami Witek, une véritable illumination, non pas prendre conscience et renverser son point de vue mais retrouver cette foi qu'il avait momentanément perdue et la retourner contre cette mauvaise image du pouvoir. A cet instant, pour nous spectateurs, la soudaine décharge de vérité correspond à une formidable jouissance. Mais jouissance de quoi? De la déroute du pouvoir? De la joyeuse dissidence du prolétaire? Sans doute, mais il me semble que, seule, cette scène « vraie » ne serait qu'agréable. Elle tire l'essentiel de sa force d'être un double, de revenir sur la première scène. Car elle a pour effet de sauver le mythe de l'image vraie, en soi; de cette image adéquate à son (bon) référent, pure, sitôt qu'elle nous restitue la vérité. Du même coup, c'est la bonne place du spectateur qui est sauvée : le plaisir sans risque d'une honnête croyance. Inscrire la mauvaise image en sous-entendant qu'il suffisait d'aller chercher la bonne c'est tout simplement administrer ce vaccin qui guérit du soupçon qui paralysait le libre exercice de la croyance.



48

DONNER À VOIR

Figs 6a, b: Still from Man of Marble used to illustrate the roundtable discussion in Cahiers du cinéma No. 298 (March 1979); Godard's re-use of the same image in the special issue of Cahiers he edited two months later.



L'HOMME DE MARBRE ET DE CELLUOID

29

rique. Logiquement, la résolution de tout ce qui s'était noué est déporté vers la fin du film au moment où, réellement, se rencontrent, dans leur rapport d'hérédité, les deux générations; Agniezska et son père. Alors, le père réel investit l'image de Birkut, du père en images : « Si, dit-il on faisait un film sur moi etc...».

Il faut, ensuite, se demander – la question portant alors sur l'arbitraire du scénario – pourquoi Agniezska reçoit la parole paternelle, c'est-à-dire pour quelle raison obéit-elle à ce « lève-toi et marche! »? Eh bien, c'est que le personnage obéit à la logique de la quête de vérité : l'errance, ponctuée d'épreuves, tend vers la rencontre finale qui dévoile le sens et indique la bonne voie. L'erreur, nécessaire cependant, consistait à chercher l'image de Birkut et non Birkut lui-même. La parole du père permet donc à la recherche d'Agniezska de prendre corps dans le réel. L'union avec le fils de Birkut aura donc, pour nous spectateurs, capitalisé l'ensemble des inscriptions fictionnelles, aura hérité les strates d'une histoire complexe, lourde à porter, mais portable toujours plus en avant dans cette dernière « bonne » image arrimée à un bon sens de l'Histoire, quand même.

Narboni : C'est au moment de cette scène, décisive, entre Agniezska et son père que j'ai compris, formulé par lui, le tour de force du film, et la raison de sa construction : pourquoi diable n'a-t-elle pas eu l'idée, qu'aurait eue la plus médiocre diplômée d'une école de cinéma, d'aller voir, ou de chercher Birkut *en personne?* Bien sûr, chaque fois qu'Agniezska rencontre un de ceux qui l'ont connu, il y a une brève interrogation sur ce qu'il est devenu, mais je la perçois un peu comme une clause de style, parce que jamais on n'a l'impression qu'Agniezska cherche vraiment à savoir où il est, ce qui est quand même étonnant de la part de quelqu'un d'aussi pugnace. Le film diffère indéfiniment le moment d'une arrivée possible de Birkut en tant que sujet de la fiction, et non pas seulement comme *objet* du récit et des films des autres. Il y a comme un impossible de la rencontre entre la cinéaste et Birkut, qui me paraît éluder une difficulté : celle de faire dire à Birkut, *directement,* ce que lui, aujourd'hui, pense de tout ce qui est arrivé, à lui et aux autres. On me dit que c'est impossible parce que Birkut est mort, mais c'est une réponse du type : votre fille est muette parce qu'elle ne parle pas. Birkut, c'est le *rosebud* de la fiction, et au moment où on croit qu'on va lui mettre la main dessus, hop ça saute une génération, on arrive au fils et le film se termine avant qu'il ait pu dire quoi que ce soit non plus. La ruse du film, c'est de donner l'impression que l'enquête ramène des choses fabuleuses en insistant sur la *poursuite* et la *sauvegarde* de l'enquête comme difficile, sans cesse en péril, menacée, etc...

Bonitzer : Tu as mal vu le film parce que dès le début elle le cherche. J'ai revu le film en pensant précisément à l'objection que tu allais faire. Depuis le début, elle le recherche et les gens qu'elle voit sont des pistes, dont elle espère qu'elles vont lui indiquer où elle va pouvoir trouver Birkut, qui a disparu. Et, finalement, lorsqu'elle accède à la possibilité directe de voir Birkut, c'est simplment qu'elle vient de se rendre compte d'un petit détail contingent : c'est qu'elle cherchait son fils comme s'appelant Birkut, alors qu'elle comprend dans une espèce de demi-sommeil, tout à la fin, qu'en réalité il doit être inscrit sur l'état civil sous le nom de : Tomshik.

Birkut est-il mort? Oui

Linhart : C'est au centre du film. Birkut est forcément mort, parce qu'autrement il aurait une position politique – d'adhésion finale ou de révolte. Mais précisément la négociation du film, sa complexité, son ouverture sur l'avenir font qu'il n'y a pas d'héritage fixe de Birkut. Personne qui puisse dire : aujourd'hui, Birkut, c'est moi – même son fils. Non, il est mort.

Narboni : Oui, Birkut est *forcément* mort : le scénario l'exige. Il y a à mon avis une difficulté que le film escamote.

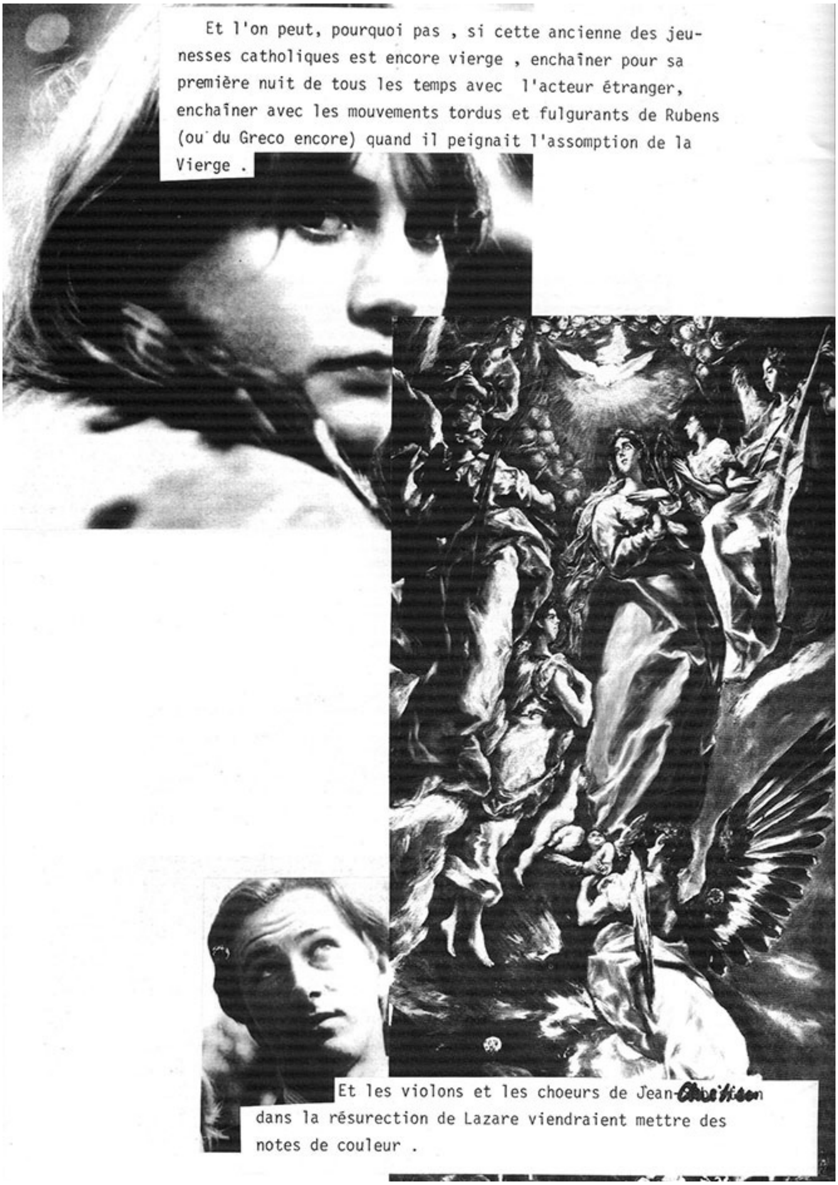
Bonitzer : C'est le mot que je voulais te faire sortir.

Narboni : Merci, professeur Lacan!

Bonitzer : Évidemment ça n'était pas la peine que le film passe son temps à expliquer que ça pose certains problèmes de faire passer quelque chose dans un film, dans un pays où justement les instances administratives sont souveraines en matière de censure! On peut toujours taxer quelqu'un de n'avoir pas dit *toute* la vérité...

Rancière : Je ne sais pas si l'argument de la censure est le seul, j'ai l'impression qu'il est dans la logique du film qu'il n'apparaisse pas. Le film dit deux choses : d'une part, qu'il faut s'intéresser aux gens en eux-mêmes, mais aussi que ce réel ce n'est pas du gibier pour jeune cinéaste arriviste.

Linhart : J'aimerais faire une remarque qui, pour ma part, sera la dernière. Je disais tout à l'heure qu'un système très dur de censure et de tension sociale dans la production culturelle, comme c'est le cas dans les pays de l'Est, finit par produire une sorte d'ascèse et de finesse extrême des évocations. Mais il me semble, au fond, qu'il y a là comme un ressort universel de la vérité de toute oeuvre forte; là où n'existe pas un système de censure institutionnelle, ce sont d'autres modes de censure qui sont à l'oeuvre et, en définitive, il y a toujours un choix à faire entre ce qui ne peut être entendu et ce qui peut être entendu – ou entendu à demi-mot. Une oeuvre vraiment forte, c'est celle qui arrive à trouver son chemin entre les différents possibles, qui élimine tout ce qui peut brouiller et parasiter le sens, et qui parvient à faire une percée sur quelque chose d'essentiel que tout concourait à refouler. Et cela, au fond, n'est pas plus facile dans notre système occidental de production culturelle que dans d'autres. Quelque chose de fort se produit quand une expérience vraiment forte parvient à jaillir, qui communique avec celle, jusque-là enfouie, de beaucoup de gens.



Et l'on peut, pourquoi pas , si cette ancienne des jeunesses catholiques est encore vierge , enchaîner pour sa première nuit de tous les temps avec l'acteur étranger, enchaîner avec les mouvements tordus et fulgurants de Rubens (ou du Greco encore) quand il peignait l'assomption de la Vierge .

Et les violons et les choeurs de Jean-Chrétien dans la résurection de Lazare viendraient mettre des notes de couleur .

Figs 7a, b: Still from Man of Marble used to illustrate the roundtable discussion of the film in Cahiers du cinéma, No. 298 (March 1979), and Godard's re-use of the image in his treatment for Passion.

Janda's edgy performance style, including her delivery of a violent kick to her sound engineer's shin. It also provides a further instance of a sequence that seems to have been carefully selected to chime with *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) – it opens with newsreel footage depicting Birkut and his wife Hanka Tomczyk (Krystyna Zachwatowicz) entering their new apartment in Nowa Huta, a scene that offers striking continuity with Isabelle's hunt for an apartment in Godard's film.

3 Reception

There is very little first-hand evidence regarding the reception of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). In an article published seven months after the event Jean-Claude Biette reported that the film was remarkable, although his wording ('[t]he experiment was, apparently, fascinating …') indicates that he had not himself been present at the screening.[37] However, he had evidently discussed it with some of those who had been there since he went on to note that the after-screening discussion had been rather turbulent, with Godard coming under attack from journalists, perhaps (postulates Biette) as a result of his refusal to assume a conventional 'schoolmasterly' role.

According to Charles Tesson, who was at the screening, Godard said afterwards that he felt like he had been watching television while changing the channel every ten minutes.[38] Rather than charting correspondences between the film's constituent clips Godard chose to instead rehearse one of his cherished themes of this period: the importance of the interrelationship between love and work and the divorce in capitalist societies between the two. Here is how Tesson relayed Godard's comments on *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) after the screening, followed by his own reflections:

Godard preferred to talk in relation to his film of work and love, and of Eisenstein, Keaton, and Birkut's love of work. To see too 'the harm that love does to love'. I retain from this experience the strange feeling of having seen the *whole* of *Sauve qui peut* in an hour and thirty minutes (nine times ten, the length of the film). Of having traversed it genealogically and geologically. This feeling of seeing a sectional drawing of a film (and it is indeed a film) for the first time.[39]

The overarching themes of love and work that Godard identifies here are criss-crossed by a number of sub-themes: the fragility of interpersonal human relations; the contrast between urban and rural life; economic servitude and the vulnerability of the individual in the context of consumer capitalism; the social roles and cinematic representation of men and women; and the ambitions and historical failures of collective attempts to imagine and implement alternative political structures.

Attempting a full analysis of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) would require a separate article. A key reference in such a discussion would be Robert Linhart, with and about whom Godard had sought to make a television series in the late 1970s titled *Travail* devoted to a 'very visual' history of work.[40] There is a good deal one could say about Godard's relationship with Linhart, with whom he had worked earlier in the same decade within the context of the radical left-wing newspaper *J'accuse* and whose name he had subsequently adopted for his off-screen interviewer persona in *France tour detour deux enfants*.[41] Linhart's presence in *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) can be felt indirectly via his contribution to the *Cahiers* roundtable on *Man of Marble* and directly via his 1978 book *L'Établi*, from which Godard had cited a lengthy passage on the reality of daily life on the factory production line on the soundtrack of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) (in the scene set in the offices of the regional newspaper) and which is reprised in the opening sequence of the compilation film. This sequence evokes both Godard's work with *J'accuse* and his subsequent attempts to create a new film journal – a project in which Linhart was again involved.[42] The quotation from *L'Établi* in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) runs over a number of shots including a striking one of Michel Piaget (Michel Cassagne) manually typesetting words in the newspaper print-room. The typesetting process in this latter shot is both foregrounded and dissected through the use of altered motion as we hear the following passage from Linhart's book on the soundtrack:

> [s]omething, in the body and in the mind, buttresses itself against repetition and nothingness. Life: a faster gesture, an arm lowered out of rhythm, a slower step, a moment's irregularity, a wrong movement [, 'getting ahead', 'slipping back', the tactics of the work station]; all the means through which, in the pathetic square of resistance against the empty eternity of the job, there are still events, however minuscule, and there is still time, however horrendously drawn out. This awkwardness, this unnecessary movement, this sudden acceleration, [this incorrect weld,] this hand that does it again twice, this grimace, this disengagement, all of this is life hanging on. Everything that, in every man on the assembly line, screams silently: 'I am not a machine!'[43]

This quotation provides a succinct epigraph to Godard's work of the 1970s, its combination with the typesetting imagery offering a concise summary of his discourse on written language generally and of his critique of conventional journalism in particular. In addition, its evocation of the violence and monotony of the production line, yet at the same time of the capacity of the individual to avoid total subjugation to the cycles and repetitions of such work, make it an apt postscript to both *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) and *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). Indeed its definition of 'life' in terms of that which evades and resists the pressures of social normalisation provides us with an excellent definition of the sense of 'la vie' in the titles of both films. Where *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) like *France tour detour deux enfants* had sought evidence of such life via the dissection of human movement through altered motion *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) pursued this quest through new means: the incorporation of the irregular, unpredictable (and in this context inherently transgressive and life-affirming) rhythms of Keaton's and Janda's performances.

4 Conclusion

Tesson's article followed by an examination of archival prints of the films enabled me to attempt a digital reconstitution of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). This reconstruction was first shown at the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt in June 2013, subsequently in the Birkbeck Cinema in London in November 2013, and also at the National Media Museum in Bradford (UK) in May 2014. On each occasion it generated considerable interest partly because of its unique form but also because viewers were surprised to discover a feature-length work by a prominent contemporary filmmaker that had slipped completely off the radar. In this digital version I was not able to replicate certain of what I nevertheless believe to be important characteristics of the original, such as the Czech intertitles of *Cops*. At some point in the future I very much hope to recreate *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) in a theatrical context using the EYE archive prints. I sent a DVD copy to Godard in January 2014 together with a number of queries but he did not reply.

I would not wish to make any overblown claims regarding the significance of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). However, given the extent to which Godard's activities in Rotterdam have been neglected and the negative light in which they have tended to be remembered when at all it is worth stressing that *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) undoubtedly constituted the most daring and inventive montage experiment that he had attempted since embarking on his Montreal lectures three years earlier. It is not a polished lost masterpiece, but it is a forgotten work by a major filmmaker and a remarkable experiment both within Godard's œuvre and in cinema history in general.

As Tesson noted following the original screening it also coheres extremely well as a film. In addition, besides its interest as a stand-alone artefact it provides us with a fresh insight into Godard's working methods and in particular into his use of montage as a generative tool for both thinking and provoking thought. Finally, the unearthing of *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) casts into relief the very concrete connection between his investigation of cinema history and his filmmaking practice in the 1980s, and it restores an important but hitherto missing intermediate link between his celluloid-based experimentation with film fragments in Montreal and Rotterdam and his later videographic film history practice with which we are now much more familiar via *Histoire*(*s*) *du cinéma* and cognate works.

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About the author

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Vinzenz Hediger for inviting me to contribute to a lecture series on Godard at the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt in 2013 which prompted me to pursue the research presented in this article. I am also indebted to François Albera, Kathleen Dickson, Monica Galer, Mark Goodall, Joe Kreczak, Laura Mulvey, Regine Prange, Ian Shand, Urs Spörri, Ronny Temme, Michael Temple, Rudolf van den Berg, Tom Vincent, and Frans Westra for their help of various kinds. A longer version of this article is forthcoming in German in Hediger & Hüser 2015.
2. From 1972 to 1982 the Rotterdam film festival was called Film International (followed by the year in question). Film International (without the year) was the name of its distribution arm. The festival was renamed Film Festival Rotterdam in 1983.
3. See Auty 1981, p. 2; Tesson 1981, p. 46; Biette 1981, p. v. Auty is the only commentator to report that Godard titled this compilation film *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). Since he is explicit on this point I have taken it to be correct.

4. Tesson 1981, p. 46.
5. De Baecque 2010, pp. 676, 879, n. 11. In the footnote de Baecque confuses and conflates two separate events which in fact took place four months apart.
6. Heijs & Westra 1996, pp. 136-137.
7. Auty 1981, p. 2.
8. See Godard's comments on this topic in Godard 1980a, p. 287.
9. Godard 2014, p. 126.
10. For a detailed discussion of the Montreal and Rotterdam lectures see Witt 2014a.
11. Monica Galer, interview by the author, 1 September 2011. Galer is Tegelaar's maiden name, to which she has reverted. To avoid confusion I have used the name under which she was known at the time (Tegelaar) in the body of the text.
12. Galer, interview by the author, 1 September 2011.
13. Rudolf van den Berg, interview by the author, 18 June 2014; Heijs & Westra 1996, p. 135.
14. Email from François Albera, 31 January 2014.
15. Albera does not recall *Old and New* or *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) being included on this occasion. Emails from François Albera, 31 January 2014, 17 February 2014.
16. Galer, interview by the author, 1 September 2011.
17. Email from Rudolf van den Berg, 10 May 2014.
18. Van den Berg, interview by the author, 18 June 2014.
19. Email from François Albera, 31 January 2014.
20. Heijs & Westra 1996, p. 137.
21. Ibid., p. 151.
22. Anon 1978a, pp. 3-4; Anon 1978b, p. 7.
23. We should note in this context François Albera's recollection of Godard having attempted a second similar experiment later in 1981 using some of the same source films that he had employed for *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*). Albera does not remember the exact date of this event but it must have taken place after the *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) screening since he recalls it following (rather than preceding) the previously mentioned fire which occurred just three days after the end of the festival during which *Sauve la vie* (*qui peut*) had been shown. Emails from François Albera, 31 January 2014, 17 February 2014.
24. Tesson 1981, p. 46.
25. These observations are based on my viewing a 16 mm print of *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) on a Steenbeck at EYE and of the 35 mm Artifical Eye print in the BFI archive.
26. For further discussion of the presence and function of the films of Eisenstein, Keaton, and Visconti in *Histoire*(*s*) *du cinéma* see Witt 2013.
27. Godard 1980b, p. 461. See also Godard's reflections on this topic on *The Dick Cavett Show*, PBS, October 1980.
28. See Witt 2004.
29. Fargier 1978, p. 40.
30. Daney 1978, p. 43.
31. Bonitzer, Géré, Linhart, Narboni, & Rancière 1979, pp. 16-29.
32. Linhart in ibid., pp. 24-25.
33. Godard 1979.
34. See Fargier 1978, p. 40.
35. Godard 1979, p. 56.
36. Godard 1985b, p. 485. Besides *Man of Marble* Godard was probably alluding here to Wajda's *Bez znieczulenia* (Rough Treatment, 1978) and *Panny z Wilka* (The Maids of

Wilko, 1979) which had been shown at Film International 1980, an event that he and Wajda had both attended.

37. Biette 1981, p. v.
38. Tesson 1981, p. 46.
39. Ibid. My research suggests that Tesson's account of the lengths of the sequences and of the film's overall running time are only approximations.
40. This was one of the two projects that Godard had attempted to get off the ground in the late 1970s in collaboration with the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel (INA). The other was *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. See Godard 1978, p. 4.
41. I have explored Godard's connection and debt to Linhart more fully in Witt 2006 and Witt 2014b.
42. Besides Godard and Linhart the other people involved in this film journal project were Anne-Marie Miéville, François Albera, the filmmaker Francis Reusser, and the journalist Philippe Gavi. Jean-Pierre Gorin was also envisaged as a potential collaborator. Emails from François Albera, 31 January 2014, 17 February 2014.
43. Linhart 1978, p. 14. Godard omitted the phrases given here in brackets.