



## Hélas pour Nouvelle Vague

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**Abstract.** Nouvelle Vague has always been aware of its place in movie History. *Contempt* (*Le mépris*, 1963) already shows the complex relationship between classical cinema and modern cinema in the guise of Myth. In 1990 Godard makes a film called *Nouvelle Vague*, a film declaredly about Myth and Resurrection. The *politique des auteurs*'s myth of the author consisted (as myths usually do) in a dichotomy: the intentional author seen as the holder of a personal view and style *and* the author as its own nemesis, being present only insofar as it is invisible, reduced to some sort of zero degree. According to Godard the historical role of Nouvelle Vague is no more to carry on the classical cinema with different means and under the aegis of myth (like in *Contempt*): it is instead to let Nouvelle Vague/*politique des auteurs* authorial dichotomy die and resurrect in the “twisted” form of nowadays' paradoxical importance of the Author, being nowhere and everywhere at the same time. The paper is a close reading of *Nouvelle Vague*, as a kind of strange prophecy on nowadays' mediascape situation, and as an example of how Nouvelle Vague (Godard, in this case) conceptualizes its own importance and place in media history.

### 1. The Author as a Myth

*“L’objective livre au cinéaste une matière brute [...] et le rôle de la mise en scène, de la réalisation, sera de donner l’impression que ce n’est pas mis en scène.”*<sup>1</sup>

(Leenhardt 1936)

Why should a paper about the latest films by Nouvelle Vague master Jean-Luc Godard begin with a 1936 quotation of Roger Leenhardt? It is very well known that the root of the French New Wave lies in the *politique des auteurs* critical movement inside the *Cahiers du Cinéma* review. The origin of this movement, some way or another, is chiefly André Bazin's thought. Among Bazin's major influences, Leenhardt's was probably the strongest.

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<sup>1</sup> “The camera lens delivers to the film-maker a piece of brute reality [...] the task of the *mise en scène* [staging], of directing, will be to render the impression that it was not staged” (my translation, M. G.).

A myth is about an origin (of a community, of a religion, or whatever). So the myth itself, the myth of the Author in this case, as a myth, needs an origin. It would not be wrong to fix a mythical origin of the myth of the author in this very Leenhardt's sentence: the *mise en scène*, the quintessential mark of the Author, is there only insofar as it cancels itself. The author is a myth. The *politique des auteurs* used to be the clerical élite celebrating this myth. But what is a myth? Of course it is unthinkable to get into the infinite anthropological question "what is a myth?" here – but one of the possible, and less disputable, definitions of myth is "an imaginary solution for a real contradiction." So, a contradiction is at stake inside the Author myth. The Author myth brought along by the *politique des auteurs* is ambivalent: the real, actual author is the author that fades out, that gives up his own existence as a "creator", or an "artist", for the impersonal power of cinema's sake and/or of reality's sake. From this nemesis, and only from it, a new form of creative, paradoxical subjectivity would come across. Namely Hawks's, Hitchcock's, Renoir's, Ray's, Rossellini's and so on. It is a double movement, personal and impersonal at the same time.

This simple truth is often forgotten, or neglected. The standard opinion of the *politique des auteurs* as a neo-romantic exaltation of the artistic creation is basically wrong. And yet, this radical ambivalence cannot really come unexpected. The original, truly romantic idea of genius was of course already an ambivalent one: the real romantic genius is the one who obliterates himself in the impersonal substance of genius. So *politique des auteurs* is actually romantic, not really in the naïve sense of merely exalting the individual genius, but rather because it perfectly embodies the stern ambivalence of that concept.<sup>2</sup>

Among the ones who were not duped by that common opinion, there is Serge Daney. His articles principally dealing with the French New Wave (Daney 1988 and 2001) are among the most lucid statements of that structural ambivalence. "En lançant la 'politique des auteurs,' la Nouvelle Vague balise bien évidemment un terrain sur lequel elle escompte plus tard évoluer et il est clair qu'elle est prête à en récolter les bénéfiques. Mais par 'auteur,' jamais elle n'entend le démiurge responsable du moindre détail de son film, maniaque jusqu'à l'obsession, maître après Dieu sur son plateau. Sinon elle aurait admiré davantage Carné, Clement ou Clouzot. Par 'auteur' elle entend l'homme qui répond *personnellement* à des contraintes et à des commandes réelles, l'homme qui tire avec un style à lui son épingle d'un jeu qu'il ne domine pas. Renoir est cet homme et c'est la liberté de

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<sup>2</sup> Back then, the critical movement that used to be particularly inclined to exalt the personal side of the authorial figures it worshipped was rather a different one: the "Mac Mahon" (Mourlet 1959). Such a movement, along with the particular cult of the author it supported, used to be quite close to the *politique des auteurs* sphere, but it was also nonetheless firmly distinct from it – also as based on a journal of its own (*Présence de cinéma*).

l'homme qui fait toujours 'ce qu'il peut' qui est admirable chez lui et non pas la servitude égoïste de celui qui ne fait que 'ce qu'il veut'"<sup>3</sup> (Daney 1988, 72). Suffice it to mention Eric Rohmer's love for classicism, the Hollywood-like transparency of the directorial style of Claude Chabrol, the subtle and passionate play with "conformist" cinematic forms by François Truffaut. As far as Nouvelle Vague directors are concerned, at least the ones descending from the *politique des auteurs*, the personal and the impersonal strictly go together.

Jean-Luc Godard himself has always been quite careful to make this subject clear for those patient enough to listen to him all along. *Breathless (A bout de souffle*, 1959) is already highly exemplary of a new conception of authorship, which is radically distinct from Bergman's or Fellini's individual craftsmanship or genius, but rather grounds itself on the self-oblivion, so to speak, in a huge pre-existing cinematic universe, as Dudley Andrew has pointed out (Andrew 1986, 19). His second one, *The Little Soldier (Le petit soldat*, 1963), is about the very existentialist denial of the self in order to act in and for the world – something eventually enacted by Godard himself in his own very politically-oriented "Dziga Vertov Group" period at the end of the Sixties, when he explicitly theorized and performed the total dissolution of authorship into a collective namelessness. But here again duality was majorly at stake. This is what the historian René Prédal tells us about that period. "La difficulté a tenir les paris de 1968 est particulièrement évidente chez Jean-Luc Godard, dont le cas est exemplaire des conflits entre volonté de témoignage anonyme et tentation d'expression personnelle. En effet, d'abord sincèrement désireux de privilégier un travail commun, Godard en vient vite à un simple dualisme (partage et non plus dissolution du travail créatif) pour arriver trois ans après à réaffirmer son moi à travers un regard purement subjectif. Le groupe Dziga Vertov se soumet en effet presque immédiatement aux décisions conjuguées de Godard et Gorin."<sup>4</sup> (Prédal 1991, 254.)

<sup>3</sup> "By launching the *Politique des auteurs*, French New Wave prepared the field onto which it would have trodden a few years later, and of which it was ready enough to reap the harvest. But 'author' here never means the demiurge who is responsible for each and every detail in the film, an obsessive maniac of precision, a master of his set as only God can be. Otherwise, Carné, Clément or Clouzot would have been admired from the beginning. For the *Politique des auteurs*, the 'author' is the man *personally* answering for real orders and constraints, the man who, thanks to a style of his own, finds a way out of what he cannot control. Renoir is this man, and what is most admirable in him is the freedom of the man who always does 'what he can', rather than the selfish slavishness of the one who only does 'what he wants.'" (My translation, M. G.)

<sup>4</sup> "The difficulty to accept the challenges coming from 1968 is particularly evident in Godard's case, which is exemplary of the conflicts between the will to testify anonymously and the tendency to express his own personality. Actually, while at first sincerely willing to opt for a common job, Godard ends up with a simple dualism (creative power was now to be shared rather than destroyed), and three years later with a full restoration of his self through a purely subjective look. Dziga Vertov Group submits itself almost immediately to Godard's and Gorin's decisions." (My translation, M. G.)

Just one year before 1968, Godard signed his *La chinoise* placing a big white cross onto his name, and released interviews in which a supposed “self-criticism” about the notion of author revealed now more clearly what the *politique des auteurs* had been really about from the beginning. “De même je dirai qu’il n’y a pas d’auteur. Mais pour que les gens comprennent dans quel sens on peut dire cela, il faut d’abord leur dire pendant cent ans qu’il y a des auteurs. Car la manière dont ils pensaient qu’il n’y avait pas d’auteur n’était pas la bonne. C’était une question de tactique.”<sup>5</sup> (Godard 1967, 67.) But even after the Dziga Vertov Group years, Godard’s film work has always kept on being crammed with references to this ambivalent authorial status, self-affirmation and self-dissolution. For instance in *Slow Motion (Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, 1980), in which a sadistic demiurge organizing all the prostituted bodies he can buy, in a grotesque parody of *mise en scène*, is himself significantly called “Messieurs Personne” (“Mr. Nobody”). This goes also for the melancholic death of the author staged in *Grandeur et décadence d’un petit commerce de cinéma* (1986), or for *Keep Your Right Up (Soigne ta droite*, 1987)’s “enough of this fucking first person” stated by a character called none other than “the Individual,” with a capital “I.”

## 2. Contempt

Such examples could go on much further. But perhaps it would be better to stick to the film that, as early as 1963, already was a perfect meta-commentary on the new status of the author brought along by the *politique des auteurs* and by the French New Wave. The film in which, as explicitly as never before nor after, the ambivalence at the core of the author notion is regulated by what regulates by definition what is contradictory: i.e., by myth. This film is *Contempt (Le mépris)*. Not only a film about myth, but also a film about the myth of the author. A film starring not only Jack Palance, Brigitte Bardot and Michel Piccoli, but also starring the myth of the myths, the myth that is supposed to achieve and overcome all myths: incarnation. Modern times begin with Christianity, i.e. when the classical myths make way for the ultimate myth: resurrection. We have here a myth, none other than *The Odyssey*. This myth cannot be represented nor filmed anymore: it can only be lived. Michel Piccoli (the screenwriter in charge to adapt *The Odyssey* for the screen)

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<sup>5</sup> “In the same way, I’ll say too that there is no such thing as an ‘author’. But to get people to understand in what sense you can say that, you have to tell them over and over again, first, that there’s such a thing as an “author.” Because their reason for thinking there wasn’t one were not the right ones. It’s a question of tactics...” (Godard 1968, 31). Anyway, Godard was not the only one among the Nouvelle Vague members to try to make things clear about what *politique des auteurs* was really supposed to stand for. See also De Baeque 1991 (2), 146–150.

is the opposite of Ulysses as much as his wife Brigitte Bardot is the opposite of Penelope: her betrayal with the modern God, i.e. money (that is, a film producer, Jack Palance), comes from Piccoli's total reluctance to go beyond the ordinary path. The ultimate opposite of Ulysses' tale. The classic gives way to modernity. Or, as Godard had written years before in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, "Tell me whether the destiny of the modern cinema does not take the same form as it did for the belated partisans of romanticism. Yes, *with new thoughts let us make old verses.*" (Godard 1972, 28.) Classical myth does not merely die nor disappears: it resurrects in a different form. The verb is now flesh. The classical and mythical connection between nature and culture (as well as the male-female one) breaks loose, and nature can shine in its own light<sup>6</sup> as Brigitte Bardot does.<sup>7</sup> And so do the ruins of language, those enacted so evidently by Godard's fragmented style.<sup>8</sup> The verb is now flesh, so Fritz Lang himself cannot direct a movie anymore; all he can do is embody Fritz Lang himself. So classicism must be substituted by modernism. So, *Contempt* takes the place left empty by classical Hollywood by showing classical Hollywood rather than telling tales like it used to (again: the verb becomes flesh). And thus Godard takes Fritz Lang's place. Godard in person plays here the role of the assistant director of *The Odyssey*, the film-within-a-film directed by Fritz Lang. So here is the point: the assistant director takes the place of the director. A classical, full, potent, authoritarian, demiurgic authorial presence (i.e. Fritz Lang) makes way for a modern authorial form, which is as present as it is essentially passive<sup>9</sup> (i.e. Godard, admitting here to be a mere follower of the classical masters, a mere assistant). With modernity, the author becomes ambivalent, personal AND impersonal: that's what the *politique des auteurs* has always been about. The dichotomies that the myth managed to keep together in the classical era, now, in the modernity, fall apart. But myth is still there – only in an incarnated form, the myth made flesh and not represented. Which is

<sup>6</sup> Basically all of the critical commentators point out how the three primary colors (yellow, red and blue) are by far prevailing in the film's palette. The sublimely stylized visual of the classical movie era turns now into a modern phase of neo-primitivism, of coming back to the origins even on a chromatic level.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Marie (Marie 2006, 209–214) has pointed out how Bardot's character here represents the splendor of nature, opposed to the impotence of culture represented by her husband (Piccoli's character). In other words, the "mythological" link between nature and culture breaks loose.

<sup>8</sup> Marie again notices how the passage from cinematic classicism to modernism, with all its linguistic disruption, does not erase the myth: it just changes its ways. "Le dialogue multiplie les chevilles narratives, liant logiquement les transitions spatio-temporelles, cependant qu'au niveau rythmique et descriptif le montage détruit ces relations causales pour y substituer une pure consécution tragique, métaphorisée par les figures de Neptune et de Minerve." (Marie 2006, 190.) ("The dialogue multiplies the narrative pivots, connecting logically space-time transitions, while on a rhythmic and descriptive level the montage destroys these causal relations and replaces them with a pure tragic consequentiality, represented by the figures of Neptune and Athena." My translation, M. G.)

<sup>9</sup> On this topic, cf. also the first pages of Rancière 2006.

why the French New Wave can be seen as the classical cinema (Hollywood's, notably) with different means: the same old stories do not take place anymore according to the traditional deal between language and reality granted by myth, but in the fissure between language and reality, granted by another myth – a myth which is itself irretrievably split, that is the myth of the author. A myth that is here made flesh through the direct presence of Godard and Lang, who significantly comments a Hoelderlin poem during the film, saying that no longer is man reassured by the presence of gods, but by their absence. The living presence, i.e. the resurrected body in standard Christian mythology, as the only myth left after the end of all myths: the only possible suture for the contradictions now left loose, those same contradictions that once the myth used to solve and regulate: Reality and Language, Male and Female, Nature and Culture.

### 3. *Nouvelle Vague*

Those very couples return 27 years later with a film called none other than *Nouvelle Vague* (1990). A film starring Alain Delon and Domiziana Giordano, but way more than them, starring Nature in person. Throughout the Eighties, Godard has filled his films with countless static shots of nature, almost postcard-like. But nowhere as much as in *Nouvelle Vague*. Here, nature is unquestionably the main character. Nonetheless, culture is hugely present. *Nouvelle Vague* is a constant flow of literary, pictorial, cinematic quotation, as overwhelming as never before (and probably even afterwards, with the exception of the *Histoire(s) du cinéma* [1988-1998]). Now the quotations form a real stream of consciousness: culture flows like a river would, and nature is filmed like an over-skilled painter would. Nature and culture are always already inside each other without any mediation – and of course the quintessential mediation between nature and culture is myth. Only one character significantly sticks out the juxtaposition of capitalistic high society and humble servants inside the villa the film is set into: a gardener. The recurring, key character of the movie. And who else than a gardener could be better placed right at the crossing point of nature and culture?

In fact, the film is all about how to intertwine dual oppositions beyond myth. *Contempt*, the other great Godardian film on myth, ended with a car accident. Another car accident opens *Nouvelle Vague*, but no one dies this time. Countess Torlato-Favrini runs over a borderline guy, Richard Lennox. He carries an Ankh, the Egyptian symbol of life as the harmonious unity between two opposite principles, active and passive. She manages to save him, and then she falls in love with him.

But he is really hopeless, so she makes him drown in a lake. But suddenly, he comes back mysteriously. Not to revenge, but to save her when she eventually falls into the same deep lake waters. And again, she is assured that he is the actual Richard Lennox only by recognizing the same Ankh on him. The symbol of duality.<sup>10</sup>

Duality is at stake then. But whereas the dual element used to be the one fit into shape by myth, now the dual element means repetition. Which of course means resurrection.<sup>11</sup> Much more overtly than in *Contempt*, here we have a film split in two by Richard's death. In the second part, he literally resurrects. The impossible couple, the proletarian and the countess, finds its own salvation thanks to repetition. No wonder that in the second half of the movie quotations and situations are often repeated for a second time. No wonder as well that the film follows the repetitive rhythm *par excellence*: spring, summer, autumn, winter, all emphatically stressed by the changing shape of nature.

Quite an unexpected and Arcadia-like vision for Godard. This time, nature and culture seem to go each its own way, and yet they seem to find a strange and magical balance. We are not into the lacerations of modernism anymore. Lennox and the countess are not only the male and female: they also embody modernity and its own overcoming. According to Fredric Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* (Jameson 2002), a solid and reliable synthesis of how modernity has globally been conceived, modernity is quite universally considered as determined by the split between the economic and the aesthetic.<sup>12</sup> The aesthetic stands before the

<sup>10</sup> Frank Curot has carefully analyzed how the dual structure comes into question in this film (Curot 2003). Curot focuses particularly on how the conflict is visually illustrated rather than directly represented. For instance, the car accident is not showed, but only alluded through a highly colliding way of editing. Once again: the myth (i.e. contradiction as such) dies as *logos* (i.e. as representation) to resurrect as image, as pure visuality. This goes also for the moment in the film when an oscillatory camera movement goes right and left from outside the villa while the woman is turning the lights off one by one: again a binary couple (right/left, or even on/off) made into visual.

<sup>11</sup> In Godard's synopsis of the film, the second part (where Lennox returns after death) is referred to as being the "New testament" after the "Old testament" of the first part, still fully dominated by myth. "Mais la femme découvre que l'autre homme est le même homme que le premier, que le deuxième est (encore et toujours) le même que le premier." (Godard 1998, 189.) ("but the woman finds out that the other man is still the first one, that the second one is (again and always) the same one as the first." My translation, M. G.) Myth is overcome by resurrection – but, once again like in *Contempt*, myth outlives its own death and transformation.

<sup>12</sup> According to Jameson, modernity is defined principally by a tendency to trace a periodization, a line between "before" and "after." This is precisely what *Contempt does* (stating as it were, "we are the modern, they used to be the classic") and *Nouvelle vague does not*. It is true that the turning point at the middle of the film starts a different phase from the former (the postmodern after the modern), but this does not at all affect the film's temporality, whereas the entire style of *Contempt* lies in the illustration of how modernity consists in a kind of temporality which is no longer the classical one. *Nouvelle Vague's* "eternal present" goes on unchanged after the split, the difference separating the second part from the first one being only the minimal, although substantial, difference springing from repetition, and not a radical break like the one separating one historical phase from another.



economic as semi-autonomous, and in a conflicting asset. The countess is a big industry boss, Lennox is a loser, a parasite. They are the most improbable couple ever, their relationship is in a constant tension, and yet they love each other. After his death and resurrection, Lennox becomes the big boss. He runs the business and reduces her basically to silence, and yet they still love each other. And, most importantly, he also gets into art commerce. What happens after the resurrection resembles very much the standard definition of our postmodern times: the opposite poles collapse on each other (and that is Lennox: an artist and an industrial), leaving out only an indeterminate leftover (which is the now silent countess). In postmodernism, capitalism erases the semi-autonomous field of culture, but the very de-materialization of capital that permits this, leads also to an “over-culturalization” of capital. As capital is being more and more virtual (or, as Lennox repeatedly says, business is now reduced to charity), the cultural element is potentially all over (Jameson 1991). And yet it is basically vanished – art has triumphed and dissolved at the same time. “Eins Zwei Drei die Kunst ist frei,” “one two three the art is free,” as stated by a written sign during the film – a concept that Godard’s *The Old Place* (1998) (Ishaghpour 2004) and *Origins of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (*L’Origine du XXI siècle*, 2000) express with particular clarity. So culture itself is the only horizon left – the true nature then, according to Jameson among others. We have no longer modernity’s split totality, we now have a single and full totality, in which the cultural and the natural are not opposed anymore, but they coincide somehow thanks to the vanishing mediation of the capital, making both nature and culture dissolve and spread all over.

The duality is then basically defused. The art commerce started by Lennox does not trade just any picture, it trades Goya’s *La maya desnuda*, being, as stated in the film, “nudity without sensuality.” Throughout the film, the sexual difference strives to be defused; the main characters try to be no more “real characters” but rather two characters from some novel. And, as stated in the film, “Let people in books invent us and read our own history. The Parkers, Favrinis, Dorfman’s... male and female, but minus pricks and pussies.” Love is an angelic matter now: no wonder that Dante Alighieri is repeatedly quoted. And the other major binary difference to be defused is sound and vision: never as much as in *Nouvelle Vague* Godard has played with the stratification of the sound and the stratification of the image. Both image and sound taken separately are made of a series of layers overlapping with each other (in volume, depth of field, tones, luminosity, colour and so on), so that the very difference between sound and image seems like fading away: sound seems such an unstable and discontinuous matter that it does not



seem to have any sort of consistence or determination indeed – and so does the image, in an equivalent manner. Both seeing and hearing as a matter of gradualness and silence<sup>13</sup>.

So what about the myth of the author? It has to be framed according to the relationship between the modern and the postmodern set up by the film's structure. In the film we have first a modernly-oriented section, dominated by the tension between the opposites, the countess and Lennox. Then Lennox dies, and the crucial gardener says immediately thereafter: "Cécile, what are those images? Sometimes free, sometimes confined. This vast thought where shapes pass while colours shine?" And Cécile answers: "It's space." Now the second half can begin: it is the postmodernly-oriented one, since postmodernism is typically defined as the absolute triumph of space, whereas modernity was more on the side of the structural antagonism between space and time. So this section is going to be dominated by Lennox "postmodernly" swallowing both opposite terms, both an artist and an industry boss. And here comes Godard's point: even more than what concerned the classical and the modern times, what connects the modern and the postmodern is that the second is a sort of repetition of the first. Of course a crucial topic in late Godard is the present as a repetition of the past: suffice it to mention the *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and *Forever Mozart* (1996). And right after *Nouvelle Vague's* finale, a voice over states what follows: "It was as if they had already lived all this. Their words seemed frozen, in the traces of other words from other times. They paid no heed to what they did, but to the division which set today's actions in the present and parallel actions in the past. They felt tall, motionless, above them past and present: identical waves in the same ocean."

Among these waves, no doubt, the *French New Wave* that gives Godard's film its title. Like Richard Lennox, the *Nouvelle Vague* movement has died, but death and tragedy is no more the last word as it was in *Contempt*. *Nouvelle Vague* modernism has died with modernity, but it has resurrected in the contemporary mediascape. No proper traces of the *Nouvelle Vague* movement in itself of course, but the tension between personal and impersonal that used to be the original core of the *politique des auteurs* has now somehow reincarnated in a situation in which the author is everywhere and nowhere at the same time. No wonder that, for the first time in many years, Jean-Luc Godard's name does not appear in the

<sup>13</sup> As for the *mise en scène*, there is a very interesting indication in Godard's own *Nouvelle Vague* script, outlining a new form of visual plenitude out of the very fragmentation of the filmic texture. Literally, visual fullness *resurrects* from its own disruption, as for a singular stylistic *Aufhebung* (Godard 1998, 189–196, especially 191–193). This explains also why Godard's way of framing emphasizes so much on the empty spaces left aside from the dissonant (camera's and characters') trajectories intersecting all the time.

starting credits of this film, whereas the actors and the crew members do. And no wonder as well that Godard has declared that in *Nouvelle Vague* (the film) there was not even one spoken line to be originally written: all of them were quotations.<sup>14</sup> As for today, we have the Internet, Youtube, the fan fictions, the interactivity phenomena, the fluid authorial status of the new TV series, the increasing presence of the audience itself in the creative process, and so on. The prestige of the genius and of the author as we knew it has basically disappeared, or perhaps transformed into a supplementary commercial value – but precisely at this point the notion of author explodes uncontrollably and spreads everywhere<sup>15</sup>. The tension between personal and impersonal has not been erased by the pervasive triumph of media power, it has only changed skin. Now that the personal and the impersonal have overlapped on each other and the dichotomies are defused, we only have a totality (the convergence of all media into a huge globalized and capitalized audiovisual world) and a leftover. The inevitable leftover, unpredictable and indeterminate as it is, is the living proof that the total closure is not accomplished: and that is precisely what is to be looked for, and what must be pushed further. And when the two lovers of the film escape the Torlato-Favrini mansion at the very end, the countess, i.e. the leftover since Lennox has become both art and industry, states “C’est moi qui conduis.” “I’ll drive.” Jameson’s recent stance on Utopia (Jameson 2005, 211–233) is exactly on the same line: today’s utopia is not to achieve the closure as it used to be in the

<sup>14</sup> One of those occasions occurred during his press conference at 1990 Cannes Film Festival (where *Nouvelle Vague* was presented). “Avec mon assistant on s’est dit: on ne sait pas quoi faire, on a signé le contrat, on a un titre, un scénario et une histoire qui pour une fois avait emballé un acteur et un producteur. Mais simplement l’histoire durait deux minutes, et un long metrage doit faire une heure trente. Donc, avec mon assistant, on s’est dit: ‘Prends tous les romans que tu aimes, je te donne les miens; il m’en reste une vingtaine, va chez Hemingway, Faulkner, Gide et prend des phrases.’ Et aujourd’hui, pour les trois quarts, on ne sait absolument plus de qui elles sont. Surtout qu’à certains moments, on les a un peu modifiées. C’est dans ce sens là que je ne me mets pas au générique. Ce n’est pas moi qui ai fait le film. Je n’en suis que l’organisateur conscient.” (Godard 1998, 201.) “I told my assistant: we don’t know what to do, we signed a contract, we have a title, a script, a story having enthralled an actor and a producer for a change. But the thing is that the story lasts just two minutes and a long feature film has to be one hour thirty minutes. So, I told my assistant: ‘Go take all the novels you like, I’ll give you mine, I have twenty left, go find Hemingway, Faulkner, Gide and take some sentences’. And now, as for 75% of all that, we have no idea anymore about what belongs to whom. Also because we modified them a little bit here and there. That’s why I didn’t include myself in the credits. I didn’t make the film. I only am its conscious organizer.” (My translation, M. G.)

<sup>15</sup> The declarations made by JLG during the aforementioned press conference mostly deal with that very subject. “Je m’aperçois aujourd’hui que quand nous, la Nouvelle Vague, et Truffaut d’abord le premier, avons défendu la notion d’auteur, c’était simplement pour dire: il n’est pas juste que Hitchcock, Howard Hawks ou Serguei Eisenstein soient moins considérés qu’André Gide ou Dostoievski. Eisenstein est plus important que la Mosfilm, et Howard Hawks est plus important que la Paramount, en tout cas aussi important. C’était tout. Et puis ça nous a dépassés. Quand vous me photographiez, j’ai une honte absolue, cela me fait pleurer. On dit: il faut bien qu’ils gagnent leur vie en prenant une photo, mais pas comme ça. On a dévoyé cette notion d’auteur.” (Godard 1998, 200.)

modern times, but it rather consists in breaking the closure, pushing forth what escapes the closure. Very first words of the film: “But I wanted this to be a narrative. I still do. Nothing from outside to distract memory. I barely hear, from time to time, the earthly softly creaking, one ripple breaking the surface.” So we have no more the narrative opposed to some external impediment, say nature vs. language, we have a one and only totality, and something shaking it from within, a structural leftover as it were. This sort of “shaking” is the tiny difference inside the identical, that only repetition lets us perceive. So that is why the film emphasizes on repetition so much.<sup>16</sup> Each and every instant, the image makes us perceive the tiny difference separating the present from the past, the very moment it repeats the past. At one point, a character tells another a wonderful definition of the image: snow on water, silence over silence. Snow of course IS water, but at the same time it is different. And the moment we see Lennox resurrected, i.e. when repetition comes across, we see him as a reflection on water while it is snowing. The *politique des auteurs* is of no use nowadays, and the guy saying to the countess “Joseph Mankiewicz, what a man: he didn’t make scenes like the others, just did his job” is explicitly depicted as ridiculous. No more antagonism between personal and impersonal. But that very potentiality disclosing from that gap is still here in our very different present: it is the gap that repetition can open up, regardless of the question of the author. “How wonderful to be able to give what you don’t have. Miracle of our empty hands,” say the two lovers when they first meet. It is always the same void, yet differently shaped, like snow and water, silence over silence: so, especially in today’s mediascape so filled with serial forms of all kinds, sticking to repetition and to the limitless potential it brings about is something like the Nouvelle Vague with different means.

In 2001, an Italian review, *Filmcritica*, collected a stance from an anonymous director who can be recognized very easily. “In the era of the virtual, one is interested more in the name than in the work. The work does not exist anymore but as a representative of the name. We came to this thanks to the *Politique des Auteurs*, and that is why I have not signed my films anymore for a long time

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“I now realize that when we, the French New Wave, and first of all Truffaut, used to defend the notion of Author, it was just to say: it’s not right that Hitchcock, Howard Hawks or Sergei Eisenstein are less considered than André Gide or Dostoyevsky. Eisenstein is more important than Mosfilm, and Howard Hawks more than Paramount – or, at least, equally important. That was all. And then, it all went beyond us. When you take a picture from me, I feel horribly, it really makes me cry. One is like: they sure have to make their living, but not like that. The notion of author has gone completely astray.” (My translation, M. G.)

<sup>16</sup> Jean-Louis Leurat and Suzanne Liandrat Guigues state explicitly that Nouvelle Vague could really be considered an illustration of Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* (Leurat and Liandrat-Guigues 2004, 168).

myself. And when something under my copyright is requested by someone else, I say ‘it is not only within your rights, but also out of duty on your part’. And if, by any chance, you want to use some text of mine in a theatre, do not even mention my name. My text is yours because it interests you. This is what I did myself with the *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. I wish that a case law can be established for cinema, so that the free right to quote without being compelled to mention the names of the authors can be granted.” (Quoted in Bruno 2001, my translation, M. G.)

All in all, it is the usual Godardian squinty attitude towards History. One eye glancing the past, one eye glancing the present. We are inside our contemporary times only insofar as we perceive them as a different repetition of the past, of modernity. We can really understand the contemporary mediascape only insofar as we are able to see it as the resurrection of Nouvelle Vague – that is, the contradiction that once grounded the French New Wave (and the *politique des auteurs*) as differently articulated.

In spite of her death, what used to be the New Wave is still among us – but now through some kind of a twisted actualization making it unrecognizable. Or perhaps like a spectral presence. That is why the historical need to trace a continuity with the past, and to know it, is more urgent than ever, and that is why Godard has been obsessed with History, and first of all movie History, throughout the last decades. So perhaps the best way to sum up this path from *Contempt* to *Nouvelle Vague*, from classic to modern and from modern to beyond, consists in leaving the last word to the brief legend opening *Hélas pour moi* (1993), shot by Godard right after *Nouvelle Vague*.

“When my father’s father’s father had a difficult task to accomplish, he went to a certain place in the forest, lit a fire, and immersed himself in a silent prayer. And what he had to do was done. When my father’s father was confronted with the same task, he went to the same place in the forest and said: ‘We no longer know how to light fire, but we still know the prayer.’ And what he had to do was done. Later, when my father had the same task to accomplish, he too went into the forest and said ‘We no longer know how to light the fire, we no longer know the mysteries of the prayer, but we still know the exact place in the forest where it occurred, and that should do.’ And that did do. But when I was faced with the same task, I stayed at home and said: ‘We no longer know how to light the fire, we no longer know the prayers, we don’t even know the place in the forest, but we do know how to tell the story.’”

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