Jean-Luc Godard's
Pierrot le fou

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Jean-Luc Godard

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Introduction

OUI, BIEN SÛR . . . OUI, BIEN SÛR

A complicated story – all mixed up

There are good reasons for maintaining that, during the five or so years before *Pierrot le fou* was released in 1965, Western cinema had for the second or third, and perhaps last time in its history, been reinvented. Within that perspective, the first reinvention would have been the innovative theoretical approaches to film-making developed by Eisenstein in the 1920s; the second, Italian neo-realism; and the third, the French New Wave. Jean-Luc Godard was foremost among the group of cinéastes for whom a journalist coined the term *New Wave,* and his 1960 feature *A bout de souffle/Breathless* was considered a pioneering moment in breaking with certain of the restricting practices of the cinema of the time while also renewing enthusiastically the possibilities that the medium seemed to offer. The New Wave directors, often friends and associates but never a coherent movement, were a group of mostly young practitioners like Godard that included François Truffaut, Éric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Alain Resnais, and Agnès Varda.

By the time of *Pierrot le fou,* Godard's films had variously been acclaimed at festivals (*Vivre sa vie/My Life to Live,* 1962) or forbidden release by the French government (*Le Petit soldat,* 1960/63), attracted the collaboration of stars like Brigitte Bardot (*Le Mépris/Contempt,* 1963) or flopped at the box office (*Les Carabiniers,* 1963). The director was nothing if not notorious, and to

this day, as he continues to make films that more than occasionally intrigue and fascinate a jaded audience of critics and spectators, he remains widely respected as the enfant terrible of cinema.[1]

Godard, born in Paris in 1930 into a Swiss family, initially intended to write fiction, but his interest in cinema led him to contribute to a series of film journals, including the *Cahiers du cinéma* founded by André Bazin, and to frequent the film clubs and *Cinémathèque* where he met many of the filmmakers who would become his fellow travelers. Eventually, with the help and financial support of that same network, he began to make his own films. But there was much to distinguish him from other New Wave directors, not the least reasons being his improvisational approach to script and to shooting, and his editing practice, in particular his use of what came to be known as the jump cut, which unsettles the viewer by giving the impression of jumping to another scene before the preceding one has played out as we would expect it to from our training as spectators of classic film and of theater.[2] Viewers of *A bout de souffle* who have been weaned on MTV will of course be less surprised by the jump cut than was the audience of 1959, but conversely, we might argue that it is thanks to the innovations of Godard that a film like *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) can be conceived of. Similarly – for the idea of the jump cut allows for sequences to be inordinately lengthened as well as shortened – we can see the timing and direction of Quentin Tarantino, for example the remarkable opening diner sequence of *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) or the extended bantering scenes in *Pulp Fiction* (1994), as conscious homages to the possibilities created for cinema by the New Wave, possibilities that much contemporary film, in its desire for the perfect illusion, leaves unexploited. For in the final analysis, Godard resolved to make his films about cinema, or at least about the image. He was from a generation that was enamored of films, and indiscriminately devoured them, a group of filmmakers whose literacy in terms of cinema was at the time unsurpassed. For him, the only subject of the films of that period was "cinema itself,"[3] and indeed the same might be said of all his work. It constitutes nothing so much as an

interrogation of the possibilities of the image, of the role of the image in our culture, and as such is unique in the history of the cinema, and of the culture and the century that has adopted the moving image as one of its most popular art forms.

In accounts of Godard's work, the period of *Pierrot le fou* is also referred to as the "Anna Karina years," and the director's personal and professional collaboration with the Danish actress playing the film's female protagonist, whom he married in 1961, structures the work of 1960 to 1967.[4] These were also the years of Godard's greatest commercial success, and indeed critical reaction to *Pierrot* was, in France at least, the most positive the director was ever to receive. He had bought the rights to Lionel White's novel *Obsession* in 1963, and intended to make the film with well-known actress and singer Sylvie Vartan, and then with Richard Burton. Finally Godard was able to pair Anna Karina, working with him for the sixth time, with the antihero par excellence of *A bout de souffle,* Jean-Paul Belmondo, in order to tell "the story of the last romantic couple" (N&M, 216; B, 263). But two days before shooting was to begin, he had nothing to go on apart from the book and the idea for a certain number of sets. Lines were therefore rehearsed on the set, or improvised, and the film was shot, in Godard's words, "like in the days of Mack Sennett . . . the whole last part was invented on the spot, unlike the beginning, which was planned. It is a kind of happening, but one that was controlled" (N&M, 218; B, 265). Filming took place over two months, July and August 1965, on the Côte d'Azur, on the island of Porquerolles, and finally in Paris, in reverse order to the events of the film. It was shot in cinemascope by Raoul Coutard, who had worked on all of Godard's feature films up to that point, who would remain with him throughout the Karina years and return again in the 1980s. Jean-Pierre Léaud, Truffaut's favorite actor, was a director's assistant (and a film spectator in one scene), and the producer Georges de Beauregard, another faithful collaborator, financed the film.

Pierrot follows the adventures of Ferdinand (Belmondo), fleeing a stultifying bourgeois existence, and Marianne (Karina), his free-spirited lover, in their escapades through the south of France en

route to a romantic utopia they never find. The film begins, after a series of autonomous shots, with Ferdinand sitting in the bath reading to his daughter from a book about the artist Diego Velázquez. He is then seen dressing for a cocktail party where, as his wife reminds him, he should behave properly so as to impress potential employers because he has recently been fired from (or given up) his job in television. The baby-sitter, supposedly the niece of friends who arrive to accompany Ferdinand and his wife to the party, is Marianne.

The scenes at the party, filmed through different-colored filters, include parodies of advertisements for cars and women's beauty products, as well as the short appearance by Samuel Fuller and his definition of cinema as "emotion," which becomes the focus of much and varied discussion in the contributions that follow. The party shows up the sterility of Ferdinand's existence, leading to his precipitate departure and return home where he offers to drive Marianne back to her house. It is only once the couple is in the car that the spectator understands they have already been romantically involved. The scene ends with a short exchange resembling a series of vows: "I'll do anything you want," says Marianne; "Me too, Marianne," replies Ferdinand; "I'm putting my hand on your knee," "Me too, Marianne"; "I'm kissing you all over," "Me too, Marianne," although the characters continue to stare ahead out of the car windshield (*A-S,* 76–8; cf. W, 37). This, however, becomes the point of rupture in Ferdinand's life and the point of departure for what will amount to a permanent flight, from Paris, from family, from the law, from enemies, ending only with the death of both protagonists at the end of the film.

The next morning Pierrot (he keeps reminding her that his name is Ferdinand, but, as she replies, one can't say "mon ami Ferdinand" as in the song "Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot") and Marianne wake up at what we take to be her apartment, but it is an apartment containing crates of guns as well as a dead body, and they are interrupted by her "uncle," whom they knock unconscious in the first of a series of slapstick scenes, before fleeing Paris for the countryside en route to the Riviera. The rest of the film is a

Marianne and Pierrot the next morning

series of mostly unconnected episodes from that escapade with, on the one hand scenes of a tense and finally fractured relationship between Pierrot and Marianne, and on the other hand, a disconnected story of gunrunning for royalists in Yemen, and Marianne's supposed or actual infidelity with the person she has introduced as her brother. A number of these scenes are memorable for their cinematic or theatrical resourcefulness. There is the semi slapstick of a roadside garage sequence that reminds us of Godard's respect for early cinema as well as the fact that Pierrot is an obvious reference to the *commedia del arte* theatrical tradition (*A-S,* 80; W, 44–5). Another sequence, revealing Godard's increasingly vocal political sensibilities and the increasing importance of opposition to America's involvement in Vietnam, has Pierrot and Marianne performing a minimalist theatrical piece for some attentive Americans whom they proceed to rob (*A-S,* 92; W, 70–2). There are also musical numbers (*A-S,* 78, 93; W, 38–9, 73–4), a scene where Pierrot undergoes a wet-towel torture that was used by the French in Algeria (*A-S,* 96–7; W, 80–1), and a humorous sequence by comic Raymond Devos (*A-S,* 106; W, 100–1).

In the relationship with Pierrot, Marianne seems to be continually raising the stakes in terms of what she expects from him, and lowering them in terms of what promises she will keep. He never seems to know what he really wants and appears powerless to attain it, as if since the beginning he had been drifting and then drawn into Marianne's sphere of influence. But she is by no means a simple character. Indeed, it has been well pointed out that the female character in many of Godard's films, and in *Pierrot* in particular, is presented on the one hand as strong, almost masculine – wielding a gun or a pair of scissors, asking forthrightly for what she wants or expects – and on the other hand as an unattainable romantic ideal.[5] As if to demonstrate his frustration at being unable to pin her down, and on the pretext of her infidelity, Pierrot finally kills her, calls his wife in Paris but fails to get through, then paints his face blue and winds a whole arsenal of dynamite about his head before lighting the fuse. In what can be taken as his first and last decisive act, he tries to extinguish the fuse with

Marianne as violent otherness

his hand, but, unable to see it, dies in a flash of flame and smoke against the brilliant blue of the Mediterranean sea and sky.

THE END OF CINEMA?

It seems that the years 1967–8 would have marked an important break in Godard's filmmaking, even if that period had not also been contemporaneous with the upheaval in French social, cultural, and political life that took place in May 1968, when students and workers took to the streets en masse to demand that the country begin to chart a new, more open course. The events of that period have been discussed extensively, and Godard's part in them was not negligible, arguing for the closure

of the Cannes festival, participating in the "Estates-General of Cinema" and in various "agit-prop" film productions.[6] But the increasingly political slant of Godard's cinema was already explicit in the films immediately following *Pierrot le fou,* and especially in *La Chinoise* (1967) and *Week-end* (1967). Godard ends his 1966 film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle/Two or Three Things I Know About Her* with a famous shot of detergent and other consumer product cartons representing an urban wasteland, stating that he has to start again from square one. The press kit for *La Chinoise* includes the following statement: "Fifty years after the October Revolution, the American industry rules cinema the world over. . . . [W]e too should provoke two or three Vietnams within the vast Hollywood-Cinecittà-Mosfilms-Pinewood-etc. empire, and, both economically and aesthetically, struggling on two fronts as it were, create cinemas which are national, free, brotherly, comradely, and bonded in friendship" (N&M, 243 [translation modified]; B, 303). And although *Week-end* and *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil* (1968) may be best remembered, respectively, for the longest tracking shot (of a traffic jam) in film history, and the participation of the somewhat puzzled Rolling Stones, those films lead much further than their parodic treatment of consumer culture might suggest.

Between 1969 and 1972 Godard renounced what he saw as the bourgeois capitalist ideology of individual authorship, and his films were signed by the Dziga-Vertov Collective, based on his association with the Maoist Jean-Pierre Gorin. Yet by 1972, with *Tout va bien,* starring Jane Fonda and Yves Montand, the larger collective had reduced to the single Godard-Gorin couple. It was clear, however, that Godard was seeking in every way to create a different cinema, not just to make political films but, as he maintained, to make them "politically."[7] For financing he turned most often to television, but the producers were not always keen to have the films shown. His topics were internationalist – Britain, Prague, Italy, Palestine – but all within the framework of explicit Marxist critiques. His desire was to turn the film screen into a blackboard, an interface for active debate rather than a medium

for passive consumption. With hindsight it is easy to say that this experiment by Godard failed, but then we would have to ask how success could be measured, given his avowed desire to renounce commercial cinema.[8] Godard continued to pursue such nonmercantile goals when, in 1974, he formed an association with Anne-Marie Miéville, and moved his operation from Paris to Grenoble, and from film to video, and for the following five years concentrated on programs designed for television or classroom use. His return to mainstream production with *Sauve qui peut (la vie)/Every Man for Himself* in 1979 was much heralded, and through the 1980s he again began to make films at the rate of about one per year. The fact that he is now at work on a somewhat open-ended video series entitled *Histoire(s) du cinéma* means on the one hand that he takes film to be a dying, or rather dead art, whose histories can now be written. The end of cinema is something, as he stated in 1965, the year of *Pierrot,* that he awaits "with optimism."[9] He harbors no illusions about reaching a wide audience – he never did, in fact, but was previously able to count on an informed and interested art house and college circuit reception – and certainly from the point of view of one who decried some thirty years ago the hegemony of Hollywood, little has changed to revitalize a monolithic, and hence ossified art form. On the other hand, Godard's continuing work means he will persist, however obstinately, to present his views, to insist that in spite of our consumption of images, a habit which seems to increase exponentially with each technological leap, we have not even begun to understand their meaning and functioning.

"OUI, BIEN SÛR; OUI, BIEN SÛR"

In a telling moment about halfway through *Pierrot le fou,* when the characters seem to have reached an impasse in their relationship, Pierrot asks Marianne whether she will ever leave him. She replies, *"Mais non, bien sûr"* ("Of course not"). *"Bien sûr?"* he persists. *"Oui, bien sûr"* ("Of course"). . . . *"Oui, bien sûr"* ("Of course"), she replies, repeating herself. Ferdinand's first question

and Marianne's reply are spoken over the image of a pet fox. The second exchange is over an extreme close-up of Marianne's face. After each of the two *"oui, bien sûr"* replies, she turns from addressing Ferdinand and looks directly into the camera (*A-S,* 89; W, 61). Somewhere in there, between her first *"non"* and second two *"oui"*s, between her "no" and her "yes," between her first and second "yes," between him and her, or between her and the camera or audience, the truth should lie. But it remains an enigma, or at least divided into half-truths and lesser fractions whose disintegrating force structures the whole film and parallels the explosion of Ferdinand dynamiting himself at its end.

In French, a "yes" that contradicts a "no" is normally *"si"* rather than *"oui."* So Marianne does not really reverse her response from "no, of course (I'll never leave you)" to "yes, of course (I'll leave you)." Grammatically speaking, her *"oui, bien sûr"* reinforces her previous affirmation of fidelity. It can properly be translated as "no, of course not."[10] What I am suggesting, however, is that within the simple fact of a repetition, even one that seems to offer an exact replica, like a photographic image of itself, there falls the structure of difference that leads all the way to falsehood and contradiction. And it is telling that that repetition is punctuated by two "takes" of Marianne looking at the camera, as if the whole problematic and dilemma of photographic truth were being brought to bear on this cinematic moment, taking *Pierrot le fou* well out of the context of a romantic fugue and even of an existential quest, and reinserting it in the abyssal space of an interrogation concerning its own status as film.

In facing the camera and in "addressing" the audience not with her words, but with her gaze, Marianne might be looking to say any number of things about her and Pierrot, seeking an ally in the spectator as she does in fact with a direct address monologue later on. Thus we might understand her to be saying here, "Can't you see I'm telling the truth; why doesn't this jerk get it?"; "Can't you see I'm trapped into telling a lie? He understands so little about me we're bound to break up; he wants me to be faithful but on his terms"; "Whether I answer yes or no his jealousy will only con-

firm what he believes to be my infidelity." On the other hand, that same spectator will see subsequent images on this same surface that show her being unfaithful, and in effect leaving him. Hence it is as if she is repeating in her relationship to the spectator the same duplicity that she shows in her relationship to Ferdinand; we might even say we can see that insincerity in the look she gives us, and the film, in highlighting an equivocal image of Marianne as woman who is romantically desired object but also enigma, encourages and develops that idea.

Yet, as the film also makes abundantly clear, it is not just a simple story of Ferdinand and Marianne. From the beginning, any number of distanciation effects have broken the spectator's willing suspension of disbelief, not the least of these being the characters' acknowledgment, or denunciation, of the spectator's presence made explicit by their looking at the camera. When Ferdinand addresses the audience earlier, over his shoulder while driving the car, Marianne asks him who he is talking to and looks back only vaguely, as if she does not share or is not quite convinced by Ferdinand's desire to include the spectator in his drama (*A-S,* 86; W, 55). But now, in the double-take scene, it is as if she is coming to terms with that necessity, first, as I have just developed, in order to avail herself of a potential ally; but more importantly, in order to pose the question of truth and lies at the level of the film image itself, and not just within the diegesis represented in the film's images. I say that Marianne does this rather than that Godard does it because it is as if the quizzical look she previously gave to, or gave with respect to Ferdinand more than the spectator, has now become the duplicitous look of this scene, directly pointed at the spectator, and in which we can now read something like, "I don't know whether you and I are ready for this, but it isn't as simple as it looks." From this point of view, it is no longer just Marianne as character who is showing herself to be duplicitous but the image of Marianne as image. For there is a sort of reluctance mixed with the enigma of her look. She first looks down, almost bashfully, then raises her head to confront the camera, as if she were aware that she is not about to gain direct access to a sym-

pathetic spectator but rather, or also, to deliver herself over to whatever image or manipulation of her image that the camera might opt for.

The moving image presents itself as a realist representation of the real world, one closer to reality itself than any other form – description, painting, photograph. It presents itself as a faithful copy of the world it represents. In using a repetition of word and image to express a doubt as much as a reinforcement, Godard's film focuses the spectator's attention on the difference that occurs within any repetition, even the most faithful copy. Once a copy is added to an original there is not just the original, plus the copy, but also the relation between them, which is *different* from either one or the other, even though one appears the same as the other. A different order of relations has been established, and indeed the term *original* has no sense unless it is used in the context of a real or potential copy.[11]

Thus Godard's refusal to preserve a seamless realism in his films must be understood less as willfulness on his part and more as a faithful attention to the reality of the cinematic image, the fact of its being a medium of relations, the space of difference within which there can occur everything from duplication to duplicity and lies. It is in this sense that I maintained that Marianne's stated or possible duplicity is finally that of the image as much as of the character. After all, once a character looks at the camera, she is saying not just whatever she says, but also, automatically, "I know you are a spectator in a movie theater looking at these images. I am an image; look at this image of me." Pierrot reinforces this when, as things fall apart, he also addresses the spectator in a monologue and explains haltingly that when Marianne says to him it is a fine day he only retains the appearance or image of her saying it is a fine day (*A-S,* 93; W, 74). The effect and emphasis of Godard's film, in providing this cinematic double-take, is thus to say, "Yes, of course I'll stick with you as spectator. I'll give you the illusion of looking at a real-life adventure, allowing you to lose yourself in it for a couple of hours. But hold on, look again, I have also to say that, yes, I would be unfaithful, I would be leaving you

or letting you down, I would be duping you if I *didn't* remind you that these are *only* images you are looking at and not the real thing."

The duplicitous truth of the moving image, what, after Bazin, we might call the duplicity of its ontology,[12] or the way in which Godard, according to our reading of this series of shots, shows that truth to be divided within itself, is emblematic of other divisions or differences that work across the medium of the screen in *Pierrot le fou.* I have already made reference to the differences between the male and female protagonists, and on one level this is simply a function of the mismatch, incompatible personalities, competing goals and desires, opposite reactions to experiences, that make the film narrative bittersweet and lead ultimately to its tragic denouement. We see and hear about this in such scenes as that where the two protagonists mention their preferred tourist destinations (*A-S,* 84; W, 51); or explain what their opposing conceptions of "everything" are (*A-S,* 89–90; W, 63); or where Marianne says, "you speak to me with words and I look at you with emotions" (*A-S,* 89; cf. W, 62); or where Pierrot imposes his priority of serious literature over popular music (*A-S,* 90; W, 63–4). But within the context of film theory, the male-female difference is also about cinema, about the complexities of the cinematic gaze and mainstream film's decided penchant for positioning the female body as object of the gazes of both the camera and the male protagonist.[13] By means of her double glance at the camera, Marianne acknowledges her role as object of the gaze, informs the spectator that she knows he or she is looking – catching the voyeur in the act, as it were – and so begins to add a layer of questioning to her acceptance of that role. It is as if she were saying, "Yes, of course I like being looked at, but . . ." or "Yes, of course I know you are looking, but do you know what you are seeing?" and so on. Godard's films both collaborate with and exploit the objectification of the female figure in cinema, and it often becomes an explicit topic of discussion. For him the model of capitalism, exposed in a number of films such as *Vivre sa vie* and *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle,* and again in *Sauve qui peut (la vie),* is

prostitution, and cinema is shown to function within the same structures of commodification of the (mostly) female body. In other cases, such as *Le Mépris,* he recasts the camera's voyeuristic gaze on the body of the sex symbol of the time, Brigitte Bardot, or, as in *British Sounds/See You at Mao* (1969), uses a sustained shot of a woman's pubic region to force the spectator to think about what he or she is doing in looking.

Within the narrative logic of *Pierrot,* Marianne does not get very far with her emancipation. She is hunted down and punished for it in classic fashion. However, we can retain the moment of her "yes, of course" double-take as opening the space of questioning regarding her role, reminding the spectator that possession by means of the gaze is an illusion, that within the medium of film are multiple layers of mediation, displacing the matter of duplicity once again from the woman herself to the camera's image of woman, which, in a sense, offers what it cannot deliver. For the satisfaction of an imaginary plenitude that possession of the image should provide for the spectator is in doubt once that supposed self-contained and all-inclusive plenitude is delivered twice: if it were sufficient unto itself it would have no need of repetition.

A further division made explicit in this scene is that between the language of images and speech. Since the invention of the talkies, the sound track has consistently been used in mainstream cinema to reinforce the image track, to provide the words that fit the movement of the actors' lips.[14] The images matched to Marianne's "yes, of course" follow that model, as does much of the other dialogue. But that second reply has also to be matched, and contrasted, with the first "yes, of course," that it echoes and calls into question, if not for the reasons I have elaborated on so far, then because of the contrasting image that accompanies the first reply, that of the fox. Now one might easily object that what mainstream cinema is in fact matching by means of its synchronizing of images and dialogue is the narrative or diegesis, and within that diegesis the fox has its place as a pet adopted by the couple in their desert isle existence. There is from that point of view every reason for the fox to appear in an image, and we are

Pierrot and Marianne, words and emotions

quite used to hearing parts of the dialogue over images other than faces with moving lips. But once Marianne's face and lips appear to repeat the "yes, of course" that we have already heard over the image of the fox, then in retrospect it is as if the fox had spoken the first time (both for Pierrot and Marianne), or else that Marianne, in speaking the second time (and by extension, perhaps, Pierrot also), was speaking like a fox, cunningly and slyly, expressing less her own cunning and slyness, and more the duplicity of that assumed relation of synchronicity between image and sound.

The image does not need sound – a silent film, photograph, or painting proves that – but realist cinema does, and, more particularly, narrative cinema does.[15] The dialogue, and often ambient sounds and music, help assure the smooth syntagmatic transition of image to image throughout a coherent narrative. Thus the

dominant conception of realist cinema – narrative realist cinema – dictates an hierarchical combination of sounds, relations of spoken to written language, and so on, constituting the conventions that remain more or less strictly in force in most films, but which are brought into explicit focus, into critique and crisis, by the work of Godard.

A further rupture occurs in relations between image and sound track in a foreign film, namely the appearance of subtitles, adding unwelcome words to the image, and raising the problem of translation, of how best to render something like this double *"Oui, bien sûr,"* of what to include and what to leave out, and so on.[16] On the surface, the question of subtitles seems to be foreign to film in the strict sense, an accident of linguistic boundaries and international commerce, but in fact that is only true from the point of view of a dominant cinema operating within a dominant language, in our case a Hollywood that speaks English. In terms of world cinema we would have to conceive of subtitles as the norm rather than the exception. Godard's filmmaking has more than once alluded to this question, especially in *Le Mépris,* where he switches among English, French, German, and Italian, in order, it has been said, to frustrate the Italian practice of dubbing.[17] What I am suggesting, however, to return for the last time to the double-take, is that some sort of translation occurs between one *"Oui, bien sûr"* and another, even before they have to be translated into English. For let us not forget that the two *"oui, bien sûr"* statements follow a *"non, bien sûr,"* which, in spite of appearances, "means" the same thing. And of course it does and it does not. In spite of the strict grammatical logic I referred to earlier, it is also a linguistic fact that "no" does not mean the same as "yes." Language is posited on the possibility of maintaining differences as opposites; indeed any system of meaning functions on the principle of the differences between its signifiers, their noncoincidence as Saussure called it.[18] The change and repetition of Marianne's replies on the sound track thus set in place a structure of difference that becomes this complex configuration of repetitions and possible contradictions, contrasts between image and sound, angles and looks, tone and gesture, that is displayed in this scene and echoed throughout the film.[19] Through it,

something moves or is translated across the signifying interface that is the screen and the sound system to inscribe difference even where there appears, or sounds, to be sameness, setting meaning as adrift as Pierrot and Marianne, introducing onto the film surface something irreducibly foreign.

Those effects are compounded once we consider the cinematic status of an image of written words, or of an image from a comic strip, or an advertisement, usually relegated to accidental or highly conventional incidences. In *Pierrot* it is almost as if those other forms were allowed to compete with the image serving the narrative. That narrative itself is presented more than once as an alternative between an adventure film or love story (*A-S,* 80; W, 45–6), between a Jules Verne novel or gangster movie (*A-S,* 90; W, 69), and at times the film has seemed to leave off that "story of the last romantic couple" in order to drift into a musical, a treatise, a documentary, a filmed play, and so on. Thus at whatever level we raise the question, or situate the analysis, we find that *Pierrot* unsettles the simple presentation of photographic truth, of narrative coherence, of psychological consistency, of semiotic systematicity, and of generic unity that we have been conditioned to presume and expect in watching film. It is everywhere saying, "yes, of course," "yes, of course," each time differently, and forcing the spectator into compounded double-takes that disorient his or her assurance concerning the images passing by on the screen.

For all those reasons, *Pierrot* might seem a very foreign film to many viewers, even before they hear its language and see its subtitles. But, in fact, it should be more familiar than ever. In the first place, as I suggested earlier, current audiences are more used than ever to "manipulations" of the image through their exposure to music video, rapid cutting, and tighter editing. In the second place, our culture is witnessing a transformation of the role of the image through new technologies, a revolutionizing of relations between verbal and iconic languages. In many ways Godard's desire for a cinematic blackboard can be seen as a 1960s prototype of the hypertext, inviting the spectator's active participation in the film's construction, offering points of reference and windows of information on various levels. Given our constant exposure to

such visual effects, nothing should surprise us anymore. Thus the disorientation often provoked by Godard's film suggests that for all the technological and informational wizardry of recent years and its appropriation by audiovisual media in general, cinema has not really moved very far from the dominant matrices of the feature film that were installed in the years 1915 to 1930. There has been very little serious questioning of those matrices, such that however quaint or amateurish *Pierrot* might appear as we head toward the twenty-first century, it still preserves its ability to disconcert the viewer raised on the stringent diet of visual consumables that Hollywood seems determined to adhere to.

CONTEXTS AND PERSPECTIVES

The five essays in this volume present a variety of perspectives on *Pierrot le fou.* Richard Dienst's reflection posits a different kind of realism for Godard's film than that of movies based on the seamless recreation of a realistic, although fictional world on the screen. This is a reality – or as Dienst prefers, after Godard, a "life" – that does not come neatly constructed, but in fragments, above all these days in images. By the same token, though, the life presented to us is far from lacking in structure, and all the elements of the film that seem to disrupt its narrative momentum have their point, just as that narrative itself, or the story of the last romantic couple, has its point in the context of Velázquez, the Vietnam War, consumerism, and so on. Referring to the definition of cinema given by Samuel Fuller in the party scene, Dienst, again following Godard, calls that structure the "emotional unity" of the film, what finally makes *Pierrot* "an exploration of the ways life can be defined in terms of the desire for images."

In the second essay, Alan Williams provides specific details concerning some of the contexts that are relevant to a reading of the film. There is, first of all, the 1960s sentiment or sensibility, although Godard was by no means an enthusiastic supporter of the countercultural forms that began to develop during that period. Besides, we cannot assimilate the European experience of the 1960s to the American experience, although we can probably

identify in that period the beginnings of the internationalization of (especially popular) culture that we recognize today. Williams emphasizes the importance of cinephilia, which, in the French context, represented something of a countercultural experience, as well as a growing political sensibility that was not without parallel, and conflict, with the positions of a group known as the situationists, for whom Godard's artistic activism appeared irredeemably bourgeois.

In the third essay, Jean-Louis Leutrat relates *Pierrot le fou* to two other films of the same period, *Une Femme est une femme/A Woman Is a Woman* (1961) and *Le Mépris.* What interests him in each case is not what we presume to be central to the film, but rather certain decentering or "ex-centering" effects, for in his view Godard seeks to avoid the single coherent and totalizing point of view that the camera, and mainstream cinema, seem to impose, in favor of a plurality of offcenter perspectives that are capable of leading the spectator along quite different lines of inquiry, a little like what I referred to earlier as the hypertextual, or window effect of his films. In the first part of his essay, Leutrat analyzes the role of the painted image in *Pierrot* (Jill Forbes also points to this) by means of a comparison with Luchino Visconti's famous 1954 film, *Senso.*[20] In his treatment of *Une Femme est une femme* Leutrat finds the credits alone to be worthy of close attention (Tom Conley shows that they are equally informative in *Pierrot*), whereas in *Le Mépris* it is the opening sequence that sets in play a whole other discursive, oral and aural network.

Tom Conley takes Godard at his word in treating his film as a blackboard, that is to say as a signifying interface on the basis of which the madness of the film's title refers less to its protagonist than to the play of signification itself. Or more precisely, he takes the film at its word(s), at the level of the maddeningly overwhelming volume of signifiers that it requires us to process, demonstrating the labyrinthine chains of sense making that are there to be followed should we dare. From Conley's point of view the ruptures I referred to earlier, between sound and image, between sound and writing, between different images, "threaten" as "interstices" or abysses within which meaning can fall, flee or fly, or