

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Goodbye to Language 2014

Jean-Luc Godard, 1930-

Story. *Goodbye to Language* is a visual film, in which storyline is subordinated to the visual techniques required to establish the story. And yet the story line survives this radical representation of itself, and in fact makes its way into Godard's own plot summary, which he posted, in verse, on Twitter:

'The idea is simple./A married woman and a single man meet.' They love, they argue, fists fly./ A dog strays between town and country/ The seasons pass/ The man and woman meet again/ The dog finds itself between them/ The other is in one/ the one is in the other/ and they / are three/The former husband shatters everything/ A second film begins/ the same as the first/ and yet not/ From the human race we pass to metaphor/This ends in barking/ and a baby's cries/ In the meantime we will have seen people talking of the demise of the dollar, of truth in mathematics, and of the death of a robin.'

Plot. The simple plot, in other words, is divided in two parts, each of which presents one version of a couple (Josette and Gedeon; Ivitch and Marcus; the dog that goes with each pair) having a love affair. (The dog, Roxy, is the same with each pair; it is Godard's own dog, who was in fact one of the award winners to emerge from the film.) The locales of the two pairs of affairs resemble one another, but incorporate different personae and rely heavily on visual effects to differentiate themselves from one another. In fact to say that little about visual effects, in this plot section, is to anticipate the whole difficulty of summarizing the present plot, which is what is seen as much as what happens. At 83 Godard, never one to repeat himself, reviews the possibilities of creating a film in a language he is at the same time saying good bye to.

Sight. Three D camera technology is the foundation of the visual plotting that synchronizes with the two dominant concept plots, the two comparable accounts of affairs. The fracturing of visual scenes, the extravagant manipulations of intense colors—which appear smeared across the sky, slaughtered into their native blacks and dark blues, wiped like cloths across rain spattered windshields, ripped apart by the eye vivifying them from a sports car window, as it pours down the highway; reds and greens from flowers growing in a field will be upzapped to ferocious brilliance; while such effects in color are matched with any number of disturbances in the naturally expected perceptions of nature—trees turn autumn brilliant, their leaves orange, the sky purple.

Sound. Aural disturbance plays as robust a role as visual invasions, in giving the simple plot its rich and complex significance. (The actual narrative is of course not precisely as simple as that I outline above, under Plot, for it involves a multitude of minuscule gesture variations between the two paradigms—gunshots go off at slightly different intervals, dogs cross a yard at differing paces and anxieties—variations which essentially modify the plot, so delicate it is in its hard to foresee trajectory of sensory formulations. This is without mentioning the number of aborted conversations, conversations battered to pieces by automobile honkings, the number of pieces of classical, indigenous, folk, teen age pop music brought to a sharp halt as though by the sudden pushing of a STOP button; so that the aural as well as the visual dimension of plot conveyance is constantly befouling its own range of clarity. A final note on the ways plot is mediated, in this increasingly new-style plotting method of Godard: there are any number of literary puns at work in Godard's profuse borrowing of scenes and references from great works of literature and music, as well as a carefree sprinkling of actual encounters with figures from literary history, like the two Shelleys, at work in their cottage.

Plot. Yes plot again. In the *Poetics* Aristotle is careful to distinguish the elements which constitute a tragedy: they range from 'plot' and 'character' to 'choral dance' and 'spectacle';---the last of which means the physical properties or appearance of the stage . Godard, already in his film *Week End* (1974), had minimized his plot, his conceptual narrative plot by diffusing the tale of the couple's week end to the disturbing and upside down world of events that continued to happen to the pair. As the notion of plot was compromised, so was the notion of character; which like plot found itself increasingly replaced by events which 'happened' to characters.

THEMES

Chaos. As in his earlier films, Godard leaves no doubt, in *Good bye to Language*, that events, like that generated by the husband wife and lover, just happen, are chance events. Nothing could more clearly support this view of human events than the subjectivity, or improbability, with which the characters simply allow what is to happen to them. Like the appearances of nature, no stable setting seems to fix or gel the things that happen here or the people to whom they happen.

Cynicism. The scenarios of marriage destruction, which play out in the rudimentary paired tales, that mark 'plot' in the old fashioned sense, are tales which reflect the film director's value free view of the 'good bye to language world.' Could we say that language, for all we abuse it recklessly, remains the most faithful and effectual bastion of our values? Where more than in language do we enshrine accounts of our ethical preferences or intellectual persuasions? The greatest of directors, Bergman, yields to the power of silence in the film of that name, or in *Persona*, but controls his silence meaningfully, so that we deepen, through it, into a fuller sense of his argument. The assault on language, in Godard, only opens for us spaces in which the meaninglessness of life has room to crowd out our values.

Sense. Our senses are crowded throughout this film; we are hearing sounds of every sort, shaped, blared, and muffled. Our eyes are filled with inexplicable, often deliriously exaggerated, visuals. Our senses drown out our thoughts.

3D. The familiar 3D glasses of our childhoods are submitted in the present film to every sort of livid thickening of our experience of the daily. We are separated from all the comforts of a flat earth, quadrilateral landmass.

CHARACTERS

Josette. Josette is one of the pair members whose marital affair preoccupies the director. She belongs to the story named '1 Nature.' She is threatened by a man who drives up, and tells her to get on home—he seems to be her husband. He disappears, firing shots, and her boyfriend to be, Gedeon, enters her life as her lover.

Davidson. The professor, as it seems, is the guy friend of Isabelle. He is the most conspicuous intellectual in the group. We see him discoursing on Solzhenitsyn, and the political thinking of Jacques Ellul. Davidson also appears in both tales, providing a kind of thematic wholeness to the narrations.

Roxy was Godard's own dog, a loving and frisky participant in both tales, and a prize winner at the Cannes Film Festival.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

DAVIDSON

Character Davidson, if any character in the film, acquires a somewhat distinctive profile. By the way he behaves, the two ladies identify him as an intellectual, a fact soon confirmed by the volubility with which he discourses about Jacques Ellul and Solzhenitsyn. His greatest fascination appears to be with Adolf Hitler, and with the notion of the abdication of individual liberties to the state.

Parallels. One might think back to Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) in which new cinematic effects of color and movement, with a minimum of character coagulations, were introduced to a public just beginning to accustom itself to the dynamism of the film industry. Godard cuts into *Good bye to Language* with numerous clips from other movies—from Lang's *Metropolis*, Cocteau's *The Testament of Orpheus*, or Aia's *Piranha 3D*—clips which offer as it were footnotes on the present film; entry points for the intellectual penetration of a Davidson. For a literary parallel one might think of Golding's *The Inheritors* (1955), which tracks our most archaic roots of language usage. Like Golding's characters, Davidson has an excavational mind, which goes as far as it can toward fundamentals.

Illustrative moments

Arriving. When he first arrives on scene, Davidson is taken for a professor. He is declaiming about Solzhenitsyn, and joking with Isabelle about her smart phone.

Joking. Davidson jokes about the new use for the thumb, to manipulate the smart phone.

Lecturing. Like a prof, Davidson is easily caught up in lecturing to others, and in the present case he expatiates, to the other characters, on topics like the rise of Nazism or Jacques Ellul's political philosophy.

Reading At the beginning of the second episode, Davidson appears again, this time ruminating over a book of reproductions of the work of Nicolas de Stael.

Discussion questions

Why does Godard want to say good bye to language? Is this a view you would anticipate from him, on the basis of his earlier films?

Is Godard in any sense a portrayer of character and characters, through his films? Is he more interested in historical and cultural mood than in characters?