



Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy

Colin McCabe

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Jean-Luc Godard's early films revolutionized the language of cinema. Hugely prolific in his first decade--*Breathless*, *Contempt*, *Pierrot le Fou*, *Alphaville*, and *Made in USA* are just a handful of the seminal works he directed--Godard introduced filmgoers to the generation of stars associated with the trumpeted sexuality of postwar movies and culture: Brigitte Bardot, Jean Seberg, Jean-Paul Belmondo, and Anna Karina.

As the sixties wore on, however, Godard's life was transformed. The Hollywood he had idolized began to disgust him, and in the midst of the socialist ferment in France his second wife introduced him to the activist student left. From 1968 to 1972, Europe's greatest director worked in the service of Maoist politics, and continued thereafter to experiment on the far peripheries of the medium he had transformed. His extraordinary later works are little seen or appreciated, yet he remains one of Europe's most influential artists.

Drawing on his own working experience with Godard and his coterie, Colin MacCabe, in this first biography of the director, has written a thrilling account of the French cinema's transformation in the hands of Truffaut, Rohmer, Rivette, and Chabrol--critics who toppled the old aesthetics by becoming, legendarily, directors themselves--and Godard's determination to make cinema the greatest of the arts.

Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy Details

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From Reader Review Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy for online ebook

Tosh says

This is a very good straight ahead biography on one of the great filmmakers EVER, Jean-Luc Godard - The Swiss' greatest contribution to the world since the cuckoo clock! Godard was at point zero with respect to what was happening in Paris during the mid-20th Century. It's a cool ride with the coolest driver ever.

Andrew Bishop says

This one is a lot of fun because it constantly places Godard in political context. Whereas Brody wants to evoke Godard the man, CM strives to evoke the times. I think he succeeds in that aim and also wins with a compelling style that never skimps on the ideas and ambitions that Godard marshalled for his films. CM is a great narrator and also places the theory of the film-making in good relief to the politics that Godard was exploring. A little messier and more limited than Brody's book, it's still incredibly valuable nonetheless.

Adam says

A bit too scholarly and theoretical for my low-minded taste, but I shouldn't expect anything less considering the subject.

Christopher says

At the turn of the millennium, Jean-Luc Godard had turned seventy years old. In recent years he had been highly productive, turning out a large number of films that had not yet been taken stock of like his better-known French New Wave period. Colin MacCabe, a longtime film scholar who had written an earlier book on the filmmaker over two decades before, thus produced this new "portrait" of Godard.

As a survey of Godard's complete body of work, this book of MacCabe's has been rather superseded by Richard Brody's later and more ample *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*. MacCabe naturally only describes films made up to "Éloge de l'amour" and his survey is less general, sometimes focusing on a few anecdotes to capture Godard's life and work during a particular era instead of exhaustively proceeding through his whole output. Nonetheless, the fact that MacCabe was very attuned to the same Sixties radicalism that inspired Godard allows him to give a very insightful account of the director's Maoist years, and also a very penetrating account of why Godard eventually left such strident political filmmaking behind and sought a new direction. Another strong aspect of this work compared to Brody's is the vaster genealogy given for Godard in the first chapter on his upbringing, which better sets him in the context of French-Swiss society.

MacCabe is an academic keenly interested in issues of political theory and aesthetics. Nonetheless, I found this a very readable book, not at all dry or dull. Besides, anyone interested in late Godard is probably willing

to delve into the particular polemics that MacCabe examines. MacCabe is obviously a fan of Godard, he believes that Godard has important things to say, but he can also be critical about Godard's lack of tact or the misogyny that runs through his early life and work.

Djll says

I suppose I'll have to read another Godard bio to get more about the director and his films, and less about the history of European political philosophy...

Jimmy says

Colin MacCabe recently wrote an endorsement for the dust jacket of Fredric Jameson's new *Valences of the Dialectic* by Verso, which enthusiastically states that Jameson is "Probably the most important cultural critic writing in English today... It can truly be said that nothing cultural is alien to him.", maybe true, who knows? Although it might not be the best sign when this is the man writing the film biography that you're about to read. MacCabe's academic credentials might deter certain readers; fans of Godard who just want to hear about all of the juicy Karina/Wiazemsky gossip, as well as the endless amount of anecdotes about Godard and his working habits. Fortunately enough, this bio contains a balanced amount of theory and biographical entertainment.

A biography on a filmmaker such as Godard really requires a good amount of discussion of theoretical influences, as much of Godard's filmmaking finds inspiration in either radical ideology or obscure classic literature. There is also the unquestionable significance of Bazin's influence on what Godard's filmmaking seemed to grow into; an adventurous filmic elaboration of the concept of Bazin's ontology of cinema (I know, stay with me here), which deals with the capability that film has of documenting the reality of fictional narratives. Unlike Truffaut, who, let's face it, didn't really stay true to the essence of what made French New-Wave filmmaking so innovative and revolutionary, Godard pushed the limits of the medium, and with the aid of his more ingenious contemporaries such as Resnais, Marker, Varda, and Rohmer, replaced the dry, mechanical adaptations that were making French cinema so stagnant and bourgeois, with films that seemed unlike anything that the world of cinema had produced before.

And of course there is also a wealth of information about his marriage to Anna Karina, which in so many ways is just painful to read. It drives home the notion that Godard wasn't unfairly pegged as a total and unabashed misogynist. Even if it could be argued that his films aren't, which, actually, many of them aren't, his personal life was not kind to the opposite sex, and to a degree he clearly hated most of the women that he was with. MacCabe's descriptions almost make it sound as though women were in some way an unavoidable package deal when it came to Godard and his love of cinema. And that he, at times, almost confused the two. Karina had apparently attempted suicide numerous times. Wiazemsky was equally tormented by his mood swings and selfishness. Of course, this is a film director that we're talking about here, few if any, are really the most compassionate people in the world when it comes down to it. Solipsism, sadism, selfishness; these all seem more or less like the sort of character traits that are a prerequisite for the job. Not to excuse any of this, at all really, but this is the picture of the man that MacCabe paints.

Also illuminating is the information about the Dziga Vertov group, and Godard's creative partnership with Jean-Pierre Gorin. MacCabe is less critical of Godard's eventual Maoist ideology laden films. Critical of

Letter to Jane of course; honestly, another example of what could only possibly be construed as misogyny, or at least some kind of weird political sadism. MacCabe has definitely seen more of these films than most people though, as his professional relationship with Godard is as close as most people seem to get. Which is sort of a problem for this book, as it's unlikely that most American audiences have seen half of the Godard films that MacCabe cites, especially every installation of his *Histoire du Cinema*, which is by no means an easy piece of media for one to get one's hands on.

I've yet to read some of the other picture-book-like bios on Godard. And ultimately this book sated my intellectual curiosity about Godard on a level that I wasn't even aware of having. And that he stresses the importance of his relationship with both Bazin and Henri Langlois is definitely the sign of an author who understands Godard and who he remained faithful to in a filmmaking sense. The less-than-admirable biographical information really has to be taken with a grain of salt, and it's also by no means absolute, but MacCabe is reporting what mostly seems like the truth. In a way it's all this stubbornness and selfishness that make Godard so provocative and intriguing. I'm still paying attention anyway.

Jack Herbert Christal Gattanella says

the biography parts of this 'portrait' we're interesting enough as I can recall, such as the detail about his rather not too shabby childhood between Switzerland and France (mostly Swiss as he's mixed), how he was kind of a young petty criminal with some similarities to the smarmy lead in *Breathless*, love affair and devastating break up with Anna Karina, his motorcycle accident (or was it car) in 1972 that, like Bob Dylan, disfigured him in a way that probably changed his career more than we know, his relationship with Anne Marie Mieville, supposed comeback in 1979, and this and that or the other, leading up to his second 'comeback' with *In Praise of Love* in 2001.

But then... sometimes the author tries just a little too hard to put his career into a context that I just didn't get into. I understand positing Godard, whether you like his stuff or not his work in the 60s challenged cinema in ways that affected the rest of the century in small and big techniques, into history. Yet I got the sense that the author, and an acolyte of his lessor 80s/90s work no less, had that same pedantic quality of pontificating about this or that that doesn't really have to do with the author, mostly in the last hundred or so pages as again I can recall.

So, a five star rating for the solid historical background and storytelling about this quiet freak of cinema with some oddball ideas and political radicalism (his trips into Mao possibly get more page time than his *Cashiers during Cinema*), and one and a half stars for the boring semantic tangents.

Iniville says

Pretty exhaustive with the anecdotes. A great companion to Richard Brody's book.

Jonfaith says

All narrative summaries of Godard's films are misleading because the films proceed by montage rather than story.

JLG and partner/collaborator Anne-Marie Miéville

This is a brilliant intellectual history of Godard and his milieu. This is less a cinematic/textual analysis of JLG's oeuvre than the Brody biography. I would thus recommend everyone read both. Here Godard's work is delineated alongside the major theoretical currents of the time the homage to Hitchcock/Hawks, the wary treading on Algeria, the dip to the Maoist left, the experiments with video, the rural turn, back to Switzerland. . I felt this work to be as equally moving as the Brody, though the focus is more on connective tissue rather the emperor-ly warts or nudity. It is difficult to articulate the bliss I have found in this project of reading four books on the auteur and spending dozens of hours watching and rewatching his films. This strikes me today a necessary passage. I honestly can't imagine extending such effort to any other filmmaker. At least, not just yet.

Fred says

Great coverage of the early years. REad up to the end of his early period of filmmaking. About the time of May '60 and his marriage to Anne Wiazemsky - his Mao period - I lost interest. McCabe is very knowledgeable about the subject. It's an intimate portrait that sheds a lot of light on his films, his thinking about film, and, notably, on his character. For example, Godard was known to all of his intimate friends as a petty thief. And was always broke and scrounging for money until he made Breathless and became an "overnight success." Even then he was often broke because, with the exception of Breathless - a truly remarkable debut - his films all lost money. His second film, Le Petit Soldat, was one of the worst performing films at the time.

David says

This is not a traditional biography where the book strictly focuses on the subject itself. Instead, the author at times writes around Godard expanding on situations that have no direct correlation with the filmmaker. So for instance, during Godard's political filmmaking period, the author would digress into details about the circumstances around Maoism or the growing concerns over Communism in the world. One can make the argument that because Godard had a growing interest in Maoism, the author had the right to go into further details about the movement, but I personally was not looking for a history lesson.

Two-third into the book, I still had a hazy portrait of the artist. I was very disappointed with the book and I would not recommend to others who are interested in Godard's life as a filmmaker.

Adam says

I doubt a better book on Godard will be written as long as he's alive.
