

# Performance in and of the Essay film: Jean-Luc Godard plays Jean-Luc Godard in *Notre musique* (2004)

Laura Rascaroli *University College Cork*

## Abstract

*The 'essay film' is an experimental, hybrid, self-reflexive form, which crosses generic boundaries and systematically employs the enunciator's direct address to the audience. Open and unstable by nature, it articulates its rhetorical concerns in a performative manner, by integrating into the text the process of its own coming into being, and by allowing answers to emerge in the position of the embodied spectator. My argument is that performance holds a privileged role in Jean-Luc Godard's essayistic cinema, and that it is, along with montage, the most evident site of the negotiation between film-maker and film, audience and film, film and meaning. A fascinating case study is provided by Notre musique/Our Music (2004), in which Godard plays himself. Communicative negotiation is, I argue, both Notre musique's subject matter and its textual strategy. It is through the variation in registers of acting performances that the film's ethos of unreserved openness and instability is fully realised, and comes to fruition for its embodied spectator.*

## Keywords

Essay film  
Jean-Luc Godard  
performance  
communicative  
negotiation  
authorial self-  
representation  
*Notre musique*

In a rare scholarly contribution on acting performances in documentary cinema, Thomas Waugh reminds us that the classical documentary tradition took the notion of performance for granted; indeed, 'semi-fictive characterization, or "personalization," ... seemed to be the means for the documentary to attain maturity and mass audiences' (Waugh 1990: 67). Little or no difference is to be found between documentary and fiction, either in the terminology used to describe acting or in the practice: 'Documentary performers "act" in much the same way as their dramatic counterparts except that they are cast for their social representativity as well as for their cinematic qualities, and their roles are composites of their own social roles and the dramatic requirements of the film' (Waugh 1990: 67). A feature that qualifies the social actors' performance is the requirement of not looking into the lens, of performing unawareness of the camera, corresponding to the stipulation of 'acting naturally'; this is what Bill Nichols would call the 'virtual performance', the everyday presentation of self (Nichols 1991: 122). Based on whether the social actor acknowledges the camera or not, Waugh proposes to distinguish between a 'representational performance', in which the documentary borrows the code of narrative illusion and naturalness from fiction cinema; and a 'presentational performance', whereby the awareness of the camera is performed, a code that, for Waugh, the documentary absorbed

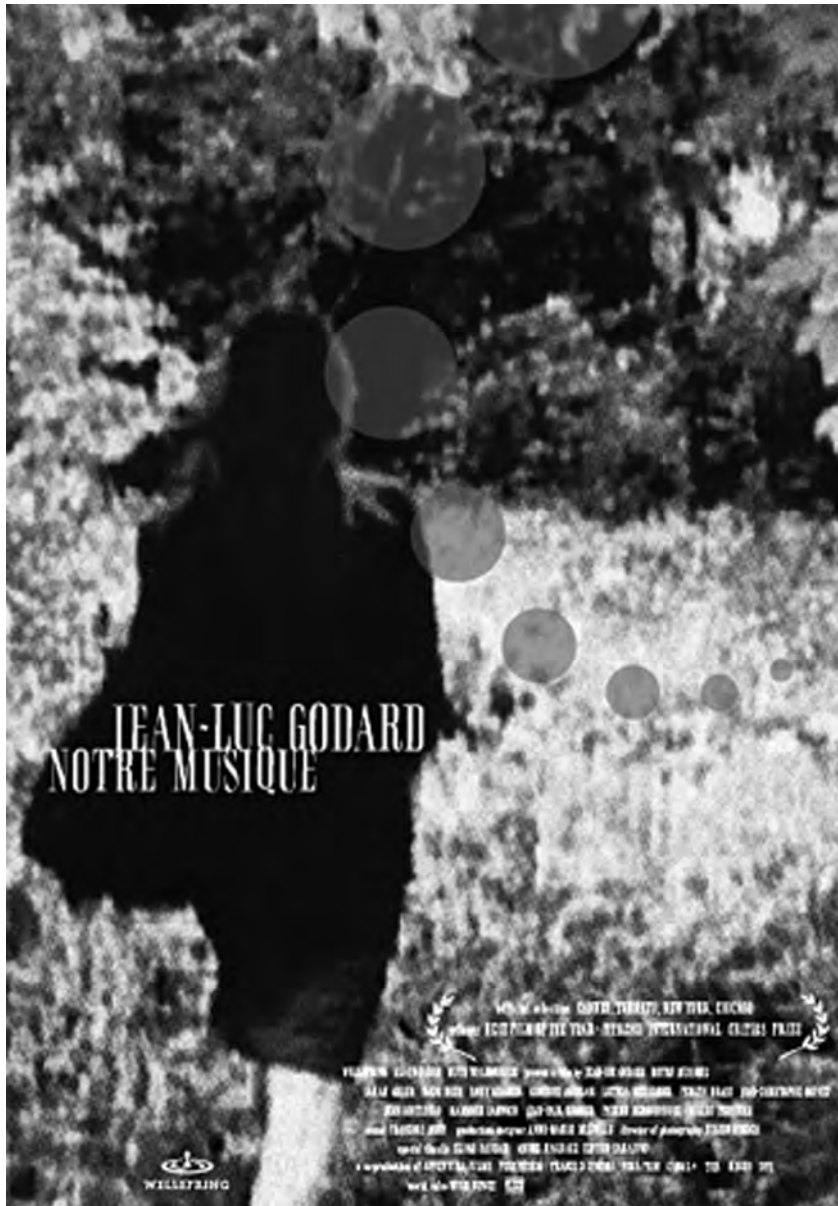


Figure 1: The poster for Notre musique.

from documentary still photography. The second tradition includes the variants of aural presentation, partly inspired by the radio, such as the interview, the monologue, and choral speech. Although the two traditions historically intersect and alternate, and despite some notable exceptions, in classical times the presentational style predominated only in the commercial newsreel and related forms; representational performance ruled, instead, in the classical documentary.

In what ways, if any, does the essay film differ from a documentary in terms of performance? Three key characteristics of the essay film must be

taken into account: first, it is an experimental, hybrid form sited at the crossroads of documentary, experimental cinema, and art film, and is thus likely to cross boundaries between fictional and nonfictional approaches to film-making; second, it is a highly self-reflexive genre, which asks questions on the relationship between film and reality; and third, it is characterised by interpellation and the direct address to the spectator.<sup>1</sup> Performance and performativity are key to the essay film, because the essay form typically reflects on its own coming into being, and incorporates in the text the act of reasoning itself: 'The essay aims... to preserve something of the *process* of thinking' (Good 1988: 20). Essays are open and fluid textual structures, searching for their own rules; in other words, they are intrinsically performative acts. It is, then, logical to deduce that the essay will use performance self-consciously, and naturally tend towards the presentational style of acting.

With the aim of more closely examining questions of performativity and performance in the essay film, I will focus on the expression of enunciativational subjectivity, on the presentation and representation of the authorial self, and on the establishment of a dialogue between film-maker and spectator. A fascinating case study is provided by *Notre musique/Our Music* (2004), an essay film by Jean-Luc Godard, in which the director 'plays' himself. Godard is an ideal choice not only because of the central role that performance always plays in his work, but also because his essay films integrate the process of their own coming into being in an especially visible and explicit manner. As Godard once suggested, commenting on his *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle/Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1966):

Basically, what I am doing is making the spectator share the arbitrary nature of my choices, and the quest for general rules which might justify a particular choice. Why am I making this film, why am I making it this way?... I am constantly asking questions. I watch myself filming, and you hear me thinking aloud. In other words it isn't a film, it's an attempt at film and is presented as such.

(Narboni and Milne 1972: 239)

My analysis will engage not only with the parameters of Godard's and his actors' performances, but also with the ways in which performance and performativity fit into the film's overall communicative strategy.

### **Godard, essayist and actor**

Widely regarded as an essayist director, Godard often described himself as one: 'I think of myself as an essayist, producing essays in novel form, or novels in essay form: only instead of writing, I film them' (Narboni and Milne 1972: 171). Bordwell notes that, already between 1959 and 1967 (date of release of *La Chinoise*), talking of Godard's cinema in terms of essay was a critical cliché (Bordwell 1985: 312).<sup>2</sup> Moure, however, is right to point out that, despite 'the narrative ruptures, the quotations and the moments of reflection or social critique', Godard's early films remain fundamentally narrative; it is 'only since 1968, with the political films, that works begin to appear which are fully inscribed in the essay form' (Moure 2004: 34; my translation). For Moure, Godard's post-1968 essayistic films no longer present true narration, but at most a situation; they are made

1. For a detailed exploration of these features of the essay film, see Rascaroli (2008).
2. For Bordwell, however, the notion of essay is only 'an alibi for unusual narrational strategies' (Bordwell 1985: 312).

3. A hybridism reinforced by 'the sheer variety of media in which [Godard] is now working and the ease with which he moves between them' (Witt 2004: 74).
4. Indeed, his use of performance goes well beyond cinema; on Godard's performances in interviews and television appearances see Witt (2004: 83–86).

up of very diverse audiovisual materials; the documentary form inspires them; and they utilise intellectual montage techniques.

One additional characteristic must be added. Writing about Godard's video-essays – *Six fois deux/Sur et sous la communication/Six Times Two: Over and Under Communication* (1976), *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants/France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children* – (1977–78), *Scénario du film 'Passion'/Scenario of the Film 'Passion'* (1982), *Soft and Hard* (1986), *Puissance de la parole/The Power of Speech* (1988), and *Histoire(s) du cinéma/History/ies of the Cinema* (1997–98) – John Conomos argued that 'perhaps the most recognisable textual trope of Godard's art is the *mise en scène* of direct address: Godard's self-reflexive voice questioning the work at hand, its fictionality and cultural or production features' (Conomos 2001). I agree, and suggest that the defining characteristics of Godard's essays are the direct address to the viewer, the director's self-analysis, the stylistic hybridism,<sup>3</sup> and the simultaneous probing of a philosophical argument and of the film's rhetorical structure.

Furthermore, I argue that performance holds a privileged role in Godard's essayistic cinema, and that it is, along with montage, the most evident site of the negotiation between film-maker and film, audience and film, film and meaning. It is important to remember that performance is a fundamental component of all Godard's work, including his most narrative and less essayistic films.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Brechtian epic theatre on Godard's cinema is self-evident: the fragmentation of an elliptical montage; the partition of the film into tableaux; the use of captions; the overt socio-political commentary; the lack of synchronisation between voice and image. It is also clear in the sphere of performance, as seen for instance in the frequent use of character asides and direct addresses to the camera, and, especially in the later work, in a theatrical, vaudeville-like acting style. Bart Testa has suggested that, in the New Wave's early period, the relationship between actor and film style was not integrated. Actors behaved as if they were stars in a classically constructed film, but the screen space was not constituted to respond to them; for instance, 'the actor persistently quotes a star, or famous classic performance, in order to behave like a star and thus, foregrounds the fact of playacting' (Testa 1990: 95), as can be seen in Belmondo's Bogart-like performance in *À bout de souffle/Breathless* (1960). Furthermore, 'the films of Godard ... deploy acting composed of quotations' (Testa 1990: 95), a characteristic that intensifies in later work. For Testa, Godard's attitude to performance does not mean that his style asserts itself against the actors; his approach, on the contrary, 'opens a space for performance that moves in an opposite direction: the editing may interrupt the acting, but it never controls its significance; the camera contains, then elides over performance, and this allows performance to rediscover itself across the interruptions' (Testa 1990: 121). Furthermore, we should add that Godard eventually moved away from the figure of the Author, who exerts total control over the making of the film, by renouncing his authorial stamp and sharing it not only with co-authors, but also with the actors as authorial figures, who are collectively co-responsible for the production of meaning.

Godard often acted in his own films: his first appearance dates back to his second film, the short *Une femme coquette* (1955), but his voice was

already present in his first short, *Opération béton/Operation concrete* (1954). In his first feature, *À bout de souffle*, he is the informer who recognises Poiccard and points him to the police; his voice is also heard several times, thus inaugurating Godard's habit of inscribing himself in his films both visually and aurally, through the image of his body and the sound of his voice, which are at times synchronised, at times disjointed. In his investigation of the ways in which Godard's voice is present in his oeuvre, in form of recitation, ventriloquism, diction or through apparatuses, Lack has argued that Godard used his voice 'to play novel and sometimes subtle variations on the old trope of cinematic self-reflexivity whereby the director's material presence in a film disrupts narrative illusionism' (Lack 2004: 314). I suggest that voice does much more than this, at least in some of Godard's work, where it becomes one of the main channels of the film's essayistic drive, as well as a site of performance and, therefore, of negotiation.

Especially in his most overtly autobiographical work, including *Numéro deux/Number Two* (1975), sections of *Six fois deux*, and especially episode 2b, *Jean-Luc, Soigne ta droite/Keep Your Right Up* (1987), *King Lear* (1987) and *JLG/JLG – autoportrait de décembre/JLG/JLG: Self-Portrait in December* (1995), Godard inscribes his self-reflexivity and paints a self-portrait. He appears here as the Artist, the Film-maker, the Old Master or even the 'old fool isolated in his Swiss retreat', as the press has often construed him (Temple and Williams 2000: 11). My contention is that, in these films, Godard plays with the multiplicity of the 'I', as directly suggested by the title of his self-portrait, *JLG/JLG*. Such a multiplicity is negotiated by film-maker and spectator through performance. It is Godard's performance of different roles, and the differentiation of the acting registers, which materialise and articulate the possibility of different identities, while also reflecting the conception that identity ultimately consists of role-playing.

This method is especially evident in *Notre musique*, which employs an ample spectrum of performances. In response to critics who saw *Notre musique* as 'baffling and irritating in its refusal of clarity' (Vincendeau 2005: 70), and who described its argument as opaque and dogmatic, I will claim that Godard's film endeavours to establish a communication with the spectator. I will also investigate the role of performance in the creation of the conditions for a negotiation between director and audience.

### ***Notre musique*: performance and negotiation**

*Notre musique*'s plot is framed within a tripartite, Dantesque organisation of the subject matter. 'Hell' is a ruthless ten-minute archival montage of fictional and documentary images of war, death and destruction. Partly reminiscent of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, it boldly mixes fragments of newsreels, war documentaries, essays like Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard/Night and Fog* (1955), and feature films as diverse as *Aleksandr Nevskiy/Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein, 1938), *Fort Apache* (Ford, 1948), *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich, 1955), *Zulu* (Endfield, 1964), *Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925) and *Les Anges du péché/Angels of the Streets* (Bresson, 1943). In 'Purgatory', the most extended and complex section of the film (as is typical of painted triptychs), Godard goes

to post-war Sarajevo to deliver a lecture at the European Literary Encounters, where he will meet a number of noted authors and artists. Two young women also attend – Judith Lerner (Sarah Adler), an Israeli journalist from Tel Aviv, and Olga Brodsky (Nade Dieu), a Jewish Israeli of Russian origin – both of whom are wrestling with the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. Judith, who has come to see a place where ‘reconciliation is possible’, as she says in the film, tries to obtain an interview with French ambassador Olivier Naville (Simon Eine), who helped her grandparents in Vichy France in 1943, and asks him to comment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the point of view of his past resistance to Nazism. She then interviews Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwich, who argues, referring to the Israelis, that ‘the world cares about you, not about us; you’ve brought us defeat and renown’. Olga attends Godard’s lecture; she visits the collapsed Mostar Bridge, and talks to her uncle, translator Ramos Garcia (Rony Kramer), about suicide. The Encounters are over; somebody delivers to Godard Olga’s DVD of his masterclass. Back at home, some time later, Godard receives a phone call from Ramos, informing him that Olga, who threatened to blow herself up in the name of peace in a cinema theatre in Jerusalem, was shot down by a marksman; as it turned out, she was only carrying books in her bag. In ‘Paradise’, Olga arrives on the shores of a lake guarded by US marines. She walks by some young people, sits next to one of them, and shares an apple with him.

This synopsis is, to an extent, deceptive. It does not fully account for the plot’s richness, or for its fragmentation, which undermines the wholeness and teleology of the narrative; nor does it reflect the film’s documentary drive. I am referring here to the filming of Sarajevo, which demonstrates the director’s ‘prescience and talent to document key places at key moments’ (Vincendeau 2005: 70) and is ‘at times strongly reminiscent of Rossellini’s *Germany Year Zero*’ (Witt 2005: 28). I am also referring to the presence of real-life figures (including Mahmoud Darwich, Spanish author Juan Goytisolo, and French authors Pierre Bergounioux and Jean-Paul Curnier). But there are in addition many elements of the fictional plot itself. For instance, the European Literary Encounters are a real event, ‘organised annually since 2000 by the André Malraux Cultural Centre in Sarajevo, in which Godard took part in 2002’ (Witt 2005: 28), with a masterclass on the same topic of the lecture as in *Notre musique*. Also, in the staged interview, Darwich ‘repeats his own lines from a real interview with an Israeli journalist’ (Witt 2005: 29); Goytisolo recites lines from his own poem about the revelation of the ‘better fate’ of the dead, and Darwich’s texts are quoted by other characters; when she visits the Mostar Bridge, Olga meets architect Gilles Pecqueux, who at the time was supervising the rebuilding of the bridge.

Stylistic eclecticism and the attitude of frequently crossing the border between fiction, documentary and experimental film-making are characteristics of the essay film, and *Notre musique* truly confounds boundaries. An even more emblematic feature of the form, as I have claimed, is the direct address to the audience and the establishment of a dialogue between film-maker and spectator. In ‘Hell’, a female voiceover utters a sparse, poetic text, adapted from Montesquieu’s *De l’esprit de lois*: ‘And so, in the age of fable, there appeared on earth men armed for extermination’. That

Godard feels the need to use a voiceover in the only segment devoid of (his) actors, devoid of narrators who can address the audience on his account, is emblematic of his desire to communicate with the spectator. In *Notre musique*, indeed, many are the instances of overt, or partly disguised, direct address. In 'Purgatory', several characters appear to be speaking to themselves, and of course to the audience. The most obvious and relevant example of direct address is, however, Godard's own masterclass, in which he lectures to a public of young people, the representatives of the real audience in the text. This sequence ends with a close-up of Godard's face in semi-darkness, staring speechlessly into the lens, and into the spectator's eyes. In the rest of the episode, the characters' lines are very often literary or philosophical quotations; because they are taken out of their contexts – and do not always receive replies from other characters – they function like open questions, ultimately addressed at the spectator. The spectator is, therefore, constantly urged to listen, reflect and respond to a text that opens and never solves problems, that incessantly formulates questions dialectically.

The entire film is built on dialectical oppositions: death/life, darkness/light, real/imaginary, agents/narrators, criminals/victims and, as Godard argues in his lecture, shot/reverse-shot. Taking this structure to its ultimate consequence, one should add the binary, director/spectator. The spectator is sited by the film in a dialectical relationship with the director, who functions as his other, and is therefore asked to answer the questions raised by Godard, and actively participate in the creation of filmic meaning. This is in keeping with Godard's self-positioning in *JLG/JLG* as a spectator, a reader, a receiver, as well as a mirror who reflects back what he receives (see Silverman 2001). The mirroring also takes place between director and spectator; Godard said just this when he stated in an interview that 'the camera is the true reverse-shot of the projector' (Frodon 2004b: 21), and the subject who films is the reverse-shot of the subject who views. It is, after all, the recognition of the reciprocity of all communication:

The distribution of roles in the enunciation as described by Benveniste is not merely a system of social rules; it is found in every use of language. Every speaker bears within him two polarities, that of sender and receiver and that of enunciation and statement. He rests on a scission. Or, rather, he does not 'rest' (implying a paradoxical stability); he functions by virtue of this schism. 'The individual is a dialogue', Valéry used to say. Communication is thus a 'dialogue of dialogues'.

(Lejeune 1977: 30)

The film makes address and communication its very textual strategy. *Notre musique* not only places dialogue (between factions, between people, between different ideological or theoretical positions) at its narrative and philosophical core, but also postulates the dialogue between filmmaker and spectator as its main goal and subject matter. This is immediately established by the film's title which, with its allusion to 'us' and its appeal to a shared humanistic ground ('our music'), summons the spectator and asks him or her to feel bound to the subject behind the camera. Godard confirmed the desire for a close relationship when he ironically

5. Furthermore, 'Hell' is interspersed with black frames, which suspend the discourse, attract attention to the work of the film, and offer pauses for reflection.

commented: 'There was a time when we said we made films for 200,000 potential friends; today that number would certainly be lower' (Frodon 2004b: 22).

A further feature of the essay film is that it must introduce and muse about a philosophical problem or set of problems, and, once again, it is easy to see how *Notre musique* complies with this; it does so not only through narrative material and the characters' philosophising, but also linguistically, by means of montage. Rather than producing a seamless, sutured text, Godard relentlessly disjoints the binary elements of cinematic language – shot and reverse-shot, image and counter-image – letting meanings clash and emerge from oppositions.<sup>5</sup> In Godard's own words, the rapprochement of two images 'provokes a question or introduces another response in the form of a question, so that we don't just say the same things over and over again' (Witt 2005: 30). The intellectual probing is articulated through antitheses, which shape the film's macrostructure itself: hell and purgatory, purgatory and paradise, hell and paradise. *Notre musique* is simultaneously philosophy *through* the cinema and *of* the cinema, because the clash is also linguistic: 'Hell' is a rhythmic piece of montage of relatively short shots, 'Paradise' proceeds through slow, observational tracking shots, while 'Purgatory' is stylistically eclectic. The concepts verbally introduced by the characters are also split and made to collide: 'We consider death two ways: the impossible of the possible and the possible of the impossible'; 'Killing a man to defend an idea is not defending an idea. It's killing a man'; 'Not a just conversation, just a conversation'. Godard connects this rhetorical procedure to the language of cinema in his lecture, when he discusses the shot/reverse-shot. Truth has two faces: Vichy France and French Jews; Nazi Germany and Israel; Israel and Palestine. The film calls for reconciliation, meeting, and dialogue; languages (French, Spanish, Hebrew, Serbo-Croatian, Arabic and English) are constantly translated for the characters and for the audience; all characters speak more than one language; and intellectual exchange between people from different backgrounds is achieved. The planned reconstruction of Mostar's Old Bridge has obvious symbolic meanings, which are implicit in its ability of linking not only people, but also ideas and instances in time.

The accent is placed on the structure itself of exchange, and on the difficulty of the process; the key topic of *Notre musique* is, in other words, communicative negotiation. In Francesco Casetti's definition, communicative negotiation, 'the process through which every addressee personalizes the sense of what is being communicated, makes it his own' (Casetti 2002: 18), is less about reaching an agreement, a compromise between the parties involved – something which would ultimately result in a 'closing down' of the meaning – and more about establishing a framework for communication. *Notre musique* does just this; not by accident, it is set in public places that are sites of movement, mixing, exchange and encounter: an international airport, a taxis, an embassy, an hotel hall, a library, a street market, a conference room, a bridge. The film talks of social, political, philosophical, literary, and emotional communication, and proposes more or less successful instances of it in a setting encouraging reconciliation (post-war Sarajevo), and within a situation propitious to inter-cultural exchange (the Literary Encounters). But it is also an essay film that creates



the conditions of its own communicative negotiation, and takes it as its subject matter as well as textual strategy.

Casetti rightly noticed that the notion of negotiation allows us to think of the filmic text, on the one hand, as containing a series of proposals that the addressee relates to and transforms into resources ('opportunities for information, entertainment, strengthening of current relationships, definition of identities'), and, on the other hand, as a terrain within which the encounter with the addressee is 'already prefigured and outlined' (Casetti 2002: 19). Rich with resources that can be appropriated by the audience, *Notre musique* also sets the rules of its own encounter and exchange with the spectator, as I have argued above. What I will suggest below is that it is through the actors' performances that the spectator negotiates with the film's meanings and structure. This happens in the central instalment, 'Purgatory'; in fact, 'Hell' is the absence, the negation of communication (which is replaced by violence), and 'Paradise' is the overcoming of the need for (the purgatory of) negotiation, and its replacement with effortless communication, one that does not need any words (the segment is completely devoid of dialogue).

Godard could have chosen to philosophise directly on communicative negotiation (for instance, by means of voiceover, which he is never shy to use), or else to make his argument exclusively through montage, or via a combination of the two. However, he prefers to enact it. The meaning of this choice is self-evident: negotiation is a performance. Indeed, the extreme fragmentation and diversity of 'Purgatory' correspond to a differentiation of the performance. The variations in acting style and rhetorical structure are bewildering, and coexist within a segment that now adopts an (almost) traditional fictional approach, now an anti-realist, even grotesque tone, now a documentary eye. 'Purgatory' begins with a dialogue between two actors (a representational performance, which sets the tone of a fiction film); moves onto a piece of anti-realist theatre (the sequence in the semi-destroyed library, an intensely presentational performance that summons the spectator on a Brechtian stage traversed by poets, translators, children, and Native Americans in traditional costumes); then to an interview (presentational); a lecture (presentational); and finally a series of dialogues (representational). Further complications, even within the same sequence, are numerous. The interview with Darwich is set up as a fictional moment, for the interviewer is a character in the fiction, but his presentational nature is highlighted by the status of the interviewee, a writer playing himself. Then there is, especially, the woman who, after introducing Judith to Darwich, exclaims in English: 'Ok folks, it's your play!', and signals to somebody to start filming; a cameraman subsequently appears behind Darwich.

Godard's desire to cover all types of performance that enact communication is evident: dialogue, monologue, interview and lecture are all forms of address, for they all imply a subject who talks to another, even if sometimes an absent one (even the monologue is always intended for an audience). Godard sets up all these forms as interpellations, as dialectical questions that solicit an answer, one which is not offered, and is, therefore, allowed to emerge somewhere else: in the position occupied by the embodied spectator. *Notre musique's* various performers site the spectator as



Figure 2: Native Americans in traditional costumes in *Notre musique* (Courtesy of Optimum Home Entertainment).

receiver of a series of questions, interpellations, stimuli; the lack of answers places the spectator in an empty, free position. Because it is genuinely empty, and not filled with prearranged meanings and responses, this space is in the singular; no uniform/prevalent spectatorial position is established by *Notre musique*. The film constantly emphasises that essayistic communication is a structure based on the interaction between two embodied subjects, and that the receiver's response is, therefore, open and unpredictable; it is the product of the negotiation of a single, embodied individual with the text. Godard takes care to reinforce this concept verbally: the French ambassador tells Judith that, while the dream of the State is to be one, the dream of the individual is to be two. This line not only draws attention to the political (resistant, revolutionary) implications of dialogue, but also to the fact that 'us' in *Notre musique* is made up of an 'I' and a 'you', the film-maker/essayist and the spectator – real partners engaged in a communicative negotiation.

It is particularly relevant that in his self-representation Godard privileges the lecturer over the film-maker. His choice to lecture, to be a performer before an audience, a speaker engaged in a situation of communicative negotiation, rather than a director behind a camera, is important; so much so that his masterclass is placed almost exactly at the central point of 'Purgatory', and of the entire film. This is not to say that Godard shows no self-irony, or that he takes his performance very seriously; indeed, the opposite is true. Humorously, many of his young listeners shortly lose

interest; they begin to shuffle in their chairs, to talk and giggle, or even laugh out loud at a time when a joke was not made; it is not exactly the image of an absorbed public. The representation, once again, draws attention to the fact that communication, especially of a reflective text, is not a straightforward act, but the result of a (difficult) process of negotiation of each single receiver with the text. This negotiation is personal, and may or may not be successful.

When, at the end of the class, one of the attendees asks Godard whether he thinks that new DV cameras will save the cinema, Godard disengages; he remains silent, his stunned face, half-hidden in the semi-darkness, staring into the void for long seconds, until the audience is heard off-screen, leaving. The sequence amounts to a gag on Godard's well-known opinions on the importance of watching films in 35mm and on the death of the cinema, on his gruffness, and on his disconnection from young audiences. I argue, however, that simply to note the self-irony, as many reviewers have done, is not to say very much, and it certainly is to say too little. The sequence is significantly more important than as an instance of self-awareness or a pun. Jean-Luc Godard appears here as himself, the world-famous director and intellectual whose opinions have international resonance; at the same time, he is playing (and playing with) his stereotypical and media-constructed persona, while also attracting our attention to the rift between the two representations, by means of the dimness of the lighting. He is doing even more: he is performing the ethos of his film. My point is that, had he answered the question, he would have closed down the dialogue. There would only have been one speaker, with not only all the questions, but also all the (right) answers. Faithful to the content of his lecture, and to the rhetorical structure of his entire film, Godard chooses instead to let the question hang; he wilfully does not fill the void, does not close the framework of negotiation, opened up – through his performance – by his act of communication.

At the end of 'Purgatory', we learn that communication has, indeed, taken place. At least one of the attendees, Olga, did engage with Godard's lecture, responded to it, and made a video (a pun?), which she then delivered to Godard. The video, somehow inspired by Godard's lecture – by Godard's film – testifies to the fact that she made the text her own: the cover of the DVD is significantly decorated by a picture of her face, and not of Godard's; and her film is entitled *Notre musique*. As a model receiver in a communicative situation, she negotiated the meaning, and went through the difficult process of making the object of communication her own. However, this ultimately proves that the essay film is a performative, open and unstable text, and produces unpredictable results; these are due to the embodied receiver's idiosyncratic and independent process of appropriation of the text itself. It also proves that *Notre musique*, hailed by most reviewers as an optimistic film (with some surprise and relief, given Godard's generally bleak take on contemporary society), is a much less hopeful text than generally depicted. If Olga's final choice of self-demise was in any way precipitated by Godard's lecture, we know for sure that he did not wilfully urge his young audience to suicide. *Notre musique* might include some instances of optimism, but they are framed in-between the hell of large-scale, indiscriminate and unwarranted death and suffering,

and a paradise guarded by armed marines. This 'paradise' contains exclusively young people, who are probably happier here than they have ever been on earth (is this Dante's circle of the 'violent against themselves', though relocated to Paradise?).

It is significant that Godard's character does not, and probably never will, watch Olga's film, arguably suggesting that, in the particular communicative negotiation between essayist director and spectator, it is the spectator who has the last word; the director only asks questions. And, perhaps, he does not even exactly know what questions he has asked. When the French Ambassador enquires of his former classmate, author Pierre Bergounioux, whether writers know what they are talking about, the latter answers: 'No. Of course not'. Bergounioux adds that people who act do not have the ability to express themselves adequately about what they do; and, conversely, those who tell stories do not know what they are talking about. Asked in an interview whether all shot/reverse-shots are fecund, once again Godard chooses not to fill the space of the embodied receiver, and, meaningfully, answers: 'I do not know! I only pose the question' (Frodon 2004: 20).

## References

- Bordwell, D. (1985), *Narration in Fiction Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Carlson, M. (2004), *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, New York: Routledge.
- Casetti, F. (2002), *Communicative Negotiation in Cinema and Television*, Milan: Vita e Pensiero.
- Conomos, J. (2001), 'Only the Cinema', *Senses of Cinema*, [http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/godard\\_conomos.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/14/godard_conomos.html). Accessed 9 June 2008.
- Frodon, J.-M. (2004), 'Jean-Luc Godard et *Notre Musique*. Juste une conversation', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 590, p. 2.
- Good, G. (1988), *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, London: Routledge.
- Lack, R. F. (2004), 'Sa Voix', in M. Temple, J. S. Williams and M. Witt (eds), *Forever Godard*, London: Black Dog Publishing, pp. 312–29.
- Lejeune, P. (1977), 'Autobiography in the Third Person' (trans. A. Tomarken and E. Tomarken), *New Literary History*, 9:1, pp. 27–50.
- Moure, J. (2004), 'Essai de définition de l'essai au cinéma', in S. Liandrat-Guigues and M. Gagnebin (eds), *L'Essai et le cinéma*, Seyssel: Champ Vallon, pp. 25–40.
- Narboni, J. and Milne, T. (eds) (1972), *Godard on Godard: Critical Writings by Jean-Luc Godard*, London: Secker & Warburg.
- Nichols, B. (1991), *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts of Documentary*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Rascaroli, L. (2008), 'The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments', *Framework*, 49:2, pp. 24–47.
- Silverman, K. (2001), 'The Author as Receiver', *October*, 96, pp. 17–34.
- Temple, M. and Williams, J. S. (2000), 'Introduction to the Mysteries of Cinema 1985–2000', in M. Temple and J. S. Williams, *The Cinema Alone: Essays on the Works of Jean-Luc Godard 1985–2000*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 9–32.
- Testa, B. (1990), 'Un Certain Regard: Characterization in the First Years of the French New Wave', in C. Zucker (ed.), *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting*, Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press.

- Vincendeau, G. (2005), 'Notre musique', *Sight & Sound*, 15:6, pp. 69–70.
- Waugh, T. (1990), "Acting to Play Onself": Notes on Performance in Documentaries', in C. Zucker (ed.), *Making Visible the Invisible: An Anthology of Original Essays on Film Acting*, Metuchen, N.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press.
- Witt, M. (2004), 'Shapeshifter: Godard as Multimedia Installation Artist', *New Left Review*, 29, September–October, pp. 73–89.
- Witt, M. (2005), 'The Godard Interview: I, a Man of the Image', *Sight & Sound*, 15:6, pp. 28–30.

### **Suggested citation**

- Rascaroli, L. (2009), 'Performance in and of the Essay film: Jean-Luc Godard plays Jean-Luc Godard in *Notre musique* (2004)', *Studies in French Cinema*, 9: 1, pp. 49–61, doi: 10.1386/sfc.9.1.49/1

### **Contributor details**

Laura Rascaroli is Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at University College Cork. Her research focuses on modern and contemporary European cinema. She is the author, in collaboration with Ewa Mazierska, of *From Moscow to Madrid: European Cities, Postmodern Cinema* (2003), *The Cinema of Nanni Moretti: Dreams and Diaries* (2004), and *Crossing New Europe: Postmodern Travel and the European Road Movie* (2006). Her monograph, *The Personal Camera: The Essay Film and Subjective Cinema*, is forthcoming with Wallflower Press (2009).

Contact: Film Studies/Department of Italian, University College Cork, Ireland.  
E-mail: l.rascaroli@ucc.ie

Copyright of *Studies in French Cinema* is the property of Intellect Ltd. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.