

TILO RUDOLF KNOPS

Hamburg

QUESTIONING (POST-)STRUCTURALISM:
THE SUBVERSION OF ABSTRACT ANTINOMIES IN GODARD'S
„DÉTECTIVE” (1984)

The classical film genres have not stopped to be influential for film production and perception. From the popular US-productions of Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, Brian De Palma and other director's [*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1982), *Indiana Jones* (1984), *Star Wars* (1977)] to several European productions (f.e. Jacques Beineix' *Diva* (France 1982), Leos Carax' *Mauvais sang* (France 1985), Roland Emmerichs' *Joey* (Federal Republic of Germany 1985), Hans-Christoph Blumenberg's *Tausend Augen* (Federal Republic of Germany 1984)]—the classical film genres are copied and plagiarized again and again. It has become a rather modish way meanwhile to construct films as a melange of genre citations from the “film noir”, from the “science-fiction”, the “melodrama” or from other genres.

I want to show by an analysis of Jean-Luc Godard's *Déetective* (France, 1984) that Godard works with genre citations too, but in a way which differs from the usual way. Instead of repeating the old formulas by copying or negating them, Godard has developed a way to work upon genre conventions which transcends the limitations of the usual way. *Déetective* can be read as a challenge to leading orientations of contemporary theories of film genres and other theoretical topics in several ways.

While presenting *Hail Mary* at the Berlin Film Festival 1985, Godard was asked by journalists, if he took refuge to mysticism and Catholic faith now. Was he working up the experiences of his youth as anacolyte in a Catholic church? Godard confronted this inquisition laconically with his origin from a Calvinist Protestant family and referred to his next film *Déetective*, which he finished before *Hail Mary* (France, 1985) (but released after) as a hired director to fill up the budget for *Hail Mary*. Being a “polar”, as the French adaptation of the “private eye” genre is sometimes called, *Déetective* would, consolatingly, remain very earthly again.

Can we expect a polished commercial thriller by Jean-Luc Godard, made just for pecuniary reasons? Of course not. As in other films of Godard we

find a cacophony of mixed sounds and images, texts and above all, citations of the classical film genres. There is the boxing film, the gangster film, the Mafia, a detective family and the melodramatic crisis of a divorcing couple. Nathalie Baye plays a wife who wants to leave her husband (Claude Brasseur), a pilot. But he needs the money which boxing impresario Jim Fox Warner (Johnny Halliday) owes him. He will not get it, but Halliday gets his wife. As usual we may find tracks from other films of Godard himself: we may recognize the grand hotel hall from the last film *Prénom: Carmen* (France, 1983) as well as a little angelic girl from the mafia-family stands for the theme of Eve/Mary in the following *Hail Mary*. The language of boxing and the untranslatable puns with the gender of "la droite" and "le gauche" will follow Godard's work still longer to *Keep Your Right* (France, 1987) (*Soigne ta Droite*), which echoes the title of one of Jacques Tati's earliest shorts *soigne ton gauche* (France, 1936).

Nearly nothing of the confusing plot fits together. Arielle from the detective clan repeats disturbed, she wasn't sure if she got it all right. There are the stars from the boxing business as well as from show and theater (Stéphane Ferrara, Halliday, Alain Cuny), and the image track repeatedly shows the balls of a billiard-table. There are teasing young girls with names like "Grace Kelly" and the gaudy neon-signs from outside, while we hear the noises of the diverse activities in an elegant hotel and of the clicking balls of a billiard-table. Often the sounds and dialogues of one scene is held on and layed upon the following scene. The photography is blending and very beautiful, yet the lighting of the scenes in the hall, bars and suites of the hotel is often done in twilight. To complete the impression of this fuzzy plot there are rags of classical music pieces by Schubert, Wagner, Chopin, Liszt, Honegger and Chabrier together with a jazz saxophone piece by Ornette Coleman superimposed in a way which is not psychologizing, but rather known meanwhile as the typical "Godardian" style. The expressivity of this music gets near to a quality which could be understood as dialogue.

: After completing films about writing [*Sauve qui peut la vie/Slow Motion* (France, 1980)], painting (*Passion/Passion* France, 1982) and music (*Prénom: Carmen*), *Déetective* drives at the world of acting. "Remember that in the theater you play a part", Alain Cuny says to Claude Brasseur, "in the movies you've played your part". Senior detective Prospero (Laurent Terzieff) wants to learn from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Boxing impresario Fox Warner (Johnny Halliday) searches for steadfastness in Conrads *Lord Jim* and tries to overreach his champion (Stéphane Ferrara), imitating the Hollywood tycoons who manage to remove the box-office grosses. Hotel detective Jean-Pierre Léaud transcends his Antoine-Doinel-cycle into slapstick comedy, cursing and railing at the legs of Italian women. Not to forget, there are the classical motives of the "film noir": Nathalie Baye, struggling for self-respect, and several moral difficulties and erotic entanglements. For a short time we may recognize some dialogue sequences from one of the

darkest „film noirs”, Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (USA, 1944). The protagonists as well as the audience are looking for a solution which remains illusion at last.

Is Godard getting old, is he just joking, but losing his wit, does he suffer from exhaustion of his creative spirit and innovative phantasy? Did the cream cake attack which he had to stand at the Cannes Festival 1985 serve him just right, since he is kidding his audience?

Godard calls the film his unbeloved child. After he had taken over the duty to direct a polished French ‘film noir’ with stars in order to get the money to finish *Hail Mary*, he put his difficulties with this rather speculative project into the center of the film: as the nearly insolvable story and the uncommon work of actors and camera show, it is rather impossible to do justice to a melange of motives from Mafia to boxing, private eye and love stories which writer/producer Alain Sarde had proposed to work on. By this self-reflexive strategy Godard manages to eat the cake and keep it. Yet the self-reflexivity to film the problems to film, which was investigated by Godard from his first films on in the sixties, has got a rather modish touch meanwhile. It is not an end itself here, but an integration of the conditions to start.

The work of Jean-Luc Godard has never progressed by generalizing “from the outside” only. Its insights have subverted the shortcomings of monolithic models concerning “classical narrative”, “the look”, “the male/the female” and other topics since a long time by drawing on their inner contradictions and splits, enforcing pretensions so far that their inadequacies become self-evident. Godard proceeds by intuitive integration of the social conditions of his work. The “subject-object-split”, as the methodological basis of scientific inquiry has been called, is not avoided by chance here, as Godard has detective Léaud to defend himself: “The situation is hard—not me.” This strategy is different from a method which tries to work “about” something and does not question the circumstances and premises of its own position. The actors were irritated by Godard’s working style, because he did not tell them how to act but treated them in a way which produced a certain state to behave.

In an interview Johnny Halliday described this unusual approach of Godard to his actors:

He has told me much more about Jim, my role, than about the story. He said: he is lonely, you have to act alone, not with the other actors. That did not help me for the film very much [...] Yet it is Godard’s strength always to get what he wants. He says nothing, he lets you feel the things. He creates a climate and conditions the actors. One day we had to take a very difficult scene. It was a scene in which I wanted to show my feelings as I felt them. I was concentrated and ready to start. Suddenly Godard started to insult Bruno Nuytten. I think that did not happen by chance. By creating an atmosphere of excitement at another place, my concentration declined. That was his intention, because he wanted to act me this scene in another way as I had planned to do. I realized this only later. Maybe I am wrong, but certainly Godard is very clever [...].¹

¹ From the press-material of Pandora Film, Frankfurt a. M.

A track of these difficulties between the director and his actors is left in the film, when someone shouts angrily: "We are not in some little French film, where the actors believe talking is acting".² And there is a scene with Erich von Stroheim on the hotel video directing a film and roaring through a megaphone: "I'm not amusing myself, I'm making a film, which is not for actors, but for the theaters". Yet, typically enough, this scene from *The Last Squadron* (USA, 1932) was already fiction, because Stroheim was only allowed to play himself as the famous film director once more.

If we consider some influential conceptualizations of "narration" and the "look", which have developed since the mid-seventies indebted much from feminist and (post) structuralist thinking³, we often find rather static antinomies. The relation of a person looking and a person looked at tends to get reduced to a one-dimensionally fixed structure of power and control, by which the gazing (male) aggressor dominates the (female) victim. By comprehending the voyeuristic and fetishistic sides of looking as a totally active controlling structure, the only way to escape seems either to attack or to negate the gaze, as several examples of counter-cinema have tried (f. e. Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, Quai du commerce—1080 Bruxelles* (Belgium, 1975); Laura Mulvey's /Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Great Britain, 1976).

This antipodal conception of the look fails, when the look of women is at stake, and especially the look at men. It also fails to account for the look of men who do not identify themselves with a controlling, patriarchally determined gaze. Generally, the notion of the actively controlling look does not get to grips with the ambivalent functions which each looking process involves simultaneously: to a certain degree, even the most rigidly staring look has to pay attention to its object, which is a rather passively functioning act.⁴

In a similar way several theories of cinematic narration tend to reduce the flow of filmic sounds and images to a linear and logical process of pure causality. By identifying these structures as the functions of patriarchal domination, the consequences usually did not lead further than to an abstract negation of narrative structure.

Even developments in poststructuralist film-theory (and practice alike) which claim to overcome the structuralist bias by changing their counter-

² Godard himself has complained in an interview about the unwillingness of his actors "to search this subject". A. Bergala, P. Bonitzer, S. Toubiana, J. L. Godard, *La Guerre et la Paix*, „Cahiers du Cinéma", 1985, 373.

³ L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Screen 16, 1975, p. 6—18.

⁴ S. Neale, *Masculinity as Spectacle*, Screen 24, 1983, p. 2—16; C. Pajaczkowska, *The Heterosexual Presumption: A Contribution to the Debate on Pornography*, Screen 22, 1981, 1, p. 79—92; I. Green, *Malefunction: A Contribution to the Debate on Masculinity in the Cinema*, Screen 25, 1984, p. 38; T. Rudolf Knops, *Die Aufmerksamkeit des Blicks. Vom Schinden der Sinne in der Filmtheorie und seinem Gegenmittel*. New York 1986; S. Prince, *The Pornographic Image and the Practice of Film Theory*, "Cinema Journal", 27, 1988, 2, p. 27—39.

-strategy of attack into a simulative strategy of ironic affirmation, often remain within a mere reproduction of the affirmed structure, which was formerly attacked: they suffer from abstract dualities and generalizations likewise and oscillate between negating or copying.

Jean-Luc Godard did never make much of static antinomies and abstract dualities. What other filmmakers took for absolute contraries, as the sharp distinctions between fictions and facts, narrative and documentary, dream and reality, Godard showed to be near to the cliché. As when he was asked by journalists, why he was copying so much in his films: by answering that the first word he ever had copied was "mama" the presupposed antinomy of "copying" and "creating" was revealed—and subverted. And *Détective* was not just too full of citations, as the question implied, but there was no word by Godard in it at all. After making the contract to film *King Lear* with M. Golan of "Cannon" in Cannes, he was asked, if he didn't fear to have to compromise in this commercial US-production now. By answering with a smile that he always felt to compromise, the concept of artistic freedom was broken up and shown as an abstract cliché. Godard's wellknown ready-wit and the freshness of his insights have strong roots in this procedure to break up certain presupposed antinomies with a third.

The training of box champion Stéphane Ferrara in *Détective* can be read as a metaphor for this strategy too: his first opponent, says Ferrara, are his own reflexions. In the language of boxing, the transcendence of the logic of attack and counter-attack is not the return, but the "break". Similarly, at the end of the film, hotel detective Jean-Pierre Léaud cries angrily, that he did not belong to those awful people who falsify problems instead of solving them.

Détective questions the shortcomings of abstract antinomies and negations in many other ways. There is no real Right or Left, snaps Mafioso Alain Cuny at his secretary, there is only the milieu, which in the French language means the middle and the underworld likewise. As always Godard uses puns and jokes on a verbal level, but he also makes use of filmic devices likewise. One example for this is the stereophonic sound which often seems heavily irritated itself about the right direction to take. Switching continuously from one to the other side, it ridicules the usual aural orientations of the audience.

Détective deals with philosophical and ethical problems of knowledge and perception, with which Godard was heavily engaged while working on *Hail Mary*, but in a more playful way. To get to the roots of a story requires to search for the truth of it, says detective Léaud. This means the task to sum up lots of stories of many individuals, and not to seek for causal relations with the help of formal logic only. These are hints which show, how often the concept of linear narration gets misunderstood as a question of formal logic instead of a narration which tries to tell a true story for a majority of people in a dispersed public audience. Generally the influence and

range of binary logic is ridiculed and subverted, as a computer asks his users for morality.

This option for researching historical complexities which transcends the boundaries of formalist reasoning and its static antinomies, appears as the approach of the second detective, too: truth lies between appear and disappear, murmurs detective Terzieff. In terms of the visual image this can only be probability ("la vraisemblable"). The process of looking and perception gets defined not as an abstract polarity between right or wrong, seeing or being seen, but as a question of finding or deception (voir-decevoir / voir-trouver). Contrary to a wide-spread opinion Godard's critique of the image is no simple iconoclasm; the image and its perceptual functions are not to judge by simple pros and cons. In *Prénom: Carmen* we could see Godard as the lunatic filmmaker "Uncle Jean" who hacked in his typewriter: "Mal vu, mal dit"—a booktitle of Samuel Beckett—, "Badly seen—badly said." In the end, thinks Prospero, everybody is left with his fragments of truth.

Détective confronts the usual notion of sexual difference with a more complex interpretation of mutual dependencies, of social strength and weakness alike: when Nathalie Baye is shown deceiving her husband with Johnny Halliday, there is a commentary voice which says: "Women are stronger because they put questions; that costs time; and time is money." For Godard the strength of women is bound dialectically to the experience of patriarchal oppression.

To motivate his plots seems to interest Godard even less than Hitchcock worried about his famous

"MacGuffin", the trick which he talked about to Francois Truffaut:

A MacGuffin is, very simple, a term for the theft of papers, documents, secrets. Basically they are without any significance, and to search by logic is to search for the truth at the wrong place. While I was working I have always imagined, the papers, the documents or secrets of construction of the fort would have been immense important for the persons in the film, yet without of any importance for me, the narrator.

Truffaut has commented to this that the MacGuffin did not only to have not to be serious. To the contrary, the effect would win, if the MacGuffin was ridiculous.⁵

Godard works in a similar manner. He expects by his audience to know the genre conventions of the film noir or the gangster film, and makes fun of its famous attributes like revolvers or exchanged hotel room numbers. Instead of working once more with these wellknown but wornout genre fetishes Godard translates the feelings and motives of certain genres into the changed historical circumstances—as Nathalie Baye's struggle for self-respect, Léaud's comic touch, Halliday's sorrow and despair carry on something of the mood and the atmosphere of the old film noir. Being an

⁵ F. Truffaut, *Mr. Hitchcock, wie haben Sie das gemacht?* München 1973, p. 125 ff. Translation by TRK.

hommage and a persiflage of the film noir likewise, *Détective* reminds us that the films which formed the genre conventions once as, say, *The Big Sleep* or *Double Indemnity* formed the film noir, did not tell stories about riddles and mysteries either but were mysterious themselves.⁶ Howard Hawks has told that while he filmed *The Big Sleep* he didn't understand the plot correctly, because he was interested in a certain atmosphere only.⁷ Godard concentrates on atmosphere too, and manages "to show the things between the things", as Jean-Paul Belmondo reported it of the late paintings of Velázquez, in *Pierrot le fou* (France, 1965). Here may lie a chance to escape the dilemma of the postmodern age, to have to copy the same structures, models and systems again and again or to negate them. Godard does neither stick to structuralist systems nor does he reproduce them as anti-systems. He seems to read the "system" not as the power itself, but as symptoms for the fights for power behind it. So he cites Italian writer Leonardo Sciascia describing the accompliceship of power and counterpower in *Il caso Moro*. "It's not the police", reads the Mafia secretary, "but the Mafia that needs a climate of peace for its big deals which depend on a public order under its control". And someone reads a fable of Lafontaine: Lion, cat and eagle greet the new order of peace, which is preached by the apes. When the mouse finds itself within the claws of the cat one day, and cautiously reminds the new laws of peace, the cat replies cynically: "Yes, but I belong to the founders of the new order."

To realize the strength of *Détective* and its melange of genre motives affords to observe and read each scene of the film actively and anew; to follow the actions of the story in a superficial mode of attention to the line of action will not do. Last but not least, the aim of carambolage, which is played in the film again and again, differs from American pool-billiard in a very special, metaphorical way: the problem is not (as in pool and classical narrative fiction alike) to clear the table successively in the most effective way, but to watch each scene with the same concentration anew: to find a way to hit two balls by constructive intelligence with a third one. In the computer age ruled by binarism this may be the last chance of the excluded Third.

⁶ E. Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* London 1980; R. Borde, E. Chaumont, *The Sources of Film Noir*, V. Almendarez, B. Jenkins, K. Stange (ed.), *Film Reader 3: Film Genre*, Evanston 1978, p. 58—66.

⁷ Hans C. Blumenberg, *Die Kamera in Augenhöhe. Begegnungen mit Howard Hawks*, Köln 1980.

ZAKWESTIONOWANIE (POST-) STRUKTURALIZMU
OBALENIE ABSTRAKCYJNYCH ANTYNOMII W „DETEKTYWIE” JEAN-LUC
GODARDA

STRESZCZENIE

Śledząc produkcję światowej kinematografii ostatnich kilkunastu lat, łatwo zaobserwować tendencję do konstruowania dzieł filmowych jako melanzu takich klasycznych gatunków, jak film grozy, science fiction, film kryminalny czy melodramat. Dążność ta jest szczególnie wyraźna w przypadku dzieł (post-)strukturalistów, którzy — z pozoru negując — faktycznie powielają wzorce strukturalistyczne.

Detektyw Jean-Luc Godarda pozornie nie odbiega od (post-)strukturalistycznych kreacji kina światowego, łącząc w sobie konwencje filmu grozy, filmu gangsterskiego i detektywistycznego oraz filmu o boksie wzbogacone dodatkowo o wątek melodramatyczny. Klimat typowy dla komedii „śląpstickowej” i farsy, wprowadza jednak postać zabawnego detektywa hotelowego. Co więcej, znawcy twórczości Godarda bez trudu odnajdą w *Detektywie* liczne odniesienia do innych dzieł tego reżysera. Mimo zewnętrznych podobieństw, utwór ten jest często interpretowany jako wyzwanie rzucone (post-)strukturalizmowi. W dużej mierze decyduje o tym sposób, w jaki Godard operuje złożonym tworzywem filmowym obalając usankcjonowane zwyczajem dychotomie pomiędzy fikcją a faktem, fabułą a dokumentem, snem a rzeczywistością.

Pośród wielu płaszczyzn utworu filmowego na plan pierwszy wysuwa się w *Detektywie* warstwa wizualno-akustyczna, przybierając formę obsesyjnie powracającego obrazu stołu bilardowego i zderzających się na nim kul bilardowych. Obrazowości podporządkowana została niekonwencjonalna praca kamer i gra aktorów oraz mistrzowskie operowanie światłem. Naturalną konsekwencją przyznania prymatu statycznym w swej naturze obrazom jest mało spójna, alinearne i wymykająca się zasadzie przyczynowości fabuła oraz pozbawienie języka funkcji podstawowego narzędzia komunikacji. Skąpe i nakładające się na siebie w kolejnych scenach dialogi są często jedynie pretekstem do zabawy słowem (kalambury, zagadki językowe); ich funkcję ekspresyjną przejmują niemal w całości muzyka — zlepek kompozycji Schuberta, Wagnera, Chopina i Liszta oraz standardów jazzowych na saksofon.

Zarzut krytyki, jakoby Godard zbyt swobodnie korzystał z wypracowanych i utrwalonych schematów, jest o tyle nieprecyzyjny, iż *Detektyw* jest w całości konglomeratem zapożyczeń filmowych. Oryginalne są natomiast — niezaprzeczalnie — założenia kompozycyjne i organizacja tego dzieła. Sukces artystyczny *Detektywa* obala kolejną; pozornie niemożliwą do pogodzenia, sprzeczność pomiędzy imitacją a oryginalną kreacją i przyczyni się z pewnością do zrewidowania poglądu na zakres tzw. „swobody twórczej artysty”.

Luźna kompozycja *Detektywa* pozbawionego niemal zupełnie napięcia dramatycznego, determinuje w znacznym stopniu recepcję tego filmu. Na zmuszonym do maksymalnej koncentracji widzu spoczywa bowiem zadanie interpretacji symbolicznej poszczególnych scen, których układ przypomina konfigurację kul bilardowych, wprawionych w ruch ręką wytrwałego gracza.

Przełożyła Joanna Narkiewicz-Jodko