

A bout de souffle: The Film of the Book

Not the cinematic adaptation of a literary pretext: *A bout de souffle* (1960) by Jean-Luc Godard is based on an original treatment. Nor the book of the film: *A bout de souffle* (1960) by Claude Francolin is the literary adaptation of a cinematic pretext, but it is a bad book, unworthy of the film (though it was deemed worthy of re-publication in a Belgian book club edition the next year).

This article describes the intertextual import of a single, six-second shot: a film of a book. Ten minutes from the end of *A bout de souffle*, Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) scrutinizes a pile of books; Patricia (Jean Seberg) is in the room, Mozart is on the record player. In close-up, as Michel's point-of-view, the camera pans down a book cover, delivering the following information: 'Maurice Sachs | *Abracadabra* | roman | *nrf* | "Nous sommes des morts en permission" | LENINE'. A thumb of the hand holding the book is also in shot. The quotation from Lenin, 'We are dead men on leave', is on a publicity band wrapped around the book.

The primary intertext of this shot, for the student of Godard, is another shot, from some five years later, fifty-five minutes into *Pierrot le fou* (1965): an immobile close-up of a handwritten page bearing the same phrase: 'We are dead men on leave'. The connection made with *A bout de souffle* is part of the later film's elaborate reflexivity, exemplified in spectacular fashion by the publicity text that accompanies *Pierrot le fou*, composed from the titles of seven other films by Godard: 'Pierrot le fou is a *little soldier* who discovers with *contempt* that you must *live your life*, that *a woman is a woman* and that in a *new world* you have to be a *band apart* if you're not to end up *breathless*' (Godard 1969: 111).

The quotation of Lenin in *A bout de souffle* and *Pierrot le fou* is in each case both simple and complicated. Simple because, in both films, the characters with whom the phrase is associated can be read as applications of the aphorism, men whose vitality merely postpones an imminent death. Complicated, in each case, for different reasons: in *Pierrot le fou*, the relation of text to source is not simply discovered by remembering the book cover in *A bout de souffle*, but altered, since the source to be footnoted is as much, if not more, Godard as Lenin; in *A bout de souffle* the relation of text to source is immediately apparent through the attribution, but is altered when we discover, eventually, that the source cited is not, despite appearances, Lenin.

This last discovery requires some context. I have known the shot in *A bout de souffle* for more than twenty years, but have always thought that its complications lay within the pages of the book held in Poiccard's hand. Reading Sachs's *Abracadabra* closely in search of some textual interaction with Godard's film,¹ however, reveals little save the odd mention of cinema-going and going to sleep (see Kline 1992: 197).

Other complications lie not in the text but in the author's name attached to it. Maurice Sachs, collaborator with fascists and betrayer of friends, is not unlike the persona Godard creates for himself in *A bout de souffle* when he denounces Poiccard to the police. This memory of Sachs is stronger still in the scene where his book is shown,

since this is the moment in the narrative where Patricia is herself about to denounce Michel to the police.

The conjunction of Sachs and Lenin is odd: though Sachs had written a book in 1936 on 'the victory of communism', it seems a curious attempt to reconcile Right and Left. Odder still is the irrelevance of Lenin's phrase to the novel *Abracadabra*. It is not (as might be expected) the book's epigraph, nor is it mentioned anywhere in the novel. Moreover, it hardly bears upon the themes or motifs of the narrative. Extra-diegetically, a connection might be found in the fact that *Abracadabra* is a posthumously published novel: though living on after death is a peculiar inversion of the 'dead men on leave' trope, we can understand the association of the phrase with the textual survival of a dead author. The phrase on the wrapper would, then, be an instance of editorial epigraphy, guiding readers to a more pathos-laden reading of Sachs's rather frivolous fantasy.

This passable explanation of the Lenin-Sachs conjunction collapses faced with the strong evidence that this wrapper did not originally come with this book. Though they do not categorically confirm that Lenin's phrase was not used to sell *Abracadabra*, the archivists at Gallimard state that the publishing house had not taken to using 'bandes publicitaires' at that time. Probably, this wrapper was taken from another book, so that Godard himself creates the Sachs-Lenin connection. This amounts to an early instance of the complex textual montages that punctuate Godard's later work, above all in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998).

A next question would be to ask whence the wrap-around came. What book was stripped of it to clothe Sachs's nakedness? This is to complicate the intertext further, taking it beyond the regime of organized associations (familiar now from *Histoire(s) du cinéma*) towards aleatory or arbitrary implications. Until we know, this path must remain unexplored, and must stand, simply, for the abyssal associations that always threaten to engulf the source-hunter.²

Remaining within the textual frame fashioned in the film, we can consider whether the attributed source of the phrase contributes something. What is Lenin doing here, at this juncture in Godard's work? No one would be surprised to find the overtly political films of the period 1966-72 loaded with reference to Lenin, alongside Mao and Stalin, but these authors also figure in *Le petit soldat* (Godard, 1960), the film made immediately after *A bout de souffle*. A brief glimpse of a pamphlet by Stalin, a close-up of the cover of Lenin's *Greetings to Italian, French and German Communists* (1919), and lengthy readings from Mao's *A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire* (1930) give a discursive context to the militancy of the FLN in that film.

More interesting, for our purposes, is the approving quotation of Lenin by Bruno Forestier, the right-wing protagonist of *Le petit soldat*: 'There is a very, very beautiful saying. Whose is it? I think it was Lenin: "Ethics are the aesthetics of the future." I find this saying very beautiful and very moving as well. It reconciles the right and the left' (Godard 1967: 80). In an interview in 1960 Godard comments on the pertinence of this remark, and adds: 'The phrase is Gorky's, but I gave it to Lenin because I prefer Lenin' (Godard 1972: 26). This illustrates the rather free style of Godard's textual montages at the time, chiming with the displacement of the wrapper in *A bout de souffle*.

Aphorisms, as texts, are free-standing by definition, and make little demand to be embedded in a source. Where Gorky initially made the remark is of less interest than how it came to be associated with Lenin. Godard appears to be the author of that

association, which persists in contexts beyond his filmmaking (see Anderson 1977). However, the aphorism used in *A bout de souffle* excites curiosity, at least, because it is difficult to imagine the context in which Lenin might have formulated it. A search of the indexes of the fifty-volume complete works of Lenin offers no clue, since neither 'death' nor 'leave' is indexed. But, if one is blessed with colleagues steeped in the culture of Marxist-Leninism, the solution is simpler.³ The phrase is not Lenin's at all, but Leviné's, Eugène Leviné's, pronounced at his trial in 1919, not long after the death of the Spartakist leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, not long before Leviné's own execution. At the trial of this lesser-known Spartakist, the following was part of his eloquent response to his judges:

We Communists are all dead men on leave. Of this I am fully aware. I do not know whether you will extend my leave or whether I shall have to join Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. I await your verdict in any case with composure and inner serenity. (Meyer-Leviné 1973: 153)

This speech, and the embedded aphorism in particular, is a canonical expression of the pathos of militancy, famous in communist circles, and almost always attributed to Leviné.

The loss of this context removes from the phrase its immediate associations. As cited by Godard, it is a comment on the human condition: we are *all* dead men on leave. For Leviné this fatalism applies only to Communists, and this is how the phrase circulated immediately after his death.⁴ The only specificity we might bring from Leviné to *A bout de souffle* is the judicial context in which he makes the remark. Pursued by the police, Michel Poiccard will resign himself, with composure and inner serenity, to his trial, conviction (and likely execution). This expansion of the frame of allusion is, however, not sanctioned from within the film. It is a function of readerly intertextuality, brought about by loose (if not free or abyssal) associations.

How does the phrase come to be misattributed in *A bout de souffle*? Looking closely at the screen reveals that 'LENINE' is not simply a misreading on our part (a 'V' might have looked like an 'N'). A solution comes from the Leviné context, provided by Rosa Meyer-Leviné, widow of Eugène and author of the book from which I have quoted his trial speech:

Leviné's leave was not extended but the words, 'We Communists are only dead men on leave' reverberated far beyond the German frontiers. I have heard them in Vilno, Paris, Tel-Aviv from people who did not even know his name: 'You know there was a Communist in Germany who said...'. They were repeated in America and Canada. Arthur Köstler included them in his book *Darkness at Noon*, though wrongly attributing them to Lenin. Isaak Deutscher said that essentially these words made Leviné the legend of his youth. (Meyer-Leviné 1973: 155)

Much is explained by this, even if it is not in his 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon* that Koestler makes the misattribution, but in his essay *The Yogi and the Commissar*, dedicated to André Malraux, published in English in 1942: 'I think Lenin used the phrase "We are dead men on furlough"' (Koestler 1942).

This essay was published in French in 1946, and the words attributed to Lenin are exactly those on the wrapper in *A bout de souffle*. The phrase and the attribution seem to

have come to Godard via Koestler, though their route remains obscure. The association with Malraux, one of Godard's more frequently quoted authors, would be an avenue, if we needed to establish why Godard read Koestler. It is clear, anyway, that Koestler's intervention was of great consequence. Without it, deprived of an illustrious signature, it is possible that the phrase would not have found its way into Godard's commonplace book (Godard 'prefers Lenin', we remember). When the phrase is re-used in *Pierrot le fou*, though Lenin's name is not given in that place, there is a discernible echoing when Lenin is later mentioned.

It is also clear that Koestler's inadvertence has engineered the effacement of Leviné, if not from History, at least from certain micro-histories still being told; from, for example, French-speaking traditions that commemorate the pathos of communist militancy, of which the most forceful illustration before us is Godard's own history-telling in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. There is particular irony in this forgetting of Leviné, since Godard has more than once associated Lenin with the Spartakists. Lenin and Luxemburg are paired in Godard and Gorin's 1971 film *Vladimir and Rosa*, and though the characters 'Vladimir Friedrich' (played by Godard himself) and 'Rosa Karl' cross-reference Engels and Marx, 'Karl' is also, of course, Karl Liebknecht.

Twenty years later, in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* 1A (1988), though Leviné's phrase is not quoted, it inevitably resonates (for this reader at least), when we are shown the embalmed Lenin in his mausoleum, exerting iconic influence after death. The irony is reinforced when, in the next episode, Godard lugubriously intones two brief apostrophes: 'oh my Karl, oh my Rosa.' The pathos of militancy here is a peculiar form of history-telling, bound up with regret for Godard's own militant past, in mourning for the deceased personae of *Vladimir and Rosa*. Had Koestler not misremembered his source, had Leviné found his rightful place in Godard's pantheon, these ghostly invocations might have been followed by a third: 'oh my Eugène.'

Koestler himself is a presence in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, with *Darkness at Noon* and *Arrival and Departure* among the several book titles cited in that work. On their own these mentions have a restricted reference: the French title of the first – *Le zéro et l'infini* – expands portentously the time frame; that of the second – *Croisés sans croisades* – chimes with the shot of crusader-like soldiers from Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* that recurs in *Histoire(s)*. But for the obsessive reader of allusion through the whole of Godard's work, they look like part of a complicated trigger-device, attached to an intertextual time-bomb, set running more than forty years ago and yet to go off.

There is no great danger yet. The associations accumulated so far are not so many as to crack the allusive frame. The names invoked – Sachs, Lenin, Leviné, Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Koestler, Malraux – can all be folded into a thematic reading of militancy in Godard, where martyrs meet traitors, or at least fellow-travellers who change direction. All are marked with the pathos of militancy, even Koestler, whose *Darkness at Noon* derives its emotional force entirely from that trope.

More names are yet to join the list, and the chain of thematic associations will expand: it appears that Leviné was not himself the originator of the phrase. The German Communist martyr Kurt Eisner, a little before his assassination in 1919, had already re-applied to Communists the remark of a French officer who, after the outbreak of the Great War, had declared that 'we are now only dead men on leave'. To end up in *A bout de souffle*, the original phrase has come far, perhaps too far, since the pathos of militarism is not a feature of that film.

We can, however, connect the shift from militancy to militarism to a similar trope in Godard's following film, *Le petit soldat*. When Forestier receives an instruction to catch a particular train, the train time – 14:18 – is used to parallel sordid anti-FLN activity in 1960 and the heroism of the Great War (Godard 1967: 22). Similar parallels are made through reference to the Second World War, with militancy and militarism combined firstly in memories of Aragon, communist and soldier: thinking of May 1958, Bruno Forestier tries to remember lines about May 1940 from 'The Lilacs and the Roses': 'May without pain and June stabbed to the heart' (Aragon 1946: 36). They combine more forcefully in comparisons drawn between Algerian resistance in 1960 and the French resistance in 1944. If it is ironic to use photographs of tortured martyrs of the Resistance as images of agents tortured by the FLN (see Godard 1967: 73), the irony doesn't diminish the impact of those familiar icons.

Many martyrs of the Resistance were communists, of course, and the chain of associations linking Leviné to Koestler can readily accommodate them. But these associations began with Sachs, compromised by collaboration, creating an opening for inclusion of less popular martyrs. *Le petit soldat* explores that opening, extending the pathos of militancy to figures on the right, and to one fascist martyr in particular, Drieu La Rochelle. He is mentioned twice in the film, the first time when the protagonist refers to the execution of his father as a collaborator: 'That's funny, my father was shot, too. At the Liberation. He was a friend of Drieu La Rochelle' (Godard 1967: 38). The second time he is comparing his generation with more heroic antecedents: 'Around 1930 young people had a revolution. For example, Malraux, Drieu La Rochelle, Aragon. We no longer have anything' (Godard 1967: 81). The second of these mentions, in particular, suggests an indifference to distinctions of Left and Right. It follows directly on from the quotation of Lenin that, according to Forestier, reconciles the two. Drieu La Rochelle explicitly embodied that reconciliation in his conversion to Leninism before his death. This is evoked in Claude Saint-Benoit's *Le petit soldat*, the 1961 novelization of Godard's film:

He was dead; he had died by his own hand [...]. In his hotel room, surrounded by the gunfire from the rooftops of Paris, Drieu had composed a sort of testament: 'I know today that there is only one revolution, Lenin's; I was wrong, I've lost, I'll pay the price' [...]. Bruno remembered his father's sobs. [...] Maître Forestier certainly supported collaboration with Germany, but above all he was anti-Gaullist and anti-Resistance. He had embraced death as proudly as Drieu had.⁵

Drieu La Rochelle, composing his testament while Paris is besieged, can be added to the list of dead men on leave that populate Godard's *oeuvre*. Though 'Maître Forestier' is not necessarily a clue to more personal associations (Godard's father was *not* shot as a collaborator), if the novelization were to prove to be by Jean-Luc himself, the biographical subtexts would certainly be interesting to pursue. Godard has more than once referred to his family's collaborationist sympathies: 'It was a family of collaborators [...]. The day Brasillach was executed, it was a day of mourning in the family' (Godard 1998: 599-600, my translation).

In his prison cell at Fresnes, 'face to face with death',⁶ the fascist ideologue and collaborator Robert Brasillach is another dead man on leave, a figure as pathos-laden as Drieu La Rochelle. Absent from Godard's work until 1998,⁷ he emerges in one of the more elaborate developments of the topos discussed here. Towards the end of

Histoire(s) du cinéma 1A, 'All the histories' (1988), after Godard's voice has uttered gravely the phrases 'History of cinema, history without words, history of the night', he uses footage of a condemned prisoner being tied to a post,⁸ superimposing words taken, again, from Aragon's 'The Lilacs and the Roses': 'I shall not ever forget the scarlet blood the scarlet kiss bespoke' (Aragon 1946: 36). The sequence continues with images of a different execution, and words from a resistance poem by Eluard; on the soundtrack is an Italian song of resistance. In this 1988 version of the sequence, resistance martyrology is all; but in a 1998 re-edit, a slight modification is made. On the soundtrack is added a faint voice singing these lines by Brasillach: 'In my thirty-fifth year, a prisoner like Villon, in chains like Cervantes, condemned like André Chénier, at the hour of destiny, like others in other times, on these scribbled pages, I begin my testament' (Brasillach 1963: 94).⁹

Overlaying icons of resistance with the testament of a fascist may seem like an attempt to depoliticize a traditional martyrology, or at least like another 'reconciliation' of left and right. But another element brought to the mix by Brasillach displaces the question onto other terms. He was the author, with Maurice Bardèche, of the first *Histoire du cinéma* (1935),¹⁰ 'the only one I ever read', says Godard. As part of both the history of France and the history of cinema (or at least the history of the history of cinema), and as someone who tells his own, personal history in his writing, Brasillach is an emblem of how different kinds of history might come together, or not. He is a figure, in fact, of what Godard attempts in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.

As such, Brasillach the fascist martyr is of less importance; like Maurice Sachs in *A bout de souffle*, he is no more than a minor, perhaps autobiographical, footnote to the big story: we would not expect Godard to add, after 'oh my Karl, oh my Rosa', an 'oh my Robert'. The pathos of militancy is reserved for Communards, Bolsheviks, Spartakists, Republicans, Resistants and internationalist revolutionaries à la Che Guevara,¹¹ the political martyrs whose images in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* tell the big story. These are the dead men on leave evoked by Leviné, those whom Godard had unwittingly implicated in the intertext back in 1959, when his camera was pointed for six seconds at the cover of a book.

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¹ What T. Jefferson Kline has called ‘resonances that play between film and its intertext’ (1999: 197).

² It is possible, of course, that the wrapper (like the front page of *France Soir* with Belmondo’s picture, like the radio broadcasts with Godard’s voice, like several other instances – discussed in my article “‘Sa voix’: the speaking subject in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*’) be faked, and that where I see an abyss there is just a void. If appearances are worth anything, however, the wrapper appears on close scrutiny to be authentic.

³ For this, and for the reference to Georges Pioch and Kurt Eisner below, I am indebted to my colleague George Paizis.

⁴ See for example Georges Pioch (1921, my translation): ‘His words are a legacy, bequeathed to us so that they never cease to nourish our meditations. They strengthen our resolve, our thought, by bestowing that same melancholy grace that every night causes the sun to set beyond the measureless ocean. His words? Leviné has said: “We communists are dead men on leave.”’

⁵ Saint-Benoit 1961: 140-41, my translation. ‘Claude Saint-Benoit’ is a pseudonym for, I suspect, Godard himself. This book of the film is certainly more than just an exploitative adaptation of the scenario by a hired hack, as is the case with Claude Francolin’s novelization of *A bout de souffle*.

⁶ The title of Brasillach’s last piece of writing, dated the day of his execution (February 6 1945).

⁷ Save for a mention of his memoirs, *Notre avant-guerre*, in *JLG/JLG* (1994).

⁸ Echoing an earlier execution in Godard, from *Les carabiniers* (1963), where a militant is to be shot for quoting Lenin, and is allowed to recite a text by Maiakovsky (another Communist martyr), in Elsa Triolet’s translation.

⁹ In *Eloge de l’amour* (Godard, 2001), the same Brasillach poem is recited (it is in fact the soundtrack of *Eloge* that is dropped into the mix of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*).

¹⁰ Translated into English by Iris Barry as *History of the Film* (1938). For a detailed discussion of Brasillach and Bardèche’s film history, see David Bordwell (1994).

¹¹ A photograph of the dead Che is shown in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*.