

IMPROVISATION IN NEW WAVE CINEMA

Beneath the Myth, the Social

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In the introduction to his study *Godard au travail* (Godard at Work), Alain Bergala (2006) draws our attention to the myth of improvisation that took shape in the 1960s around the filmmaking of Jean-Luc Godard. Godard maintained this myth through postures designed to enhance his image as a creator. He loved to speak of his constant improvisation, whether it involved dialogue that he would dream up the night before shooting and suggest to actors on the set—using earphones—or happened at the level of *mise-en-scène* itself, as when he waited until bodies and scenery were in front of him before deciding how the actors and the camera would move. This posture resonated with the idea he had forged of his creative practice. As Bergala (2006, 154) makes clear, “Godard proclaimed a cinema of the *found* against a cinema based on the execution of a programmed script.”¹

This conception of improvisation cannot help but resonate with that embraced by jazz musicians of the 1950s, as described by Howard Saul Becker (1963). The musicians Becker studied divided themselves into two groups: on the one hand, there were those players who belonged to dance bands and devoted themselves to pleasing audiences drawn to familiar melodies and rhythms; on the other hand, there were the improvisers or “true” musicians, recognized by their peers but unable to live off their art because the “straights”—the customers at the “joints”—had no taste for that kind of playing. In cinema, the appearance of the *Nouvelle Vague* (New Wave), with its new shooting methods, its liberated stories that no longer followed

strictly linear narratives, and its editing techniques that broke with those of classical continuity, generated the same line of division—between the “improvisers,” led by Godard, and the others, who belonged to a profession and entertainment industry from which they made their living. The emergence of this line, which divided the filmmaking community over the question of improvisation, is what interests us here.

It is important that the link we want to establish, between cinema and jazz, not be misunderstood; our intention is not to somehow compare the various “arts of improvisation” or to collapse one community into another, for example, the French film world of the early 1960s into the American jazz scene of the 1950s. Rather, we want to try to understand the processes of community formation that played themselves out around the question of improvisation. If we treat each of these as a medium, in fact, we see that jazz and cinema cannot share the same relationship to improvisation, for one key reason: while musical improvisation takes shape within performance, the direction of a film involves making a finished product that cannot claim to offer viewers the live experience of an improvisation. In technical terms, improvisation is the act by which one simultaneously composes and executes a musical piece at one and the same time or simultaneously composes and utters dialogue. This happens either because circumstances require that it happen or because it is presumed it will produce a superior effect, unless it is, simply, the rule of the creative game that one has adopted. Such a definition of improvisation emphasizes the simultaneity of the time of invention, execution, and audience reception. However, this simultaneity is not possible in the case of cinema, where the time of projection is always deferred relative to that of shooting and editing. To be sure, the cinema can record performances that may be improvised—those of actors who invent their lines and of the filmmakers who follow these actors and react the best they can to what is happening.² However, setting aside the fact that these circumstances are extremely rare, at least in the case of fiction film, improvisation in what is filmed, or in the act of filming itself, is very difficult to detect in the viewing of a film. In the first place, there is no single, unique form of representation that would signal its character as improvisation at the moment in which it takes place, through its difference from a written text or prior performance with which the public would be familiar. And even when one has filmed improvised action, the arrangement of images and sounds in the act of editing—which uses and mixes various kinds of visual and sound recording as needed—effaces the sense of a performance taking place in front of the camera in favor of the after-the-fact construction of a

story's spatiotemporal continuity. Moreover, a scene may occasionally appear improvised even if it has been meticulously prepared in advance. In other words, the status of improvisatory elements is obscured by the mediatic apparatus that strives for transparency. One is never sure whether there has been improvisation (we know it only through the more or less reliable testimony of the director or crew). Improvisation, we might say, is that ethereal and elusive *something* in the image in which one wants to believe. Depending on the case, it is capable of eliciting admiration, repulsion, and even indignation. It is precisely these affective responses of viewers to improvisation, which have little to do with the actual presence of improvisation in cinema, that will concern us here.

In the early 1960s, improvisation invaded films and the discourses about them. Directors embraced or rejected it. In the films of Godard and his cohort, critics looked for traces of the influence of Jean Rouch, a master of improvisation (in front of the camera and behind it) who was seen as the “guru” of the Nouvelle Vague (cf. Gauthier 2002, 70–75). In discourses on cinema, improvisation took on a level of importance that was not justified by the actual practices of the young filmmakers of the movement. In fact, improvisation was rarely practiced, but it nevertheless crystallized many of the breaks with which the movement was credited: a break with traditional methods of shooting and a rupture with the consensual, literary realism that the former masters of French cinema used to bring the “truth of life” into their films. One of the most common explanations of this phenomenon was aesthetic in character: improvisation was seen as bound up with the emergence of cinema vérité, which shattered the boundaries between fiction and documentary and which inspired the directors of the New Wave. Cinema vérité had been introduced by Jean Rouch in his film *Moi un noir* (1958). It involved filming documentary images—which required improvisation on the part of the cameraman, who had to adapt to an event as it was unfolding—and then “fictionalizing” them through editing and commentary. The resulting contrast with those fiction films characterized by polished writing, acting, and shooting was sufficiently engaging that it set in place a “style” for makers of fiction films that evoked the in-the-moment and improvised character of documentary filming.

This style was generated by methods of working that were highly unusual in the film world. They involved the use of amateur actors and of exterior shooting, sometimes with hidden cameras. The temporalities of invention and execution were often collapsed into the moment of filming itself. The new generation of filmmakers set out to make its name on the basis of this

distinctiveness. It must be noted, however, that these methods were practiced in only a very few films and that the “style” that resulted was limited—in the case of Godard, in particular—by an editing practice that left nothing to chance. The resulting films were closer to the model of a carefully constructed artifact than to that of a performance.

One of the key ideas of the critic and theorist André Bazin, to the effect that cinema was the art of revealing the real, served to enhance the appeal of improvisation. In his account, the cinematic image bears an ontological relationship to the event—by definition unique—that unfolds before the camera. Beyond sets and acting, what the camera captures, quite definitively, is the improvisation of life itself; the cinema conserves the form of change of something that happens only once. Out of these claims about the essence of cinema, the filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague derived the imperative to break with false studio sets, showy acting, and finely chiselled dialogue.³ This led to the idea of leaving room for improvisation while shooting, an idea in line with the notion of cinema capturing the improvisation of life itself. However, improvisation would have to remain invisible so it would not break what film theorists have called the “effect of the real” of the cinematic image.⁴ This effect of the real is the lot of any shot in film, since it is produced by visual and sonic analogies that obscure the medium and point directly to things heard and seen out of camera range. This effect of the real reinforces the reality effect produced by a fictional universe. While it does not completely fool the viewer, it nevertheless gives the impression that a film’s characters really exist. To notice improvisation would undermine this effect, since it would draw our attention to the real performances, those of the acteurs and the filmmakers, and thus *rupture the analogic illusion by forcing the viewer to notice the ways in which the analogy has been fabricated*. Arguably, this explains the commercial failure of François Truffaut’s second film, *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960), which was characterized by improvisation much more than was his first film, *Les 400 coups* (1959), which was an unexpected success.⁵ The impression of spontaneity and freshness that ensured the success of *400 coups* owed nothing to a practice of improvisation—which was limited to two or three asides by Jean-Pierre Léaud—or to the perception of improvisation.⁶ When improvisation is noticed, it interrupts our immersion in the world of the film; the film is then seen to be “sloppy” and judged a failure, and audiences react negatively, as was the case with *Tirez sur le pianiste*. This is what Godard understood so well. Conveying the impression that he improvised was part of a larger strategy designed to undermine the narrative and logical conventions of verisimilitude, transpar-

ency, and naturalism (which Truffaut had no intention of abandoning, and which his audience had not asked him to give up), even if, in reality, Godard scarcely improvised at all.

If improvisation—rare in any case—did not have the desired effect when used, why was it so important for those active in the field of cinema in the 1960s? What was it that, crystalized within improvisation, proved so interesting both to the cinema's young rebels and to established professionals? The first thing that might be said here is that “improvisation,” before becoming a *technical* issue (involving the practice of filmmaking itself) or an ontological one (having to do with the very definition of cinematic art⁷) emerged as an issue on the social terrain of work itself. To improvise is to act without preparation, either because one already possesses the necessary skills to do so or, on the contrary, because one's incompetence requires that one improvise. In the 1960s, the question of improvisation was posed in these terms as much as in relation to the cinema as an art form. Indeed, it was as a result of the confusion between these two perspectives that *l'affaire* of Jean Aurel and Roger Vadim unfolded. The controversy received a great deal of attention in the press, partly because of the involvement of Brigitte Bardot and partly because of what might be called its “tribal” character. The Nouvelle Vague had torn itself apart in public in response to the accusation of slander launched by Vadim against Truffaut, who had attacked Vadim in an inflammatory article published on December 22, 1960, in the weekly magazine *France Observateur*. Truffaut wrote that Vadim had maneuvered to take the place of Jean Aurel, the contractual screenwriter and nominal director of *La bride sur le cou* (*Please, Not Now!* in the United States), a film starring Bardot. The actress, who also produced the film, was alarmed by Aurel's lack of preparation—this was his first film—and turned for help to Vadim, who moved from simple technical consultant on the film to becoming its director mere days after his arrival on the set. Truffaut then came to the defense of Aurel, who felt he had been pushed aside and accused Vadim of disloyalty. Why did Truffaut defend Aurel? He did so in part because he saw Aurel as a young filmmaker much like himself. Truffaut's intervention, which won the highly publicized support of Godard before and during the trial,⁸ amounted to declaring something along the lines that he and Godard, too, had been beginners; they, too, had had supervisors and “technical consultants” (with the difference being that, unlike Vadim, they respected their work); and they, too, had deliberately chosen not to script everything in advance and looked for ideas that would guide their directing in the act of filming itself. This “improvisation,” which was really no

such thing, was part of their profession. As filmmakers, they had the right to choose their methods of working, and no producer could break a (moral) contract on the grounds that they made use of such methods.

Nevertheless, Truffaut lost at trial as the court recognized Aurel's lack of preparation, which caused delays and resulted in retakes, and his low level of involvement in the writing of the script and direction once Vadim arrived on the set.⁹ It is worth noting that the film's technicians supported Vadim against Aurel in a letter published in *Le Figaro* on January 14, 1961. It should also be pointed out that, in French cinema at the time, the culture of labor was *ouvrière* ("workerish") and artisanal, marked by a level of care for work well done and respect for the director but limited by some distrust of the innovations of intellectuals who seemed to overstep the boundaries of their roles.

This episode allows us to highlight what, in the discourse of both sides concerning improvisation, touches on the social value of "work." Here, the issue of improvisation itself changes character. Let us return to Godard's posturing in this context and consider the ways in which posing as an improviser might be seen as a denial of the social value of work. In the 1950s, the French cinema was a world dominated by artisans, whose enshrined values were work well done, technical perfectionism, and mastery acquired through experience. In contrast, the filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague came from the world of criticism, in which they had made their names fighting for the recognition of cinema as an art form. As a result, they sought to impose a different sense of the value of work in the cinematic field: one that set the artist against the artisan. Following this logic, we might see young rebels as bringing an artistic sense of work into a milieu that would not acknowledge it. There were, in fact, artists working in the world of film, many of them already recognized as such at the beginning of the 1960s. However, they were *master* figures and included, in particular, Henri-Georges Clouzot, whose name would be invoked during the Aurel-Vadim trial.¹⁰ Like the directors of the Nouvelle Vague, Clouzot challenged the professional culture of the filmmaking world while he was making *L'Enfer* (1964), a film he was forced to abandon after several months of tests and weeks of filming, even though his status as a "genius director" had given him an unlimited budget and absolute freedom on the project.¹¹ Clouzot was not an improviser, however; he was something like its very opposite: an "experimenter." The greatest obstacle to the completion of his films was that they were overprepared.

However, Godard's improvisatory poses are not simply those of a newcomer seeking to transform a cinema dominated by a culture of artisanal

work and to impose himself as an artist or intellectual.¹² His poses were received differently in the film world of the period. They were seen, in moral terms, as proof of off-handedness, flippancy, confirmation that Godard was content to make “little films” on the fly, as it were, such as *Bande à part*, *Une femme est une femme*, and *Made in USA*, which annoyed half of the critics and delighted the other half. In the case of *Une femme est une femme*, Godard’s improvisation was interpreted in two ways, each of which expressed the affinities (or lack thereof) felt toward him. Michel Capdenac (1961) wrote in *Lettres françaises* about a “cinema which clearly does not take itself seriously and which, with its flippant tone of never-ending improvisation, will say anything at all, no matter how perfectly futile, like a hawk who invents, in proclaiming them, the bountiful qualities of his merchandise, but with such brashness, brilliance, talent and, for once, a kind of secret tenderness.”

By not taking himself so seriously, Godard showed “tenderness,” modesty, and generosity, according to his most enthusiastic supporters. They focused on the sociability that they saw as one of his key virtues. Conversely, his improvisation would be read by others as proof that he did not take his audience seriously, that he had no qualms about leaving them feeling excluded and humiliated: “The prince of little tricks, Godard piles up the corny jokes to kill time, like a clock ticking off the minutes. . . . The result is a film that, most of the time, seems to have been conceived solely to amuse its director while it was being made: we, the audience, *feel embarrassed, left out*” (our emphasis).¹³

These polarized responses recall an imaginary scene of interaction that the work of Erving Goffman may help us to interpret. Goffman (1967, 6) has shown how, in direct interaction, each person follows a line of behavior designed to avoid losing face and to ensure that the other not lose it, either. He describes those lapses or lulls in which an unease between the partners develops—when one of them is embarrassed or feeling left out, as in the second of the reviews just quoted—and has recourse to a “repertory of face-saving practices” that aim to neutralize this embarrassment to stop the interaction—this minimal sociability—from floundering (14). Inasmuch as the viewing of a film may be seen as an indirect form of interaction, the improvisatory gestures of Godard may be seen as provocations in this sense. In *Interaction Ritual* (1967), Goffman draws our attention to the threat of offense that runs through every interaction, noting that a significant part of every interaction is devoted to ignoring or warding off that which is offensive by cutting it short, disarming it, or offering a riposte. The price to be paid when the offense is too strong is a breakdown of the relationship. Goff-

man insists on the fact that the perception of an offense presupposes a public witness possessing norms and values of which both the offended person and the person committing the offense are aware. It is very much in relation to the values of this “public” that the defense or condemnation of Godard organizes itself, being concerned fundamentally and precisely with the respect to be shown toward a filmmaker on the basis of how much he is judged to show the same respect toward others. The first of the reviewers quoted earlier uses the occasion to express his complicity with Godard and avoid the rupture that so much flippancy on Godard’s part might have engendered; the second denounces what is insulting in Godard’s indifference toward others (i.e., toward those viewers whom he ignores to have his own fun) (Goffman 1959, 47). An imaginary scene takes place in which a film replaces the Goffmanian face-work of a partner, leaving the viewer feeling either at ease or wronged, like an accomplice or a victim. However, this viewer, now represented by the author of a published review, endorses his chosen posture, for all his readers, and from this flows a moral tone that either offers a protest in the name of a general civility or supports the filmmaker, justifying his behavior in the name of a new sociability that arrives in a roundabout way but nonetheless founds a new communality. In the latter case, Godard’s “flippant tone” and “never-ending improvisation,” to borrow Capdenac’s words, are in the service of that “secret tenderness” that animates new partners and players ready to demonstrate their solidarity and complicity on the social scene.

Why did the impression of improvisation—left or perceived—carry such importance? Perhaps it is because, at the time, it was bound up with the signs of respect people showed one another in their various social activities. Let us return to Clouzot, a master whose genius was said to express itself in his hard work. On November 4, 1960, *Le Canard Enchaîné* noted about *La vérité* (1960): “a scenario whose architecture is a model of ingenuity and precision, a staging that leaves nothing to chance, performances directed with a master’s hand, . . . consummate understanding of story, [a] constant concern for perfection, [and] a solid grasp of the audience’s tastes.”

For the journalist, this valorization of work went hand in hand with a denunciation of the “skewed, unreasonable, worthless youth” represented so well by Bardot’s character, but the article included an ironic reference, typical of the newspaper’s satirical tone, to the laborious character of “the director’s efforts.” We see here, in fact, evidence of a certain ambivalence toward the value of work of a sort missing from another review, published in the conservative *Carrefour*: “Working like an ox, leaving nothing to chance,

Clouzot not only demonstrates a rare sense of professional responsibility but shows, as well, that he is modest.”¹⁴

Through one’s work, then, one signals to the others the respect one has for them and reassures them of one’s sociability. Moral accents of this kind are not rare in the debate surrounding improvisation. Critics of the period who denounced improvisation in the Nouvelle Vague were looking for evidence of work, which they took as proof of morality. Work is the fruit of labor and an essential part of the respect one owes to the person who has performed it; conversely, the person who has produced the work shows respect for the others by giving to them the best that she can produce. The quality of work is one of the major signs through which respect is expressed, and, through it work enters into the circuit of the gift, in which the merit of everyone is recognized in the fruits of their work. Indeed, critics of the time interpreted films as, in effect, gifts offered to audiences. Worthless films could signify only the contempt in which their authors held the audiences for which the films were destined. While improvisation was ultimately nothing more than a working method that produced superior works, the partisans of the Nouvelle Vague were obliged to struggle against the impression of disrespect provoked by Godard’s up-front flippancy. Associated with carelessness, improvisation was, in fact, a synonym for imposture, the equivalent of an insult for those at whom it was directed and, ultimately, toward the larger community interpellated by a film. It should be remembered that, at the beginning of the 1960s, improvisation was not simply a Godardian posture but a collective rallying cry. Ultimately, at the time of the Truffaut-Vadim affair, the foot soldiers of the Nouvelle Vague might well have said, “We are all ‘improvisers.’”

Improvisation was a declarative act: for auteurs, to be seen to improvise or not was part of their *enunciative strategies*, reinforced by punchy pronouncements. For film viewers, improvisation, above and beyond the impression made by any particular stylistic gesture, carried a moral sense that called on their social rather than their aesthetic sensitivities. In a sense, their social sensitivity expressed itself in the perception of improvisation.

What impulse was contained within the call to improvise? More than anything else, for the young rebels of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, this call was a means of acceding to the role of director. These rebels had not been formally trained in school, had not served apprenticeships—and so, in a sense, they improvised their status as filmmakers and did so collectively, most notably through the making of shorts such as *Le coup du berger* (Jacques Rivette, dir., 1956). Improvisation revealed the collective to itself. By improvising

themselves as filmmakers, they were obliged to function as a tribe, in a network outside professional circuits. Improvisation, then, through its liberating function, was the founding act of their “community.” The first films of the Nouvelle Vague were marked by solidarity, expressed through brief appearances by directors in one another’s films, through the borrowing of actors, through references by one film to another (as Godard did on so many occasions in *Une femme est une femme*). One after another, their films made reference to this founding act and maintained a semiotics of solidarity and liberty (e.g., through the transgression of aesthetic and dramatic rules) that guaranteed, for those who recognized it, a sense of community.

Creative improvisation also belongs to an ideal of successful social interaction. Cinema, after all, involves a collective mode of production that produces a sense of collectivity through interaction. The creative dimension of improvisation appears to guarantee the formation of an ideal community; it points in the direction of utopia. Within it, a model of sociality crystallizes that sets aside rivalry among egos and builds on promises of relationality. One must be able to improvise together to belong to a group that is taking shape outside the usual rules of the field. In 1961, Agnes Varda (1994) had Godard and Anna Karina shoot a silent film to be included as a film within her film *Cléo de 5 à 7*. She describes the shoot as symbolizing, for her, “*La Nouvelle Vague* as we experienced it, with imagination in charge and friendship in action.”

“This dynamic of deviance,” to borrow a term from Becker (1963, 192), is of the same order as that produced by traditional communities. It, too, will end up establishing rules and generating exclusions: “We see that people who engage in acts conventionally thought deviant are not motivated by mysterious, unknowable forces. They do what they do for much the same reasons that justify more ordinary activities.”

Very quickly, these people came to defend themselves against the frivolous and incompetent imitators who usurped those signs of lightness, spontaneity, and complicity among filmmakers, technicians, and performers that characterized the “true family” of the Nouvelle Vague. In *La Nouvelle Vague*, Antoine de Baecque repeats Claude Chabrol’s comments describing his “dis-trust towards the crowd of anonymous first-time filmmakers” getting ready to make their first films. Chabrol was even more outspoken on the subject in *L’Express*: “Let us be under no illusions. There is an underside to the current success of the Nouvelle Vague: the fact that certain people, who are incredible charlatans, will be able to direct films” (quoted in de Baecque 2009, 72). In private, Truffaut also deplored the fact that certain films had been

branded Nouvelle Vague, films that “quickly gathered together all those things considered reproachable in young filmmakers, their amateurism, their banality, their incomprehensible and eccentric characters” (quoted in de Baecque 2009, 102). In a long interview in the October 22, 1961, issue of *Nouvel Observateur*, however, he expanded on the moral rather than aesthetic problem that lay behind this rejection, emphasizing the refined moral values of “his” tribe: “The deliberate lightness of these films often comes across, sometimes wrongly and sometimes with good reason, as frivolity. Confusion arises because the qualities of this new cinema—its grace, lightness, modesty, elegance and speed—go hand-in-hand with its faults—its frivolity, obliviousness and naïveté” (quoted in de Baecque 2009, 103).

Why did these improvisers bother the professionals of cinema to such an extent? What contextual knowledge is needed to help us understand the opposition between two political models of the “communal?”¹⁵ In 1958, the communist unions in the film world mobilized against a reform of government policies that would have brought stronger political control over film. In their eyes, the new agreement—meant to bring the film industry in line with the rules of the European common market—threatened the tradition of quality in French cinema that had been rooted in a sense of craft, which was seen as opposed to the industrial standardization characteristic of Hollywood cinema. There were also worries about employment in the field, with France falling behind a German industry now swollen with American money invested in the film sector. There was no place for questions about improvisation, which found themselves edged out in the opposition between an industrial, capitalist rationalization of filmmaking labour and an artisanal practice. The artisans of cinema had no desire to sacrifice their self-respect, rooted in a sense of craft, to the dictates of an industry suspected of wanting to make films the way one makes canned food.¹⁶ When the first films of the Nouvelle Vague were released, the professional milieu, along with a significant faction of the communist-leaning critics, did not support them. The fact that the directors had become filmmakers by staking claims to improvisation was seen as irritating by those writing in the columns of union newspapers. Laurent Marie (2005, 146) explains, “Through a series of editorials and articles whose main targets were the methods and amateurism of these new filmmakers, the editors, including several of the old guard (Max Douy, Jean Dréville) of the union newspaper *Technicien du spectacle*, accused the young filmmakers of undermining the professional rules then in effect. Many people felt threatened by these first-time filmmakers [who had] no respect for common practices.” Admittedly, Truffaut had fired the first shot in

his articles, regularly going after screenwriters and directors, as well as the producers who hired them, and all those who lay claim to the French quality that gave them distinction. Nevertheless, the improvisation embraced by the directors of the Nouvelle Vague had to do with something more profound than their simple corporatist self-interest. The young rebels (Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol, Rivette, Rohmer, Malle) who demonstrated their contempt for simple technique had found the means to make films in part through family money, through personal relationships, or by working within closed communities. In this respect, improvisation was on the front lines of a class conflict. The professional unions set two social models against each other: on the one hand, that of a social advancement that necessitated connections with bourgeois circles and built its members' reputation in opposition to the values of professionalism to produce a community of amateurs and newcomers; and on the other hand, a *society of craftspeople* in which it was necessary to pay one's dues to get ahead and be recognized by the collectivity. In the latter model, it was the profession that gave individuals a social value based on their competence. In this case, it was craft that was to be defended and craft that was felt to be under attack by improvisers who used exterior locations, stripped-down crews, and amateur actors.

We can see here how improvisation, from the perspective of those opposing it, was perceived as a lack of (or an attack on) the respect to which people felt they were entitled. This question of respect would emerge regularly during a period of social unrest marked by heightened tensions among different groups, classes, and generations. To improvise was also a sin of youth that could be pardoned more or less easily depending on the context. Those who had fought in the Second World War worried about a younger generation, seduced by materialism, that seemed to be on the rise in the early 1960s. Indeed, some of the older generation accused young people of being immoral and uncivil "monsters" (Fournier 1958). This worrisome youth was the focus of two hotly debated and compared films of the late 1950s, *Les tricheurs*, directed by Marcel Carné (the most respected craftsman in French cinema), and *Les cousins*, the second film by the young prodigy Chabrol. The denunciation in both films of the incivility of selfish, disrespectful youth masked a deeper anxiety about the social, and thus about the future of a society that judged social relationships on the basis of a respect whose meaning was precisely what the heroes of these films seemed to have lost.

The upheaval in morals engendered by modernity fed this alarm. Traditional civility, which reassured members of a group of their common desire

to live together, no longer existed; the modes of socialization surrounding new dances and new appetites for consumption frightened the elderly, as in the scene from *Adieu Philippine* in which a friend of the young heroine's father refuses to dance a cha-cha-cha with her, saying, "You are a marvelous teacher, but I prefer more tender dances, and I consider these brutal dances the perfect expression of the heartlessness at the heart of today's youth." It was nevertheless people like him who sent the youth of this period to Algeria, from which they returned with horrific memories, and it was precisely to "save" her friend from such a departure that the young woman attempted to seduce the older man. However, *Adieu Philippine*, filmed in 1960, was not released until 1962. By then, the war was over, even if its shadow hung over the future of several of the film's characters. And the inconsequential love story was ultimately reassuring, as was the profile of the main characters, modest workers with sensible leisure activities who were far from the characters of *Les tricheurs* or *Les cousins*. Youth rediscovered the qualities of freshness and spontaneity that made it possible to find value in the improvisation offered up without fanfare by the filmmaker, a young person who improvised to escape the codes and conventions for representing youth on the screen:

The truth of character. For the first time in French cinema, here is a young man, he might be from public housing, or a Renault plant, or a boy's gang. He isn't an actor. In real life, he works in a bank. He came to cinema by accident. He doesn't speak dialogue written to please. *He says what he wants to say, he improvises as in cinéma-vérité.* He speaks with his own words, in his own tone. If Mr. Delon played this role, with dialogue by Michel Audiard in a film by Henri Verneuil, we'd find it delicious. In this case, because it's real and truthful, people protest. However, it's the truth that's making them cry out. Or, rather, it's crying out the truth. (Collet 1963)

In order for spontaneity to have a positive value, however, it is necessary that it appear in a context in which the older codes of interaction have become heavy and unworkable. As long as these codes are still in force, spontaneity is perceived as a false mode of interaction, a threat. In Goffman's terms, it is a source of unease. The valorization of spontaneity as a means of reviving the social bond presumes that this bond is threatened by encrusted conventions. In 1962, at the moment of *Adieu Philippine*'s release, these conventions were doubly exhausted—both sociologically and dramaturgically.

The recognition of improvisation, then, produced a greater sense of

truth—or, conversely, of falsity, as when improvisation in one film rendered false the scenes of interaction written and filmed for another—in the films of Jacques Rozier. However, a threshold had been crossed. One soon passed from the impression of spontaneity to the sharing of intimacy, at that moment in which the truth of interaction threatened to become a psychodrama unfolding in front of the camera, at that point at which one asked actors to invest, in their performance, feelings, and emotions that they really felt at the moment of shooting. This is what Jean Rouch had asked of his actors in *La pyramide humaine* (1961). Those actors were, in fact, adolescents in their first year of high school in Abidjan. Rouch laid out for them the initial situation: a new student, white and just arrived from the homeland, sets out to break down the barriers between whites and blacks. These barriers, according to Rouch, were real for the students, and the film allowed them to effectively overcome them. He claimed that the emotional relationships that produced this result, and that one sees develop in the film, really transpired and that his role was essentially that of exploiting the situation to dramatic ends, relying mostly on scenes that were improvised.

From the viewer's perspective, this kind of improvisation places one in a relationship of intimacy one is not always ready to occupy or that one has not really desired. Viewers do not leave their social sensitivities in the cloakroom when they enter the viewing room. Film viewers are not voyeurs looking to see what they are forbidden to see. They are watching a spectacle legitimized by the conventions of theater (or cinema), of which the most important is this: that what confronts them is the intimacy of the characters, not that of the actors. When actors bare themselves, the viewer is surprised, even embarrassed. Goffman reminds us that the spectacle of intimacy unfolds only within the frame of a very specific kind of theatrical experience: that of a theater in which actors and spectators play at being intimate without really being so. In real life, we are called on to manage the modesty of others, to protect their intimacy. In theater or cinema, tact is not required when we are dealing with characters. What happens when the character is the actor laying herself or himself bare, when she or he is no longer acting but living the situation as a person—when the performed interaction becomes, on the contrary, an instrument by which the performer reveals her or his intimate being? Writing about *La pyramide humaine*, Georges Sadoul suggests:

The truth—and [Rouch] tells us this—is that the game imagined for the film became reality. Love and rivalry were born in the course of the film,

leading on occasion to little dramas. . . . We would have preferred to see these episodes of truth rather than those others which sometimes smell of fiction . . . [but] if we can imagine super electronic cameras using thermo-plastic film that made it technically possible to record romantic or social conflicts unknown to their protagonists, we can be sure that the very honest Jean Rouch would prevent himself from pushing his quest quite that far. To show human intimacy on the screen is, in fact, obscene—not in a pornographic but in an etymological sense. The intimacy of the heart cannot be staged, shown naked in public.¹⁷

Since Rouch's time, however, it is not only that filmmakers no longer prevent themselves from pushing their quest quite so far—even though they deny this—and not only that viewers may or may not be duped (as when they perceive real relational games as scripted interaction) but that these viewers, without the filmmaker's complicity, may see something hidden from everyone else (from filmmakers and actors) when they suspect, beneath the performance and outside its control, an independent interaction revealed in an improvisation that the viewers believe they have detected. Suddenly, the intimate relationship among actors, or between actors and crew, becomes clear to the viewer, who then "loses" the characters. If the viewer is embarrassed, Goffman tells us, it is because he or she is pulled between two postures: on the one hand, that of a viewer who has paid to applaud a spectacle, and on the other, that of an observer who is present, much to his or her surprise, at a real interaction between people. The ordinary viewer "sympathetically and vicariously participates in the unreal world generated by the dramatic interplay of the scripted characters. He gives himself over. He is raised (or lowered) to the cultural level of the playwright's characters and themes, appreciating allusions for which he doesn't quite have the background, marital adjustments for which he doesn't quite have the stomach, varieties of lifestyle for which he is not quite ready, and repartee that gives to speaking a role he could not quite accept for it were he to find such finery in the real world" (Goffman 1986, 130). The onlooker is confronted with a scene of real interaction—people who are very much interacting under the guise of producing a performance. Two outcomes are possible: either the onlooker, excluded from an interaction that is taking place between actors and no longer between characters, feels out of place, even embarrassed for having been an unexpected witness, or bound to the actors in a real or imaginary way, the onlooker's sharing of intimacy may reinforce a sentiment of complicity with them. In the latter case, the onlooker will share

with these actors—or take pleasure in the belief that he or she is sharing—an emotional experience that strengthens the sense of communal belonging. With reference to the important role played by the perception of improvisation in the critical texts defending the Nouvelle Vague, we can now understand those texts as expressing a sense of closeness to those who belonged to this movement. To detect improvisation in the performance of an actor or in the approach of a director is also to attain an intimacy with this person—an intimacy that the game of roles and masks, in theater as in life, usually hides and blocks. It is to live, with that person, a moment of intimacy that is able to feed our imaginary attachment to them.

My analysis of the debates over improvisation that accompanied the rise of the Nouvelle Vague has shown the close ties between that movement and the social dynamics of their era. The social sensitivities of the French in the early 1960s were, at least in part, bound up with those particular artistic and aesthetic orientations that characterized the Nouvelle Vague. The social experience of the French was characterized by systems of values that were inherited, defended, or rejected by conventions and customs that regulated relationships and constrained them, by methods of work that enforced or complicated collaboration, and by frameworks of experience that protected reticence and modesty. For film audiences entering into the imaginary scene of interaction among spectators, actors, and directors, the ambivalences of a desire for intimacy were maintained, determined by the level of proximity people felt or wanted to feel with one another. The question of improvisation enables us to go to the heart of those social dynamics—of inclusion and exclusion, defiance and trust, promise and frustration, openness and vulnerability—that were engendered by the uneasy attention of people toward one another, toward those with whom they had to deal in the performance of everyday life.

Notes

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1. In Bergala's book, we find the note that Godard sent to his American producer, Joseph A. Levin, to justify the lack of shot breakdowns in a scene from his scenario for *Le mépris*: "This sequence will last about 20–30 minutes. It is difficult for me to recount exactly and chronologically what will happen" (quoted in Bergala 2006, 149). However, the structure of the scene, both dramatically and aesthetically, was thought out in precise terms; bits of dialogue were written;

and, most important, the characters' states of mind were identified. It was up to Godard to find the space and rhythm with which he would orchestrate the exchange of looks and bodily relationships that translated this to film.

2. Raoul Coutard, the Nouvelle Vague cameraman hired by Georges de Beauregard for *À bout de souffle* (1959), often told the story of how Godard would treat filming as a kind of *reportage*, with cameras on the shoulder and natural light, which presumed if not an element of improvisation, at least a sense of professional risk, since it required that he give up such guarantees of photographic quality as the tripod, which minimized the camera's incidental movements and directional errors, as well as the ability to control light through the use of lamps. The reception of these films would comment more on this "amateurishness" than on their improvisatory qualities.

3. For Jean Douchet (1998, 255), all of the ruptures enacted by the Nouvelle Vague were rooted in a concern for truthfulness aimed at preserving the improvised character of life itself: "What interested the Nouvelle Vague was no longer the story contained in the script, but, on the basis of this script, the encounter between a unique story and the truth of life itself. The true story told by a film rose out of this duel between fiction and reporting. Editing, as a result, was subservient to the unpredictable and the random. It was no longer about organizing shots in a pre-established, determined sequence, but about organizing the breaks, gaps and ruptures in sound and image which were provoked by an event and which intruded, in a surprising and even disruptive fashion, into camera range."

4. "The effect of the real designates the fact that, on the basis of a sufficiently strong reality effect, the viewer arrives at a judgement as to the existence of the representational figures and assigns them a referent in the real" (Aumont and Marie 2007, 65). The idea is that the reality effect, which may be obtained through the use of those conventions acceptable to realistic representation, will be reinforced by an effect of the real carried by the analogic character of the image.

5. *Tirez sur le pianiste* (1960) was Truffaut's biggest failure. It was photographed by Coutard and influenced by Godard's techniques, which, in turn, were inspired by Rouch's methods of filming.

6. In 1959, Truffaut stated in the magazine *Arts*, "Where the seasoned director shoots fifteen takes, we shoot two or three. This stimulates the actors, who have to take the plunge. . . . I believe strongly in chance and in the strokes of luck that happen during filming. Things move on a set. Filming outside shakes things up even more. And that allows us to be on the lookout for these kinds of accidents. *Parfois d'improviser*" (quoted in de Baecque 2009, 82).

7. Cf. André Bazin (1967, 14–15): "Viewed in this perspective, the cinema is objectivity in time. The film is no longer content to preserve the object, enshrined as it were in an instant, as the bodies of insects are preserved intact, out of the distant past, in amber. The film delivers baroque art from its convulsive catalepsy. Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were."

8. "Twenty-seven filmmakers, including Jean Cocteau, Claude Chabrol, Jean

Delannoy, Julien Duvivier, George Franju, Jean-Luc Godard, Alex Joffe, Pierre Kast, Jean-Pierre Melville, Louis Malle, Alain Resnais, Jacques Tati and François Truffaut have just signed a joint protest following the replacement of Jean Aurel by Roger Vadim. . . . In their protest, the 27 directors declare that Roger Vadim's attitude toward Jean Aurel went against the spirit of collegial brotherhood. They argue that one cannot replace the director of a film already underway without his consent, and that no argument invoking force majeure can replace the consent of the ousted director" ("De nombreux réalisateurs prennent Parti dans l'affaire Aurel-Vadim," notice in *Le monde*, January 14–15, 1961). The trial took place in 1962. Several of the filmmakers who signed the petition were called on to testify, including Jean-Luc Godard.

9. As noted in the report of the public hearing of March 27, 1962, "Given that [Jean Aurel] has only himself to blame if the sequences directed by the co-directors were not entirely faithful to his original scenario, since, at the moment that the camera began filming he had only produced a third of the shot breakdowns and had not yet found the conclusion to his story; given that, faced with work scarcely begun, and under pressure as a result of the financial demands inherent in the making of any film, Roger Vadim and Claude Brûlé were obliged to devise the various sequences of a film whose author had not, in contravention of standard practice and in violation of his obligations, completed the shot breakdowns before filming, said circumstances explaining why Vadim, called upon to oversee the project, had to play a more important role and recreate the unfinished scenario." The tribunal of the Grande Instance du Département de la Seine recognized Vadim's good faith and found Truffaut guilty of defamation.

10. The press commented on one detail of the hearing involving Bardot's deposition in the trial: while she offered, as proof of Aurel's incompetence, the fact that he had forced her to redo some of the scenes shot on the first day, Truffaut felt compelled to reply that "Clouzot also made Mademoiselle Bardot do retakes of scenes already shot for *La vérité*." Lifting her blond hair, which was held by a black headband, Bardot furiously answered, "I don't accept the comparison. When Mr. Clouzot reshot scenes, those scenes were already good, and this great director had prepared his shot breakdowns many weeks ahead of time" (*Le Berry Républicain*, January 30, 1962).

11. On this subject, see Serge Bromberg and Ruxandra Medrea, dir: *L'enfer d'Henri George Clouzot*, documentary, 2009.

12. This is the analysis offered by Esquenazi (2004) in *Godard et la société française des années 1960*.

13. "Un Godard audacieux prisonnier d'un Godard collégien," *L'Express*, September 14, 1961, Cinémathèque Française, on-site press clippings database. <http://www.cinematheque.fr/bibliotheque.html>. Italics added for emphasis.

14. *Carrefour*, November 9, 1960.

15. Max Weber (1978, 40) defines "communal" relationships in terms of the subjective sense of belonging.

16. It is interesting to note at this point that filmmaking professionals refused

to invoke improvisation to justify the basic creative dimensions of their work. In his study of “dance” musicians, Becker noted that those musicians who considered themselves craftsmen refused improvisation—which would have seen them barred from their professional milieu—but nevertheless sought to distinguish themselves from the simple sheet readers of dance orchestras. Their sense of craft allowed them to maintain their self-respect while giving them a sense of social inclusion that jazz improvisation would have made impossible.

17. Georges Sadoul, “La chronique de George Sadoul,” *Lettres françaises*, April 27, 1961, Cinémathèque Française, on-site press clippings database. <http://www.cinematheque.fr/bibliotheque.html>.