

Is there life after

Godard

His films have inspired three generations of independent filmmakers, he has obliterated every film convention ever conceived, and he once punched a producer in the nose for screwing with his film about the Stones. Critic, filmmaker and philosopher-rebel Jean Luc Godard, who announced "the death of cinema" at the close of his 1968 film *Weekend*, has been nominated for six *Palme d'Ors* throughout his legendary 58-year career but has walked away with exactly none. At this year's festival, Quentin Tarantino, who took home the coveted prize in 1994 for *Pulp Fiction* and whose homages to Godard's films border on plagiarism, teaches the master class.

But no one said movies were just.

The B-movie thrillers and film noir gangster pictures of the '40s and '50s blazed an indelible impression on Godard during an intense period of "self-education" in 1950's Paris. As one of the first writers to contribute to Andre Bazin's *Cahiers du Cinema*, Godard formed life-long alliances with Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, François Truffaut, Jacques Rozier and Jacques Demy. Together, they consumed, analyzed and critiqued the films of Sam Fuller, Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and Jean Renoir, among others. In their essays, they formulated the notion of "*director as auteur*," a groundbreaking notion at a time when directors were generally considered little more than hired hands.

The leap from the critic's page to the big screen was merely a matter of a conversion of terms. Godard once commented, "To me, thinking about films and making them is no different," and so, along with Truffaut and the others, Godard formed the legendary *French New Wave*, spawning such groundbreaking films as Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* and *The 400 Blows*, Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* and, of course, Godard's landmark films *Breathless*, *My Life to Live* and *Band of Outsiders*. Though the works produced by the collective are as distinctive as each man's personality, the drive behind them was common: a passion for what they called "realist" cinema and, more importantly, the burning need to push the boundaries of the medium. With an informal manifesto that sounds amazingly similar to the present-day digital-video filmmaker's credo – shoot quickly, on the cheap, with brazen indignation – Godard and his cohorts shook the foundations of the ever-increasing homogenized cinema being pumped out of the Hollywood system at the end of the Golden Era.

With essentially every sequence in his films, Godard sought to annihilate conventions of traditional cinema. Every step of the filmmaking process was questioned and held under a microscope (Godard often referred to himself as a scientist of sorts). The use of camera angles, musical score, editing, plot and acting was methodically deconstructed, reexamined, renegotiated and re-presented. Penelope Gilliatt, in her 1976 article for *The New Yorker*, noted that Godard gave cinema a future by "always attempting to return to zero, making films as though none had ever been made before." It was in this manner that Godard made intellectually challenging movies with a post-modern sense of self-awareness. His films consistently *provoked* an audience, inspired it to participate in the creative process, forced it to think. Indeed, his films pissed the audience off. In his own words, "I am trying to change the world. Yes."

By Joseph Christiana



"Perhaps the most interesting thing with video is that you can grab the camera easily. But if you can grab the camera easily maybe you can put it down more easily too, and think about it better."

Though his films were never a draw at the box office and he was essentially sent into exile by the French film industry because of the unconventional nature of his work – "I am the only known filmmaker who only made failures" – his respect among his peers never waned. To name just a few of the filmmakers whose work was significantly influenced by Godard: Cassavettes, Coppola, Warhol, Soderberg, Jost, Scorsese, Linklater, Hartley, Araki, Altman and, of course, Quentin Tarantino, whose production company's name, *A Band Apart*, is itself homage to Godard's 1960 film *Band a part* (*Band of Outsiders*). It's no exaggeration to say that Godard and The French New Wave are the founding fathers of American Independent cinema as we know it today.

So coming off of another year where the list of top-grossing American films reads like a comic-book villain's secret formula for mass lobotomy, and in the midst of a period when the independent film community seems lethargic and self-satisfied with the comfortable niche it's carved for itself, it's easy to concede that Godard was right, that cinema really is dead as an artform, that it no longer maintains the capacity to provoke, to move, to inspire.

But is there life after Godard?

Perhaps. We are inarguably at an exciting time in cinematic history. Like the music industry before it, the film industry is scrambling before an impending implosion, and, as sure as the ongoing revolution in digital production and distribution is taking root, so shall the surgical hand of cinematic democratization excise the cancerous tumor of the corporation from cinema. As I write this column, I hear a new generation of Godard's bastard children picking up their cameras without giving a second thought to Godard's bane of existence: the imperialist, consumerist-pandering, *bourgeois* lawyers and businessmen of Hollywood. And so it is here and now, with video camera in hand, that cinema comes to a crossroads: It will choose either to continue to turn over in the coffin described by Godard, or it will rise to the challenge of one of his most notorious provocations...and find new life.

Some words of advice from Godard: "Perhaps the most interesting thing with video is that you can grab the camera easily. But if you can grab it more easily, maybe you can put it down more easily, too, and think about it better."

Joseph Christiana is a New York/New Jersey-based indie-guerilla filmmaker. His latest short film, Famous, recently screened at the Newfilmmakers Series at the Anthology Theater in New York City and will be included in the forthcoming feature film Motel. Famous was inspired, in part, by the work of Godard.



Godard with Mick Jagger (© Cupid Productions). The "founding father of American independent cinema" and the art of smoking while scanning film.

