

Godard's Contra-Bande: Early Comic Heroes in *Pierrot le fou* and *Le Livre d'image*

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Introduction

Throughout Jean-Luc Godard's scope of work spanning over more than six decades, references to the comic strip strangely surface, seemingly unattached to any interpretative frame, creating instability and disproportion within the form of the films. Specific images of characters reading and performing *Les Pieds Nickelés*, or *Zig et Puce* appear in his early films, *À Bout de souffle* (1960), *Une Femme est une femme* (1961) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965), whereas in *Une femme est une femme* (1960), *Alphaville* (1965), *Made in U.S.A.* (1966), and *Tout va bien* (1972), the whole of the diegetic world resembles the compositions and frames of the comic strip. In Godard's later period, even though we witness an acute shift in register of the image, comic figures ostensibly continue to appear, drained of color, as if photocopied several times, floating free in a void of empty black space detached from any definitive meaning. Without doubt, the filmmaker uses the comic strip as Brechtian means in order to provoke distancing effects (Sterritt 64), but I would also suggest that these instances put forward by the comic may also function to point to provocative connections between aesthetics and politics.¹

Thinking of Godard's oeuvre, in the chapter "Au-delà de l'image-mouvement" of *L'image-temps*, Gilles Deleuze remarks that the filmmaker drew inspiration from the comic strip at its most cruel and cutting, thus constructing a world according to "émouvantes" and "terribles" images that reach a level of autonomy in and of themselves (18-19). From a list of works spanning over few decades, inhabited according to him with trenchant disconnected images, Deleuze extracts the still-vivid cartoonish quality of Godard's compositions and frames, and substitutes it with the notion of *series*: "Avec Godard, l'image « déenchaînée » devient sérielle et atonale" (238). Godard's serial image, for Deleuze, responds to the political conditions of the errant, of the nomadic subject of a globalized world, and therefore to a set of entirely new problems than those of the subject in the pre-World War II period (253-255).

In this article, I would like to seize on the serial (unchained, atonal) image that Deleuze presents in relation to Godard's work as a leaping off point to ask how we might think about cinematic spectacles in relation to the notion of the historical image. My

inquiry will be driven by two extraordinarily different sets of examples from Godard's work, both of which feature highly spectacular comic book images. The first involves *Pierrot le fou*, which spotlights Ferdinand, a disenchanted bourgeois driven into a road-trip extravaganza with a female companion named Marianne. While Ferdinand continuously reads and references *Les Pieds Nickelés*, comic book elements also appear to affect the formal aspect of the film, giving rise to images dominated in primary colors, balloon-like narration repeating speech and exclamations interspersed with dialogues. First published in 1908, *Les Pieds Nickelés* is an early form of French-language *bande dessinée*,² centering on a group of young slackers who often get into trouble. Recent accounts have analyzed the theme of imperial conquest and colonial past in *Les Pieds Nickelés* as well as in other comics from the pre-World War II period such as *Zig et Puce*, pointing to the different adventures centered around white male characters with no regional traits whatsoever (McKinney 2011). An analysis involving the strangeness of the French countryside landscapes as it appears in *Pierrot le fou* and the politically vexed situations into which Ferdinand gets himself can suggest the profound formal and archeological parallels between the film and the comic series, and help rethink Godard's film as a modern cinematic form that activates fictional imageries and narratives of the past.

In sharp contrast, Godard's more recent work *Le livre d'image* (2018) superimposes elements of comic books in a rudimentary form; their remnants reshaped or transformed over other images form a heterogeneous cinematic and historical archive. The power of the spectacles these images create springs from their failure to metamorphose completely. This effect is furthered by Godard's revealing of his own technique – his voice-over narrates the effects while what we see are images of the cinematic mechanism that brought them into being. Godard's use of the comic strip as one of the spectacles transforming the power of images is thus complex and ambiguous, suggesting at once the bankrupt abyss of the serial image and the potentially deterritorializing power of comics that this world has produced.

Playing panels and cinematic collage

A defining characteristic of Godard's films is their collage construction. Collage, along with its homologues *décollage*, or *racolage*, is often understood by most film critics as a radicalization of montage, a superimposition of media elements as well as verbal and visual quotations, and the creation of meaning through juxtaposition rather than narrative continuity.³ These qualities make it easy to see parallels between Godard's films and the composition of the *bande dessinée*. For example, *bande dessinée* produces meaning out of the relationship, linear and non-linear, between discontinuous units or panels separated by a gutter (also called "interconic space" between panels), techniques comparable to Godard's use of disjointed montage and jump-cuts. *Bande dessinée* also

relies on “iconicity” or sets of cultural items that govern an image (and the iconic forms that words are taking), and which cartoonists transform within the *mise-en-page* in order to create effects (Groensteen 112-115; Baetens and Frey 167-171).⁴ As it is well known, Godard’s variable use of iconicity, through transformation of advertisements and art-historical quotations, has unmistakably attributed him the epithet “the master iconoclast” (Sontag 147). While critics often compare the flat tone of Godard’s vividly colored landscapes and detached sounds with the effect rising from the mass-printed graphicity of the comic strip, they go no further than saying that specific comic strip references function as direct quotations and/or an inspiration for the *mise-en-scène*.⁵ And yet, the transgressive potential of specific quotations “from the past” is worth emphasizing because, in Georges Didi-Huberman’s words, they allow to *comparaître* – “faire apparaître ce qui est cité, puis de se donner les moyens de prononcer un jugement historique, éthique et politique” (*Passés cités* 102). In quoting and making episodes from *Les Pieds Nickelés* reemerge, I argue that Godard engages in an explicitly historical, political, and ethical critique that comments on the norms of production, distribution, and circulation of images in artistic practices in the modern period.

This parallel invites us to consider Godard himself, as a filmmaker in the mid-1960s, conceiving his tenth feature – the third filmed in color – but it also exemplifies the multilayered function of quotation in *Pierrot le fou*. Godard’s early works in color were strategically constructed to allude to a cartoonish style and effect, which in the filmmaker’s development can be traced back to the beginning of his career as a film critic. During those years, Godard published a few articles in the journal *Les Cahiers du cinéma* in which he celebrated the cinematic use of “tons violents,” “l’emploi délibéré et systématique des couleurs les plus criardes,” and “scènes à l’extrême limite de l’absurde, dans le féroce et loufoque univers de notre enfance” (Godard 70-86). His article from 1956, figuratively titled “Mirliflores et Bécassines,” praises Frank Tashlin’s genius in directing grotesque comedies (with Jerry Lewis) and highlights the ways in which popular figures create imaginative cartographies and alter perceptions of contemporary spaces.⁶ Tashlin, who was considered to be a marginal Hollywood filmmaker (or at least in the margins of the classical pantheon for the rest of the *Cahiers* circle), was also an established cartoonist, and an auteur of comics and children’s magazines. Godard was particularly interested in Tashlin’s elegant and graphic manipulation of vulgar “documentary” elements, suggesting that they manage to pierce the heart of the American society in order to reveal its profoundly mercantile structure.⁷ This surely influenced Godard’s metonymical and digressive figurations of his early filmic experimentations, especially the ones in color, which reveal similar political overtones. Needless to say, Godard’s use of colors, comparable to Tashlin’s cartoonish aesthetics, exceeds the powers of figuration and symbolism, and serves as a means to diversify the various levels of his social and historical critique. For instance, the ostensible use of blue, white and red in *Pierrot le fou* does not merely serve to represent the French nation, but becomes a complex crossroad

of cultural and art-historical allusions, linking modern film color (a product of commercial productions) to the colors of other non-cinematic art forms, such as the comic, reverberating with the temporal layers of the narrative. Space, time, and scale become unhinged from the linear grounding, and the characters become a sheer surface, a crossroad of allusions within a texture of reality, an imitation of a documentary, that does not truly belong to them.

In *Pierrot le fou*, the world of the film collides with that of *bande dessinée* and history. In the opening sequence, Ferdinand Griffon (Jean-Paul Belmondo) nicknamed Pierrot, meaning “sad clown,” is portrayed as a husband of a rich Italian *bourgeoise*, who at a cocktail party hosted at the “Expressos” becomes increasingly embittered by the mundane men and women of his social circle. Reciting lines of advertising slogans and ready-made formulas to each other, as if through another medium, these modern men and women appear to buttress the ideology of post-war capitalist demand and modernization. Lost amidst the disparate snippets of conversation, Ferdinand makes an effort to find a sense of unity and meaning in a world dominated by mechanic, uniform text and visual: “J’ai l’impression,” he confesses, “d’avoir des machines séparées, que ça ne tient pas ensemble: les yeux, la bouche, les oreilles....” This scene is filmed as a series of montages with red, green, white, yellow and blue filters, whose organization posits a critique of the film camera as perpetuating the capitalist ideology of the spectacle, but also to the background coloring of comic panels, especially the ones of early twentieth century comics. Along the way in this splash field, Ferdinand loses his senses and returns home to find his children’s baby-sitter, Marianne Renoir (Anna Karina), – a name that symbolically combines the embodied figure of the French nation with the Impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir and his son, the filmmaker Jean Renoir, – reading an album of *Les Pieds Nickelés* series. After telling Marianne he would drive her home, the characters leave the scene taking the album with them, an event which shifts the filmic narrative by projecting them, as they become the last romantic couple and adventurers, into a completely disintegrated, vivid, cartoonish, and suicidal society marked by a swarm of references to various media, fictions, and situations of recent historic events.

Godard not only borrows the *bande dessinée*, but he tacitly links the album to the colonial history of its narrative, and its aftermaths on a global scale. After the opening scene, the film’s form increasingly begins to resemble the formal composition of the BD: its Eastman color and Techniscope format, shot by cinematographer Raoul Coutard, give stark nightmarish angles of vision and a garish color appropriate for the exaggerated situations and the hyperreal human relations the film depicts. The overall *mise-en-scène* of Marianne’s half-furnished apartment is constructed with uniform artificial light, flatly illuminating the characters and the few brightly accented colored objects scattered throughout the frames: we see shiny green glasses, red and yellow pans, pop-art posters (another of the film’s sources), Marianne’s blue bathrobe, but also the devastating presence of a male corpse covered in bright red blood amidst piles of guns and weapons.⁸

The intense white walls recall the blank pages and gutters of comics. Covered with disparate posters containing references to the French-Algerian past, as well as contemporary (1965) references to world catastrophes – from events such as the Vietnam War, the colonial war in Angola, and the Congolese coup d'état, through which Marianne moves back and forth as if in a linear sequencing of panels –, the walls invite the viewers to involve themselves and participate in the creative process. But this jarring anachronistic chaos of historical and current references becomes dizzyingly disorienting, as it is depicted with the same flat cartoonish aesthetics as the other objects inside the frames. Godard thus complicates any attempt to metamorphose these figures or interpret the events in order to unmask an ideology. Consequently, he inserts even more fictional references in addition to *Les Pieds Nickelés*: a close-up image of the cover of *Mister X* and *Gérald Norton*, reproductions of Renoir and Picasso, and a black-and-white poster of *Le Petit Soldat*, Godard's fictional film from 1960 but censored until 1963 for depicting the conflicting political stances and torture scenes of the French-Algerian war. But, unlike all the other fictional references that slowly disintegrate into the aesthetic texture of the film, *Les Pieds Nickelés* ostensibly continues to follow the characters' trajectory, to the point of becoming their sole possession. By disseminating the album into the twisted filmic adventure that continues to develop through deserted landscapes while stealing cars, oil, setting fire and getting involved in accidents with murder, weapon trafficking in Algeria and facing war devastations from the Vietnam War, Godard provocatively suggests that going mad in modern times is comparable to the actions of the famous trio of adventurers and criminals that Louis Forton depicts in his series.⁹

This album of *Les Pieds Nickelés* features the famous trio of French white men – Filocharde, Ribouldingue and Croquignol – who set off to pursue criminal adventures in non-European lands and casually interfere with the trans-African and trans-Asian expeditions that took place during the height of France's colonial empire. While the series occasionally mocked French colonial aspirations, it simultaneously “reproduced,” as Mark McKinney has argued, “colonial structures of representation” (*The Colonial Heritage* 17). McKinney observes that the series drew inspiration from historically specific events such as the 1931 *Exposition coloniale* in Paris, and the *Croisière noire*,¹⁰ as well as from real sites, typically nexus of global culturalism (African, European, American, and indigenous), the result of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism, transforming them into fictionalized worlds of adventure. Re-inscribing these imaginative worlds of Western colonial narratives onto the colonized played a key role in bringing French imperialism and colonial ambitions to children, who constituted the predominant readership of the series (16-24).

Questions of imperialism and criminal adventure permeate *Pierrot le fou*. They formalize the film's unspoken sensations through a set of particularized historical and imaginary references, which chaotically and violently circulate through the film's scrambled speech and images. The ambivalent voice of the characters, intermittently

enunciating and repeating phrases in the form of ephemeral and ineffectual dream or lived historical event – for instance, when Ferdinand says in a voice-over: “comme dans un mauvais rêve,” followed by Marianne’s voice-off: “comme pendant la guerre d’Algérie,” while the visualization appears as if captured from a wandering camera – exemplifies the dramatic circulation of this kind of speech that refuses to erect an authoritative voice. We find out that Marianne is associated with a crisis in the OAS¹¹ and wanted for murder. But the film does not offer us any framework to relate to her, as her crisis is mockingly featured through images of her browsing through *Les Pieds Nickelés* against a white wall onto which we see flashing “OASIS” (typographically broken into “OAS”, written in sharp blue, and “IS” in bright red signaling Marianne’s relation to OAS, but also a projection in the “oasis” of the two of them as the last romantic couple) while plotting with Ferdinand to knock out her suspicious “uncle” and OAS agent. Marianne’s sudden transformation – which will repeat itself on two other occasions throughout the film: first, as she wears a U.S. Army jacket and second, as she morphs into a Vietnamese woman while dramatically performing a “Vietnam War scene” for American marines and tourists, dressed in a traditional robe, her face painted yellow – clearly echoes the slackers’ many disguises into officials and indigenous populations, in order to trick and steal money. Thus, *Pierrot le fou* constantly lingers on the edge between one world and another, as more tropes alluding to the world of adventurers multiply and collide with associations of historical references.

In her essay “*Les héritiers d’Hergé: the figure of the aventurier in a postcolonial context*,” Ann Miller observes that the long-standing figure of the “adventurer,” central to the French-language comics, reaches back to the very first popular comics such as *Zig et Puce* and *Les Pieds Nickelés* (307). The readers of the *Les Pieds Nickelés* have encountered adventures in distant places, which were “simply a pretext for a set of gags based on the hostile environment provided by the natives,” which Miller contends were “depicted with unrestrained racism and no attempt to convey any effect of realism,” unlike Hergé’s *Tintin* and E.P. Jacobs’ *Blake and Mortimer* in which “realism became the paramount as the adventurer took on the role of *redresseur de torts* (author’s emphasis) (307).” Episodes in *Les Pieds Nickelés* do indeed present their readers with an onslaught of unrealistic, overly hyperbolic images, but I would argue that it is precisely these unrealistic comical appearances that reemerge hauntingly in *Pierrot le fou* as an undetermined, depersonalized hidden world, reclaiming to speak to us. In the film, Marianne and Ferdinand, unsure about who they are and how to act within the space of politics, are represented as two collective actors, who have avidly consumed the adventures of *Les Pieds Nickelés*. The film’s engagement with *Les Pieds Nickelés* is not without a reflection on the fetishization of the act of collecting and consuming the series, but also on the investment, fetishizing itself, in the actions that these adventurers pursue, which are significant to the shaping of the collective historical consciousness. The characters also represent the increasing disenchantment with the notions of *engagement*

and classifications imposed by post-war modernization, a sphere which, as Godard shows us, is dominated by the media industry and exclusion. Throughout the film, most of the references to the Vietnam war are dispersed in a spectacularized form through radio, panels calling for protest, as well as documentary footage that Ferdinand briefly watches. While in contrast, the war in Algeria reemerges as an affective collective image through fragmented voice-off narration from hazy figures related to Marianne's family (her "uncle," "brother," or "lover," and by extension France's), as well as through the film's dream-like intertitles, verses, and typography written on the walls or enunciated. In short, the Algerian war reappears in the film as something haunting which France has excluded or repressed.¹²

Through the film's characters, notably Ferdinand, Godard manages to provisionally express the grievances of the whole society, not in the form of images of recollections that belong to the character, nor through images of scenes as they happened, but as images suspended in the past seen through the phantasmatic gaze of a child or a madman. This is nowhere more apparent than in a key scene in which direct elements from the comic become sites of phantasy. Midway through the film, Ferdinand (holding the album) and Marianne appear in a semi-rural countryside, framed against a "Total" gas pump, a visual element which represents a direct allusion to the Franco-Algerian economic cooperation assured by Algerian oil, resulting in the process of decolonialization and the ending of the war. Marianne has transformed herself by wearing a U.S military uniform, a reference that reflects the lingering dependence of France on foreign oil controlled by the American coalition during the war, and perhaps, the desire for the French to extricate themselves from this dependence through Saharan oil (a desire which Marianne perverts by decrying her will to flee to "Chicago," or "Las Vegas").¹³ This scene slides from the referencing of the recent war to the broader historical colonial framework of the comic, when Ferdinand, instead of speaking in a voice-off, begins to read a text from the episode *Les Pieds Nickelés voyagent* seemingly chosen at random. The text reads:

Après avoir bouffé pas mal de kilomètres, ils arrivèrent en vue du désert de Bahionda qu'ils devaient traverser avant d'atteindre Khartoum. Zut ! Ça manque d'ombrage maugréaient les Pieds Nickelés... en s'aventurant dans cette plaine de sable, sous un soleil de feu. On serait bien mieux à l'ombre d'une demi-brune sans faux-col, et bien tassée.¹⁴

This is the only time that Godard explicitly has his actor read the text directly from the comic, instead of blending parts of its thematic and formal structure into his films' collage. After Ferdinand reads this decontextualized episode, he does not react nor respond to it, and the couple continues to pursue their adventure by stealing and burning cars for the rest of the film. The scene presents itself in a concealed phantasmatic form, occupying an impossible space outside of the film.

On the level of the comic action, the read episode is apparently inspired by what McKinney calls the “colonial carnivalesque” (137) (or series of events related to the colonial-era expeditions from which cartoonists such as Forton borrowed in composing their comics), and depicts the slackers crossing the desert by trans-Saharan African camel caravans. In the comic, the text appears beneath the frame, describing what the image dramatically visualizes as an “exotic adventure” scene: the slacker’s traversing Bahionda and Khartoum, a route which symbolically links France’s North African colonies to the west ones. Read in the context of the film, this text is repeated and reversed by the movements of the filmic narrative. Simulating the original speech from the comic, this episode no longer reigns over the filmic narrative, since, as we are witnessing, the narrative breaks down and shatters into many possible and virtual trajectories. The comic’s speech, thus depersonalized, would appear to be mocking the characters, or what at this point seems to us as their search for a unified narrative or meaning. Suspended in this way, at once within and outside of the filmic realm, this scene echoes a situation analogous to the first half of the film throughout which Ferdinand (carrying the album under his arms) was enunciating in a voice-off: “Nous traversâmes la France..., comme des apparences... comme un miroir..” along with Marianne’s reverberating voice-off “comme des apparences...”, while both were shown crossing a river, a forest and deserted roads under the bright sun, indeed “comme des apparences...”, with no sign whatsoever to indicate their location. Here Godard anticipates the phantasmatic and redeeming appearance of Bécassine in *Le Livre d’image*: Disrupting and suspending the narrative continuity in this way, the film examines and eventually resists the truth-claiming narrative of the comic told from the perspective of an identifiable subject with a definite history corroborated by capitalist hegemony and its white imperialist ambitions. Instead, it mocks our expectations and demands us to think about the alternative potentialities of the single space that appears immediately in front of us.



Figure 1. Anna Karina (Marianne) and Jean-Paul Belmondo (Ferdinand/Pierrot) reading *Les Pieds Nickelés* in *Pierrot le fou* (1965).

Indeed, the last part of the film precisely dramatizes this movement of failure to ground an authoritative, identifiable narrative trajectory. Although Ferdinand is increasingly becoming madder, towards the end of the film he attempts to get his life back on track by denouncing Marianne, after he has put himself at the mercy of her suspicious “brother,” “qui fait du trafic...des trucs... en Afrique,” and the OAS agents who are after them. This scene is symbolically figured in an image of Ferdinand absorbed in contemplation in the middle of train tracks and deciding to get out of the frame at the right moment, when the train approaches him. When the hostile OAS agents use waterboarding (“le truc qu’on t’a appris au...”) in order to torture him to confess about the money, the scene is dispersed with fragmented and suspended enunciation. Elliptically inflected, their dialogue, along with the speculative quasi-comical use of Marianne’s bright dress for such a horrifying thing as torture (“Y a qu’à prendre la robe de la pute”), produce a tone of unsettling familiarity with the past, creating an ambiguous distance from the enunciating voice. The visualization presents Ferdinand wearing a garish blue, red and yellow shirt, as he struggles for air, his face covered with the poignantly red dress. Unrecognizable, he begins to sort through the verbal wreckage numbly, comically delivering: “ploom ploom tra la la...” This scene is a clear crossroad of further references to the practice of torture by OAS during the Algerian war. It closely resonates with another “fictional” scene from Godard’s black-and-white film *Le Petit Soldat* in which FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) members are depicted torturing a French soldier, but it also stunningly resonates with documentation and photography from the Algerian war which circulated around France through clandestine anti-colonial materials. The traumatic images seem to float, impersonal, through the film’s characters, who have become unrecognizable. Reconstructed with vivid colors, *Pierrot le fou*’s imagery can only affectively figure the unspeakable sensations of such scenes, with a poignant appeal to be seen. Ferdinand’s grotesque transformation into a completely mad Pierrot, after preparing his own immolation and enunciating his final complaint in the form of a prolonged scream or cry and absurdly painting his face blue, is the ultimate commentary on this film’s gesture.

In *Cinéma 2: L’image-temps*, Deleuze argues that modern (post-World War II) *auteur* cinema renders visible the affectively charged images, which are disconnected, serial and atonal as they circulate in a (cinematic) movement that proliferates them through various events and centers, instead of organizing them around a single event. The camera begins to wander and move on its own, producing a sort of intensified free indirect discourse (or “free indirect vision,” as Deleuze dubs it) in which transferable clichés become a primary matter of cinema (239). These are the deserts created with extremely saturated color in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Red Desert*, the homogenizing, empty, and symmetrical houses in Yasujirō Ozu’s films, or Godard’s cartoonish color schemes that secrete what the philosopher calls “deterritorialized” socio-historical gestus: “ni réel ni imaginaire, ni quotidien ni cérémonial, mais à la frontière des deux, et qui renverra pour

son compte à l'exercice d'un sens véritablement visionnaire ou hallucinatoire" (252). Comical and tragic, the figure of the modern adventurer in *Pierrot le fou* is responding to the post-war ruins and to the loss of a center, denouncing the continuous illicit exercise of imperial power on a global scale. Incapable of organizing his narrative, nor mapping his place in a fragmented postmodern world, Ferdinand's mad struggle responds to the political conditions of a late-capitalist society, no longer centered around a grand Western narrative as in *Les Pieds Nickelés*, and can only lead us to reflect on how various individuals and collective actors might emerge to map their own respective places.

Bécassine's Gaze : Historicity and Untimeliness in late Godard

In Godard's late films, we can read his demonstration of alternate narratives and historical practices, one that reemerges radically transformed, as an unprecedented experiment with the esthetic possibilities of montage and digital technology. Along these lines, works that ought to be regarded as delivering a kind of archeology of the medium of cinema and, simultaneously, an act of recalling the twentieth century, are Godard's latest experimental video-essays: *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998), *Adieu au langage* (2014), and *Le livre d'image* (2018). The latter is an 85-minute video project, an "objet cinématographique," as Godard's editor and collaborator Fabrice Aragno puts it, interweaving found footage, text, and still images in an attempt to reconstruct the space of accelerated circulation, dislocation, and degradation of images, and of a certain idea of cinema, which we may call "art cinema," in today's digital economy.¹⁵ It is in this film that Godard amply returns to the popular figure of early comic art, Bécassine, a figure which affirms its own appearance, like *Les Pieds Nickelés*, laying claim to a new form of collective potential by reimagining the relations of the political.

Le livre d'image opens with a close-up image solely of an index finger pointing upwards towards the heavens, presumably borrowed from Leonardo da Vinci's final painting, "St. John the Baptist" (1513-1516). This image serves as an incongruous counterpoint to the following text that progressively appears written onto the black screen: "Les maîtres du monde devraient se méfier de Bécassine, précisément parce qu'elle se tait." This text, along with the painting of the index finger, reverberate with a new intensity as the filmic narrative unfolds, and images representing Bécassine, smiling enigmatically, index finger similarly pointing upward, appear floating free in a void of empty black space, detached from any grounding or meaning. Viewers of this experimental cinematic object will not take long to realize that it is far from *Pierrot le fou*'s material corporeality, calling upon us to think of the coexisting potentiality of modern film color in relation to other non-cinematic colors, notably that of comics. *Le livre d'image*'s form insists on distancing itself from any material cinematic texture, including the most recent high-quality glossiness of contemporary cinema, again calling upon us to think about the material dimension of the film but from the perspective of the digital

image, which is removed from any ontological ground or referent, enacting a temporality in a perpetual present tense.¹⁶ This is what contributes to the overall mysterious tone of *Le livre d'image*: its oscillation between images and sounds, as if sourced from a degraded VHS copy, seemingly without refinement or technical finesse, even though many of the images have been reworked through digital and other advanced technological means.

Along this compilation of “second-or-third-generation of images,”¹⁷ as Jonathan Crary puts it, through Godard’s extraordinary use of montage, the figure of a pointing Bécassine appears as a divine incarnation of history, symbolically repeated three times: the first time in the form of a mysterious savior, then as an accusatory figure projected onto the catastrophes of the century she has witnessed, and finally, towards end of the film, as a prophetic icon who gives a final salute to the viewers and invites them to imagine a different life. Critics have noted that Godard identifies with the comic figure of this provincial maid, a claim that inevitably establishes a connection with Godard’s previous works, in which iconic apparitions meta-cinematically draw a link with the figure of the filmmaker.¹⁸ Indeed, in his archeological media project *Les Histoire(s) du cinéma*, we encounter the figure of the angel from Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus,” dramatically superimposed upon that of Godard himself. Suggesting a process of critical recuperation of history, the angel of Klee’s painting—which also metaphorically appears in the most celebrated passage of Walter Benjamin’s essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” — presents a divine spectator amid a hail of ruins who looks back on the past while being propelled into the future by a wind blowing from paradise (*Ill* 257–58). Godard strikingly revives this figure in *Le livre d'image* through Bécassine, granting her angelic powers. Initially she is superimposed onto Godard’s image of himself, working meticulously on his montage table and contemplating the stock of images from historical archives, from films and other fictions anchored in collective memory. Close-up images of his hands dissolving into the film’s celluloid track suggest the multiple planes of memory and the inevitable process of degradation. As the film unfolds, as if through Bécassine’s vision commemorating all the miseries and injustices presented with Godard’s montage, it leads us to this question: does Bécassine’s prophetic role, exemplified through the simple but cunning gesture of pointing with her finger, represent an act of redemption or an act of accusation? Or is she instructing us to remember past events interpenetrated with the present, warning of “un sens véritablement visionnaire ou hallucinatoire,” to re-use Gilles Deleuze’s phrase (252)?

The provincial maid Bécassine, heroine of the popular French-language eponymous *bande dessinée* series, was created by Maurice Languereau and Jacqueline Rivière, illustrated by Joseph Porphyre Pinchon, and popularized since 1905, initially appearing in the pages of *La Semaine de la Suzette*. In her article “Strange Encounters During Wartime: *Bécassine chez les Turcs*,” Annabelle Cone explains that Bécassine’s arrival in the fictional and cultural sphere coincided with the demographic movements that occurred during the Third Republic and remain valuable to the French collective

memory, notably the heavy migration of people from the provincial parts of the country to urban centers, mostly Paris, where many of the relocated citizens entered domestic service. The process of acculturation that hereto occurred was largely effected through massive public school education of rural children and their eventual migration to urban employment, a process which transformed this formerly provincial population into a more “nationalized” one (i.e., an homogenous citizenry) (183-184). Through a postcolonial lens, Kristin Ross observes that the folkloric, regionalist integration into French national culture (a process which is represented in Bécassine’s individual history), represents a form of “internal colonialism,” which acquired new means as France was going through the homogenizing modernization and decolonization processes during the 50s and 60s, thus effectuating “the creation of a privatized and depoliticized broad middle strata: a ‘national middle class’” (*Fast Cars* 11). Highly personal, localized and temporally specific, the Bécassine series provides an overarching articulation of the larger national and historical picture of France, from the beginning of the century until modernization, when the series ceased publication.¹⁹ Analyzing the series’ political implications, McKinney shows that even though Bécassine was a subject affected by “internal colonialism,” the series, in general, complacently flattered French imperial ambitions. McKinney illustrates this argument by analyzing the pertinent use of specific visual and verbal tropes, ranging from advertisements featuring racist depictions of black women, to the “architecture exotique des pavillons étrangers et coloniaux,” the discriminatory depictions of representative members of the colonized nations during the 1937 Paris exhibition, to the most hostile representations of Arabs as parasitic and lacking mastery of the French language, in its later volumes (*The Colonial Heritage* 61-62).

In a different vein of inquiry, Annabelle Cone’s article reevaluates the album *Bécassine chez les Turcs* (1919) to argue that this particular episode, produced at the historical juncture immediately after World War I, profoundly disturbs colonial stereotypes rather than confirming them. Cone agrees that Bécassine’s position as an “infiltrator,” a silent observer of the inner workings of the French haute bourgeoisie, means that she was already well situated to make visible a certain hierarchical, social order and its oppressive forces (185). However, Cone contends that the album, whose events takes place during World War I, differs from the rest of the series to the extent that it attempts to give a representation of Bécassine’s relationship to the global political situation, and not merely the national.²⁰ Escaping her domestic environment, in this album, Bécassine gets to see the victory on the Eastern Front while befriendng other culturally “subjugated” individuals, notably a young Arab. This event, Cone argues, enables the creation of a space of ideological contradiction that blurs national identities in favor of a more transnational one, eventually pointing to further ideological contradictions not entirely contained by the reassuring authority of the narrative (194-197).

Cone's critique is worth noting because it provides a rereading of Bécassine as a figure gaining historical consciousness in the immediate aftermath of a world catastrophe and reflecting on the global situation, but also as a figure that attempts to project her desire for a societal change into the future. Cone goes on to analyze the last scene of this album where the powerless maid overlooks the past at the gates of a ruined Constantinople, the bridge between the West and the Orient, gazing into an image that represents a reference to concentration camps, to suggest that Bécassine's vision transforms into a more prophetic one. The very last page of this album represents a strange utopian "memory-image" figuring together the various transnational characters Bécassine had encountered throughout the volume. This depiction is followed by Bécassine's isolated image, her index finger pointing to her head and then pointing upwards as she confides to the readers her uncertainty for the future and her desire for social change. Cone highlights the importance of this unusual ending to the volume, as it offers an "alternative" to the common narrative with a colonial plot (Strange 194-195). Indeed, Cone's critique of *Bécassine chez les Turcs* situates the provincial maid into a figurative framework that intimately resonates with Godard's cinematic and historic project of finding new potentialities that exist at the juncture of history, haunting individuals and collectivities from a distance, and projecting a desire for a different life.



Figure 2. Image of Bécassine in Godard's *Le Livre d'image* (2018).

These potentialities are revealed in Godard's *Le Livre d'image* in the way that the filmmaker conflates Bécassine's prophecy with cinema's projecting powers, as well as with the history of the twentieth century, notably what has come to be regarded as its memory, marked by devastations of the two World wars and the decolonization wars. Bécassine's contested representation as a silent observer echoes the beginnings of cinema as a silent medium, hinging on the interaction between moving images and image-texts or intertitles. In early cinema, Godard tells us, "parole" was separated from "voix." This system, considered "primitive," offered stunning possibilities for the filmmaker as it allowed for indefinite associations (or "rapprochements," to use his vocabulary)²¹ between text and image. For Godard, (and we can extend this concern to Gilles Deleuze, who shares with the filmmaker a similar understanding of the importance of the late 1910s and the early 1920s as crucial moments of potentiality for cinema and history), this revelatory possibility of the cinematic medium, comparable to that of comics, was never taken up after the invention of talkies, in which "parole" and "voix" became one and the same thing. It can be said that Godard laments cinema's unrealized potential in the history of the moving images, which after the invention of talkies became (for the most part) an authoritative, ideologically charged sphere, or in the words of Deleuze: "liée à l'organisation de guerre, à la propagande d'État, au fascisme ordinaire, historiquement et essentiellement (214)," instead of becoming a field in which thought itself (in his words "une forme qui pense") would be reinvented.

Godard's Bécassine also appears critical of her own muteness in the face of history, as does "cinema" in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, for having excluded and repressed the catastrophes and experiences of the century, such as French colonialism in Algeria. In an episode that Cone analyzes, Bécassine leaves France's bourgeois décor and encounters the Orient, its everyday scenes, its diverse music, people, and voices. She finds herself fearful when, on a ship sailing to Yemen, the captain threatens to throw out at sea a young North African who was hiding in a box of garbage, among the other passengers. Connecting Bécassine's individual history to the history of images and oppressive regimes, Godard's *Le livre d'image* poignantly echoes this episode of Bécassine on the boat and as well as at the gate of Constantinople, reviving her gaze. The film comprises images of Belle Époque Paris from Ophüls's film *Le Plaisir* (1952) along with images of nineteenth century Russia in Maistre's *St. Petersburg Dialogues* (1821), countered with images of violence and brutality from western films such as Pasolini's *Salo* (1975) and Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), as well as images from an ISIS video of people being thrown out to sea and Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946), in which people jump into the sea to signal the end of the war, – an intricate assemblage of visual and sound quotations from infinite virtual sources. Godard's project includes a number of references from his own films, a gesture which can be viewed as an auto-critical inquiry of the problems encountered when filming outside of the "West," in particular for his collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin on their unfinished film project *Jusqu'à la victoire* (1970), about the

Palestinian resistance movement in Jordan. The filmmaker is constantly interrogating whether he and Gorin failed to grasp the protest of the situation they sought to depict or unintentionally silenced the voices and cries of those that needed to be heard.

Alex Fletcher writes that the central problem raised in *Le Livre d'image* “is not simply the representation of violence, but the constitutive violence of representation itself” (*Late Style* 65). The problem of violence of representation in the film, strongly echoing Edward Said’s and Gayatri Spivak’s work on the subject of Orientalism and Otherness, appears with piercing sensibility in Godard’s redeeming of the figure of Bécassine. The gentle simplicity of her drawing, her sincere yet silenced mouth, her observing eyes, and the indexing act of her pointing finger remain secret, and indescribable when we see them confronted to the dizzying cohort of images borrowed from Western and non-Western literary and cinematic cultural representations of the Orient, ranging from Dumas’s nineteenth-century fictional travelogue, *L’Arabie heureuse*, to Pasolini’s *Arabian Nights* (1974), and also including a number of images from Arab cinema, such as frames from Chahine’s *Cairo Station* (1958) and *Jamila, the Algerian* (1958), Khemir’s *Wanderers of the Desert* (1984), and Sissako’s *Timbuktu* (2014). Mirroring Bécassine’s image, Godard’s voice-off further reverberates with intensity: “La demi-voix douce et faible disant de grandes choses,” while interspersed with high-definition and color saturated footage that depict tranquil quotidian scenes and vast landscapes of the Tunisian coastal town La Marsa. These scenes are followed by another intertitle, “Sous les yeux de l’Occident,” that superimposes Bécassine’s ostensibly silent and reassuring image, pointing her finger upwards while Godard’s omnipresent voice-off goes on: “Une sorte de murmure en français infiniment pur,” inviting the spectators to further reflection. The intertitle “Les Arabes peuvent-ils parler?” emerges in one sequence, recalling the title of Gayatri Spivak’s famous essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985), ultimately resonating with the ethical and political irresolution in Godard’s film. Although the political significance in some of these images of violence is greater than in others, Godard’s radical act of removing all of them from their ontological ground demonstrates the filmmaker’s concern with the single production power of the apparatus, a spectacular and quasi-divine space which yields with uncountable sources of memory of the century. Godard thus reweaves and suspends the strands of history and voices into a new strategic fiction, allowing us both to remember what cinema and Bécassine could have been, and to project powers of the image that might invite us to reimagine them beyond the limits of their history.

Le Livre d'image, then, can be understood as extending the critique of the interaction of fiction, historical consciousness, and politics that Godard develops in *Pierrot le fou*. In both films, the filmmaker not only borrows from early comics, he also conducts a dialogue therewith and comments on their esthetic and historical implications. If *Les Pieds Nickelés* ostensibly reemerges in *Pierrot le fou* as a kind of historical residue, as I have attempted to show, threatening to undo the integrity of the

characters, it also opens up a space of inquiry in which imagining alternative relations to political consciousness is possible. Commenting on that gesture, the figure of Bécassine allows the filmmaker to take up the question of the political against its own materiality and representation, exploring new ways of imagining the history of the century. Godard's most recent film thus presents an extraordinary reflection on the circulation of seen, heard, imagined, feared, or dreamed images but also on their active, unrealized, and pressing demands.

Notes

¹ Henceforth within the text, I will interchangeably use the terms “comic,” “comic strip” and “comic book,” as well as the French-language term “bande dessinée,” (une “bédé or “bd”) which, as Mark McKinney explains, is translated literally as *a drawn strip* (or band) and “has an advantage over the English term, *comics*, insofar as it contains no suggestion that the material is comic or funny” (*History* xiii). For a more comparative analysis of this terminology, see McKinney’s “French-Language Comics Terminology and Referencing” in Mark McKinney (ed.) *History and Politics in French-Language Comics and Graphic Novels* (UP of Mississippi, 2008) pp. xiii-xv.

² For earlier attempts at graphic storytelling, see recent works by theoreticians Thierry Smolderen, *Naissances de la bande dessinée: de William Hogarth à Winsor McCay* (Bruxelles: Les Impressions nouvelles, 2009) and Benoît Peeters in collaboration with Thierry Groensteen, *Töpffer, l'invention de la bande dessinée* (Hermann, coll. “Savoir sur l’art,” 1994).

³ Already in 1965, the surrealist Louis Aragon, inspired by the European Cubist collage practices, used the term “collage cinématographique” to describe Godard’s active appropriation of source materials with a view to an original project. See Louis Aragon’s *Les Collages* (Hermann editions, 1965, pp.126-127) For other uses of the term in relation to Godard’s works, see, for example, Angela Della Vacche “Jean-Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le fou*: Cinema as Collage against Painting,” in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 23 (1), 1995, pp. 39-54 and Katherine Hoffman “Collage in the Twentieth Century: An Overview,” in *Collage: Critical Views*, (ed. K. Hoffman), UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1989, pp. 1-37. Douglas Smith explains how Godard’s avant-garde practice of “déchollage” has a political function: see “(Dé)collage Bazin, Godard, Aragon” in *A Companion to Jean-Luc Godard*, (ed. T. Conley and T. J Kline, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, pp. 210-223. In a conversation with Marguerite Duras, Godard mentions “racolage” to describe his own craft. For comparative analysis of these terms, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Passé Cités par JLG* (Les Éditions de minuit, 2015) pp. 11-30.

⁴ For more on the semiotics of comics, see Jan Baetens and Hugo Frey, *The Graphic Novel: An Introduction* (Cambridge UP, 2015) especially pp. 103-187; and Thierry Groensteen, *Système de la bande dessinée* (PUF, 1999). Groensteen develops the notion of *solidarité iconique* [iconic

solidarity] in graphic storytelling as “les images solidaires qui, participant d’une suite, présentent la double caractéristique d’être séparées (cette précision pour écarter les images uniques enfermant en leur sein une profusion de motifs et d’anecdotes) et d’être plastiquement et sémiotiquement surdéterminées par le fait même de leur coexistence *in praesentia*.” For more on *solidarité iconique*, see Groensteen, *Système*, p.21, 23-25, 133, 187.

⁵ See, for example, James Roy Macbean’s analysis of Godard’s comic strip iconography in *Made in USA* in relation to pop-art and the “active painters:” Pollock, Poliakoff, Hoffman in “Politics, Painting, and the Language of Signs in Godard’s Made in USA,” *Film Quarterly*, 22, No. 3 pp. 18-25. John Hulsey’s explores Godard’s appropriations of Jules Feiffer’s comic in his film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*, “Godard’s Remote Control” in *A Companion*, *ibid.* pp. 264-265. For Godard’s construction of the *mise-en-scène* in *Made in USA* as visual investigation of the notion of the “sign” in relation to the comic strip, see Drew Morton’s “Godard’s Comic Strip *Mise-en-Scène*” in *Senses of Cinema*, Issue 53, 2009. sensesofcinema.com/2009/feature-articles/godards-comic-strip-mise-en-scene/

⁶ See Godard, “Hollywood ou Mourir: Frank Tashlin, Un vrai cinglé de cinéma” in *Godard par Godard: Les Années «Cahiers»* (Flammarion, 1989) pp.108-110.

⁷ Reminding us of the basic filmic necessity, even as a fiction, of documentary elements, people and places, Godard highlights Tashlin’s interventionist cinematographic form, in which “le comble de l’artifice se marie avec la noblesse du vrai documentaire.” See, Godard, *ibid.*, pp. 110. Godard also famously coined the adjective “Tashlinesque”. Moreover, he included an extended homage to Tashlin and Lewis in the design of a cross-section factory set in his film *Tout va bien* (1972). For more on Tashlin’s grotesque style and resonances with Godard, see Ethan de Seife, *Tashlinesque: The Hollywood Comedies of Frank Tashlin* (Wesleyan UP, 2012).

⁸ In response to an impertinent interviewer’s demand to know why there must be so much blood in *Pierrot le Fou*, Godard insists, “It’s not blood, it’s red.” Indeed, the function of color in this film comes to exceed and even undermine its referential capacity. See Godard, “Parlons de Pierrot” in *Godard, Les Années Karina* (Flammarion, 1985) pp. 108.

⁹ The album *La Bande des Pieds Nickelés* illustrated by Louis Forton, uniting six episodes which appeared in the weekly magazine *L’Épatant*, from June 1908 until January 1912, was originally published by Offenstadt in 1915. The copy of this album which appears in *Pierrot le fou* is from the Godard family’s personal collection since 1948. The filmmaker’s act to insert his own copy of the album echoes both the act of improvisation and of metacinematic reflection that Godard addresses in filmmaking. See Antoine de Baecque’s *Godard, Biographie* (Grasset, 2010) pp.287, 844n248.

¹⁰ *Croisière noire* was the name of colonial-era automobile expeditions across Africa (28 October 1924-26 June 1925). Together with *Croisière jaune* taking place across Asia (4 April 1931-12 February 1932), these expeditions were also called “traversées” [crossings], “raids” – a military term – or “croisières” [cruises]. For more on French Trans-African expeditions in comics, see Chapter 4, in Mark McKinney, *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* (Liverpool UP, 2011).

¹¹ Godard is referring to the OAS or *Organisation de l'armée secrète*, a French far-right organization that used torture and assassination with the goal of preventing Algerian independence. Through the characters' narration, Godard explicitly refers to the war as "la guerre d'Algérie." As we have been discussing, Marianne's character is ambiguously constructed as having something to do with the OAS, while Ferdinand as adhering to circumstantial, reactionary politics regarding the inflictions of the war. Many of Godard's early works stage this vexed political engagement, despite the fact that Godard, along with the rest of *Cahiers du cinéma* group, avoided declaring a direct statement on the role of the artist in the pressing issue, the Algerian war. His film *Le Petit Soldat* is treating this subject most acutely, although it compares or, as it has been critiqued, "it equates," far-right and far-left engagements. See De Baecque, Godard, *Biographie* (Grasset, 2010) pp. 162-168 and Godard's discussion on the topic in a 1962 interview: *Godard par Godard: Les années Karina, 1960 à 1967* (Paris: L'Étoile/Cahiers du cinéma, 1985) pp. 35-37.

¹² Historian Benjamin Stora speaks of "Algeria: the war without a name" in *Emergencies and Disorder in the European Empires*, (Routledge, 1994) pp. 208-216.

¹³ For a useful overview of the context of this reference, see *Le Pétrole algérien* by Rabah Mahiout, (Alger: Éditions En.A.P. 1974) and *France and Algeria: A History of Decolonization* by Philip C. Naylor (UP of Florida 2000).

¹⁴ This text appears in the album *La Bande des Pieds Nickelés*, *ibid*, p.153. It is the album's 4th episode, originally published in *L'Épatant*, n.136-154 (November 10, 1910- March 16, 1911).

¹⁵ For more on the collaboration between Godard and Aragno on *Le Livre d'image*, listen to the interview with Aragno after the film's premiere at the Cannes Film Festival: vimeo.com/271516180

¹⁶ For the atemporality of the digital image, see for example, Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) and Jussi Parikka, *Archive Dynamics. Software Culture and Digital Heritage* (Cambridge, 2012). For more on Godard and the implications of the digital image, see Godard and Ishaghpour (Editions Farrago, 2000), Daniel Morgan, *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema* (UCP Berkeley, 2013), Timothy Murray, *Digital Baroque: New Media and Cinematic Folds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Crary describes Godard's latest projects as "second-or-third-generation images, treated with effects of flickering, oversaturation, repetitive oscillations, flashings, extreme slow motion, and many more." See Jonathan Crary's "Jean-Luc Godard, Histoire(s) du cinema" in *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Non-Governmental Activism* (Zone Books, 2012), pp. 300.

¹⁸ Alex Fletcher, "Late style and Contrapuntal Histories: The Violence of Representation in Jean-Luc Godard," *Radical Philosophy*, 2.04. 2019, pp. 60.

¹⁹ Cone explains that Bécassine stopped publication before the golden age of comics, which began in the late 1950s, and before decolonization (for France and Belgium, the two countries that led the way in *bande dessinée*), *ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

²⁰ Cone explains that although the albums of the 1920s and the 1930s, picture France as containing ethnic minority characters, the representation of France does not exceed the national borders and the one of Bécassine is less adventurous and less daring, even tired, as the last album from 1939 demonstrates, incapable to respond to the upcoming geopolitical turmoil (197).

²¹ Antoine de Baecque explains that the term “*rapprochement*” Godard himself often uses to describe montage as an esthetic form and possibility. The term is borrowed from a poem by Pierre Reverdy “*L’Image*,” originally published in the French journal *Nord-Sud* in 1918: “*L’image est une création pure de l’esprit. / Elle ne peut naître d’une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées. / Plus les rapports des deux réalités rapprochées seront lointaines et justes, plus l’image sera forte – plus elle aura de puissance émotive et de réalité poétique. / [...] Une image n’est pas forte parce qu’elle est brutale et fantastique – mais parce que l’association des idées est lointaine et juste.*” See De Baecque, *Godard*, pp.682-683. In a recent interview aired on *France Culture*, Godard talks about the notion of “*rapprochement*” in relation to the montage in *Le Livre d’image*. For more, the interview is available on www.franceculture.fr/cinema/jean-luc-godard-sentretient-avec-olivia-gesbert

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