

October 2020

Irmgard Emmelhainz. Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Mackenzie Leadston

The Ohio State University, leadston.1@osu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Leadston, Mackenzie (2020) "Irmgard Emmelhainz. Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 44: Iss. 1, Article 24. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2138>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Irmgard Emmelhainz. *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Abstract

Review of Irmgard Emmelhainz. *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

Keywords

Jean-Luc Godard, militant filmmaking, political filmmaking

Irmgard Emmelhainz. *Jean-Luc Godard's Political Filmmaking*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 327 pp.

In his post-New Wave stage, Jean-Luc Godard began what has come to be known as his “revolutionary period.” Never one to shy away from an infusion of political ideas in his cinema, Godard moved on to work with the Dziga Vertov Group and Sonimage, thus defining an age of more militant and radical filmmaking that eventually dissipated in the 1980s. However, Irmgard Emmelhainz challenges the notion of such a narrowly defined phase of “political” filmmaking. Indeed, as Emmelhainz contends, as early as *Le Petit soldat* (*The Little Soldier*, 1960), Godard displayed a certain political engagement that did not end after his Sonimage work, but rather has been a more consistent presence within Godard’s larger oeuvre. Emmelhainz’s book thus aims to reconstitute what we think of as Godard’s political and militant filmmaking beyond his brief revolutionary period, though the films from this era are certainly central to her study.

Emmelhainz highlights how, despite scholars’ and critics’ tendency to ignore the radical process in Godard’s post-Sonimage films, there is a coherence in his oeuvre that she calls “dialectical materialist filmmaking” (2). By dialectical materialist films, Emmelhainz refers to the act of rendering underlying ideological structures perceptible through filmic conflict in order to demonstrate or uncover some actuality or message. She highlights how Godard, throughout his career, employs montage and the use (or lack) of shot/reverse-shot to confront seemingly oppositional positions or histories, forcing the viewer to evaluate the continuity of pairings as constant political and militant choices, establishing the director’s consistent dialectical materialist ideology. Emmelhainz’s inventive approach challenges perceptions of incoherence by putting films from these different eras into dialogue to demonstrate the continuity of his political filmmaking. She astutely organizes each chapter thematically rather than historically or by specific films. That is not to say that Emmelhainz ignores the historical context surrounding Godard’s filmmaking. On the contrary, this book is ideal for those who are searching for an overview of Godard’s post-New Wave film practices, as Emmelhainz gives sufficient accounts of both the context and making of the included films, though her intervention is primarily a theoretical one.

Although *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1976) comes to be one of the primary framing films of the book, Emmelhainz engages with many of Godard’s lesser known works and even some of his unrealized projects, as well as producing captivating extended readings on more contemporary films such as *Notre musique* (*Our Music*, 2004), *Film Socialisme* (*Film Socialism*, 2010) and *Adieu au langage* (*Goodbye to Language*, 2014). The work becomes not only a contribution on the more obscure films of the director, but also an engaging

discussion on militant filmmaking more generally. She also gives a productive overview of Godard's work with the Dziga Vertov Group (1967-1974) and the origins of Godard's militant filmmaking. At the same time, Emmelhainz gestures towards his larger materialist method that concretizes and formalizes action and engagement through self-reflexivity and challenges the "ideology of the cinematic apparatus," or the ability of cinema to mask its political messages or intentions such as in socialist realist cinema (56). It is this materialist tendency that she argues continues to characterize Godard's filmic practice. She demonstrates such continuity in his work by consistently referencing and returning to this early period in her readings of later films. Each chapter tends to blur such temporal markings through comparison and is structured somewhat loosely around several disparate threads that are woven together and organized by a larger motif.

Some of the book's most useful work comes from its thoughtful discussion on *Tiermondisme* "Third Worldism," which could be used in classes on Third World Cinema. In continuing its exploration on the sensory implications and underpinnings of Godard's montage, the third chapter focuses in part on representations of seeing and blindness and the parallel relationship held in montage between sound and image. Even though the director himself has questioned the imposition of his voice onto those who are voiceless, Emmelhainz situates Godard as consistently anti-imperialist by highlighting the director's compassion and self-criticalness. Indeed, her more charitable reading of Godard is one of the book's strengths. The most compelling chapter is the fifth, which recenters Godard's political gestures and longstanding debate with Claude Lanzmann concerning the Shoah, as well as his polemical support of the Palestinian conflict, around a passion for aesthetics. The author reveals Godard's profound sensibility and desire to incite change by filming what is conceived of as being unrepresentable. Emmelhainz illustrates how Godard uses formal cinematic techniques to bring the Shoah and the Palestinian conflict into conversation, establishing a useful paradigm for dialogue. She revisits this theme in multiple chapters, distinguishing the book from other analyses that consider Godard as too problematic and verging on anti-semitism.

This book will be most appreciated by a more specialized audience, particularly those already familiar with Godard who are interested not only in his radical and political practices, but also his work outside of the typical cannon, including unmade films, shorts, and television projects. Because of its sometimes meandering structure, it is hard to divide individual chapters (which are perhaps more productively viewed as groupings), but those concerned with particular topics can safely read sections independently.

Mackenzie Leadston
The Ohio State University