This is an extract from the article referred to by Agnès Guillemot in our conversation where Godard says ‘If direction is a look, montage is a heartbeat’. Considering that when he wrote this piece he had yet to make a full-length film, it is a surprisingly elegant insight.

... montage is above all an integral part of mise-en-scène. Only at peril can one be separated from the other. One might as well try to separate the rhythm from the melody. ‘Eléna et les hommes’ and ‘Mr Arkadin’ are both models of montage because each is a model of mise-en-scène. ‘We’ll save it in the cutting room’: a typical producer’s axiom, therefore. The most that efficient editing will give a film, otherwise without interest, is precisely the initial impression of having been directed. Editing can restore to actuality that ephemeral grace neglected by both snob and film-lover or can transform chance into destiny. Can there be any higher praise of what the general public confuses with script construction?

If direction is a look, montage is a heartbeat. To foresee is the characteristic of both: but what one seeks to foresee in space, the other seeks in time. Suppose you notice a young girl in the street who attracts you. You hesitate to follow her. A quarter of a second. How to convey this hesitation? Mise-en-scène will answer the question ‘How shall I approach her?’ But in order to render explicit the other question, ‘Am I going to love her?’ you are forced to bestow importance on the quarter of a second during which the two questions are born. It may be, therefore, that it will be for the montage rather than the mise-en-scène to express both exactly and clearly the life of an
idea or its sudden emergence in the course of a story. When? Without playing on words, each time the situation requires it, each time within a shot when a shock effect demands to take the place of an arabesque, each time between one scene and another when the inner continuity of the film enjoins with a change of shot the superimposition of the description of a character on that of the plot. This example shows that talking of mise-en-scène automatically implies montage. When montage effects surpass those of mise-en-scène in efficacy, the beauty of the latter is doubled, the unforeseen unveiling secrets by its charm is an operation analogous to using unknown quantities in mathematics.

Anyone who yields to the temptation of montage yields also to the temptation of the brief shot. How? By making the look a key piece in his game. Cutting on a look is almost the definition of montage, its supreme ambition as well as its submission to mise-en-scène. It is, in effect, to bring out the soul under the spirit, the passion behind the intrigue, to make the heart prevail over the intelligence by destroying the notion of space in favour of that of time. The famous sequence of the cymbals in the remake of ‘The Man Who Knew Too Much’ is the best proof. Knowing just how long one can make a scene last is already montage, just as thinking about transitions is part of the problem of shooting. Certainly a brilliantly directed film gives the impression of having simply been placed end to end, but a film brilliantly edited gives the impression of having suppressed all direction. Cinematographically speaking, granted the different subjects, the battle in ‘Alexander Nevsky’ is in no way inferior to ‘The Navigator’. In other words to give the impression of duration through movement, of a close shot through a long shot, is one of the aims of mise-en-scène and the opposite of one of those of montage. Invention and improvisation take place in front of the Moviola just as much as it does on the set. Cutting a camera movement in four may prove more effective than keeping it as one shot. An exchange of glances, to revert to our previous example, can only be expressed with sufficient force – when necessary – by editing.

The montage, consequently, both denies and prepares the way for the mise-en-scène: the two are interdependent. To direct means to scheme, and one says of a scheme that it is well or badly mounted.
Films to View

Certainly Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* and his other major films will yield value at every viewing, but Godard is right: *The Navigator* and Buster Keaton’s other classics have just as much to teach us albeit in a vastly different idiom.