

Cinema

The Archeology of Film and the Memory of a Century

Jean-Luc Godard & Youssef Ishaghpour

Translated by John Howe

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**Part II Jean-Luc Godard, *Cinéaste* of Modern
Life: The Poetic in the Historical**

Foreword



We're born in the museum, it's our homeland
after all...

Jean-Luc Godard

The freshness of the Nouvelle Vague (New Wave) movies that came out of France from 1959 onward was not simply the product of raw talent, beautiful monochrome photography and novel jump-cuts boldly assembled on the hoof. Underlying their narrative approach and often clearly perceptible in their dialogue is a self-consciously theoretical dimension. The New Wave was a concrete manifestation of the distinctive French cinema whose development had been discussed for over ten years in the columns of *Les Cahiers du cinéma* and its predecessor *La Revue du cinéma*. François Truffaut, twenty-eight when *Les quatre cents coups* was released in 1959, and Jean-Luc Godard, whose *À bout de souffle* appeared the following year when he was thirty, had both written for *Cahiers* from the start.

It is hardly surprising that France, a country where the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre could enjoy equal billing in the early 1960s with the president Charles de Gaulle and the non-New Wave film star Brigitte Bardot, had been quick to realize that cinema was an art form as well as a vertically integrated cash-generating distribution cartel. Art critics and philosophers took cinema seriously from its first appearance (owed, it should be remembered, more to the inventive Lumières than the businessman Edison); specialist film critics, most of all the great André Bazin, founder of *Cahiers*, established a clipped, precise, informed writing style that few Anglophones can emulate even today; in 1936 Henri Langlois started the collection of old movies at the Cinémathèque française, in whose viewing rooms the New Wave gang spent their teenage years post-World War II. The thriving 1930s cinephile subculture of film societies and reviews resumed with great vigor after the Hollywood-starved occupation years: France in the 1950s was liberally sprinkled with art houses and specialist cinemas showing old and non-mainstream movies, as it still is today.

À bout de souffle was Godard's fifth film. Since his first short, *Opération béton* (1954), he has made as director, and often as producer and scriptwriter too, well over a hundred films, more than forty of them full-length features. Some were much admired, some

(especially during Godard's Maoist period from 1968 to 1973) attracted harsh criticism; few enjoyed great commercial success. But Godard has continued to make films, quite often films he wanted to make, largely because he is recognized by his peers as a master film maker. Collaborators have always been confident that Godard as a director knew exactly what he was doing. He gained an early reputation for making films exceptionally quickly and cheaply even by New Wave standards.

For a man immersed in cinema since adolescence and an emblematic figure of the French New Wave, Godard is something of a heretic. For a start he is not exactly French, being of Swiss Francophone Protestant and French Huguenot descent. In youth a well-dressed "bourgeois" appearance contrasted with the casual student attire of his fellows; in their often voluble company he was known for his long, withdrawn, thoughtful silences; as a director he has been known to reshoot *at his own expense* sequences that appeared faultless to co-workers. Most of his films have been made in 35 mm, but he has used 16mm and sometimes both gages. He started to use video as soon as it became available, and much of the recent work, some of it made for television, has mixed video with film.

Even Godard's early films contain explicit references to the physical processes of film making, a

reflective and reflexive element that has become central to his work. When Henri Langlois died in 1978 he was scheduled to deliver a series of lectures on the history of cinema at the University of Montreal. Godard was the chosen substitute, and the lectures he gave were published in 1980 as *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma*. A frequent complaint in these lectures was that a verbal discourse alone was inadequate for the purpose: a history of cinema image, Godard thought, should be narrated using that image. Although the lectures had used extracts from Godard's own films and those of other makers as illustrations, he felt that the subordinate role this gave to the image was misleading. This eventually led to the appearance of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, the main subject of both the texts that follow: four and a half hours of video made for television, widely regarded as Godard's masterpiece.

Histoire(s) du cinéma is an extraordinary piece of work, quite unlike anything ever made by anyone else. It can be described broadly as a history of cinema and a history of the twentieth century, each inside the other. A complete work in itself, it is subdivided into four chapters, each with an A and B section, and should be seen simultaneously as one film, four films and eight films. It was composed over a period of twelve or thirteen years, between the mid-1980s and 1998, at the studio in Rolle, Switzerland, where

Godard has lived and worked since the late 1970s. Work was interrupted by other commitments and difficulties with TV production companies, although Godard now says that these delays were beneficial to the final product: a dense collage – I hesitate to use this word, but it will do – of all sorts of film clips, from early film through Hollywood and other cinema to newsreel and video, often processed and overprinted, still photographs and reproductions of paintings, with added captions and subtitles, and snatches of soundtrack similarly pasted over and combined with recorded music of all sorts, broadcast speech, poems and other audio text, the whole assembly cemented together by Godard's own voiceover.

The title itself embodies a sort of diagram of the film's deconstructive/constructive poetic approach. Ostensibly it means: *History of cinema*, with the bracketed "s" suggesting that there may be more than one history of cinema. Like its English equivalent, the word *histoire* also has the related meaning of story or account, but in French common usage it has, when used in the plural, two sarcastic meanings which it does not have in other languages: lies or bullshit, and problems or hassles. And of course there is History with the uppercase: Stalin-Hitler-Henry Ford-Hiroshima history, the real thing. In this work the word *histoire(s)* possesses all these meanings, sometimes one at a time, sometimes all at once.

Godard himself describes the making of *Histoire(s)* as “an act of painting.” Although it consists almost entirely of quotations it is neither documentary nor fiction, nor indeed any other recognizable genre of narrative cinema. It is however clearly an ambitious, large-scale and somewhat forbidding work of art, perhaps a great one. Youssef Ishaghpour, the art historian and cinephile whose dialogue with Godard and essay on Godard’s genealogy as a modern artist make up this text, compares Godard at different moments to Hegel, Wagner and Rembrandt; Colin McCabe, in his entertaining and informative recent biography of Godard, admits to having called Godard “the great French poet of the twentieth century” (his interlocutor however had “looked at me as if I were an uncultured rustic”). Ishaghpour writes in depth on the poetic in Godard’s work, and underlines Godard’s insistence on a sort of legal equality between image and text.

I have watched a good deal of *Histoire(s)*¹ and find it hypnotic, imposing and affecting, but so complex and filled with references as to be impossible to follow except in brief, partial flashes. While the *auteur’s* voiceover proceeds at a stately pace, with frequent repetitions and long pauses, extremely rapid sequences of retouched and overprinted images fill the screen amid a farrago of music clips and other sound, interspersed with titles and blank screen.

Repeated throughout is the image of 35 mm film whizzing back and forth in time through an editing console, and a rather bullying sound effect of tapping typewriter keys. My emphatic guess would be that even the most learned academic or critical or professional cinephiles would need several or many viewings to come to terms with it as a complete work. Although Godard claims, perhaps not entirely seriously, that the work is easily understood by “sincere people,” I do not believe I am alone in finding it difficult, or needing to view sequences repeatedly, look things up and consult cinephile friends.

With the poetic quality of Godard’s verbal discourse I am on firmer ground. A few years ago I was given the job of translating into English the transcribed voiceover from *Histoire(s)* for ECM Records of Munich.² No text is perfect, of course, but although the work had to be done in a hurry it was not difficult. Translating is not always enjoyable, but this was. Godard’s discourse has a crystalline character that makes it drop straight into English and read brilliantly without the need for any crossword-type translator’s gymnastics. That limpid quality is present even when, as in the dialogue with Ishaghpour, Godard is speaking off the cuff, with corrections and hesitations: a quality that demands attention even where one disagrees, which makes a dismissive response seem crass or foolhardy.

In the dialogue that follows, originally published in two numbers of the French review *Trafic*, Youssef Ishaghpour persuades and provokes Godard into giving a partial exegesis of *Histoire(s)*, in support of what Colin McCabe calls the “attempt to find an audience on his own terms,” something that “might serve as the very definition of modernism.” The mechanisms of that modernism and its intellectual and artistic roots are examined in detail in Ishaghpour’s scholarly and sympathetic accompanying essay.

John Howe

Notes

1. About two thirds of it, recorded from TV in the version shown by the Franco-German arts channel, Arte. Apparently there is no available definitive edition of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Godard complains that the original videotapes released by Gaumont were of “appalling quality.” There is said to be a Japanese DVD edition; DVD seems a good idea for *Histoire(s)* as the technology facilitates rapid leafing back and forth and replaying short sequences.
2. For Jean-Luc Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, The Complete Soundtrack, ECM New Series, 1999 (4 vols, 5 CDs).

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Any mistakes or solecisms in the translation are my own, of course, but I am indebted for technical and other information to Chris Darke, Mike Hodges, Laura Mulvey, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and Yann Perreau.

John Howe

Part I
Interview

1

Cinema



Youssef Ishaghpour. Viewing your *Histoire(s) du cinéma* one is put in the same situation as you, with your project, the “plan” you thought unachievable but achieved nevertheless, as in that Brecht poem. A bit like St. Augustine starting to write a book and having a vision of a child trying to move all the water out of the sea into a small hole with a spoon. We always come up against the impossibility – the pointlessness actually – of saying everything, when the real task is to “say it all.” Something that can be done by creating “a thinking form,” like your *Histoire(s)*. But to “say” those *Histoire(s)* one would have to develop their Platonic Idea. That would require a breadth of outlook that is probably hard to achieve without first establishing a distance from your work, which has no equivalent either in cinema history or the history of art in general, or indeed in its approach to History proper. Only a period of sedimentation would provide enough distance for this work to be able to

metamorphose into an Idea. But as a spectator, I'm still too close to your *Histoire(s)*. And what sort of history are we talking about, by the way? There's nothing you would expect to find in a textbook: no listing of dates, names and facts in chronological order to describe sequences of events, no methodical cataloging of technologies, schools of thought or great works. You position yourself below the vicissitudes, without avoiding them, and also above them, in a synthetic perspective from which cinema stops being the entertaining spectacle it is generally held to be, or the specialist area it is for cinéphiles, to appear as it really is: not just the major art form of the twentieth century, but the center of the twentieth century, embracing the human totality of that century, from the horror of its disasters to its efforts at redemption through art. So it's about cinema in the century and the century in cinema. This, as you say, is because cinema consists of a particular relationship between reality and fiction. And since its power made cinema the century's manufacturing plant, or in your words made "*the twentieth century exist*," it's as important as any major historical event, and can take its place alongside the others on that basis. But since those events were determined partly by cinema, and were also filmed for cinema newsreels, they're an integral part of cinema; and because, as History, those events acted on the destiny

of cinema, they're part of cinema history. "*History of cinema, History of the news, actuality of History,*" as you say many times. It's essentially a work of art, not a discourse, so I understand both your wish to talk about what is really a film – and also eight films – and your reluctance to talk about it.

Jean-Luc Godard: Well, no, to put it simply I don't have an encyclopedically learned discourse that could be summed up by saying I was trying to do this or I did that. Not at all. It's eight films combined in one, both together. It came like that. But it's eight chapters of a film that could have had hundreds of others, and even more appendices, like the footnotes that are often more interesting to read than the actual text... It's a big book with eight chapters, and that layout didn't budge in ten years. Sort of a dim beacon in the dark to say go this way, "Fatal beauty" at the moment, not "Mastery of the universe"... And the reason why eight, or rather four, with A and B sections: because a house has four walls. Naïve stuff like that.

