

Histoire(s) du cinéma

A contemporary review

Almost twenty years ago, Godard stated what we can now see as a first draft of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. His so-called ‘Introduction to a veritable history of cinema and television’ was a series of improvised talks and film-shows given in 1977 at the Montreal Film School, a transcription of which was published as *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma* (Albatros, 1980). The series was structured as a succession of encounters of ‘voyages’, voyages between Switzerland and Canada, of course, but also between the great film classics and Godard’s own work. The lectures themselves were intended to pave the way for a truly filmic – that is, predominantly visual – history, largely letting the image to the talking, rather than the academic word. As Godard himself later described the ill-fated project: ‘It was decided that the scenario should be divided into several (ten) chapters or voyages, with a budget of \$10,000 (Canadian) per chapter, to be shared between the Conservatory and the film company of which I am a partner, Sonimage. So for each trip I brought with me a little of my personal history [*mon histoire*], and plunged myself back into it at a rate of two films per month. But this dipping into my past often revealed something different from what my memory had recorded, no doubt explained by the fact that in the morning sessions there were projected extracts of films from the history of cinema, films which were related to what I was doing at that time. And I gave a running commentary on all this to three or four Canadians who were as lost as I was in the whole business [*histoire*]. Then everything came to a stop. [...] But “nobody’s perfect”.’

Godard uses this preface to the published transcripts more or less to disown the rambling and increasingly disillusioned series of lectures as a failure. In order to bring this ‘veritable history’ into being, he clearly needed a different material set-up, both in financial and technological terms. These two problems he appears to have solved by the late 80s, when the first two chapters of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* were broadcast by Canal + (with whom he had signed a deal in 1988 initially for ten projected chapters of 50 minutes each). Thanks to the latest video and digital technology, he was now able to assume full authorial control of his history-making process, effectively eliminating in his home-based editing-suite and studio the aleatory chaos of flights, projections and audiences – and also concealing his own evident limitations as a public speaker.

If the practical set-up is significantly altered, Godard has clearly retained much of the basic structure of the earlier version. Notably, the overall shape of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* reproduces the ‘serial’ form of *Introduction à une véritable histoire du cinéma*, with the eight chapters working in alternations with one another (1A, 1B to 4A, 4B). This arrangement echoes the voyages to Montreal, and the alternation between morning screenings and afternoon talks – or between classic films and Godard’s works, or between the projection of celluloid and the sound of the speaking subject.

But watching *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, we can also see that the serial structure explicitly refers to the melodramatic *feuilletons* of early cinema (for example *Fantômes*, 1913-14, or *Les Vampires*, 1915-16) and to Godard’s video works

of the 70s (*France tour detour deux enfants*, 1977-78), the latter using quasi-arithmetical formulae to draw the teleological sting out of storytelling, that traumatic responsibility, or from telling the historical Truth, an even heavier responsibility. And of course such early Godard films as *Vivre sa vie* (1962) or *Masculin-Féminin* (1966) were divided into sections, as part of their fake-documentary strategy.

It is true that Godard's project has been scaled down when measured against its original ambitions: the ten chapters are now just eight, the first three 50 minutes, but the remaining five only some 25 minutes each. But it would be rash to accuse him of failure simply on account of these altered proportions. For when he announces in his opening chapter that he intends to recount 'all the stories' in the history of cinema, this is effectively to invoke the inexpressible and the infinite. It is a rhetorical strategy that recalls Milton or Joyce, Mallarmé or Proust. To quote the Bertolt Brecht poem Godard often cites in this context: 'I examine carefully my plan. It is unrealisable.'

Godard has explained that the first three chapters (1A, 1B, 2A) fulfil a particular function which (along with their greater length) sets them apart from the other five. As he says to critic Serge Daney – whose interviews with him appear in 2A and the final chapter, 4B – these three are 'the three fundamental chapters' which outline both the major theses and the presiding methodology of the work. A strong sense of the principal narratives, ideas and motifs of *Histoire(s) du cinéma* can be found in the titles of these first sections: *Toutes les histoires*, *Une histoire seule* and *Seul le cinéma*. *Toutes les histoires* announces the vast ambition and scale of the project: in contrast with all existing histories of the cinema which tend to reproduce the same events in the same order with slightly varied critical emphasis and theoretical discourse – Godard desires to match such treat innovatory French historians as Michelet, Fauré, Braudel and Foucault, and to shift radically both the *what* and the *how* of historical enquiry. To complement this bold attempt to multiply and render complex the very objects of film history, a second driving force in this projects aims to convey cinema's specificity, not just as a 'language' (for Godard has always been highly suspicious of the linguistic paradigm), but also as a way of seeing and representing the world, and a way of giving people the opportunity to 'project themselves' (as he puts it) into that reality. This specificity is part of what's to be read in the titles *Une histoire seule* and *Seul le cinéma*, but with the word *seul(e)* Godard is equally concerned to emphasise solitude and a state of abandonment, for (as he maintains) cinema has been isolated and excluded. Cinema offered a unique opportunity, a one-off chance, which he passionately believes has been wasted – an extremely severe judgment his own work does not escape.

We could argue that there exist two types of conceptual opposition at work in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, two fundamental structures pulling the project in seemingly contradictory directions. The first is the power struggle or fight to the death in which Evil inevitably triumphs over Good. Thus Hollywood crushes the world's other cinemas, the spectacle destroys the documentary, television kills cinema, culture stifles art, and (in Godard's memorable phrase) 'the text is death, images life'. The logical conclusion of this process would be the definitive closure of those three letters 'FIN', the end. But this violent, destructive relationship seems tempered by a different sort of opposition, fluctuating, open-ended and creative. Montage is once again the key symbolic figure: the bringing together of two contrasting elements to produce a third, as yet unknown, its energy deriving from the conflictual but productive

interaction between cinema's analytical curiosity and its representational projection, between its scientific inheritance and its illusionistic capacity to dream and to make dream, between its impersonal History and its personal interventions in the multiple lives of its subjects. In other words, the closing line of this type of historiography would always announce: 'to be continued...'

Michael Temple, *Sight and Sound*, January 1998

HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA

Director: Jean-Luc Godard

Production Companies: JLG Films, La Sept, France 3, Société Nouvelle des Etablissements Gaumont, CNC – Centre national de la cinématographie, Radio-Television Suisse, Vega Films

Producer: Jean-Luc Godard

Co-producer: Ruth Waldburger

Script: Jean-Luc Godard

Editor: Jean-Luc Godard

Chapter 1(a)

Toutes les histoires

(All the (Hi)stories)

1988

51 mins

Chapter 1(b)

Une histoire seule (A Single (Hi)story)

1989

42 mins

Chapter 2(a)

Seul le cinéma (Only Cinema)

1997

26 mins

Chapter 2(b)

Fatale beauté (Deadly Beauty)

1997

28 mins

Chapter 3(a)

La Monnaie de l'absolu

(The Coin of the Absolute)

1998

27 mins

Chapter 3(b)

Une vague Nouvelle (A New Wave)

1998

27 mins

Chapter 4(a)

Le Contrôle de l'univers

(The Control of the Universe)

1998

27 mins

Chapter 4(b)

Les Signes parmi nous

(The Signs Among Us)

1998

38 mins

France/Switzerland 1998

Parts 1-8 267 mins + intervals

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