

Céline Scemama

Jean-Luc Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: Cogito Ergo Video

2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13688>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Scemama, Céline: Jean-Luc Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: Cogito Ergo Video. In: Annie van den Oever (Hg.): *Technē/Technology. Researching Cinema and Media Technologies – Their Development, Use, and Impact*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2014, S. 196–206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13688>.

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Jean-Luc Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: *Cogito Ergo Video*

Céline Scemama



Fig. 1: Chapter 1b, *A Single Story*, 1'45".¹

On Technique, Thought and Beauty

When viewing HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA (1988-1998), one necessarily asks oneself how, technically, Godard succeeded in bringing such a vast selection of sounds and images into this impressive and infinitely beautiful work. One also wonders from where the bits and pieces of images, phrases, and melodies were taken, even as they vanish and are replaced by others – but this is another matter. We cannot begin to consider the film's poetics – a film about History, which, for Godard, means a film about all stories – without taking into account how Godard, as a filmmaker, puts the techniques of cinema to the test.

Long before this highly atypical film, Godard had always attached great importance to film techniques. In *À BOUT DE SOUFFLE* (1960), he used highly sensitive film generally reserved for photographers and the making of documentary films; in *LA CHINOISE* (1967), he already thought of using a video camera; he used high-definition video for an unprecedented color treatment in *ÉLOGE DE*

L'AMOUR (2001), and is considering using stereoscopic 3D technology in his next film (ADIEU AU LANGAGE). In HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA, strangely enough, the innovation does not lie in the adoption of any technological novelty but in the way Godard uses methods and processes that are in fact very old – which also lends the film a melancholy and tragic dimension.

What is important here, however, is not Godard's relationship to any state-of-the-art technology. According to him, he had thought of using a video camera on LA CHINOISE, at a time when Sony had no interest in such cameras: "When LA CHINOISE was being made, I'd seen a camera and a video recorder in Philips's window, and said to myself that the discussion in the room between the Maoists could be filmed on video by them and they could then make their *autocritiques*, as the fashion then was."²

What matters is not so much whether his interest in new technologies put Godard ahead of his time, as is the way in which he instantly thought of using them to serve his outlook on the times; more than one year before the May 1968 events started in France, he had already made LA CHINOISE. The young revolutionaries he depicts in this film "play at" revolution and, as Shakespeare and TO BE OR NOT TO BE³ have taught us, there is no incompatibility between "playing" and "doing." Therefore, the kind of theatricality one observes in LA CHINOISE is in fact the most vivid expression of a certain social reality as the artist saw it. Godard was well aware that representation was an integral part of the revolutionary process, and his video camera project – whereby the characters would have been shown filming one another – was meant to emphasize this essential fact.

In HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA, Godard uses old cinematographic techniques – "a wonderful legacy of the past"⁴ – and thus experiments in an unprecedented way of conceiving a prophetic work of History, a kind of funeral announcement. For Godard, this means going back to the infancy of cinema as it lays dying. Iris-ins, iris-outs, fast motion, slow motion, superimpositions, old-fashioned fade-outs: HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA integrates all the outdated effects and cinematographic tricks that Epstein used to theorize and experiment with, and that Élie Faure already regretted: "Superimpositions and slow motion effects, which played a fundamental role in the development of our rhythmic and visual education, have disappeared from most contemporary films."⁵ Godard is neither conservative nor backward-looking; however, he has never refused a new technical possibility and has always been infatuated by machines.⁶ In the manner of pioneers such as Méliès, Lumière, Griffith, and Vertov, he has always experimented with the technical potentialities his art offered. "Technological inventions bring the idea of a new art form. But once the idea exists, [...] it inspires technology in turn, gives it a direction and a specific mission."⁷ In this case, Godard entrusts the art of film with a mission that has often been denied: to think – and, more particularly, to think "all the stories." And to think, for Godard, means to *see...* and to see implies to *hear*. Consequently, such audiovisual thought cannot be



Fig. 2: Chapter 1a, *All the Stories*, 44'55".

dissociated from what is objectively – and hence technically – happening on screen. Even though his transformation of the Cartesian phrase – “*Cogito ergo video*”⁸ – is sometimes considered humorous, it is nevertheless a founding principle, a discourse on method.

Are thought and beauty two separate entities? It seems not, as Godard uses techniques to forge his audiovisual material into beauty *and* thought at the same time: “Few pan shots – maybe one high-angle shot, but because a mother is crying over her murdered child”⁹ – a phrase that reminds us of Godard’s statement from the sixties: “Tracking shots are a matter of morality.”¹⁰ What is beautiful is not the represented thing itself, but a form’s accuracy with regard to its object – which is why Godard repeats no less than eight times in the film: “neither an art nor a technique: a mystery.”¹¹

The thought and beauty present in a work of art essentially depend on the employed techniques: technique is everything. On the other hand, technique is nothing without the use one makes of it. An artist makes do and invents new forms with whatever comes to hand: therefore, technique is nothing. Thought and beauty, in a work of art, are the result of a coincidence between materials, techniques and the various ways in which the artist uses them: a mystery, that is, which this article does not pretend to solve but to explore – notably through the analysis of certain film extracts.



Fig. 3: Chapter 1b, *A Single Story*, 0'14''.

Associated to Greenberg's line in *TO BE OR NOT TO BE*,¹² when quoting Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* (act III, scene 1): "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?"

Cogito Ergo Video

Godard's version of Cartesian certitude – "*Cogito ergo video*"¹³ (Fig. 3) – means: "I think, therefore I see." Consequently, Godard thinks what he shows – that is, what he sees. In other words, his thought never precedes what he sees: "Never decide anything in advance,"¹⁴ Bresson writes. Godard's thought exists only because his sight is focused in a very specific way, and inasmuch as "a mechanism gives rise to the unknown, and not because one has found this unknown in advance."¹⁵ *HISTOIRE(S)* is entirely based on this principle. We can see Godard's thought take form on screen, as it were, from one shot to the next – although not in the way we see and grasp objects that surround us, as ideas cannot be separated from their mode of appearance: the combination of images, words and sounds. This principle is very much in keeping with another Bressonian precept: "Your film is not readymade. It makes itself as it goes along under your gaze. Images and sounds in a state of waiting and reserve."¹⁶ Godard follows Bresson's teachings and respects "the precept: find without seeking."¹⁷ Once in contact

with the associated images, sounds and words, the screen, thus impacted, reveals the unexpected: “It is profitable that what you find should not be what you were expecting. Intrigued, excited by the unexpected.”¹⁸ The whole difficulty – “*hoc opus, hic labor est*”¹⁹ – implied by this method is to “Provoke the unexpected. Expect it.”²⁰ To provoke and wait at the same time: a fine paradox, for the artist, which ties in with the other great principle upon which HISTOIRE(S) is based: “A thought that forms a form that thinks”²¹ – “to provoke” being the equivalent of “a thought that forms,” and “to wait,” of “a form that thinks.” This phrase is not more rhetorical than Godard’s transformation of Cartesian certitude, as Godard’s thought does not exist independently from the images that appear edited together on the screen – which amounts to saying it does not exist without the syntax Godard uses to work with his material, a syntax which wholly depends on the instruments of cinema and, in this particular case, of video.

Are video and cinema here considered as two separate art forms? Generally speaking, they may be – and sometimes quite vigorously –, but Godard himself implies no such thing. According to Youssef Ishaghpour, “[...] For cinema to turn in on itself in this way, in this sort of reflection on itself and its History – for that to be possible and for the result to become a Scripture, cinema *squared* so to speak, a great work – it seems to me that the existence of video was necessary.”²² And to that Godard answers: “Video seemed to me one of the avatars of cinema [...] I’d say there was no very big difference between video and cinema and you could use one like the other. [...] Video came from cinema, but you can’t say now that IT²³ comes from cinema.”²⁴ However, Godard explains that what he realizes in video could not be done through cinema. He also says that,

HISTOIRE(S) was cinema. Technically it was textbook stuff, very simple things. Of the forty possibilities in the list I used one or two, mostly overprinting to help retain the original cinema image, while if I’d tried to do the same thing with film I’d have to use reverse negative copies and that causes a loss of quality; above all you can alter the image easily with video, while with film all variation has to be preplanned. [...] It was an act of painting. The overprints, all that comes from cinema, they were tricks Méliès used.²⁵

Godard’s answer is highly significant, especially in its paradoxical aspects. He explains that HISTOIRE(S) is at once cinema and an act of painting, and that video is cinema, even though all that video enables could not be done with film. Two points may be singled out: according to Godard, video is cinema’s daughter, or one of its avatars, but the *immediacy* of the mixing and combination of images is – as such – only possible with video. The potentialities of video are compared to an “act of painting” because, in both cases, the artist works with his hands, and, furthermore, the screen may be compared to the painter’s canvas receiving



Fig. 4: Chapter 4a, The Control of the Universe, 7'19''.

shapes and colors. Before the form itself begins to think, the artist must think with his hands, whether in the art of film, video or painting.

The mind is only true when it manifests itself – and in the word “manifest,” one hears the [French] word “main.” [...] It is time that thought becomes what it truly is: dangerous for the thinker and capable of transforming reality. “Where I create is where I am true,” Rilke wrote.[...] It is said that some think, others act. But man’s true condition is to think with his hands. [...] I shall not denigrate the tools we have, but I do wish they were functional – [...] if it is generally true that the danger does not lie in the tools we use but in the weakness of our own hands.²⁶

Thinking with One’s Hands (Fig. 4)

Video enables Godard to make a film in a more visible and immediate way: the editing, fast and slow motions, superimpositions, fade-outs, and so forth, are directly made on a set of screens and in a sound control room. It is Godard’s hands that think and try out new rhythms and associations, and with his eyes and ears that he apprehends the outcome of this “form that thinks” in its turn: “It is manual work,” Godard says. This clearly appears in the film, notably in the



Fig. 5: Chapter 3b, A New Wave, 5'26". Eisenstein cutting film and Anna Karina:¹ "Beauty. Montage my beautiful care."

passages using reverse, fast or slow motion effects: when Capitaine de Boël-dieu,²⁷ in slow motion, miraculously rises from the ground after having been shot, for instance, or when a young woman²⁸ runs toward a door in fast motion and does the same movement in reverse and in slow motion.²⁹ The latter shot is caught between two shots showing edit benches, which further emphasizes the manipulative process at work. In the film as a whole, Godard shows 31 times the image of a spinning film reel on an edit bench – a film in the process of being edited –, thereby using video to show the potentialities of celluloid film and demonstrate the essential manual dimension of cinema. The most significant shots in that respect are those that show Eisenstein manipulating film³⁰ – an icon of cinematic thought at work (Fig. 5).

This enables Godard to try out the effects an image, a sound, a word, a title and a bit of dialogue produce when they are brought together. From an infinite number of possible compositions, Godard chooses only one, leaving the fabrication process partly apparent in the completed work. This is particularly obvious when the word "error" appears on the screen:³¹ at one point, when alluding to the founder of Universal Studios, Godard first mentions Erich Pommer, but in the next shot, a written phrase appears: "Error – Carl Laemmle" (Fig. 6). He also says:³² "and Tyrone Power in a romance set in the South Seas – never mind the



Fig. 6: Chapter 3a, *The Small Change of the Absolute*, 6'53''.

story, so long as it is entitled *Birds of Paradise*.”³³ And then, “error” appears on screen again, followed by “Virginia Mayo.” And Virginia Mayo herself appears. This happens three other times in the film: Godard leaves the traces of this trial and error, because they show the way he proceeds and how his thought progresses on screen. However, among all the possible solutions and compositions he tried out, he kept only those that appear in the film – highly complex compositions on which are based both an individual thought and a specific art form.

For instance,³⁴ the expression “dream factory”³⁵ – which reflects the duality of cinema itself – has a double meaning in this context: the factory one has been dreaming of, a beautiful factory, and, on the other hand, an industrial machine designed for the mass production of dreams. “SUDDENLY”: the Russian title card from *BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN* (1925) creates an interruption similar to the inversion of power represented in Eisenstein’s film. The battleship retaliates by shooting at the palace. Eisenstein’s three stone lions – one asleep, one sitting, one rising to its feet – symbolize, in three shots, the uprising of the people within a very short period of time, hence mirroring the revolutionary process. Within a few seconds, the people have taken power. But immediately afterwards, Godard says “the Gulag Archipelago” and thereby announces what will follow: the death of Lenin, and the collapse of a dream. “Communism has worn itself out dreaming such factories,” Godard says a little later. Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony* – as



Fig. 7: Chapter 1a, All the Stories, 15'37''. Lenin and a shot of THE NEW BABYLON.¹

unfinished as the communist ideal itself – accompanies the images of Dziga Vertov's KINO PRAVDA until the roll of the timpani announcing Lenin's death. Superimposed on Lenin's inert face – and while the *Unfinished Symphony* still re-sounds – there appears, in a very quick alternation, the image of women's faces evoking the decadence of a corrupt civilization. Those women – one of whom smokes a fat cigar and occupies a central position – appear as scavengers feasting on Lenin's body. It is most unlikely that the simple juxtaposition of these two images would have sufficed to produce such a powerful effect, but the flickering superimposition gives the impression of a successful attack on Lenin's body launched by the women of THE NEW BABYLON (1929, Fig. 7).

Neither an Art nor a Technique: A Mystery

Even though none of all this would be possible without the use of technique, Godard nevertheless rejects the primacy of technique in the foundations of art and thought: "I mean that cinema has never been an art, and even less so a technique. Technicians might tell you this isn't true, but one must bear in mind that the 19th century, which invented all techniques, also invented stupidity."³⁶ Techniques do not really matter, video is cinema, and "the camera has never

fundamentally changed: the Panavision Platinum is less sophisticated than the Debie 7..."³⁷ In fact, nothing is ever predetermined by the artist, that "operator of associations" – "A thought that forms a form that thinks" – but it is such techniques and such gestures that produce the unexpected that appears on screen: a mystery, that is, since whatever objectively appears onscreen neither results from technique nor intention.

"Neither an art nor a technique," says Godard. Of course, such a statement must be put into context, as Godard is probably the last person on earth to not consider cinema as an art form – and even Art itself, as it appears in HISTOIRE (S). However, by going back to the origins of cinema – the infancy of an art form – he brings the mechanical characteristics of the cinematograph back to the foreground. He also refers to the Lumière brothers' prediction, which he explains as follows: "An art without a future, a kind warning immediately uttered by the two brothers [...] and then they were misunderstood: they spoke of an art without a future – namely an art of the present, an art that gives, and receives before it gives: say, the infancy of art."³⁸ An art – Godard calls it an art – that, because it inherited from photography, becomes the most realistic of all art forms. The infancy of art is the promise that art made to life, because cinema, by reproducing life, has a responsibility toward life, and resounds through it: here is another aspect of the mystery.

Let us consider another example³⁹ dealing with the potentialities of the cinematograph's early techniques – the infancy of an art that promises to fulfill its duty toward the life it is capable of reproducing, and, on the other hand, of an art perverted by its desire to gain power over life itself. Such a thirst for power over life is related to that which realizes itself in war. And such a desire to possess the world is incarnated onscreen under the aspect of another: the desire to possess the body of a woman. Both aspects are systematically interconnected in HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: every time a threat looms over a living thing, every time humanity is offended, attacked, raped, despised, or worse, pornography fills the screen and the bodies of women become objects of domination. The phrase "Splendor and Misery of Cinema" appears on screen, thereby emphasizing the two opposite aspects of cinema: Eadweard Muybridge's galloping horse, and, later on, Étienne-Jules Marey's flying bird – "splendor," the same sequence repeated over and over of a lion going round and round in a cage – splendor and misery – a pornographic film from the nineteen-thirties (Fig. 8). Superimposed on magic lantern animals, stags appear, along with the phrase "on cinema," and a song by Otis Redding is heard: *I've Been Loving You Too Long* – a sadly ironical counterpoint to the "love stories" shown in pornographic films.

There are no exact words to describe what can be seen and heard on screen while viewing HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: the combination of many forms and the modalities of their encounters. Maybe this is what Godard has always called *montage*, one that has never existed yet, "like a plant that never really popped out



Fig. 8: Chapter 1b, A Single Story, 28'54''. A pornographic film from the thirties and *ROLLA* (Gervex, 1878).

of the ground [...]. People at the time of silent movies felt it very strongly and talked about it a lot. Nobody though really found it.”⁴⁰ Cinema thus seems condemned to die without having done what it could and had to. Nevertheless, in the dusk of the 20th century, Godard produced this monumental *opus* displaying, like a fireworks display, the full power of film editing. Paradoxically, he uses the techniques of video to discover cinema’s most lively mode of expression. However, video – which Godard considers as one of the avatars of cinema – is not used to make a video film but to show – in a state of emergency, before it is too late – in what consists the kind of cinema that fundamentally relies on editing – that is, on associations. And this is a manual work above all else. The whole “mystery” of HISTOIRE(S) seems to rely on the strange balance struck between a thought developed with one’s hands and that elaborated with the help of machines.

Translated by Maxime Shelledy

- documents related to the film club's activities show. See "Enzo Ferrieri Archive-Fondazione Arnaldo e Alberto Mondadori," courtesy of the foundation.
53. Bragaglia, *Film sonoro*, 18 [my translation].
 54. *Ibid.*, 20 [my translation].
 55. See, for instance, Enzo Ferrieri, "Il film di silhouettes," unpublished and undated lecture [presumably 1933], typescript with hand-made remarks, Class. 1.3, Fasc. 3, "Enzo Ferrieri Archive-Fondazione Arnaldo e Alberto Mondadori," courtesy of the foundation.
 56. Ettore Maria Margadonna, "Felix, Mickey, Oswald and Co. (Cioè la cosa cinematografica vera e propria)," *Il Convegno* 3-4 (25 April 1930): 128-136 [my italics]. See also Alberto Cecchi, "Cinelandia-Cartoni animati," *L'Italia letteraria* 12 (30 March 1930): 5.
 57. See Tom Gunning, "Moving away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality," in *Screen Dynamics: Mapping the Borders of Cinema*, ed. Gertrud Koch, Volker Pantenburg and Simon Rothöler (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum, 2012), 42-59.
 58. See Ferrieri, "Il film di silhouettes."

Jean-Luc Godard's HISTOIRE(S) DU CINÉMA: *Cogito Ergo Video*

1. Time indications are based on the Japanese edition of Godard's film (*Imagica*, 2001). This may vary slightly from other editions. For the Gaumont edition (2007), 21 or 22 seconds must be added to the time code indicated here.
2. Jean-Luc Godard and Youssef Ishaghpour, *Cinema: The Archaeology of Film and the Memory of a Century*, trans. John Howe (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2005), 36.
3. Ernst Lubitsch, 1942.
4. Cf. Jacques Aumont, *Amnésies. Fictions du cinéma d'après Jean-Luc Godard* (Paris: P.O.L., 1999), 241-242.
5. Élie Faure, *Fonction du cinéma* (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, Médiations, 1953), 82.
6. "I like objects. In my editing room, there is a notice on the machines: 'Be gentle with us, we are not human beings'" (Jean-Luc Godard, "Editing, Loneliness and Liberty," comments made at a conference on April 26, 1989, available at http://www.directors.ocatch.com/s/Godard/conference_Godard.htm; French version in Godard, "Le montage, la solitude et la liberté," *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard, Volume 2: 1984-1998*, ed. Alain Bergala [Paris: Cahiers du cinéma-éd. de l'Étoile, 1998], 243).
7. Béla Balázs, *L'Esprit du cinéma*, trans. J.M. Chavy (Paris: Payot, 1977), 234.
8. Chapter 1b, 0'13".
9. Chapter 1a, 44'55". Godard's voice is heard pronouncing those words in figure 2.
10. In "Hiroshima, notre amour," *Cahiers du cinéma* 97 (July 1959): 5.
11. 1b [10'11", 25'14", 28'03", 29'05", 30'02"]; 2b [9'22"- 9'53", 10'36", 23'08"].
12. Ernst Lubitsch, 1942.
13. Chapter 1b, 0'14".
14. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 45.

15. *Ibid.*, 32.
16. *Ibid.*, 33.
17. *Ibid.*, 30.
18. *Ibid.*, 56.
19. Virgil's *Aeneid* quoted in the first shot of chapter 1a.
20. Robert Bresson, *Notes on Cinematography*, 50.
21. Chapter 3a, 23'37"- 25'50".
22. Godard and Ishaghpour, *Cinema*, 31-32.
23. IT "information technology."
24. Godard and Ishaghpour, *Cinema*, 31-32.
25. *Ibid.*, 32-33.
26. Denis de Rougemont, *Penser avec les mains* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1936), 14, 146, 147, 163, 171.
27. In *LA GRANDE ILLUSION* (Renoir, 1937). Chapter 1a, 39'45".
28. In *TWO TICKETS TO BROADWAY* (James V. Kern, 1951).
29. Chapter 1a, 21'21".
30. Chapter 1a, 23'34"; chapter 3b, 5'17"- 5'37".
31. Chapter 3a, 6'49"- 6'54".
32. Chapter 3a, 7'31".
33. Vidor, 1932.
34. Chapter 1a, 13'44"- 15'40".
35. Chapter 1a, 13'36".
36. Chapter 1b, 28'3".
37. Chapter 1b, 27'38".
38. Chapter 1b, 30'2"- 31'30".
39. Chapter 1b, 27'22"- 29'5".
40. Godard, "Editing, Loneliness and Liberty"; in French: Godard, "Le montage, la solitude et la liberté," 242.

Performativity/Expressivity: The Mobile Micro Screen and Its Subject

1. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 306. About Latour's notion of inscription and his related concept of the immutable mobile in relation to digital cartography for mobile screens, see Sybille Lammes, "Destabilizing Playgrounds: Cartographical Interfaces, Mutability, Risk and Play," in *Playing the System: Subversion of Technoculture*, ed. Daniel Cermak-Sassenrath et al. (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2014, forthcoming).
2. In line with this Latourian perspective and the so-called affordances approach to technology as developed by Donald Norman, we subscribe to the idea that not only do technologies shape our practices, but also practices inscribe technology (Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* [London: Basic Books, 1988]). As Larissa Hjorth has sketched out, Latour and Norman adhere to what can be called Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) perspective to technology, which include social constructivist and affordances approaches, of which the latter has