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# Re-disciplining the Audience

## Godard's Rube-Carabinier

*Wanda Strauven*

In the late 1990s, I toured California in a roofless Jeep. After a long day of “tough” (windy) driving, I ended up, rather accidentally, in the “no-nonsense services town”<sup>1</sup> of Barstow. On the historic Route 66, I took a cheap room in a Best Motel. Fatigued and dazed by the trip, I nestled down on the queen-sized bed and switched on the color TV, one of the motel’s amenities. There were probably over 100 channels. And, inevitably, I started zapping. I would prefer to see myself in this specific situation not as a couch potato, but as an active “homo zappens”<sup>2</sup> who is taking control of the multiplicity and the simultaneity of signs (or channels). This is, of course, self-deceit.

While “mindlessly surfing”<sup>3</sup> typical American television (soaps, sports, weather channels, CNN, lots of commercials...), I suddenly stumbled upon something different, something bizarre: it was a sequence of black and white images, in French, with English subtitles. In my zombie mood (or mode) I zapped forward; then, abruptly, I stopped and went back. I had to go back to those images. These were Nouvelle Vague images, there was no doubt about that. I was sure it wasn’t Truffaut because it was too surreal. It had to be Godard. Once back in the Old World, I did some research and discovered that it was, indeed, *LES CARABINIERS* (France: 1963, *THE RIFLEMEN*).

### “To Collect Photographs Is to Collect the World”

I was able to trace back *LES CARABINIERS* thanks to its picture postcard sequence, which is one of the most remarkable moments of the film. During this 12-minute sequence, the riflemen’s wives (and the spectator) get a summary of their war conquests. Because: “To collect photographs is to collect the world,” according to Susan Sontag who pays close attention to Godard’s film from page one of her collection *On Photography*:

In ... *LES CARABINIERS* (1963), two sluggish lumpen-peasants are lured into joining the King’s Army by the promise that they will be able to loot, rape, kill, or do whatever else they please to the enemy, and get rich. But the suitcase of booty that Michel-Ange and Ulysse triumphantly bring home, years later, to their wives turns out to contain

only picture postcards, hundreds of them, of Monuments, Department Stores, Mammals, Wonders of Nature, Methods of Transport, Works of Art, and other classified treasures from around the globe. Godard's gag vividly parodies the equivocal magic of the photographic image.... Photographs really are experience captured, and the camera is the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood.<sup>4</sup>

With the exception of the photo of the sphinx, the riflemen did not take any of these photographs themselves; they just collected them, they did not shoot them. They only shot people. So, talking about the camera as an "ideal arm of consciousness" is, in my opinion, not really appropriate here.

More important is the intertextuality of the cinema that occurs between the different series (or "categories"<sup>5</sup>) of pictures. There is, as Jean-Louis Leutrat and Suzanne Liandrat-Guigues have quite properly observed, a transversal one, i.e., the "*série transversale cinéma*."<sup>6</sup> For instance, among the mammals we see Felix the Cat (named after the cartoon hero), followed by the dog Rin Tin Tin. The Industry category contains a photo of the Technicolor Laboratories of Hollywood. And in the last category, which constitutes a "*catégorie à part*"<sup>7</sup> (namely women, naked or scantily dressed), there are images of Elizabeth Taylor, Brigitte Bardot, and Martine Carol (in her part as Lola Montès).

The pornographic aspect of this last series is interesting in how it sends us back to two previous moments in the film: first, the photographs of pin-up girls by which Michel-Ange and Ulysse are persuaded to become soldiers in the King's Army and, secondly, the very suggestive undressing and bathing of a lady that closes the sequence of Michel-Ange's first visit to a movie theater. It was this explicit meta-filmic instance, this scene-at-the-movies, that disciplined me in Barstow, but more specifically, it was Michel-Ange's attitude as a simpleton or "country rube"<sup>8</sup> that stopped me from zapping between the channels (pretty much as Hector Mann roused Professor Zimmer from his stupor in *The Book of Illusions*).

In this article, I explore the forces behind this scene-at-the-movies from the 1960s in order to understand why it attracted me in the first place, and why it prevented me from zapping any further. For that purpose, I will make a comparison with the disciplining of the early film audience through the genre of the rube films. Although my analysis focuses on a Nouvelle Vague film, which is an object of traditional (Parisian) cinephile practice, my interest is elsewhere: it's all about how late-night television in the postmodern/postclassical era can help engage us not only with old, forgotten masterpieces but also with the history of (early) cinema, and help us – maybe – to better understand that specific past.

## Godard's Ambivalent Homage to Early Cinema

The scene-at-the-movies in *LES CARABINIERS* narrates Michel-Ange's first film experience. In other words, Michel-Ange is an immaculate film spectator, and his reaction to the moving image on the screen is comparable to that of the "historical" early cinemagoers; at least if we are to believe what the traditional film history has tried to make us believe.

Michel-Ange gets to see three attractions, which are remakes of respectively Lumière's *L'ARRIVEE D'UN TRAIN* (France: 1895, *THE ARRIVAL OF A TRAIN*), Lumière's *REPAS DE BEBE* (France: 1895, *FEEDING THE BABY*) and Méliès's *APRES LE BAL, LE TUB* (France: 1897, *AFTER THE BALL, THE BATH*). In terms of pastiche-imitation versus parody-transformation, the first attraction seems, at first glance, more "truthful" to the early cinema style than the other two. However, no passengers are waiting on the platform; in fact, the train does not stop, but passes right through (at high speed). And there is diegetic sound, accompanied with (extradiegetic) piano music. Our rube Michel-Ange tries to protect himself from this filmic danger by crossing his arms in front of his face.

The second attraction is a real subversion of the original: not only has the baby become a toddler, but it also comes with a spoken soundtrack (is this a deliberate metaphor for the cinema who has learned to walk and talk?); further, it contains anachronistic references to fascism (in the father's address to his son) and slapstick comedy (in the action of throwing whipped cream pies), which could lead us to read it as a pastiche in its literal sense (*pasticcio*): a mess. But we could also speculate on Godard's critical or satirical intentions in relation to the crisis of the modern family and consider it as a pre-postmodernist (or pre-postclassical) parody. Michel-Ange's reaction is excessive laughter.

The third and final attraction is, in contrast to the subversive rewriting of Lumière's family scene, a sublime rewriting of Méliès's first nude film, re-titled: *LE BAIN DE LA FEMME DU MONDE* (*THE SOCIETY LADY'S BATH*). It is sublime not only in its display on the screen (within the screen), but also in its interaction with two kinds of spectators (outside and inside the film). Godard plays with the off-screen concept: to the amusement of the external spectator, Michel-Ange changes seats twice in order to see what is going on beyond the limits of the screen's frame. As in the first attraction, he acts like a typical rube in that he does not understand that the frame is the limit, that there is no beyond. But in a very subtle manner, Godard fools the external spectator because as the society lady starts taking off her gown, the framing is a medium-close-up; when she steps into the bath tub, the camera lifts slightly up; and when she goes down into the water, the camera tilts downward. Whose gaze is this? Who is imposing this gaze, this framing on us? Michel-Ange? Is he too intimidated, too prudish

to look at her entire naked body? Very unlikely. I am tempted to think that his vision is less limited than ours, that to his eyes the lady's naked posterior is indeed visible (just as it is in Méliès's *APRES LE BAL, LE TUB*). Thus, Godard is re-framing the scene for the external spectator!

Only towards the end of *LE BAIN DE LA FEMME DU MONDE* do we see the actual size of the screen within the screen. Here, the framing is even less restricted than the full shot we have been contemplating from the beginning of the third attraction. There is, of course, no proof that the framing has been fixed/immobile during the entire scene, but it should have been according to the early cinema tradition (and along the lines of the first and second attractions). Another characteristic of the early ("primitive") cinema is the actress' "to-camera address,"<sup>9</sup> her direct look into the lens. Combined with the shot-reverse-shot technique of narrative cinema – Godard is re-editing – her gaze becomes ambivalent: is she looking at us as external spectators? Or is she looking at the rube? And if so, is her gaze one of complicity, since she knows that he has seen more than we have? The fact is that Michel-Ange interprets her quick look as an invitation and climbs on stage to join her in/on the screen.

This entire scene-at-the-movies with its three attractions is a rather complex homage to early cinema. Instead of literally quoting, appropriating, early cinema "classics," Godard decides to rewrite them. While the Lumière "documentary" tradition is subverted (or even perverted), the Méliès "magical" tradition is displaced onto a level of meta-filmic tricks (who is fooled by whom?). Is Godard inviting us to look differently at early cinema? But why is he then re-establishing the myth of the credulous early cinemagoer that New Film History scholars have been trying to dismantle?<sup>10</sup> Michel-Ange's reaction to the first and the last attraction is clearly stereotypical in the defensive attitude towards the approaching train versus the offensive attitude he has when faced with the naked woman. Or are we being fooled again?

## Rubes and Spectatorship(s)

The question is: Did early cinemagoers really duck in their seats for approaching trains? Did they really want to touch the actors on the screen? Dai Vaughan has observed that their "prodding of the screen [is] comparable with our own compulsion to reach out and "touch" a hologram."<sup>11</sup> One could add that the "shock moment" they experienced in front of *THE ARRIVAL OF A TRAIN* is similar to our viewing experience of 3D-movies, horror or special effects (I remember I ducked in my seat more than once watching Spielberg's *JURASSIC PARK*).

So, what is wrong with the myth of the first *cinématographe* screenings? Why did New Film History have to deconstruct this myth? A major concern was, no doubt, the revaluation (or updating) of the mentality of the early spectators, to point out that they were anything but stupid. André Gaudreault and Germain Lacasse have introduced the notion of the “neo-spectator” to indicate the so-called “virgin” film spectator at the end of the 19th century, in clear distinction with today’s film spectator who carries along the cultural baggage of more than 100 years of cinema.<sup>12</sup> Because of this difference in visual memory, our reaction to the “primitive” films differs from the way neo-spectators would have reacted to it.

On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that these neo-spectators were not entirely (or perfectly) virginal: they had already been initiated by a long series of optical toys – i.e., 19th-century visual memory – into the illusion of movement. I would like to emphasize the word illusion in that they knew (or must have known) that it was an illusion of movement, not actual movement. Tom Gunning goes a step further when he proposes interpreting people’s screaming in front of *THE ARRIVAL OF A TRAIN* as an expression of their will to participate in modern life, to have an “encounter with modernity.”<sup>13</sup> This would mean that the early cinemagoers pretended to be credulous, but were in fact incredulous, which characterized them as modern citizens.

This brings us to the difference between the city-dweller and the peasant, which was enhanced, or emblemized, by the genre of the early rube films that appeared around 1900. By displaying the ridiculous attitude of country men at the *cinématographe*, these films were – supposedly – meant to make the (urban) audience conscious of the “look, don’t touch” rule. Actually, this specific genre of early cinema created the image of the credulous early cinemagoers! For instance, *COUNTRY MAN AND THE CINEMATOGRAPH* (UK: Robert W. Paul, 1901) and its remake *UNCLE JOSH AT THE MOVING PICTURE SHOW* (USA: Edwin S. Porter, 1902) both show the reactions of a country man in front of (the illusion of) an exotic dancer, an approaching train, and a courting couple. In front of the approaching train, the country man’s reaction is – like Michel-Ange’s – defensive he runs away from the filmic danger. And by the end of the last attraction – at least in Porter’s version – the rube tears down the screen, as Michel-Ange does towards the end of *LE BAIN DE LA FEMME DU MONDE*.

Whereas several scholars have stressed their “didactic nature,”<sup>14</sup> Thomas Elsaesser has suggested reading these early rube films as a form of discipline. Through laughter the spectators were disciplined (rather than educated in cine-literacy), that is, they were prohibited from talking and creating other distractions; their attention was drawn to the screen portraying this stupid country man, and not to the legs of their attractive female neighbor.<sup>15</sup> In other words, these rube films inform us about the attitude of the early (urban) audience that,

circa 1900, was very likely getting bored by the endless series of approaching trains.

If this is the case, we can only wonder what Godard's scene-at-the-movies in *LES CARABINIERS* is telling us about the 1960s spectator who, in the meantime, has also become a TV viewer. It seems as if Godard is trying to convince this (new) spectator to go back more often to the movies. With the help of the society lady and the complicity between her and the rube, Godard re-initiates the TV viewers into the experience of cinephilia, telling them that if you go to the movies, you will get to see what the rube sees. You get to see more than you see on TV! By the 1990s, this was no longer true: there was simply too much on TV. But that's probably why I got struck by the colorless, less-is-more images on my color TV in Barstow. Godard's carabinier kept me from zapping. I was disciplined not by laughter (as were the early cinemagoers around 1900) or old-fashioned cinephilia (as were the (French) TV-viewers in the 1960s), but through (film) historical curiosity. I wanted to understand to what degree Michel-Ange's attitude was similar to, or different from, Uncle Josh's. I wanted to understand how postclassical spectators can (still) be disciplined by rubes from the 1960s.

In this particular disciplining process, my historical curiosity was, without doubt, preceded or instigated by tenderness – I was touched by the rube-carabinier and specifically by his tender touching of the society lady on screen. After her inviting glimpse, Michel-Ange jumps on stage and starts caressing her arms very softly, delicately. Even the most obtuse rube should feel from the very first touch that the lady in the bathtub isn't real, that she is just a projected image. So, why does Michel-Ange continue touching her? And why does he try to enter the screen? Or is Godard maybe not telling us anything specific about the spectatorship of the 1960s after all? Maybe this scene-at-the-movie is merely creating the basis for the cinematic apparatus theory?

## **The Future(s) of Film: TV-Zapping**

In 1924, Buster Keaton wonderfully prefigured the principles of the apparatus theory in one of the key scenes in *SHERLOCK JUNIOR* (USA: Buster Keaton & Roscoe Arbuckle, 1924). Keaton creates an image of the mechanism of film viewing, by means of a "modern" rube as we see projectionist Keaton entering the screen to participate in the drama on-screen. But it is not the body of the projectionist who literally enters the screen, it is his ghost (or double); his real body is asleep. It is merely his dream in which Keaton wants to save his girl from the malicious hands of his rival. Similarly, Michel-Ange might be considered as a double or as the embodiment of the film spectator's desires. It is strik-

ing that the other spectators – in the Le Mexico theater Michel-Ange enters, as well as in the theater where Keaton works as a projectionist – do not react. They don't even laugh at the rube, as if he is invisible.

Interesting enough, Keaton's *SHERLOCK JUNIOR* not only announces the apparatus theory, but the zapping mode as well. The projectionist's double remains within the same frame (TV screen), but the channel changes continuously. This could be interpreted as a new form of discipline (following the discipline through the thrills of the cinema of attractions and the discipline through the laughter in the rube films). Perhaps in the 1920s people were getting so used to the narrative tradition that they needed something like a purely meta-filmic moment, the non-narrative within the narrative. This would lead us to an explanation of the "birth" of experimental cinema as a necessity to entertain spectators who were getting bored by stories.

Whereas Keaton disciplines the 1920s spectators through the art of zapping, Godard's scene-at-the-movies had the exact opposite effect on me in the late 1990s: it *prevented* me from zapping. Like the spectators of the 1960s, I was re-initiated into cinephilia thanks to Michel-Ange's literal, bodily accentuated love for the screen. However, this 1990s cinephilia was not born in some *cinéclub*; it is instead fundamentally linked with my (American) TV experience. Thanks to TV zapping, I rediscovered *LES CARABINIERS*. It is revealing, then, what Godard actually has to say about television:

Take away the text and you'll see what's left. In TV nothing is left. When I watch television I watch it on mute. Without the sound you see the gestures, you see the routines of the women journalists and hosts, you see a woman who doesn't show her legs, moves her lips, does the same thing, and occasionally is interrupted by so-called on-the-scene footage. She'll be the same the next day only the text will have changed. So there should only be the text; let's do radio. The more you want change, the more it's the same thing.<sup>16</sup>

Godard's only interest in television is its text. Paradoxically, this is the reason why he watches TV "on mute," as if it is silent cinema where he lets the gestures do the talking. But they don't have anything to say. In opposition to the "silent" images of early cinema, television images are meaningless. Without the sound, Godard says, "nothing is left." This might explain why my senses were struck by the images in *LES CARABINIERS*. As I was zapping through the immense TV text of meaningless images, I suddenly encountered images with a meaning of their own, images that did not need a text. Although these meaningful images also recur in the spoken scenes of *LES CARABINIERS*, they certainly reach their peak of "purity" in the two speechless (i.e., without text, not without sound) attractions of the scene-at-the-movies. The scene – let me repeat it once more – that disciplined me in Barstow.



## Notes

1. According to the *Michelin Tour Guide*: "Once a 19C stop for miners, pioneers and farmers on the Old Spanish Trail, Barstow is now a no-nonsense service town about midway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, 60 miles west of Mojave National Preserve. A mecca for outlet-mall shoppers, the former Southern Pacific railway hub still has 24-hr train switching. It also is remembered as a stop (in the 1940s and '50s) on Historic Route 66." *California*, Michelin Travel Publications, 1999, p. 82.
2. Jos de Mul introduced the term "homo zappens" to indicate the Futurist of the 21st century who – thanks to the electronic revolution and the advent of the internet – can simultaneously stay in "multiple virtual worlds" and fully experience Marinetti's concept of "imagination without strings" (or wireless imagination). See <<http://www.eur.nl/fw/hyper/Artikelen/imag.htm>>.
3. As Paul Auster's character David Zimmer does during six months after his wife and two sons died in an airplane crash, "anchored to [his] usual spot on the sofa, holding a glass of whiskey in one hand and the remote-control gadget in the other" (Auster, Paul. *The Book of Illusions*, London: Faber and Faber, 2003, p. 10). Zimmer remains numb, unfocused, till one night his senses get struck by a clip of Hector Mann who makes him laugh and changes his life (converting him from literature to (new) cinephilia!).
4. Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*, New York: Doubleday, 1977, p. 3.
5. According to Deleuze, Godard's cinema is characterized (or constituted) by "categories," which are always reflective, instead of conclusive. *LES CARABINIERS*, in its entirety, is a film of categories of war; "[ce] n'est pas un film de plus sur la guerre, pour la magnifier ou pour la dénoncer. Ce qui est très différent, il filme les catégories de la guerre. Or comme dit Godard, ce peut être des choses précises, armées de mer, de terre et d'air, ou bien des "idées précises", occupation, campagne, résistance, ou bien des "sentiments précis", violence, débandade, absence de passion, dérision, désordre, surprise, vide, ou bien des "phénomènes précis", bruit, silence." Deleuze, Gilles. *L'Image-temps*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1985, p. 243.
6. Leutrat and Liandrat-Guigues. "Le Sphinx." *L'Esprit Créateur*, 30/2 (Summer 1990), p. 87.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
8. See Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 25: "The country rube was a stock character in vaudeville, comic strips, and other popular media, and early films seized upon the encounter of supposedly unsophisticated minds with city life, modern technology, and commercial entertainment as a comic theme and as a way of flaunting the marvels of that new urban world (compare *RUBE AND MANDY AT CONEY ISLAND* [Porter/Edison, 1903])."
9. With regard to Godard's use of "to-camera address" in general, David Bordwell observes: "This is not simple "reflexivity" (reminding us we're watching a film) but a self-conscious demonstration of the filmmaker's power over the profilmic event, a virtuosic display of the ability to govern what we see". According to Bordwell, Godard "refuses to identify the profilmic with the diegetic." Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 326.

10. I am referring to the new wave of early film scholars that emerged after the 1978 FIAF conference held at Brighton. I am aware of the anachronism: in 1963 Godard is re-establishing a myth that has yet to be dismantled.
11. Vaughan, Dai. "Let There Be Lumière." Elsaesser, Thomas (ed.). *Early Cinema: Space Frame Narrative*, London: British Film Institute, 1990, p. 65.
12. Gaudreault, André, Germain Lacasse. "Premier regard: Les "néo-spectateurs" du Canada français." *Vertigo*, 10 (1993), p. 18.
13. Gunning, Tom. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator." Braudy, Leo, Marshall Cohen (eds.). *Film Theory and Criticism*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 832.
14. Morissette, Isabelle. "Reflexivity in Spectatorship: The Didactic Nature of Early Silent Films." *Offscreen*, July 2002. <[http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new\\_offscreen/reflexivity.html](http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/new_offscreen/reflexivity.html)>. On the "learning process," see also Hansen, op.cit., pp. 25-30.
15. Elsaesser, Thomas. *Filmgeschichte und frühes Kino. Archäologie eines Medienwandels*, München: edition text + kritik, 2002, pp. 71-74.
16. From the interview with Emmanuel Burdeau and Charles Tesson, May 2000. Godard, Jean-Luc. *The Future(s) of Film: Three Interviews 2000/01*, Bern: Verlag Gachnang & Springer, 2002, p. 20.