

## REVIEWS

Michael Witt, *Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian*  
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EMILIE BICKERTON

### A BONFIRE OF ART

It is unusual to be thrilled by a list, especially one as apparently standard as the oeuvre of an artist at the end of a book about him. But the pages Michael Witt has devoted to ‘Works by Godard’ at the end of his *Jean-Luc Godard, Cinema Historian* paint an unfamiliar portrait, completely changing our conception of a man usually thought of as the director of *Breathless*, *Alphaville*, *Pierrot le fou* and *Weekend*. Witt’s list includes these, but also all the rest: scripts, videos, press catalogues, trailers, books, invented interviews and texts reflecting on his own practice. To see Godard foremost as a multimedia artist sheds an entirely new light on his work. The importance of his feature films is not diminished; they now appear as early stages in a much longer, ongoing journey motivated by a central concern: what are the possibilities for genuine communication? Over the years he has looked for the answers in different mediums, using a range of tools, from scissors and glue to photocopiers, found footage, photographs, tape recorders, digital cameras and now 3D. Witt tackles his subject, in what is his first sole-authored book, in such an unfussy manner and without the elliptical quality tainting much Godard commentary—artsy, complicated prose trying to compensate for a kernel of confusion—that the experience of reading *Cinema Historian* is like a door swinging open.

The central subject of the book is Godard’s personal and poetic reflection on cinema and history, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, first released in 1998 as a four-and-a-half hour video series. As evoked in Witt’s title, this epic work is about

cinema's own history, and most of the material comes from stories told by it on the big screen. But *Histoire(s)* is also a running commentary on the telling of world history, and how it might be re-envisioned through the use and montage of cinematic forms. This combination of cinema and history is one of the defining features of Godard's oeuvre, and Witt chose this work as his focus because he considered it the theoretical and material culmination of Godard's 'self-appointed mission' to explore the possibility of genuine communication 'against the backdrop of the flood of reproductions in circulation on television, in the mass media, and on the internet'. Formally speaking, *Histoire(s)* is divided into eight parts of varying lengths, some less than 30 minutes and others nearly an hour, all weaving back and forth through the films of the twentieth century; the mood and themes change, but there are recurring motifs, underscored by an idiosyncratic account of the birth, brief life and, in Godard's view, protracted decline of cinema.

In his opening pages Witt gives a useful breakdown of *Histoire(s)* and in doing so provides us with a roadmap for navigating through the series. He argues that the first two-part chapter, made up of episodes 1A (51 mins) and 1B (42 mins), is the cornerstone of the work. 1A, 'Toutes les histoires' presents in condensed form 'the principal lines of thinking that run through the remainder of the series': the great promise of cinema and its catastrophic political-aesthetic decline. In 1B, 'Une histoire seule', Godard examines his own place within the history of cinema, and pursues some theoretical reflections on cinema's defining characteristics. The subsequent six episodes are 'localized case studies': 2A, 'Seul le cinéma' (27 mins), unfolds the metaphor of 'projection', already introduced in 1B; 2B, 'Fatale beauté' (29 mins) explores cinema's relation to beauty; 3A, 'La monnaie de l'absolu' (27 mins), focuses on the representation of war, with particular reference to Italian neo-realism; 3B, 'Une vague nouvelle', offers a personal account of the French New Wave; 4A, 'Le contrôle de l'univers', is a meditation on Hitchcock as one of cinema's great artists—'he made difficult, sensitive, mysterious and successful films that didn't follow a recipe', Godard has said, and 'that's extremely rare'. The final section 4B, 'Les signes parmi nous' (38 mins), is both 'a sombre, intimate self-portrait' and a meditative stocktaking on the work as a whole.

Running throughout, as Witt puts it, is 'a three-way tension between a bleak overarching narrative of cinematic decline, the vitality of the crystalline forms through which that narrative is expressed, and a recurrent thematic emphasis on artistic metamorphosis and renewal'. Already the youngest of the arts, cinema was 'the child that turned out bad': it failed to live up to its historic responsibilities. There are also, however, moments of resurrection—one of the recurrent motifs in the series along with fire and sacrifice—to suggest that *Histoire(s)* is not just a tragedy in eight acts, but

also an exploration of the possibilities of image-making in the context of such powerful and negative influences.

On first viewing, *Histoire(s)* is a breathtaking ride through cinema's history, or in Witt's more seductive description, 'an audiovisual tapestry of astonishing sumptuosity'. One problem with this sumptuous tapestry is how hard it is to talk about: the viewer is left with feelings and impressions, and perhaps a sense of illumination, but these are all frustratingly resistant to linguistic expression. The 'dense texture and serpentine forms', Witt ventures, 'are closer to those one more readily associates with poets and musicians', recalling modernist modes of serial and fugal composition. Because text, commentary, sound and image co-exist or cut into each other all the time, describing isolated passages rarely manages to satisfactorily capture their spirit or our experience of watching them. The five-minute homage to Hitchcock, for example, is suddenly announced in the middle of 4A by a black screen and the inter-title L'ARTISTE flashing up between images of Robert Bresson, Fritz Lang, Eric Rohmer. Hitchcock's voice then comes in, giving a definition of the art of cinema, quickly overlapped by another commentary from Godard, and then another, while clips of Hitchcock films are at the same time shuttering across the screen. The sequences we are watching do not match the commentaries, but 30 seconds later the scenes under discussion do appear. On the soundtrack, samples of music increase in intensity, creating a crescendo effect with new inter-titles flashing and Godard whispering praise for the director. We can only absorb all this in snatches and, using the elements we manage to retain, try to impose our own interpretative logic upon it. The effect can be exhilarating, but only if we abandon the attempt to grasp the totality of the material—the rush of images, music, text to read and overlapping spoken dialogue—in complex internal relation to each other—for our own critical reflection.

This immediatist, non-reflexive reaction is the desired effect. Godard said he wanted to generate feelings, not words, so as to touch something deeper and essential in his viewers. *Histoire(s)* 'should emanate directly from the combination of images and sounds rather than from an explanatory or interpretative text written about or imposed on them', he told Eric Hobsbawm in 2000 during a panel discussion with other historians to mark the work's release. The task of the spectator, Witt elaborates, 'is not necessarily that of understanding but rather of hearing, receiving and "seeing" the effects of his compression and concatenation of his disparate source materials in the intuitive, emotional and visceral way one might experience a piece of music'.

*Cinema Historian* has the big ambition of changing the way we see Godard as an artist. Witt sets about doing this in a nuts-and-bolts fashion, taking apart *Histoire(s)* in all its forms. He examines the origins of the series in the

1970s, exploring the parallel works made during the decades of its gestation, and the models and guides—artistic, historical, philosophical—with whom Godard maintained real or imaginary dialogues, and whose ideas fed into the final series. Further complicating our grasp on *Histoire(s)* is its various manifestations: as videos, books and CDs. These have all come out at different stages and none replicates exactly the contents of the other. Witt deals with this with aplomb, treating the books and CDs as fundamentally different objects from the audiovisual series rather than simple offshoots. *Histoire(s)* is not solely an audiovisual series, he says, but ‘a more complex integrated multiform work’. Looked at in this way, we see a multimedia artist at the height of his powers, not casually spinning off a book or soundtrack from a video series, but literally transforming each into striking works of graphic design, iconographic criticism, and experimental musical composition.

Witt was guided by two essential insights gleaned during his doctoral research on Godard’s collaborative work with Anne-Marie Miéville in the 1970s. Both form constitutive elements in his portrait. The first was the realization of the scope and variety of Godard’s work in different media and contexts; the second the integrated nature of Godard’s life project and the ‘flow and metamorphosis’ within it of references, ideas, motifs. Each work is “‘to be continued” into the next’, says Witt, quoting editor and filmmaker Jacques Doniol-Valcroze in 1965. In its own style and rhythm, *Cinema Historian* has something of this fluid and metamorphic quality. In each chapter Witt builds his arguments carefully, but he also weaves and twists elegantly around themes, goes forwards for a closer look at something mentioned in passing, then moves ahead again. The result is to leave open the contradictions and tensions in Godard’s own work. Interpretations are confidently offered, but nothing is ever shut-down or absolute. At times this can be frustrating, but it is at least true to its subject. Godard’s counter-cinema has always resisted giving straight answers. It is one means among many of challenging what Peter Wollen called ‘the seven deadly sins of cinema’, including the single diegesis and closure, with corresponding ‘cardinal virtues’, in this case multiple narratives and openness.

One additional and vital layer of analysis and commentary in *Cinema Historian* comes from its own iconographic criticism. In the very design of his book Witt has followed the example of the Third Republic art historian Élie Faure, who famously said ‘I do not comment upon the picture through the text. I justify the text through the picture.’ Godard also takes Faure for a guide, and has fulminated against the redundant use of images by film writers, usually from a literary background, who ‘put a photo’ so that the reader ‘can be certain that this is indeed the film under discussion’. *Cinema Historian*, by contrast, gives almost as much space to its vast selection of stills from *Histoire(s)* and other films as it does to the text. The images

appear on nearly every page, in an outer column delineated by a soft green background, running down the side of the inner writing. The result is like a work of art history, with the same glossy colour pages.

In his discussion of the major intellectual and artistic influences on *Histoire(s)*, Witt identifies five distinct groups: historians and philosophers of history; art historians; cinema historians; found-footage essayists; and audiovisual critics and historians. In this large and diverse crowd some figures stand out: Charles Péguy and Jules Michelet for their 'poetic' approach to history; Serge Daney for a long-running conversation on the role of the image in the era of mass media; above all, Henri Langlois and André Malraux. In the 1950s, the director of the French Cinémathèque had famously nurtured the tastes of the nascent New Wave. 'One evening / we went to see / Henri Langlois / and then there was light', as Godard puts it in 3B. Langlois's mixed screenings—film noir, silents, B-movies, French and American classics of the inter-war years—proved to Godard that 'showing was a form of thinking', and that it was possible to develop a visual cinema history through the juxtaposition of different films.

The relationship with André Malraux was more vexed, but no less fundamental. Malraux's *Psychologie de L'Art* (1947–49) and *Le Musée imaginaire* (1952–54) 'showed me the way', Godard has said, towards a poetic, visual approach to the composition of history. In the late 60s Malraux as French Culture Minister had become Enemy Number One, but in the 80s Godard was ready to turn to him again as a source of inspiration. Conceptually, Witt argues, three Malrucian ideas have been definitive: first, the notion of art as 'the small change of the absolute', as the title of 3A has it—an outcome of humanity's unending struggle against the human condition, the passage of time and the inevitability of death. Second, there is the idea of artistic creativity as not the representation but the transfiguration of the real—in Godard's metaphorical take, 'art is like fire, it is born out of what it consumes'. Third, there is Malraux's exploration of art's metamorphoses, both in the transformation of the idea of art from epoch to epoch, or culture to culture, and in the remembrance and destruction of inherited forms, and creation of new ones, in the art of the present. If we are accustomed to thinking of Godard as a solitary figure, operating for the past forty years from a tiny town on the shores of Lake Geneva, an unexpected portrait emerges from this sustained look at his defining intellectual relationships. Godard has of course always drawn on the work of others, in his use of explicit references and quotations; he collaborated closely with Jean-Pierre Gorin in the 1970s, and thereafter with Miéville. Witt's picture is of an artist in constant and open dialogue with his contemporaries and predecessors.

Godard's unforgiving account of cinema's political-aesthetic degeneration is the central theme of *Histoire(s)*. Witt first clarifies the concept

of cinema which *Histoire(s)* constructs, evoking the director's profound engagement with the silent era since his Cinémathèque days, and his identification with the great hopes for a truly modern art form held out by the earliest forms of the cinematograph. Those who have found Godard's negativity towards contemporary forms of cinema excessive, or his celebration of its silent era uncritical, need to take into account the depth of his belief in the revolutionary potential of the cinematograph, Witt argues. Cinema's failure to live up to its initial promise as an art form was not just an aesthetic but a cultural-political disaster, giving its late-twentieth century course the proportions of a tragedy.

It is not hard to share Godard's exhilaration at those times when the first films were being made—the era when Jean Epstein could exclaim 'Bonjour Cinéma!' without irony. In an age of social revolution, artistic endeavour and technological innovation had combined with two vital ingredients: montage and projection. The first of these has always been essential to Godard, the faithful follower of Robert Bresson's injunction: 'Bring together things that have never been brought together and did not seem predisposed to be so.' The scissor-wielding montage pioneers Griffith, Méliès and Eisenstein transformed the initial desire to study human movement into an art. Projection by the Lumière brothers turned it into an industry, which also brought films to a mass audience and offered viewers a new way of engaging with themselves and society. 'Cinema projected / and people / saw / that the world / was there', as Godard puts it in 1B. In Witt's words:

Inherently inclusive in its extra-linguistic mode of address, and drawing social classes together in the movie theatre, the popular nascent art form carried the promise, for Godard, of a contagious democratizing effect: by simply representing the physical and social world to vast numbers of individuals in an instantly recognizable form, it facilitated a makeshift process of self-psychoanalysis on the part of the viewer and a profound negotiation of one's place in the world.

In part, this is a formal attribute: the juxtaposition of images in cinematic montage creates an immediate basis for comparison. Godard:

You see a rich person and a poor person and there's a comparison. And you say: it's not fair. Justice comes from a comparison. And from then weighing it in the scales. The very idea of montage is the scales of justice.

Witt then outlines the overt reasons Godard has offered for cinema's decline: the arrival of sound, commercial exploitation, the mass spread of banal and blinding television imagery, and its failure to acquit itself in face of the Judeocide and the anti-Nazi resistance. His nuanced reading qualifies Godard's melodramatic claim in 3A that 'the flame'—of cinema—'was

extinguished for good at Auschwitz'. Like Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler*, Godard ascribes cinema with the power to conduct 'a sort of visionary ethnology, or embryology, of imminent social mutation, *foreseeing* emergent patterns of political turbulence and social upheaval.' In the 1920s, Renoir's *La règle du jeu* foresaw the disintegration of Europe into war, while Murnau's *Nosferatu* depicted a Berlin reduced to rubble long before it took place. The point is hammered home in 1A when Godard cuts repeatedly between the dancing skeleton in Renoir's film and archival footage of the concentration camps. But a second, complementary political-historical function lay in cinema's ability to confront and broadcast the events it has prophesied for democratic debate, as they come to pass. As Witt puts it: 'momentous moments of social instability and conflict are crystallized immediately in cinematic form, and made available for discussion.' Immediacy is critical here for cinema to enable the popular 'self-psychoanalysis' evoked above.

Godard knows, of course, that some films did try to play this role, and shows both Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* and Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* in 1A. But for the most part, he claims, cinema abdicated its responsibilities, leaving the field to the impoverished medium of the newsreel. As 1A's intertitles state: 'what there is of cinema / in the war newsreels / says nothing / it doesn't judge'. Godard dismisses two Polish works on the camps—Munk's *Passenger* and Jakubowska's *The Last Stage*—as 'expiation films' and individual ventures, rather than collective efforts by the Polish nation to confront its recent past. He has been scathing about Lanzmann's *Shoah*—'a scenario for a film rather than a finished work'—and Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, and has nothing but contempt for *Schindler's List*. But he also sees cinema's abdication extending more broadly: it barely addressed the French Resistance, or May 68—Godard dismisses his own work from that period.

What is the explanation for the medium's political-historical failure? Witt suggests that in *Histoire(s)*, Godard shows us cinema had already been weakened, misused and corrupted, 'insulted and injured' for several decades before the 1940s. Commercialization was a key culprit—cinema's roots had been in science, but it was quickly seduced by the allure of glamour and profit to become an offshoot of the cosmetics industry. Male domination was also a disabling force: Godard is hardly known for his feminist sensibility, but *Histoire(s)* has powerful passages reflecting on the early screen obsession with sex—first evoked, then punished—and the manipulation of women. The talkies were a third blow, robbing cinema of its universal language and its ability to make people see, without the distraction of spoken dialogue. Cinema was already crippled as a democratic medium before World War II. At first it 'stammered' history, and then at a given moment it no longer did it. 'Cinema stopped there'. But cinema has not exactly 'stopped

there', in as much as the missed encounters have forced new movements and experiments into action, including those of Godard himself.

One of the most interesting contradictions in *Histoire(s)* comes with Godard's model of what constitutes 'true cinema', as opposed to 'films'. The latter can always be made, but 'cinema' itself requires a rare combination of elements, all with their roots in national consciousness. It is worth dwelling on this 'unresolved tension', as Witt calls it. One thing that immediately strikes any viewer of *Histoire(s)* is how much material is drawn from Godard's personal list of *auteurs*. The likes of Dreyer, Hitchcock, Lang, Renoir and Welles have nourished his work since his earliest days as a film critic at *Cahiers du cinéma* when he championed the *politique des auteurs*. However, in *Histoire(s)* Godard presents 'true cinema' as existing only when the collective thirst for a national self image produces a simultaneous revolution in film language. According to Godard this has happened only a handful of times: in post-revolutionary Russia, the German cinema of the 20s and 30s, Italy's post-war neo-realism and American Hollywood in the 40s and 50s. He also manages to slip in his own French New Wave by way of a revisionist account attacking its *politique*, and admitting the movement was the 'twitch of a twitch', having described Italian neo-realism as 'the last twitch of cinema'.

The tension between an *auteur* approach to cinema and one based on national consciousness is a rich one; it animates one's viewing of *Histoire(s)*, rather than blocking it. It is easy to challenge, and one feels the division cannot be absolute for Godard himself. After all, the history of cinema is replete with examples of trans-national borrowings, which have led to the development of new filmic languages, from the revolutionary Russians and Griffith, with his one-time assistant from Vienna, Erich von Stroheim, to Godard's own New Wave, inspired by techniques and genres from Hollywood's studio directors. A knottier problem is the narrowness of Godard's pantheon in *Histoire(s)*. While he is right to make a distinction between isolated works by brilliant directors and 'cinema' in a broader sense, this does not compensate for his limited geographical scope of reference. Witt acknowledges that Godard 'sets to one side the overwhelming majority of national cinemas', and consistently locates the origins of cinema and its true trajectory in the Western aesthetic tradition. But this merits more attention, because the result is a skewed account of cinema's history that has such obvious counter-examples, the most glaring being Japan. In *Histoire(s)* Godard features the work of Mizoguchi, but he maintains that while the country had fine directors and a substantial film industry, it was not caught up in any widespread quest for national identity. Yet the output of the stellar filmmakers in postwar Japan contradicts this. Kurosawa, Oshima, Shindo, Yoshimura, Ichikawa, Suzuki and Matsumoro were all dealing with Japan's shattered national identity in



the wake of Hiroshima, and also breaking the revered aesthetic traditions upheld for so long by the formidable studio system. Their work collectively would seem to fit Godard's 'true cinema' definition, but he has not sought to expand the pantheon he established early on in his career.

Godard, of course, never promised to account for every film ever made, and *Histoire(s)* is purposefully not a systematic historical narrative of cinema. He subscribes instead to the view outlined by Hollis Frampton in his appropriately unfinished epic project on cinema history, *Magellan*—that any 'completist' film historian is on a one-way road to the asylum. Perhaps this is why Witt decided not to pursue the question of geo-cultural limitations. Instead, in keeping with his portrait, he is a cinema historian in a poetic way, who values the lyricism and evocative nature of Michelet's work, for example, over more accurate but drier accounts of the past. Godard has, indeed, always admired chroniclers and has preferred to pursue imaginary dialogues with historians from Alexandre Koyré to Georges Canguilhem, while his attempts to talk to real ones when *Histoire(s)* came out on video did not generate particularly interesting results. For Godard, the 'proper' historians have that dangerous habit of sticking to the facts without taking any risks, meaning they often miss the essence of the times they are exploring and trying to evoke. So, in his bid to get at the essence of cinema, one can imagine Godard did not mind too much about excluding almost completely the film traditions from Asia and Africa. Somehow, this is not the point.

'The important thing is what they hide from me, not what they show me' said Bresson about his actors. We could say the same of Godard. What he shows us is half the story; what he does not show is just as important. His model of cinema leaves the door open to more than he has allowed inside; it is up to us to expand his definition of cinema to include more filmmakers than *Histoire(s)* would otherwise acknowledge. So, too, with the so-called end of cinema. As Witt points out, 'running alongside his account of the disintegration of cinema's documentary eye is a competing story that emphasizes renewal'. After the flame of the cinematograph was 'extinguished', there was Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave. The same goes for the beginnings of a new era on screen, the one described by Serge Daney as the shock of the camps signalling an end but also 'a founding trauma underpinning the self-conscious forms of modern cinema'. In *Histoire(s)* Godard seems to agree with this, in clips evoking a classic sign of this modern cinema: actresses looking directly back at the camera in *Summer with Monika*, *Europa 51* and *Bonjour Tristesse*.

Ends and beginnings, in other words, run throughout *Histoire(s)*, and what seems to have stopped or been extinguished can rise again in a new form. This is also true for television, the subject of Witt's penultimate chapter. In *Histoire(s)* Godard is unequivocal about the impact of the small

screen. He refers to the post-television era as ‘after Chernobyl’ and describes how ‘the Beast devoured Beauty’. But television has also been integral to Godard’s creative project, Witt argues, in its role as a ‘negative exemplar’, providing the ‘quasi-mythological destructive force against which he has reacted and struggled in the creation of his work and in opposition to which he has defined cinema as art’. One of Godard’s vital insights has been his criticism of the silent and corrosive effect of television on modern filmmakers who have unconsciously internalized the small screen’s banal aesthetics. On this point, Witt appropriately includes a memorable exchange between Woody Allen and Godard, who asks Allen whether he thinks television could affect his filmmaking, ‘like radioactivity can have a harmful effect on your brain’. Allen’s confusion only confirms what is evident in his later work: these films lose nothing when viewed on television because its aesthetic informs their every shot. Allen seems unaware that such a critique could be possible.

Witt’s journey through *Histoire(s)* ends with the possibility that Godard may be moving into new territory even as he reaches his ninetieth year. In *Film Socialisme* (2010) Witt detects a ‘turning of the page’ in Godard’s historiographic project, as well as ‘abundant evidence of formal vitality, of a continuing belief in the potential of new technologies—if used imaginatively—to produce the potent poetic imagery, and of deep curiosity for the digital image economy and contemporary world’. In Godard’s newest, fully-3D release, *Farewell to Language*, there is further evidence of this new phase, though the film is also filled with ambiguity and counter-arguments. In its most positive form, *Farewell to Language* is an education in what 3D technology can offer cinema. Godard takes up the mantle from Hitchcock, who had understood its potentials so well in 1954 with *Dial M for Murder*, placing all those plant pots in the foreground of his frame and drawing spectators into the narrative by turning us into murder accomplices, as Grace Kelly secretly handed us her scissors out of view of everyone in the film. For such a master of montage as Godard, 3D is an exciting proposition: he is no longer restricted to placing images one after the other, he can now put them on top of each other to generate moments of active co-creation for the spectator. In *Farewell* there are passages when one can either keep the double images blurred on the screen or close one eye and see a single image, open another eye and see a different one.

This is rich territory, but it comes with a particularly bleak outlook in which a dog, Roxy Miéville, appears to have a richer life than the man–woman dyad. The title of the film, and the choice of Roxy as one of his protagonists, suggests Godard may be retreating from his search for forms of real communication. The 3D medium, in Godard’s hands, takes on a rather violent, at times overwhelming quality. It is more difficult than ever to reflect on what we are seeing as the inter-cutting of sound, text and image is so intense,

and we are literally right in there, among the swirling car lights and the saturated fields of flowers, or down at ground level with the dog. After this it remains as hard as ever to predict what might come next with Godard. In his closing reflections, Witt describes *Histoire(s)* as 'not only a bonfire of the art of the past, but also a time capsule filled with traces of films, evidence of a lifelong passion for cinema and a record of the secret of cinematographic montage'—'an incendiary device designed to be projected into the future to nourish art forms as yet undreamed of'. Years after *Histoire(s)*, it is clear Godard has not yet finished adding to the contents of this time capsule.