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# Godard Interview

## by Cahiers du Cinema

Cahiers: Let's go back to the line that concludes "La Chinoise." The verbs are in the simple-past, the line is spoken in a thin, pale tone. Don't you risk implying that what has preceded is an illusion or illusory?

Godard: No. It's a simple-past, not a complicated-past. The tone is not thin or pale, it's the same tone all Bresson's heroines have. And as for illusion, it is precisely because Veronique has realized that it has all been an illusion that she may now be able to transform it into something real. When she speaks softly and calmly she speaks like a Chinese. At the Chinese Embassy I was deeply impressed by how softly they talk. Her tone is that of a year-end report. She realizes that she has not made a great step forward, though she's made lots of steps: she's gone so far as to kill the man who didn't write "And Quiet Flows the Don"; but that's still something less than a really bold step.

Cahiers: A film on the Rhodiaca strikes would allow you to describe an examination of conscience very different from that in "La Chinoise" . . .

Godard: Yes, but if a man of cinema made such a film today, it wouldn't be at all what should be made. And if it were made by the workers (who, technically, could very well do it if someone gave them a camera and a little assistance, it would not be, culturally, as exact a representation of themselves as the one they give every time they go on strike. There's the gulf. I used to have lots of ideas about cinema. Now I have none. Since my second film, I have ceased to know what cinema is. The more films you make, the more you're aware that we work with commonplace ideas or against them — it amounts to the same thing.

Cahiers: Do you think you've invented anything in cinema?

Godard: I've made a single discovery; I've discovered what you have to do to move smoothly from one shot to the next if they are both shots in motion, and—harder still — to cut from a motion shot to a stationary shot. Hardly anyone does it, because hardly anyone thinks of doing it. You have simply to pick up the movement at the stage you left it in the preceding frame. You can link any one shot to any other: car to bicycle, crocodile to apples. It's being done, but being done more haphazardly than otherwise. If you edit formally, not in terms of changes in ideas the way Rossellini edited the beginning of "India" — that's another problem — but if you edit on the basis of what is in the images, and that alone, on the basis of the sign and not the referent, you've got to begin where the person of the thing in motion is hidden by another person or thing, or crosses in front of another person or thing, and cut there. If you don't there is a little shock. If you want it, ok; if you don't, there is no other way to escape it. My editors can do it by themselves by now. I discovered it after "Breathless" and I've used it systematically ever since.

Cahiers: You haven't any "ideas" about cinema, but still, thematically present in "La Chinoise" . . .

Godard: Yes, it is a question in "La Chinoise," precisely because it is now in question. I don't see how one might diminish this question in films — paradoxically, in doing so one would tend towards the narcissistic — the extreme case will be the camera filming itself in a mirror.

Cahiers: A little like what you did in your sketch for "Far From Vietnam"?

Godard: No, not exactly. I filmed myself there because I couldn't do otherwise; it had to go that far, because we are all narcissists, everyone of us, at least as far as Vietnam is concerned; you've got to admit it.

Cahiers: Renoir has already questioned film's immediate influence; he remarked that the war broke out right after he made "Le Grande Illusion," a film for peace.

Godard: Right. Cinema hasn't the slightest influence. People thought the train pulling into the station in Lumiere's first film should be frightening. It was — the first time, not the second. That's why I've never understood censorship, not even ontologically. Censorship is based on the idea that image and sound exert some immediate influence on personal conduct.

Cahiers: You can't really place the effect of an image. . . .

Godard: I guess not, but no more and no less than the rest. Because everything has some kind of influence. If you forget that part of film that is formally "television," you could say that film has the "influence" of scientific research or Theatre or chamber music.

Cahiers: Does this undermine your confidence in film?

Godard: No, not in the least. Quite the contrary. But you've got to realize that the millions who have seen "Gone With the Wind" haven't been influenced by it any more than the many fewer who have seen "Potemkin." People credit film for juvenile delinquency; but movie attendance dropped in the United States in precisely those years when juvenile delinquency was increasing. Sociologists haven't even begun to study the question.

Cahiers: La Chinoise is a series of short sequences almost completely independent of each other.

Godard: It's a Film de Montage. I shot the sequences independently, and not in order. The order came later.

Cahiers: Do you mean it might have been different?

Godard: No, I don't. There was an order that had to be found. I think I found it. It's what I finally found, it's the order you see in the film; there can't be another. I admit I had a hard time editing it. We shot in the order . . . we shot in. As a rule I shoot sequences in chronological order, I mean with at least a provisional idea of the film's chronology, its logic—even if I've had in the end to permute whole sequences. This is the first time I've shot in an order that presupposed nothing. Oh, I knew that one shot followed another—sometimes, not always—when I filmed the discussions, for example. But for the most part they were independent. The linking came later. But that means they're not independent anymore; they're complementary, if not also coherent.

Cahiers: What guided you? Was it a logical coherence, or was it an emotional or simply a visual coherence?

Godard: It was always logical. But logic is visible in any one of a thousand ways. Here's an example: one of the texts presented in the discussions is a speech of Boukharin's. As soon as it's read, there's an inter-title: "Boukharin made this speech"; this is followed by a photograph of his accuser. I could simply have followed it with a photograph of Boukharin, but I didn't think it necessary; you've just "seen" Boukharin in the person who reads his speech. So I had to show his opponent instead — Vichynski, and eventually Stalin. That's why this is followed by a photo of Stalin. And since it's a young man who



"LA CHINOISE" will premiere on Monday as part of the University Art Museum's Godard Retrospective.

speaks in Boukharin's name, it has to be a photo of Stalin in his youth. But we're now in the period of the Stalin-Lenin feud. But at that time Lenin was already married. And one of Stalin's greatest enemies was Lenin's wife (Stalin was already plotting against Lenin). So I followed the shot of young Stalin with a shot of Oulianova, Lenin's wife — it's only logical. What has to come next? Well, it was revisionism that toppled Stalin. So then you see Juliette reading an ad in France-Soir, in which a Soviet Russia is advertising Czarist monuments. Therefore right after you've been shown the members of the firing squad that killed the Czar as young men. It's a theorem that presents itself like a puzzle. I have to find which piece fits which. You've got to induct, feel your way, and then deduce. There's nally only one way that fits, even if you have to try several combinations to get it.

Cahiers: When you edit, then, you do what most filmmakers do with their shooting-scripts.

Godard: In a sense, yes. But it's a kind of work that just isn't interesting if you do it on paper. If you like to work on paper, why do you have to make films? My position's a little like Franju's: as soon as I've imagined the film, it's as good as made; I can tell, vaguely; then, why shoot it? Well, to do right by the public; it's like Franju says, "to give them something to get their teeth into"; then he adds, "if I've finished my 800 pages, I don't see what's left to be done. Do they want me to shoot that? Okay, I shoot it — but that's so depressing you have to get drunk." There's only one way to avoid it, don't write a shooting-script.

Cahiers: So when you shoot, you shoot in the dark — but in total freedom, too . . .

Godard: No, this isn't the question. It's in shooting that you discover what you have to shoot. It's the same thing in painting, one color follows another. Since a film's shot with a camera, you've got to get rid of the paper — unless you go even further, like Norman McLaren — he's one of the greats — and "write" directly on negative film.

Cahiers: So in shooting you make a collection of items you've then got to classify.

Godard: No, I don't, because it's not a matter of just any items. If it's a collection, it's a collection that has some certain aim, a precise direction. And it's never a matter of just any film, but always of a particular film. You can only collect the things you need. My next film (Weekend, which opened in Paris on 29 December; its stars are Mireille Darc and Jean Yanne) is rather the opposite; it's an organized structure. All I had for La Chinoise was details, lots of details, I had to arrange. But for Weekend I have the structure but not the details. It's agonizing: the agony of being unable to find what I need, the agony of not being able to keep my commitment — since for the money I get, I contract to make a film. But even this is based on a false notion, for it isn't in terms of debts or of duty (in its bad sense) that the problem of work should be posed, but rather in terms of some normal activity — in terms of leisure, living a normal life. The tempo's got to be right.

Cahiers: Aren't there as many incompatibilities between writers and filmmakers as there are between filmmakers and the men at Rhodiaca — although the writers have already written a lot on film?

Godard: Well, if they have, as a rule it's only in the degree that film sometimes involves references to literary forms, or simply literary citations.

Cahiers: Do you think the esthetics of film is linked to the terms in which films

are circulated and viewed?

Godard: Yes. If you changed these conditions, you'd change everything. Today a film is subject to an incredible number of arbitrary rules. They say a film's got to last an hour and a half; a film's got to tell a story. Right, a film's got to tell a story; we all agree; the trouble is, we don't agree what a story is or what it's got to be.

Cahiers: What can you do right now, to change all that?

Godard: We've got to solve the technical problem first—everything that has to do with the economic factors, the financing, the projection, the albs. The young people who're just getting a start in film don't have to know everything. They can start without knowing anything but Lumiere and Eisenstein. They'll know something some day—the way Picasso learned about Negro art when he was thirty; if he hadn't run into it then, he'd have painted Les Femmes d'Alger a few years later; but he'd have been doing something else in the meanwhile. When you're still young you can always start over. Men have been working for them, even if their efforts have been disorganized, confused. They've got to list everything that's wrong with cinema, everything from theater-seats—to editing tables. I just bought one, I mean an editing table. They haven't really thought them out. They're manufactured by men who've never edited a film. I'm holding on to it, though; if I get the money together, I'm going to have it rebuilt.

Cahiers: How is it not really "thought out"?

Godard: Editing tables result from a certain esthetic; people have thought of them as little projectors. That's all right for men who think of editing as pencil notes on paper. The director goes in Monday morning and tells the film-editor where to make the cuts and splices. The film editor takes the film off the machine to another table to do as she's been told. If she's dealing with a man like Grangier or (Henri) Decoin — they can't be bothered — she does it all herself. It goes the same way in Hollywood, though the cutters are better. In any case, the editing is done as if it were on the side. But there are other filmmakers — Eisenstein was the first, Resnais was the second, I'm the third—who edit, each of us in his own fashion, at the editing table, with the image and against the sound. The problems of handling it just aren't the same. I wind the film back and forth. I splice the film without taking the reels off. If the editing table hasn't been designed for this, it sure isn't easy. It reflects a whole ideology. If editing tables are so designed, it's because most filmmakers are in the habit of editing this way. And after all, nobody told the men who make them to make them any other way. I used editing tables for the example, but it's the same with everything else. If you're going to make revolutionary film and if you're using a reactionary editing table, things aren't going to go well. I told Pasolini that his linguistics amounted to a shiny reactionary editing table. The more films I make, the more I realize that a film's really a fragile thing. It's difficult to make films; it's no less difficult to have them seen — it's all unbalanced. If these problems were first resolved — though I doubt it's ever going to happen in the West — you might discover other ways of working; you might do something really new. Something as new as the discoveries at the beginning of film. Everything was invented in the first 10 or 20 years of the silents, when technique moved hand in hand with production and distribution. We've lost sight of the ways these things are related; so they each go their own way—if you think they're going anywhere at all. The only





# Godard by Cahiers

thing I'd feel like writing for Cahiers—it would take time; I keep finding new things to say — is something about the way to get film off to a new start. To get off to a start you need some technical basis: of course it's not easy. The director of the Centre du Cinema in Algeria thinks he'll do better to have his films distributed by Jacquin or Tenoudju. That's the tragedy of the Third World; it's cornered, it's got money problems. Everything's in league against it, the way everything's in league against the unemployed. It's the way the Algerians are financing Italian movies, instead of films by young Algerians. They tried, but the kids spent it to make camp. They'd do better to halt production, to give the beginners the opportunity for some study and research to see as many good films as they can. Or they could have them work for television, or in the labs, or in the sound-studios. That would really be practical: the men who make films don't know what's going on in a cutting room or in a film lab. Everyone in film should do some time in another sector. You run into the same thing at all levels in film: people haven't been educated. It's a question of education. Right here in France you've got everything you need to do really good work. But the men who organise it are either loafers or robbers. They hire honest men but they don't train them, they don't give them responsibilities; they keep them cogs in a big machine. The people working in film have good intentions, they think they're doing the right thing. But they're locked—and unaware that they're locked—in a system of esthetic and economic assumptions. . . . That's the reason why things are the way they are now in film — even in Russia.

They nationalized their cinema — but ideologically, not practically. People still have to pay to see the movies; those that make money pay for more movies just like them.

If I have a definition of film, it's this: film is capitalism's agit-prop. The proof it's capitalism's best propaganda is that nobody's aware of it. . . . Film is subject to the kind of imperialism that's in power everywhere else. Those of us who are trying to make films that are "different" have got to be the fifth column and try to wreck the system.

Cahiers: Films are being made outside the system . . .

Godard: Yes. Bertolucci's not making American movies; neither is Resnais nor Straub nor Rossellini nor Jerry Lewis. But "different" film, good or bad, is no more than an infinitesimal fraction of a year's production.

Cahiers: But is there still in fact an "American" cinema?

Godard: No, there isn't. There's a cinema that calls itself American; but it's only the ghost of a past. The men who made Hollywood were poets or gangsters; they took Hollywood by force and imposed their poetic law. The only guy with guts today, the only one who's survived, is Jerry Lewis. He's the only man in Hollywood who's doing something else, who stays outside its categories, its norms.

Cahiers: Does this mean that film has by definition a political dimension?

Godard: Always. In the past that dimension was political but it remained unconscious. Today it's beginning to be conscious. No, let's say that people have started to seek for the language of its unconsciousness.

**Cahiers:** You've been saying that education's the big problem. The characters in *La Chinoise* are bourgeois. The bourgeoisie gave them the education they've started to question.

Godard: Everything follows from the way they've acquired their knowledge. Their education is an education in class. They're taught to behave like members of their class. I've said so in the film. I cut something out of the paper the other day about education in class as it's managed here in France; I've kept it because I'm planning a film on Emile; it's something Missoffe, the Secretary of Youth, said in his white paper on education: "The schools will express a social structure in providing a lengthy, abstract training for the youth selected essentially on the basis of family background to fill the highest posts in business and government. The training they will give the children of workers and peasants will be shorter and simpler for the place such people fill in the world requires a much more specialized education." No comment.

**Cahiers:** What's Emile to be like?

Godard: It will be a modern film, about a boy who'll refuse to go to his high school because it's overcrowded; instead he'll educate himself — by watching people, going to movies, reading, listening to the radio, looking at television. . . . Education is a mixed bag of techniques that need re-examination and correction — just like film. Everything needs to be reexamined. What's going to happen to a workman's kid when he wants to go to school? Right away he's going to get trapped in money problems. It's the Third World's problem. The scholarship system itself is immoral. They're the kids who deserve them who ought to get them. But the kids "who deserve them" — the schools operate just like the army, they're busy enlisting (the kids who don't enlist don't "deserve" to get their degrees) — are the ones who always come to class, in other words, the

ones who can afford to come to class every day; they aren't the ones who have to work to stay in school. Even if the ones who always come to class don't really learn any more than the kids who get the D's and F's. They don't know how to give the kids the desire or the time to learn. I'm not saying it's simple. I'm saying there's just too much that's plainly unacceptable and in really basic terms.

**Cahiers:** In the Eastern bloc it's not hard to get into school as to stay in school, but there too they're restricting some training to an elite. A thirty-year old day-laborer just can't hope he'll ever make movies; he'd have had to have gone to film school when he was twenty.

Godard: The work a day-laborer and an intellectual do are different quantitatively but not qualitatively. We've never been placed on the same footing. That's why we can't talk or work together. A day-laborer is never going to teach me a thing; I'm never going to teach him a thing. It ought to be just the opposite: there ought to be a lot I could learn from him, a lot he could learn from me. That's why there's a few who want to change all that — the Chinese, or more precisely sons of the Chinese. The hope for change isn't all that utopian if you're willing to think not in years but in hundreds of years. Cultures last a long time. How can you expect the new cultures that began just a hundred and fifty years ago with Marx to be finished. It'll take a thousand, two thousand years.

**Cahiers:** The last "cultural revolution" is already two thousand years old, the Christian revolution . . .

Godard: And it's only just beginning to come to an end. It's produced nothing but reactionaries. The image-and-sound industry is still its faithful mercenary.

(Selections from a "Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard," Cahiers Ducinema #194 October 1967. Translated by Alpha 60 Associates.)