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HIS 20TH CENTURY

★★★★HISTOIRE(S) DU CINEMA

Directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard
With Jean-Luc Godard.

★★MONTPARNASSE 19

Directed and written by Jacques Becker
With Gerard Philipe, Lilli Palmer, Anouk Aimee, Gerard Sety, Lila Kedrova, Lea Padovani, Denise Vernac, and Lino Ventura.

By Jonathan Rosenbaum

If you want to be "up to the minute" about cinema, there's no reason to be concerned that it's taken four years for Jean-Luc Godard's ambitious video series to reach Chicago. After all, James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, the artwork to which *Histoire(s) du cinema* seems most comparable, written between 1922 and 1939, was first published in 1939, but if you started to read it for the first time this week, you'd still be way ahead of most people in keeping up with literature. For just as *Finnegans Wake* figuratively situates itself at some theoretical stage after the end of the English language as we know it—from a vantage point where, inside Joyce's richly multilingual, pun-filled babble, one can look back at the 20th century and ask oneself, "What *was* the English language?"—Godard's babbling video similarly projects itself into the future in order to ask, "What *was* cinema?" Indeed, the fact that it's a video and not a film already tells you a great deal about its point of view.

Joyce's province was the history of mankind as perceived through language and vice versa, both experienced and recapitulated through a single ordinary night of sleep. Only superficially more modest, Godard's province is the 20th century as perceived through cinema and vice versa—the title can be translated loosely as "Film (Hi)story/Film (Hi)stories"—both experienced and recapitulated through technology. Clips and sound tracks are examined and juxtaposed—partly through the ordinary operations of a video watcher (fast forward, slow motion, freeze frame, muting, and programming) and partly through more sophisticated techniques like editing, sound mixing, captioning, and superimposition.

As "unwatchable" and "unlistenable" in many respects as *Finnegans Wake* is "unreadable," the first two parts of Godard's *Histoire(s)*—entitled respectively "All the (Hi)stories" and "One (Hi)story Alone," both showing twice tonight at the Film Center—are also almost as hard to translate as the Joyce work, though the English subtitles affixed to the version showing here do help somewhat. (The video contains some stretches in English and a few in untranslated Russian.) The subtitle, Orna Kustow, sensibly hasn't tried to do justice to all the wordplay, though a valuable service is carried out by identifying many of the film titles by their English equivalents rather than their literal translations. *J'ai la droit de vivre*, for instance, is subtitled as *You Only Live Once*, the original title of Fritz Lang's film, rather than "I Have the Right to Live," and *La loi de silence* is rightly identified as Hitchcock's *I Confess* rather than rendered as "The Vow of Silence." But even so, the original French titles contribute to Godard's meanings, so bilingual viewers do have an advantage. (When *Tempete sur le*



Histoire(s) du cinema

cinema is subtitled "Tempest Over the Cinema," for instance, this elides the reference to Pudovkin's *Storm Over Asia*, known in French as *Tempete sur l'Asie*.)

This isn't to suggest, on the other hand, that having a perfect grasp of French—which I don't, by the way—would make this video crystal clear. A poet who proceeds largely through intuitive metaphors and pithy slogans suggesting playful, dialectical paradoxes, Godard has never been easy to take "straight"—not even when he was writing criticism for *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 50s. Alone among his critical colleagues who became filmmakers, he insisted from the beginning that his writing and filmmaking were essentially alternate vehicles for the same discourse; his early movies functioned as film criticism the same way his reviews anticipated much of his filmmaking. (Significantly, the first part of the video essentially begins

with two technological sounds/images/rhythms: film turning on an editing table and Godard tapping typewriter keys—the first legato, the second staccato.) *Alpha-ville*, for instance, can be read in part as a critique of German expressionist cinema, and *Weekend* as a series of annotations on American movies interrelating murder and capitalism, such as *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Johnny Guitar*, and *Psycho*.

In his print criticism Godard often tended to value current films as theoretical models of what he regarded as the "essence of cinema." What ordinary reviewers might deem a "bad" film, he might exalt as the illustration of certain basic abstract principles. A good case in point would be his perverse but provocative defense in 1958 of Jacques Becker's penultimate feature, *Montparnasse 19*—a film coincidentally being revived this week in a

new print at the Music Box. A black-and-white feature fictionalizing the impoverished and dissolute last two years of Amedeo Modigliani's life (1919-'20), it was initially prepared by Max Ophuls—scripted with Henri Jeanson and cast (with Gerard Philipe as the famous painter and Lilli Palmer and Anouk Aimee as two of his lovers)—but Ophuls died before he could begin directing it. Becker—a major figure in French cinema (though woefully neglected in the U.S.) who assisted Jean Renoir on most of his major films of the 30s, then became a singular director in his own right—was asked to take over the production, and many problems ensued. Jeanson and the set decorator angrily left the film, objecting to Becker's changes, and though the film's U.S. distributor still credits the script to Ophuls and Jeanson, critic Tom Milne reports it was completely rewritten by Becker. (The film itself carries no script credit at all.) Modigliani's daughter wound up in a supervisory role on the production, and Becker himself—an exacting craftsman known as a stickler for period details—is said to have collapsed under the pressure.

The film certainly looks it; it's hokey, Hollywoodish, and often stilted in its mawkish treatment of Modigliani as a wastrel and lost soul. Moreover it can't be taken seriously as a portrait of the artist whom Manny Farber has plausibly described as an "Italian Jewish mannerist" and candidly caricatural portrait painter. ("He seemed to gather—and attract—types without any critical concern; one cannot help gasping at the number and variety of people that made up his company—people of every class from bohemians to prudish professionals, wispy schizoid teenagers, whores, sexless matrons. Every class but one: being a gigolo, he wasn't much interested in working stiff.") Philipe's portrayal seems neither Italian nor Jewish—Modigliani comes across as a French alcoholic who happened to paint pictures of whores, hardly any sort of mannerist.

As Andre Bazin put it, the hero of this film could just as well be a musician or poet. Yet at the same time, the movie gives some evidence of being deeply felt and personal: when, for example, the hero makes a disastrous visit to an American tycoon who wants to use his work to promote and package a line of perfume (a beautifully realized scene), and in the sinister figure of an art dealer (Lino Ventura) literally waiting for the hero to croak so he can move in to corner the Modigliani market. All things considered, while the movie is a mess compared to Becker masterworks like *Casque d'or* (1952) and *Le trou* (1960), it's nonetheless haunting and affecting at times, in much the same way that Charlie Parker's Dial recording of "Lover Man," made on the verge of nervous collapse, is—suggesting a kind of pain and turbulence that escapes altogether.

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Film Ratings

- ★★★★ = Masterpiece
- ★★★ = A must-see
- ★★ = Worth seeing
- ★ = Has redeeming facet
- = Worthless

GODARD

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er the control of art. One also finds a romantic sense of doom familiar from other biopics about underappreciated painters.

Back in 1958, Godard celebrated this pathos in theoretical terms, calling it a negative definition of cinema: the film, he declared, won't prove to you that "Modi" (as he's called in the film) loved Jeanne or that Beatrice loved Modi; "nor that Paris is a wonderful city, that women are beautiful or men are weak; nor that love is pleasant, that painting is amusing or that painting is tedious; nor that art is more important than anything else or anything else more important than art. No. *Montparnasse 19* will not prove that $2 + 2 = 4$. Its purpose lies elsewhere. Its purpose is the absence of purpose. Its truth, the absence of truth. *Montparnasse 19* will prove to you only that $2 - 2 = 0$."

From here, Godard developed a cock-eyed theory of modernism: "If a modern novel is fear of the blank page, a modern painting fear of the empty canvas, and modern sculpture fear of the stone, a modern film has the right to be fear of the camera, fear of the actors, fear of the dialogue, fear of the editing. I would give the whole of the postwar French cinema for that one shot, badly acted, badly composed, but sublime, in which Modigliani asks five



Montparnasse 19

francs for his drawings on the terrace of La Coupole.

"Then, but only then, everything pleases in this displeasing film. Everything rings true in this totally false film.

Everything is illuminated in this obscure film. For he who leaps into the void owes no explanation to those who watch."

This was Godard 35 years ago. Godard today is leaping into the void himself—a

void that he calls cinema—and, for better or worse, trying to explain it to those who care to listen. His explanations, moreover, are no longer those of a cinephile, at least in the same way. But the fear and the fascination and the poetry remain.

In order to suggest some of the complexity and richness of Godard's *Histoire(s)*, let me attempt to describe everything we see and hear over a two-minute stretch near the beginning. This section comes shortly after we hear Godard say, "All the histories that have been, that might have been," and its ingredients include a quote from Andre Bazin ("Cinema substitutes for our gaze a world corresponding to our desires") parsed out into five phrases, a dozen film clips, a passage from a Beethoven string quartet, and segments from the sound tracks of two separate films. The first clip, and the most subliminal, consists of successively larger color close-ups, connected by jump cuts, of a woman whose eyes seem to be painted blue; if I'm not mistaken, this woman appears in the film-within-the-film in Godard's own feature *Contempt*, which uses the Bazin quote as its epigraph. Then, behind "Cinema substitutes" are intercut alternating clips from Murnau's *Faust* (Mephistopheles greeting Faust at a crossroads) and Minnelli's *The Band Wagon* (Cyd Charisse dancing around Fred Astaire in a production number) while we hear both the string quartet and part of the narration and dialogue from Resnais' *Last*

Year at Marienbad, both of which continue through most of the segment. Behind “for our gaze” are intercut alternating clips from Renoir’s *Rules of the Game* (servants beating sticks against trees, rousing rabbits out of hiding for wealthy guests to shoot) and Mizoguchi’s *Ugetsu Monogatari* (a woman stumbling through a forest then fighting off a man who approaches her). Behind “a world” are intercut alternating clips from two films I don’t recognize, though they both appear to be French: in one, a man stands in the ocean holding a nymphet and teaching her how to swim, and in the other a group of wealthy couples enter a nightclub and start to dance. Behind “corresponding,” a clip of Lillian Gish limping exhaustedly across a street in Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms* is intercut with a raucous shot of a race involving dance-hall women (including Marlene Dietrich) riding cowboys piggyback from Lang’s *Rancho Notorious*, and at this point the sound track of the Lang film, in sync with the images, briefly takes the place of the *Marienbad* narration. Finally, behind “to our desires,” three intercut clips alternate: Gish continues to cross the street and catches her breath on the other side, masked soldiers on horseback in Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* attack with lances, and a lush period ball scene is glimpsed in a wide-screen color film I can’t identify; by this time, dialogue from an earlier section of *Marienbad* has supplanted the narration.

Here are a few thematic connections

that I suspect Godard has in mind: *Faust*, *The Band Wagon*, and *Marienbad* represent three different versions (or “substitutions”) of the Faust theme: the production number in *The Band Wagon* comes from a musical based on *Faust*, and Charisse dancing around Astaire in a gangster setting is explicitly linked in the editing to Mephistopheles tipping his hat to greet Faust, while the narration from *Marienbad* (beginning, “You haven’t changed—you still have the same remote eyes, the same smile, the same sudden laugh . . .”) constitutes a comparable seduction of the film’s heroine by the hero. In short, three forms of hypnotic persuasion into a world of fantasy fulfillment are presented together.

Similarly, one might surmise that Renoir’s rabbits and Mizoguchi’s fleeing woman are linked as the victims of predators, that Gish (fleeing from her father’s abuse) and Dietrich are accorded contrasting means of locomotion in relation to men, and that the three final images define three cinematic attractions “corresponding to our desires”—feminine fragility, war/violence, and production values. As for the string quartet, your guess is as good as mine.

Some of the subsequent juxtapositions include a witch burning from Dreyer’s *Day of Wrath* with Rita Hayworth singing “Put the Blame on Mame” in *Gilda*, the wicked witch from Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* with Bernard Herrmann’s *Psycho* score, Renoir’s *Elena et ses hommes* with “The Night They Invented Champagne” from *Gigi*, a shot from *Bonjour Tris-*

tesse with a Monet landscape, and successive evocations of Lang’s *The Indian Tomb*, Cukor’s *Bhowani Junction*, and Duras’ *India Song*. But I don’t want to suggest that you have to be able to identify Godard’s specific references in order to appreciate his video; at best it can help one to enjoy certain inflections. When one block of material announces, “1940, Geneva, Max Ophuls. He falls upon Madeleine Ozeray’s ass just as the German army takes the French army from behind,” it may help to know that Godard is alluding to Ophuls’s unfinished filming of a stage performance in Geneva of Moliere’s *Ecole des femmes*, but that isn’t really the principal point of this rude simile. Much more significant is the simultaneity of what’s happening in cinema and what’s happening in the world outside—a point made equally when Godard uses a guest at a masked ball in a skeleton suit in *Rules of the Game* (1939) to allude to concentration-camp victims. (Actually, a similar cast of mind can be seen in a mocking juxtaposition eliminated by the French censors from Godard’s first feature, *Breathless*—a cut from a shot of Charles de Gaulle’s car following Dwight D. Eisenhower’s in a procession down the Champs Elysees to Jean-Paul Belmondo following Jean Seberg down the sidewalk.)

In terms of the video’s overall myth, cinema and the 20th century—almost interchangeable in Godard’s terms—are contextualized by two key countries (France and the U.S.), two emblematic producers (Irving Thalberg, Howard Hughes), and two

emblematic world leaders (Lenin, Hitler); two decisive falls from cinematic innocence (the end of silent film that came with talkies and the end of talkies that came with video); and two decisive falls from worldly innocence (World War I and World War II). A good many of the epigrams and glosses might be said to emanate directly from these reference points: “But if myths start with Fantomas, they end with Christ,” “World War I would let Americans ruin French cinema,” “(Hi)stories with an ‘s’ . . . with an ‘SS,’” Thalberg as “the only man who conjured up 52 films a day,” Hughes as aviator identified with *Only Angels Have Wings*.

Once I played a record of Cyril Cusack reading aloud from *Finnegans Wake* at a friend’s house, and it provoked sustained giggles of delight from her two grammar-school children; I wouldn’t be surprised if Godard’s audiovisual babble had a comparable effect. Adults, more prone to worry over what they can’t immediately decode—and therefore less likely to see the forest for the trees—may have some problems with it, just as they might with Joyce. Godard’s work should be approached in a spirit of innocence. When asking big questions, it usually helps if you keep them simple, and despite some appearances to the contrary this is what I believe Godard has done. As he puts it at one point, “Cinema, like Christianity, is not founded on history. It tells a story and says, ‘Believe it.’” And at another: “It’s not a just image. It’s just an image.”