

INTRODUCTION TO A TRUE HISTORY OF CINEMA AND TELEVISION
JEAN-LUC GODARD
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First Voyage

Part One

Friday 14 April 1978

Fallen Angel, Otto Preminger (U.S.A., 1945)

À bout de souffle (Breathless), Jean-Luc Godard (France, 1960)

SERGE LOSIQUE: [*media res*] . . . *has gone to see a film. [laughter] Yes, he's a true cineaste, he watches films. First of all I have to explain myself. People are calling me on the phone, people are talking nonsense in the newspapers, saying there are administrative conflicts around this research course, which is starting late. I'm going to tell you quite frankly that there is no conflict or anything of the sort. First of all, we have always called this film research.¹ We are going to try by every means possible to discover the true history of cinema from a practical perspective, by which I mean through images and thanks to Godard's genius. But research is research, it's like a baby, no doctor can tell you in advance, even if you made the baby, whether it will be a boy or a girl. So if it is simply a question of transmitting, of saying 'Here, we're going to show Griffith, we're going to show Eisenstein', let's say to look for editing, this is easily done. At that point it becomes an idiotic university course; at that point you can open any book. And what will this give you? This is why we are going to try all kinds of experiments; we've already set up the dates for this first year.*

And I have to tell those of you who follow Godard that they must be patient, because Godard is a fellow in great demand—look, there's someone here from New York [gestures off-screen] because he loves Godard, he's patient. You have to be patient. I've been patient with Godard for ten years. It has taken me ten years to establish contact—it's true—and for him to feel at home here. I don't want to bother him with contracts or anything else. Cinema is an irrational thing, so accept the irrational and Godard will be here. He was already here a month ago, he's come back, he's promised he'll return before he goes to Mozambique in May, and that's how things will proceed.

*Now, why then, we changed our minds, we had nine students, or nine fanatics, we realised that the equipment we had at Loyola² or here was simply plagiarising television, playing with toys. Where is film history in all that? Nowhere. You might as well go to a junior college and play with their machines, you'll get absolutely nothing out of it. This is why today—I discussed this with Godard, I barely slept, we were up all night cooking something up, first of all for the first stage, the gardening stage, to obtain a true history of cinema. When I say gardening, I think the best thing is to begin with the films that influenced Jean-Luc Godard, who brought about the revolution in film you are familiar with, the French New Wave. And what influenced him, as you are no doubt aware, was American cinema, crime films. That's why today, while he is watching another film, he's asked you to watch two films, *Fallen Angel* by Preminger and then his own first film, *À bout de souffle*. And after that you can ask him anything you want.*

*We'll do the same tomorrow, we're going to show *M*, it's going back in time, you see, it's like cutting into film history, and his own film *Le Petit Soldat* (*The Little Soldier*). How does that sound? So Jean-Luc Godard will be here immediately after the films, take from them whatever you want, you will see how he came to make *À bout de souffle* under the influence of American cinema. This is what we propose for today. And if after this weekend we find something, then we'll head for a different kind of gardening—today we're going to start with potatoes, tomorrow or in the coming months it will be green beans, I don't know. We're searching, no more and no less. The first stage will be a kind of psychoanalysis of cinema taking Godard himself as its starting point and heading off in every direction. And maybe next year, because this is a long-term project, I'm telling you . . . Godard will be back in the next few days, I'm telling you this because it took ten years to get him here, and now he's here and he'll be back. He told me when he landed at Mirabel airport that the weather was fine but that it was snowing in Geneva. And I said that's nice to hear for a change. OK? So now you're going to see *Fallen Angel* and immediately after *À bout de souffle*. Try to see if there is something in common between the two films and then you can put intelligent questions to Godard. OK? Thank you very much.*

SERGE LOSIQUE: *All right, it was long. I make no apologies, it was meant to be. But tomorrow we are going to show just one film in the morning and another in the afternoon. That will give you a chance between twelve o'clock and two o'clock to have a sandwich or a coffee. So, if you have any*

questions about Preminger and Godard, but if you do, because we're recording everything, for the history of cinema of course, I'm going to ask you to go to the microphone.

JEAN-LUC GODARD: But maybe I should explain a little what's happened, that I've come here, that I have an agreement with the Conservatory . . .

SERGE LOSIQUE: *I already explained that.*

You explained it? All right, we'll . . . Oh, I can explain it, maybe I'll explain it a little differently.

SERGE LOSIQUE: *If you like, by all means, you're the head gardener.*

You spoke about gardening?

SERGE LOSIQUE: *Exactly.*

When I came here, I thought I was going to . . . I'm preparing for my own use a sort of history of cinema and television that I am going to call *Aspects inconnus de l'histoire du cinéma* ('Unknown Aspects of Film History'). And then I realised that first I had to be able to see films, which for me was difficult. It was something I was going to do with Langlois, but even in Paris this was difficult. Here it's quite easy to see films, I don't know how Serge does it but you ask him for a print of a film and there it is. Obviously it's a little far for me to come from Europe, and then we realised the last time I was here—to see a film, to do research and work, my idea . . . I would like to recount the history of cinema not only chronologically but rather archaeologically or biologically. To try to show how changes came about. Like in painting, if you had to recount its history: how perspective was created for example, the date when oil paint was invented, the date something else was invented, or the history of music if you want to do something different there. In cinema too things didn't just happen. Cinema was made by men and women living in society who at a given moment express themselves, and impress this expression, or express their impression in some way. And this creates geological layers, shifts in the cultural terrain. And to do this, you need the tools to screen films and analyse them, not necessarily very powerful tools but well adapted.

These tools don't exist, however, and I realised that . . . I'm 50 years old and I feel like I've finished my life, that I have maybe thirty years left and that I am going to, well, live off the

interest of my life, if you like, like a fifty-year investment; now I am going to start receiving interest. And what interests me, precisely, is to look at what I've done and in particular, because I made a few films, to take advantage of this and try to . . . I said to myself that this should be easier. Someone who had not made films and wanted to look back over their life, their family life, they might have some photographs, if they kept any, but they won't have everything. But their work life, for example, I don't think they would—if they worked on a General Motors assembly line or in an insurance company or as an airplane pilot . . . Or simply as a housewife, I don't think that a woman who has worked twenty years as a housewife raising children—she'll have a few pictures of her children, but I don't think she'll have a lot of pictures of the work she has done, simple things like doing the dishes, washing clothes, running errands. There won't be a lot of pictures of that. No images for her to look back on. Sounds, even fewer sounds.

And so I had the idea that in cinema, and I'm discovering that this is an illusion, it would be easy—because I made films, because making films consists in recording a series of photographs—it would be easy to watch them again and that I could at least start out from that past to look back over my own. Like a kind of psychoanalysis of myself and where I am in cinema. And I realised that the very history of cinema, which should be the easiest thing in the world to do and see, is absolutely impossible to see. You can see a film and then talk about it, but that's a pretty poor work method. We have to try to do something else. But we may not be able to do this right away.

I realised coming here with Serge in fact—we had planned on carrying out a kind of research. I had a few themes: the idea that the main thing in cinema was what is called editing, although people don't know what this is. Compared to music and painting, or literature, editing is something different and unique to cinema and television today. And this editing had to be hidden, because it is quite powerful—it places things in relation to each other and makes people see things . . . An obvious situation: a man whose wife is cheating on him, as long as he hasn't seen the other guy his wife is seeing, that is to say doesn't have two pictures, of him and his wife, or of the man and himself, he hasn't seen

anything. You always have to look twice. That's what I call editing, simply bringing things together. This is the extraordinary power of the image and the sound that goes with it, or of sound and the image that goes with it. And in my view the history of that, the geology and geography of that, is to be found in the history of cinema, but it's invisible. It's essential, I think, that it not be shown. In fact I think I am going to spend the rest of my life, or the rest of my working life in cinema, trying to see this—first of all to see it for myself and see where my own films fit into it.

(...)

Notes

1. In the context in which it is used here, the French word *recherche* also carries with it a sense of open enquiry and experimentation.
2. For background about the genesis of the present volume and about Concordia University, the Conservatoire d'art cinématographique/Conservatory of Cinematographic Art and other references to Montreal and Quebec in the text, see the essay by Michael Witt and the translator's introduction elsewhere in the present volume.