

INTRODUCTION TO A TRUE HISTORY OF CINEMA AND TELEVISION
JEAN-LUC GODARD
FORTHCOMING (2012) FROM CABOOSE
© CABOOSE 2010. REPRODUCTION WITHOUT PERMISSION PROHIBITED.

Third Voyage

Part One

Friday 9 June 1978

Faust, F.W. Murnau (Germany, 1926)

Rancho Notorious, Fritz Lang (U.S.A., 1952)

La Belle et la Bête (*The Beauty and the Beast*), Jean Cocteau (France, 1946)

L'Année dernière à Marienbad (*Last Year at Marienbad*), Alain Resnais (France, 1961)

Alphaville: une étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution, Jean-Luc Godard (France, 1965)

JEAN-LUC GODARD: [*media res*] . . . there aren't a lot of people [*three-second cut in sound*] always start out with very few people.

SERGE LOSIQUE: *You're right. That's true research for you. [Ten-second cut in sound] It's not what they call pre-cooked, ready-to-eat, here is Godard ex cathedra, blah blah blah, not at all. We're going to do this gradually, we'll end up with something concrete. For the moment this may be the best way we have of proceeding. I have to leave, so I leave you with Jean-Luc. Feel free to ask him whatever questions you like. I wanted to ask him a question about Marienbad, someone beat me to it, bravo. So I'll see you in a while.*

[*Serge Losique exits*]

My name is Paul Godard. [laughter] You have shown us this morning three or four pieces of films for us to get to know Jean-Luc Godard, your thoughts around Alphaville. Thank you for the films; now for books: can you do the same for books? Can you indicate, you have a literary culture, a great artistic culture, you should be able, you have all these things in mind when you make your films. You have shown a few sections of films, can you do the same thing by indicating to us a few titles of books, a few paintings or sculptures perhaps?

No, I won't do that for you with books, which are beginning to be my enemies. It's true I was raised, I had an intellectual upbringing. I was raised in the cultivated bourgeoisie. And what strikes me about this film is the way I used this entire culture, which I sifted through in my own manner and which today I no longer really have. So for books, or paintings, no, you have to ask other people. Besides it's been quite well done, it's been done quite often in a number of books. But it hasn't been done visually, precisely, so it isn't very interesting to me. Besides I don't understand very well what you would like to know.

. . . Jean-Luc Godard's bibliography around a work . . .

Yes, but what we are doing here doesn't . . . I have no interest, my only interest is in seeing pieces of films and trying to see a connecting thread, like a film, a musical theme. But we can only find this thread if we assemble the right instruments, capable of producing certain notes at a certain time, and the people to produce them. At that point we may discover a kind of music and express something that happened or that we wish to happen.

I have been a part of film history simply because I made films. Other people have been a part of it in other ways, by going to see films for example. But no one filmed them or questioned them at that moment, so we can't have a very good idea of what happened. But there is a whole section of film history, the principal section—we won't even mention television, because it's so many billions of individuals and hours spent watching—but when people do a history of cinema, they do it using the films only. But you should also be able to do it using the way viewers watch films. There are too many of them, but there would be lots of interesting things, so at least we can do it using the point of view of people who made films. This has never been done because it is always literary types who do film history, and even today film criticism is done by literary types. Writing film criticism means writing: 'This is good'; 'what's-his-name acts well'; 'what's-her-name acts badly'; 'extraordinary spectacle; lovely colours'; that sort of thing. And then they put a photograph so that the newspaper reader can be certain that this is the film they're talking about. [laughter] But the photograph has no other purpose; critics don't use photographs, they don't need them.

I think I'm quite alone in the cinema. There are not many people—this is something today I am quite certain of. So I've spent twenty years, twenty whole years to get to the point, let's say, of growing up. I've spent about twenty years in film, meaning I'm still quite young in film even though physically I'm 50 years old, meaning I'm beginning to grow old. But in the cinema I'm fifteen, twenty years old, I feel like I'm quite young, in full possession of my powers. And I'm starting to be able to see things and see what I'm doing. The last time I told a friend: 'I'm beginning to see in *Le Mépris* what isn't good, which shots are bad, etc.' and he said to me: 'Can you tell me which ones?' But I couldn't say. Today, however, thinking about it, I realise that it is moments in the shot and they weren't seen because they were part of the shot. When shots are shorter, you can see more easily that certain shots shouldn't have been made. But because there are so many of them, you don't see either, because they are carried along. It's like in a newspaper. If there was a single headline, you could see. But when there are sixty pages, you can't see what doesn't work perfectly well.

I'm beginning to understand a little about how talking film took the place of silent film, because you can see—and this is important—I realise that a film like this is very similar. That's why, each time I show one of my own films, I always try to show a silent film beforehand, because people no longer know, they express . . . Even not very good silent filmmakers expressed themselves a little better, I think, simply because the film spoke in a different manner. And sometimes there were intertitles, some of which were seen as titles, but at the same time they had the same weight as a shot, so that the following shot could start all over again if you like. Today we saw that there was . . . It was like back then with silent film: there was a shot, and after the shot an intertitle, and then back to the shot or another shot. And so what did the invention of the talking film consist of? No one has ever said. I thought of it only two weeks ago. What did it consist of? Well, they removed a shot, they removed the shot with the intertitle and put, side by side . . . Meaning there were three shots and they removed one and made one shot out of the other two. They removed the shot with the intertitle. The intertitle shot was before the mouth and then afterwards

the mouth did this [*opens and closes mouth silently to imitate silent film actors talking*]. That was silent film. And talking film consisted of simply letting a shot slip . . . and the mouth [*bouche*], like in real life, began to talk. But it was interesting, because silent cinema, before, could result [*déboucher*] in something, and I think the system was such that no one wanted to . . . it would have changed a lot of things to be able to *see* things. It would have changed, and I think this is the history we have to tell. This is the project Losique has offered to help with at the start: to recount this history, something that might have changed. The means of changing, or at least the means for seeing that change was possible. Because I believe that silent cinema—this is my belief, you can say this is easy enough to say because it didn't continue, but it's my thesis and examples exist—it would have changed things. In Russia for example, when they were changing things, why did Russia become what it became? It's not easy, to say because so-and-so was a baddie, or things like that, they were carried away by the . . . In any event cinema—we can't see this elsewhere—cinema represents communication, it represents the future television. You can see that cinema, when Lenin and when the Soviets were launched, cinema was one of the most important things for them. And if you were to study rather quickly, over three or four years, the evolution of two or three leaders, you could see that there was a world that might have changed and which didn't change.

And film, I think, because it recorded that, retained traces of it. And today, we can watch these traces, they're like a direction that would have ended—how? I don't know—or would have truly begun how? I think that the history of cinema is like a child who might have learned a little differently, or who began to understand something different than the child who is born and absolutely refuses to say the words 'mommy and daddy'; you sense that this child will be different. And what do they do? They declare the child abnormal. Well, silent cinema was declared abnormal by literature. That's my point of view. And later it was normalised by making it talk, and today it has great difficulty in becoming something.

(. . .)