

The Cinémathèques and the History of Cinema

Jean-Luc Godard

After twenty years of cinema, around 1967/68, and due to the social movements taking place around me, I realised that I didn't quite know how to make movies anymore... Even how I believed it to be, I didn't know it. I asked myself too many questions: 'But, what should I show after this shot? And, after all, why does one shot need to follow from the previous one? Why does it have to be this way?' In the last instance, I asked myself quite natural questions, but there wasn't a natural answer. And it has taken me ten or fifteen years, I don't know, to try to relive... One sooner or later goes back to his or her homeland: I have decided to go back to my homeland, cinema, since I need images to live and to show them to others, perhaps I need it more than anyone else. And in a very extreme form, because I was in a certain moment of film history and, little by little, I have grown to become interested in the history of cinema. But I am interested in it as a film-maker, not as in the texts I have read by Bardèche or Brasillach, Mitry or Sadoul (that is: Griffith was born that year, invented this or that thing, four years later, he did something else), but rather in asking about how the forms he used were created and in thinking about how this knowledge could help me. And three or four years ago I had an idea for a project: to begin what I would call a 'visual history', seen as certain aspects in general invisible, a visual history of cinema and of television. At the same time, I tried to get hold of my own technical equipment, just as a painter tries to have his or her own colour tubes and, during the courses in Montreal, I realised that this was almost impossible.

In my view, films are almost not seen because, for me, to see films implies having the option to compare them. But to compare two things, not to compare one thing with the memory one has thereof; to compare two images and, in the moment when these are seen, to indicate certain relations. Now, to make this possible, a certain technical structure (which currently exists) is needed. In fact, before, one could say: 'OK, one would need to project the film.' If one says: 'In that film Eisenstein takes the parallel editing theoretically inaugurated by Griffith', then one should screen Griffith and Eisenstein at the same time, one next to the other. Then one could certainly see, just as justice can see all of a sudden when something is true or false. And in this way it could be debated. However it is obvious that placing one film theatre next to the other is rather difficult. But now there is video. Films can be placed one next to the other, and be compared. One could think this should be the first task of the Cinémathèques and of film schools. Unfortunately it seems the last thing to be done, and this is precisely why, the only history that could be written, that of cinema, is not being written and there is no difference between making cinema and writing the history of cinema. Cinema writes its own history as it is being made. It could even give some indications as to 'how history, should be made, the history of mankind, of women, of children, of cultures, of social classes', because cinema is in itself its own historical matter and it could give good indications. The Cinémathèque is the only place where something like this could take place and I think that the fact that this is not happening is not

something innocent in the context of the current trend of society, in which it is virtually almost forbidden. In theory, people say: ‘Yes, this is such a good idea!’ but in practice it’s not possible.

This is something I realised in Montreal, because I had as a principle to locate myself in the history of cinema to know where I found myself: it was a psychoanalysis of sorts said out loud. We programmed two days of screenings twice a month, on Fridays and Saturdays: on the morning, three or four film extracts and, in the afternoon, one of my films. Depending on each case, we selected fragments of films with sound or silent, which in my view related to the film screened in the afternoon. Now, once or twice – once in particular – something happened. Spectators saw (or at least they remembered they had seen – as the memory of a lightning – and could not see it anew; if there had been video players, they could have seen and kept the proof), I was saying that people saw something. It was a Friday or a Saturday. Out of my films, we were going to screen *Week-End* in the afternoon. I said to myself: ‘What extracts can I select? *Week-End* is a rather barbarian film, monstrous, and so I’m going to select monster films for the morning.’ I asked Losique to select a fragment from *Freaks* by Browning (for the simple reason that I had never seen it); a fragment of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (which, in my view, is the arrival of the monsters, the barbarians, against those who call themselves civilised); *Germania anno zero* (that is, a territory after the downfall, the end of the monster). I also had Hitchcock’s *The Birds* (that is, humans attacked by other beings) and after that, weirdly, because to begin with Losique couldn’t find *Freaks*, I had a first *Dracula* and a short excerpt from Feuillade’s *Les Vampires*. And the fact of seeing a full fragment of *Germania anno zero* in-between other excerpts... [...] and weirdly, the fact of seeing *Germania anno zero* in-between *Dracula* and *The Birds*... strangely enough, it seemed as if *Dracula* the vampire wasn’t the monster, but rather all the people around him: the bankers and the high society of London at the time the story is taking place...

In my view, the history of cinema would be the history of two complots. The first one: the complot of the talkies against silent cinema, since its beginnings. Second complot: words, which could have helped silent cinema... A complot against the fact that history will not be written... they will find a way to prevent history from being told – otherwise it would be too much, because if one knows how to tell one’s own history, then... oh, I don’t know... the world changes!

And I ask myself if the personnel working at Cinémathèques may have any interest in asking themselves... if other people think in the same way about this, about the production of films related to conservation. Preservation, well, it is better or worse, but one asks oneself what is the interest in preserving impeccably if one sees that... what is being preserved? An image. What is interesting to preserve is the relationship between one image and another. It is not so dramatic to preserve a film as long as three photographs of a film by Vertov and three others of a film by Eisenstein are preserved, this way we can know what was happening: this would be the task that journals should face. And if we have a film, so much better, because in that way it can be seen and it is a pleasure, but it is not absolutely necessary. It is so much better to make them, and this was, as I see it, one of Langlois’s great ideas: certainly films should be screened, but they also should be made. It was primarily an incitation to make films.

I would rather consider the Cinémathèque as a place of production and not only of mere presentation. Because if it is a place of presentation and circulation, it does the same as the other places of presentation and circulation. ●

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