

# Michael Witt. 'Jean-Luc Godard. Cinema Historian'.

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Jean-Luc Godard is, probably, the filmmaker who has deeper and most thoughtfully studied the relation between cinema and history. He is, certainly, one of the 'historians' who has developed this inquiry in the most radically cinematic way. Through the experimentation with montage, both in its dimension as a tool for creation and as a conceptual thinking category, Godard has opened a horizon and settled a territory to think and 'historize' cinema (and images) through its own matters and mechanisms. This, at least, should imply a renewal (if not revolt) in the way in which theoretical and historical approaches to images are conceived, and a mandatory reassessment of the researching methods in the field of arts; a place to reflect not only about how we know cinema –and images– but rather how cinema is a source of knowledge itself.

It is thrilling, therefore, to discover the genealogy, development and potentials of this sort of *laboratory* through the entire work of Godard, composed by such a number of different formats as cinema, video, television and collages, and which is in a certain respect was condensed in his series *Histoire(s) du cinema*. This is precisely Michael Witt's quest in *Jean-Luc Godard. Cinema Historian*. Witt, also co-editor of other books devoted to the work of the artist such as *Forever Godard* (Black Dog Publishing, 2004) and *Jean-Luc Godard: Documents* (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 2006), makes an in-depth and detailed analysis of the filmmaker's work and thinking, to illuminate the Godardian theorem, according to which cinema, in particular cinematic montage, reconstitutes the concept, the experience and the form of history: "The central tenet of his theorem – is the proposal and demonstration of a cinematically inspired method of fabricating history based on the principle of montage of disparate phenomena in poetic imaginary." (Witt, 2013: 2).

What this theorem seems to be insisting in, and which remains as a constant idea through Witt's pages, is demonstrating that cinema provided images a tongue, a form to expressing themselves; hence, the concept of cinema as an epistemological tool and a thorough element to formulate ideas. *A form that thinks*, as expressed by Godard in the chapter 3A. In this fall of the tyranny of word –in "the idea of drawing as a more direct, less prescriptive means of expression than writing"(2013:192),

for instance, the quest for a historiographical methodology alternative to linear, chronological and totalitarian historical discourses arises. A quest that Godard himself solves at the *Moviola*, bringing to the fore the tension, the possibility of combination and comparison implied in the movement of montage, to formulate a nuclear, anachronistic and subjective thinking regarding history.

The structure of the book is similar to that of *Histoire(s) du cinema*. Despite it is divided in seven chapters, each with a clear body of work and a thesis, some key referents such as Malraux, Langlois or Daney, and some Godardian motives such as the notion of 'montage', 'projection' or the 'Orphic' nature of the concept of history, are transversal to the study and developed through various sections creating certain resonances. The first chapter exposes a detailed genealogy of the series based on the integral work of Godard, shedding lights on his quest for a method that not always had the means to be expressed; the second and third chapter, probably the central and most interesting body of the study, focus on the one hand, in the exploration and foundation of the videographic device and on the other, in the concept of history that audiovisual experimentation brings about. The fourth section studies the relation between cinema and the concentration camps based in the Godardian reproach regarding the absence of cinematographic images about it, to explore in the fifth chapter the notion of nationhood in the postwar cinemas and cinephilia as territory. The sixth chapter questions the influence of television on cinema, and finally, in the seventh chapter the author reflects on the sound design of Godard's work, opening a perspective to approach the filmmaker as a multimedial artist.

The biggest gain in *Jean-Luc Godard. Cinema Historian* lays on the fact that, besides incorporating Godard's ideas within the French cinematographic tradition (Vigo, Cocteau, Bresson, Epstein, Renoir) and settling a number of filmic references as precedents of *Histoire(s) du cinema* (*Film sur le Montage* de Jean Mitry in 1965 or *La machine a refaire la vie* de Julian Duvivier in 1934), Witt actually accomplishes to point out – almost as if it was evident– the links between the Godardian theorem, formulated from cinema, and an anti-positivist quest

already founded from the field of history and art philosophy (Charles Peguy, Walter Benjamin, André Malraux). Witt quotes an excerpt of *Clio, dialogue de l'histoire et de l'âme païenne*, postumos work of Peguy:

'I was given a name, History, and a first name, Clio. What would it have been if it had had nothing at all to do with text, but with movement itself, with an idea, with reality, with life (...) Or simply if it had still had something to do with a text, but had had nothing to do with determining it on the basis of words, but on an idea, for example, or on an intention, or on a movement.' (2013:79)

Cinema, therefore, would become the way of materializing a certain way of knowing, of experiencing time, that would be far removed from that founded by the word, and which was being conceived even before the world knew the invention of the cinematograph. As Witt shows, Godard articulated it through montage: way beyond its potential to provide plasticity to the for or continuity to a narrative, for Godard, montage is conceived and practiced as a writing tool to establish a plastic thinking with images; with an idea, an intention, a movement. •