

FOREVER GODARD

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It was the early 1970s. The mighty United States was exercising all its military potential on a tiny state of poor farmers. Carpet Bombing in Hanoi and other parts of North Vietnam was a routine exercise. Just like many people from different parts of the world, quite a large number of US citizens were opposing the military operation, they were very much annoyed by the news of war crimes and human rights violations in Vietnam by the occupied force. Many protesters in the US like the boxing legend Md. Ali had to face the ire of the administration. Hollywood megastar Gene Fonda was always outspoken against the autocratic attitudes of the US authority. By almost putting her career at stake she opposed the US war effort in Vietnam and visited the war-devastated country. She got the nickname Hanoi Jane in America and had to face criticism, humiliation, and assaults on many occasions even long after the cessation of war. During her visit to Hanoi in 1972, a press photographer Joseph Kraft clicked her with a group of Vietnamese communist soldiers popularly known as Vietcong. The photograph was published in L'Express in the month of August of that year. The camera focuses on that news photograph and on the soundtrack Jean Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin initiate their conversation, *Letter to Jane, Investigation of a still* (1972) begins. The 52 minutes film scans the said photograph on several occasions in different modes, and also uses stills from the film *The magnificent amberson* (1942) by Orson Welles, *Kluge* (1971) by Alan J. Pakula, and starring Jane Fonda and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) by John Ford, and starring Jane's father Henry Fonda, as well as publicity stills from *Tout va Bien* (1972) by Godard and Gorin. Though for the majority of the time the screen is occupied by the said photograph of Jane towering above some Vietnamese. The directors repeatedly analyze the image, in its original form, or cropped, to examine and deconstruct various elements of the image with the help of voice over debates from Gorin and Godard. The film is a bitter critique of the Hollywood star system, criticizes Hollywood iconography and at the same time raises questions about the role of the intellectuals in revolutions and their involvement in class struggles. Many observers marked the film as the purest example of minimalist political filmmaking. Minimal filmmaking means cinema that involves minimal dependence on the technical conventions of cinema as a narrative form. Ultimately *Letter to Jane* arises as an extraordinary example of a political essay written on the screen. Jean Luc Godard (1930-2022) interrogated society, the system, and the world through his images from *Operation Beton* (1954) to *The Image Book* (2018) and provides the medium with a new kind of expression.

From 1958 to 1963 about 170 French directors made their debut feature films. It was the time when cinema was losing its audience in the western world. In France, this adverse situation opened up some new avenues for young filmmakers. Some esteemed producing companies assumed that it is better to invest the cost of a big-budget film on several low-budget productions in the expectation of making more than adequate profit. The producers were even more impressed by the need to employ young directors to capture the teenage market. Loi D' Aid-a quality film award, introduced in 1948 also helped the experimental filmmakers greatly. At that time five nascent iconoclasts Francois Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol and Jean Luc Godard were writing in Cahiers du Cinema and viewing films for hours and days and weeks at a time in Andre Bazin's Cinema Club and Langlois's Cinematheque. They learned about films by studying them rather than creating them and here lies the importance of their work. The release and success of Truffaut's *The 400 blows*(1958) are celebrated as the official beginning of the French New Wave Cinema. This particular term Nouvelle Vague or New Wave was coined by Francois Giroud in L'Express. Though some earlier films especially Agnes Verda's *La Pointe Curte*(1955) bear the stylistic specialities of Nouvelle Vague. Godard came to the direction after all of his friends but with the release of *A Bout de Souffle* or *Breathless* (1959) French New Wave Cinema started to be mentioned wherever cinema is discussed or produced.

Jean Luc Godard was born on December 4, 1930. His father was a French doctor and his mother was a Franco-Swiss lady from a very wealthy family. Though the family lived in Paris young Jean Luc Godard spend his summer holidays at the estate of his maternal grandparents in Switzerland in a culture of literature, sport and religion. This protestant upbringing influenced Godard. His biographer Antoine de Baecque mentioned this in his book. His parents were separated after the Second World War and it left a deep scar on the teenager. Young Godard had an ambition of publishing novels. He studied first in Nyon and then in Paris. He received a certificate in ethnology from Sorbonne University, Paris. In 1950 he published Gazette du Cinema along with Eric Rohmer and Jacques Rivette. He even used the pen name Hans Lucas on some occasions when he was writing for Cahiers du Cinema. In the early 1950s, he broke up with his family and took a little international trip then returned to Switzerland and joined the Grand Dixence Dam project as a workman. With his working experience and savings from his income as a workman, he produced and directed his first film *Operation Beton*. This is an honest documentary but the principles which would always control the work and personality of Godard are well evident here.

Based on a storyline offered by Truffaut he made *Breathless*. It resembles a thriller. The film opens with a quotation from 19th-century French novelist Stendhal (Pen name of Marie-Henri Beyle). It says "*We are going to speak of dreadful things*". The quotation is replaced by a dedication to 'Monogram Pictures', a small American film-producing company famous for low-budget Western and Horror movies. In the film Michel Poicard(Jean Paul Belmondo), an

anarchist automobile thief kills a cop who was following him on his motorcycle. In Paris, he finds his former girlfriend Patricia (Jean Seberg) who sells the New York Herald Tribune. Michel has convinced Patricia to migrate to Italy with him. Michel comes to Paris to encash a crossed cheque but fails to do so. This money caught up in a social nexus of financial institutions is opposed to the cash that Michel steals from both friends and strangers. Ultimately Patricia denounces Michel; the Police identify him and track him down. Michel's infatuation with Humphrey Bogart, the Hollywood star and his reenactment in the role of a Hollywood gangster cannot last for long and shot down by the police. Michel before dying makes one of his favourite comic faces and Patricia responds. The film was shot entirely in the original location in the streets, highways, hotel rooms, cafes, etc. Godard did not hesitate to disobey the internationally accepted rules of continuity editing. The Highway sequence ruthlessly violates the codes of spatial and graphic continuity editing which were so scrupulously observed by the editors of that period (even now). Godard did not hesitate to alternate hyper-fragmentation of the image and rapid montage with a long continuous take. The film was made entirely without sound and dubbed later.

Before Godard, cinema had a traditional language and narrative structure that moviegoers had come to expect. Godard revolutionized filmmaking by upending the traditional storytelling techniques and cinematic language in the hopes of transforming film into a revolutionary art form.(Greene&VanTine,2019)

In *The Little Soldier* (1960) for the first time, Godard worked with Anna Karina and their relationship developed to a personal level. Anna played the protagonist in seven out of twelve films Godard made between 1960 and 1966. *The Little Soldier* was banned by the French authority for almost three years due to its comment on the Algerian liberation war. The narrative unfolds like a gangster film but turns on the theme of betrayal. Bruno(Michel Subor) belongs to a fascist terrorist organization fighting the freedom struggle in Algeria has deserted and hidden in Geneva during the Algerian War and falls in love with Veronica(Anna Karina) who works for a left-wing organization. From this relationship, Bruno finds meaning in life but the film ends with Bruno's betrayal and Veronica's death. Later Godard's film has become more dialectical and rhetorical in structure. Godard himself described them as "Critical Essays". One may consider *The Soldiers/The Riflemen* (1963) as the first of those "Critical Essays". Here Godard has created a fable about the nature of war and it's like a parody of the films of the Lumiere Brothers and at the same time homage to those early inventors. The narrative line of the film is fragmented and almost achieves Brechtian detachment from its subject.

Roberto Rosellini, the legendary figure of Italian Neo-Realist Cinema worked as a co-writer of the film. *La Chinoise*(1967) tells about a Maoist guerrilla cell at the Nanterre campus of Paris University. Godard had explained his intention to make *La Chinoise* in an interview.

Why La Chinoise? Because everywhere people are speaking about China. Whether it's a question of oil, the housing crisis, or education, there is always the Chinese example. China proposes solutions that are unique... What distinguishes the Chinese Revolution and is also emblematic of the Cultural Revolution is Youth: the moral and scientific quest, free from prejudices. One can't approve of all its forms... but this unprecedented cultural fact demands a minimum of attention, respect, and friendship. (Wolin Richard2010)

Surprisingly within a year, it took place in reality. Students at Nanterre are instrumental in beginning the University rebellion that led to the events of May 1968 which had shaken the world. Probably Godard's most violent attack upon Western capitalist society is *Weekend*(1967).A young couple becomes trapped in a monumental weekend traffic jam which Godard renders with a 4-minute long single slow lateral tracking shot that concludes at a terrible accident spot. Then the film is dominated by images of mindless slaughter even the act of cannibalism stands as the mirror image of capitalism. As a customary film show concludes with a "The End" board on screen as it is "Fin" in French film but the *weekend*ends with "Fin De Cinema" which means the end of cinema. Godard literary declares the end of his cinema to enter into a new chapter of his self-expression.

'I only wanted to establish that what we have done in cinema is 100 percent mistaken and the direct opposite of what we should be doing...'- Dziga Vertov(Vertov,1923)

Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin actually united in a dream of revolutionary cinema and formed the Dziga Vertov group. Dziga Vertov the revolutionary filmmaker of Soviet cinema denounced narrative cinema of all forms in his theory and practice. All of Godard's films between 1968 and 1973 were produced under the banner of this new collective. Godard and Gorin were the principal creative forces behind these films, but usually, they went without on-screen credit. Most of the films of this time period were credited to theDziga Vertov Group collective. In this period Godard used agitation techniques of Soviet revolutionary cinema, tried to abandon narrative completely, and exercised Marxist-Leninist principal in cinema. Student's struggle of May 1968 had a tremendous influence on him, that revolutionary period demanded a response from the French intellectuals. Godard's response was through his new film collective; through his new expression even he criticized his own films of the earlier period. This creative part of his life is popularly known as the Maoist period.*La Gai Savoir* (1968)is the first film of this period.

The political and aesthetic ideas Godard raised in the political films from LE GAI SAVOIR on delineate his theoretical concerns. Yet those films often presented ideas as slogans or in some other distanciated way. Godard never handed the audience a completely worked out political theory or program of action. Audiences had to work with the concepts presented to create their own political syntheses. In many cases, only by disagreeing with one or more of the specific political points that Godard and Gorin raised, could the audience enact what the makers had

hoped their films would achieve. The films' ideas were to be considered, erased, and amended dialectically in comparison with the audience's own political experience. (Julia Lesage, 1983)

At the Yanan Forum in 1942 Mao Zedong urges the cultural workers: to "struggle on two fronts," The Dziga Vertov Group films used to quote that in their films. *La Gai Savoir* is a cinematic essay dealing with the philosophical assumptions of structural linguists regarding the role of language as an instrument of social conditioning and control. *Wind from the East* (1969) is based on the writings of Mao Zedong and Brecht, the film is a collage of polemics, politics, and agitprop theatrics. *Pravda* (1969) is itself a fairly minimalist piece with two voice-over, those of Godard and an anonymous woman. Films like *Vladimir and Rosa* (1972), *Letter to Jane* (1972), and others were the outcome of the collective. The association between Godard and Gorin ended in 1973. Then Godard started his experiment with a combination of film and videotape. *Number Two* (1975) is the first film of this period. In this phase films were produced under the banner of 'Son Image'. Some of these films were co-directed by Anne-Marie Mieville with whom a personal bonding began that lasted for a long and Godard moved to a village in Switzerland for the rest of his life. Through Son Image Films Godard pioneered the process of interrogating cinematic images by offering two contradictory perspectives. In the meantime, he influenced a whole generation of young filmmakers from different parts of the world.

In 1998 Gaumont Company released a four and half hour long video series namely *Histoire(s) du Cinema*, Godard's epic is an unprecedented work in the history of modern art and culture. According to Godard the history of cinema was never published properly, and historians have failed to realize the potential of cinema as the source of history. This belief of the director is visible in this cinema essay. *Histoire(s) du Cinema* certainly not only deals with cinema but also with the history of its relationship with television, with other art forms, with the social, political, and economic changes of the twentieth century, and with the tendencies of film interpretation and appreciation. It also examines Godard's life and his position in the history of cinema. Colin Mac Cabe wrote about this work in his biographical book on Godard:

*...a history of his chosen art form which is also a history of his own life and the history of the century. It is difficult to find a comparison of this work, which certainly has no parallel within film or television, but perhaps the aptest is Dante's Divine Comedy which takes elements of one life to provide a perspective on human history. Dante is also apt because it is the writing of the Divine Comedy in Italian which signals the real beginning of a recognizable European culture; it is not an exaggeration to say that *histoire(s) du Cinema* marks its end.--(Colin Mac Cabe ,2005)*

The Video essay series is divided into eight episodes. Episodes have a significantly different structure, aim, and ideas but at the same time blend into each other. Godard uses thousands of clips from films and television, audio clips from radio programs, drawings, paintings, animations and texts, extracts of music, and some recitations and also compiles a number of sequences that

are shot exclusively for this project. It tells about the relationship between cinema and the world that is represented in it and the cinema and the world within which it exists. Cinema was invented at the fag end of the 19th century, and throughout the 20th century, cinema is involved in the recording. Thus becomes a treasure of history. Godard toiled for years to complete this monumental project. In the post-Maoist period when with the collaboration of Anne-Marie Mieville in Sonimage projects he had started his preparation even it is evident that such preparations are actually much older. Godard believed in the exemplary power of cinema to express indescribable more than any other art form. In *Histoire(s) du Cinema* he has justified his hypothesis by compiling a few clips. *Histoire(s) du Cinema* is a unique effort not only for cinema; it is true for any art form. Michel Witt concludes his book Jean Luc Godard, Cinema historian on *Histoire(s) du Cinema* with

Histoire(s) du Cinemais fundamentally inspirational and productive: It is not only a bonfire of the art of the past but also a time capsule filled with traces of films, evidence of lifelong passion for cinema, and a record of the secret of cinematographic montage. Ultimately, it is an incendiary device designed to be projected into the future to nourish art-forms as yet undreamed of, and to ignite an artistic renaissance at some distant, unforeseeable moment in time: the image will come at the time of a resurrection. In their opening tale of their marvelous collection of sketches set in and around the world of cinema published in 1923, Quelques Histoires de Cinema Charles-Felix Tavano and Marcel Yuonnet recounted the tale of discovery by a group of construction workers, in the year 3024, of a tightly sealed chest buried deep in the ground, containing five reels of ancient films. Once restored and projected before astonished, rapt audience, these fragments spark a thirty-five century artistic revolution, inspiring a group of young directors, the 'Primitive'. Histoire(s) du Cinema is that chest. (Michel Witt 2013)

Godard never took a rest; even when he had decided to leave this world he was engaged with more than one film project. He started with French new wave films, then engaged himself to make Marxist-Leninist film collective, after a brief intermediate Sonimage phase he initiated his further experiments with film, video, and other media, and through six decades his works mesmerized, surprised, annoyed, agitated and inspired not only the cinephile but also the people who are interested in art, culture, politics, and society as a whole. In his last film *The Image Book* he quotes Peter Weiss' *The Aesthetics of Resistance* at the concluding part of the film. It's uttered over the black screen:

"Even if nothing turned out how we'd hoped, it would not have changed what we'd hoped for."

From beginning to end he had never compromised with his own ideological stand, which had led to a bitter situation even with his friend Truffaut. His activism was not restricted in filmmaking or writing.

Many critics have correctly mentioned what James Joyce and Pablo Picasso have done in literature and painting, and Godard has done that in cinema. As Picasso Godard reveals to us

through his work and it is impossible to separate him from his film, politics, and worldview. As it is mentioned here:

“In film mythology, the name ‘Godard’ probably does represent something like the ‘last of the great auteurs’. But as Godard likes to remind us, the important words in the phrase the ‘la politique des auteurs’ was ‘politique’ rather than ‘auteur’. In other words, it was less a cult of artistic personality than a policy or strategy designed to gain for films, and for cinema in general, the same artistic status accorded to painting, literature, and music. Fifty years on, this is the lesson he wishes to retain: ‘That’s what the New Wave was about: ‘The auteur-policy, not the author, the works.’” (Temple and Williams)

He had travelled through an untraveled path, created his own alley to proceed, and paved it for others who want to deal with cinema in a different way. Certainly, Godard’s film represents reality but his realism is not confined to watching life, instead of that expresses his own ideas and feelings. Films are not reliable representations of reality; they represent the images of the real world. Actually, he removed realism from the ivory tower of cinematic art. He tried to look at the world, life, and cinema from a dialectical point of view. From the very beginning, he was in search of a new expression to establish reality on screen, and in this quest, he denounced the institutional mode of storytelling on screen. He believed that Hollywood’s way of tailoring subjects to suit the consumer established a set of expectations against which any divergence could be measured. In the film *Wind from the east*, without any hesitation Godard uses a voice-over directly on the image:

“Hollywood shows this in the form of cinema, as something wonderful, dreamlike, for which you have to pay admission. But this dream is also a weapon in Hollywood’s hands.”(Simon and Schuster1972)

All through his life, he was a rebel against the dominance of industrial cinema and its attitude to compel everyone to accept a monolithic system. His rebellion was not confined to the protest against the hegemony of the film industry; he had created other cinema. As we consider D.W.Griffith as the father of narrative cinema or S.M. Eisenstein for his ‘Montage of attraction’, Jean Luc Godard is also a pioneer by developing a completely different kind of cinema. . As Satyajit Ray portrays him in his famous essay:

“...iconoclast in the group was Jean-Luc Godard. As an innovator, one has to put him not far below D. W. Griffith, and any analysis of the New Wave unorthodoxy must in the end boil down to an analysis of the methods of Jean-Luc-Godard....Godard is the first director in the history of the cinema to have totally dispensed with what is known as the plot line. Indeed, it would be right to say that Godard has devised a totally new genre of cinema. This genre cannot be defined, it can only be described. It is a collage of story, tract, newsreel, reportage, quotations, allusions, commercial short and straight TV interview-all related to a character or set of characters firmly placed in a precise contemporary milieu.” (Ray Satyajit, 1976)

Jean Luc Godard is the person who influenced the modern art and language of the cinema mostly; once Truffaut commented “*There is cinema before Godard and cinema after Godard.*” This is not an exaggeration to say that through Godard’s works art and politics of cinema found a new avenue altogether.

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