

From *La Nouvelle Vague* to *Histoire(s) du Cinéma*:

History in Godard, Godard in History

Colin Nettelbeck

How can one speak about the manner of speaking that Jean-Luc Godard has been practising for nearly fifty years now? Wouldn't it be necessary to argue not just with words, but with sounds and images, too?

Alexander Horwath¹

Since the beginning of his cinematographic career in the 1950s, Jean-Luc Godard has maintained a crucial and prominent role as both a major filmmaker, and an uncompromising commentator on the nature and direction of French cinema production as a whole. He is also without question the most persistent revolutionary of cinematographic language of his time, not just in France but worldwide—with “language” here understood as embracing everything from audio-visual techniques and the direction of actors to the construction of over-arching narrative frames and style. Godard’s own cinema language is full of complexity and has always been in flux—occasioning a level of obscurity that leaves many viewers perplexed, impatient, and even bored. That has not prevented him from being the world’s most influential film-maker of the last half-century.

The focus of this particular study is on the relationship between Godard and history, and, through the case study of Godard, it examines the tensions between recent French history and cinema more generally. Along lines of investigation similar to those adopted by, among others, Antoine de Baecque, Christian Delage and Vincent Guigueno,² it explores the potential historical value of cinema as an artistic activity situated at the intersection of subjective expression and the power of the camera to register the external world with objective accuracy. It is hinged on a double

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¹ Alexander Horwath, “The Man with the Magnétoscope: Jean-Luc Godard’s monumental *Histoire(s) du cinéma* as SoundImage Textbook,” *Senses of Cinema* 15 (July-Aug. 2001), http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/15/godard_horwath.html (first published 1998). I am grateful to Kate Ravenscroft and Eleanor Davey for their research assistance and their help in the preparation of this paper.

² See Antoine de Baecque and Christian Delage, eds., *De l'histoire au cinéma* (Brussels, 1998); also Christian Delage and Vincent Guigueno, *L'historien devant le film* (Paris, 2004).

perspective, whose two aspects have been called respectively—in a *clin d’oeil* to a habitual Godardian rhetorical trope—“History in Godard” and “Godard in History.”

By “History in Godard” is meant the ways in which Godard’s films can be considered as a form of testimony about the time of their making. From this viewpoint, the sound-image artifact has the status of a kind of historical document or “trace,” which can serve in the construction of historical narrative about the particularly transformative period in French history that followed the Second World War and that corresponds to the time in which Godard has worked. Like any historical trace, a film must be scrutinized for its reliability—a process complicated by the subjective quotient in the object itself. But is the subjectivity of an artist necessarily any more suspect than that, for instance, of a letter from Napoleon to Josephine?

France’s postwar era has been a time of rapid and extreme political change, as the particular tribulations of reconstruction and decolonization became entangled with the more global cleavages of the Cold War. Socially and intellectually, too, most prewar habits and patterns were violently shaken and even destroyed. It is hard to overstate the impact of the birth-control pill, for example, on sexual mores; but the developments of Marxist- and psychoanalytically-based philosophies were also powerful agents in what was to become a systematic dissolving of familiar and shared patterns of meaning, after which the world of the past would become literally unrecognizable for postwar generations.

All this is the material of Godard’s films—from his very first feature film, *A bout de souffle* (1960), and early works like *Le petit soldat* (1960), *Les carabiniers* (1963), *Pierrot le fou* (1965), *Masculin féminin* (1966) and *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (1967). It is even more obviously so in the films of his most politically engaged era, in the lead-up to 1968 and its aftermath: *La chinoise* (1967), for example, *Weekend* (1967), or *Tout va bien* (1972). If much of his more recent work—*Passion*, *Prénom Carmen*, *Je vous salue, Marie*, *Soigne ta droite*, *Nouvelle vague*, the epic *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and *Éloge de l’amour*—is more symbolico-metaphysical, and hence more oblique in its integration of contemporary socio-political preoccupations, it is not for all that, as we shall see, removed from historical pertinence.

At the very least, Godard appears to be an historical witness that one cannot afford to overlook in reflecting on the more profound changes that have occurred in France since the mid-twentieth century. In proposing Godard’s very substantial body of work as having important metonymic value in relation to French history, we cannot entirely ignore the somewhat problematic nature of Godard’s own “Frenchness,” given that he is half Swiss, and has regularly spent much of his life in Switzerland. But it is not hard to argue that it is, overwhelmingly, the French experience that is at the core of his creative preoccupations. The vast majority of his films are set in France, and it is the “French” cinema—however blurred the edges of that reality may be—that has been the base for most of his work. Another potential problem with the metonymic idea is the diversity of Godard’s films: this is not work that can be readily organized according to any obvious underlying unity of purpose, or even described in terms of a coherent evolution. It is, rather, a moving mosaic, betraying often quite sharp ideological and aesthetic shifts, and marked by unpredictable forays into the technology of sound and image production. And yet we can ask whether the very turbulence of the opus, with its multiple loose ends and scattered contradictions, is not in itself a reflection of the uncertainties of the times. On this level, too, history finds its way into Godard.

As for “Godard in History,” this is intended not only to allow an evaluation of the historical place that the filmmaker deserves to occupy, but, more pointedly and more controversially, to account for and to scrutinize the ways in which Godard sometimes actually sets himself up as a proto-, or quasi-historian, claiming direct historical status for his filmic essays and narratives. In the specific field of cinema history, Godard is well served. As Colin MacCabe states in his recent biography, the attention paid to Godard’s thought and work over the years has been prolific and global.³ No other film director has had as much written about him. In more general histories, however, even those devoted specifically to culture, the acknowledgement of Godard’s importance is much more sporadic, and often enough completely absent. In relation to May 1968, for example, Godard’s work offers unparalleled insights into the charged atmosphere and ideological tangles of the time. Nonetheless, it receives widespread but scattered attention in Pascal Ory’s *L’entre-deux-mai*, but notably less in Le Goff’s *Mai 68: l’héritage impossible*. Charles Sowerwine alludes to the significance of a film like *Weekend* in relation to the anti-consumerist movement, but his emphasis remains on the political protests; and Godard does not feature at all in the studies by Joffrin or Ross.⁴

More revealing still is Godard’s relationship with history as an epistemology—his attempts to claim historical value for his films. How, for instance, should a historian treat the filmmaker’s 1972 comments to Robert Phillip Kolker about *Tout va bien*?

“In fact this movie is just a newsreel. In a way we summed up the last two years in France in an hour and a half.”⁵ Critically, Godard’s claim is not just about himself. Through his total identification with film, it is also a claim for *cinema as history*—both as agent (seeking to change the world) and narrator (documenting the stories of the changes wrought). From the viewpoint of most historical approaches, Godard’s utterances (verbal and filmic) can appear closer to those of an iconoclastic seer or a prophet: they are full of paradox and shadow, and of aphoristic generalizations that can as often be irritating as illuminating. One has only to open either of Alain Bergala’s collections of Godard’s interviews and reflections to realize how close one is to a mystical realm.⁶ But to dismiss them too readily for that reason would be to overlook some serious questions that he raises about the nature and operations of historical narrative. With the aggressive intrusion of the work of Godard, recent French history is not in a safe place. Its definitions and parameters are questioned, and while its value in the quest for truth and understanding may be ultimately affirmed, this only happens through and after a process of systematic subversion.

The starting point for this study is the celebrated—but relatively under-discussed—work by Françoise Giroud, called *La nouvelle vague. Portrait de la jeunesse*, which appeared in book form in 1958.⁷ Famously, this book was to give its name to the new movement in French cinema, which over the following two years

³ Colin MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70* (London, 2003), 375.

⁴ Pascal Ory, *L’entre-deux-mai. Histoire culturelle de la France, mai 1968 – mai 1981* (Paris, 1983); Jean-Pierre Le Goff, *Mai 68. L’héritage impossible* (Paris, 1998); Charles Sowerwine, *France since 1870: Culture, Politics and Society* (Basingstoke, 2001); Laurent Joffrin, *Mai 68. Histoire des événements* (Paris, 1988); Kristin Ross, *May ’68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago, 2002).

⁵ “Angle and Reality: Godard and Gorin in America,” from *Sight and Sound* 42.3 (1973): 130-33, reproduced in David Sterritt, ed., *Jean-Luc Godard Interviews* (Jackson, 1998), 61.

⁶ Alain Bergala, ed., *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, vol. 1, 1950-1984 (Paris, 1985), and vol. 2, 1984-1998 (Paris, 1998). These volumes have almost biblical or *I Ching* value for Godardians.

⁷ Published by Gallimard in the “L’air du temps” collection.

saw the emergence of an extraordinary array of innovative filmmakers.⁸ Giroud's own preoccupations, however, had little to do with the cinema. The opinion survey out of which she built her book was conducted in 1957 for the weekly *L'express*. It was a—rather approximate—attempt to take the temperature of the generation of eight million French people then aged between eighteen and thirty. The overall result was a surprisingly conservative picture of the France of the time. While unhappy with the current political regime, and concerned about the situation in Algeria and international security, these young men and women were overwhelmingly committed to the freedoms of democracy and confident in their benefits; they were largely pacifist and they believed in love and marriage; although conscious of social injustices, they were confident that these could be overcome and indeed described themselves as reasonably happy with their lot. There is little in this snapshot that anticipates either the revolution that was about to occur in French cinema—though theoretically Godard and Truffaut could both have been in Giroud's sample—or the powerful political confluence that was to destroy the Fourth Republic and shape the structures of the Fifth by sweeping Charles de Gaulle back into presidential office. In fact, the generation described by Françoise Giroud can be seen as representing the “before” in relation to which we can best evaluate what happened afterwards. They were the blank wall on which the writing had not yet appeared—writing which would affect them less than their younger siblings, or those born a few years later and who would reach the age of twenty in 1968.

The “writing” in question is in part De Gaulle's complete refashioning of France and its position in the world through a paradoxical process that married conservative, traditionalist nationalism with a thorough modernization of the economy, and that espoused a discourse of long-term continuities even as it set in train what Henri Mendras would later aptly call the “Second French Revolution.”⁹ But the writing was also that being done by a fearlessly experimental and self-assertive cinema, which was staking out for itself a predominant place in the nation's cultural life. By modeling revolutionary ways of seeing and behaving, the popular culture medium of cinema offered a readily accessible and stimulating counter-discourse to what was emanating from political circles. Alain Touraine, in his early reflections on May 1968, stressed the powerful impact of the graffiti explosion during that time, reading it as the most profound cultural expression of the whole liberation movement.¹⁰ By then however, the cinema, Godard at its head, had been playing an analogous role for a decade already.

The political dimensions of the conflict between the Gaullist state and cinema were explicit. De Gaulle's efforts to control cinema included direct ministerial responsibility for censorship—and Godard suffered from this repressive mechanism on a number of occasions.¹¹ More symbolically, and more durably, the Cinémathèque affair in February 1968, in which Henri Langlois, the founding director of this unique institution, was summarily and clumsily fired from his position, led to a gathering of filmmakers into a powerful lobby-group within the French political framework.¹²

⁸ Led by Godard and Truffaut, the New Wave included such pillars of the future French cinema industry as Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, Claude Chabrol, Agnès Varda and Alain Resnais.

⁹ Henri Mendras, *La seconde révolution française, 1965-1984* (Paris, 1988).

¹⁰ Alain Touraine, *Le communisme utopique. Le mouvement de mai* (Paris, 1972), 216.

¹¹ See, for instance, MacCabe, *Godard*, 201-03; also Jean-Michel Frodon, *L'âge moderne du cinéma français. De la Nouvelle Vague à nos jours* (Paris, 1995), 142-53.

¹² Frodon gives a lively account of these events, 220-40; see also Sylvia Harvey, *May '68 and Film Culture* (London, 1978), 14-27.

Godard's contribution here was critical, and it can be seen as long-lasting, for it is possible to see in this set of events the origins of the ongoing social and political influence of film-makers as a group—what Jean-Pierre Jeancolas calls a “cinéma de la responsabilité.”¹³ Although in the Langlois Affair, film-makers were protesting about something that concerned them directly, their collective action already had wider social implications of the kind that would, over the following decades, see them crystallize into a direct political force over such matters as immigration policy and education.

It would be silly to assert that de Gaulle's vision was entirely retrogressive or that productions of French cinema in the 1958-1968 decade were devoid of conservatism. There was no facile dichotomy at work. Rather, this period, with its pressure-cooker turmoil, marked the birth of the new order, whose contours are still being defined today. There is almost total discontinuity between the young France of Giroud's survey and the new political, social and artistic realities that came into being even as the book was being published.

Denial and obfuscation about the realities of the French experience and behavior during the Second World War, and the concomitant creation of the myth of a French identity and dignity based on the resistance were integral to de Gaulle's program, and it would be many decades before that particular story was being satisfactorily told with any consistency. The argument here however, is that the de Gaulle era was also, and no less, the era of a new French cinema which, in its openness of form and spirit, not only *allowed* for the confrontation and working through of this traumatic material, but actually facilitated it. In other words, the cinema, during the Gaullian period, was a serious force of opposition, and, as such, it deserves much greater historical attention than it has so far received. It should not be forgotten that the first really telling blow to the Gaullian myth came neither through politics nor the admirable work of Robert Paxton,¹⁴ but through the cinema, with Marcel Ophuls' *Le chagrin et la pitié*. As Jean-Michel Frodon has put it:

Paradoxe très moderne d'un travail de vérité comme celui effectué par Ophuls, et qui, en jetant bas le mensonge de l'Histoire officielle, ouvre la possibilité de remettre en cause l'Histoire elle-même, ses élans, ses tragédies, ses atrocités, mais aussi ses promesses de temps meilleurs.¹⁵

Despite the constraints on its release, the film had an audience of more than 600,000 spectators in Paris. From *Le chagrin et la pitié*, there is a direct cinematographic line back to Resnais's *La guerre est finie* (1966), Godard's *Les carabiniers* (1963) and *Le petit soldat* (1960) and *Hiroshima, mon amour* (Resnais 1957). There is no doubt that Paxton's *La France de Vichy* produced a huge shockwave in France; but it was not any larger than that produced by Louis Malle's equally corrosive *Lacombe, Lucien*, which drew huge audiences to the French cinemas in the same 1973-1974 season. In other words, as much as a revision of de Gaulle's version of history was right and necessary, the conditions of that revision,

¹³ See Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, “Un cinéma de la responsabilité: esquisse de cartographie du cinéma français vivant en 1998,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 36.1 (Jan.-Apr. 1999): 12-25.

¹⁴ Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (London, 1972) was translated into French as *La France de Vichy, 1940-1944* (Paris, 1973). Marcel Ophuls' film was shot during the twilight of de Gaulle's reign, and after being banned from television (an interdiction that was to last until the Mitterrand government of 1981), was allowed a limited release in cinemas in 1971 (cf. Frodon, *L'âge moderne du cinéma français*, 267).

¹⁵ Frodon, *L'âge moderne du cinéma français*, 269.

evident in the probing subversions of French cinema, were coexistent with the myth itself.

Does this suggest a possible basis for considering the period as a whole in terms of a fundamental continuity? It would be a brave, perhaps rash, person who proposed such a viewpoint. As we know, the historiography of post-war France is still multiply fractured along numerous and complex lines. Given the enormity of the events and the changes that have derived from them, this is not surprising. French historians have engaged in sharp and mostly unresolved debates about the national experience of the Second World War and how to account for it, with irreconcilable differences about the nature of the experience itself—that is, what should be included in the story—and about the ways in which the story should be constructed. These conflicts have had enduring consequences for the concept of French identity—Braudel’s masterwork notwithstanding¹⁶—and without consensus about identity, historians are inevitably on shifting ground.

A key flaw in the Gaullist myth was, precisely, its arrogant determination to ignore the specific memories of so many key participants in the events for which it sought to account; not just those collaborationists who had made bad political choices, but whole sections of the population whose experience was in fact crucial to understanding the realities of the period, and therefore to building a stable future. These included most egregiously the 65,000 Jews deported to the death camps—very few of whom survived, but whose memory was never lost to their families, friends and acquaintances. But there were also other deportees, there were returning prisoners of war, and there were many tens of thousands of young men press-ganged into the *Service du travail obligatoire*. And of course, while de Gaulle, on his return to power in 1958 made the claim of understanding the “Françaises” as well as the “Français,” his story of the French experience of World War II largely omitted French women altogether.

Revision and re-revision of the original post-war Gaullian version of events has not led to any durable narrative synthesis. Rather, as room has had to be made for material omitted or suppressed—such as the extent of the collaboration, the legitimacy of the Vichy Government, the persecution and deportation of Jews, and the almost complete ignoring of the place of women—the impossibility of elaborating a single narrative has become more evident. Tensions between memory and forgetting (and the problematic nature of accepting memory as historical testimony), the lack of availability (and sometimes of reliability) of archival material, the recriminatory and contentious climate amongst survivors, and, above all the longer-term social, political, and religious shifts within France and in global organization, are some of the contextual forces that have resulted in an increasing compartmentalization and fragmentation of historians’ work.¹⁷

In the face of this historiographical uncertainty, Pierre Nora, in *Les lieux de mémoire*,¹⁸ has produced one way of coming to terms with the chaotic unraveling that followed the collapse of the Gaullian myth, by projecting history as a way of

¹⁶ Fernand Braudel, *L’identité de la France* (Paris, 1986).

¹⁷ Some examples of different attempts to reconcile history and memory—and to articulate the tensions between them can be found in Henri Rouso, *Le syndrome de Vichy, de 1944 à nos jours* (Paris, 1987, 1990); Eric Conan and Henri Rouso, *Vichy, un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris, 1994); Annette Wieviorka, *L’ère du témoin* (Paris, 1988); Gérard Noiriel, *Sur la ‘crise’ de l’histoire* (Paris, 1996); Jean-Marie Guillon and Pierre Laborie, eds., *Mémoire et histoire. La Résistance* (Toulouse, 1995); for some of the problems associated with accounting for the experience of women see for instance Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy et l’éternel féminin* (Paris, 1996).

¹⁸ Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1997).

reconstructing the past through the perspective of the present. In doing so, he has created a kind of symbolic miniature—albeit a sizeable miniature!—of contemporary French history-writing, calling upon a very large number of specialist historians who offer reflections on their field. Among the roll-call of participants are Georges Duby, Jacques Le Goff, François Furet, Mona Ozouf, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, Madeleine Rebérioux, Alain Corbin, Michelle Perrot, Jean-Marie Mayeur, Jean-Pierre Rioux, Pierre Birnbaum, Catherine Maire, Christophe Charle, René Rémond and some dozens of other distinguished historians who in real life might seldom find themselves in each other's company. (One has only to recall the sharp exchange between Pascal Ory and Marc Fumaroli over *L'Etat culturel*, for instance, to admire Nora's reconciliatory powers.¹⁹)

The work is itself a memorial to the eclectic pluralism of a kind of history that, in the end, leads less to any comprehensive overview, than to what one senses could have been an infinitely expandable collection of ingredients that Nora felt should not be left out. The pluralism is apparent in every aspect of the composition of the work, from the recourse to a multitude of authors through an organization process that at every point bursts through the seams that have been rather artificially stitched through it. Perhaps in homage to the Gallic tradition of tripartite presentation, it is arranged in three huge sections. The first two are devoted to the concepts of “La République” and “La Nation,” but if these concepts are intended to offer some semblance of familiarity and unity, the detailed content included under the rubrics, while not perhaps completely arbitrary, challenges rather than confirms any sense of wholeness. The last major section of the work is called “Les France,” and very explicitly, through some four dozen disparate chapters, explores the multiplicity of conflicts and divisions characterizing French life, as well as the fragile nature of even the most persistent traditions.

This is perhaps less history per se, than history in the making, a kind of kaleidoscopic user's manual for would-be historians of a culture whose changes are too numerous and profound to offer purchase to any single linear narrative. The historian of present time—as Nora styles himself—thus becomes a documentalist for some future historian of what will then be, plausibly, a more readily approachable and understandable past.

For all its inclusiveness, *Les lieux de mémoire* suffers from some notable omissions, one of which is any sustained treatment of the visual arts, and of photography and cinema in particular. In fact, only one chapter of any substance is fully devoted to an artistic work as such: Antoine Compagnon's treatment of Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.²⁰ Despite this, the Nora model and approach do appear to offer a way of bringing Godard and cinema more fully into history. In part this is because Godard's work itself is structurally analogous to the processes at work in *Les lieux de mémoire*. This is the case if one considers the collection of individual films that make up his opus—whose diversity and aleatory development have been sketched out above. It is even more evidently so in the work that encapsulates most fully his vision and method, namely *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (begun in 1989 and developed over the following decade).

¹⁹ Fumaroli published *L'état culturel. Essais sur une religion moderne* (Paris) in 1991, and Ory's riposte appeared in “Où sont la culture et la mesure?” *Lu* (Oct. 1991), 8. See Colin Nettelbeck, “*L'immoraliste* turns ninety—or what more can be said about André Gide? An essay on cultural change,” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 39.1 (1992), 120-21.

²⁰ Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3: 3835-69.

Like *Les lieux de mémoire*, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is an epic undertaking, plural in its conception, simultaneously hugely ambitious in its scope and disarmingly modest in its execution. Godard believes in the cinema as a privileged—perhaps the most privileged—way of apprehending the passage of time. In undertaking to narrate the stories and histories of cinema, he also seeks to show just how indispensable cinema is in the preservation and narration of various critical events of the recent past. In fact, Godard's position could be summed up in this way: *given* the imperative to historicize present experience in order to be able to make sense of it, the camera is a more reliable instrument than the pen; and hence, cinema must offer a better record and account than books. Godard's constant recourse to the reading aloud of printed sources is a sign of his respect for the written word; but it is also an affirmation of cinema's ability to include print media in a way that they cannot reciprocate.²¹

This idea goes back to Astruc's late 1940s claims for the powers of the "caméra-stylo," and it underpins all of Godard's work which, as MacCabe rightly insists, is informed by the Bazinian aesthetic.²² The fundamental vocation of cinema is nothing less than to transmit the truth. Now, Godard is obviously not so naïve as to believe that the vocation is always fulfilled. *Histoire(s) du cinéma* shows numerous examples of cinema betraying itself, from the crassnesses of Hollywood hegemony and Nazi use of propaganda to the failure of the New Wave to live up to the "vérités premières" that it discovered. But Godard's faith seems ultimately unshakeable, and is expressed in a language consistently shot through with spiritual, almost mystical vocabulary: the cinema is a phoenix, always able to rise from the ashes and to undertake again its redemptive work. Niépce and Lumière, the pioneers of photography and cinema, redeemed western painting from its original sin of perspective. Godard's own enterprise, for its part, seeks to redeem a cinema dominated by facile storytelling—what he calls "une industrie de l'évasion"—that excludes humanity from its history rather than permitting participation in it.

Histoire(s) du cinéma shares with *Les lieux de mémoire* its sense of the impossibility of transmitting the whole story or a story of wholeness, while recognizing that the fragmented nature of the present can be endowed with meaning *only* by opening up passages to the past. More obviously than Nora and his team of historians, however, Godard situates himself at the heart of his narration; as well as hearing his voice, we frequently see his image as he constructs a moving collage of image and sound, where single frames or short clips are superimposed or folded into repetitive sequences that play alternately on the viewer's intellect, emotions, memory and curiosity. In this way, subjectivity is shown to be utterly integral to the whole enterprise. Fiction and documentary are not so much mixed as made to coexist in a simultaneity of epistemological equality. Each is different from the other, but each is able to suggest meaning in terms of the historical framework that, like some kind of immense fractal jigsaw puzzle, progressively fills out. The picture thus constituted has no claims to comprehensiveness. MacCabe, again, signals several important omissions, such as the Hollywood blacklist of the McCarthy era.²³ Godard's choices

²¹ An intriguing case-study of the subordination of written text to image-based history, if space permitted, would be *L'œil de Vichy*, which Claude Chabrol, one of Godard's New Wave colleagues and strongest supporters, made in 1993. The film, scripted by key Vichy historians Robert Paxton and Jean-Pierre Azéma, is a chronological narrative fabricated largely from Vichy propaganda documentaries and newsreels, which are turned on their heads in a stunning indictment of the regime. Just why Chabrol came so late, relatively, to this story, would require a study in itself, but it is probably related to the deep ambiguities that emerged during the late years of Mitterrand's presidency.

²² MacCabe, *Godard*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 296.

are subjective in the strongest possible sense: that is, they derive from the unflinching and undisguised presence of himself as subject in the whole composition process. As Horwath has astutely remarked, not only does Godard believe “that history consists of unfinished, incomplete, suddenly interrupted sentences,” he has steadfastly refused to entertain any postmodern idea of the “death of the subject,” and on the contrary maintains faith in “a cinema that conjoins the individual with the world.”²⁴

Whether, or to what degree, *Histoire(s) du cinéma* can be considered as history, or an alternative to history—or whether, as we suggested with Nora’s work, it is the stuff from which history can be made—is open to a discussion beyond the scope of this article. That such a discussion should take place, however, seems incontrovertible. This particular work, and indeed Godard’s work as a whole, poses an urgent challenge to the ways in which we think about the meaning and processes of history. Its conceptual foundation, with its nexus of subjectivity and documentary authenticity, together with its rich lode of historical traces, are such that any history of twentieth century France that ignored them would be unforgivably the poorer for doing so.

There is an excellent example of Godard the historian (or proto-historian) at work in his 2001 film *Éloge de l’amour*. In the episode in question, real-life historian Jean Lacouture is inserted into a fictional narrative in which representatives of Steven Spielberg arrive in a remote French village to buy the memoirs of an old couple of former resistance fighters. One of the Spielberg representatives is none other than Cordell Hull Jr, and while the point that Godard makes is a polemical one—that because the Americans have no past they need to steal European memory—the deeper comment here is historical, and that on two levels. Firstly, he is saying that the French have lost the capacity to give a meaningful account of their own history, and secondly, he is claiming that the content of that history is the subject of American appropriation. The link to Cordell Hull, Roosevelt’s Secretary of State, situates the Second World War as the key moment of transformation, a point that he had already made in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* in relation to the American takeover of world cinema.²⁵ This also ties in with the part of the *Éloge de l’amour* that deals with the quest to restore to their rightful owners the huge numbers of works of art stolen by the Nazis during the Occupation period. The attempt to right an historical wrong is precisely the vocation that Godard sees for cinema in its capacity to redeem reality from its incomprehensibility.

Once again, this seems to be analogous to the kind of history that we find in *Les lieux de mémoire*, where the sense of the transitory is in constant tension with the desire to hold on to those products of time which, sometimes mysteriously, contain meaning for the community that produced them. In his essay on Proust, Antoine Compagnon asks how on earth “this homosexual and snobbish Jew could have become the uncontested model of the great writer in France?”²⁶ We could ask a similar question about the rich, quasi-delinquent Protestant boy from Lausanne in relation to French cinema. In a thoughtful article on Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*, Julien Neutres sees Fellini as having become “un véritable monument,” thanks to his ability to create a common mythology through the articulation of individual and collective

²⁴ Horwath, “The Man with the Magnétoscope.”

²⁵ “Si la première guerre mondiale avait permis au cinéma américain de ruiner le cinéma français, avec la naissance de la télévision, la deuxième lui permettra de financer, c’est à dire de ruiner, tous les cinémas d’Europe.”

²⁶ Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, 3: 3856.

experience.²⁷ Something similar has happened with Godard. His work is already in itself a *lieu de mémoire*, and as such should be of keen interest to historians of contemporary France. But Godard, like Proust, is also a creator whose vision of history, in its blend of fiction and document, in its non-linear pluralisms, and in its insistence on the presence of the subject, presents permanent resistance to any historiography that leaves out or understates the work of the imagination, or that, in its ambition to create stories of general or holistic application, ignores the specificities of individual experience.

²⁷ Julien Neutres, "Le cinéma fait-il l'histoire? Le cas de *La Dolce Vita*," *Vingtième siècle, revue d'histoire* 83 (July-Sept. 2004), 62. My thanks to my colleague John West-Sooby for drawing my attention to this piece.