Forms that think

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In chapter 3A of *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, Godard writes "*A thought that forms a form that thinks*", implying the complete formulation of certain ideas that go round this work, that is to say, cinema is a powerful creator of forms, and it was originally conceived for thinking.

As is the case with other messages formulated by Godard, this sentence has been celebrated, interpreted, discussed and not always accurately used. Above all, as in other situations, it has only been partially considered. For instance, given that the sentence is placed in this video composition -which, among other things, can be labelled as a poetic essay about cinema- has been read just as a reference to cinema essay, in so far as a quite frequent characteristic among all different and various films to be labelled as cinema essays is that they ponder over images. To this could be added to the fact that Godard could be considered among the most relevant creators in the genre of essay; besides, he considers his video works as a mean to divert images. But if we stick to the body of the *Histoire(s)*, to Godard's testimony, and to the concrete context of the sentence (that is to say, the tribute to a certain resistance cinema), it should be gathered that Godard refers to cinema itself. This does not imply thst every film must produce knowledge, but that art based on images in movement creates shapes that lead to thinking, regardless of their condition as fiction or document.

As a matter of fact, this way of understanding cinema in relation to thinking does not originate at the *Histoire(s)*; it stems from the times of Godard as a critic writer. For instance, when he classified westerns, he divided them in three categories: those based on images, those based on ideas, and those based in both images and ideas. After determining this taxonomy he made clear that, although based in the prevailing term, it was not exclusive; namely, images relate to ideas and ideas relate to images. [1]. In fact, he includes diverse examples in the *Histoire(s)* he had already highlighted as a young critic, such as certain moments of *The searchers or The Wrong Man*.

Furthermore, if Godard's affirmation that cinema, unlike other arts, can show its history by itself is more or less evident due to cinema's matter, the connection between form and thinking is best understood when we refer to its concept of image. Since we shall remember that when Godard speaks about image he refers to the cinema pictures (analogic); thus, it is never about a simple frame, but the aggregation of different image. Moreover, Godard believes an image is always a product of editing; ergo, an image in cinema is in fact three images: the first, the one that follows and the connection the viewer's mind builds between them. When he speaks about films, Godard relates to those pictures created at the editing stage. Quoting him, "*An image calls another one, an image is never alone; contrary to what they currently call 'images', nothing more than aggregations of solitudes glued by discourse, by the worst discourse possible*" [2].

Cinema, in so far as it is a sequence of images, builds forms by editing them. It leaves space for the combination of each image with its predecessor and sucessors. This combination produces wider or closer variables, that will reclaim a certain

degree of attention and participation from the spectator. According to Godard, silent film allowed an untold freedom of interpretation to the public, who could form its own conclusions from the sequence of images. This would relate to a paradigm based in what Dziga Vertov proposed with his editing based in differentiation. From Godard's point of view, cinema was created to think, but the path opened by the pure sequence of images was weighed down by the arrival of sound and the development of the film industry. Godard does not refrain from using sound film examples [3].

In fact, editing as a way of creation can be compared to our way of thinking; as an image that connects to an other so as to build a meaning works similarly to how in our minds a subject can be associated to a predicate, a proposition to an other one, or a concept to another concept, so as to build new ideas. It does not just relate to active thinking, but we can as well associate it to memory, as it is normal for it to stablish connections between specific memories. Quoting Godard "*It is not about judging. But we can show an idea, another idea; a reel, another enchained reel. Then, we've got an image. If we have an image we have a thought and, if we have a thought, we are able to make a judgement. That is what cinema is for*" [4].

Godard explained in one of his 'filmed scripts' how he personally faced the creation of forms. In this essay he used a poetic simile to talk about the emergence of an image that, as a subtle wave, is not yet a sea, but just an idea that denotes motion. In a plastic style, Godard lets us see that, as a creator, when facing the blank screen (and thus he shows himself with his open arms towards the empty screen), the first thing to be seen is an image (in this ocassion he refered to the creation of his film *Passion*, and was about "a woman running away and carrying a flower bouquet"), from where a shape is born, by bringing together pictures that would go before and after it.

In this sense, in another of his films, *King Lear* (1987), he said one could physically hold a moment when editing, as when one holds an object, one grasps the present, the past and the future with one's hands [5]. Frames, implying different instants, go through the editor's fingers, and by binding them one is empowered to alterate their sequence. It comes to an evidence, when he says this, that Godard thinks on an analogic film editing, where a celluloid film can be cut and pasted, where there is an actual connection with the material. Besides, time has passed since Godard declared him being unable to hire an editing assitant, as he considered it a nuclear step in the creation process, a very personal phase, as if it were a music composition [6].

In regard to the *Historie(s) du cinéma*, it is about a video piece where Godard worked with images (film soundtracks, classical music, popular music, historical sound files, noises) and various materials (labels, filters), managing them so they would show different aspects of cinema and its century. The forms in *Histoire(s)* are particularly complex, due to the fact that different elements are associated and dissociated whithin brief seconds. They act as the main indicators of the ideas concerning editing Godard has developed through his whole corpus, be it cinema or video. As in other occasions, the relations he defines are personal, but this subjetivity does not controvert with his purpose of including the spectator actively; on the contrary, Godard believed his work would result into the creation of debates.

But, above all, Godard used visual editing as a strategy for meditating and generating thought. Why do these sets of images become means for thinking? The reason is that each of them bares a meaning of its own and comes from a certain context. By putting them together, the spectator meditates over their bonding threads. By getting to know them their significance may be altered at the viewer's eyes. He may also wonder about the ideas he would build from these images, their connections and the purposes the director might have borne in mind when working with them. These

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pictures may even raise questions to the public the creator had never encountered.

The desire to generate collisions (conceptual or visual collisions), after Walter Benjamin declaring this purpose with the quotes used in *Passagen-Werke*, is strengthened by the insertion of two theoretical premises in chapter 4B: on one hand, Pierre Reverdy's declaration "an image's strength bares no relation to its brutality or fantasy, but to a distant and fare association of ideas"; on the other hand, Robert Bresson's precept of "drawing things that have always been distant near". As an example of their usage, is the evidence of images having been attached to them: to the first declaration was associated a succesion of pictures from *Madame de…* with a painting by Bosch; to the words of Bresson proceeds the view of a group of soldiers hauling the corpse of a deportee to a concentration camp, following the rythm defined by the sequence of terms *German/Jew/Muslim*.

When referring to the technical details, the resources used in the construction of these forms were relatively simple, as it was basically a piece developed in Godard's personal studio. He states: "These are very simple things. From the forty available options I had, I haven't used more than one or two, mainly the overimpressions. I didn't have a big table, nor a twenty-five television equipment, nor a documentalist. The overimpressions, all these come from cinema, are tricks already used by Mélies" [7].

As a matter of fact, there are numerous overimpressions throughout the chapters, that stand out not just because of their beauty or sharpness, but for responding accurately to Godard's different contraposition of two others, or the existance of two different rythms in the story, or even the fact that both fiction and documental are valid to tell a fact.

In addition, decellerations stand out due to their visual effectiveness, and they seem to be used as a way of normally altering the time of the different clips, thus highlighting their importance inside the sequences, even if in their original films they barely lasted a second.

There are two main resources that distinguish the composition of this piece, namely the repetition and the introduction of blank frames. They bear a direct relation to the creation of rhythms and silences, as in a poem or musical composition. If black spaces serve as puntuation signs, repetition can insist on certain points and produce variations in certain images.

Thus, for instance, we could analyze several examples from *Histoire(s)* where History is shown in relation to cinema and vice versa. A story is never built (there is no unique line, be it official or alternative), but through editing a new system of evocations and suggestions, this construction being subject to change depending on what it is to be distinguished. With the aid of these examples we can perceive how Godard constructs forms that suggest a new vision of History and provoke reflection on them.

This way, in 1A, by showing the Nazi occupation of France, both the initial passiveness (therefore the quietness of Seurat's pictures) and the division between the French resistance (De Gaulle's speech, quotes from poets of the resistance) and the Vichy government (collaborationist speeches, Radio Paris) are enhanced. Meanwhile, the entry of the German soldiers is accompanied by the effective opposition of Sigfrid images and Monet's flower country scenes. Besides, Godard insists in his main concern, cinema, and consequently exposes his point of view, stating that film had abandoned its testimonial original function, and news reports on television were the ones to hold on, while he points the images Bresson considers the single gesture of resistance made by French cinema. When, at the end of 3A, he picks

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up this allusion to World War II, he will not resume it from the occupation, but from the Liberation of Paris, and he will focus his discourse on the attitude of cinema by referring to various national filmographies and only saving the reaction of Italian film industry after the war.

Godard also shows other aspects of History, aside from its shocking violence, namely, the repetition factor. Thus, he makes use of one of Victor Hugo's speeches about the Balcan war, so as to remind us of the war in former Yugoslavia. Hugo's words about Goya's engravings tell us about cruelty and rage towards civil victims, referring to the fact that, despite the erection of the contemporary world on the values of brotherhood and happiness, it was as wild as always; only technique was improved, not the degree of humanity.

When analyzing these three examples, we see that each element, be it images or sounds, has a value of its own (according to the spectator's knowledge, it would be understood or not) and a value as a gear piece. Putting them together (be it by association or contraposition) leads us to ponder about their nature as separate elements and the possible relations between them. The case of the *Histoire(s)*, formed mainly by quotes from older films, sets off a chain reaction of ideas and evocations, as the viewer witnesses the collapse of elements and, while recognizing the different objects, he not only remembers their independent meaning, but also and his relationship with each of them. This leads him to reconsider the combination of elements he just saw. If Godard defines cinema as territory, when seeing *Histoire(s) du cinéma* one could as well say "je voyage pour connaître ma géographie".

Footnotes

[1] *"Because there might only be three kinds of westerns, as Balzac once said there were only three kinds of novels: those based on images, those based on ideas, and those based both in images and ideas; that is to say, Walter Scott, Stendhal and himself. Regarding western, to the first type would correspond The Searchers; to the second, Rancho Notorious; to the third, Man of the West. I do not mean by this that John Ford's film is just a fair succesion of images, on the contrary; nor that Fritz Lang's lacks plastic or decorative beauty; no, I mean that in Ford's, we first perceive an image that refers to an idea; while in Lang's we have the opposite situation; and, finnally, with Anthony Mann, we go from idea to image to idea"*. Read article "Super Mann" (*Cahiers du cinéma*, n. 92, february 1959). In *Jean-Luc Godard (*Ed. Alain Bergala), 1998, *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godar*d. Volume I, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, pp. 165-166.

[2] See Jean-Luc Godard (Ed. Alain Bergala), 1998. *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*. Volume II, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, p. 173.

[3] Let us review the former example quoted from *The searchers* (1956), an often misunderstood film due to the readings done of the plot ignoring its images. The complete sequence of the scene where John Wayne picks Debbie in his arms and decides to take her home, leads us from the youngster's fear towards a man scared by the hate he feels towards the Indian girl, the only remain he has left from the love of his life. The spectator will see this according to the images he is given, as well as to their relationship with the rest fo the film.

[4] See the interview "Le bon plaisir de Jean-Luc Godard" (May 15, 1995), in *Jean-Luc Godard* (Ed. Alain Bergala), 1998.

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In *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*. Volume II, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, p. 311.

[5] See the explanation given in the lecture "Le montage, la solitude et la liberté", pronounced at the Férmis on April 26th 1989. Jean-Luc Godard (Ed. Alain Bergala), 1998. In *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*. Volume II, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, p. 242.

[6] See the conference "Le montage, la solitude et la liberté", pronounced at the Férmis on April 26th 1989. Jean-Luc Godard (Ed. Alain Bergala), 1998. In *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard* Volume II, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, p. 243.

[7] Jean-Luc Godard & Youssef Ishaghpour, 2000, *Archéologie du cinéma et mémoire du siècle*, Tours, Farrago, pp. 26-27.